HR directors in UK boardrooms
A search for strategic influence or symbolic capital?

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Abstract

Purpose – A place in the boardroom is often considered a necessary if not sufficient condition for HR directors to exercise strategic influence on business decision-making. The purpose of the paper is to explore the perceived importance of HR boardroom representation, both in a formal and symbolic sense, and to what extent HR directors can exercise strategic influence without it?

Design/methodology/approach – Evidence is explored from a survey of 1,188 UK HR practitioners, including 255 board members, and a series of follow-up interviews with 16 HR directors.

Findings – Analysis of the survey findings suggests that boardroom versus non-boardroom representation of HR appears to matter in four key areas: board members believe they have greater involvement and influence in business planning processes; they have more positive perceptions of the overall performance of HR; they give higher ratings of CEO perceptions of the HR function; and they believe they achieve greater integration of HR strategy with business strategy.

Research limitations/implications – While there are increasingly other formal mechanisms and forums (e.g. executive committees, personal networks) outside the boardroom for HR directors to exercise their influence, it appears that the “symbolic capital” of boardroom recognition and esteem still retains enormous significance and rhetorical appeal for the HR profession.

Originality/value – The paper seeks to reframe the debates on the relative importance of HR boardroom versus executive committee representation as forums of strategic influence, by focusing on the continued symbolic significance of boardroom representation. It is concluded that a reworking of Bourdieu’s concept of “symbolic capital” (i.e. professional esteem, recognition, status, or respect) as board capital may be useful in reframing future research on HR boardroom representation.

Keywords Directors, Human resource management, Senior management, Symbolic management, Strategic management

Paper type Research paper

You cannot underestimate the symbolic importance of the boardroom for HR people. It’s not a question of influence or rewards, it’s really all about recognition (HR Boardroom Director).

Introduction

For over two decades a place in the boardroom has been viewed as the Holy Grail for the HR profession in the UK (Sisson, 1995; Guest and King, 2004). This is certainly the predominant view in much of the prescriptive HRM literature: a seat on the board is the ultimate realisation of the desire of HR professionals to finally move from an old-style and marginal administrative support position to a new and more strategic role. Central to this ambition was the rise of the resource-based view of the firm that placed human resources, and by implication HR professionals, in a new strategic role in achieving competitive advantage (Barney and Wright, 1998). This was reinforced by agendas of HR professionalisation designed to control access and improve the overall status of the
profession (Gilmore and Williams, 2007). But perhaps the most decisive influence on boardroom ambition has been the “Ulrich model” of “business partnering” which suggests that the HR function should forge a multi-level “partnership” between HR and line managers, and that this should ultimately be realised at board-level with HR directors operating as “strategic business partners” (Ulrich, 1997). Although the Ulrich model had a strong focus on traditional operational delivery and transactional personnel administration it took the HR profession by storm in the US and UK during the late-1990s, mainly because it appeared to promise both a new era of “strategic HR” and a new board-level role for HR directors (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). It is perhaps no surprise then that practitioner surveys consistently suggest that HR directors believe that most large organisations will have a HR director on their board within the next five to six years (Rendell, 2007). For some, indeed, the fallout from the current financial crisis and economic recession may well accelerate this process (Bogart, 2009).

There is, however, an alternative and growing stream of literature which suggests that HR, directors can exercise strategic influence without a place in the boardroom (Torrington and Hall, 1996; Armstrong, 2000; Kelly and Gennard, 2001; Stiles and Taylor, 2002). Kelly and Gennard (2007) have recently reviewed this literature and provided their own support for the view that HR directors do not need to have a boardroom position to exercise strategic influence. Based on interviews conducted during 2003-2004 with 72 directors (including 30 HR directors) in 49 organisations in the UK they argue that strategic decision-making takes place mainly in executive committees and that HR directors can also exercise strategic influence through informal networks (Kelly and Gennard, 2007, p. 108). Executive committees are particularly important because they are invariably Chaired by the CEO and include all the main executive directors with operational and strategic responsibility for business performance. In addition, they argue that nearly all HR directors interviewed, including those on the main board, were dismissive of the Ulrich model of HR business partnering because “it implied that senior executives operated in functional boxes when in reality they integrate their separate activities by behaving as general business managers” (Kelly and Gennard, 2007, p. 112). This criticism highlights a central problem with the Ulrich model, it says very little about how HR professionals enacted strategic business generalist and HR functional or specialist roles in practice (Pritchard, 2009).

But how realistic is the assessment of alternative pathways for the strategic influence of the HR function? Has the executive committee replaced the boardroom? Is it more important for HR to forge new strategic business partnerships with line managers rather than worry about boardroom representation? Are HR directors already operating as an integral part of the business? Or are the issues much more complex? Without a seat on the board is it possible for HR directors to finally lay to rest the traditional characterisation of old-style personnel as an inward-looking administrative and reactive support function disengaged from business needs and priorities (Storey, 1992; Legge, 1995; Guest and King, 2004; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Guest and Bryson, 2009)? Ultimately, it may not just be a question of perceived strategic influence but also a search for “symbolic capital”: the professional esteem, recognition, status and “distinction” that boardroom representation confers (Bourdieu, 1986).

The growing emphasis on other forums for HR directors to exercise strategic influence is important, not only because the role of the boardroom in strategy
formulation can be overstated, but also because there is growing evidence of a pattern of long-term decline in HR director representation in the boardrooms of UK companies (Farndale, 2005, p. 665; Kersley et al., 2006, p. 68). From 1990 to 2004 HR representations in UK boardrooms declined from 63.1 per cent to 45.8 per cent, although the downward trend may have stabilised (Cranet, 2006, p. 10). Currently, less than 4 per cent of FTSE 500 companies have a HR director on their board; a pattern that is mirrored in the S&P 500 index of large publicly traded US companies (NACD, 2009). From 2007 to 2008 HR director representation on the boards of FTSE 100 companies dropped from six to five ( Phelps, 2008). Against this background the identification of alternative mechanisms of influence is necessary and desirable, as well as politically and rhetorically pragmatic. The danger, however, with shifting the focus from the boardroom to executive committees, as the main arena of strategic decision-making, is that it may seriously underestimate how symbolically important a place in the boardroom still is for HR directors’ self-perceptions of their professional status, strategic role and influence. More pointedly, if the boardroom is no longer important for HR influence in strategic decision-making then why do so many HR directors and managers still aspire to become strategic business partners (CIPD, 2003; EO, 2005)? Are HR directors and their professional advocates self-deluded or misguided by the rhetorical appeal of business partnering and the totemic allure of the boardroom? Should the HR profession give up its search for a share of the “symbolic capital” of boardroom status and recognition (Bourdieu, 1986)?

