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Global Standards for Human Resources:
A Profession That Governs?

Ylva Ulfsdotter Eriksson
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Abstract: In 2011, an international project to standardize human resources management (HRM) started with the purpose of developing global standards for human resources (HR) in order to enable organizations to work more efficiently and be more resource-smart with respect to HR issues, but also to advance professionalism in the HR field. The HR profession can be defined as being rooted in an occupational professionalism with a certain amount of professional discretion. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the relation between standardization of knowledge and professional discretion within HR. A common argument from the sociology of professions is that standards limit and threaten professional discretion. In this paper, I argue that global standards may instead enhance the status of the HR profession, since HR standards are designed for managers to follow. Proposed ideas challenge the sociology of professions by approaching this subject from a different angle.

Introduction

During the last decade, attention has been given to the HR profession and its contributions to the organization and the business (cf. Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Ulrich, Younger and Brockbank, 2008). One party that has shown interest in the HR profession is the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), which in 2011 started a global project to develop international standards for human resource management (HRM). The international Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) had courted ISO since 2009, arguing that standards for HRM are warranted, and would improve professionalism within HR and thus benefit the profession (SHRM, 2013a).

> A consequence of the growth and diversity of those who operate Human Resources ('HR') roles has been their tendency toward fomenting proprietary and complicated solutions to management concerns where simplicity and consistency were warranted. Standardization is seen as a remedy to the bureaucratic inefficiencies that emerge from activities where self-conscious risk aversion can often overwhelm the flexibility needed in the modern marketplace (SHRM, 2013b)

To argue that standards promote professionalism and occupations' professional endeavors contradicts what has been stressed within the sociology of professions. Prominent researchers claim that standardization and bureaucratization reduce autonomy and discretion for professions, and hence are de-professionalizing (cf. Fournier, 1999; Sullivan, 2000; Evetts, 2003).

This article focuses on the relation between standardization of knowledge and discretion, and the possible implications for the HR profession. It conducts a theoretical discussion of whether standardization of HRM might have a positive impact on the HR profession and strengthen its professional status within the organization. According to researchers, HR does not qualify as a profession, and instead is defined as a 'semi-profession' (Brante, 2009; cf. 2011). The role, status and contributions of HR within organizations have been questioned in previous research (Berglund, 2002). Yet, others have suggested concepts that aim to help HR to set the agenda and more forcefully establish its position as a strategic partner that provides value to the organization (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; cf. Boglind et al., 2011).

The theoretical argument in this article departs from two premises: 1) professions are carriers of complex, science-based knowledge; and 2) standards are compressed and simplified knowledge. Even though both professions and standards are carriers of knowledge, it is the contradiction between them that has been focused on in the sociology of professions. The central argument can be summarized as follows: the higher the standardization, the lower the professionalism, and vice versa. However, it is important to note that standards and science-based knowledge are different kinds of skills and knowledge, as will also be shown in this article.

The purpose in this article is to theoretically explore whether standards, following these premises and as paradoxical as it sounds, may enhance the professional status of HR, and contribute to giving it a more authoritative position in the organization. The main arguments for this are that: a) when a field of knowledge is designated for standardization, it can be interpreted as recognition of the field. Standards thus contribute to establishing, strengthening, and legitimating the field of knowledge; b) standards for HRM are addressed primarily to the first-line managers that have operational responsibility for personnel management, rather than to the HR professionals themselves; and c) standards hence turn HR into a controlling position, a profession that monitors those required to comply and follow. These are conditions that can add status and power to HR professionals in the organization.

The discussion is put forward in two sections. The first section describes HR as a profession, highlights the demarcations between knowledge fields, and explains the role of HR in the organization. The second section discusses the relation between the professional value of discretion and standards, and how a profession can govern at a distance through the latter. The final section provides some summary conclusions.

Demarcation of knowledge for an organizational profession

The HR Profession

Professions are 'Science-Based Occupations' (Brante, 2011; cf. Torstendahl, 1990; Fournier, 2000). Scientific knowledge contributes to the status, autonomy, and trust of professions, since they possess the highest knowledge in a given field. However, as pointed out by prominent researchers in the sociology of professions, 'it no longer seems important to draw a hard and fast line between professions and occupations' (Svensson and Evetts, 2010: 10; cf. Evetts, 2009; Torstendahl, 1990), since they have mutual challenges and common characteristics.

