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The Hybrid Nature of the e-HRM Professional: An Identity Perspective

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The Hybrid Nature of the e-HRM Professional: An Identity Perspective

Abstract

This paper provides insights into an under researched area of identity and identity work, that of the e-HRM Professional, drawing on scholarly work to date concerning career identity and hybrid identity. A review of studies to date indicates limited understanding of individual as professionals who inhabit a hybrid role 'betwixt and between' two technical specialisms. This paper sets out the rationale for a research study that places the individual e-HRM professional at the centre and responds to calls from scholars and practitioners alike.

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Keywords

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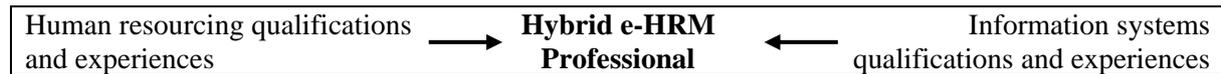
The way in which individuals construct their personal identity in the workplace and the complexity of identity dynamics has been well documented by international scholars (Casey, 1995; du Gay, 1996; Sennett, 1998). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) note that ‘people are continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness’ (2002: 626). Identity work, has been shown to be concerned with a diverse range of work including the work of specific job roles such as priests (Kreiner *et al.*, 2006), first-line supervisors (Down and Reveley, 2009), and managerial identity (Watson, 2008), to those working from home (Tietze and Musson, 2010) or in specific geographic locations (Kondo, 1990), and from the way in which work gets done through everyday organisational talk (McInnes and Corlett, 2012). An individual’s identity is bound up with the work that they do (Pratt *et al.*, 2006). This is particularly true of those who consider themselves to be a ‘HR professionals’ (Bell *et al.*, 2006; Pritchard and Symon, 2011), such that an individual’s job title has a symbolic resonance (Martinez *et al.*, 2008) and reflects status for the individual and others (Smith *et al.*, 1989). Thus, it matters (Orton-Jones, 2008) as it is an expression of ‘who I am’ (Caldwell, 2002; Grant *et al.*, In Press).

Previous studies regarding those undertaking professional work has emphasised defining professional work and categorizing occupations (Watson, 2002), where specialist knowledge is vital to ‘professional work’. The ‘professional rhetoric’ (Bolton and Muzio, 2008; Cheese, 2015) of the CIPD, the UK’s HR professional institute, illustrates a continuing attempt to define and gain credible ownership of strategic people management and associated professionals within its remit. However HR professionals tend towards professional insecurity (Caldwell and Storey, 2007) for a variety of reasons and it is therefore possible that e-HRM professionals, as a collective (Humphreys and Brown, 2002), may have similar concerns regarding their identity, status and career development.

The role of e-HRM professional is, in practice, a fairly recent phenomena, and has emerged to support the lack of technological skills of the HR specialist. Their role is primarily focused on e-HRM systems which comprise “web-based systems designed to support the implementation of human resourcing (HR) strategies, policies and practices in organisations (Ruël *et al.*, 2004) by a variety of organisational actors (Strohmeier, 2007)” (Tansley *et al.*, 2013: 1). Although reasonably well established in the USA (Schramm, 2006), the work of the e-HRM professional is still an exception in the UK. It has its antecedents in the literature of the last 40 years of electronic HRM (e-HRM) (see Bondarouk and Furtmueller, 2012). This developing literature is still emerging, however the majority of empirical studies are not conducted at the individual level. Rather scholarly work to date is mainly concerned with e-HRM systems themselves (for example, Hussain *et al.*, 2007; Raiden *et al.*, 2008; Kavanagh and Thite, 2009), the impact of technology on the HR function (Beadles *et al.*, 2005; Delorme and Arcand, 2010; Marler, 2010), the role of HR professionals (Hendrickson, 2003) and does not consider the e-HRM professional in the most wide ranging review of the literature to date (Bondarouk and Furtmueller, 2012). Early reference to the role is fairly descriptive, relating to limited discussion of the skills, knowledge and competences needed to perform such roles (Pasqualetto, 1993; Connell, 1995) and at this stage there is no sense of a ‘community of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger *et al.*, 2002; Wenger, 2004), although there are some more recent attempts to understand this role from a human capital perspective (for example, Williams, 2010). E-HRM professionals are drawn from HR or IS disciplines (see Figure 1). However, how individuals who undertake ‘hybrid’ e-HRM work make sense of their identity and their work within the context of an organisational setting is not yet empirically understood within scholarly literature.

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Table 1: E-HRM disciplines



This paper sets out a research agenda to investigate the hybrid nature of the emerging role of the e-HRM professional from an identity perspective, thus responding to the invitation for further empirical studies from Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) and Alvesson *et al.* (2008). Here ‘identity work’ is defined processually as an individual’s engagement in forming, repairing, maintaining, and strengthening or revising of their identities (Snow and Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). The intention here is to consider how these individuals make sense of their personal identity in their role and how this sense of identity positions such individuals within their organisational context, whereby “interpretively inclined organisational researchers [reveal] a vital key to understanding the complex, unfolding and dynamic relationship between self, work and organisation” (Alvesson *et al.*, 2008: 8).

For example, do e-HRM professionals perceive themselves as part of the HR function, the IT function, or perhaps ‘betwixt and between’ (Garsten, 1999) in a different function altogether? How does an individual’s functional development influence their sense of identity in their current role? To what extent do such individuals perceive their role as a profession in its own right? This positioning is likely to have implications for their career development (as professional identity is a predictor of career change intention - Khapova *et al.*, 2007), organisational succession planning (Guinn, 2000) and the development of the HR and IT functions of the future.