This article argues that HR boardroom representation matters in terms of HR director perceptions of their role and strategic influence: as such it appears to carry enormous “symbolic capital” in affirming the perceived status and legitimacy of the “profession” and its contribution to business performance (Legge, 1995, pp. 52-53). Evidence is presented from a review and re-analysis of a major survey of HR practitioners in the UK, Where we are, where we’re heading (CIPD, 2003)? The survey is important because it covers the views of 1,188 practitioners, including 255 board members, and the findings on board membership have not been examined before; an odd omission given the almost complete absence of any hard data on the subject. A systematic analysis of the findings suggests that over half of HR directors in UK boardrooms see themselves as “strategic business partners”, and most of the profession appears to aspire to this role. In addition, an analysis of the findings suggests that four factors appear to differentiate HR directors on the board from non-board HR directors. Board-level HR directors are more positive about their involvement and influence over business strategy; they are more positive about the perceived performance of the HR function; they give higher ratings of CEO perceptions of the HR function; and they are broadly more positive about the integration of HR strategy and business strategy. The interview evidence partly reinforces these findings, but suggests that the picture is much more complex in terms of the scope and limitations of strategic influence. A place in the boardroom may not be necessary or sufficient for HR to exercise strategic influence, and it may have no performance impact, but it has considerable symbolic significance for HR directors in terms of their perceived role and influence. It is concluded that a reworking of Bourdieu’s concept of “symbolic capital” (i.e. professional esteem, recognition, status, or respect) as board capital may be useful in reframing future research on HR boardroom representation.
The survey data was collected by a combination of postal and email questionnaires sent to 4,000 CIPD members and 1,000 non-members across most industry sectors in the UK. Some 1,188 completed forms were returned, making a response rate of 23 per cent. The returns were overwhelmingly from CIPD members, 1,103 (93 per cent), with just 75 non-members responding. Within this overall sample 255 were board members and 625 were non-board HR directors or heads of HR; the remainder were HR managers and a diverse array of other CIPD member groups as well as a small number of non-members. While the sample frame may not be fully representative of the whole HR profession (especially non-members), the seniority of the two key respondent subgroups makes the survey an invaluable source for comparing and contrasting the potential importance of boardroom representation. The CIPD published a very brief summary of the main findings (mainly frequency counts), but did not explore the findings in terms of subgroups. Given the richness of the data, its broadly representative nature, and the potential for sub-group analysis, the CIPD was persuaded to make the SPSS data files (anomised), available for further in-depth analysis and interpretation.

Further details of the survey sample are covered in the CIPD (2003) summary report, but it is worth outlining some of the main characteristics of the survey sample that relate to an analysis of HR boardroom representation. Although the survey data was not collected to answer classic questions regarding career pathways to the boardroom (e.g. elite educational qualifications), which are usually framed using detailed demographic or behavioural data, it does, however, provide some useful indications of access issues (Westphal and Stern, 2006). In terms of work experience, most of the respondents have some non-HR experience, although there are few significant differences between the subgroups. Both board members and non-board members are as likely to have sales and marketing experience. However, experience within a production or manufacturing environment appears to be positively correlated with board membership ($r = 0.074^*$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting perhaps that experience of industrial relations or a unionised environment may be a potentially important factor. Interestingly, experience within finance does not appear to confer an advantage in terms of boardroom access; a finding that seems to run counter to the conventional view of why HR directors are excluded from the boardroom. As regards tenure, one might expect board members to have more years of HR experience than non-board members. This is partly evident in Table I, but the two sub-groups appear to have equivalent experience at the six to ten-year threshold.

At the organisation level HR director representation in the boardroom rises and then declines with size: it is highest in organisations of 250 to 5,000 employees and lowest in organisations with 25,000 or more employees (Table II). Sectoral factors are also at work in that boardroom representation tends to be markedly higher in public services than in any other sector. Of the 255 board members included in the survey sample, by

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience in HR</th>
<th>1-3 years</th>
<th>4-5 years</th>
<th>6-10 years</th>
<th>11-15 years</th>
<th>16-20 + years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR Board member (n = 245)</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11.02</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR Director/Head (n = 617)</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>48.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I.
far the largest sectorial grouping, 27.8 per cent (71), were from the public services; although one should caution that the concept of “board” representation in public services is markedly different from that in company structures. In contrast, representation was generally low in most private sector organisations, averaging just 3 per cent across 14 industry sector classifications. These findings are broadly in line with Workforce Employee Relations Survey findings, and they indicate that HR director representation in UK boardrooms predominates in medium-sized enterprises and public sector organisations (Kersley et al., 2006).

The interviews
Interviews were conducted with 16 of the survey respondents. Of these, eight were board members (five male and three female), and eight were senior HR directors or heads of HR who were non-board members (four female and four male). The interviewees came from a wide range of organisations in the private (ten) and public sector (six). A total of 14 of the interviewees were also represented on the executive committee of their organisation. All the interviews were conducted by telephone and lasted approximately 30-40 minutes, using an interview agenda that was circulated in advance. The interviews were focused on probing the major findings of the survey and providing a broader “context” for the analysis and interpretation of the symbolic significance of boardroom representation (Pye and Pettigrew, 2005).

The survey findings
The survey covered a wide range of topics, but one of the key questions asked practitioners to classify their current and desired roles using the ubiquitous “Ulrich model” of four HR roles: “strategic business partner”, “administrative expert”, “employee champion”, and “change agent” – a model that has recently been updated but not radically altered by Ulrich and Broadbank (2007). Each of these prescriptive roles is associated with different and sometimes contradictory requirements, although the overall model is meant to be integrated and holistic (Caldwell, 2003). Strategic business partners align HR with the business and help line managers execute strategy, and it is this role that is most strongly identified with a strategic role for HR directors in the boardroom. Administrative experts focus on the improving efficiency and the cost effective delivery of transactional or administrative HR, such as payroll, pensions, and recruitment and selection. Employee champions, in principle, represent the voice of employees, but their main role is to increase employee commitment and increase their contribution to business success, so this role tends to be strongly characterised by intrinsic role conflict in mediating the interests of employees and managers. Finally, change agents facilitate continuous organisational transformation and culture change, and this appears to mark out a new role for HR as an interventionist rather than a reactive function.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation size and board membership</th>
<th>Under 250 employees</th>
<th>251-5,000 employees</th>
<th>5,001-25,000 employees</th>
<th>25,000 + employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HR Board member (n = 255)</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>61.2</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR Director/Head (n = 625)</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>306</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
One of the most striking findings of the survey is the confirmation that the strategic business partner role predominates over all other roles. Of 1,188 practitioners surveyed, 56 per cent indicated that they aspired to become “strategic business partners”, although only 33 per cent were currently performing this role. The second most important role was that of change agent with 28 per cent currently performing this proactive role and 30 per cent aspiring to it. In contrast, 24 per cent saw their role as a more conventional administrative expert and only 4 per cent aspired to this role in the future. Interestingly, just 12 per cent of respondents perceived their current role as an employee champion and less than 6 per cent wished to continue in this role. This is a disconcerting finding for those who believe the shift from employee advocacy to business-oriented HR has already gone much too far (Kochan, 2004).

