HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AS A PROFESSION IN SOUTH AFRICA: PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVES

CHANTEL VAN DER WESTHUIZEN
LJ VAN VUUREN
DELÉNE VISSER
Programme in Industrial Psychology
Department of Human Resource Management
Rand Afrikaans University

ABSTRACT

Many organisations are downsizing their Human Resource (HR) operations due to the perceived lack of credibility of the function as a whole. This study investigates possible reasons for this perceived lack of credibility, and suggests ways in which the Human Resource Management (HRM) function can overcome this challenge. One of these suggestions implies the need to advance the professional status of HRM. The current professional status of HRM, as perceived by South African HR practitioners (N = 398) was evaluated by means of the trait approach to assessing the professional status of an occupation. The results reveal that practitioners do consider HRM to be a profession. However, HRM is still very much in the early stages of achieving true professional status. Other findings and their implications are also discussed.

OPSOMMING

Die Menslike hulpbronbestuursfunksie (MHB-funksie) word deur verskeie organisasies gerasionaliseer as gevolg van 'n oënskynlike gebrek aan geloofwaardigheid van die funksie as 'n geheel. In hierdie studie is moontlike redes vir die geloofwaardigheidsprobleem ondersoek en aanbevelings gemaak ten opsigte van wyses waarop die MHB-funksie hierdie uitdaging kan oorkom. Een voorstel impliseer die behoefte om die professionele status van die MHB-funksie te bevorder. Die huidige professionele status van MHB soos gesien vanuit die perspektief van Suid-Afrikaanse MHB-praktisyns (N = 398) is aan die hand van die eienskapgebaseerde metode om die professionele status van 'n beroep te bepaal, geëvalueer. Die bevindinge dui daarop dat ofskoon praktisyns MHB as 'n professie beskou, die MHB-funksie steeds in die vroeë fase van die strewe na ware professionele status is. Ander bevindinge en implikasies word ook bespreek.

It was over a decade ago that several management visionaries began promoting a new direction for the human resource management (HRM) function. They argued that, as business made the transition from an industrial to an information age, the knowledge, know-how and experience of employees would become the core assets of the organisation. The real foundation of competitive success would no longer be proprietary processes or even distinctive products, but rather outstanding people. The custodian of the workforce, the HRM department, would in turn need to undergo fundamental changes, moving beyond its traditional responsibilities of personnel administration and employee advocacy, to play a central role in assisting organisations to fulfil their highest-level business goals. If HRM does not become more tightly linked with the strategic and economic objectives of the organisation, its ability to make an adequate contribution to the bottom line would be undermined. Unfortunately, the path from idea to reality has not been an easy one (Connolly, Mardis & Down, 1997, p. 11).

Questions therefore arise as to the real value of the HRM function. What led the Bank of America, BP Amoco and others to transfer all human resource (HR) activities to an outside vendor? What is the future of HRM and what role should it play in business? These questions are in the minds of HR practitioners and executives alike. The consequence of these types of questions are that HRM frequently finds itself struggling to gain credibility among executives and line managers, and as a result, it could easily find itself outsourced. In fact, the very survival of HRM hinges on the ability to achieve increased credibility (Ulrich, 1997, p. 250).

During the continuous attempt to gain credibility and to instil pride, HRM faces many obstacles, one of which according to Ulrich (1997, p. 251) is the need for improved professional status. Since HRM may enhance its credibility by actively pursuing sustained professional status, it is necessary to explore

and evaluate this status on a fairly regular basis. The current professional status of HRM as seen from the South African practitioners' perspective is therefore evaluated. However, before this is attempted, it is necessary to define HRM and to describe its role within the organisation.

HRM and its role within organisations

It is evident from its name that the HRM function has to do with the management of the human factor within the organisation. Despite the magnitude of descriptions and definitions of HRM, most definitions are in line with the one by Cascio (1998, p. 30), who describes HRM as attracting, selecting, retaining, developing and utilising human resources in order to achieve both employee and organisational goals. Singer (1990, p. 3) defines HRM as a specialised field that focuses on development programmes, procedures and activities which aims to satisfy the needs and goals of both the individual and the organisation. The definition of Hall and Goodale (1986, p. 6) is in line with that of Cascio and Singer, as they define HRM as the process of optimal alignment between employees, positions, organisations and the environment, to the extent that the employee can obtain certain levels of achievement and work satisfaction, whilst the organisation achieves its goals in return. It is clear from these definitions that HRM has two foci, the employee and the organisation. When studying the field of HRM, it is therefore necessary to evaluate the importance of both the employee and the management of the employee within the organisation.

It is alleged that with the constant focus on reengineering of HRM processes, measuring HRM value and aligning HRM practices with business strategies, HR practitioners often ignore the human aspects of business (Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius & Kanov, 2001). The human part deals with understanding and meeting the needs of employees. Some of these needs are business related, e.g. the need to have impact, to acquire technical knowledge, to be competent and respected. Other needs are more personal in nature e.g. the need to be valued, appreciated and to be part of a team. When these needs go

unmet, employees become less committed, which may lead to lower performance and reduced business results (Ulrich, Losey & Lake, 1997, p. 259).

Brockbank (1997, p. 66) is of the opinion that HR practitioners should ensure that senior management has grasped the idea that employees are the critical and ultimate source of competitive advantage. According to Miller and Catt (1989, p. 10), it is an organisation's employees who individually and collectively use their skills and abilities to perform their jobs that make it tick. "Those who fail to appreciate the vital role people play in managerial and organisational success are destined to finish behind those who do" (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1992, p. 9).

Over and above understanding the importance of employees within the organisation, it is important to focus on the management of employees, through understanding the role that HRM plays in empowering and enabling managers to manage people. The role of HRM as a management tool according to Ulrich (1997, p. 226) includes the following: *Strategic people planning* which involves identifying organisational capabilities and gaps, assessing external and internal work climate and formulating and implementing people strategy. *People acquisition and development*, which is aimed at defining competencies and strategy development, strategic staffing education and training, individual performance management, coaching and succession planning. *Administration of people, policies and practices*, which relates to personnel administration, staffing support, compensation and benefits administration and HR information services. Finally, *organisation design and development* is concerned with change processes, shaping of the work environment, design and management of remuneration benefits and policies.

Regardless of the important role that HRM performs in supporting management to manage an organisation's most valuable asset, its value is often questioned, and the question still exists whether organisations should do away with it. The following section focuses on the credibility of HRM, which poses a major threat to the survival of the function.

Confronting the issue of credibility

Ulrich (1998, p. 29) states that there is good reason for HRM's beleaguered reputation, based on the perception that HRM is often perceived as being ineffective, incompetent, costly and value sapping. There are serious and widespread doubts about HRM's contribution to organisational performance, and therefore the credibility of the function as a whole. According to Knicely (1997, p. 118), the best way for HR practitioners to be successful in future is to focus on credibility, competence and courage. Firstly, *credibility* involves doing what one says one will do, maintaining a level of integrity beyond reproach and keeping confidences. Secondly, *competence* includes constantly upgrading business and HRM skills, broadening the professional toolkit in order to address changing organisational needs, being aware of shortcomings and using good judgement to search out best practices. Finally, *courage* refers to the process of how things are done, pushing for continuous improvement and demonstrating the willingness to take risks.