A second body of literature is drawn from notion of career identity, which is taken here as “a [dynamic] structure of meanings in which the individual links his [or her] own motivation, interests and competencies with acceptable career roles” (Meijers, 1998: 191 amended) and is not associated with one particular role, but is an assimilation (Meijers, 1998) rather than a product of various work-related experiences (Fugate *et al.*, 2004). Taking this perspective, it is helpful when constructing identity (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008) and thus identity work, to address the questions, ‘who am I’, ‘how do I act’ and ‘where do I belong’ (Fugate *et al.*, 2004). It is likely that an individual’s sense of career identity changes over time and particularly where an individual makes a significant change, moving from one specialist career to another; this is likely to be particularly problematic where these changes incorporate much of the original role. This creates a co-constructionist (Cohen, 2006), narrative-based project (LaPointe, 2010) for both the individual concerned and others with whom the individual is in close working contact in a particular organisational setting.

Finally the notion of hybridity is reviewed. The notion of the ‘hybrid’ role as a way of understanding individuals is not understood at this time. A hybrid identity synthesises two or more core, distinct identities simultaneously to construct a new distinct identity that it is relatively enduring. This phenomena has been used to examine the role of managers (Rees, 1996), accounting professionals (Miller *et al.*, 2008), information systems professionals (O’Connor and Smallman, 1995), and more recently the hybrid nature of e-HRM project teams from the position of identity ambiguity (Tansley *et al.*, 2013). Much of the work on hybrid identity to date is located in the cultural identity literature (for example, Luke and Luke, 2005; Chattalas and Harper, 2007) and in information systems literature (for example, Scarbrough, 1993), and there is also interest at an organisational level (Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997; Albert and Adams, 2003). Hybrids have “distinctive and relatively stable attributes and characteristics, and are not merely intermediary or transitory forms [and are defined here as] actors, entities, objects, practices, processes and bodies of expertise” (Miller *et al.*, 2008: 943-944), which may

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result in a “double consciousness’ [...] a kind of ‘two-ness’ where two identities try to exist within one person” (DuBois 1996 [1903], cited in Iyall Smith, 2008: 7). Where the work of Tansley *et al.* (2013) focuses on the e-HRM specialists within a team context, this paper specifically takes a micro-analytical approach and focuses on the tensions developed as a result of the individual’s ‘two-ness’.

Soenen and Moingeon (2002) discuss hybrid identities from an organisational perspective. Their framework (Table 2), proposing five facets of identity, provides a useful analytical framework to examine individual hybrid identities.

Table 2: The Five Facets of Identity (Soenen and Moingeon, 2002)

FIVE FACETS OF IDENTITY	DEFINITION
The Professed Identity	The professed identity of an organization is the answer organizational members provide to and for themselves when asked for their identity
The Experienced Identity	The experienced identity of an organization is the “local” form of social representation. It consists of a common knowledge collectively constructed about what the organization is for its members. “This has been conceptualized ... as shared cognitive beliefs, as collective cognitive maps, or as collective unconscious structures” (Soenen and Moingeon, 2002: 9).
The Manifested Identity	The manifested identity refers to the way identity is manifest in the organization’s routines, structure, performance, marketing position, etc.
The Projected Identity	A projected identity refers to those identity manifestations that are (more or less) consciously manipulated and presented to certain publics or audiences
The Attributed Identity	The attributed identity is the way the firm is seen by various publics

Recent work (Williams, 2010; 2014) suggests that many of these HRIS attributes and characteristics are innate and are made visible when an individual is able to work in a HRIS specialist role co-constructing a new identity in relationships with others (Gergen, 1994). The ‘five facets’ framework is utilized here as a way of surfacing the hybrid identity work of e-HRM professionals

Research Methods

The ontological orientation for this paper is founded on the premise that reality is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Cunliffe, 2008), and takes an interpretive analytical approach, being concerned to interpret the interpretation processes of others. In order to explore the nature and identity of e-HRM professionals, interviews with two e-HRM professionals are examined and offer a rationale for future research. These interviews are derived from two previous, un-related research studies that are separated by time and industry sector; the author of this paper was a member of both research teams. In the first research study, ‘Peter’¹ works in a global marine and aeronautics engineering organisation in the Midlands, UK. He is in his late 20s, based in the UK, and is part of a team of 10 e-HRM specialists, with an operational role. In the second research project, ‘Ann’¹, is in her late 30s, and works in the public sector in a large local authority in Wales; she has a strategic as well as

¹ ‘Peter’ and ‘Ann’ are pseudonyms.

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operational role. In this paper ‘Peter’ and ‘Ann’ illustrate examples of an ‘extreme case’ (Yin, 2003) or ‘critical case’ (Savin-Baden and Howell-Major, 2013) and are an illustration of a ‘well-defined group of people’ (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015) as it makes sense to choose cases that are ‘transparently observable’ (Pettigrew, 1988). These interview conversations (Yin, 2003) are offered as support for a larger study, but are explored in this paper to offer support for potential theorising regarding the notion of identity and hybrid identity work of professionals.

In summary, this paper contributes to the ongoing academic and practitioner interest in the development of the HR professional in a technological context (CIPD, 2007; Cheese, 2015). By drawing on previous empirical work from an identity perspective, and informed by reference to notions of career identity and hybrid identity in particular communities of practice, the role of the e-HRM professional is conceived ‘betwixt and between’ in a hybrid role. Future research will explore how individuals employed in these roles understand their identity work as professionals.

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