Towards a sustainable HRM: Bridging professional capital and sustainable micro-political influence tactics of German Human Resources Managers

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Abstract

This study investigates the professional capital and the sustainable micro-political influence tactics, German Human Resources Managers use to contribute to the organizational success and also maintain and develop their position within the organization. In larger organizations, HR Managers must fulfil the contradictory roles of a human resources specialist and of a strategic business partner at the same time. We use the concepts of professional capital and of sustainable micro-political influence tactics to identify the patterns, managers' use in daily activities, allowing them to serve both roles on a long run. The results of our study show, that HR professionals generally use soft influence tactics and tend to combine them with other proactive influence tactics to reach a desired outcome and develop a socially sustainable relationship to main collaborators. In that sense, German HR Manager contribute to a sustainable HRM system and seem to be prepared for further professional developments.

Towards a sustainable HRM: Bridging professional capital and sustainable micro-political influence tactics of German Human Resources Managers

Introduction

Our paper addresses the status of HR professionals within the organizations and investigates how HR managers, as a group of stakeholders in the organization, try to acquire influence by adopting more strategic and sustainable HRM activities and respective micro-political tactics.[1] Following the early notion of Legge (1978, 1995) about the *powerlessness* and *marginality* of HR professionals in strategic decision making, several more recent studies described changes in status and power positions of HR managers and their departments (e.g. Marchington, 2015; Lang & Rego, 2015; Sheehan et al., 2014; Reichel & Lazarova, 2013; Ulrich et al., 2013; Boudreau & Lawler, 2012; Roche & Teague, 2012).

Empirical studies also showed that important elements of their professional power base, like specialized professional HRM knowledge, control over HR activities and possibilities to manage the interpretation of meaning in the organization, are under threat by changing role expectations of other actors in the organization. HR manager face a shift of focus towards strategic management roles (e.g. Sheehan et al., 2014). At the same time, these changes provide opportunities for HR professionals to strengthen their position in the organization, and to contribute to the organizational success. However, it is still a question how far the roles of strategic advisors or business partners have really gained ground in daily HRM activities, instead of being part of expected business talks of HR professionals (e.g. Keegan & Francis, 2010; Roche & Teague, 2012). Recent debates are also interested in knowing, how individual activities contribute to a sustainable Human Resources Management System (Ehnert, 2016). Therefore, we are going to investigate the patterns of daily activities of HR Managers and departments, their consequences for their position within the organization and their contribution to sustainable HRM.

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In the state-of-the-art chapter, we refer to different studies that emphasize the tensions that HR professionals face by changing role expectations, how they respond to it, and influence their power position within the organization.

After the state-of-research chapter, we explain our theoretical foundation. To understand the power basis of HRM professionals, we use a special application of the concept of capital from Bourdieu (1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2002), namely the concept of professional capital from Nordegraaf & Schinkel (2011). We link their concept to the concept of micro-political influence tactics from Yukl (2013) with a focus on socially sustainable influence tactics (Lee et al., 2017). We assume that building sustainable relations to important actors in the firm is essential for the professional perspective of HR managers and experts. The following chapter explains methodology, methods and sample of our empirical study. We are using a qualitative interview approach based on interviews with 39 German HR managers from large to medium-sized organizations. We particularly investigate:

- the patterns of the daily activities of HR managers and departments, and how they currently address role expectations of a sustainable HRM

- the power positions of HR departments, and the professional capital on which these power positions of HRM are based on

- the micro-political influence tactics of HR departments and HR managers as their representatives aimed at gaining a socially sustainable influence within the organization

Next, we describe our main results with respect to professional capital, changing role expectations, daily activities and sustainable micro-political influence tactics of German Resources Managers. In our last section, we discuss our findings in contrast to already existing studies and draw conclusions for further research.

State of Research

A number of more recent studies described changes in status and power positions of HR managers and their departments (e.g. Dai et al., 2016; Lang & Rego, 2015; Marchington, 2015; Sheehan et al., 2014; Reichel & Lazarova, 2013; Ulrich et al., 2013; Boudreau & Lawler, 2012; Roche & Teague, 2012). In their study, Reichel and Lazarova (2013) underline, that despite the centrality that has been rhetorically assigned to HRM activities, HR departments often experience marginality in every-day-practice. They stress that the status of HR departments seems to be negatively influenced by the devolvement of line managers and positively influenced by the outsourcing of non-core HR tasks. Furthermore, the study by Sheenan et al. (2014) puts an emphasis on the power position of HR professionals. It shows that important elements of the professional power basis of HRM, like specialized and professional HRM knowledge, control over HRM activities or the possibilities to manage meaning within the organization are under threat by role expectations towards strategic roles.

Roche & Teague even state, that "…the new business partner role of HR has not yet become strategically oriented or organizationally embedded in any reconfiguration of the HR function and how HR is aligned with business" (Roche & Teague, 2012: 1353). It seems to be advantageous for HR professionals to talk the language of their business partners in face of changing role expectations (e.g. Keegan & Francis, 2010). Additionally, Roche & Teague (2012) found that expertise in operational HRM activities might be helpful to gain influence in the managerial decision-making process and, at the same time, maintain the power status of HRM even in times of recession. Furthermore, other authors have pointed to different communication strategies of HR professionals like developing, claiming or demonstrating professional competencies (e.g. Sheenan, 2014; Ulrich et al., 2013; Boudreau & Lawler, 2012) as important activities to improve power position within the organization. In a more recent study, Dai et al. (2016) showed, how the HR department of a state-owned company in China, successfully improved its power positions

and established a closer relationship to the business department by increasing the efficiency of their talent management for the group, and transforming the HR department from a cost into a profit centre. In contrast, Marchington (2015) examined the development of human resources departments in the UK and argued that with an overemphasize on strategic business partnerships, HR departments loses focus, influence and a unique selling point because it has disregarded the employee champion or advocate role. Thus, HR might subsequently be subsumed and dominated by other functions, such as finance and marketing.

To reach a sustainable position of influence within the organization, HRM have to adapt "... strategies and practices that enables the achievement of financial, social and ecological goals [...] over a long-time horizon" (Ehnert, 2016: 3). The recent scientific contributions to such a sustainable HRM (e.g. Renwick et al., 2016; Ehnert et al., 2016; Cohen et al., 2012; Jackson et al., 2011) focus on content related strategies, and the building of sustainable HRM systems, but neglect more or less the underlying micro-political influence strategies and tactics (e.g. Lee et al., 2017).
Overall, most of the studies on power positions of HR professionals and departments have several shortcomings.

