

## **HR roles and activities. Empirical results from the DACH region and implications for a future development of the HR profession.**

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### **Abstract**

Since the late 70s there has been an intense discussion about function and tasks of human resource management (HRM) which lead into a variety of HR role models. Those models either consider the extent to which departments are reactive or proactive – like Legge and Tyson & Fell - and those that combine a number of dimensions, as can be found at Ulrich's, Storey's or Guest's work.

The recent development in HRM finds a theoretical basis in Dave Ulrich's HR role model (1997) which underlies this study. He established four roles for HR managers which cover the dimensions strategic/operational focus and people/processes oriented. In detail: 'administrative expert' and 'employee champion' have a day-to-day/operational focus, while 'strategic partner' and 'change agent' are allocated to future/strategic roles.

Especially the strategic focus of HR has been discussed in science for many years. But what about the implementation as a business practice? This quantitative survey examined the extent of the current strategic focus of HR activities in the three DACH region countries (Germany, Austria, and Switzerland). A comparison of their current HR business practices is of particular interest, as they are strongly economically and culturally connected and there is a lively exchange of employees. The following questions led the survey:

What is the current focus of the HR activities in the DACH region?

How does this affect the resources dedicated to the different HR roles?

Are there any differences in the focus of the HR activities within the DACH region?

The results indicate that there was a major shift regarding the focus of HR activities. In all three countries HR is now mostly seen as an employee champion, coming from an administrative, process oriented HR understanding. The strategic aspect of HR roles also evolved remarkably. And as the results show that shift is not yet completed. The most important driver for the change is the increasing competences of the HR professionals.

Regarding the intercultural aspect it is remarkable, that despite these development most of the HR functions are not seen as management positions in Germany and Austria.

As strategic management is mostly a management and top-management issue, the importance of HR roles has to evolve. Therefore it is important to strengthen the HR roles as management positions and to increase the strategic and management competences of HR employees.

This first study will be followed by another international study on HR roles and HR competencies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A new HR competency model will be developed to cover the current state and afterwards will be tested in Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia.

**Keywords** HR Roles, HR Competencies, Strategic Human Resource Management, DACH Region, Quantitative Research

## **Introduction**

Greater mobility in the global labour market, globalisation and the internationalisation of businesses, has caused more and more organisations to be confronted with the challenge of managing an increasingly diverse workforce (Michailova et al. 2009; Budhwar & Debrah 2001; Banutu-Gomez 2002; Kundu & Malhan 2009; Andreassi et al. 2014; Ruona & Gibson 2004). Due to these changing business requirements the focus and range of the human resource (HR) activities has developed a lot in the past decades. In the early days, the range of HR activities have been rather administrative, the focus on the employee and their development became more and more important. Nowadays the employees are seen as a valuable resource of a company (Beer et al. 1884). With the new challenges, like the demographic change and the skill shortage, the need for strategic oriented HR activities increases. This request for a more strategic orientation of the HR activities is not a new one, but was stated in many publications in the 1990s (Wright & Snell 1991; Huselid 1995; Conner & Ulrich 1996). Often HR departments had to face other challenges, such as the demand to reduce costs or to increase efficiency of the process and therefore the operational aspects of the HR activities have been prioritized. The evolving technological possibilities offered new potentials to automate administrative activities (Higgins 2007; Gooderham et al. 2004a). Hence fewer resources are occupied with administrative tasks, so that HR departments should be able to focus on important strategic HR issues. The added value that HR provides for the long-term success of a company should lead all HR activities (Wright & McMahan 1992; Ulrich et al. 2009; Conner & Ulrich 1996).

The underlying international study “HR roles and their development in Austria, Germany and Switzerland (DACH region)”, conducted by the Institute for Human Resources & Organisation of FH Wien University of Applied Science of WKW (A) in cooperation with the Institute for Strategic Human Resource Management of Leuphana University Lüneburg (D) and klingler consultants ag (CH), examined the current focus of HR activities in the DACH region. The following research questions led the empirical study:

What is the current emphasis of the HR activities in the DACH region?

To what extent are the HR resources allocated to the different HR positions?

Are there any differences in the focus of the HR roles within the DACH region?