The HR occupation's status as a profession can be questioned on theoretical grounds, since HR professionals do not have an exclusive area of knowledge or an established jurisdiction. Additionally, a formal education within a particular field of knowledge is not always required for HR positions (cf. Brante, 2011; 2009). It is possible for people with different educational backgrounds to pursue careers within HR. Nevertheless, HR professionals are often academically trained (cf. Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Armstrong, 2012; Ulfsdotter Eriksson, 2013). The theoretical foundation in higher education within HR and HRM lies within the behavioral and social sciences, especially organizational behavior (psychology, sociology, social psychology, learning and development), in combination with business administration and labour law (Armstrong, 2012; Ulfsdotter Eriksson, 2013). It is also possible to enter specific programs within HRM, with a major in, for instance, human resource management and labour relations.

Hence, I argue that HRM as a knowledge field is becoming more clearly defined and demarcated. Common international standards can therefore contribute to strengthening this field of knowledge further.

The Making of the HR Knowledge Field

An important part of the professional project is to *demarcate* – in other words, delimit and define – a field of knowledge (Larson, 1977; Parkin, 1979). Professions hence strive for autonomy and control over a certain field of expertise. Control can be achieved in two ways (Abbott, 1988): control over skills – the 'how to do it in practice' (technology) – or control over academic knowledge (for instance, by collaborating with universities and exerting influence on education).

The concept of *jurisdiction* captures professions' area of expertise and how the profession masters and monitors it (Abbott, 1988). Jurisdiction requires boundaries and Fournier (2000) argued that the construction of boundaries is a central part in a professional project and the foundation of a profession (cf. Weber, 1983; Abbott, 1988). Fournier identify two central boundary processes: the construction of an independent *field of knowledge* and the *labour of division* upholding the boundaries to other occupational groups.

> The professional project involves not only an occupational group appropriating a field as its exclusive area of jurisdiction and expertise, but also the making of this field into a legitimate area of knowledge of and intervention on the world (Fournier, 2000: 69).

This quote contains three arguments that I will emphasize. The first statement draws attention to the need for a well-delimited and -defined area of expertise. Standardizations may contribute to clarifying the boundaries of the HRM field. It is not only ISO who demarcate; it should also be noted that HR professionals from around the globe participate in formulating standards. The second argument declares legitimacy as an important aspect of professionalization. The fact that ISO has taken up HRM as an area to standardize is in itself an expression of recognition of this particular field of knowledge. The third statement in the quote, 'intervention on the world' relates to when a phenomenon is 'discovered as an object of knowledge, a valid target of control and intervention' (Fournier, 2000: 70). For HR, and on a general level, the 'object' is employment relations, which have been seen as objects of investigation for a long time: the social movement of HR at the beginning of the 20th century generated both the 'object of knowledge' and the emerging occupational group of HR professionals (Armstrong, 2012; cf. Damm, 1993). However, when the most prominent organization of standardization (ISO) is directing its attention to the knowledge field of HRM, the object is the knowledge area itself. Standardization of HRM might thus be interpreted as boundary making within this field of knowledge. It is possible that the symbolic value of HR and HRM increases as a result of this attention, thus enhancing the status of the occupation.

Organizational Professionalism

Professions are claimed to be under threat from organizational and economical changes. Enhanced bureaucratic controls are assumed to lead to a reduction of autonomy and discretion for professions (cf. Fournier, 1999; Evetts, 2003; Sullivan, 2000). Evetts (2003; 2006; 2009) argues that increased organizational pressures on efficiency have given rise to new discourses of professionalism. Evetts (2009) distinguishes two ideal-types of professionalism: *occupational professionalism* and *organizational professionalism*. The former is based on traditional professional values, such as collegial authority, discretion and jurisdiction, while the latter draws on organizational and managerial control, bureaucratic authority and standardized procedures. Research shows that professionalism is increasingly controlled by

aspects other than the profession itself (Fournier, 1999; Svensson, 2002; 2011; Evetts, 2009), implying a growth of organizational professionalism.

The HR profession is primarily situated within organizations. HR professionals are experts on personnel management, but rarely work with employee issues at an operational level. Operational personnel management on a daily basis is performed by line managers (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Armstrong, 2012). The change from a service-oriented HR targeted directly toward employees to a more strategic HR role working primarily toward the employer began in the mid-1990s, and was initially referred to as Human Resource Management (HRM), though it has lately been conceptualized as Human Resource Transformation (HRT) (Beer, 1997; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005, Ulrich et al., 2008; cf. Boglind et al., 2011). During the last decade, more significant HR positions have developed that involve monitoring and supporting personnel management conducted by managers at various levels (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Ulrich et al., 2008; Armstrong, 2012).