Firstly, the studies predominantly addressed the situation in an Anglo-Saxon context. There are just very few studies from other cultural regions or institutional settings like Eastern-Europe (e.g. Kazlauskaitė & Bučiūnienė, 2010; Poor et al., 2011; Hirt & Ortlieb, 2012; Kohont & Brewster, 2014; Poor et al., 2015) or Germany (e.g. Lang & Rego, 2015; Link & Müller, 2015, Bader, 2016; Keegan, Brandl, & Aust, 2018). Although some aspects of power positions are mentioned, the focus of many studies is rather on other aspects. The focus of Lang & Regos's study (2015) was on perceived tensions of HR managers, and respective coping strategies, while Link & Müller (2015) put an emphasis on line managers as HR workers, and consequences for professional HRM. Bader`s interest (2016) was also line manager`s role as people managers. Finally, Keegan and her colleagues discuss in their conceptual paper how HR practitioners can

handle all-day tensions. They draw on paradox theory and suggest response strategies like suppressing, opposing, splitting or adjusting.

Secondly, most of the studies with a focus on power positions of HRM but do not or rarely address strategies and strategies or tactics of HR professionals and their departments. If strategies or tactics are addressed at all, a focus on sustainable strategies that build stable relationships to important actors in the organization are missing.

Thirdly, many studies are under-theorized, lacking a sound theoretical framework from social and/or organization theory. This includes a lack of meso-level approaches for organizational power structures, restructurings, and implementations of new organizational models, like the "business partner model", for HRM. They also lack micro-level approaches to explain the actions of individual or collective organizational professionals, like HR managers.

Our paper addresses these shortcomings by developing an adequate theoretical frame, which combines two already established theoretical approaches, which have been rarely used for explaining the situation of HR professionals. Furthermore, we analyse a unique data set with interviews of German HR managers and experts over a longer period of more than ten years, which allows us to draw conclusions about the state and the developments of the challenges towards HR work, and how HR managers cope with them. Finally, we especially address issue of sustainability by looking for the long-lasting patterns of professional capital, the take-over of HR roles and micro-political tactics of HR managers.

Theoretical background

Our analysis is theoretically based on a combination of two concepts. The first concept is Bourdieu`s Theory of Practice, especially the idea of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital of actors in certain fields of action (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2002). Focusing on organizational professions like Human

Resource managers and experts, the available capital can be described as professional capital. Noordegraaf and Schinkel further developed this idea on (cf. Noordegraaf & Schinkel, 2011; Schinkel & Noordegraaf, 2011). The second theoretical approach is the concept of micro-politics, more precisely micro-political strategies and tactics (e.g. Crozier & Friedberg, 1978; Yukl & Falbe, 1990; Neuberger, 1995; Blickle, 2003; Yukl, 2013). Here, we are looking especially at socially sustainable strategies (Lee et al., 2017). While professional capital of HR professionals, managers, experts, and respective departments, can be seen as the structural basis for action, the micro-political strategies address the technical, social and political activities of HR professionals aimed at gaining, maintaining and increasing influence in organizations. Successful strategies may reproduce the professional capital of the managers and experts increasing their organizational reputation, and acceptance. Both concepts have neither individually nor together, been used for the analysis of power structures of Human Resources professionals like HR managers as a social group or as a department of experts. However, we argue that they are appropriate to gain new insights into this social group, which is working under threats like rationalization, restructuring or outsourcing.

Even in challenging situations of changing expectations from other intra- and extra organizational stakeholders, HR professionals seek to work under consistent conditions. They try to establish successful long-term relationships to other stakeholders in the organization, respond to role changes (e.g. Ulrich, 1997; Caldwell, 2003; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005; Wright, 2008; Beer et al., 2015; Cleveland et al., 2015; Cohen et al., 2015; Gerpott, 2015), and support a sustainable Human Resource Management system (e.g. Bailey et al., 2018; Truss et al., 2012). In our next chapter, we are going to explain these three streams of our theoretical framework in more detail.

Professional Capital: the basis for the power position and the status of Human Resources managers and departments

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Bourdieu's *Theory of Practic*e offers an interesting theoretical frame for the analysis of power positions of different social groups in an organization. Bourdieu's analysis is interested in how "inter- and intra-organizational power relations are produced, reproduced, and contested" (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008: 1), and how professional attitudes and behaviours play a role in an organizational context (Schinkel & Noordegraaf, 2011). Especially Schinkel and Noordegraaf (2011) strengthened this perspective on professions through their concept of "professional field", "professional capital", "symbolic capital" and "professional habitus". They developed appropriate categories to explain the development of a profession as a battle for power. Based on Bourdieu's concept, Emirbayer and Johnson (2008) propose an approach for the analysis of the power structures within an organization. Their focus is on:

> "Determining the key figures or groups in an organization and assessing the kinds of capital [...] that they possess and that appear to be at stake in their interactions".
>
> (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008: 22),

as well as on power relations that are spanned between these positions taken on by the actors in the field.

We analyse HR managers and departments and have a look at their power positions and their relation towards other stakeholder groups within the organization. Stakeholder groups can be the top management, the line management, other departments, owners, workers councils or other forms of representatives of employees, as well as special groups of employees in an organization. However, HR managers are at the same time also part of their profession. Noordegraaf & Schinkel (2011) refer to Bourdieu but extend it to professions and professionals. They see the latter as "a well-educated and well-behaving group member" (Noordegraaf & Schinkel, 2011: 100) following norms and rules of a specific profession that are legitimated through professional associations, a standardized education, special codes for behavioural jurisdictions. **Figure 1** shows

the position of HR professionals and departments in the organizational as well as professional field (see **Figure 1**).
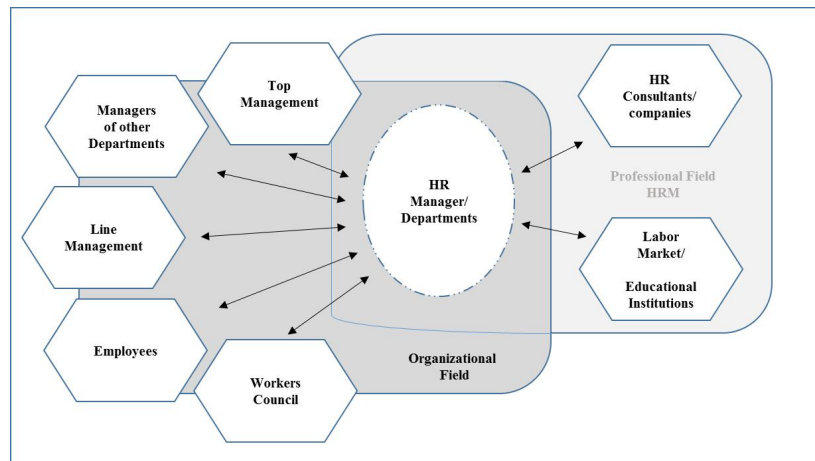

Figure 1*. Position and relations of HR professionals in the organizational and professional field*

Therefore, the position of a respective professional within an organization depends on:

- how other social groups perceive this profession as necessary and useful for the organization and its goals

- whether and what kind of professional qualities they attribute to this respective professional.