The survey evidence also confirmed the strong association between the strategic business partner role and boardroom position. Out of a total of 255 board members included in the survey 51 per cent (130) believed they are currently performing a strategic business partner role, versus 22 per cent (138) of HR directors or heads of HR (n = 625) without a boardroom position (Tables III and IV). What is also dramatically evident is that most non-board HR directors and heads of HR want to assume this role in the future: a shift from 22 per cent (138) to 61 per cent (384). In this respect the strategic business partner role appears destined to almost completely eclipse the administrative expert and employee champion roles.

There is also a clear indication that board members are significantly more likely to see the HR function in their organisation as performing a predominately “strategic” and “proactive” role rather than an “operational” and “reactive” role when compared with other directors and heads of HR that are not on the board (Tables V and VI). This strongly indicates that HR directors in the boardroom appear to have internalised the “mental models” and rhetorical messages that HR should be a business partner and that the HR function must be more strategic and proactive.

### Table III.
Ulrich model of HR roles: current and future roles (HR Board member)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Strategic Business Partner</th>
<th>Administrative Expert</th>
<th>Employee Champion</th>
<th>Change Agent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current roles</td>
<td>51.1%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future roles</td>
<td>49.8%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *Significant at p < 0.05; n = 255

### Table IV.
Ulrich model of HR roles: current and future roles (HR Director/Head)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Strategic Business Partner</th>
<th>Administrative Expert</th>
<th>Employee Champion</th>
<th>Change Agent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current roles</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future roles</td>
<td>60.9%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *Significant at p < 0.05; n = 625
Given the significant association between boardroom position, HR as a strategic business partner and the perceived strategic role of the HR function, it is perhaps no surprise that the survey evidence suggests that boardroom position matters across a range of potentially strategic factors. A systematic trawl through the data indicated that there were four factors that appeared to differentiate HR directors on the board from non-board HR directors:

1. they are more positive about their involvement and influence on the business planning process;
2. they have more positive perceptions of how HR is perceived in their organisation as a whole;
3. they give higher ratings of CEO perceptions of the HR function; and
4. they are more positive about HR strategy and business strategy integration.

Each of these areas is now explored in more detail and discussed within the context of the interview findings, which provide insights into the perceived symbolic value of the boardroom.

**Business strategy: HR involvement and influence**

HR involvement in strategic decision-making and business planning was often framed in the early strategic HR debates as a question of whether involvement is late and limited or early and substantive. Buyens and De Vos (2001) argued that early involvement in strategy formulation would make HR more strategic and value driven, while late involvement during the implementation stage would make it adaptive,

<table>
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<th>Table V.</th>
<th>Strategic versus operational HR function</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mainly strategic focus</td>
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<tr>
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<td>%</td>
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<tr>
<td>HR Board member</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR Director/Head</td>
<td>24.6</td>
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<td>Note: *Significant at p &lt; 0.05</td>
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<th>Table VI.</th>
<th>Proactive versus reactive HR function</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mainly proactive focus</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR Board member</td>
<td>39.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR Director/Head</td>
<td>29.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note: *Significant at p &lt; 0.05</td>
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</table>
operational and reactive. In contrast, more recent debates have underplayed the formulation-implementation distinction and suggested that what matters is not involvement at the top (e.g., the boardroom), but HR involvement at all levels (Kelly and Gennard, 2007). However, the continued symbolic significance of the boardroom has often been ignored or seriously underplayed in these discussions (Roden, 2006).

The survey evidence partly reinstates the importance of early involvement and at the highest level. If you are a HR director on the main board you are much more likely to believe that you will have significant “involvement” in and “influence” over business strategy from the onset of planning to implementation (Tables VII and VIII). There is also a series of strong positive correlations between involvement and influence (scored on a scale of 3 High and 1 Low) for both respondent groups during all phases of business planning. For example, the correlation between involvement and influence at the onset of planning is $r = 0.759^{**}, p < 0.01$ while during implementation it is $r = 0.688^{**}, p < 0.01$.

These are not surprising findings. Recent Workforce Employee Relations Survey data has once again confirmed that boardroom representation of HR is positively associated with the inclusion of employee relation issues in strategic business plans (Kersley et al., 2006, p. 64). Links between early involvement in planning and perceived influence during implementation are also a common theme in research on business planning, suggesting that a disjunction between involvement and influence would be contradictory or at least counter-intuitive (Boxall and Purcell, 2003). In most cases more involvement means potentially more influence, and this may confer an advantage to HR directors on the board.

Interestingly, however, the perceived advantage of HR board directors over non-board directors begins to narrow during the implementation stage of business planning, with both sub-groups appearing to have more equal involvement during implementation (Tables VII and VIII). This equalisation may be a reflection of the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Outset of planning</th>
<th>During development</th>
<th>During discussion</th>
<th>During implementation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% Saying high n</td>
<td>% n</td>
<td>% n</td>
<td>% n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR Board member (n = 255)</td>
<td>0.000* 54.5 139</td>
<td>0.000* 60.4 154</td>
<td>0.000* 66.3 169</td>
<td>0.067* 69.0 176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR Director/Head (n = 625)</td>
<td>0.000* 33.6 210</td>
<td>0.000* 40.6 254</td>
<td>0.000* 49.1 307</td>
<td>0.000* 62.2 389</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table VII. HR involvement in business planning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Outset of planning</th>
<th>During development</th>
<th>During discussion</th>
<th>During implementation</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% Saying high n</td>
<td>% n</td>
<td>% n</td>
<td>% n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR Board member (n = 255)</td>
<td>0.000* 44.35 113</td>
<td>0.000* 47.5 121</td>
<td>0.000* 52.5 134</td>
<td>0.014* 60.4 154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR Director/head (n = 625)</td>
<td>0.000* 27.6 172</td>
<td>0.000* 35.0 219</td>
<td>0.000* 41.9 262</td>
<td>0.000* 53.1 332</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table VIII. HR influence in business planning

Note: *Significant at $p < 0.05$
tendency to include HR in business planning only during the later phases of the planning process, especially implementation. Certainly, the pattern of increasing involvement and influence during implementation is clearly obvious in Tables VII and VIII although it applies much more strongly to HR directors without a boardroom position. While the distinction between formulation and implementation may not be so rigid in practice, it is clear that the perceived contribution from HR appears to come during the later stages of business planning (Guest and King, 2004).