The challenge on the other hand, is to overcome the fact that many HR executives are not confident that current HR practitioners with traditional administrative and clerical skills possess the capabilities to make the transition that these new changes demand. A number of HR executives interviewed during a study conducted by Connolly et al. (1997, p. 16), indicated that they expressed a high degree of concern about the abilities of the HR practitioners within their organisations, to cope with the present and future pace of change.

Ulrich (1997, p. 18) states that there are certain myths around HRM which impact negatively on HRM as well as the credibility of the HR practitioner as a professional. These include myths such as: people go into HR because they like people, anyone can do HR, HR deals with the soft side of a business and is therefore not accountable, HR focuses on costs which must be controlled, HR's job is to be the policy police and the health-and-happiness patrol, HR is full of fads, HR is staffed by nice people etc. According to Beer (1997, p. 54), the capability of most HR practitioners impacts greatly on the credibility of the function. In order to play a strategic role, HR practitioners require analytical and interpersonal skills, which will have to be equal to the best consulting organisations that are often used to assist HRM with organisational effectiveness and change management. It is clear from the above that a lack of credibility does not revolve around the HRM function only, but also around the people who perform the function.

Considering that a lack of credibility is such a critical obstacle for HR practitioners to overcome, it becomes imperative to firstly understand the reasons for the lack thereof, and secondly to investigate and propose possible solutions in order to address and overcome this challenge. Van Vuuren (2001, pp. 298-303) found that the obstacle of credibility might be ascribed to the following factors:

- A lack of clarity in many organisations as to who is responsible for HRM;
- HRM is often criticised for its lack of business understanding and therefore its inability to act as a strategic business partner;
- As per the change from personnel management to HRM and due to the uncertainty of where HRM should be positioned within the organisation, the self-worth of both the function as well as the people who perform it, are negatively impacted upon;
- Through the years HRM has been exposed to a variety of names to describe the function e.g. personnel administration, personnel management, labour management, HR capital, employee management, people management, etc. Although the name changes might indicate progression, it still causes insecurity concerning the true identity and perceived stability of the profession;
- The extent to which HRM actually adds value to the success of the organisation is constantly in question; and
- The HR practitioner is often described as being passive or subservient and therefore not able to make a difference in improving the credibility of the function.

One of the ways in which the credibility of HRM can be entrenched, is through achieving professional status (Ulrich, 1997, p. 17). Mohrman and Lawler (1997, p. 157) are of the opinion that one of the most important challenges that HRM faces, is the aim to professionally reinvent its structure. This will make it possible to deliver the kind of business partnerships that will enable the organisation to become more effective. In agreement to this, is McKee (1997, p. 156) who states that "the HRM function cannot resurrect itself if it is burdened by the weight of those who cannot or will not move to a professional, strategic partnership".

It is therefore necessary to define and understand what constitutes a profession. The following section will therefore firstly focus on defining the professions, and secondly identify the characteristics of a profession.

"Profession" – a conceptual point of departure

There does not seem to be a universally agreed upon definition of what constitutes a "profession". In many ways, the professions are classified as being the elite occupations (Sokoloff, 1992, p. 7). Everett Hughes, a pioneer of the sociological study of the professions since the early 1950's, placed the social recognition and status of the professions at the centre of his theory (Louw, 1990, p. 9). According to Hughes (1988, p. 31), a profession refers to the act or fact of professing. In other words, an occupation that one "professes" to be skilled in and to follow, thereby possessing certain attributes in order to

provide beneficial services to clients under strictly specified conditions (Barcus & Wilkinson, 1986, p. 15).

According to Inkeles (1964, p. 106) a profession could be classified according to the following criteria:
● the use or application of a body of knowledge;
● the context in which the discipline is used (public or privately), within large groups or face to face with one individual;
● the way in which those concerned make their living, how they relate to their clients, to one another and to the larger society;
● how much freedom and autonomy they enjoy; and
● how well or poorly organised they are.

After defining the professions, it is necessary to explore the characteristics thereof in order to determine what sets professional occupations apart from non-professional occupations. There are various approaches to studying the professions, some of which makes it possible to understand the characteristics of a true profession.

Approaches to studying the professions
Despite numerous approaches to studying the professions, Sokoloff (1992, p. 7) distinguishes between the American and the British approaches. The *American approach* has been dominated by a structural-functional concept, which attempts to define the characteristics of the professions. This includes identifying attributes that assist in defining the degree of professional status of a particular occupation. The *British approach* involves using a more theoretical approach to understand the "place" of the professions. It calls upon both Marxian and Weberian theory in doing so (MacDonald & Ritzer, 1988, p. 260). Those who follow the British approach, analyse the theoretical aspects of inter- and intra-professional conflict, the relationship between the professions and the state, as well as the place of the professions in the social stratification system. Within this perspective, there are those who view professionals as part of a new middle managerial class.

Louw (1990, p. 5), in turn, identified three approaches used to study the professions, namely the *trait approach*, the *functionalist approach* and *critical studies*. The first of these, namely the *trait approach*, suggests identifying the "traits" of a profession, thereby making it possible to distinguish between professional and non-professional occupations. The trait approach is similar to the American approach due to the structured way in which the characteristics of professions are classified. Despite criticism against the trait approach, it is difficult to escape thinking in terms of characteristics in some way or the other if one wants to define a profession (Louw, 1990, p. 8). Larson (1977, p. 8) concluded that although the list of special attributes of the ideal-type profession may vary, substantive agreement does exist about its general dimensions.

Secondly, there is the *functionalist approach* with the primary assumption that professions fulfil certain fundamental needs in society. The more fundamental the need, the higher the value that society place on the services rendered by that particular profession (Louw, 1990, p. 8). According to Rueschemeyer (1964, p. 20), this approach can be characterised in terms of the emphasis that the professions themselves place on being service- or community-orientated, and applying their specialised knowledge to problems which are relevant to society. According to Louw (1990, p. 9), the approach implies social unity by making use of professional expertise and knowledge. It is therefore possible that a profession's clientele perceive certain aspects of professional behaviour as central, whilst the professionals themselves emphasise different aspects.

Finally, the more recent *critical studies* that is similar to the British approach, focuses on the economic and political dimensions of the professions. Work done by researchers in this area, reflect the political influence of the professions, its relation to political and economic elite and the state, and its relation to the market and class system (Louw, 1990, p. 10). Authors working in a more critical tradition, view professionalism as a peculiar type of occupational control, rather than an expression of the inherent nature of particular occupations (Johnson, 1972, p. 45).

In summary, both the *American* and *trait* approaches focus on the characteristics of a profession, which makes it possible to answer questions such as "what sets a profession apart from other occupations?" On the other hand, the *functional* approach focuses on the impact of the professions on society, whereas both the British approach and critical studies focus on the economic and political dimensions of the professions. In order to measure the current professional status of HRM as a strategy to increase credibility, it was therefore decided to utilise the *trait* approach due to the structured and quantifiable context in which HRM can be evaluated in terms of its professional status.