The power position of an actor in an organization can be described by the total amount and the structure of professional capital she or he possesses. The types of capital that play a role in most fields are economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2002: 119). An example for economic capital is money, or more precisely for departments or social groups in organizations, the budget of each department. This economic capital at the same time symbolizes the strength of a department's position. For

cultural capital, three different forms can be discerned: the "incorporated cultural capital" - which is acquired during an (in)formal education and socialization processes, the "objectified cultural capital", e.g. books on HR management, and the "institutionalized cultural capital" - e.g. titles such as an MBA).

Social capital embraces the total amount of current or potential resources that are connected to a network of relations to other actors or the affiliation to a certain group (Bourdieu, 1986). Finally, a special form of capital is the "symbolic capital", which works as a kind of credit or advance, rooted in the belief of a group into those who possess it. In a wider sense, symbolic capital of HR professionals can be described as the form and amount of capital that is perceived as relevant and highly valued by other actors, and thus is recognized. Overall, the amount of symbolic capital corresponds to the power of actors (Bourdieu, 2005b: 120; Bourdieu, 1984: 7f).

Regarding HR managers and experts, we can assume that their development within the profession of HRM experts contributes to the acquisition of cultural and social capital. Within the organization, those actors receive "professional capital", which can be expected and accepted as symbolic capital in the organization; determining the position of the actor in the organizational field and empowering her/ him to act advantageous in different situations (see **Figure 1**). In addition to individual capital of HR managers, like individual professional networks, formal qualifications and incorporated management knowledge and experience, each organization provides specific professional capital to different formal posts, like the salary, the budget of a department, job titles, networking options through the memberships to special project groups or other opportunities.

Micro-political influence tactics: The activities of Human resource managers and experts to gain, maintain and increase influence

The notion of micro-politics can be described as the exploitation and allocation of human resources to achieve personal goals, a personal rise within a system or the safeguard of a rule of power in combination with an improvement of the own conditions of existence

(e.g. Burns, 1962; Miller, 2008; Rong & Cao, 2015). In this respect, power is relative and reciprocal to the interdependence of actors, seldom absolute, but restricted to certain actors and their traits. It includes that the actors are embedded in more or less stable power structure that allows pre-structured, guided and limited individual political actions. Although actors themselves are influenced by individual and collective political activities. With respect to HR professionals and HR departments, activities as well as strategies of the HR professionals to improve their position within the organization are based, and at the same time limited, by already existing power structures and rules.

Nevertheless, a basic assumption of micro-politics is also that individuals or groups have enough room to manoeuvre for the interpretation and pursuit of own interests. This can be an individual or a group interest. Power orientation thus has a focus on the establishment, the maintenance and the expansion of possibilities to influence individuals or groups with a focus on the available or attributed power sources and resources (e.g. Neuberger, 1995; McAllister et al., 2015; Munyon et al., 2015). In more detail, individuals or social groups can adopt various power tactics and techniques to influence organizational decisions and pursue individual plans and rational strategies using their own resources and the perceived resources of their counterparts. This can result in struggle, conflicts, change or contingency, due to the various possibilities of actions, and alternative perspectives (e.g. Fleming & Spicer, 2008; Piot et al., 2016).

Usually individuals have three possible directions of such an influence in an organization. A supervisor can influence her/his subordinates, employees in turn can try to influence their supervisors and finally, a lateral influence can take place between equivalent individuals (Yukl & Falbe, 1990; Yukl, 2013; Chaturvedi & Srivastava, 2014). The influence of HR managers and departments to managers from other departments and work councils is mostly lateral. Moreover, upwards influence tactics are used towards top management executives. The result of an influence attempt can be either a

commitment, a weaker form of compliance, or a passive or active resistance (Yukl & Falbe, 1990). We argue that strong power positions of HR professionals and departments are positively influenced by tactics that create at least some sort of compliance, better commitment or active support of HR professionals and departments. An achieved power positions, based on resources and successfully used strategies, constitute the foundation of the following influence processes (Yukl, 2013: 186, 187).

Since our focus is on the enforcement of own interests within daily work activities, we choose proactive influencing tactics as the relevant concept for our analysis (Neuberger 2006; Yukl, 2013). Neuberger also points to the tension between legitimate socio-cultural norms of behaviour and illegitimate concealed behaviours with deceptive intentions in the use of tactics. This illustrates the ambivalence between micro-criminality required as a sort of "intrapreneurship" to fill the gaps of the imperfect order in an organization (Neuberger 1995, 2006: 552f.). The Following legitimate norms may in turn lead to more sustainable and stable relationships and power positions. Depending on this concept of proactive influence tactics, scholars use different terms for a comparable lists of influence tactics, partly summarized to superordinating strategies that are seen as more stable and used on a long-term result. In our analysis on micro-political influence tactics of Human Resources managers, we decided to use the set proactive influence tactics developed by Gary Yukl (2013).

Proactive influence tactics show a different impact on recipients, collaborators as well as counterparts. In this direction, Lee et al. (2017: 2ff.) found that "rational persuasion", "apprising", "inspirational appeals", "collaboration", "consultation", and "ingratiation" as well as "legitimation tactics" have a positive influence on the relationship between actors, while "personal appeals", "exchange" and "coalition tactics" have only a moderately positive effect. Only "pressure" was found to have a negative effect (see **Table** below).

In line with mainly lateral or upwards oriented influence tactics of HR professional, especially soft and rational influence tactics - like

rational persuasion, inspirational appeal, apprising, collaboration, ingratiation, and consultation - contribute to positive relationship-oriented and task-related outcomes. They successfully engage in a target persons' commitment to a certain request (e.g. Falbe & Yukl, 1992; Tepper et al., 1998; Clarke & Ward, 2006; Steensma & van Milligen, 2003; Berson & Sosik, 2007). Especially a good and long-lasting sustainable relationship to main collaborators in the organization, can contribute in strengthening the power position of HR professionals, and in reaching organizational long-term goals.