Most of the interviewees were in broad agreement with the proposition that greater involvement equates with more influence. However, there were some significant differences in the evaluations of the stage and degree of involvement:

- This is a capital-intensive business . . . I am not there to advise the board on strategy . . . the HR contribution comes in later when effective implementation matters” (HR Director, Board).

Another interviewee expressed a similar view:

- What makes us different is our business model not the HR strategy alone . . . it is part of the business mix (Head of HR, Non-Board).

For others the business case for early involvement was taken for granted:

- The executive committee meets every eight weeks and HR issues are always on the agenda (HR Director, Executive Committee).

There were also some interviewees who felt HR strategy was “talked-up” and they “blamed” HR business partnering for making the profession “obsess about a seat in the boardroom”. However, access was still considered symbolically important both for those setting on the board and those who aspired to it:

- If, as you say, it was taken away tomorrow, would I have less influence, well the answer I am sure is yes (HR Director, Board).

Yet despite this affirmative answer there was considerable ambivalence from some of those inside and outside the boardroom as to whether boardroom representation was necessary for involvement in strategy or for gaining business credibility:

- I’ve work in some companies where HR really had a terrible image problem [even when represented in the boardroom] . . . here we have created credibility because we have worked closely with line managers . . . [and] from the ground up . . . (HR Director, Executive Committee).

Overall perceptions of the HR function
Survey respondents were asked to evaluate perceptions of the HR function in their organisation, especially in terms of its overall business credibility (Table IX). In general, the evaluations are noticeably positive, and HR practitioners appear to be overly assertive about their success; perhaps a naturally biased response given the long-standing history of negative evaluations of the function (Wright et al., 2001; Barker, 2009). But it is evident that HR board members tend to offer much more positive evaluations in terms of how frequently the executive board discusses HR issues, how much the CEO takes HR seriously, and how fully HR issues will be taken account of in business planning process (Table IX). Interestingly, the one area in which there are no significant differences between HR board members and non-board
members appears to be in relation to HR managers’ ability to discuss business issues. This is a notoriously weak point for HR managers, but the findings suggest that the ability to discuss business issues may be much more widely distributed in organisations: it is not just the prerogative of the board. This finding lends support to those who argue that senior HR managers are increasingly operating as “general business managers” (Kelly and Gennard, 2007).

The ability of HR managers to engage with business issues was a central focus of the interviews. Both board members and non-board members felt there had been a very significant change in this area; “HR has come a very long way in a very short time”, “there are more HR business generalists”, and “we are business partners”, were typical responses that reflect broader discourses of HR professionalisation. There was, however, some criticism of how the issue of business knowledge and credibility had been framed, both formally and symbolically. One interviewee felt strongly that “you do not need a place in the boardroom to have business credibility” (HR Director, Executive Committee). There was also some criticism of the Ulrich model of business partnering:

I don’t like these role models they box you in . . . I doubt Ulrich has ever been a HR director . . . HR operates across the whole business . . . (Head of HR, Executive Committee).

The increasing role of executive committees was also noted as a positive development by most of the interviewees, who generally believed that membership and a reporting line to the CEO was “sufficient recognition” of the business contribution of HR. Yet even those HR directors outside the boardroom felt that a seat on the board was “still the icing on the cake”, the ultimate “accolade” or a “symbol” of business esteem.

CEO perceptions of the HR function
Attitudes of CEOs towards the HR function are often vital to the influence it can exercise within organisations (Kelly and Gennard, 2001, 2007). Unfortunately, research evidence on CEO perceptions of the HR function tends to be somewhat negative (Guest et al., 2004; Phelps, 2008). Many Chief Executives come from a finance background and they often express very traditional views of personnel or HR as essentially a support function with limited strategic value and a modest impact on business performance (Guest and King, 2004). This is reinforced by long-standing inter-professional discourses which have always tended to marginalise the HR profession in terms of its

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Executive board frequently discusses HR</th>
<th>CEO believes HR has key role in business</th>
<th>HR issues fully accounted for in business planning</th>
<th>HR managers can discuss business issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Agreeing</td>
<td>% Agreeing</td>
<td>% Agreeing</td>
<td>% Agreeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR Board member n = 255</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
<td>0.001*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR Head/Director n = 625</td>
<td>69.7</td>
<td>70.8</td>
<td>70.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *Significant at p < 0.05
status, expert knowledge, accountability and potential contribution to business performance (Legge, 1995; Caldwell, 2003). So even when HR directors have a place in the boardroom there is often an assumption that they invariably listen, council or implement, rather than provide high-level strategic input into business decision-making (Caldwell, 2003; Sheehan, 2005). In contrast, HR practitioners often overstate or inflate their contribution to business performance, especially when compared to CEO or senior line management evaluations of the HR function (Berry, 2007; Phelps, 2008). This intrinsic “misrecognition” of the real and perceived value of the HR function has rarely been addressed as a question of the limited symbolic value conferred on the HR profession (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991).

The survey evidence is broadly positive in terms of how HR practitioners score CEO perceptions of the HR function in four key areas: contribution to business performance, closeness to the business, influence of HR on board decision, and relationships with line managers – although the survey gives no indication of CEO judgements in these areas (Table X). What is interesting, however, is that HR directors on the board tend to give much more positive ratings in the first three areas than non-board members, once again underscoring the perceived significance of board membership. The fourth area, relations with line managers, is scored highly for both sub-groups, suggesting that boardroom position may not confer an advantage. This finding is perhaps not surprising as senior HR directors inside or outside the boardroom are often in a position to have more positive relationships with line managers at their equivalent managerial level; a process that can be enhanced when line managers are assigned dedicated senior HR business partners within business units. In contrast, the problems in HR line-partnerships usually arise at more junior levels, where HR managers are often unable to provide adequate support to line managers (Whittaker and Marchington, 2003; IRS, 2007).