The DACH region was of particular interest for the authors as these three countries not only form, together with the Netherlands, the so called “Germanic Europe Cluster” (Szabo et al. 2002) but they also have strong economic and cultural connections.

### **HR Roles and HR Competencies**

In general it has to be stated that the traditional notion of HRM has been highly influenced by scholars from the United States of America (Michailova et al. 2009; Clark & Pugh 2000; Gooderham et al. 2004b). The following review gives a brief summary of scientific approaches to HR roles and HR competencies to indicate the context of this survey. Generally spoken these models either consider the extent to which departments are reactive or proactive (e.g. Legge 1978; Tyson & Fell 1986; Monks 1992) and those that combine a number of dimensions (e.g. Guest 1990; Storey 1992; Ulrich 1997). The typologies themselves show the range of roles which HR has developed in a historical context. The initial role of a focus on employee welfare, and increasingly a means of controlling employee absence, developed into the bureaucratic element of the HR role. The rise of the power of trade unions at local company level resulted in the negotiator role, which has since declined again in line with further changes in the industrial relations context. In the 1990s, the rise of HRM turned attention to the strategic role of HR and its role in helping organisations manage change as the business environment became more competitive.

As one of the forerunner Karen Legge (1978; 1975) describes in her early work personnel managers as problem-solvers and distinguishes them into two roles: the “conformist innovator” and the “deviant innovator”. The *conformist innovator* accepts the existing organisational aims and *adjusts* his means to achieve them. By that he is not making his activities conform to the existing values about what constitutes organisational success but follows his own ideas within the current value system. The *deviant innovator* on the other hand makes every effort to *change* this means by creating acceptance for another concept of organisational success. Therefore he often has to confront the value system of colleagues and superiors. This often is followed by a long process of advertising those new ideas before they can be expressed in a coherent set of activities.

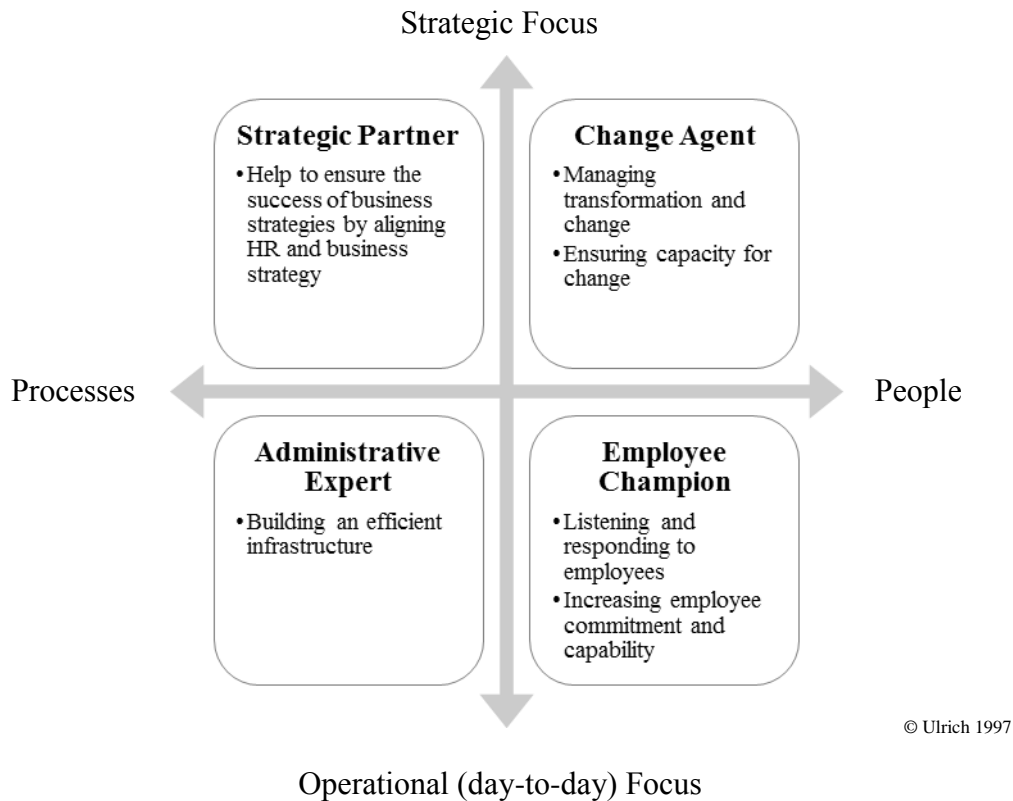
Later Tyson & Fell (1986) differentiates three Weberian ideal types of models which are not bi-polar as Legges approach but introduce a hierarchy: *The clerk of works model* (personnel management as administrative support), *the contract manager model* (personnel department staff is acting on behalf of line managers) and *the architect model* (personnel executives create and build the organization). They describe the process in which these models arise as an adaptive one based on organizational contingencies. The factors welfare, employment management, industrial relations and professional traditions have been moulded within differing organization contexts by marketing strategies, management ideologies, by conflict and change, and by trade union response, into one of these three models of personnel management. Later Kathy Monks (1992) modified the model by Tyson & Fell (1986) to