Table 1. *Micro political influence tactics and their impact on the sustainable relationships between actors[2]*

Proactive Influence Tactics	*Sustainability*
Rational Persuasion: *The agent uses logical arguments and factual evidence to show a proposal or request is feasible and relevant for attaining important task objectives.*	*- positive task-orientation* *- positive relationship-orientation*
Apprising: *The agent explains how carrying out a request or supporting a proposal will benefit the target personally or help advance the target person's career.*	
Inspirational Appeals: *The agent makes an appeal to values and ideals or seeks to arouse the target person's emotions to gain commitment for a request or proposal.*	
Consultation: *The agent encourages the target to suggest improvements in a proposal or to help plan an activity or change for which the target person's support and assistance are desired.*	
Collaboration: *The agent offers to provide relevant resources and assistance if the target will carry out a request or approve a proposed change.*	
Ingratiation: *The agent uses praise and flattery before or during an influence attempt or expresses confidence in the target's ability to carry out a difficult request.*	

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[2]   Yukl (2013: 202) and Lee et al. (2017: 224)

Personal Appeals: *The agent asks the target to carry out a request or support a proposal out of friendship or asks for a personal favour before saying what it is.*	*- moderately positive task-orientation*
Exchange: *The agent offers an incentive, suggests an exchange of favours, or indicates willingness to reciprocate later if the target will do what the agent requests.*	*- moderately positive relationship-orientation*
Coalition: *The agent seeks the aid of others to persuade the target to do something or uses the support of others as a reason for the target to agree.*	
Legitimating: *The agent seeks to establish the legitimacy of a request or to verify authority to make it by referring to rules, policies, contracts, or precedent.*	*- negative task-orientation* *- positive relationship-orientation*
Pressure: *The agent uses demands, threats, frequent checking, or persistent reminders to influence the target to carry out a request.*	*- negative task-orientation* *- negative relationship-orientation*

Sustainable HRM: HR roles, role changes and expectations towards the daily work of HR professionals

The daily work of HR professionals is often described by HR role models. They address expectations of internal and external actors and social groups towards the aims, focus and the activities of HR professionals, managers and experts and their departments. **Table 2** shows the four most influential role models for HRM, which have often been developed with respect to one another. Therefore, they share many similar roles for HR professionals and departments, which address the co-operation with different partners in the organization.

Table 1. Roles of HR managers in selected role models

Focus towards other social groups	Storey (1992)	Ulrich (1997)	Caldwell (2003)	Ulrich/ Brockbank (2005)
Top Management	*Advisor*	*Strategic partner*	*Advisor*	*Strategic partner*
Line Manager	*Handmaiden*	*Administrative expert*	*Service provider*	*Function al expert*
Top Management/ Line Manager	*Change maker*	*Change agent*	*Change agent*	*Human capital developer*
Employees and their Representatives	*Regulator*	*Employee Champion*	*Regulator*	*Employee advocate*
All actors				*HR Leader*

Although the models are based on theoretical taxonomies like Storey`s (1992) distinction between strategic and tactical as well as interventionist and non-interventionist role, the have all been used for empirical studies as well, who are mainly interested in role changes

(e.g.Caldwell, 2003; Ulrich et al., 2013). The scholarly discussion and the findings from professional practice about HR role conclude that:

- the described roles occur in practice usually in the form of role combinations whereby "role taking and role making" can be analysed through typical *patterns* of daily activities and their importance (e.g. Storey, 1992; Ulrich, 1997; Caldwell, 2003)

- the role expectations are fundamentally conflicting, stressful (e.g. Caldwell, 2003; Roche & Teague, 2012; Sheehan et al., 2014; Marchington, 2015), or the expression of fundamental organizational paradoxes (e.g. Gerpott, 2015; Kegan et al., 2018)

- the typical role conflicts or paradoxes are:

    - between roles as "employee advocate" on the one hand, and substitute of the management (*ward of managers*) on the other hand (e.g. Gerpott, 2015: 218), or

    - between the role of "business partner" and "internal consultant" on one hand, and "intermediary of the social relations" (*steward of social contract*) on the other hand (Kochan, 2004; Wright, 2008; Marchington, 2015)

- the roles are constantly changing with increasing role expectations and activities of HR manager towards business partners, advisors to the top management, or a strategic actor in the process of change, often called "new roles of HRM" (e.g. Caldwell, 2003; Ulrich et al., 2013)

- the traditional role of an "employee attorney", who is seen as an intermediary between employees and employee representatives, clearly loses its importance (e.g. Keegan/ Francis, 2010: 891): "erosion of the role"; Gerpott, 2015).

The latter development is seen critically by many authors with respect to consequences for the professional identity of HR managers as well as the development of the company (e.g. Wright, 2008; Gerpott, 2015; Cohen, 2015; Marchington, 2015). Ulrich (1997) stated that the introduction of business partner models leads to an alienation of employees from the management as well as from HR management, but new role expectations towards HR professionals "[…] can both, represent employee needs and implement management agendas" (1997: 45).

At the same time, the idea of "Sustainable Human Resources Management" can be understood as a further development of strategic human resources management patterns and planned HRM activities with an intension to achieve organizational long-term goals (Bailey et al., 2018; Truss et al., 2012). Short-term goals are more performance-oriented. Long-term goals consider the individual wellbeing and have a societal impact (Beer et al., 2015; Legge, 2005). Nevertheless, sustainable HRM supports a more people-oriented way of thinking in the organization, puts people back in the centre of interest and includes internal and external stakeholders (Cleveland et al., 2015; Voegtlin et al., 2012; Gond et al., 2011). Sustainable HRM system make recommendations on how to overcome the weaknesses of soft human resources management attempts. They provide an understanding of the relationship that exists between HRM and business, give an inside into the influence factors of other stakeholder groups inside and outside the organization and acknowledge the ambiguous demands and tensions other stakeholders put on HRM professionals and their outcomes (Aust et al., 2015).

Consequently, "Sustainable Human Resource Management", asks for a successful combination and handling of the conflicting tactical and strategic roles, of the roles of an employee advocate and those of an HR expert, business partner and strategist. We assume that this strategic role orientation must be accompanied at the political level by respective sustainable, micro-political, pro-active influence tactics to build long-term and stable relationships to main collaborators in and outside the organization.