Characteristics of a profession
There is almost universal agreement to categorically reject the notion that a profession is any principal calling, vocation or employment, and on the proposition that no single characteristic will adequately convey the idea of a profession. The disagreement amongst critics is based on what the characteristics of a profession should be, and there is perhaps even more disagreement regarding the extent to which an occupation should possess the specified characteristics. There is, however, wider agreement among authors as to the core characteristics of what constitutes a profession. Various research conducted over several years has resulted in the following criteria that could be used to differentiate between a profession and a non-profession.

Full-time employment
The first criterion that separates professionals from amateurs and from ancillary members of a field, is that professions are full-time occupations and the principal source of their members' incomes. Professions are neither subordinate to other professions, nor stepping-stones to them (Moore, 1970, p. 6).

A calling
Members of a profession make lifelong commitments to its activities, values and principles. The profession represents a primary and enduring identification. "The bond established by shared mysteries, exemplified in technical language and common styles of work and often even common attire, bespeaks a consciousness of being set apart, and insisting on" (Moore, 1970, p. 7).

A commitment to a code of ethics
A code of ethics is a set of moral guidelines designed to protect the professional, the profession and the public served by the group (Brown & Srebalus, 1996, p. 210). Professionals abide by a code of ethics that includes practice standards in the delivery of services to clients, in relation to competitors and the public. The code of ethics defines what is proper and improper behaviour and forms the embodiment of the moral standards of a professional service (Kubr, 1996, p. 115). Whilst the general aim of a code is to provide practitioners with a guide to make ethical decisions, Brown and Srebalus (1996, p. 210) state that a code of ethics serves several other purposes such as:
● providing a basis for regulating the behaviour of members of the professional group;
● providing standards of practice regarding activities ranging from fee setting to deciding on which clients to serve;
● providing guidelines for action when certain types of difficult decisions arise;
● clarifying the responsibilities of professionals to clients, employers, society at large and to the professional group;
● enhances internal professional harmony as it establishes guidelines for professional practices and regulates inter-member interactions; and

- protecting the profession by establishing standards of practice that are often used in the adjudication of liability suits.

Mandatory education preparation and training
There should be a defined body of knowledge proper to the profession that can be acquired through a system of professional education and training. The necessary level of professional expertise is attained after a certain number of years of practical experience, preferably under the guidance of senior members of the profession (Kubr, 1996, p. 116). Professions also possess esoteric but useful knowledge and skills, based on specialised training or education of exceptional duration and difficulty (Moore, 1970, p. 6).

Continuous research
According to Altbach and Finkelstein (1997, p. 35), the professions have to adapt to a competitive research climate. Altbach (1995, p. 30) is of the opinion that the "golden age" of the professoriate is at an end, and that although great emphasis is placed on training within the professions, continuous research will remain the "gold standard". It is thus fair to state that the practising professional continuously keeps abreast of relevant developments in theory and practice (Kubr, 1996, p. 116).

Independence or autonomy
The ultimate achievement of a profession is the attainment of autonomy, freedom from evaluation and control (Kubr, 1996, p. 116). Autonomous professions are entrusted to receive and protect privileged information. They determine their standards of education and training and assist in shaping the legislation that regulates their practices (Gallessich, 1982, p. 367). The autonomy of professionals and the respect they elicit can largely be attributed to their very high levels of education. "Professionals are thought to derive a great deal of fulfilment from their work and to enjoy a high degree of respect, autonomy, control and status" (Sokoloff, 1992, p. 7).

A formal association or society/regulating body
The formal professional association or society has an important role to fulfil, namely to set ethical standards, establish a code of behaviour and provide continuous education programmes and publications for its members or alumni (Davis, 1998, p. 112). In addition to this, the "professional associations, through their activities and reward systems, could strengthen their members" (Gallessich, 1982, p. 386). According to Henry, Sims and Spray (1971, p. 6), referring to a group of people as a profession is unjustified unless they have a common professional association.

Service and social interest
Professionals put their knowledge and experience at the disposal of clients as a service against appropriate remuneration. True professionals are characterised by the "service ethos" which indicates that they serve client needs and interests, to which they subordinate their own self-interests. Furthermore, true professionals view individual client interests from a wider social perspective, and keep broader social needs and interests in mind when serving individual clients (Kubr, 1996, p. 117).

Public and peer recognition as a profession
Every profession strives to persuade the community to sanction its authority within certain spheres by introducing a series of powers and privileges. The society in which the profession operates and the clientele that it serves should recognise the social role, status and behavioural norms of the profession. There may also be explicit recognition e.g. a legal text governing and protecting the professional practice. This could include setting educational standards and behaviour that are considered unprofessional and illegal (Kubr, 1996, p. 117).

Carr-Saunders (1928, p. 8) stressed that it is the character of the work itself that distinguished the professions from other occupations. He defined professions in terms of specialised skills and training, minimum fees or salaries, formation of professional associations and codes of ethics to govern practice. Greenwood (1957, p. 45) identified the following as being the essential elements of the ideal profession: a basis of systematic theory, authority recognised by the clientele, broader community sanction and approval of this authority, a code of ethics and a professional culture sustained by formal professional associations.

It should be clear from the above discussion what constitutes a profession. The following section will become more specific, where these characteristics will be utilised to evaluate HRM in terms of its professional status, as suggested by the trait approach.

HRM as a profession
When evaluating HRM as a profession, Lätti (in Van Vuuren, 2001, p. 217), states that HRM in South Africa can indeed be considered a profession, and provides the following reasons which could be linked to the characteristics of a profession as discussed previously:

Characteristics of a profession	HRM as a profession (Lätti in Van Vuuren, 2001, p. 217)
A formal association or society/ body of knowledge	- the profession has a body of knowledge
	- the existence of a licensing authority – the South African Board for Personnel Practice (SABPP) (however, registration the Board is voluntary which poses a risk to the credibility of HRM)
	- the existence of a professional society (IPM – Institute of People Management)
A commitment to a code of ethics	- the existence of an ethical code for the profession
	- the possibility of disciplinary action should the ethical code not be adhered to
Mandatory education preparation and training	- tertiary qualification standards that prepare potential HR practitioners for entrance to the profession

Furthermore, Losey (1997, p. 147) states "the suggestion that anyone can do HRM work is simply not true, as HRM is a profession". Ulrich (1997, p. viii) is in agreement that HRM is indeed a profession, as there is an established body of knowledge, standards and distinct competencies, and HR practitioners are competency driven experts who draw on a body of knowledge to make informed business decisions.

In order to further evaluate HRM in terms of the characteristics of a profession, it is necessary to investigate and understand the mission, objectives, code of conduct and professional commitment of its regulating board, namely the South African Board for Personnel Practice. The board's *mission* is to establish, direct and sustain a high level of professionalism and ethical conduct in personnel practice. By enabling HR practitioners to make significant contributions to their profession, the board assists organisations to manage and utilise the practitioners more effectively (http://www.sabpp.co.za/intro.htm).