include a fourth innovative/professional role which falls between the roles of the contracts manager and architect.

David Guest (1990) is one of the first who does not only list several working types of HRM but also includes dimensions. He follows the assumption that the combination of behavioural science and business strategy leads HRM to competitive advantages. Therefore he established four choices for HR managers to divide their approaches: the Traditional/Conservative (focused on administrative efficiency and cost minimization), the Radical/Conservative (managers are privileged and workers replaceable), the Pluralist/Innovative (centres on productivity improvement and change) and the Unitarist/Innovative (HRM concentrates on talent management).

In the early 1990s John Storey (1992) developed an empirical model – based on dates from the UK – with which he suggested four roles for human resource managers on the basis of two bi-polar dimensions (intervention versus non-intervention and strategy versus tactic). Those roles were: the ‘advisers’, the ‘changemakers’, the ‘handmaidens’ and the ‘regulators’. While handmaidens and regulators are found at a tactical level of an organisation, advisers and changemakers are positioned at the strategic level where they are able to intervene more within their organisations. The dimensions tactical/strategic and interventionary/non-interventionary together with the named roles could be visualized in a four square model and therefore be regarded as an inspiration to Dave Ulrich’s well known model.

This mentioned HR role model by Dave Ulrich (Ulrich 1997) is the theoretical foundation of the following study. Ulrich systemized the different HR activities and defined specific HR roles from a US perspective. His HR role model comprises all the aspects that currently define a highly-developed HR work. It reflects on the one hand the process and people dimension of the HR activities and on the other hand the operational and strategic focus. Figure 1 shows Ulrich’s HR role model with the two axes people/processes and strategic/operational focus.



**Figure 1.** HR role model by Dave Ulrich (Ulrich 1997)

The strategic partner and the change agent reflect the strategic focus of the HR work. The most important activities of the strategic partner are to align the HR activities to the strategy of the company and to develop a human resource strategy; the activities of the change agent are people oriented and concentrate on the capability of an organization to change. The administrative expert and the employee champion are the two roles that compose the operational aspects of the HR activities. The administrative expert ensures the efficient design and delivery of the HR processes. The employee champion on the other hand is concerned with the day-to-day problems and the needs of the employees (Ulrich et al. 2009).

This HR role model offers a good classification of current HR practices. Especially the clear depiction in four dimensions brings a strong research advantage compared to the earlier described approaches. As it was also the basis of several surveys worldwide (de Guzman et al. 2011), the research team decided to replicate the study in the DACH-Region in order to examine the fit of the HR role model for the DACH region and have comparable results.

## Methodology

As mentioned before the study was based on the HR role model of Dave Ulrich. Ulrich's questionnaire (Conner & Ulrich 1996) was translated into German and several questions regarding company structure and the HR departments were added. A five-point scale was used; 1 = strong agreement to 5 = "strong disagreement".

The survey was conducted at the same time (November – December 2012) in Austria, Germany and Switzerland by the three project partners. In total, 204 participants with HR responsibilities answered the online-questionnaires (110 from Austria, 48 from Germany and 46 from Switzerland). Most of the participants (78%) came from large companies (> 250 employees), 22% of the sample represent small and medium sized companies. Regarding the industries, the financial sector was represented by 14% followed by the information and communication sector. About half of the questionnaires have been answered by HR directors. 13% of the respondents work as human resource developers and 11% represent HR generalists.

