How HR Professionals Perceive Change and Their Role In It

- A qualitative study

Moa Rova

Essay/Thesis:	30 hp
Program and/or course:	Master Thesis in Strategic HRM and Labour relations
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Supervisor:	Freddy Hällsten
Examiner:	Karin Allard
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Abstract

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Purpose: The purpose of this study is to describe and analyse the impression HR professionals have on change.

Theory: The theoretical frameworks used in this study are *the nature of change* and *roles in organisations*. The first framework refers to two different stances on perceiving change, namely 'the planned approach' and 'the emergent approach'. These are used to analyse how the respondents perceive change. The second framework includes 'role expectations', 'role conflict' and 'role ambiguity'. These are used as tools to analyse how the respondents perceive their role in change.

Method: The study has applied a qualitative research design with *semi-structured interviews* as the chosen type. The sample consists of twenty-one HR professionals, from both public and private sector.

Result: The results show, in contrast to what previous studies have indicated, that HR perceive the area of change and their role in it as important. This role is although perceived to be ambiguous and unclear to some extent. The results also show that a planned approach on change is more common among the HR professionals. Although, the findings indicate that an emergent approach could be of use in organisations, due to the many challenges and risks a planned approach imply. The study emphasises the importance of defining the HR role in change. It is further argued that HR needs to take the role they want to have in change, market themselves better in organisations as well as display how they can contribute.

Foreword

I would like to thank all participants who have taken the time to participate in my study, this is highly appreciated. I would also like to thank my supervisor at the University, Freddy Hällsten, for his guidance and valuable feedback. Further, I would like to thank my family for all their support. Finally, a special thanks to Marcos, for your help with proofreading, discussing ideas and for being a big support through out the thesis.

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Introduction

The Human Resource (HR) function has experienced an immense transformation over the last few decades (Hope-Hailey et. al., 1997; Ogilvie & Stork, 2003; Truss et. al. 2002; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015), converting from a more "traditional" administrative HR function, into a core business function with additional strategic focus (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). This functional transformation has in turn led to changes in the roles of the HR professionals and the complexity of the HR role has increased (Caldwell, 2003). One of the front figures at the time of the debates around the HR functions was Dave Ulrich. Ulrich (1997) emphasised that HR needs to *add value* to business in order to continue to be a relevant function within organisations. Reflecting on how HR can add value to business performance formed an entirely new way of thinking about the HR function and the HR role, compared with the earlier focus on administration and HR practices. Ulrich argued that HR should take an active part in building a competitive organisation in the future, and he presented a framework containing four key roles for HR professionals to take on, in order to contribute to this aim. One of those roles presented in his framework was that HR should become a *change agent*. Ulrich argued that due to rapid changing business environments, knowledge in change management would put HR in a strategic business partner role. His starting point was that change will happen and HR professionals are needed to help their organisations to change (Ulrich 1995; 1997). This is consistent with the views of Caldwell (2001) who argued that HR taking on a change agent role and leading changes will help them develop into a business partner role by their contribution to business performance. Caldwell could also see from his study that the change agent role had grown in significance over a few years (Caldwell, 2001; 2003). The HR function having strong competence in change management was claimed to be crucial going into the twenty-first century (Burke, 1997; LaMarsh, 2004; Ulrich et. al. 1995).

Today, two decades after the first discussions of HR as change agent, there are still highly competitive business environments where changes are inevitable for organisations wanting to survive (Brown et. al., 2015; Kalyani & Sahoo, 2011). It is evident that change is a global phenomenon that affects all organisations wanting to stay competitive (By, 2005; Kalyani & Sahoo, 2011). Kalyani and Sahoo (2011) argue that with globalisation new business concerns have emerged. Competition is high and there is a constant pressure for continuously being innovative. Therefore, the dynamics of change are a reality for any business and future

success is dependent on how well change is managed. Change is thus becoming a core competence of any organisation (Kalyani & Sahoo, 2011). Organisational change should therefore be seen as a highly current topic in companies today. Although, the role of HR in change seems to be less clear and continues to be discussed.

Alfes et. al. (2010) argues there has been an exhortation for HR professionals to use their knowledge in how to manage people, workforces and become agents of change. HR professionals have been directed to lead and advise both senior and line managers in how to manage successful change. Although, the author's argue that there is limited research exploring to what extent this is the case in practice. Deshler (2016) states that HR has taken steps forward, but still has a long way to go before becoming true agents of change. Edgley-Pyshorn and Huisman (2011) found that the expectations surrounding the HR function in change are very diverse. Where some saw HR as highly contributing, others did not know, nor agree that HR should be involved at all.

There are several writers in the literature that argue HRs importance in change. A change often involves employees, where behavioural or motivational aspects are requested to change (Balogun & Hope Hailey, 1999; Kalyani & Sahoo; 2011). Therefore, as argued by Burke (1997) turning to HR should only be natural. According to Choi (2011), change efforts in organisations have shown to often be unsuccessful and not to lead to the intended change. The meta-analysis of Choi showed that several studies indicated that one of the most common factors leading to the high failure rate of organisational changes, was a lack in understanding of employee reactions (ibid). An additional argument for why HR should have a role to play. A recent study by Brown et. al. (2015) showed that when HR take on a *strategic* change agent role, the level of employee cynicism decreases, compared to when HR solely facilitate administration in the change process. The authors argue that this might be because taking on a solely administrative role, would imply HR coming in late in the change process. Thus, HRs active involvement from the start of a change is argued to be important (Brown et. al., 2015).

With this said, it can be argued that there are many researchers claiming the importance of HRs role in change, even though there seems to be a fragmented picture of what this role looks like in reality. Further, it is unclear how HR professionals perceive their own role regarding change. Rynes et. al. (2002) examined in a survey study to what extent HR professionals agreed with different research findings in the HR field. One of the more

surprising findings according to the authors was that only 50% of the respondents agreed upon change management competence being the most important competence for HR managers. This showed to contradict the results from the study by Ulrich et. al. (1995), where associates got to rank the most important competencies for HR managers to be effective in their job and managing change was ranked as the most important competence (Rynes et. al., 2002; Ulrich et. al., 1995). In a replication study by Sanders et. al. (2008) on the study by Rynes et al. (2002) only 40% of the HR professionals agreed on its importance. This shows a gap between what research perceive as important compared to what the HR professionals perceive as important.

Further, a Cranet survey study (The Cranfield Network on Human Resource Management) conducted in the Swedish context (2014) asked HR managers to judge their HR functions capacity in different areas and what was considered areas of improvement. One of these areas described was change agent role. The respondents were asked to choose five of the thirteen HR areas that they perceived to be the most important areas to improve. The results showed that the change agent role, described as developing processes and methods to enhance the organisations ability to change, was only agreed upon by 42% as one of the five most important areas. Thus, not being considered in the top five. The authors discuss that a lower number of perceived importance could either mean that this is an area that the HR managers consider themselves to control. Alternatively, it could be interpreted as an area that the HR managers do not consider important to be good at (Lindeberg & Månson, 2015). Since all of these studies around the HR perceptions on change have been quantitative, it appears necessary to follow up with a qualitative study where the perceptions of HR professionals on the topic change can be studied in more detail. Additionally, this study can contribute to this topic given previous research on HRs role in change has shown to be inconclusive.

Purpose and research questions

The aim of this study is to describe and analyse the impression HR professionals have on change. The current study will shed light on HR professional's relationship with the topic, in a more detail than has been done before. This is of interest since many authors argue the importance of HR having a role in change, but earlier studies have indicated that HR professionals do not see this as an important area. Two decades after Ulrich's (1997) popular book and model, where HR was encouraged to take the role as change agents, there seems to

be little known about how HR professionals perceive the topic of change. This study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do HR professionals perceive change?
- How do HR professionals perceive their role in change?

To answer these questions, the paper will start by presenting a background of the HR function and the emergent focus of the HR change role. Earlier research on the topic will be presented, followed by a presentation of the theoretical perspectives chosen to analyse the results from this study, namely, change perspectives and roles in organisations. Thereafter, the methodology of the study will be presented, followed by a section where the empirical findings are presented and analysed. Finally, the results will be discussed in conjunction with the previous research and theoretical perspectives. The conclusions drawn from this study will be presented.

Previous research

The new Human Resource function and the emerging HR change agent role

Over the last decades, the HR function has transformed to a great extent (Hope-Hailey et. al., 1997; Ogilvie & Stork, 2003; Truss et. al. 2002; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). Ulrich and Dulebohn (2015) compile the developments that the HR function has gone through over the last decades. From the more "traditional HR department" where HR provided traditional administration and HR services as well as regulatory compliance, to a shift where the importance of the HR function is enhanced and HR starts to be viewed as more of a core business function. There is a change in the skills of HR staff, from lower level Personnel Management Administrator to operate as HR professionals with the aim to match HR practices and organisational needs. This leads up to what Ulrich and Dulebohn refer to as the "HR strategy wave", where alignment of HR practices to the business strategy reaches an increased focus.

Dave Ulrich (1997) one of the front figures at the time of the debates of the HR functions, states that HR functions need to create value and deliver business results, in order to help the organisation meet the changing competitive landscape. Together with line managers, HR can champion the competitive organisation. This would according to Ulrich indicate new roles and competencies of the HR professionals and he presents a model for multiple roles (see figure 1), containing: *Strategic partner* (aligning HR strategies with business strategies), *Administrative expert* (designing and deliver efficient HR processes), *Employee champion* (involvement in employee concerns and needs) and *Change agent* (managing transformations and change). The administrative expert and employee champion roles are described to have a more operational and day-to-day focus. The strategic partner and change agent roles are having a future and strategic focus.

FUTURE/STRATEGIC
FOCUS

Strategic Partner   Change Agent

PROCESSES   PEOPLE

Administrative   Employee
Expert   Champion

DAY-TO-DAY/OPERATIONAL
FOCUS

Figure 1. A multiple-role model for human resource management (Ulrich, 1997).

The *change agent role* was argued to be important due to the competitive challenges laying ahead in terms of the increasing pace of change. Specifically, organisations and its people must learn to change more rapid in a more comfortable way. Here HR professionals are argued to have an important role to play. With the change agent role, Ulrich believes that HR can add value to a company by managing change. HR as a change agent can be seen as a business partner in the organisation due to their role in helping the business through transformations as well as adapting to changing business conditions (Ulrich, 1997).