For most interviewees CEO perceptions of HR were mainly positive, although board members tended to be much more upbeat. There were, however, peculiar dynamics to the CEO-HR relationship, depending on whether HR was inside or outside the boardroom. The personality and experience of the CEO was often noted; if they came from a purely finance background their attitude to the role and influence of HR could be “unforgiving” and “limiting”. In contrast, CEOs with broader experience in more than one functional area were considered “much more inclusive”, and some had taken “effective ownership” of the HR agenda or “fully absorbed” it into boardroom deliberations. When asked if a boardroom position versus executive committee representation enhanced perceptions of the role of HR, the responses were more

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Contribution to business performance</th>
<th>Closeness to the business</th>
<th>Influence of HR on board decisions</th>
<th>Relationship with line managers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Saying positive</td>
<td>0.010*</td>
<td>0.034*</td>
<td>0.000*</td>
<td>0.559</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR Board member (n = 255)</td>
<td>73.3 187</td>
<td>75.7 193</td>
<td>80.9 196</td>
<td>83.9 214</td>
</tr>
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<td>HR Director/Head (n = 625)</td>
<td>61.2 383</td>
<td>64.5 403</td>
<td>52.6 329</td>
<td>83.5 522</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table X.
Positive CEO perceptions of HR

Note: *Significant at p < 0.05
complex. For two interviewees a position on the executive committee was preferable to being a boardroom insider because it could place HR too close to the CEO and boardroom politics. For example, the appointment of a “new broom” CEO might mean “clearing out the HR director as well”, especially if they are too closely linked, or came in at the same. For others, their boardroom role had to be the “cautious adviser” sticking to the more conventional areas where HR can make a contribution such as succession planning, talent management, governance issues, rather than straying into strategy or financial issues: “The agenda must be kept tight … you can’t overload directors with support issues and details” (HR Director, boardroom). In general, it appeared that HR directors in the boardroom have to be “more politically astute and business focused” because of the potential vulnerability and limits of their role, while those outside the boardroom felt they could “get on with the real business of HR”.

**HR-business strategy integration**

Strategic HRM and HR business partnering have been strongly identified with two processes (Boxall and Purcell, 2003):

1. **horizontal integration**, integrating HR activities with each other; and
2. **vertical integration**, integrating HR activities into business strategy.

The instrumental assumption underlying both these processes is that HR directors can exercise rational “strategic choice” and that they can plan and influence business strategy, at least with respect to people management issues. It is also often assumed that the boardroom representation of HR is central to reinforcing policy integration, and there is some evidence of this connection (Guest *et al.*, 2004). Certainly, the early studies of personnel/HR directors in the boardrooms of UK companies suggested that boardroom representation mattered not only in terms of personnel influence in business decision-making but also in terms of the presence of personnel policy committees and company-wide HR policies (Sisson, 1995, pp. 98-99). However, theoretical definitions and measures of “integration” vary, and most of the strategic HR literature has concentrated on HR-business strategy integration from a traditional planning perspective (Sheehan, 2005; Jarzabkowski and Balogun, 2009).

There have also been very few empirical attempts to examine how effective HR managers or directors are at achieving HR-business strategy integration, although there have been some notable attempts at measuring integration using boardroom representation as a surrogate measure. For example, Budhwar (2000) has explored the relationship between HR strategy integration and the devolvement of HR to line managers in large UK manufacturing firms, using survey evidence collected from 93 HR specialists and supplemented by a series of follow-up interviews. The survey indicated that 50 per cent of firms had a high level of integration, but 61 per cent had a low level of devolvement. Intriguingly, Budhwar also found above average representation of the HR function at board level (55 per cent), and this constituted one of his four key measures of integration. However, the research was not designed to explore the possible influence of HR boardroom representation on other measures of integration (e.g. the presence of a written personnel strategy) or devolvement (e.g. line manager responsibility for decision making on HR areas such as pay and benefits). Could there be a connection?
Another important empirical source for the exploration of HR-business strategy integration has come from *Workforce Employee Relations Surveys*. These surveys have often questioned the strategic influence exerted by HR as well as the limitations of HR-business strategy integration (Sisson, 1995, 2001; Kelly and Gennard, 2007). Curiously, the most recent survey has sidelined boardroom representation as a possible measure of integration. Instead, Kersley *et al.* (2006) propose a three-level “integration index” consisting of workplaces with a strategic business plan that includes employee relations, HR involvement in creating the plan, and “investor in people” accreditation. Yet interestingly, HR boardroom presence appears to be positively associated with all three. However, they also note that there is little evidence of integration in most UK workplaces, and this represents a challenge to “vociferous advocates of strategic HRM” (Kersley *et al.*, 2006, pp. 67-68).

The analysis of the CIPD survey data adds an interesting twist to the integration issue with respect to the ability of HR directors to act strategically. Overall, there is a positive correlation between the integration of HR activities with each other and the integration of HR activities with business strategy ($r = 0.495^{**}$, $p < 0.01$). And boardroom membership tends to be more positive for the integration of HR activities with business strategy, a finding that is consistent with most survey evidence on boardroom representation over the last two decades (Sisson, 2001). However, boardroom representation does not appear to be significant for the integration of HR activities with each other, suggesting that HR directors inside or outside the boardroom may be struggling to cope with new and increasingly complex HR policy and corporate governance challenges (Table XI).

Personnel or HR policy integration has, of course, always been highly problematic for HR practitioners. Peter Drucker once famously described the personnel function as “a collection of techniques without much internal cohesion...a hodge podge” (Drucker, 1961, p. 243, cited in Sisson, 1995). The rise of HRM was meant to eliminate this policy failure but this does not appear to have happened (Sisson, 2007). Instead, HR policy integration is becoming more challenging as old models of “internal joint regulation” of employee relations policy have been replaced by the ever-increasing external legislation and the growing blurring of boundaries of HR processes and activities, both inside and outside organisations (Marchington *et al.*, 2005). In this context the ever-present danger of HR policy fragmentation may be increasing while the rhetoric of integration intensifies.

Many of the interviewees were acutely aware of how complex HR integration issues are. They often noted the increasingly “business first philosophy” that informed their

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Integration of HR activities with each other</th>
<th>Integration of HR activities with business strategy</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>% Saying major strength</strong></td>
<td><strong>%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR Board member ($n = 255$)</td>
<td>48.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR Director/Head ($n = 625$)</td>
<td>48.3</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*Table XI.*

**HRM and integration**

**Note:** *Significant at $p < 0.05$
role, and the sense that “business priorities come before policy issues”. HR policy formulation was also challenging because of “stakeholder overload”, the shifting boundaries of the HR function, and the endless cycle of new employment legislation. In addition, some interviewees noted growing business complexity, “financial short-termism” and the difficulty of planning ahead that is essential for “HR systems and process integration” as well as broader “joined-up policy initiatives”. Even with HR inside the boardroom there were limits to what could be achieved:   

There is only so far you can push the policy side of HR in the boardroom agenda ... Any item has to be very business focused ... if you want to avoid losing your credibility (HR Director, Board).