Frame of reference of the study

The integration of three streams of literature in our theoretical foundation shows, that the power position of HR professionals and HR departments within the organization can be described by the professional capital of the actors, and its recognition through other stakeholder groups within the organization (symbolic professional capital). Their professional capital is the basis of their actions, independently of its recognition by others, but the latter is important for the acceptance and the valuation of HR professionals and departments. During their activities, HRM professionals need to consider and to respond adequately to the changing, and contradictory, role expectations from the other internal and external stakeholders. One of the main challenges seems to be the creation of sustainable HRM systems that addresses employee's individual and social needs, and long-term organizational goals. These expectations are import antecedents with an influence on capital, strategies and tactics of HR professionals and departments. Based on their professional capital, HR managers develop different strategies in their daily work that address these role expectations, and use proactive micro-political influence tactics to maintain and increase their own power positions in rivalry to other professionals of different levels in the organization. One important strategic goal can be to create a sustainable HRM system that combines a people focus with long-term organizations goals. For this purpose, HR professionals use socially sustainable micro-political tactics, like networking or collaboration to establish stable relationships to other important actors in the field.

Our design in **Figure 2** shows the basic links between professional capital, role expectations, micro-political influence tactics and the power position of HRM professionals in the organization.
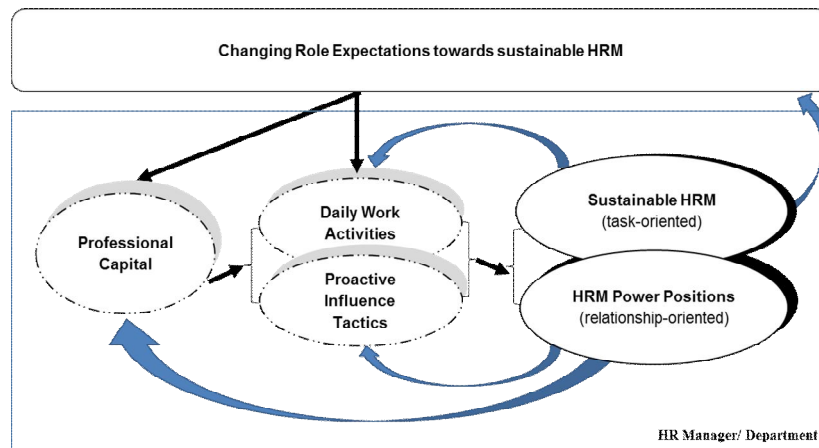
Figure 2*. Frame of reference*

In our empirical study, we will focus on the following aspects of the above framework:

- the professional capital and power position of HR departments and the on which the position is based on
- the role patterns of the daily activities of HR departments and how they address different role expectations as well as a focus in role taking and making, role change and patterns of sustainability
- the micro-political influence tactics of HR managers and departments aimed at gaining and increasing a sustainable influence within the organization

Empirical study: Methodology, data collection and analysis

Our qualitative empirical study is based on the analysis of three interviews series with German HR managers in middle-sized and large cooperation's from 2003 - 2013 (**Table 2**).

Table 2. Overview of the studies involved

Survey	Professionalization of HRM (2002)	Dick (2010)	Langstrof (2013)
Period	2002-2003	2009-2010	2013
Focus	changes in human resources and careers of HR managers	changes in tasks and working methods in the economic crisis	professionalization in the human resources of SMEs
Size	medium-sized companies (260 to 2,000 employees)	medium & large companies (700 to 21,000 employees)	medium-sized companies (100 to 5,000 employees)
Industry	car suppliers, trade, energy, communications services	IT, software, telecommunications, electronics, household goods, energy, car, aviation, construction, chemical, pharmaceutical, banking and finance, public administration	energy, logistics, retail, mechanical engineering, waste management, banking and finance, public administration
People	HR managers of the company or branch	predominantly directors or heads of HRM or head of	HR managers

		personnel development	
Number	*7*	*21*	*11*
***Interviews*[3]**	*Case 1_1 to 1_7*	*Case 2_1 to 2_21*	*Case 3_1 to 3_11*

At the beginning, the managers described the current situation of their organizations, like structure, tasks, instruments, as well as the co-operation of HRM with other actors in the organization. Additionally, the interviewees were asked to describe relevant changes in their tasks, structures and position. Finally, we also asked for their professional career towards their current position. The interviews were performed in the office of the interviewees and lasted between 30 and 150 minutes. For a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000, Hammersley, 2008, Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) of interviews with HR managers, we followed Alvesson and Kärreman's guidelines (2000), and looked at text passages about the positions of their HR departments and their understanding of roles and about professional and tactical activities to gain and to increase their influence in the organization. We started with explicit working definitions of the central categories, professional capital, HR role expectations and micro-political influence tactics accordance based on our literature and developed coding rules for the interview material (**Table 3**).

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[3] We would like to thank Martin Dick and Max Langstrof for providing interview material and Fabian Colombo for support in the coding process.

Table 3. Main guiding categories of the analysis and their definitions

Main categories	*Definition & coding rule*	*Illustrating example*
Role patterns in daily activities of HR professionals/ departments	*Statements about HRM activities with direct or indirect references to the typical roles of HRM, namely strategic partner, personnel expert, employee advocate, service provider, business partner of line management, or change agent*	*Codes examples for strategic partner role, and change agent role* *"Before my time, the HR manager was not a member of the top management, today I'm sitting here. It is, of course, the case that we have to go through the main objectives, which can also be found in a personnel department." (Case 3_3, Waste Management)* *"Then we have a very wide change management area in which we support any kind of change processes on request from the specialist areas (...) In fact, we accompany the entire process of change conceptually in implementation." (Interview 2_21, Energy Sector)*
Professional capital of HR professionals/ departments	*This means the acquired capital available to the individual person or a close group of persons*	*„At heart, you need the ability to talk in a targeted way to totally different persons in*

	characterizing the person or group her/ him as a HR professional. Professional capital can occur in different forms (e.g. diverse sub-forms of cultural capital, social capital or economic capital).	*different situations, and in a way that our bridges are not burned behind ourselves, but you may come back." (Interview 2_15, HRM Business partner, Banking and Finance)*
Micro-political influence tactics of HR professionals	*Statements that refer to influence tactics of HR professionals in daily work through which the position of HRM in the organization is maintained, extended, or planned to do so.* **Examples**: *rational persuasion, inspirational appeals, exchange, pressure, ingratiation, collaboration, consultation, coalition, networking, legitimation*	*Code example for Consultation and Networking* *"(...) it is increasingly implemented that HRM performs as consultant of the top management representatives (...) HRM gets also increasingly proactive there, in the sense of an implicit strategy." (Interview 2_1, Head HR development, IT-consulting)*

Finally, we summarized the codes for each of the categories. Our sample does only allow an analysis from the perspective of the HR managers as HR professionals. However, the interviewees often refer to their staff members, the HR experts, and their departments. With respect to professional capital, and the fulfilment of role expectations be other groups of actors, we also have to rely on self-descriptions, although we can conclude from described results of HR work in the interview texts. In the further analysis, we especially put attention on those characteristics of the daily working patterns, of professional capital, and influence tactics who were characterized in the literature as building sustainable relations with other actors in the organization.