The changing role of the HR function is therefore opening up for HR to take a more strategic role in the change management. Ogilvie & Stork (2003) argue that HR had been a part of change before, but where the earlier role was more reactive, the new strategic era led to an opportunity to take on a more proactive role in change management (Ogilvie & Stork, 2003). Caldwell (2001) argues in line with Ulrich (1997) that HR taking on a change agent role will help them into a strategic business partner role by their contribution to the business performance. Competence in change management is also claimed to be critical for HR professionals to be effective in their jobs. Ulrich et. al. (1995) showed in their study of critical HR competencies based on a huge dataset, that the competence of managing change was ranked as the most important, among the competence categories included in their study. Managing change competence explained as much as 41.2% of the overall performance of HR professionals. Competence in managing change was claimed to be crucial for HR-

professionals going into the twenty-first century (Burke, 1997; LaMarsh, 2004; Ulrich et. al. 1995).

The discussions of the importance of HR as change agents are still on going today, about twenty years after they started. Deshler (2016) argue that despite these steps forward that HR departments have taken in the last decades, there is still a long way to go before becoming true change agents. Long & Wan Ismail, (2012) argue HR specialists that do not function as change agents, will limit their ability to be a strategic partner in the company. Brown et. al. (2015) also emphasise the importance of HR taking on a change agent role.

Studies on the HR change agent role

Caldwell (2001) examines the change agent role among HR professionals in UK by combining a survey study with personal interviews and his findings indicated a growing role for HR professionals as change agents, and he proposes a new typology containing four types of HR change agent roles: change champions, change adapters, change consultants and change synergist. With this Caldwell highlights the complexity of the change role itself. Another study that investigates the HR change role directly, is the study by Alfes et. al. (2010). They argue that there is a lack of studies that examining HR roles in change management in more detail and they conduct two case studies from the UK public sector on the HR-role in change management. The study explores the HR roles in change from both a *process perspective* (HR professionals contribution to the process of managing change) and *content perspective*, (specific HRM practices HR professionals contribute with in supporting change). Another dimension used in the study is how *proactive* vs. *reactive* HR are in their role. The results from their study shows that the HR departments have different roles during change due to their proactive or reactive involvement in the change. The findings lead up to Alfes et. al. proposing a model based on the two dimensions process/content and proactivity/reactivity, containing four different roles (see figure 2). *Change Drivers* has strength on both dimensions, i.e. active involvement in the different stages of the process and deployment of a range of HR activities. *Responsive* HR departments have low involvement on both dimensions and are thus acting more reactive in both process and content. *HR focused* would imply proactivity on specific HR practices to support the change, but more reactive in helping out to drive the change process. On the contrary are the *Change Focused* HR

departments, that play an active role in supporting and driving the change process but is more reactive in terms of developing and engaging HR practises to support the change.

content
proactive

HR
Focused

Change
Driver

reactive ———————————————————— proactive **process**
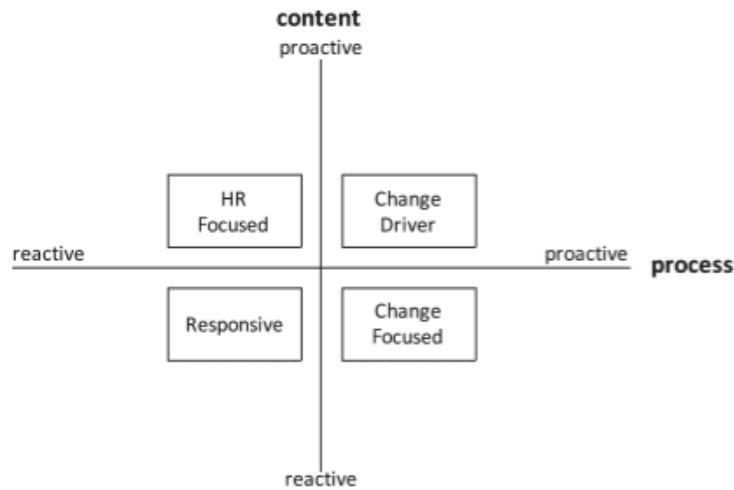
Responsive

Change
Focused

reactive

Figure 2. Model of HR functional roles during change (Alfes et. al. 2010).

Antila (2006) investigates the role of HR managers in international mergers and acquisitions, and the results showed HR managers did have a role as a change agent, even though the responsibility was primarily with the line managers. The results also revealed that operative administrative roles were more common than strategic roles like the change agent role, but as argued by Antila, that does not mean that HR does not add value. Edgley-Pyshorn and Huisman (2011) could see from their study that expectations on HR in change were very spread among others included in the change. Where some perceived HR as one of the most important function to support the change, others were unaware if HR was or should be involved at all. Further, the interviewees claimed that HR firstly needed to prove their worth, before others would accept HR as a planner of change initiatives.

As the study by Caldwell (2001) showed, the change role is multifaceted and Caldwell argues the complexity of the role, by showing that the change agent role in itself can consist of overlapping, sometimes confusing and conflicting roles that can be hard to manage in reality. Caldwell argues that there is a potential tension between prescriptive ideal and practice and the future of change agency is not going to be a clearly defined generic role. Caldwell continues that this reflects the ambiguities and the chameleon character the HR function imply and that HR professionals in the reality will have overlapping, confusing and

conflicting roles that will be even more apparent in the specific change agent role. Lemmergaard (2009) investigates the HR role performance in a case organisation, where Ulrich's four roles (strategic partner, administrative expert, employee champion and change agent) were included. The results have a positive take on the multiple roles of HR professionals. HR is in the case organisation perceived as efficient in both their operative and strategic roles, where change agent is included. These perceptions are consistent from both HR executive and line managers. Therefore, the findings show that HR can manage multiple paradoxical roles in an efficient way. Looking at the change agent role in specific, there was a tight collaboration between HR and line managers, which is discussed as a success factor. The study shows that there is a higher pressure and expectations on HR functions to manage multiple roles, and this is argued to make them a central part of business competitiveness. The authors argue that it is increasingly important to show the value of the HR function, and the first step might be to define and clarify the roles and role expectations of HR.

What is a change agent?

As been described, several authors have argued that HR should take the role as a "change agent" (Brown, et. al., 2015; Caldwell, 2001; Deshler, 2016; Ulrich, 1997), what does this imply? Ulrich (1997) argues, as change agents the aim is to build the capacity of the company to handle different types of changes. A change agent has the role to *make change happen*, by having an understanding of the critical change processes, creating commitment to these processes and to ensure that the change will follow as intended. This is in line with how Balogun and Hope Hailey (1999) and LaMarsh (2004) describe the change agent as the person or group of people who is responsible for making the change happen. The change agent role can therefore be a responsibility shared by a group.

According to Ulrich (1997) HR should own the accomplishment of the change agent role. Although, this does not imply that they must necessarily conduct all the work by themselves. Line managers and external consultants could also play a role. Ulrich states that as change agents, the goal for HR is to get the change completed, rather than to implement change. HR is to lead, guide and support teams (e.g. management teams) through the steps of change (ibid). Deshler (2016) states that HR as change agents should help leaders identify the barriers of change as well as how to overcome them. HR should also help the leaders reflect on their

assumptions and enhance their understanding of the organisation's ability to perform, by asking tough and probing questions.

The contributions of HR in change

Several authors are arguing that HR should have a role in change since they have contributions to make. The main argument is because change usually revolves around people. Kalyani and Sahoo (2011) argue that that change programs often imply a change in behaviour, mind sets or motivation and therefore HR should have an important role to play in change management. Deshler (2016) states organisational change often indicates changes in behaviour are needed. Here HR can play a crucial part, by helping the organisation and the employees to make real behaviour changes. HR professionals understand both business and people, therefore HR can help to make real change happen. Deshler also emphasise that HR managers must claim their role as change transformations agents. This is in line with how LaMarsh (2004) and Peacock (2008) argue that HR have an important role to play in change, but at the same time, HR must claim their role as a strategic partner in change (LaMarsh, 2004) and define what they can contribute with to the business (Peacock, 2008). Choi (2011) argues in a literature review that change efforts often have shown to be unsuccessful, and do not result in sustained change. Also, several studies show that the reason organisations fail in their change efforts is because leaders of change underestimate the reactions of the employees. Therefore, as discussed by Choi, since HR professionals contain knowledge of employee attitudes, they should have a key role in change management (Choi, 2011).

A recent study by Brown et al. (2015) examines the impact of HR on employee change cynicism. Employee cynicism is expressed in negative thoughts about the possibility of successful changes. The results show that the more experience employees have had of changes in the workplace, the more change cynicism is developed. However, depending on what role HR takes on in a change can have a significant impact on whether employee cynicism will be evolved in the first place. HR taking on a *strategic change agent role* had a positive impact, and the levels of employee cynicism decreases. On the contrary, when HR takes on an *administrative expert role* in change, levels of employee cynicism will increase. The researchers suggest that this can be an effect of HR coming in late in the process when taking on an administrative role, and therefore they cannot interpret the change from an employee perspective and recognize the employee needs. HR having limited information and

therefore the information they give to the employees is insufficient, which can grow negative emotions among employees. Therefore, the authors argue that HR can contribute in an organisational change by being a strategic agent and with this prevent the development of employee cynicism. Further, since the results showed that the experience of a quantity of changes increases employee cynicism, the authors argue, that HR taking on a strategic change agent role will also have a positive effect for future changes, when employees get more positive experiences from change (Brown et. al., 2015).

What can be concluded is that people issues are important to deal with in change, and here HR is argued to have high knowledge. Although, this does not imply that HR should be solely responsible. As for example Ulrich (1997) argues, HR and line managers should work together when managing change.

Theory

This section will present the theoretical perspectives of interest for this study. In order to understand changes in organisations, there are different perspectives of change important to have in mind. The two most common stances are the *planned approach to change* and the *emergent approach to change* (By, 2005) and these will be further elaborated. There has also been shown from previous research that the change agent role could be potentially conflicting, confusing and hard to manage in practice, since it is multifaceted consisting of overlapping roles (Caldwell, 2001:2003). Thus, *roles in organisations* is another theoretical perspective applicable for this study.