Ulrich et al. (2008) highlight this point with reference to the different HR roles acting at different levels in the organization (cf. Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; cf. Ulrich and Beatty, 2001): at top-management level, HR professionals take the form of *corporate HR,* and influence the overall HR philosophies and HR policies within the organization. They are the designers of the HR architecture, and thus determine how personnel management shall be performed in the organization (cf. Armstrong, 2012). As support staff in *centers of expertise*, HR professionals function as internal consultants in various and specialized HR topics. At this level in the organization, HR professionals also design HR processes in different areas (recruiting, compensation and benefits, development, etc.). HR professionals also work close to line management in the form of *embedded HR*. In this role, HR professionals have a general responsibility to support line managers to implement the organization's HR policies and processes.

These conditions contribute to HR professionals' establishment of a stronger attachment to the organization than to the profession, which in turn strengthens the organizational professionalism more than the occupational professionalism. Bourgeault' et al. (2011) argues that studies of professions generally view the relationship between professions and organizations in a negative manner, as being in opposition to each other (cf. Svensson and Evetts, 2010). They ask whether professions can benefit from organizational conditions: 'How can high status vs. low status professionals in a highly bureaucratized vs. less bureaucratized organization make use 'situational resources' – do different kinds of professionals do so differently, or differently than other' (Bourgeault et al., 2011: 81).

Acting from a discourse of organizational professionals, embedded in managerial control, HR professionals are put in a position in which they are set at govern at a distance (Fournier, 2000: 281f). By using internationally recognized standards as 'situational resources,' may thus support and clarify HR's controlling and monitoring role. Since ISO is a well-established and recognized actor, which provides standards in different areas, its involvement may lend legitimacy and recognition to HR and HRM issues. HR proposals, processes, and activities are thus not only random and fuzzy concepts invented by the local HR professional, but draw on synthesized, compressed and, above all, internationally approved knowledge. This intention, or desire, is also expressed in the quotation from SHRM (2013b) given in the introduction to this article.

HRM Standards: Governing by Technologies

Standardization and Professional Discretion

Standards aim at improving governance and control for greater rationality and to clarify the business idea (Brunsson and Jacobsson, 1998; cf. Miller and Rose, 2008). Brunsson and Jacobsson (1998) cite four arguments for standardization: *Information transfer*: this suggests that following a standard signals quality, particularly when the standard has been approved and certified by a third party (for instance, ISO). *Cooperation and coordination*: if others know how to act in relation to a specific issue, coordination is facilitated. *Simplification*: this entails minimizing the number of variations of solutions, which creates predictability and direction, and minimizes complexity. Standards are seen as important in a global context in order to create predictability in the production of goods and services (cf. Ganslandt, 2009).

Standards indicate 'best practice,' and the argument for using the best solution is hard to counter. The best-practice argument is one explanation for why the use of standards has increased (Jutterström, 2007). Standards have a symbolic value, not only instrumental and rational ones. Researchers claim that objects that become standards are those that are timely, modern, and reflect contemporary values with respect to how the organization should be structured and operate (Jutterström, 2007). However, a criticism of standardization is that it limits autonomy, independence and discretion in decision-making for professions (cf. Evetts, 2009). Standards are often also assumed to threaten professional discretion (cf. Fournier, 1999; Sullivan, 2000; Svensson and Evetts, 2010).

Discretion is regarded as a hallmark of professions (Molander and Grimen, 2010). The discretionary power of decision lies in the interface between scientific training and knowledge, external regulations, and individual cases' unique characteristics. Molander and Grimen (2010) disclose three types of contexts influencing a decision, and thus discretion: fairness, reproducibility and individualization. *Fairness* refers to equal treatment of people and compatibility in the same kind of case over time and space. However, there is a risk when it comes to making different decisions in similar cases. Standardized solutions can remedy this. *Reproducibility* aims at 'best practices' and successful solutions become standards. Both fairness and reproducibility are also key aspects in the bureaucratic ideal (Weber, 1983:58 ff.). *Individualization* comes into play when a decision affects a particular individual in specific circumstances. These premises have different levels of validity depending on the context in which professionalism is exerted, and are discussed by the authors as arguments for standardization.

The social boundaries that surround discretion have also been discussed by Feldman (2001), who highlight the social control of decision-making within organizations. Discretion is an inevitable part of bureaucracy, and occurs when 'a person whose job is to do so makes choices based on an assessment that is or can be justified by reason' (Feldman 2001: 164). Feldman makes it clear that the decision-making power that exists in professional practice takes place within the existing regulatory framework.

