



# 'An army of our own': Legitimizing the professional position of HR through well-being at work



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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on how HR practitioners legitimate their position in municipal organizations through the discourse of well-being at work. I show how HR practitioners draw upon the desirability and appropriateness of well-being as a value of work life in municipalities and the wider societal context. I also show how, as a result, they reflect and reinforce formal structures, individual choice and responsibility, performance, and the meaningfulness of work as discursive themes of well-being that require and justify the position of HR practitioners as 'an army' of management programmes, practices and resources.

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## 1. Introduction

The interest of this article lies in scrutinizing how HR practitioners draw on institutional and societal values that are linked to the discourse of well-being at work to legitimate their position in Finnish municipal organizations. In studies of HR practitioners, their concern regarding well-being at work is a constant bone of contention (Keegan & Francis 2010; Renwick, 2003). The historical background of HR practitioners as promoters of welfare in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, and as developers of the quality of work life in the 1970s (Jacoby, 2004), is something both public and private sector HR practitioners have shunned away from. Instead, their focus has been on managerial and market logics of strategy and performance (Harris, 2007; Wright, 2008), in line with the adoption of New Public Management (NPM) in the Nordic context (Christensen & Laegreid, 2007). Still, the strategic aspirations of HR practitioners in public organizations have been difficult to realize, due to the absence of transparent linkages between long-term planning, line management and their contributions to performance (Harris, 2004). Kochan (2004, 132) has also stated that the HR profession 'faces a crisis of trust and a loss of legitimacy' due to overlooking employees as stakeholders.

Among academics and practitioners, the weak status of HR practitioners has been a recurring concern (Caldwell, 2003; Wright, 2008). In the public sector, the position of HR is even more precarious (Farndale & Hope-Hailey 2009). HR practitioners are affected by both external and internal expectations arising from municipal top management demands for strategic contributions to services needed by citizens (Lindström & Vanhala, 2011; Truss, 2008). Moreover, the pressures of managing a proportionally smaller staff in larger entities due to municipal mergers – which seek cost-effectiveness in all occupations – cause uncertainty for HR practitioners, such as the risk of being outsourced themselves.

Adding to these pressures, over the last decade, well-being at work in the Nordic context has evolved into a large-scale societal concern. The number of senior workers in Finnish municipalities is growing, as in the other Nordic countries (Lindström et al., 2008), spurring the agenda for well-being at work. The financial impact of ill-being at work through absenteeism, underachievement, turnover, and early retirement has prompted employers to implement diverse well-being programmes and practices in Nordic organizations. The institutional pressures on municipal organizations to improve well-being at work stem from policy-makers, employer organizations and trade unions jointly propagating well-being at work as an objective, and from discussions regarding the ageing workforce and the raising of the retirement age (e.g. Ministry of Employment and Economy, 2012). Since institutional pressures create a situation in which HR practitioners need to evaluate and possibly reconstruct their work (Boon, Paauwe, Boselie, & Den Hartog, 2009; Boxall & Purcell, 2008; Guerci & Shani, 2013), this

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study asks how the strengthened well-being at work discourse is adopted and employed by the HR practitioners themselves.

Through a detailed study of ten semi-structured interviews with Finnish HR managers, I show that HR practitioners in Finnish municipalities have not only accepted well-being at work policies but have, in fact, embraced well-being at work as a field to be coordinated and managed. HR practitioners position themselves, for example, as a structured ‘army that can support well-being in different situations’. The article contributes to research on the role of public sector HR practitioners (Harris, 2007; Lindström & Vanhala, 2011; Truss, 2008) through the lens of discursive legitimation—an approach unfamiliar to this line of research. Even though HR practitioners are building their position through the discourse of well-being at work, well-being is still strongly represented in an instrumental sense, as a means to an end; i.e. better performance of municipal work. I also add an empirical study to the nascent research on the legitimation of professional roles and positions and the importance of the institutional environment in the legitimation process (Goodrick & Reay, 2010). When the well-being at work discourse is employed in the legitimation process, the interviewees combine discursive strategies from both the previously theorized legitimation of practices (Van Leeuwen, 2008) and the legitimation of professional roles (Goodrick & Reay, 2010).

The article is structured as follows. First, I present an overview of previous research on HR and well-being at work, and explain why the discursive legitimation of professional positions is a suitable angle for this study. I continue with the methodology, followed by the results. The article ends with a discussion and conclusions section.