The nature of change

The planned approach to change

There are different perspectives on change in organisations. *The planned approach* takes the stance that changes can be planned (Burnes, 2009). This implies that organisations can identify an area where change is needed, evaluate this area and if needed, implement a change (ibid). The study by Alfes et. al. (2010) explained earlier, belongs to this perspective. The process dimension used by Alfes et. al. is collected from Hayes (2010) who present a model of the change process. The first step of the model is *recognising the need for change*, a change process start with identifying external events or internal conditions that require a change to take place. Second step is *diagnosis*, and is a review of the present state as well as identifying the preferred future state. *Plan and prepare to change*, is the third step, and involves planning the process and addressing the people who will be affected. This is followed by *implementation*, where the plan is ensured to happen as intended. Last step is *sustaining change* and it is about making the change stick throughout the organisation, for example with feedback and reward systems that reinforces new behaviours (Hayes, 2010). The planned approach to change is being criticised for not being able to suit the constantly changing world (Balogun & Hope Hailey, 1999; Burnes, 2009).

The emergent approach to change

The emergent approach to change argues that change is not a linear process or an isolated event, but instead continuous and cumulative (Balogun & Hope Hailey, 1999; Burnes, 2009). It is argued by advocates of this perspective that this would better suit the continuously

changing environments that the organisations work in. The emergent approach believes more in bottom-up, than top-down processes, when initiating and implementing change (ibid). Czarniawska (2015) one of the critics to the planned change approach argues that bigger organisational reforms can have harmful effects on people as well as resources, since big changes will often have a high cost. The author argues that one problem with a planned change is that it takes time, and during this time everything will not stop and wait for the change to happen, instead life will go on. This poses a risk that at the end of the change the goal of the change will not seem relevant anymore. To revise the goals during the on-going change is according to Czarniawska not something common that companies do. Czarniawska also argues that those that govern planned changes have a hard time seeing other types of spontaneous changes, those that are not planned. The author means that there is a difference between innovation and invention, an innovation or improvement does not mean a dramatic change; instead it will improve what already exist (Czarniawska, 2015).

Mintzberg and Waters (1985) discuss planned and emergent perspectives on *strategies*. The planned approach to strategies, or what they refer to as *deliberate strategies,* can only be pure deliberate if the realised strategy turns out exactly as intended. In order for this to happen the environment must be perfectly predictable or under control and the intensions to have been exactly agreed on by every actor involved. For the *emergent strategies* to be pure, there are no intentions at all from the start. Both these strategies in their pure form are argued by the authors to be highly unlikely in organisations. They see these two perspectives more on a continuum, that there are more tendencies in both directions, but no perfect form. The deliberate strategy is argued to be more about direction and control while the emergent strategy opens up the idea of strategic learning. The authors argue that traditionally, intentions have been seen as pretty solid and actions are made to realise them instead of adapting to them. Emergent strategy is about adapting and learning what works. Especially in unstable and complex environments would a more emergent approach fit, as argued by the authors, where management can respond faster to the reality and act before they have a clear understanding of a situation. Although, sometimes deliberate strategies are needed, when management impose intentions on the organisation (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985).

Due to the fast paces of changes in today's business environments, managing change is a critical skill (By, 2005). Burnes (2009) argues that no matter what perspective on change one

take on, change has to be managed, meaning someone or several must take responsibility to make sure change happen, i.e. the role of the change agent. Balogun and Hope Hailey (1999) argue that there is no best way to manage change that fits all changes. The context needs to be taking into account. Instead of using best practice solutions, maybe there are more "best questions" that agents of change need to identify.

Roles in organisations

Roles in organisations describe the types of behaviour that is associated to a given position, initially developed from task requirements (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Rizzo et. al. (1970) describe that every position within a company should have specified tasks and responsibilities, and with this the management can hold employees accountable for certain behaviours, but also, this is a way to provide guidance and direction for employees on what they are supposed to do (Rizzo et. al., 1970). Katz and Kahn (1978) describe in the same way that roles represent patterns of behaviour required of the individuals who possess the functional role, regardless of their own personal wishes. An individual in a social system containing a role has demands of that role to act in a certain ways. In organisations individuals have less freedom to change their roles to personal preferences than in other social settings. Included in the concepts are, except for role behaviour, *norms* (general expectations prescribing and sanctioning the behaviours) and *values* (ideological justifications where the norms are rooted). The functional roles tie people together, and roles are interdependent on other functional roles. These other roles oneself has relationships with are referred to as *role sets*, and they are often dependent on that individuals' performance to some extent. This interdependency creates *role expectations*, i.e. beliefs about what someone should do or not do in their role. Role behaviour thus is motivated by these expectations of others and by accepting and fulfilling these. *Role sending* is what Katz & Kahn refer to when the people in the surroundings of one individual is communicating these role expectations in different ways (ibid).

Truss et. al. (2002) examine the changing HR functional roles with partly Katz & Kahn (1978) 'organisational roles' as a framework. The results from their study showed that organisational context had an impact on how strategic HR could be in their role, but also expectations from senior and line managers had a great impact, i.e. by sending signals to the HR function on how they should be and act. Although, results also showed that HR are not just passive receivers of sent role expectations, but have the possibility to actively shape the

nature of their role. Their behaviour was also partly shaped by their own will to act strategically. In one of the case studies the HR manager acted deliberately to change the role of the function by increasing visibility of HR and building credibility among other staff by showing how HR can contribute. With this the expectations among senior and line managers also changed in time and the HR department could take on a more strategic role. The other case-organisation was more transactional and showed a relatively small attempt to increase visibility and strategic focus, i.e. they did not change the expectations of other key role-set members (Truss et. al, 2002).

In an organisation and profession, one can possess multiple roles. For example a first-line supervisor who is partly a leader toward subordinates in one's unit but also has a role of taking directions from the next higher level of management. Therefore the first-line supervisor is a member of two subsystems. Personality could also have an effect on roles, in the way that the roles attract those individuals who are suited for them (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Ulrich (1997) states that to create value, HR must fulfil both operational and strategic roles as well as be responsible for both qualitative and quantitative goals. The HR role in itself therefore consists of multiple different roles, sometimes paradoxical, but Ulrich argue that this is necessary for HR to add value. Caldwell (2003) questions Ulrich's model due to the these multiple roles of HR professionals and that those might lead to enduring issues of role conflict and role ambiguity.

Role conflict

Role conflict is defined by Katz & Kahn (1978:204) as "the simultaneous occurrence of two or more role expectations such that compliance with ones would make compliance with the other more difficult". This is often due to disagreements of two or more role-senders. But it could also be that one role-sender is giving different expectations that are in conflict with each other Katz & Kahn (1978). Rizzo et. al. further explain how role conflict appears. It could be a conflict *within* the individual; that the person's own values are not in line with the role, called intra-role conflict. An example of this is "I have to do things that should be done differently" (Rizzo et al, 1970: 156) There could also be a conflict between the time, resources and capabilities of the person compared with the defined role, called intra-sender conflict. One example: "I receive assignments that are within my training and capability" (Rizzo et al, 1970: 156). A third type of role conflict is when having multiple roles that are in

conflict, called inter-role conflict, and examples of this are: "I am able to act the same regardless of the group I am with" and "I work with two or more groups who operate quite differently" (Rizzo et al, 1970: 156). The last type of role conflict is conflicting expectations or conflicting requests, example "I receive incompatible requests from two or more people" (Rizzo et al, 1970: 156). Role conflict could result in anxiety, tension and reduced effectiveness (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

Role ambiguity

Role ambiguity implies that an individual feels uncertain about what they are supposed to do in their role (Katz & Kahn, 1978). The experienced uncertainty could be on different aspects of the role, for example, what other "role-sets" one is included in, who to serve and the role behaviour in itself. Rizzo et. al. (1970) define role ambiguity firstly in terms of how predictable the outcome of one's behaviour can be. One example of this: "I do not know if my work will be acceptable to my boss" (Rizzo et al, 1970: 156). Secondly role ambiguity is defined in terms of how clear the role requirements are, two examples: "I know what my responsibilities are" and "I am uncertain as to how my job is linked" (Rizzo et al, 1970: 156). As with role conflict, role ambiguity could show negative consequences as high tension, ineffectiveness and lower levels of job satisfaction (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Jackson and Schuler, 1985).

Guest and King (2004) examine ambiguities in the personnel manager roles and find ambiguities exist. They find an ambiguity in the overlap between the personnel function as a specialist function and the personnel activities for all managers, i.e. what is the responsibility of the HR function compared with that of the managers in personnel matters. An HR director from the sample expressed that HR should support the business but sometimes rather feels like the business no longer takes responsibility because they think HR is doing it. The second ambiguity found in the study is the difficulty to measure HR performance and by that showing the contribution of the HR function to business performance (Guest & King, 2004).

Method

The upcoming section will present the methodological aspects of the study; the chosen design, the participants included, how data was collected and analysed. This will be followed by a discussion of reliability and validity, limitations and ethical aspects.

Research design

The study has applied a qualitative research design. Since the purpose with this study is to describe and analyse the impression HR professionals have on change, a qualitative study is an appropriate method. Qualitative method provides the opportunity to study people, and the perceptions they have as well as the meanings they make of their own situations, attitudes and actions (Hakim, 2000). The chosen type was *semi-structured interviews*. Interviewing is described as a flexible form of research, where the participant's thoughts are in focus. The goal is to collect detailed answers to get a deep understanding of a topic (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Hence, this method offers the researcher an opportunity to gather a detailed picture of the subject, due to the researcher meeting the participant, and therefore, gaining information directly with the opportunity to ask follow-up question (Hakim, 2000).

Information about participants

The HR-profession is the chosen sample for this study. The sample consisted of 21 participants; 14 with the title HR Managers/Personnel Managers, four was HR Directors, one with the title Vice President HR, one was a HR Strategist and one with the title HR Business Partner. As can be seen, 19 out of 21 respondents hold a manager position. Further, most of the participants were included in the top management team of each organisation. Since not much is known about the topic, it was decided to include HR-professionals from both private and public sector, and non-profit organisations, with the aim to get broad view upon the topic. 12 of the organisations were private, 8 were from the public sector, and one was a non-profit organisation. With this aim, the researcher also decided to include HR-professionals from different types of organisations. One respondent worked in a medium-sized organisation with approximately 100 employees, twelve respondents worked in bigger organisations with the minimum of 250 employees and ten respondents worked in global multinational companies. The participants had HR work experience in the range of seven years to 42 years, with the average of 18 years. The sample is therefore a mix of HR professionals, with the common link

that they all worked strategic with HR, but to different extent. Some of the participants could also refer to previous workplaces when they discussed their perceptions of change and their role, but the main focus was on their current organisation.