The statistical analysis has been conducted with SPSS 20. The aim of study was to analyze the characteristics of HR work in the DACH region according to the HR roles defined by Ulrich (Ulrich 1997). First, a confirmatory factor analysis was performed to see whether the four roles of Ulrich's model fitted the items. As the fit indices were not acceptable, an exploratory factor analysis was performed to see how many factors could be extracted and how many items loaded on each factor and therefore to get an insight about the structure of the data.

With a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value of .868 and a significant Bartlett test ( $p < 0.01$ ), the factor analysis procedure seemed useful for the dataset. The principal axis factoring method was used to extract the factors due to the abnormality of our data. The factors were rotated to get a better discrimination between them and to improve the interpretation. Loadings smaller than 0.4 have not been considered.

The results of the confirmatory factor analysis are not reported here. If you're interested please feel free to contact the authors<sup>1</sup>.

#### *Research limitations*

This survey, developed by Conner and Ulrich (1996), has been shown to have content validity and, to a degree, construct validity, though it has yet to be tested for concurrent or predictive validity (Simpkins 2006). Generally, cross-national research faces the challenge of obtaining an appropriate sampling frame (Hidioglou & Srinath 1993): here the sample size in particular for Germany is very small, whilst the Austrian and Swiss situation is quite well presented. Beyond that a major methodological limitation would be that the analyses are built not only on perception data but are also self-responded biased.

## **Results and implications**

The results showed that the roles strategic partner, change agent, administrative expert reflect HR roles in the DACH region. Regarding the role of the employee champion only three out of six items have loadings higher than 0.4. It is remarkable, that in contrast to the study of Dave Ulrich (Ulrich 1997), the roles of the strategic partner and the change agent can be clearly separated in the DACH region.

The following table 1 shows the correlation of the HR roles in the DACH region. The strongest correlation exists between the two strategic oriented HR roles (strategic partner and change agent). Also the two people oriented roles, the change agent and the employee champion show a strong correlation.

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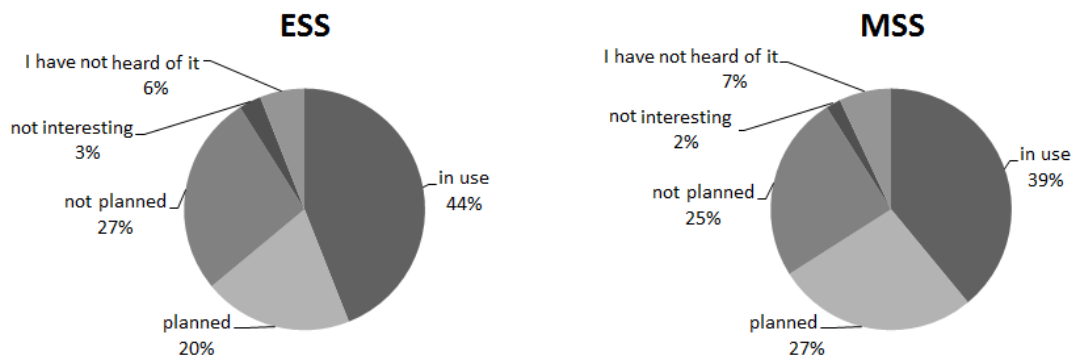
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	Strategic Partner	Change Agent	Administrative Expert	Employee Champion
Strategic Partner	1	.618	.337	.374
Change Agent		1	.473	.572
Administrative Expert			1	.426
Employee Champion				1

**Table 1.** Correlations between the HR roles in the DACH region (n=204)

Beside the defined four factors which represent the strategic partner, the change agent, the administrative expert and the employee champion, the results showed two more factors that could be extracted in the DACH region. A strong correlation (.798) was detected between two items of the strategic partner therefore forms a new, separate factor. These two items (“HR strategy is aligned with the business strategy“ and “There is a defined, formulated HR strategy“) represent the outcome of the strategic HR work, whereas the other items of the strategic partner reflect that HR takes an active part in developing the company’s strategy.