Main Results

Professional capital of German HR managers and departments

The perceived *professional capital* of German HR managers and their departments consists of special knowledge about the HR issues and tools as well as knowledge about HR core processes of a special organization. HR managers possess a high potential for empathy, communication and negotiation skills, many contacts and networks of relationships, problem-solving competencies, and the ability to manage the own know-how as well as the own service orientation. Our examples illustrate some of these aspects. Certainly, all interview partners put an emphasis on specialized HR knowledge. We found many companies that especially organize, manage and develop this knowledge through external and internal training. This includes knowledge about the organization as well as about the core business of the departments that an HR professional oversees. This is the sort of professional capital that is recognized by line managers and top management and thus serves as symbolic capital:

> „HR professionals have indeed a broad knowledge of the firms core business …We really try to stay up to date and act very well in our particular division. […]. In the meantime, all personnel staff is people with an academic degree and professional experience. They are remarkably better educated, and all know other firms from the inside as well. This increases their recognition as well. That is a simple fact. "

(Case 2_6, Pharmaceutical Industry)

The quotation also shows that a combination of *HR expert knowledge and knowledge of the core business* may strengthen the position of the HR professionals. The latter can also be developed through close cooperation with the other departments with the role of a HR service provider.

„ […] we are very well informed […] as internal service provider we are in the know; we know the developments and the special challenges."

(Case 2_21, Energy sector)

Moreover, a central part of the professional capital of HR managers is the *ability to communicate and negotiate* with various social groups in and outside the organization.

„At heart, you need the ability to talk in a targeted way to totally different persons in different situations, and in a way that the bridges are not burned behind you, and you may come back."

(Case 2_15, Banking and Finance)

„Our strength is the local implementation, to bring the others as co-workers into the boat, to create a joint understanding of newly established structures and instruments and so forth."

(Case 2_ 21, Energy sector)

The above-mentioned competencies are gained through and based upon *intense contacts and networks of relationships.* The interviewees mentioned that their HR officers "[…] are spending at least 80% of their working time together with their costumers (in the line)" (Case 2_21, Energy sector), have regularly direct talks managers, including senior managers and top management (Case2_9, Energy sector), and/or have contacts to HR managers from other firms (e.g., Case 1_1, Car supplier). As result, HR professionals often refer to their relationship management as a central professional competence:

„Relationship management is very well organized with us […] we do have efficient processes there […] is one of our strengths."

(Case 2_6, Pharmaceutical Industry)

Other important aspects of the professional capital are a *high potential for empathy*, and a problem-solving orientation and competence to solve conflicts.

> „Well, I think, a high potential for empathy is important. […] One has to work in a solution-oriented way […] and a respective behaviour, for example in situations of conflict, is also needed."
>
> (Case 1_7, Communication services)

> „I think a certain amount of empathy should be there, because as a HR person you should definitely have it. The ability to enter into the role of the other."
>
> (Case 3_7, Energy)

Moreover, *problem-solving competencies*, and *service orientation* are important parts of the professional capital by the interviewed managers. Finally, the HR managers in our sample put an emphasis on *abilities to manage their own know-how*:

> „We started to train ourselves and create a basic structure and instruments for that purpose, so that we are able to solve all routine tasks by ourselves having a very good knowledge there […] and not how to react."
>
> (Case 1_7, Communication service)

Although we need to rely on the perception of the interviewed HR managers, they often also refer to the acceptance of their professional competencies in the sense of *symbolic capital*. It shows that many characteristics of the professional capital are widely accepted by the other social groups like top managers, line managers, employees or members of the workers representatives. The following quotes are examples:

„On the other hand, it is increasingly realized and accepted, that HRM works as a consultant of the top management"

(Case 2_1, IT Consulting)

„These departments want us as business partners to be there, even if ... around 90% are without a relevance for HR. Nevertheless, in 10 % of the topics, HR knowledge is needed. Here, the integration of the (HR) Business partner is relatively essential."

(Case 2_10, Telecommunication).

Role patterns in daily activities of HR professionals/ departments

The empirical analysis revealed various references to the central roles of HR managers across industries and according to the difference in company size. It was very clear that HR managers were aware of the different roles as well as their role conflicts, explaining the differences and often-contradictory expectations towards HR professionals:

„Sometimes, we have to negotiate with employees' and representatives against our own interests. Then you are sometimes in a sandwich position."

(Case 3_7, Energy Sector)

„The HR policy is decided by our top management. We have a different opinion on this, but this is the position of top management. For example, the management also carries out negotiations with the workers council. We then typically hear from the works council what happens there. I think this is wrong, but it is lived like that."

(Case 2_6, Pharmaceutical Industry)

Other statements like the following adds the notion that the respective collaborators recognize the role of HR departments as a business partner:

„These are really the essential elements, that there are conflicts […], but if you have a business-partner relationship with one another, it is also considered by the others. This is a mutual giving and taking."

(Case 2_14, Chemical Industry)

Finally, a few HR managers reject the traditional role of employee advocates:

„So, the HR staff must also be able to enter the business areas which will be important. […] We are not intermediaries between executives and employees. This is the responsibility of the workers council. We clearly represent the employer position. This has changed considerably. Sometimes you have to remind your own department staff on this again."

(Case 3_6, Logistics Industry)

In our material, the traditional role of an employee's representative as well as the more recent role of the strategic business partner of the top management were most frequently addressed (by 34% of each coded role references).

The role of an HR expert respective an HR service provider makes 23% and 9% of the total accounts to personnel management roles. Furthermore, we found combinations traditional roles as well as new roles. The following quotations illustrate certain facets of the activity and role descriptions of HR managers:

Employee representative: "... try to support him in his development"

„The employee also always has the opportunity to simply go to HR and say whatever he wants […] If we are signed to an employee whom we consider valuable that who does not advance with his boss, we are secretive as HR and try to support him in his development."