Participant selection

This study takes on purposive sampling, i.e. a sampling strategy that targets participants in a strategic way instead of randomly. Generic purposive sampling is when the researcher initially decides criteria for the type of participants needed in order to be able to answer research questions (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In the current study, participants that were found to be interesting for the study aim were contacted. Mainly HR managers and HR professionals working with strategic HR was targeted. Some participants the researcher contacted directly. Some others participant were contacted from two different HR networks, through the researcher's supervisor at the University of Gothenburg. Through these networks, contact was made with those who had reported an interest to be a part of the study. Finally, some participant were contacted through snowball sampling, which is a form of purposive sampling. Snowball sampling is when using the first established contacts in the study to get contacts with more participants (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In the first interviews, the researchers asked the participants if they had contacts with HR professionals that would match the study aim. Some of the participants in the study were contacted through this method. The contacts with the participants were made either through email or telephone.

Reflections of the study sample

From all participants that were contacted with the question if they would have the opportunity to participate in the study, several answered no or did not answer at all. Therefore, there is a potential problem with the sample that only HR-professionals that have worked a lot with change and feel that they have good experience to contribute with, would be the ones to agree for an interview. If that were the case, the sample would not provide a complete picture of HR and change management. Indeed, there were some respondent who stated they had an interest in the questions of change and said they had work a lot with these questions. Although, there were also some respondents that commented before the interview started that they hoped they could answer the questions, since they did not perceive that they worked with these questions in a "special way", i.e. they implied change management was not an area they perceived to have a special competence in. The rest of the respondents did neither say this was a topic they

felt interested in nor that they were insecure in giving satisfactory or "correct" answers about the topic. Therefore it could be argued that the sample represented a good mix of HR professionals based on the interest for change management as a HR topic. However, the majority of HR professionals in the sample hold a manager role, and this might affect the results since a management position often implies a higher role of authority and responsibility, something that is good to have in mind. Although, it can be argued that the sample represented is satisfactory to answer the research questions on how HR professionals perceive change and their role in change. However, this does not imply that generalisations can be made; this is a very small sample. Generalisations are not the purpose with qualitative research (Hakim, 2000).

Data collection and analysis

As been argued earlier on, this study has applied a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews as the chosen type. A semi-structured interview imply that the researcher has pre-prepared questions sorted in different topics in an interview guide. But these are very flexible in the sense that the interviewer has the opportunity to adapt the questions and follow the lead of the respondent. This type of interview is leaving space for follow up questions as well as getting in to areas picked by the respondent (Bryman and Bell, 2015). The interview guide in this study contained some pre-prepared questions (see appendix 1), but during the interviews the researcher remained flexible and followed the lead of the respondent. Therefore the questions did not always follow the same order, and different topics could come up in the interviews. The interview guide was developed with previous research and theory as inspiration. The researcher tried to avoid leading questions and wording in a way that got the interviewee to answer in a specific way. As argued by Bryman and Bell (2015) this is important to think about when both formulating interview guide and conducting the interviews. One example of this was the question of the HR role in change management. The researcher chose to word it with "What role do HR **have** in change according to your experience?" Instead of asking what role they *get* or *take*, since these word seemed more 'charged' with a leading direction. The interview guide was further revised during the period of the interviews. Questions that seemed irrelevant were deleted and some new questions were added around themes that seemed to pop up in several of the interviews.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes, the most common duration was around 45-50 minutes per interview. The interviews were recorded and permission for this was given from the respondent before the interview started. The benefits of recording are that the interviewer can put full attention to what is said in the interview and not worrying about writing it down, and also that you capture *how* something is being said (Bryman & Bell, 2015). All interviews were then transcribed accurately. The analysis for this study is done with *thematic analysis*. Thematic analysis is when the researcher search for themes and codes in the transcripts. For example, when searching for themes the researcher can look for repetitions, topics that often are brought up, similarities and differences between interviewees, missing and theory-related material, i.e. looking for concepts (Bryman & Bell, 2015). For the analysis, the researcher partly searched for repetitions, similarities and differences within and between interviews as well as looking for concepts. Further, all interviews were held in personal meetings.

Reliability & validity

Reliability is concerned with the measurement of the study, if a study that is replicated by another researcher at another time would reproduce similar results. *Validity* deals with if the method is investigating what it is supposed to investigate (Kvale, 2007). To judge the reliability and validity of a qualitative study the concepts of trustworthiness and authenticity can be used (Bryman & Bell, 2015). By being open with how the study has taken place, how the process has looked like as well as limitations, the researcher in this study has had the aim to build trust about the method and the study. Therefore, the researcher has described as well as keeping records of: the process of reaching the study problem, choosing participants, making transcriptions and analysis. As well as reflect on limitations and what potentially could affect the results. This is what Bryman and Bell (2015) refer to as *dependability* and is one aspect of trustworthiness that can be linked to judging the reliability of the study. The researcher has also during the analysis reflected on the credibility of the results from the participant's view, that is, that the findings and conclusions drawn are believable. This is what Bryman and Bell (2015) refer to as *credibility,* another aspect of trustworthiness. Due to a small study group, the results from this study cannot be generalised to a bigger context. The goal is instead to give a detailed picture of how the HR professionals in this study perceive change and their role in it. This is in line with how Bryman and Bell (2015) discuss

transferability. The authors argue that there are difficulties in qualitative research to transfer the results to another context and the aim should be at giving a thick description instead. This is another aspect of trustworthiness (ibid). The researcher in the current study has further reflected about objectivity, that is to not letting personal values or theoretical leanings steer the study a certain way. This is referred to as *conformability* by Bryman and Bell (2015), how to stay objective. Finally, the researcher has aimed to describe the participant's answers faithfully and fairly, that different viewpoints are lifted and having the aim to enhance the understandings of the topic. Bryman and Bell (2015) describe this as reflecting over the *authenticity* of the research.

Reflections and limitations of chosen method

The data in this study has been based on the participant's perceptions and thoughts. A case study could have provided the research with additional observations, that show how they act in their role in practice. This could be discussed as a potential limitation with the chosen method. However, the aim was to capture how HR professionals perceive the topic of change and with the chosen method, twenty-one HR professionals from different organisations could be reached, and this could be seen as a strength.

The researcher chose to not define or explain for the HR professionals what was meant with the concept of change in this study. This was consciously because the researcher did not want to lead them in to specific kind of changes, in order to get a broad picture of what changes they work with and how they perceived change. There could be both advantages and disadvantages discussed with this. A few of the respondents did express uncertainty about what changes they were supposed to talk about and maybe would have answered in more detail if they would have been provided with specifics about what type of changes to reflect about. On the other hand, by not defining change, a broad picture of different changes could be captured as well as how changes could be seen in other ways.

Ethical considerations

The participants were asked to voluntarily take part in the study, which they all agreed to. Before the interview started, the purpose with the study was explained and the interviewee was assured anonymity. The researcher also explained how the collected data would be used. The researcher asked about permission to record the interview and all respondents agreed to

this. This is in line with the ethical issues of interviewing according to Kvale (2007) who argues that the overall purpose should be explained, obtaining permission as well as securing confidentiality as important aspects. Kvale also emphasise awareness of interview situation, transcription and analysis. All of the interviews were held in private, mostly in the respondent's own office or a conference room at the company. One of the interviews was held in a coffee shop. This was on the initiative of the respondent and did not seem to affect the interview or the answers due to the quite calm surroundings. The researcher has been careful and accurate when transcribing as well as when translating answers from Swedish to English, so that the text stays loyal to respondents' answers.

Empirical Findings & Analysis

This section will present the empirical findings from this study as well as analyse them with previous research and theoretical perspectives as tools. In line with the aim of this study, the first part will present and analyse the HR professional's perceptions on change. The second part will continue by presenting and analysing how the HR professional's perceived their role in change. Further, as mentioned before, both public and private organisations were included in the sample, in order to collect a broad sample of HR professional's perceptions. It can be noted from the findings that there was no clear difference shown between these groups on how they perceived change and their role in it. Consequently they will not be distinguished in the following section.

HRs perceptions about change

In line with several authors in the literature (Brown, et. al., 2015; By, 2005; Kalyani & Sahoo, 2011) the majority of the HR professionals perceived that it is a continuously changing environment that the organisations must constantly adapt to, not to fall behind competitors. There is a need to be prepared for the future and changing to stay competitive, as was mentioned by several. The two following quotes represent this,

"Partly, it is about having the right structure and the right roles and the right organisation for tomorrow's needs. To constantly have a strategic workforce plan where we know what's happening in our world".

"From my perspective I would say, change absolutely, all the time. That's probably what we should get used to. That's what life looks like now. What was modern yesterday is not modern today".

These types of comments were apparent in the majority of the interviews. Although, there were a few that were more doubtful and questioned if sometimes change was more of a trend. One respondent stated,

"And that change is a trendy word, a trend that one has to change. It is not always necessary either".

Planning and implementing change

The majority of the HR professional talked about change in the same way as Burnes (2009) describes planned change, i.e. the possibility to isolate an area needed to change, plan and

implement the change. A few described the steps they took that were very similar to the steps described in the change model by Hayes (2010). Two quotes illustrate this,

"Based on that we made a future analysis, analysis of required needs, based on what challenges we will face. Because sometimes you need to change things in the business, not because they do not work, they may work today, maybe they worked yesterday. But in three years they will not work. (...) So the present state analysis is connected to a future state, a required need analysis".

*"We stand very much for structure and **how** this change, the process itself, is going to take place. Then it is the business that is responsible for the change and implementation in everyday life".*

The first statement illustrates the step *diagnosis* from Hayes (2010) model, reviewing present and future state. The second statement illustrates the steps *plan and prepare to change* and *implementation*. The first step of the model by Hayes, *recognising the need for change* was also often mentioned in a few of the interviews. The last step of Hayes model, *sustaining change*, was more rare to bring up in the interviews.