Two items of the administrative expert have a very strong correlation and therefore can also be considered as a separate factor. They represent the technological aspect of efficient HR work, employee self-service (ESS) systems and management self-service systems (MSS). With an ESS system HR provides the possibility for employees to, at least partly, maintain their personal data and to retrieve specific information as e.g. their remuneration by themselves. MSS is a web based system that allows managers to activate and control HR processes, to adapt HR relevant information, and to have easy access to HR reporting. Both concepts contribute to an efficient HR organization and also reflect the increasing service-orientation of HR work (Hilton et al. 2013). In Germany and Switzerland about 40% of the participating companies already have an ESS system in use, nearly 17% of the companies plan to implement such a system. In Austria this percentage is even higher (46% already use ESS systems, 20% plan to implement one). The MSS system already exists in about 39% of the participating companies and is planned in 27% of the companies. Figure 2 shows the use of the ESS and MSS systems in the DACH region.



**Figure 2.** ESS and MSS use in the DACH region (n=204)

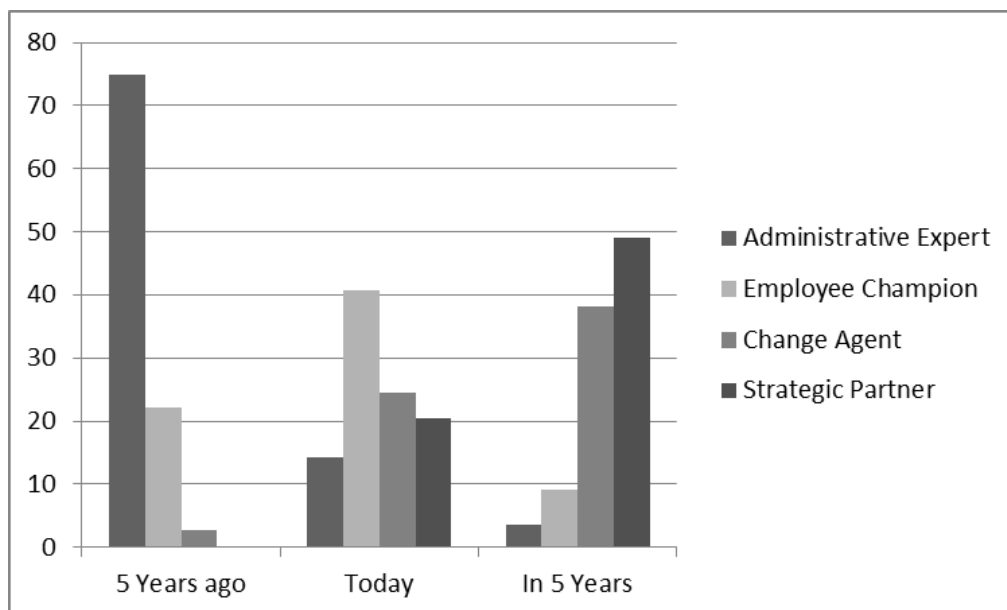
Over all, the results regarding the HR role model demonstrate that the characteristics of the HR roles are very similar in all three countries. Table 2 illustrates the characteristics (mean, median, standard deviation) of the four roles in Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

	Germany				Austria				Switzerland			
	N	M	Med	SD	N	M	Med	SD	N	M	Med	SD
Strategic Partner	43	2.18	2.00	0.73	89	2.44	2.29	0.88	43	2.14	2.14	0.78
Change Agent	43	2.33	2.20	0.74	89	2.45	2.20	0.85	43	2.47	2.40	0.71
Administrative Expert	43	2.07	2.20	0.74	89	2.06	2.00	0.72	43	1.91	1.80	0.54
Employee Champion	43	2.05	2.17	0.64	89	2.03	2.00	0.69	43	2.05	2.00	0.51