(Case 2_5, Chemical industry)

Our results show that German HR professionals are aware of their responsibility for the employees as a central part of their professional identity. This also includes their perception of workers councils as important partners as well as critical comments on the top management.

Strategic consultant: "... today I am sitting here"

„Before my time the HR manager was not a member of the top management team, today I'm sitting here. It is, of course, the case that we have to go through the main objectives, which can also be found in a personnel department."

(Case 3_3, Waste Management)

The quotation shows that the role of a strategic consultant of the top management has gained importance during the last years. The participation of HR managers in top management decisions also helps to put HR objectives to the forefront. As a result, to be a part of the top management (symbolic capital) strengthens the power position of the HR departments in the organization.

Personnel expert and service provider: "We try to shape this in a needs-oriented way"

„Now we have a training catalogue, which is launched every year and we have got a lot of encouragement for it. The topics are presented in a company-specific manner in coordination with different departments. […] and now we give the feedback and ask: `What do you like? What is missing? And try to make it more needs-oriented."

(Case 3_7, Energy Sector)

The role of a personnel expert as a further traditional role of HR experts also seems to be still of importance. References to the role were found in nearly all organizations. However, within this role, a shift towards an understanding as service provider ("need-oriented") was found as some of the references indicate. Fulfilling these roles may support the attribution of professional symbolic capital to HR experts through the receivers of such services like line managers, or employees.

Expert for change: "... has to plan much more ahead"

„Then we have a very wide change management area in which we support any kind of change processes on request from the specialist areas. […] In fact, we accompany the entire process of change conceptually in implementation. Our strengths lie in the implementation on site, to bring employees into the boat, to establish a common orientation in the newly established areas and so on."

(Case 2_21, Energy Sector)

References towards the role of a change agent was not found in all, but at least a few, often-larger organizations. The top management may especially welcome this role, but also, as the quote indicates, by line management undergoing change processes.

To sum up, our material shows that German HR managers perceive themselves to a considerable extent as people experts and employee advocates. Only a very few of the asked HR professionals departed from this position. At the same time, we found proof for role changes towards the role as a strategic consultant and a HR service provider and, at least, for larger organizations, towards the role as a change agent. The combination of these contradictory role enactments in the daily HR work seems to fit with expectations of sustainable HRM systems, although the interviewed HR professionals did not refer to this concept.

Micro-political influence tactics of German HR professionals

We found a preference for the use of soft influence tactics like collaboration, consultation, coalition, and networking, which is obviously related to the more dominant lateral or upwards influence of HR activities. In addition, exchange, rational persuasion, pressure and legitimation tactics were found. Typical references to *collaboration, consultation respective networking* as influence strategies include:

„ […] HRM works as a consultant of the top management representatives […] getting increasingly proactive there, in the sense of an implicit strategy."

(Case 2_1, IT Consulting)

„Let's put it like this, we try to play a mediating role, to include the interests of all parties, to include them, and to find a way everybody can live with."

(Case 3_3, Waste Management)

With the use of *rational persuasion* as an important tactic, HR managers demonstrates their cultural capital like *professional knowledge.* Nevertheless, this tactic also points to the contributions of HR activities to long-term organizational goals, in the sense of a sustainable HRM:

„This topic has to be placed in a way to show that we are able to create added value, which works better through long-term HR recruitment and HR retention. This is a good lever."

(Case 2_13, Construction industry)

Many HR professionals referred to *exchange* tactics, as equivalent information exchange based on specific knowledge about the employees, or as reciprocal exchange of contributions to a common goal. The HR professional tried to establish stable exchange patterns, which also, at least, maintained or stabilized their position towards the exchange partner.

„Well, we try to come to a reciprocal accommodation, to solve problems with the axe does not make sense. "

(Case 1_7, Communication Services)

„ […] but if you have a business-partner relationship with each other, this is also considered by the others. This is a reciprocal giving and taking. "

(Case 2_14, Chemical Industry)

We also found several interesting examples for the use of *pressure tactics*. The interesting aspect is here, that the influence of pressure is often combined with an already established power position, from which the interviewed HR managers expects a further increase of their influence. This is perfectly displayed in quotations, where managers claim that they see their trainings as "obligatory", or that they "want" their top management team member to act "powerfully" for HR issues.

„There are trainings, which we see as obligatory, especially in the management area, where we say that a certain group of managers have to have that kind of training."

(Case 2_7, Software development)

„He is member of the top management, which I see as an ideal precondition […]. If you have someone in the superstructure who can powerfully act within the top management and the decision board. That is where we want to go."

(Case 2_2, Telecommunication)

Legitimations tactics also play a role in influencing other social groups within the organization. In the following quotations, the HR managers legitimize their HR structure with a reference to the fashionable business partner model of Dave Ulrich. Even the titles or names of the departments are claiming excellence in HR work, as the critical remark in the second quotations shows. It remains open, whether this is accepted by business partners and can result in an increased symbolic capital of HR.

„We are organized according to Dave Ulrich. We do have three departments here, two as so-called *Centres of Excellence*, where there are specialists for Compensation & Benefits, HR and management development, HR-Controlling and so forth."

(Case 2-20 Banking and Finance)

„What is referred to as the `business partner` is often only a renaming of the classical personal referent […]."

(Case 2_10 Telecommunication)

Even if the business partner model is more a "talk" than real "in action", the references of the interviewed managers show the strong influence of perceived expectations towards their work.

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Finally, we also found a few influence tactics beyond the model by Yukl like *persistence*:

> „We did that over years giving respective feedback. Then, we included (the issue) into leadership training and asked for it again and again. Such things did not work in short terms in our company."

> (Case 2_12, Public Administration)

Since the use of influence tactics is normally characterized by combinations of preferred tactics, we also looked at such typical patterns of tactics. We identified a combination of the predominantly soft and rational influence tactics: *collaboration, consultation, rational persuasion, coalition or legitimation*, that are likely to have a positive or moderately positive effect on the relationship to other individuals or groups. These tactics were found to be helpful to establish, maintain and develop socially sustainable relationship to other stakeholder groups, which in turn supports the development of the power position and the development of a sustainable human resources management system. Even pressure tactics, when used in combination with other tactics, seemed to be effective means for increasing the power position of HRM professionals.