Risks and challenges with planned change

All of the participants could see several challenges and risks with change, and these were discussed to a great extent in relation to planned changes. This is in line with critiques of the planned approach to change that have argued that these changes do not suit a constantly changing world (Balogun & Hope Hailey, 1999; Burnes, 2009). From the current study, when discussing *challenges*, the most common types mentioned were communication, employee resistance, time and tempo. With communication the challenge was to reach out to employees as well as knowing how much communication is needed. To avoid employee resistance, the challenge was to motivate for change and to get everyone on board since not all will like the changes. Change was claimed by several to take long time, especially changing behaviour, and you need to let it take time as several of the participants stated. This in combination with the high pace of changes there is today was argued to be a challenge.

Further, all the HR professionals could also see several *risks* with change. For example, several participants mentioned the risk that people will quit or there is a drop in efficiency and engagement among employees, or that the change initiative leads to no sustained change in the end. Change fatigue, i.e. that people get tired of always having to change was stated by the majority as a risk with changing to often. The challenges and risks that the HR professionals

in this study describe, are in line with how Czarniawska (2015) describes that the bigger organisational reforms can have a high cost for companies and effect both people and resources negatively. Czarniawska emphasise the problem of changes taking a long time as some of the participants also stated in this study. As Balogun & Hope Hailey (1999) and Burnes (2009) argue that constantly changing landscape and planned changes do not fit, this could be argued to be valid from the current study's findings. That change takes time to implement does not fit with the fast pace of changes.

Another discussion that came up in a few of the interviews was the risk of changing for the sake of changing, due to all the negative effects that could arise from change. This can be illustrated by the following quote,

"It may happen that change becomes something of an end in itself, it has to be so much change all the time, it feels like it is more prestige in doing change than making sure the foundation is made well (...). Then you can loose energy in what is already good because you only focus on change".

On this topic there was differences found in the sample. Another respondent thought changes were absolutely needed and stated,

"Obviously there is a some form of limit, but I do not think a serious company is in a position to change for the sake of changing. Because change also cost money. So it must be well-founded".

A few respondents reasoned that yes, there is a risk to change for the sake of changing, since you might loose of efficiency, change fatigue arise and so on, but there is a greater risk to not change and be left behind the competitors.

Adjusting and adapting as a way to change
Even if the big majority talked about changes from the planned perspective, there were several of the HR professionals that also discussed that companies should, and to some extent do, work with smaller "organic" changes. This is in line with how Balogun and Hope Hailey (1999) and Burnes (2009) describe the emergent approach to change, that is to view change as continuous and cumulative instead of an isolated event or a linear process. One respondent mentioned that to work with these changes more might reduce the risks that often arise with bigger and planned changes,

"Maybe one could make it a bit less dramatic with small adjustments. That's why it's so good with these organic changes all the time, that you can constantly develop and improve your business. So you

do not have to do these big reorganizations that require a lot of time, or major change work if you were constantly working on changes in small doses and if you had a culture that was change prone."

To work with smaller changes, to constantly simplify and improve and how HR can support these was mentioned in some of the interviews, even though, it was more discussed as an option, not as something that was common to work with. To work with changes like this were seen as a way to avoid the risks with the big changes, to stay competitive and as an easier way to get employees on board. This is in line with how Czarniawska (2015) criticise bigger reorganisations and highlights the benefit of improving what already exists, to avoid the dramatic changes and negative effects following them. Balogun and Hope Hailey (1999) and Burnes (2009) argue that these types of changes would better suit the continuously changing environment organisations. There was one respondent in this sample that described a more emergent approach on change, in that bigger scale, planned changes was rarely something they worked with due to the continuously changing business context they were in,

"...in our concepts of change is that it is always, it happens constantly. So it is really more an adaptation so to say (...) so it is more of the smaller continuously improvements"

The respondent above although mentioned, that sometimes bigger changes that are planned are necessary, as for example system changes. This is line with how Mintzberg & Waters, (1985) argue about planned and emergent *strategies*. The emergent strategies are about adapting and learning what already works and this is argued to better fit an unstable and complex environment, since management can respond quicker to reality and act before a clear understanding is achieved. Although, Mintzberg and Waters also state that sometimes planned strategies are needed in that managers impose intentions on the organisation. Even if emergent approach were not as outspoken in the other interviews, reflections about it, that sometimes you do not realise that you work with it was shown in some interviews. One respondent stated,

"... last year we worked in a completely different way, but you have not really realised that you are making these change journeys yourselves".

Balancing change and stability
Another frequent topic in the interviews from this study, was the problem of the instability and uncertainty employees might experience in a change. Several respondents claimed that

employees and organisations have a need for stability, but at the same time stated the necessity of constantly changing. How should this be balanced? One respondent stated,

"And you must respect that how... I must also create my new value, I cannot just let go and start, I have to find security somewhere in this new value"

As mentioned before, one of the most common risks perceived was that changing a lot creates change fatigue among the employees. Several respondents argued that it is important to give the employees the time to "recover" in between the changes. This takes on, as described before, a planned approach to change, that view change, as an isolated event (Burnes, 2009). It can also be argued to be in line with the problems of planned perspectives that its critics argue, that these changes do not suit a constantly changing landscape (Balogun & Hope Hailey, 1999; Burnes, 2009). If there are constantly changes, how can there be time to rest and recover? As Czarniawska (2015) argues, changes take time and by the time change is completed, the world has continued to change and the aim with the change might not be relevant anymore. If Czarniawska's perspective is valid, it might be that new changes are needed instantly, and there is no possibility for this recovery. Another respondent stated the importance of communication to create stability:

"... when working with change and organisational development to keep the communication aspect all the time, because this it what can create security in a changing situation".

Similar kinds of statement about information and communication to create security were also found in other interviews. Another respondent talk about generating involvement to create this felling of security as well as *adding* new work methods instead of changing them completely:

"We have worked quite a lot with adding work methods and not completely let go and change. (...) I think it may be a risk, in a general process, a major development work, it can easily be that you release all familiar work methods and suddenly everything is new. And there is no organisation that can handle that, having no security anywhere, that everything is new, it does not work".

This shows an emergent perspective on change, to improve what already exists (Czarniawska, 2015) as a way to deal with the change and stability problem.

HRs perceptions about their role in change

The majority of the respondents perceived change tasks as a big part of their HR role, where change in different forms was something they worked with almost everyday, including both bigger and smaller changes. Comments like *"It feels like something you do every day"* and *"Every day, in one way or the other"* were typical answers on how often they perceived to work with change in their role as a HR professional. All participants stated that that HR has contributions to make in change management, for example by providing expertise on people in change, by planning and leading the change or by supporting process of change in different aspects. As several authors in the literature argue that change is about people (Balogun & Hope Hailey, 1999), changing behaviour, mind sets or motivation (Kalyani & Sahoo, 2011) and therefore HR should have role to play, was consistent with how several of the HR participants also described why HR should be included in change. This can be illustrated with the following quote,

"It's just in line with these other things, it's about people and we're good at people. This is what we are educated in".

Multifaceted change role

The HR professionals described a wide variety of work tasks that were included in the HR change role. A majority claimed that HR is a support function in change, mainly by guiding line managers through the change processes and coaching them on how to handle and talk with employees. A few of the respondents had a role to initiate and suggest change, often in collaboration with line managers. A bigger part of the participants were involved in planning the change process. To have a process role and contribute with competence about what is a suitable process and how will this take place, was apparent in several of the respondents answers. Several respondents also stated that HR had a role to provide expertise and act as a consultant, discussing ideas and problems, as well as provide expertise about labour law, employee reactions etc. This expertise role was both to line managers and top management group, as a base for decisions. Further, in the role of an expert, some respondents stated that HR had a role to ask critical questions. Also communication was mentioned of several as a part of the HR change role.

Obviously, the participants performed all these tasks to different extent, some were more operative in their role, like mostly supporting with labour law issues. Others had an additional

strategic focus, where they initiated, designed and drove the change process. Although, this shows how multifaceted the HR change role is, consisting of different roles and tasks, both operative and strategic. This is in line with the study by Caldwell (2001) where the HR change role showed to be multifaceted containing several different roles in itself. Multiple roles in itself does not need to imply a negative meaning. But it could have the potential risk to lead to a conflicting and ambiguous role (Caldwell, 2003; Katz & Kahn, 1978). For it to be a role conflict, Katz and Kahn (1978:204) define "the simultaneous occurrence of two or more role expectations such that compliance with one would make compliance with the other more difficult". From the interviews, role conflict in the change agent role according to this definition did not seem to be a big problem. Even if the role was multifaceted, the different tasks did not seem to be in conflict with each other. There were two potential sources of role conflicts that could be found in the HR change role. A few respondents expressed a tension in that HR is being a 'partner' and a 'police' at the same time. One respondent perceived that there were expectations expressed from CEO and top management of HR to control that line managers do what is decided, and at the same time there were expectations of HR to act as a partner to the line managers. This is a potential source of role conflict, more specific the kind of role conflict that Katz and Kahn (978) and Rizzo et al. (1978) refer to as a disagreement between two or more role senders, that these have different expectations. Although, this was only apparent in very few of the interviews. There was one more potential source of role conflict shown, in change competence that will be discussed closer in next section.

Change competence

The respondents perceived different knowledge and skills needed for HR professionals working with change. First of all, several mentioned the need to know about people, how they react in change. But also to have good knowledge about the business was seen as crucial by several respondents. As well as knowledge about change processes was argued by some. There were different opinions about if HR professionals have the necessary competence about change management. Several perceived that HR do have the necessary knowledge, but that changes does not always turn out the way one might think in reality, and therefore experience is important. This can be illustrated in the following quotes,

"Knowledgeable, we are probably good, but skilfully I sometimes doubt a little bit… to go from theory to practice".

"One know the theoretical behind, like what does the change curve look like, but to actually take it in and work with it practically in projects… that is a competence based on pure experience".

On the other hand did some of the respondent perceive that HR did not have necessary knowledge and skills about change,

"I think it's a skill that I see and hear from HR colleagues that you feel a bit uncertain and thin in that area".

That some felt insecure about change knowledge could be argued to be a potential source of role conflict. Rizzo et. al. (1970) describe the intra-sender conflict as partly about a conflict when someone feel the assignment is not within ones capabilities and training. As a few stated that they perceived to not have the necessary knowledge, this could be a source of role conflict. Although, this assumes that they **get** the assignments to participate in change, in the areas they feel lacking of knowledge. Therefore this is argued to be a *potential* source of role conflict.