Realism and pragmatism were also evident in the evaluation of the scope for integrating HR policies with business strategy:

I think it is a mistake to think you can integrate HR policies with the business ... what you have to do is make the linkage up [from HR] to business facing issues one at a time (Group HR Director, Board).

Interestingly, this was viewed as a selective and one-way process, with HR taking the lead if necessary, when ideally it should be a two-way process with line managers driving implementation. Despite all of these difficulties, however, most interviewees felt that a position in the boardroom or the executive committee was important for making any significant headway in overcoming the major obstacles to policy cohesion and the business ambitions of the HR function. Certainly, without representation in the boardroom or the executive committee the HR function would lack recognition and the possibility of influencing decisions.

Discussion

Are the survey findings a critical rejoinder to those who might underplay the strategic remit of the boardroom for HR while talking up the role of other forums of representation and influence, especially executive committees (Torrington and Hall, 1996; Kelly and Gennard, 2007)? Yes and no. HR directors inside the boardroom appear to be clearly more confident about their ability to exercise strategic influence. But the boardroom is not the only context in which emergent processes of strategy formulation takes place, especially in large organisations. As many of the interviewees made clear executive committees are important as are the panoply of new line-HR relationships that have come with the devolution of HR and the rise of business partnering. Nor should HR involvement in implementation be viewed as a downstream or “third level” activity devoid of strategic implications (Purcell and Ahlstrand, 1994). In many cases strategy is often a non-linear, adaptive and practice process, so much so that “execution is analysis and implementation is formulation” (Weick, 2001, p. 353). From this “strategy-as-practice” perspective the debate over the strategic importance of HR boardroom representation may be partly misguided, for what matters in not high-level “representation”, but how HR can exercise its influence and make a business contribution at whatever level is appropriate (Jarzabkowski and Balogun, 2009). Compounding this issue, however, is not the question of influence (real or imagined), but the persistent desire of many HR directors to achieve recognition and status by obtaining a place on the board, even in the face of the evidence of a long-term decline in boardroom representation in the UK.
As the debates about HR access to the boardroom have shifted in recent years, the new emphasis is on the mechanisms by which HR directors can exercise their influence outside the boardroom. For most advocates of a shift of focus there are two key mechanisms: a direct reporting line to the CEO that puts HR on the same footing as other functions, and a position on the executive committee as the highest decision-making management forum in most businesses (Roden, 2006). In practice these two mechanisms tend to be mutually reinforcing since CEOs often Chair executive committees (Stiles and Taylor, 2002). However, just like boardroom representation, a CEO direct reporting line and a seat on the executive committee are not in themselves guarantees of HR influence in business decision-making, even if they undoubtedly carry symbolic significance and value.

Currently, research on HR reporting patterns is scant, even though it has taken on a new strategic significance because of the reconfiguration of reporting between HR and the line ushered in by HR business partnering and the devolution of HR activities, especially in large organisations. In some organisations the “line of business” HR director or business partner will report directly to the CEO, while having a dotted-line to the group head of HR: a significant break with conventional functional models of HR reporting which made sense when “personnel” was a clearly demarked departmental activity. The limited evidence available, however, from large-scale surveys is not encouraging in terms of the emergence of more strategic reporting models. Saratoga benchmarking survey data, covering FTSE100 and Fortune 500 companies, indicates that fewer senior HR directors have a directing reporting line to their CEO, down from 83 per cent in 2003 to 63 per cent in 2008 (Phelps, 2008). Compounding this problem there is some evidence that CEOs are spending less time with their most senior HR director, and that they are often not consulted on major business issues (Berry, 2007). The negative implication of this is that some CEOs are increasingly seeking outside HR advice on sensitive and strategic HR issues, including rewards and executive pay. More research needs to be done in this area to discover how different HR reporting patterns are changing and what implications this has for CEO evaluations of the real and perceived value of the HR function.

As regards HR representation on executive committees this appears to be increasing in the UK, although the dynamics driving this appear to be complex (Finch, 2007; Sealy et al., 2009). Many interviewees were broadly positive about their role on executive committees, although this form of representation did not carry the larger symbolic value of the boardroom. Again, more systematic research needs to be done in this area, especially given the long-term decline in boardroom representation. At one level the importance of boardroom representation may have been overstated. For example, there is little evidence to suggest that boardroom representation makes any difference to financial performance. A recent study by Sheehan et al. (2007) of 441 Australian senior HR Managers, suggests that while CEO support for HR has a positive impact on perceived organisational performance, HR representation on the board of directors appears to serve a purely “symbolic function”. There is also growing evidence that as boards take ownership of key areas of strategic HR the role of HR directors in the boardroom is less important. Paradoxically, the ascendancy of HR issues in the boardroom and the decline of HR director representation may be a realisation of the view that “HR is too important to be left to HR” (Ulrich, 1997). Of course, with a now seriously flawed “Anglo-Saxon model of market capitalism” this reversal may undergo
reevaluation against other varieties of social market capitalism. But what impact the fallout from economic recession will have on the diminishing boardroom role for HR is still very unclear. Will HR directors seek to reinvent their role as guardians of employee governance issues and business ethics in the boardroom, or will they become “handmaidens” of corporate retrenchment and cost-cutting (Sisson, 2007; Gennard, 2009)?

Despite limited evidence on the scope and value of HR reporting lines to senior management or the CEO and the representation of HR directors on executive committees, these avenues are likely to gain increasing importance; partly because boardroom positions for HR are declining and partly because they seem to be genuinely accepted as an alternative pathway to perceived strategic influence (Kelly and Gennard, 2001, 2007). Certainly, there is no shortage of self-reporting and “sponsored” surveys indicating that HR directors and practitioners believe they are increasing their business knowledge and strategic influence (IRS, 2007). Many of the interviewees in this study were also broadly positive about a new and enhanced business role for HR. However, even the new focus on executive committee management forums and positive messages about growing influence will not satisfy everyone, especially those who feel HR is still slighted as a “Cinderella profession” lacking real strategic influence. In practice, the debates will ruble on, mainly because it is now almost impossible to disentangle the strategic influence of HR from issues of professional status and symbolic recognition, and that means for many HR professionals that their deeper ambitions will not be fully realised until they find a place in the boardroom.