Summary and Discussion of the findings

The goal of our study was to investigate the main characteristics of professional capital, the patterns of daily work activities, and the micro-political proactive influence tactics of German Human Resources managers. In contrast to Anglo-Saxon studies, our study reveals, that the role patterns of German Human Resources Managers have not yet fundamentally changed. To a large extend, German HRM professionals still identify themselves with the role of "*HR expert*" and an "*employee advocate*". Nevertheless, our study also shows some changes in the adoption of new HR roles like the "*strategic consultant*" and the "*business partner*" with a strategic mentality. In order to maintain and improve their positions in the organization, HR

managers strive to successfully combine the traditional roles with the new roles. These changes are also displayed in their self-perceived professional capital, where the managers perceive "*core business knowledge*" and experience as well as "*HR expertise*" as important characteristics. Furthermore, HR managers claim to build on their "abilities to communicate and negotiate", their "empathy", as well as their "network of contacts". The latter is in line with the use of the sustainable micro-political influence tactics where we found. "*Collaboration*", "*consultation*", "*rational persuasion*", "*coalition*" and "*legitimation*" are the preferred tactics used, aimed at establishing a socially sustainable relationship to the collaborators, and reaching HR as well as organizational goals. The following figure 3 summarizes the main findings of our empirical study with respect to self-perceived professional capital characteristics, main role enactments, and proactive influence tactics. The results also indicate some task- and relation-oriented outcomes of the HR work and influence attempts as perceived by the managers, although this has to be researched more in-depth by asking other groups of actors.
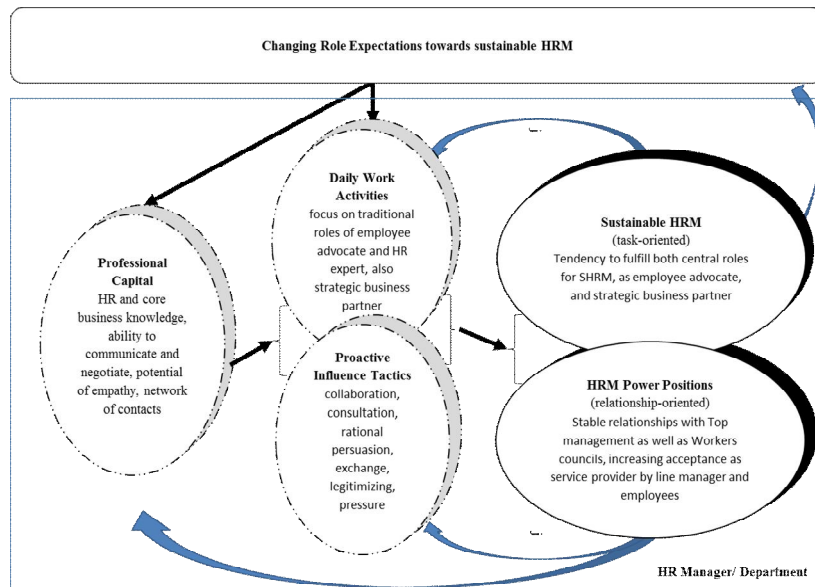

Figure 3. *Main findings*

All in all, our results shed a light on the specific situation in Germany, with a strong tradition in regulated relationships between employees and management, where HR managers play a substantial role in connecting top managements` organizational goals and interests with the individual and group interests of employees, including the workers representatives like work councils. The results with a still important part of HR work devoted to employee issues or relationships to workers representatives shows clear differences to the findings of Ulrich and colleagues (2013). The main group of HR managers was also found to be quite sensitive for the role conflicts between the roles of an employee advocate, and a strategic service partner for the line and the top management (e.g. Wright, 2008; Marchington, 2015; Gerpott, 2015), trying to balance both groups of roles.

In order to also successfully adopt these new roles, the HR managers mainly used soft influence tactics to build and re-arrange their interpersonal relationships to top management executives, and other managers, in line with the findings of Lee et al. (2017). The patterns of a sustainable Human resource management (e.g., Diaz-Carrion et al. (2018); Ehnert et al., 2016) were expressed as an in-built into the professional capital in form of a double orientation towards core business and a results orientation as well as HR in our material. The activity focus was on the employee advocate and the strategic business partner role, and finally in form of socially sustainable influence tactics. As a result, we conclude, that German HR managers, with a focus on both, employee issue and long-term organizational goals, seem to be well prepared for building a sustainable HRM system in their organization.

Contributions, Limitations and Implications for further research

Our study contributes to the scientific discussion on the HR work activities and the power position of HR professionals and department as follows:

Firstly, we respond to rather under-theorized studies by proposing a new theoretical framework based on Bourdieu's concept of professional capital, which we combine with the micro-political approach of proactive influence tactics. We argue that, through the integration of a meso level perspective and a micro-level approach, we are able to investigate and understand the organizational effects of individual behaviours of Human Resources Managers in Germany.

Secondly, our contribution adds to the rather large body of Anglo-Saxon empirical studies on the work activities and power position of HR professionals a study, rooted in a German context. Moreover, the study is based on a unique database of interviews with HR managers, which covers 10 years of Human Resources Management experience in Germany.

Thirdly, the results, despite their limitations, deliver impressive insights into the HR managers daily work, and their strive for professional recognition.

Fourthly, and moreover, we add the focus on sustainable Human resource management to our analysis by looking especially for sustainable capital and activity patterns, as well as socially sustainable influence tactics of HR managers.

Beyond the above-mentioned contributions of our study, we also see some deficits and shortcomings. Although our theoretical framework is helpful to understand important task-related, social and political aspects of the situation of HR professionals, there is a need to better integrate the theoretical concepts and deeper analyse the relation

between role expectations, daily activities, professional capital and sustainable micro-political influence tactics, and its outcomes.

Moreover, the results of our empirical study further show indications for other influence tactics that were not included in the concept provided by Yukl (2013). We argue that the list from Yukl can be further extended through political tactics like "*persistence*" "*networking*" or "*self-promotion*". Another shortcoming of the study is the focus of the sample on HR managers, and their view towards HRM activities and problems. Our study predominantly analyses overall references to tactics, and only partly the perceived outcome of an influence tactic or the social groups addressed by each tactic. Moreover, up to now, we have not looked for any context factors like branch or size of the organization, periods, and characteristics of the HR managers. Although the focus on managers delivers a probably one-sided perspective on the state and changes in HR profession in organizations, it can be the starting point for more detailed and multi-level, and multi-actor case studies that addresses the mentioned limitations of our approach, and empirical material.

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