The *objectives* of the board are to promote, direct and influence the development of the personnel profession, to set competency standards for education, training and conduct for those engaged in the profession, to advise involved parties on the development and attainment of those competencies and the evaluation thereof. In addition to these objectives, the board also exercises authority in respect of all matters affecting the standard of professional conduct of the personnel practitioners who are *voluntarily* registered in terms of its charter. As guardian of the

profession, the board does have a disciplinary function and it does de-register members for various reasons (http://www.sabpp.co.za/intro.htm).

In terms of the *code of conduct*, registered members of the HRM profession are obliged to uphold certain standards in their practice, both in their interests of the public and of their calling. These include the following which could also be linked to the calling as a characteristic of a professions http://www.sabpp.co.za/code.htm):
- conducting themselves at all times in keeping with the dignity, standing and reputation of the profession;
- doing their work to the best of their ability and so discharging their duties to employers, employees and clients;
- not undertaking work for which they are inadequately trained or experienced;
- not canvassing or soliciting work in an improper way;
- refraining from presenting themselves or advertising their services immodestly or in any way undermining to the profession;
- refusing to disclose confidential information acquired in the course of their professional practice; and
- at all times obeying the rules and conventions as prescribed by the Board in their professional lives.

Finally, upon registering with the SABPP, HR practitioners are required to sign a *personal commitment*, which should be displayed in an appropriate place in the work environment. These include the following (http://www.sabpp.co.za/commitment.htm):
- commitment to the people and the organisation which the professional serves – by striving for effective results, serving impartially, developing people and building relationships;
- commitment to the profession – by pursuing its enhancement with loyalty, performing duties according to the best practice, in the public interest;
- commitment to ethical standards – by maintaining the highest standard of ethical behaviour, discretion and non-discriminatory practice; and
- commitment to excellence – by striving for continual professional development and in keeping abreast of new knowledge and practice.

It appears as if HRM can indeed be considered a profession, however, it might still not have achieved true professional status compared to the traditions of the medical, accounting and engineering fields. Lätti (in Van Vuuren, 2001, p. 218) mentions the following obstacles that prevent HRM from becoming a true profession in South Africa.
- Registration is optional/voluntary;
- The SABPP is not a statutory entity who can, based on government regulation, find members guilty of misconduct and can therefore not assign disciplinary actions accordingly;
- Not all employees who perform HRM functions within the organisation are members of the SABPP;
- No professional competency model exists for the HRM profession as yet (Unit Standards have been developed for HRM since the interview with Lätti, which are based on outcomes that are required to function within the HRM arena. These Unit Standards could be considered as input to a competency model. (http://www.hrsgb.org.za/procedure_stella_carthy.htm)
- It seems as if the SABPP does not possess the same power and prestigious status which other traditional professions' representative bodies possess; and
- There are thousands of people performing the HRM function that have no formal HR qualifications, training or professional affiliation.

Given these obstacles that HRM has to overcome in order to achieve true professional status, the future becomes uncertain. Kochan (1997, p. 121) believes that the HRM profession will either undergo dramatic shifts in the years ahead, or will lose even more influence both within the managerial community and in the broader society that it is expected to serve.

The underlying challenge facing HR practitioners lies in finding the right balance between building coalitions with other professionals who share responsibility and influence over employment relations, and deepening efforts to make HRM a strategic asset to their organisations (Kochan, 1997, p. 127). On the other hand, Losey (1997, p. 147) is of the opinion that the future of HRM as a profession does not necessarily imply the continuous growth in the number of HR practitioners, but rather more competent HR people. "Simply stated, those who do not stay current and maintain respect as legitimate business partners are at great risk. This is the way it is and should be for a demanding profession" (Losey, 1997, p. 147).

There are few, if any, professions who comply with all the criteria of a profession. The question then still remains, can HRM be considered a profession, and if so, to what extent? This question could be evaluated from various perspectives such as the perspectives of the general public, other professions, other business units within the organisation, line management, staff members as well as members of the HRM profession. For the purpose of this study, and as an initial and exploratory first step in analysing and evaluating the perceived professional status of HRM in South Africa, it was decided to solicit the opinions of HR practitioners in this regard. The HR practitioner is obviously at the core of HRM, and may therefore be able to provide, not necessarily a more objective, but indeed an informed perspective on the extent of HR's professional status.

Should HRM be perceived to be a profession by its members, this perception may serve as a basis for member's to increasingly pursue in a confident manner, the entrenchment of the profession as a true profession in the eyes of peer professions and disciplines, as well as other relevant opinion groups. In utilising the trait approach to ascribe an estimate of HRM's professional status, and applying it in a quantitative and structured manner, HR practitioners' perspectives can be established with a view to future professionalisation attempts.

METHOD

Participants
The population consisted of 1969 HR practitioners registered at all levels of registration categories with the South African Board for Personnel Practice (SABPP). Questionnaires were mailed to the practitioners who were requested to complete and return the questionnaires to the researcher. A total of 398 (20.21%) practitioners responded. The responding group consisted of 331 males (83.20%) and 67 females (16.80%), with ages varying between 25 and 76 years. They had between 3 and 40 years of experience in the HR field. In particular, 11.10% had less than 10 years experience, 52.60% had between 10 and 20 years experience, 27.70% had between 21 and 29 years experience and only 4.50% had more than 30 years experience.

There were 305 (76.60%) respondents who occupied permanent positions within their respective organisations, with 65 (16.30%) self-employed as consultants. The majority of the respondents were in senior HR manager positions (33.90%), with 20.40% in HR director positions. Only 10.60% were junior HR managers, and 11.60% were HR practitioners. This explains the fact that most of the respondents had more than 10 years experience. In terms of tertiary qualifications, 88 respondents (22.10%) had a bachelor's degree, 94 (23.60%) an honours degree, 91 (22.90%) a master's degree and 31 (7.80%) a doctoral degree. A number of industries were included in this study, with the top five being manufacturing (11.30%), education (5.80%), mining (5.50%), government (3.0%), financial services (2.30%) and Information Technology (IT) (2.30%).

Measuring instrument

The mail survey data collection method was utilised for the purpose of this study, which entailed distributing a questionnaire to the selected population for completion. The questionnaire consisted of two categories. Section A focused on biographical information, and Section B focused on HRM as a profession. Section A consisted of 15 questions providing biographical information about the HR practitioner, whereas section B consisted of 28 items requiring responses on a six-point scale. Responses ranged from "does not adhere at all" to "adheres totally", "totally inadequate" to "totally adequate", or "not at all" to "to a very large extent". A low score consistently indicated a negative perception. Based on the trait approach, HRM was evaluated against the characteristics of a profession as discussed earlier. These characteristics were transformed into 28 items on a 6-point scale. Examples of how these characteristics were transformed are listed below:

Characteristics of a Profession	Item on Questionnaire
A formal association or society	• Substantive theoretical principles (a body of knowledge)
	• A typical professional group solidarity and the cohesion among members of the profession
Mandatory education preparation and training	• Specific skills and the application thereof
	• Extensive academic tuition in preparation for a formal qualification in HR
	• Practical training and preparation for the profession
Continuous research	• HR practice has a strong research basis
A calling	• Personal commitment and responsibility of members to the profession
Independence/Autonomy	• A feeling of occupational pride
	• Control over the quality of tuition/training
Public and peer recognition as a profession	• A perception amongst other professions that HR is indeed a profession
A commitment to a code of ethics	• An applicable code of ethics

Procedure

As per the guidelines of Alreck and Settle (1995, pp. 183-209) concerning the survey research method, a covering letter accompanied the questionnaire. The covering letter explained the purpose and importance of the study and ensured the anonymity of respondents. The questionnaire was mailed to the selected population and included a pre-paid envelope. Participants were requested to complete the questionnaire and to return it by the date stipulated in the cover letter. In an attempt to increase the response rates, a follow-up email was sent to the selected population as a reminder of the request to participate in the survey.