Some of the HR professionals expressed that competence development in change management as an area for improvement. One respondent argued that changes happen more than labour law issues, and in the same way that HR updates themselves about labour law should they also constantly competence develop in change management,

*"HR professionals must really make sure they know, because this is really, this will be with us for many years to come. So it's about not just believing that you **can**. You have to learn it and go to lectures, read and develop as a HR department all the time."*

Another respondent in on the same track,

"… competence development for HR, its really there where there is a great opportunity and great potential and that's where I see HR has the important role to play in the future. So I think that, considering HR, there should be more investments around becoming really good and professional within this".

Another aspect showing in the interviews was the importance to collaborate with other department, and that change is not something HR should do solely themselves. The communication department was especially mentioned to be a real help and strength. This is in

line with Ulrich (1997) who argue that HR taking on a change agent role does not imply they need to perform all the change work by themselves.

To sum, even if the change role showed to be multifaceted, and some of the HR professionals perceived to lack knowledge in the area of change management, there were no clear role conflicts shown. Although, the change role showed to have potential of role conflict.

The perceived ambiguity of HRs role in change

As stated earlier, a majority of the HR professionals argued change issues as being a big part of their HR role. Although, what also shown from the interviews was that some respondents perceived HRs role in change as unclear. According to Katz and Kahn (1978) and Rizzo et. al. (1970) when someone possesses a role in an organisation, this role should provide guidance on what one is supposed to do. For the majority of the participants, HR did not have an outspoken change role in their organisations, even if all were included in change, to different extent. Also the area of change in itself was perceived as unclear by some. One respondent described it as a "fluffy area". Some participants also perceived it as unclear what role HR is supposed to have in change, as illustrated by the following quote,

> *"... it's a pretty diffuse concept, because I mean, what is the change and what is it HR is going to be involved in?"*

One respondent stated that it was clear that HR had a role in change but not **what** this role is. This is in line with how Rizzo et. al. (1970) describe role ambiguity, where unclear requirements lead to uncertainty and ambiguity. Also, how predictable the outcome is of one's behaviour is another type of role ambiguity described by Rizzo et. al. If change in general as well as the role is perceived as unclear, it may be difficult to predict the outcome of ones behaviour and what behaviours are suitable. For other respondents it seemed to be more clear what role HR had. In one of the interviews, the respondent explained how they had defined what HR are supposed to do in change,

> *"So that it does not become an unclear thing, but it's well defined, **how** do I support change issues?*

In this company had HR defined and developed a change process as a model. This change process was used as an HR process, the respondent explained,

"And that process, that is, the knowledge of the process, this is owned by HR, just like a recruitment process. If you are a manager and need to recruit then I will tell you that this is what our recruitment process looks like, these steps need to get done, but you do them. And the same here, now we have a change, so our change process looks like this, these are the steps."

This is in line with the reasoning by Lemmergaard (2009) and Peacock (2008) who emphasises the importance of defining and clarify the roles of HR. The study by Lemmergaard (2009) showed that HR taking on multiple roles was not a problem in itself, the key is to define and clarify them. This can be supported by Katz and Kahn (1978) that state that role ambiguity arise when people are uncertain of what they are supposed to do in their role.

Unclear responsibility

Several of the HR professionals in the study perceived that responsibilities between HR and the line managers sometimes were unclear, and that HR in some cases get to take over the responsibility from the managers. One respondent expressed,

"...there are many people who find it difficult with changes, and sometimes a bit unpleasant. Especially if the change means something for the individual, in one's own department. Then you do not really want to be manager anymore. And you want to shift that responsibility on someone else who knows it better".

The unclear responsibilities was further argued by a few of the respondents to have led to that HR became a scapegoat in change, as can be illustrated in the following quote,

"It has happened that we agreed on something, {in the top management group}, *and then one week after, I heard it was talking in the organisation, that HR has said that we are going to do this".*

Several of the respondents also argued that it is very important to be clear with what HRs role in change is and that HR can give suggestions and advices, but it is the manager who decides in the end. The unclear responsibilities could be argued as an additional reason of the change role being perceived as ambiguous. One of the types of role ambiguities defined by Rizzo et. al. (1970) is due to the responsibilities being unclear. This is further in line with Guest and King (2004) who argue that one specific HR role ambiguity is the unclear responsibility between HR and line managers. In the same way the result from the study by Guest and King showed that HR sometimes felt that the line managers did not take on their responsibilities

because they expected HR to do it for them. Therefore, it could once more be argued that HR needs to define and make clear what their role and responsibilities are in change management

Expectations of HR

As could be seen from previous section, some of the HR professionals perceived the role in change as unclear and ambiguous, and others perceived it as more clear. From the role perspective, expectations from others play an important role. As Katz and Kahn (1978) argue, how one act in their role is depending on what expectations others have on that role. The participants in this study experienced very different expectations of the HR department in change. The sample could be divided in three groups, where the first group experienced very high expectations from others when it came to change management. As one respondents expressed,

"Very high expectations. Sometimes I think they are unreasonable, because it feels almost as we get… we almost have higher expectations on us than the closest manager, or the responsible manager. And I do not think that's really good actually."

The second group of respondents express that there are low expectations of HR, one respondent stated,

"In a change, I think the expectations are quite low, because I don't think they always know that we have that competence. That's what I believe, its more that the organisation still see HR quite a lot as this base producer, which produces wages and those more administrative benefits".

Then there was the third group, that stated that expectations of HR could differ in content, what HR were expected to do or that the expectations were dependent on the type of change, or whom the expectations came from, as can be illustrated in the following quote,

"Very different in my opinion. (…) There are those who think HR should serve with everything (…) what I would call the more traditional human resource work. Then there are those who think HR should be curators, that you should go to HR when feeling bad or having problems (…). And then there are of course those like… I think more and more in management positions who see what HR can contribute with from a business perspective".

This is in line with Edgley-Pyshorn and Huisman (2011) who found that the expectations surrounding the HR function in change could be very diverse. As argued by Katz and Kahn (1978) this will also affect how one will *act* in their role. It could therefore be assumed that

the HR respondents that experienced higher expectations also had a bigger role to play, than those respondents that experienced lower expectations. In fact, there were examples from the current study of HR professionals that experienced high expectations that were highly involved compared to those that experienced low expectations. This is in line with the study by Truss et. al (2002) that showed that the expectations, or 'sent signals' from line managers and senior managers had a big impact on how HR acted in their role. It could further be argued that experience different expectations, from different people and groups within the organisation, as some respondents from the interviews stated, could give rise to role ambiguity, due to individuals then feel uncertain about what they are supposed to do (Katz & Kahn, 1978). The fact that the respondents experienced very different expectations also shows that the role for HR in change is not very clear and transferable, but instead very organisational specific.

Taking the role and building trust

Several of the respondents perceived that that HR needs to **take** the role they want to have in change. This can be illustrated in the following quotes,

"And then you get included, if you are raising your hand and says, I think like this, then you often get task to do it".

"... HR has a really important role here and its as always, if you do not take the role you will not get it. Then others will do it. If you feel that you can contribute with your profession, then you must have confidence to do it."

The taking of roles was argued in relation to a strategic change role, that the more operative parts of change would be automatically put on HR in change, like labour law issues. But if you want to be included strategically, then you need to take that role, its not always obvious that this role is requested, as was agreed by several of the respondents. This is in line with how Deshler (2016) and LaMarsh (2004) argue that HR must claim their strategic role in change.

Several of the HR professionals also stated that HR needs to build up trust and credibility, before they will get an obvious role in change. The following quotes illustrates this,

"... in HR we have a good, a high credibility in the organisation. We are highly appreciated for what we do and get very good feedback. And then you have a trust capital when you enter a change process and you are at least listened to in the beginning (...). The key is to be accepted…"

"...Everything is about if managers have confidence in me, and what I do, or for HR and what we do. Yes, then we get a bigger role".

"So first, HR must have earned it by showing that you are being useful, then you are an important player. Then it can't be kept away from anyone, that HR has a crucial role in change work."

Further, some respondents perceived it was depending on line and senior whether they let HR have a role or not in change.

The taking of roles and showing what HR can contribute with, can further be analysed from Katz and Kahn (1978) framework about role expectations. Some are formally expectations developed from task requirements. But it is also expectations formed from other role sets about how a person should act in a role. Therefore, it could be argued that they are able to change. As the study by Truss et. al. (2002) on HR roles showed, that HR professionals are not just passive receivers of sent role expectations, but can actively shape their roles, by building trust, credibility and showing how they contribute. The expectations changed with time when the HR managers in the study consciously started to act differently (Truss et. al., 2002). Several of the HR professionals in the current study shared these perceptions, that HR needs to take the role and show what they can contribute with. It can be argued that by time, the expectations will change and they will be more naturally included in the strategic change, if this is desirable. Building trust was also about being a good operative support, as stated by several of the respondents. This shows the necessary link between the strategic and operative roles, also in change.

There was one respondent in the study, who also shared this perspective that HR needs to take the role and to show their contributions, but this participants at the same time problematized why it is like that, as can be showed in the following quote,

"I usually say that it is a little unfair with HR, because the economists for example, it is always very clear what their role is, nobody questions it. But when you work at HR you always need to earn your role. It's never really so clear."

There was also a few that stating that what change role one takes on is also dependent on the HR professional her or himself. If a person has an interest in these questions, then they take the role, read up on the topic and want to learn and contribute. This is in line with how Katz and Kahn (1978) argue that personality can have an affect on roles, that individuals are attracted to roles that suit them.

External consultants

One topic that came up in several of the interviews was external consultants, and whether or not this is a necessary support. Several had experience from working with external consultants in change. The role of the consultants could for example be to help out planning the change and to get the change process started. One respondent stated it was more common before to take in external consultants, but today it is expected that HR and managers have the best skills for change management. There were different opinions on the need of external consultants, some perceived consultants as necessary due to the time and energy a change take, others were more critical. These different opinions can be illustrated in the following quotes,

"... you think you should do everything yourself. And you shouldn't, you should work with consultants (...) And sometimes I think HR is a bit too, just because we are used to having so extremely many areas, so we gladly take on one more. And I think that's a giant trap. That you actually work with consultants. Then you could have the consultants as your own method support, nobody needs to know".

"Its to often that you take in external help. Who comes in and makes an effort and then disappears from there. And I have just seen so many failed examples of that."