**Future research: exploring symbolic capital**

A broader understanding of the continued symbolic significance of the boardroom suggests that there is a need to rethink existing HR debates on boardroom representation, and HR professionalisation (Gilmore and Williams, 2007). At one level the positioning of HR boardroom access in terms of the rise of HRM and the corresponding ascendancy of HR business partnering is simply the most recent manifestation of a long-standing struggle of the HR profession for influence, status and recognition. Legge (1995) captured this historical trajectory very well and its broader implications for how the rhetoric of HR roles had been redefined:

Traditionally, personnel managers have suffered from problems of achieving credibility, recognition and status in the eyes of other management groups and employees. This has resulted in a willingness to adopt different roles and rhetoric’s to suit the contingencies of the times and to exploit possible bases of power... By the late 1980s the most perspicacious personnel managers realised the need for a new rhetoric [HRM] to assert credibility, one that performed the dual, if paradoxical, function of highlighting a new specialist contribution, while simultaneously locating themselves unequivocally within the management team (Legge, 1995, pp. 52-53).

The debate on whether boardrooms or executive committees are the primacy forums for HR to exercise influence is a subplot of this much wider and long-term search by the personnel/HR profession for status, recognition and strategic influence (Roden, 2006). Historically, personnel and HR professionals have had to confront some intrinsic limitations to their role, influence and perceived status (Gilmore and Williams, 2007). In the struggles between traditional professions, business managers and functional
specialists, HR has always found it difficult to defend the content and boundaries of its “jurisdictional claims” to professional expertise or business knowledge, not only because these claims were intrinsically weak, but also because the professionalisation of business management was rarely reducible to exclusive domains of expertise (Abbott, 1988). The relatively weak occupational status position of HR has also been reinforced by role ambiguities that derive from four major sources (Caldwell, 2003):

(1) marginal or second order involvement in business decisions or strategic planning (i.e. implementation rather than strategy formulation);

(2) difficulty in defining the content and boundaries of “HR” or “people management” practices and processes, and its constant vulnerability to encroachment, intervention or control by managers or other outside providers (e.g. consultants, lawyers, outsource specialists) with overlapping knowledge claims or expertise;

(3) lack of specificity in defining HR performance outcomes and a corresponding lack of accountability in achieving outcomes, a process that is intensified in the “performative cultures” of managerialism that erode claims to professional autonomy; and

(4) deep and unresolved role conflicts and ambiguities of self-identity in serving both the goals of business and the needs of employees.

Against this background the struggle for professional roles and a new identity based on old style specialist HR expertise versus new forms of generalist business knowledge has constantly created contradictions between professionalisation driven by qualifications and codified knowledge and the incorporation of HR as an integrated business function that contributes directly to business strategy and performance outcomes. Certainly, the traditional administrative expert role of personnel specialist has tended to set uncomfortably with the increasingly strategic and business focused remit of HRM (Ulrich, 1997). How far HR practitioners have been able to transform themselves into a new breed of business professionals is still unclear in a context in which the being and becoming of the “profession” appears out of step with the challenges of being and becoming a “professional” in increasingly complex organisational settings. Three decades ago Legge famously suggested that personnel managers could only break out of their traditional administrate roles and gain power by becoming “conformist innovators” or “deviant innovators”. But Guest and Bryson (2009) have recently argued using WERS data that there is no evidence of the emergence of either of these innovative roles. In particular, HR professionalisation in the form of the increasing number of UK workplaces with qualified personnel/HR specialists has not lead to any growing uptake of potentially innovative or “progressive” HR practices. Nor is there any positive association between various performance outcomes (e.g. productivity) in workplaces with a personnel/HR specialist versus those without a qualified specialist (Guest and Bryson, 2009).

The debates about HR professionalisation, performance and the uptake of “progressive” HR practices are complex partly because they are conducted through rhetorical discourses in which perceptions, symbolism and self-interest are almost as important as reality in defining the ambitions of the HR profession. This is perhaps especially the case with respect to boardroom access, were it is difficult to reconcile the
The decline of boardroom representation with the apparent “misrecognition” and “overstatement” of its real importance to the strategic influence that HR directors can exercise. Is this a case of the symbolic value attributed to HR boardroom representation overtaking any realistic assessment of its strategic value?

One possible way of reframing this question for future research is to draw on Bourdieu’s (1986) polymorphous concept of “symbolic capital”. Bourdieu identifies four major forms of capital:

1. Economic (e.g. all forms of economic wealth and financial assets);
2. Cultural (educational credentials, expertise and cultural goods);
3. Social (networks of interpersonal relations – family, friends, acquaintances, colleagues, contacts); and
4. Symbolic (esteem, honour, prestige, recognition that legitimises social positions of power and influence).

The classification is somewhat permeable. Cultural and symbolic forms are closely related because symbolic capital is often the embodiment of cultural capital. All forms of capital are also resources that have their own dynamics and they can be held together or blended into unique formations. In addition, it is possible in many cases to “covert” one from of capital into another, although the forms of conversion vary enormously. For example, professional and elite academic credentials (cultural/symbolic capital) can be traded as economic capital (talent) on the job market. But all forms of capital are not strictly reducible or convertible into economic capital. Symbolic capital is particularly complex because it can be a mechanism for the manifestation and transmission of all the other forms of capital, through drawing “distinctions” which emphasise economic and cultural differences and the boundaries between individuals and groups, although there is usually no direct mechanism for converting symbolic capital into other forms of capital. Rather, all other forms of capital carry elements of symbolic value – they can be classified as valuable. For example, most positions of authority and leadership have both economic and symbolic value. Another central feature of symbolic capital is that it functions as a form of “symbolic power”, it allows individuals and groups to occupy positions and exercise influence and power on the basis of prestige, recognition or status. Finally, Bourdieu (1986) locates symbolic capital within the multiplicity of overlapping and competing “fields” in which it is valued. Different fields will in practice value the same object differently, and different individuals, groups and institutions will embody different combinations or accretions of capital. Ultimately, the position of actors within fields (individuals, groups or institutions) is partly defined by the concentration or distribution of the various forms of capital they can control, defend, transmit or reproduce through social practices.

While Bourdieu’s analysis has often been criticised because it carries “functional” and instrumental implications, and says little about gender, it also opens up possibilities for a more flexible and subtle exploration of the inner working of “symbolic value” within the context of fields were managerial and professional groups compete. For example, if capital is a highly concentrated resource within the social space of the boardroom that enables individuals to exercise influence and maintain a position of power within an institutional status hierarchy, then it can be used to...
effectively control access and representation. Symbolic capital, may therefore be important in ordering the relations between directors within the boardroom, as well as defining the boundaries of their relative professional standing and influence within the competing fields of professional practice that intersect at Board-level within organisations. Certainly, many UK board directors are often rich in various forms of capital: public school education or elite academic credentials, highly specialised and valued knowledge (e.g. finance or accounting, engineering); institutional recognition (e.g. membership of exclusive institutions, or other boards), as well as the cultural disposition of knowing how to speak and act with self confidence and exercise interpersonal influence (Westphal and Stern, 2006). More broadly, board capital can be defined as a social space within a field in which various professions (e.g. accountancy, law, engineering, HR) and their individual members compete for shares of symbolic capital (recognition, prestige) and economic capital (rewards), as well as other policy and political goals. While this competition is normative and defined by professional values it is rarely disinterested (Bourdieu, 1986). Board capital is therefore intrinsically a form of symbolic power that can be both achieved and acquired through professionalisation, business performance, and the broader institutional context of regulatory and governance regimes; they all constitute potential resources which may give directors increased individual leverage in the performative power games of the boardroom.