## 2. HR practitioners, well-being at work and legitimation

The roots of HR can be traced to the growth of industrial organizations in the 19th century (Morley, Gunnigle, O’Sullivan, & Collings, 2006) when ‘early HR’ developed as an administrative function to secure the well-being of industrial workers. Early representatives of the occupation were involved in organizing basic worker needs such as housing, recreation and the teaching of hygiene (Jacoby, 2004). It is argued that the weak status of HR practitioners stems from the occupation’s origins as a provider of paternalistic ‘welfare work’ as opposed to the business approach of, for example, production managers (Legge, 1978).

In order to strengthen their position in organizations, HR practitioners have taken steps towards organizational professionalism as a distinct occupational value and discourse, which is reflected in their (self-)organizing and control of work (Evetts, 2011). In organizational professionalism, organizational priorities are discernible as the guiding values of occupations. Here, managerial aims such as efficiency, control and bureaucracy; and practices such as performance assessments, are employed by, for example, HR practitioners, project managers, and controllers, to strengthen their professional positions in organizations. This is in sharp contrast to the more traditional strategies of occupations that strive for status, for example, building independent professional standards or collegiate controls (Evetts, 2011; Muzio, Hodgson, Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, & Hall, 2011; Wright, 2008).

Organizational professionalism is coupled with the incorporation of NPM into public sector HR before the end of the 1980s. NPM can be seen as an identity project in which public professionals’ source of identification in particular is redefined as the managerial direction of financial priorities and performance values (Du Gay 1996), thereby threatening the traditional professional logic of relying on expert judgments and professional discretion. As distinct professional actors, HR practitioners in public organizations were pressured to adopt NPM managerial and

market logics, in order to become more business-oriented and, consequently, contribute to individual, organizational and financial performance (Harris, 2007; Truss, 2008, 2013). The shift in HR professional identity from one that provided support for balancing employee and firm interests to a ‘business partner’ with line and senior managers, aligned HR practitioners with the interests and goals of management (Kochan, 2004). At the same time, the rhetoric of HRM promoting alignment with business strategy and the contribution to performance emerged, and pushed employee interests to the side line of HR practitioners’ work (Harris, 2007; Keegan & Francis, 2010; Woodall & Winstanley, 2001).

HR practitioners are identified as an occupation using the skilful strategy of constant redefinition to improve their position (Caldwell, 2003). This is accomplished through meaning creation, by making their initiatives ‘legitimate, desirable, rational, and inevitable’ (Sheehan, De Cieri, & Greenwood, 2014). Legitimation is a process through which a phenomenon becomes perceived as desirable, appropriate or taken for granted within a certain socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman, 1995). In this study, I use the approach of discursive legitimation (e.g. Van Leeuwen, 2008) to study how HR practitioners attempt to strengthen their position. This approach stresses language use in relation to social phenomena, which means that I perceive well-being at work, as well as social positions in relation to it, as phenomena that are constituted by how they are defined, and talked and written about. Consequently, the discursive construction of the positions in relation to well-being at work both reflect and alter the social contexts in which they are expressed.

Legitimation strategies are specific ways of using discursive resources to construct a sense of either legitimacy or illegitimacy (Fairclough, 2003; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). In their seminal study of discursive legitimation, Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) differentiated four general strategies for legitimation or delegitimation: authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation (or moralization), and mythopoesis, which may all occur either separately or simultaneously. Authorization is legitimation by reference to, for example, tradition, law or authoritative persons. Rationalization, on the other hand, is a two-way approach in which either the utility of something is emphasized (instrumental rationalization) or in which legitimation is accomplished by reference to the ‘natural order’ of things (theoretical rationalization). The third category of legitimation – moralization – means that shared value systems are drawn upon in order to legitimate something. Finally, mythopoesis is an implicit form of legitimation, conveyed through narrative accounts (Van Leeuwen, 2008).

HR work in organizations is constructed in relation to changing institutional-level pressures (Boon et al., 2009; Boxall & Purcell, 2008; Guerci & Shani, 2013). In line with this, the societal- and municipal-level calls to enhance well-being at work in Finnish public sector organizations create a situation in which HR practitioners need to respond to these demands by evaluating and reconstructing not only their work, but also their professional positions in these organizations. Today, the concept of well-being at work is engrained in the Nordic context. Kindred concepts are job quality (Findlay, Kalleberg, & Warhurst, 2013), wellness at work (Farrell & Geist-Martin, 2005) and health promotion (Holmqvist & Maravelias, 2011). However, these notions all emphasize partly different phenomena. Job quality stresses workers’ rights and fair pay, whereas wellness and health promotion relate especially to the physical and psychological aspects of well-being. Well-being at work as a concept often takes distance from pay and working conditions, while incorporating social aspects in physical and psychological well-being. Well-being at work can thus be broadly viewed as an entity consisting of physical (e.g. ergonomics), psychological (e.g. exhaustion, engagement) and social (e.g.

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