RESULTS

It was decided to perform an exploratory factor analysis on the data obtained for the HRM as Profession Questionnaire to establish whether a single or several constructs were measured by the questionnaire. It was firstly determined whether the sample was adequate and whether it was justified to perform a factor analysis on this questionnaire. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.92, thereby indicating that the sample was appropriate for conducting further analyses. The Bartlett test of sphericity indicated that the variables yielded a statistically significant approximate chi-square $[\chi^2 (378) = 6144.4, p<0.001]$. The above tests provided the necessary justification to continue with the factor analysis.

Scores on the 28 items of the HRM as Profession Questionnaire were subjected to a principal axis factor analysis, which resulted in six factors being extracted. The factor matrix was rotated by means of a varimax rotation. The factor matrix is reported in Table 1. The intercorrelations between the six HRM factors are reported in Table 2.

TABLE 1
ROTATED FACTOR MATRIX OF THE HRM AS A PROFESSION QUESTIONNAIRE

Item	Factor 1	2	3	4	5	6	h^2
b8	**0.65**	0.10	0.10	0.13	0.18	0.20	0.54
10b	**0.63**	0.31	0.23	0.26	0.11	0.02	0.63
b9	**0.62**	0.11	0.16	0.28	0.18	0.10	0.55
b11	**0.61**	0.33	0.23	0.18	0.04	0.10	0.58
b7	**0.60**	0.13	0.20	0.12	0.15	0.13	0.47
b6	**0.50**	0.21	0.21	0.27	0.02	0.05	0.42
b12	**0.45**	0.21	0.25	0.16	0.05	0.12	0.36
b23	0.23	**0.78**	0.11	0.17	0.20	0.13	0.76
b22	0.13	**0.73**	0.17	0.18	0.11	0.07	0.63
b21	0.13	**0.73**	0.11	0.06	0.06	0.04	0.57
b20	0.28	**0.70**	0.23	0.08	0.14	0.10	0.65
b28	0.22	**0.33**	0.18	0.24	0.00	0.05	0.25
b17	0.13	0.11	**0.71**	0.15	0.14	0.06	0.58
b13	0.26	0.19	**0.54**	0.09	0.09	0.19	0.45
b18	0.27	0.15	**0.54**	0.23	0.17	0.08	0.48
b25	0.20	0.19	**0.52**	0.04	0.46	0.22	0.60
b19	0.33	0.20	**0.52**	0.05	0.30	0.24	0.57
b16	0.16	0.17	**0.47**	0.02	0.20	0.25	0.38
b24	0.23	0.29	**0.41**	0.19	0.30	0.09	0.45
b2	0.19	0.10	0.05	**0.69**	0.02	0.06	0.53
b1	0.12	0.15	0.10	**0.69**	0.04	0.00	0.52
b3	0.13	0.11	0.11	**0.54**	0.08	0.22	0.39
b5	0.33	0.10	0.10	**0.46**	0.17	0.07	0.38
b4	0.31	0.06	0.09	**0.45**	0.13	0.23	0.38
b26	0.20	0.28	0.35	0.14	**0.83**	0.12	0.92
b27	0.20	0.19	0.30	0.19	**0.81**	0.16	0.89
b15	0.27	0.15	0.30	0.21	0.16	**0.73**	0.78
b14	0.20	0.07	0.09	0.24	0.16	**0.72**	0.72

TABLE 2
INTERCORRELATION MATRIX OF THE SIX HRM FACTORS

Factors	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	1.00					
2	0.56 (0.000)	1.00				
3	0.62 (0.000)	0.52 (0.000)	1.00			
4	0.56 (0.000)	0.40 (0.000)	0.42 (0.000)	1.00		
5	0.49 (0.000)	0.43 (0.000)	0.68 (0.000)	0.39 (0.000)	1.00	
6	0.51 (0.000)	0.35 (0.000)	0.59 (0.000)	0.45 (0.000)	0.47 (0.000)	1.00

(p values in brackets)

Most of the factors correlated relatively strongly with one another, which indicated the possibility that a second order factor analysis would yield one factor only. Since the purpose of the study was to measure the extent to which HR practitioners considered HRM to be a profession, such a procedure was considered. However, the questionnaire was designed to measure various traits/characteristics of a profession, and opinions had to be measured against these. The decision was taken to work with multiple factors instead.

Only two items loaded on Factors 5 and 6 respectively, indicating that these two factors were not adequately determined. According to the intercorrelation matrix in Table 2, Factor 5 correlated strongly with Factor 3 ($r = 0.68$) and Factor 6 also correlated strongly with Factor 3 ($r = 0.59$). It was therefore decided to combine Factors 5 and 6 with Factor 3, rather than omitting the four items comprising Factors 5 and 6. The intercorrelation matrix consisting of the four revised HR factors is reported in Table 3. Again it was clear from the substantial intercorrelations that a single factor would emerge as a result of a second order factor analysis. Nevertheless, the four obtained factors were utilised, because they corresponded to the characteristics or traits of a profession.

TABLE 3
INTERCORRELATION MATRIX OF THE FOUR REVISED HR FACTORS

Factors	Formal association	Recognition as profession	Regulating board	Education and training
Formal association	1.00			
Recognition as a profession	0.56 (0.000)	1.00		
Regulating board	0.65 (0.000)	0.53 (0.000)	1.00	
Education and training	0.56 (0.000)	0.40 (0.000)	0.48 (0.000)	1.00

(p values in brackets)

The items comprising each factor were analysed and compared to the characteristics of a typical profession. Subsequently the factors were named Formal association (Factor 1), Recognition as a profession (Factor 2), Regulating board (Factor 3) and Education and training (Factor 4). Descriptive statistics of the four factors are reported in Table 4. Cronbach alpha coefficients were calculated to determine the internal consistency reliabilities of each factor. Satisfactory reliability coefficients ranging between 0.77 and 0.90 were obtained.