Another respondent argued the importance of learning change from experience,

"It's also many times that you take in consultants working with changes in an organisation. And then maybe HR does not really participate in the process, so the consultant will do it and they will leave their report and then you're supposed to take it from there. I think it's good sometimes that HR is involved, sometimes it's good to have consultants, but sometimes its also good that HR is involved in the small changes and uses their skill and really think about change competence and such things."

There were also a few stating that HR sometimes value themselves low, as one respondent stated,

"I also believe it is about how we value ourselves and what value we put on ourselves within the HR function. (...) And looking at how we value ourselves in HR in relation to how we value others, for example in a management team, we value ourselves considerably lower than the others in the management team".

Another respondent argued that low confident was sometimes a reason why external consultants are brought in,

"But I think sometimes we buy ourselves free, so to say. If we buy that external consultant and it goes bad, we can say, well that was a very weak consultant"

External consultants could be analysed from a role ambiguity perspective, in those cases where the participants stated that feeling insecure sometimes led HR to take in external consultants. This is in line with the definition of role ambiguity and feeling uncertain about what one is supposed to do in their role (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Further, as some of the respondents perceived that external consultants in some cases were brought in unnecessarily, with the result that HR is left with a recipe formulated by the consultants that they do not really understand. And they miss the opportunity to learn from experience. Although, as some respondents argued external consultants are good, it can provide manpower and extra competence. The risk seems to be when external consultants takes the job HR could do and HR is not involved and learn from the experience.

HRs perceptions about change agency

It was also shown from the results that there were differences in what the HR participants perceived the role of HR in change should be. As argued by Caldwell (2001) and Ulrich (1997) the future HR functions should take on a *change agent role*. The change agent role implies a strategic focus on change (Ulrich, 1997) and is in the literature describe as making change happen by understanding the change processes, creating commitment to the process and ensuring change to happen (Balogun & Hope Hailey, 1999; LaMarsh, 2004; Ulrich, 1997). Alfes et. al. (2010) define a *change driver* as an HR department that is both highly involved in the change process as well as deploying a range of HR practices. Some of the participants in the current study perceived their contribution more in terms of operative support, like labour law support. Others perceived it as more of a strategic contribution, i.e. in terms of a change agent role, like designing and driving the change process. And a third group perceived both parts. There were different opinions of if HR should be a driver of change or

not. A few stated that HR contributed by being a driver and leader of the process, as one stated about HRs contribution,

"To drive the process further, to all the time challenge and question and make sure we have the right model and the right skills to deliver what is required".

"So I think it will be even more important in the future if you are looking at today with automation, robotisation. So much of that traditional HR work, if you think about it, like recruitment, how much you can predict through data analysis and everything. I think that this with change management will be one of the critical areas for HR in the future, to drive it, definitely"

But a few others were more critical to HR as a driver of change,

"The contribution in itself is change management support. That we understand our role in being a support, that we are not going to drive the change. That the business must do".

There was also several that emphasised the importance of collaborate with other functions in change, mostly mentioned was communication department. But also to have a tight collaboration with line managers was seen as a key. Ulrich (1997) argues that as change agents the goal for HR is to get the change completed, rather than to implement change. But as could be seen from the results in this study, some were sceptical of HR having the role that "make change happen" and perceived HR more in terms of a support.

Deshler (2016) has a different take on change agent, when stating that HR as change agents should help leaders identify the barriers of change as well as how to overcome them. The HR change agent role according to Deshler is to help the leaders reflect on their assumptions and enhance their understanding of the organisation's ability to perform, by asking tough and probing questions. This could be argued to be more of an expertise function, and from this point of view, several respondents in the study perceived this to be HRs role. HR was mentioned by several to have a role to provide expertise and ask critical questions, as stated buy one respondent,

"So all the preparation and to secure… and then you can join the steering committee in this case cause it was a big project, and to secure… you ask the control questions more or less, are we on the right track?"

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to describe and analyse the impression HR professionals have on change. The background is the popular framework of Ulrich (1997) where HR was encouraged to take on a change agent role. This section will deepen the discussion of the results from this study, with the help of previous research as well as the theoretical frameworks *the nature of change* and *roles in organisations*.

The constantly changing organisation

The majority of the HR professionals in this sample perceived change from mainly a planned perspective. This implies that it was more common to perceive change as something that can be evaluated, planned and implemented, as the planned perspective of change advocates (Alfes et. al., 2010; Burnes, 2009; Hayes, 2010). There was one respondent that perceived change from more of an emergent perspective, i.e. that it is difficult to isolate and plan, but instead something that is continuous (Balogun & Hope Hailey, 1999; Burnes, 2009) and the respondent stated that they worked more with adaptations. Even though a planned approach was a more common perspective, but there were several risks and challenges connected to this approach. For example, employee resistance, the length of time a change takes, a drop in efficiency, change fatigue or that the change would not be sustained in the end. Due to this, a few respondents reflected on how smaller changes, to adjust and adapt current work methods, would be a better fit sometimes. This shows that some respondents reflected on an emergent approach in the same way as Czarniawska (2015) emphasising smaller improvements as a better way to change to avoid the many risks with planned approach. Since there are many risks and challenges surrounding the bigger, planned changes, agreed upon by both the HR professionals in this sample and the literature, it might be considered that an emergent perspective should get a higher focus in organisations. Especially since the majority of the HR professionals perceived change as necessary and as a constant pressure in order to stay competitive. As argued in the literature (Balogun & Hope Hailey, 1999; Burnes, 2009) and by some of the respondents in the current study, if the organisations are in a context that constantly changes, an emergent approach might be better suited. There was a clear example of this in the study, in the change and stability contradiction. Several of the respondents argued that stability and security are also needed and employees need recovery time in between changes. This can be argued to not suit well with a constantly changing world. As

Czarniawska (2015) argues, the bigger planned changes takes time and during this time the organisation and the world will continue to change, so the risk is that by the time the change is implemented, the goals for changing in the first place are no longer valid; the organisation needs to change again. If Czarniawska's perspective is valid, it might be that new changes are needed instantly, and there is no possibility for this recovery. Change fatigue might arise as a consequence. With an emergent approach, the changes are smaller, continuous and less dramatic as well as easier to get employees on board with (Czarniawska, 2015). This might be more functional to work with.

That said, it must also be emphasised that a few respondents were more restrictive of the need to always change. They argued that change sometimes felt more like a "trend" and that it was more of a prestige to focus on change, rather than the operative day-to-day activities. Change must also be analysed with in context, as argued by Balogun and Hope Hailey (1999), it might not be every organisation that has a pressure for continuously changing. Either way, if one has the perspective that change is a constant need or not, this study highlights that an increased focus might be needed for the emergent approach when it comes to change. Having said this, it is still clear from the study that an emergent approach on change alone is not ideal. There were a vast amount of different changes mentioned by the HR professionals, some of which planned changes deemed to be necessary. This was also stated by one the respondent that had more of an emergent approach regarding change. The respondent argued that sometimes it is unavoidable with bigger, planned changes, for example a change of systems. This is in line with how Minztberg and Waters (1985) argue about planned and emergent strategies, that no pure form is highly likely in any organisation. Sometimes management need to impose intentions on employees. This is also how Balogun and Hope Hailey (1999) argue, that there is no 'best way' to manage all changes. As Mintzberg and Waters (1985) describe strategies on a continuum between the planned and emergent approach, changes could also be viewed this way. Today there appears to be a predominant focus on planned changes. This study suggests that organisations and HR professionals begin to investigate how to work with smaller changes, by adapting and adjusting what already works to a greater extent.

One respondent in this study explained how they developed change with adding work methods, instead of changing from scratch, as a way to create security. This shows that the respondent could see the benefits with smaller changes to reduce the instability, in line with

how Czarniawska (2015) and Mintzberg and Waters (1985) talk about improving what already exists. Another respondent in this study talked about developing a 'change prone culture', where constant adaptations and adjustments come from the teams and individuals all the time. As Balogun and Hope Hailey (1999) and Burnes (2009) state, the emergent approach believes more in a bottom-up, rather than a top-down process, when initiating and implementing change (ibid). Creating conditions for these smaller changes could therefore be an option for the HR change role. This might be one way to work more with an emergent approach on change, and potentially to some extent avoid the risks and challenges with the planned changes.

The important, yet ambiguous change role

As previously mentioned in this paper, a survey study by Rynes et. al. (2002) as well as a replication study by Sanders et. al. (2008), indicated that HR professionals did not perceive change competence for HR as highly important to them. Additionally, in a Cranet study (2014) conducted on Swedish HR managers, change was not ranked as one of the most important areas for improvement. This was interpreted by Lindeberg and Månson (2015) as either that change was an area HR managers consider themselves to control or simply not an area they consider as important to be good at. This would be in line with Rynes et. al. (2002) and Sanders et. al. (2008). The results from this study showed to contradict the results from Rynes et. al. (2002) and Sanders et. al. (2008). The majority of the respondents in the current study did perceive change as important and necessary for the organisations in order to stay competitive in the constantly changing landscape. Furthermore, all the respondents perceived that HR had contributions to make in change. There were also respondents that perceived that HR was lacking in change competence. Mostly, in putting knowledge into practice, and learning to be good in change by experience, but also some felt weaker in the knowledge area and expressed a wish for competence development in change. That said, it can be argued that in contrast to the results from Rynes et. al. (2002) and Sanders et. al. (2008) the majority of the HR professionals in this sample did perceive change competence as something important. Only a few questioned the need for change and perceived it as more of a trend.

This shows the results also contradict how Lindeberg and Månson (2015) explain the findings from the Cranet study, that change is not something perceived as important to be good at for HR. Although, their other explanation, that change is an area that the HR managers consider

themselves to control, could be further elaborated. As could be seen from the results some respondents perceived that HR had necessary knowledge and skills in change. But there were also some that perceived that HR had the right knowledge but not the right skills, i.e. how do work with change in practice. There was a third group of respondents that overall felt "thin" in the area of change and wished for more competence development in change and they perceived change competence as an area for improvement. Therefore, the Cranet study results can only partly be supported of how HR perceive this as an area they control.