The implication of a symbolic reading of HR debates over boardroom representation are potentially promising for future research that draws on more ethnographic and sociological methods, although the scope of this research can only be very briefly hinted at here (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986). Because the boardroom is a social space that operates through symbolic power; it tends to reinforce and reproduce legitimisations of boardroom access; it defines why HR or any other function does or does not deserve a seat on the board. The counter discourse of HR professionalisation and HR business partnering was designed to affirm a more positive rhetoric of business inclusion by reconfiguring HR roles: HR has come of age and has earned its place at the top table as a “strategic business partner” (Ulrich, 1997). In this discourse symbolic capital is often defined negatively as the absence of prestige, or the lack of recognition of the contribution and esteem of the HR function; and these discourses affirm why the HR profession and individual HR directors should be given the status and recognition they deserve. Alternatively, absence from the boardroom can be defined positively: HR has strategic influence, it does not need to seek boardroom representation, what matters is executive committee representation or informal networks. The deep tensions within these competing discourses are likely to continue, because they highlight a central paradox of symbolic capital clearly identified by Bourdieu: “misrecognition” and self-delusion. In the search for symbolic capital participants can be involved in an exercise of self-deception; they seek recognition which derives from their sense of exclusion, marginality or subordination, but these conditions are internalised and reproduced in the new rhetoric of inclusion (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991). This curious paradox may go some way to unraveling the characteristic distancing behaviors of HR directors inside the boardroom from those outside it (Baker, 2009). Yet even the growing attempt to abandon the focus on HR boardroom representation as misguided tends to reproduce the same paradox; it undervalues the real, perceived or potential contribution of HR to business performance (Roden, 2006). In this sense the old role
ambiguities and problematic self-identity of the HR profession returns in new guises: the search for symbolic capital through boardroom representation or the affirmation of strategic influence outside the boardroom are both reconfirmations of how far the HR profession is from resolving long-standing uncertainties over its role, self-identity and professional status.

Some limitations of the survey data
Before concluding this paper it is important to note the possible limitations of the survey data. The data covers a fairly representative group of CIPD members at board level \((n = 255)\), but it does not include a sufficient HR group of non-members who may operate within the boardroom. Approximately 10 per cent \((25)\) of the board directors surveyed \((n = 255)\) are not CIPD members. In contrast, just 5.5 per cent \((35)\) of non-board members with the HR Director or Head of HR job title are non-CIPD members. This is an interesting contrast, but it only becomes an issue if it is established that most senior HR directors in the UK are not CIPD members. Currently, there is very little evidence available to substantiate this view. However, this would not in itself invalidate the findings for CIPD members who are on the boards of their organisations.

The complexity of boardroom representation and its formal and symbolic importance for HR professionals has rarely been fully addressed by most existing survey instruments. Even the highly regarded WERS data does not differentiate between types of boardroom representation. This is also a problem with the CIPD survey data. For example, there is no clear differentiation between representation on the “main board”, the “executive board”, or the “executive committee” reporting to the board, and as has been noted earlier it is also important to capture the differences between “boards” in public and private sector organisations. Clearly, these different forms of representation may affect perceptions of relative influence and status. However, the broad distinction created between sub-groups in terms of board members versus non-board members was considered valuable in exploring the perceived importance of boardroom presence.

The anonymised nature of the survey data (a condition of access) placed limits on the sort of analysis that could be undertaken. Data was available on organisation size and sector, but no robust information was available on the age, gender or qualifications of the respondents. These limitations undoubtedly make it difficult to construct a robust regression model to establish if some of the findings are purely a function of board membership or the attributes of the respondent who are board members. Nevertheless, there is a substantive amount of inferential survey data and supportive interview evidence to suggest that board membership has a positive impact on HR directors’ perceptions of their influence, as well as carrying symbolic value.

Finally, it is worth emphasising that the findings are based on self-perceptions and as such they must be treated cautiously as they may be subject to the conventional limitations of “functional” or “self-interest bias” (Wright et al., 2001). HR practitioners sometimes offer overly positive perceptions of their strategic role, perhaps not deliberately but more as an affirmation of their self-belief in value and status of the HR profession. However, there are frequent instances in which practitioners can express forthright and even very critical views of the HR function, and this was facilitated by the types of scaling and multiple response questions, frequently used in the survey.
Interestingly, HR directors both inside and outside the boardroom have often been highly self-critical of the caliber of HR practitioners and the overall performance of the HR function in their organisation (Guest et al., 2004; Baker, 2009). So the issue of bias may be partly moderated by professional self-criticism and the distancing behaviour that often characterises HR professionals in senior roles.

Conclusion

The survey and interview evidence presented here have explored the idea that boardroom representation is not necessary or essential for the HR function to exercise strategic influence. Nevertheless, the boardroom appears to exercise a symbolic hold over the ambitions of the HR profession. It is clear from the survey that most board-level HR directors perceive themselves as “strategic business partners”, and most HR directors outside the boardroom seem to aspire to this role as a pathway to the boardroom; even if the business partnering idea may be overly prescriptive and contradictory in practice and boardroom access is in decline (Francis and Keegan, 2006). It is also evident that HR directors without a seat on the board are less optimistic about their ability to influence strategic decision-making in their organisation. In contrast, HR board directors are significantly more positive about their role in four key areas; involvement and influence during business planning; perceptions of the performance of HR, CEO perceptions of the HR function, and the integration of HR strategy with business strategy. While these findings are based on self-perceptions research, and there is no hard evidence that perceptions have an impact on business performance or the effectiveness of the HR function, they are nonetheless a reminder that boardroom representation still matters profoundly for HR directors in terms of their perceived professional status, influence and strategic role. Ultimately, the boardroom is the symbolic epiphenomenon of a profession still in search of its identity and legitimacy; it is a realm of perceived symbolic capital. Without a significant shift in perceptions and a revaluation of how HR contributes to business success or exercises strategic influence, the boardroom will continue to exercise a powerful hold over the imagination and ambitions of the HR profession in the UK.

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Further reading

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