TABLE 4
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF THE FOUR HRM FACTORS (N=398)

Factor	M	SD	Number of items	Cronbach alpha
Formal association	3.51	0.81	7	0.86
Recognition as a profession	3.50	0.93	5	0.84
Regulating board	3.16	0.86	11	0.90
Education and training	4.05	0.77	5	0.77
Total	3.42	0.90	28	0.96

A secondary analysis was conducted to determine whether perceptions regarding HRM as a profession differed between groups defined by specific biographical indicators. In order to conduct this analysis, Manova tests were performed. Four Hotelling T^2 tests were conducted to determine whether there were significant differences between (a) gender groups, (b) registered and non-registered psychologists, (c) registered and non-registered psychometrists and (d) employment status, with

regards to the four HRM factors as dependent variables. Three Wilks' lambda tests were conducted to determine whether there were significant differences between the groups formed on the basis of (a) years experience, (b) organisational size, and (c) age with respect to the four HRM factors. These results are reported in Table 5.

TABLE 5
SUMMARY OF RESULTS OF OVERALL MANOVA TESTS REGARDING GROUP DIFFERENCES ON THE FOUR HRM FACTORS

Variable	Hotelling T^2	Wilks' lambda	F	df	p	Effect size η^2	Observed power
1	0.19		1.90	4 & 393	0.110	0.19	0.57
2	0.00		0.47	4 & 391	0.760	0.00	0.16
3	0.12		1.10	4 & 380	0.360	0.11	0.35
4	0.21		1.93	4 & 365	0.105	0.21	0.58
5		0.80	0.70	12 & 1024	0.800	0.00	0.36
6		0.95	1.38	16 & 1189	0.144	0.14	0.72
7		0.96	1.30	12 & 965	0.210	0.14	0.68

1. Gender	:	Male/Female
2. Registered as psychologist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa	:	yes/no
3. Registered as psychometrist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa	:	yes/no
4. Employment status	:	permanent employment/self employed
5. Age groups	:	0-35/36-45/46-55/≥56
6. Years experience	:	0-10/11-15/16-20/21-25/≥26
7. Organisational size	:	0-250/251-1000/1001-4000/≥4001

Based on the results of the Manova tests, no significant differences were obtained between any of these groups. To further explore these results, the effect sizes and observed power of the Manova tests were determined for each test, and these results are also reported in Table 5. However, the moderate power of the tests does not allow one to conclude that null hypotheses of no differences are in fact true. Cohen (1988) stated that a study should have at least 80% power to be worth conducting. If the power is less than 0.80 statistical tests will not detect differences, unless the expected effect is large. Because multivariate tests usually have lower power than univariate tests, it was decided to proceed with oneway Anovas to determine whether there were indeed significant differences between the means of the various biographical groups. "Multivariate F is often not as powerful as univariate F, and significance can be lost. If this happens, the best one can do is to report the non-significant F and offer significant univariate results as a guide to future research" (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001, p. 329). The results of the statistically significant univariate Anovas are reported in Table 6. The observed power was in fact higher than was the case for the multivariate Manovas. Only statistically significant differences are reported in Table 6.

There were statistically significant differences between the means of the male and female groups on Factor 2 (Formal recognition as a profession) ($p = 0.028$). The male respondents ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.93$) showed a higher recognition for HRM as a profession than female respondents ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.90$). There were also differences between the opinions of individuals who had permanent positions within the organisation versus self-employed consultants. Results varied on both Factors 3-Regulating Board ($p = 0.036$), and Factor 4-Education and Training ($p = 0.011$). Respondents in permanent positions perceived HRM to have a more prominent regulating board ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 0.89$), than contractors ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 0.77$). In

TABLE 6
STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT ONEWAY ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE TESTS

Factors	Levene's test			Between subjects effects			Effect size	Observed power
Levels of the independent variables	F	p	SS	MS	F	p	η^2	
Recognition as a profession **Male (n = 331)** M = 3.55 SD = 0.93 **Female (n=67)** M = 3.28 SD = 0.90	0.33	0.568	4.19	4.19	4.87	0.028	0.01	0.60
Regulating board **Permanent Employment (n = 305)** M = 3.23 SD = 0.89 **Self Employed (n = 65)** M = 2.97 SD = 0.77	1.35	0.25	3.36	3.36	4.42	0.036	0.12	0.60
Education and training **Permanent Employment (n = 305)** M = 4.13 SD = 0.75 **Self Employed (n = 65)** M = 3.86 SD = 0.77	0.38	0.54	3.76	3.76	6.58	0.011	0.18	0.73
Education and training ≤ 250 (n=104) M = 3.88 SD = 0.75 **251-1000 (n = 87)** M = 4.13 SD = 0.71 **1001-4000 (n = 84)** M = 4.08 SD = 0.78 ≥ 4001 (n = 97) M = 4.20 SD = 0.76	0.61	0.612	5.56	1.85	3.27	0.021	0.02	0.75

terms of Education and Training, permanent employees perceived this as a more important part of HRM as a profession (M = 4.13, SD = 0.75) compared to contractors (M = 3.86, SD = 0.77). There was a difference between groups within organisations of different sizes (p = 0.021) in terms of Factor 4 (Education and Training). The mean score was larger for organisations with more employees than for organisations with fewer employees, which indicates that Education and Training is an important factor of HRM as a profession within larger organisations.

A final exploration of the data consisted of analysing the individual items in terms of response endorsement. The purpose of this exercise was to establish which response options per item were selected by the majority of the respondents, and to further understand and position practitioners' opinions in terms of HRM as a profession. These results would further assist in suggesting ways in which the HRM function could increase its credibility, and thereby its professional status. The item response options were categorised according to low, average and high scores. Low scores (1 and 2) represented a negative opinion, whereas high scores (5 and 6) represented a positive opinion. The percentages of respondents that endorsed the categories are reported in Table 7.

The middle category of the response scale of an attitude questionnaire typically draws the largest proportion of the responses (following an approximately normal distribution), unless the respondents favour or dislike the particular item (strong positive or negative attitude). Several of the items in the HRM as Profession Questionnaire were strongly endorsed at the extreme ends of the response scale. It was decided that if one third (33.33%) of the respondents selected either low (1+2) or high (5+6), this could be regarded as a particularly strong endorsement at one of the scale extremes. Chi-square tests were performed on each item to establish whether the extreme proportions (1+2 or 5+6) differed statistically significantly from 0.33. Statistically significant results of these tests are also reported in Table 7.

In terms of *positive endorsements*, close to half of the sample (49.90%) responded positively in terms of the existence of a body of knowledge and theoretical principles, academic qualifications (49.10%), as well as specific skills and the application thereof (44.60%). Finally, 65.50% of the sample responded positively to the overall question on the extent to which HRM may be regarded as a profession. This indicates that more than half of South Africa's HR practitioners consider HRM to be a profession. Despite this strong positive response to the classification of HRM as a profession, the following step was to analyse the negative item responses in order to make the necessary recommendations to overcome and improve the obstacles that prevent HRM from achieving professional status.

Strong *negative endorsements* included the following:

Education and Training – Close to half of the sample indicated that there is limited training that is relevant to knowledge of ethical awareness (48.10%), and limited training that is relevant to knowledge of ethical issues (46.50%).