Why did these three studies then imply change as an area HR do not perceive as important? It could be considered if it can be a result of *how* this question has been understood by the HR professionals. As these three studies has assumed a change agent role, this has been asked from a strategic perspective, i.e. HR as a driver of change, developing processes and planning and ensuring change to happen, as the role of a change agent has been described in the literature (Alfes. et. al., 2010; Balogun & Hope Hailey, 1999; LaMarsh, 2004; Ulrich, 1997). As can be seen from the results in this study, there were different opinions found in the sample whether HR should be a driver of change or not. Several respondents perceived the HR role to be about supporting with planning and preparing the change process, which can be viewed as a more strategic approach. Some of the respondents mainly mentioned the HRM practices and activities they performed in change, such as supporting with labour law issues. Several perceived the role to be about advising and acting as an expert. This is in line with how Deshler (2016) described how HR in a change agent role should act, helping leaders identify the barriers of change as well as how to overcome them. Therefore, the contradicting results of the current study and the three quantitative studies results could be a problem of how the question has been comprehended and how the HR professionals see the change agent role. Another finding from this study was that the change role is perceived as unclear, that HR do have a role in change but it is not clear what this role is. This might be another explanation for the contradicting results, that the area of change is perceived as ambiguous and unclear. This result will be further elaborated in next section.

The multifaceted and unclear change role

The professionals described the change role consisting of different tasks and responsibilities, both with an operative and strategic focus. It was therefore a very multifaceted change role that appeared. This is in line with the study by Caldwell (2001) who argued that the change

role is multifaceted, consisting of overlapping roles. Caldwell argued that this would imply a complexity of the change role, and that these roles had the risk of being confusing and conflicting, thereby very hard to manage in reality (ibid). As was shown in this study, the change role was indeed multifaceted. Giving an overall picture of the respondents answers, the HR professionals described their role in change as a management support, an expertise function, a role to propose changes, to design, implement and drive the change forward. Also providing good operative support, dealing with labour law issues, manage communication and other administrative tasks was mentioned. A possibility that this multifaceted role would lead to role conflict, as argued by Caldwell (2001) could not be seen to a great extent in the current study. There was a potential for role conflict in that some respondents perceived they had a limited competence in change. Another potential role conflict of HR by acting as both a 'police' and a 'partner' toward the line managers, was mentioned by a few. Although, as can be seen from the results, the HR professionals perceived the change role as ambiguous to a higher extent than they perceived it as conflicting. As stated by several, change was perceived as a confusing concept as well as what role in this HR is supposed to have. The ambiguity was also apparent in responsibility, where the responsibility in change between HR and line managers was not always as clear cut. Furthermore, in some of the interviews, expectations of HR in change were diverse in the organisation, which also can be interpreted as a type of role ambiguity (Katz & Kahn, 1978). As argued in the literature, it is important to define and clarify the roles of HR (Lemmergaard, 2009). This was also argued in the current study by several respondents, where some emphasised that change also needed to be defined. As the study by Lemmergaard showed, HR taking on multiple roles was not a problem in itself, but the key is to define and clarify them.

What is required of HR to take on a change role?

As Caldwell argued in 2001, the future HR change role will not be a clearly defined generic role due to its complex nature. This study claims to share this view. The fact that the respondents experienced very different expectations also show that the role for HR in change is not very clear and transferable, but very organisational specific. Even though, all the participants in this study perceived that HR had contributions to make in change. As in line with previous research that argues the importance of HR in change, since HR has competence of behavioural and motivational aspects and have an understanding of employee reactions in change (Brown, 2015; Burke, 1997; Kalyani & Sahoo, 2011). It could therefore be

recommended for HR to take a role in change, if they do perceive they have contributions to make. As some respondents in the current study did state, HR needs to take the role they want to have in change. They cannot wait to be requested to help out with strategic change work, but must take the role, marketing themselves and show how they can contribute. This was argued in relation to the *strategic* change role since several claimed that HR will naturally get involved in the operational matters in a change, like labour law, administration and so on. Having confidence and take the role can especially be argued as important in those cases where respondents expressed that they perceived to have good knowledge about change, but not good skills, i.e. to go from theory to practice. Also, several argued the need for HR to show how they contribute and build up trust, and then the role will be put on HR more naturally once proven.

Also shown in this study, the change role was in some cases perceived as unclear and ambiguous, and as both respondents from this study and authors in the literature argue (Lemmergaard, 2009; Peacock, 2008) it is of importance of HR to define and clarify their roles and how they will contribute in change. Some respondents perceived it was depending on line manager whether they let HR have a role or not, as well as senior managers. As argued by Katz and Kahn (1978) how one acts in their role is dependent upon what expectations others have on that role. It can be interpreted that line and senior managers in this case do not expect HR to have a role in change. But as the study by Truss et. al (2002) show, the expectations sent by line managers and senior managers did change with time, after HR had started to act differently and shaping the new expectations.

As also shown, some felt insecure, that they did not have enough competence as well as the fact that change is fuzzy and it is not clear what HR is supposed to do here. As also argued by some, sometimes external consultants are maybe used unnecessarily. This could be interpreted as a negative circle, since several stated that HR has the knowledge but needs to learn from experience to be good in change. Although, some respondents argued external consultants are helpful by providing manpower and extra competence. The risk seems to be when external consultants take the job HR could do and HR is not involved and failed to learn from the experience. Therefore, competence development in change as some respondents requested could be argued as a way to enhance knowledge while at the same time taking on the roles in practice.

Conclusion

Twenty years ago, Dave Ulrich (1997) argued that HR should take an active part in building a competitive organisation in the future. He proposed a model containing four roles that he argued HR professionals need to take on, in order to become this core function within organisations. One of these was the role of HR as *change agent*. The aim with this study was to describe and analyse the impression HR professionals have on change, today, 20 years after HR as change agent was initially debated. This was especially of interest since there have been quantitative studies indicating that HR professionals do not perceive this role as very important (Lindeberg & Månson, 2015; Rynes et. al., 2002; Sanders et. al., 2008). This study contradict these findings, it can be argued that the majority of the HR professionals in this sample both perceived change and HRs role in change as an important area and role. One explanation for why these quantitative studies results differ from the current study could be in *how* the surveys asked about and defined this change role. As this study showed, the HR change role is multifaceted and complex, containing a range of tasks, both operative and strategic in nature. The change role showed to be perceived as ambiguous and unclear for some of the respondents. It could also be concluded that the HR professionals had very different expectations of them in change. This shows that this is role is very organisational specific and thus is not a clearly defined generic HR role. This is in line with how Caldwell argued in 2001, that there is a complex nature of the change agent role consisting of overlapping and confusing roles in itself. He predicted that the future of change agency is not going to be a clearly defined generic role.

It can further be concluded that the HR professionals in this study perceived that HR do have a lot to contribute with regards to change. Since the role was perceived as ambiguous by some and not as an obvious HR role in organisations it can be argued, in line with both the results from this study and previous research, the change role and responsibilities in change need to be defined and made clearer. It was further argued as needed by some respondents since change was described as a diffuse area in general, which might contribute to the confusion of the role. Additionally, a recurring theme was the thought that HR needs to take the role they want, market themselves with what they can do and show their contribution in change. It can be concluded from the discussion with role theory, that by taking these actions, the

expectations in the organisation on what role HR should have in change would probably change with time.

Finally, it can be concluded that the majority of the respondents perceived change from the eyes of a planned approach. At the same time, this approach showed to be connected to several risks and challenges. There were some of the respondents that therefore reflected about an emergent approach on change and argued that working with smaller adaptations and adjustments, as a way to change, might be a more beneficial approach to some extent. As Mintzberg and Waters (1985) argued, the emergent approach might be a better fit to the constantly changing and complex environments, that several of the respondents stated to work in. Another argument that the emergent approach could be used to a higher extent in organisations was found in the contradiction of change and stability. Several respondents argued the need for employees to have stability, and recover in between changes. This does not seem to fit the constantly changing landscape they at the same time argued to work in. An emergent approach on change and improving what already exists could be argued as one way to reduce the feeling of instability that arise with bigger planned changes.

Limitations and future research

The researcher did not define what types of changes that were going to be discussed during the interviews, in order not to lead the HR professionals to think in a certain way about change. Although, it could be discussed whether this still lead the respondents to think from a planned approach, since this could be argued to be the more common approach in organisations. It might therefore have been expected from the respondents that this is the perspective to discuss. This might have had an effect on the results. At the same time, since the respondents gave plenty of examples from planned changes, it can be argued that this is an approach organisations work with a lot, hence not certain whether this affected the results to a high extent. The emergent approach might have been discussed in more detail, if it would have been asked about more directly. Therefore, future research could ask more directly about the emergent approach and how organisations work with this as well as how HR professionals perceive this approach. Future research on HRs role from an emergent approach could be argued as important due to the several risks and challenges shown surrounding the planned approach. To find out how HR can support these types of changes could be of interest. As a

few respondents commented on in this study, developing a 'change prone culture' could be one way and this could be argued to fall under the HR role and responsibility.

Implications for HR professionals

HR professionals that perceive they have contributions to make in change and want to be a part of change are recommended to take the role they want to have in change, allowing them to learn from practice and showing their contributions. With this expectations from others will probably change with time. Also to define and clarify the role of HR in change and as well as clarify what are HR responsibilities and what are line managers responsibilities. Since some respondents argued they felt "thin" in change competence, as well since some perceived change as an topic for the future, it is recommended for HR to develop the competence HR require in change, both from planned and emergent perspectives. Additionally, putting higher emphasis to the emergent approach to change is further recommended, especially for organisations in constantly changing environments. HR is suggested to investigate what their role here could be here.

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Appendix

Interview guide

- Background questions:
  - Number of employees in the organisation
  - Position
  - Tenure
  - Number of years working with HR in total
  - Description of current role and responsibilities
- How often would you say that you work with change in your role?
  - Could you give examples of types of changes that you work with?
- Could you describe more in detail how your organisation works with change, by giving examples?
  - What does HR do more specific?
- Could you describe what role HR has in change according to your experience?
- What are the expectations on HR in change?
- Do you perceive any *challenges* working with change?
  - In that case, which and why?
- Do you perceive any *risks* working with change?
  - In that case, which and why?
- Do you perceive that HR has contributions to make in change?
  - In that case, which and why?
- Do you perceive that HR has the necessary competence about change?
  - If not, what do you think is missing and why?
- Is there anything else that we have not discussed or that I have not asked about that you want to bring up, on the topic change or HRs role in change?