Given how the aforementioned theorists have discussed discretion, there appears to be no great contrast between this form of decision-making power and standards. Rather, they seem to be strongly related. Larsson (2007: 15) suggested that:

> The core of a profession is certainly not of fixed routines, but a discretionary application of general knowledge in unique cases. However, it does not prevent that activities include more standardized and comprehensive programs, in which it is essential that the surroundings have confidence (My translation).

Standards as Deployable Technologies

The programs and processes pointed out by Larsson in the quotation above relate to the kind of 'programmed knowledge' that is found in standards and regulations, manuals and computer programs. Knowledge can be turned into *technologies* and become deployable by non-experts; for instance, by standardization (cf. Miller and Rose, 2008).

HR processes can be defined as forms of technology, since they are concretizations that are deployable by other parties (cf. Abbott, 1988). Based on theory and previous research, as well as best practice, HR processes are designed and developed in a variety of areas, such as recruiting, work environment, pay and rewards, and learning and development (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). The purpose of HR processes is to enhance uniformity in HR management. In other words, HR processes are standards for personnel management. One HR specialist, interviewed by Ulfsdotter Eriksson (2013), who primarily worked on designing HR processes, pointed out that there is a similarity between standards and HR processes: 'They are very close to each other. Today, there is probably some sort of common practice – but it's not always so well defined' (HR Specialist quoted in Ulfsdotter Eriksson, 2013: 133. My translation).

Molander and Grimen (2010) further distinguish between epistemic and structural discretion. *Epistemic discretion* focuses on how professionals make grounded assessments in order to make effective decisions. S*tructural discretion* indicates the degree of delegated freedom in choosing between alternative actions. This has been likened to the hole in a donut, as an illustration of the free space in relation to the restrictions that surround it (cf. Hawkins, 2001). Structural discretion requires two specifications: 1) the standards against which a decision must be taken; and 2) the authority that has set the standard. The more space the authority leaves, the higher the level of discretion for the individual practitioner. Standardized HRM may therefore contribute to delimiting the scope of structural discretion for managers, and the HR profession is given the opportunity to determine how large the 'hole in the donut' ought to be.

For an occupational group like HR, which has professional claims and ambitions, a unified professional language and codified knowledge in the form of standards would contribute to strengthening the knowledge field. The involvement of the HR profession in creating standards can thus be interpreted as a way in which to enhance the quality of employee management by reducing, or at least controlling, the hole in the donut. It should also be noted that HR professionals already develop processes and procedures for different parts of the HR function – a fact which may indicate that they are already taking control over the space. When HR professionals participate in the formulation of standards and processes intended for others to follow, they will take on a role as 'professionals that govern' (cf. Fournier, 1999: 285). HR would thus 'supervise' employee management conducted by line managers through standards.

Professions are ascribed a recognized position based on professional knowledge. By means of standardization of knowledge and construction of techniques, professions may thus claim expertise and mastery. This is part of the 'boundary making' and construction of a field of knowledge. Following this, it is not discretion within a profession that bestows professional status to an occupation, but rather the power to control knowledge. When HR standardizes knowledge, it also enhances control over the knowledge base – both in the mere construction of standards, and by governing these forms of conduct at a distance (Fournier, 1999; Miller and Rose, 2008).

Conclusions

In the introduction, two premises were stated: that professions are carriers of complex, science-based knowledge, and that standards are compressed and simplified knowledge. These premises have been portrayed as opposing, and standards regarded as a threat to professional autonomy and discretion: the higher the standardization, the lower the discretion – or the higher the professional discretion, the lower the standardization. The theoretical discussion in this article suggests that it is not that simple; that it is possible to combine standards and professionalism. For a profession with a weaker occupational professionalism, or even a lack of it, standards might strengthen the profession within an organization.

The standardization of HRM can further be interpreted in terms of recognition of a field of knowledge, and, hence, HR professionals as experts. From this I argue that compressed knowledge, as in standards, can provide a distinct knowledge platform for the HR profession, and thus better communicate the professional status and expert role in the organization. Further, since HRM standards are aimed at first-line managers, HR professionals are the ones in control: the HR profession thus achieves a position that governs at a distance both downwards and upwards in the organization, by producing 'forms of conduct' (cf. Miller and Rose, 2008). It may render status and power to the profession, as well as to individual HR professionals within the organization.

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