Regulating board – Close to half of the sample (45.0%) indicated that there is limited exclusion of non-qualified individuals, whereas more than half of the sample (52.0%) were of the opinion that there is limited disciplinary function for members who are found guilty of unprofessional conduct.

Recognition as a profession – Low scores were obtained concerning the perception of HRM as a profession as viewed by other professions (41.40%).

The following section will focus on discussing these results in more detail, specifically focusing on the negative item endorsements. The aim will be to make recommendations which the profession could utilise to improve negative perceptions, thereby striving towards improving the perception of HRM as a profession as a whole.

ITEM	ITEM DESCRIPTION	SCORE 1 + 2 (low)	SCORE 3 + 4 (average)	SCORE 5 + 6 (high)	χ^2	p
	Factor 1: Formal Association					
b8	Professional socialisation	20.40%	65.70%	13.80%		
b10	Feeling of occupational pride	16.50%	58.10%	25.40%		
b9	Shared values & norms	16.90%	61.60%	21.50%		
b11	Power & status due to membership	26.50%	60.30%	13.20%		
b7	Professional group solidarity & cohesion	21.90%	63.50%	14.60%		
b6	Commitment & responsibility of members	10.20%	59.0%	30.70%		
b12	Exclusive rights to categories of knowledge and techniques	23.20%	61.40%	15.40%		
	Factor 2: Recognition as profession					
b23	General respect for the profession & it's members	23.10%	64.90%	12.0%		
b22	Perception amongst the general public that HR is a profession	26.70%	56.90%	16.40%		
b21	Perception amongst other divisions/line managers that HR is a profession	30.60%	52.80%	16.60%		
b20	Perception amongst other professions that HR is a profession	41.40%*	47.40%	11.20%	9.19	0.002
b28	The extent to which HR can be regarded as a profession	5.0%	29.40%	65.60%*	195.64	0.000
	Factor 3: Regulating board					
b17	Adequate controlling & licensing authority for the profession (SABPP)	19.50%	47.70%	32.80%		
b13	Regulation of admission requirements & selection of members	23.60%	57.70%	18.80%		
b18	Adequate professional association (IPM)	23.60%	48.80%	27.60%		
b25	Disciplinary function for members who are found guilty of unprofessional conduct	52.0%*	35.20%	12.80%	61.12	0.000
b19	Protection for the recipients of HR services	35.50%	54.20%	10.30%		
b16	Exclusion of non-qualified individuals	45.0%*	45.20%	9.80%	21.41	0.000
b24	Relevant & useful professional code of ethics	20.10%	53.60%	26.30%		
b26	Training which is relevant to knowledge of ethical awareness	48.10%*	42.70%	9.20%	36.12	0.000
b27	Training which is relevant to knowledge of ethical issues	46.50%*	44.10%	9.40%	27.72	0.000
b15	Control over quality of tuition/training	30.40%	58.80%	10.80%		
b14	Control over curriculum content	26.60%	59.20%	14.20%		
	Factor 4: Education and training					
b2	Specific skills and application thereof	2.80%	52.70%	44.60%*	20.44	0.000
b1	Body of knowledge – theoretical principles	4.10%	46.0%	49.90%*	45.62	0.000
b3	Academic tuition/formal qualification	7.0%	43.90%	49.10%*	40.05	0.000
b5	Research basis	14.40%	57.0%	28.60%		
b4	Training	21.50%	59.10%	19.40%		

* Extreme proportion significantly larger than 0.33

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate possible reasons for the perceived lack of credibility of the HRM function, and to suggest ways to overcome this challenge. One of these suggestions implied the need to advance the professional status of HRM. Although the current professional status of HRM could be measured against the perception of various population groups, it was decided to focus on the perception of the South African HR practitioner, with the aim of achieving a more informed opinion. The population consisted of 1969 HR practitioners who are registered at all levels of registration categories with the SABPP.

The mail survey data collection method was utilised for the purpose of this study, which entailed distributing a questionnaire to the selected population for completion. The questionnaire consisted of two categories. Section A included biographical information of the population, and Section B focused on HRM as a profession. Section B consisted of 28 items requiring responses on a 6-point scale. Based on the trait approach, HRM as a profession was measured against the characteristics of a typical profession.

An exploratory factor analysis was performed on the data and a four-factor solution was obtained. Using the four factors, Formal association (Factor 1), Recognition as a profession (Factor 2), Regulating board (Factor 3) and Education and training (Factor 4), an analysis was conducted to determine whether perceptions regarding HRM as a profession differed between groups defined by specific biographical indicators. There were statistically significant differences between the means of the male and female groups in terms of formal recognition as a profession. Furthermore, there were differences between the opinions of individuals who had permanent positions within the organisation versus self-employed consultants in terms of regulating board and education and training. Finally, there were differences between groups from organisations of different sizes in terms of education and training.

The purpose of the individual items in terms of response endorsement was to establish which response options per item were selected by the majority of the respondents, and to understand and position practitioners' opinions in terms of HRM as a profession. Both positive/high and negative/low item endorsements are of interest in gaining more insight into the way HRM is viewed.

In terms of the results, it is clear that HR practitioners do consider HRM to be a profession. A high score was obtained from more than half of the sample (65.5%) on the overall item of *HRM as a profession*. This indicates that HRM has indeed come a long way in its attempt to achieve professional status. Practitioners were also positive about the *education and training* criteria of the field. These endorsements indicated that there is a body of knowledge that stipulates the specific skills and academic tuition/formal qualifications required in order to enter the HRM field, as well as the application thereof. In addition to these positive item endorsements, it is further essential to focus on the negative item endorsements, as it is these items that impact on the credibility of HRM, and ultimately the professional status of the function as a whole. The two factors that had the lowest item endorsements were Recognition as a profession and Regulating board. Recommendations to improve the perceptions in terms of these two factors will be discussed individually.

Recognition as a profession
Every profession strives to persuade the community to sanction its authority within certain spheres by introducing a series of powers and privileges. The society in which the profession operates and the clientele that it serves, should recognise the social role, status and behavioural norms of the profession. In terms of recognising HRM as a profession, statistically significant low scores were obtained concerning the perception of HRM as a profession as viewed by other professions. In support of this finding, 30.06% of the sample indicated that other divisions and line managers held negative perceptions of the professional status of HRM.

Based on the perceptions of other professions, other divisions and line managers, it is apparent that the underlying question remains as to whether HRM is considered a value adding and essential function within the organisation. If HRM fails to add value to the business or impedes organisational performance, organisations might consider doing away with it, hence the need to improve its recognition as a true profession. The question then arises as to how HRM can create value and deliver tangible results in the ever-changing business world? Within the dynamic business environment, HRM faces the challenge of transforming itself from the "service and support" paradigm of the past, to becoming a professional, specialist and valued partner with line management. This entails a transformation of the HRM function, which as previously discussed, includes the following:
● New roles and strategic focus areas for HRM;
● A shift from HRM activities to HRM deliverables;
● New areas of competence;
● New ways of positioning and articulating the role and value created by HRM in business language; and
● New ways of measuring success (business measures versus HRM indicators).

In order to achieve these goals, the HRM function needs to strategically re-position itself through understanding the evolution of HRM. This transition has evolved from a typical *personnel function* with a focus on salary and benefits administration, to *head office centred* HRM that included a rise of specialised functions e.g. training, recruitment etc. During this stage, HRM policies were outputs determined and controlled by an HRM head office. Thereafter, HRM made a transition into the *consulting* arena, where decentralised HR generalists mainly focussed on transactional, day-to-day HRM activities. Currently HRM involves becoming a *business partner*, where it plays an integral role in defining business strategy.

As suggested by Ulrich (1998), HRM should be structured around the achievement of business goals and policies, and deliverables should be flexible and determined by the organisational or divisional strategy. What this transformation means for the business, is that the HRM function will focus on becoming pro-active, future focused versus a traditional day to day support role, more focussed on value creation via strategic business partners and on delivering an efficient transactional HRM service.

The rationale for achieving improved credibility and professional status through the business partner approach, is as follows:
● The business partner model creates a robust HRM structure that can be flexible enough to change along with the organisation e.g. through future mergers, and structural changes;
● It provides control of HRM services to the business;
● It eliminates duplication – cuts the cost of service provision;
● It creates a simple operating system; and
● It allows flexibility to respond to the changing needs of the business within HRM project teams.

In striving towards utilising the above model as a possible solution to overcoming the lack of recognising HRM as a profession, HR practitioners have some tough decisions to make given the many roles that the function fulfils. According to Lawler (1998, p. 73) the HR practitioner has to realise that "what's good for the business isn't always good for employees, and vice versa". This leads to the biggest role conflict for HRM, being the attempt to try and be both business partner and employee advocate. This dichotomy has surfaced some difficult situations for HR practitioners in terms of clashes between employee-related issues and ethical problems. Unfortunately, managers do not always appreciate the difficulty that HR practitioners face in trying to serve both the organisation and employee interests. This is evident from the low scores obtained in terms of line management and other division's perception of HRM as a profession.

Lawler (1998, p. 75) further states that if HR practitioners are truly going to become business partners, they have to partially abandon the employee advocate role in order to first gain credibility as a business partner. Once credibility as a business partner has been established, HRM can revert to the employee advocacy role in addition to its strategic role, as it is very difficult to be seen as a business partner, whilst having the employee advocate role as the only *raison d'etre*.

The business partnership model presents HRM as a supplier of necessary expertise that assists the core business to be successful. As such, HRM continuously provides answers to real business problems thereby maintaining a reason to exist within the organisation. HRM and other staff support departments that are committed to having an impact on the core business, can establish themselves as market-valued departments that are indispensable to the success of any organisation. Should these objectives be achieved, the HRM function has indeed gone a long way to increase its credibility, thereby ensuring the first step in the journey towards improving its recognition as a profession.

Regulating Board
The regulating board or formal professional association of a profession, has an important role to fulfil, namely to set ethical standards, establish a code of behaviour and provide continuous education programmes and publications for its members or alumni. Regardless of the objectives, mission, and code of conduct of the SABPP, and the fact that the SABPP governs most aspects of what the literature describes as professional behaviour, negative perceptions around the regulating board do exist amongst HR practitioners. Statistically significant low scores were obtained from close to half of the sample indicating that there is limited exclusion of non-qualified individuals, as well as the opinion that there is no disciplinary function for members who are found guilty of unprofessional conduct. The following aspects should therefore be considered as contributing factors to creating negative perceptions:
● Registration is optional/voluntary;
● The SABPP is not a statutory entity that can, based on government regulation, find members guilty of misconduct and can therefore not assign disciplinary actions accordingly;

- Not all employees that perform HRM functions within the organisation are members of the SABPP; and
- It appears that the SABPP does not have as much power and prestige as other traditional professions' representative bodies.

It is clear that it becomes a challenging task to address these factors. One could further question as to whom ultimately becomes responsible for taking on this challenge, the organisation, the SABPP, or both? On the side of the SABPP, one alternative would be to initiate steps towards formal legislation whereby only registered practitioners are recognised and considered as credible and professional members of an HRM team. This could possibly assist in overcoming the lack of credibility in the long run, however, it does not address the current state of affairs. This poses a major challenge, especially if current HR practitioners do perform and add value.

Organisations could nevertheless play a role by motivating staff to register through introducing incentives, e.g. increased remuneration, insisting on registration as a prerequisite for future promotions, etc. A further suggestion would be for organisations to make registration to the SABPP a pre-requisite for applying for any HRM related positions. Organisations could further assist by instilling the honour and privilege of registration amongst HR practitioners, whereby registration is not considered a compulsory and bureaucratic approach, but rather a value to the organisation as a whole.

Over and above the role that the SABPP and organisations play in improving negative perceptions concerning limited exclusion of non-qualified individuals and the non-existence of a disciplinary function for members who are found guilty of unprofessional conduct, training institutions could also play a significant role. The main role would be one of education and awareness creation amongst current and future HR practitioners concerning the SABPP, it's mission, objectives, benefits, registration criteria etc., thereby encouraging registration and membership of the Board. In addition, training institutions could encourage participation in professional activities by establishing, in conjunction with the SABPP, student forums or syndicate groups which will in turn increase awareness on latest trends and developments. Training institutions should further aim to structure curricula and activities in alignment with SABPP requirements. This will not only create greater awareness and motivate practitioners to register, but will also emphasise the importance of adhering to the professional conduct.

Finally, taking into account the characteristics of a typical profession, there should be a defined body of knowledge typical to the profession that can be acquired through a system of professional education and training. The necessary level of professional expertise is attained after a certain number of years of practical experience, preferably under the guidance of senior members of the profession. Professions also possess esoteric albeit useful knowledge and skills, based on specialised training or education of exceptional duration and difficulty. Statistically significant low scores were obtained from close to half of the sample indicating that there is limited education and training in terms of ethical awareness and ethical issues.

It must be emphasised that the SABPP, organisations and training institutions have a role to play in improving education and training in order to create greater awareness concerning ethical issues of the HRM profession. It should continuously be emphasised that a code of ethics is a set of moral guidelines designed to protect the professional, the profession and the public served by the group. Professionals abide by a code of ethics that includes practice standards in the delivery of services to clients, in relation to competitors and the public. The code of ethics defines what is proper and improper behaviour and forms the embodiment of the moral standards of a professional service.

These and other benefits of a code of ethics as discussed previously, should be conveyed through creative and innovative ideas in order to improve the general awareness of ethical issues concerning the HRM profession.

In conclusion, it is evident from the research results that HR practitioners do indeed consider HRM to be a profession. However, there are still some negative perceptions that need to be addressed based on the above recommendations. The assumption is made that once these negative perceptions are addressed and overcome, HR practitioners will have more confidence in their field. This might have a positive impact on the perception of HRM as a whole. Further studies could be conducted to determine the perception of other professions, the public and other divisions/line managers in terms of HRM as a profession. Such studies should elicit even further suggestions and recommendations to improve the positioning of HRM in the modern organisation.

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