N = sample size, M = average, MED = median, SD = standard deviation

**Table 2.** Characteristics of the HR roles in the DACH region (n=204)

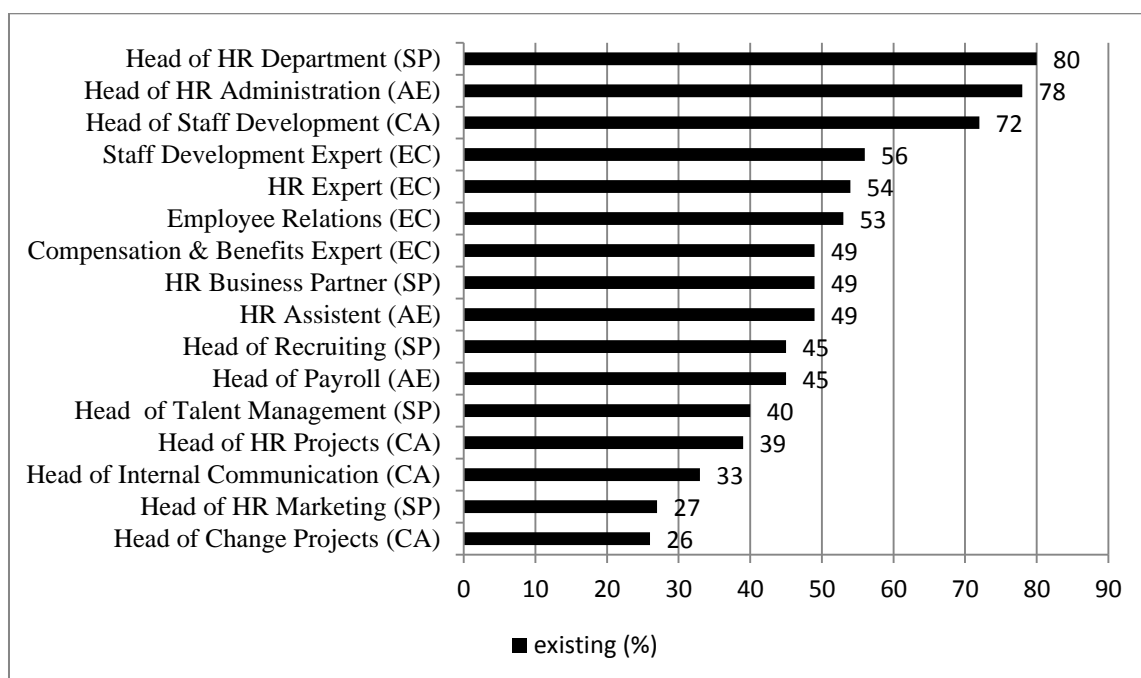
The operational focused HR roles, such as the administrative expert and the employee champion are still more dominant than the strategic roles (strategic partner, change agent), but the estimations about the development of the HR roles display, that the shift towards a more strategic focus is taking place and will be even more evident in the next five years. In the past five years, the importance of the role of the administrative expert has decreased dramatically (from 80% to 10% in Germany and from more than 70% to about 15% in Austria and Switzerland). At the moment the focus lies on the employees. The employee champion is seen as the most important role followed by the change agent. According to the estimation of the participants the decrease of the importance of operational HR activities will continue in the next five years. The roles of the change agent and strategic partner will become the most important ones. It is interesting to note, despite the fact that the two roles could be clearly separated in the DACH region their development seems to be very similar. The following figure shows the estimation of the participants regarding the development of the key aspects of the HR work in the DACH region:





**Figure 3.** Development of the key aspects of the HR work in the DACH region (n=204)

Regarding the positions that are currently established in the companies the results show (see Figure 4), that there is one HR position for the roles of the strategic partner, the administrative expert and the change agent that is currently established in more than 70% of the companies in the DACH region. In Germany and Switzerland about 90% of the companies have a head of HR, which is connected with the role of the strategic partner. In Austria, this percentage is only 73%. This might be due to the fact, that the sample of Austrian companies comprises more small and medium sized companies than in Germany and Switzerland, in which the position of the head of HR is often taken by the CEO. The head of administrative HR, which reflects one HR position of the administrative expert, is the second most frequent position, followed by the HR position of the head of human resource development, which represents one function of the change agent. The other positions connected with the change agent that should help to support the change process are far less represented in the participating companies. Hence it seems that the current focus of change management activities in HR emphasizes on the individual employee and its ability to cope with the change. All four positions connected to the employee champion are established in more than 50% of the companies.



AE = Administrative Expert, CA = Change Agent, EC= Employee Champion, SP = Strategic Partner

**Figure 4.** HR positions currently established in companies in the DACH region (n=204)

In the DACH region, the position of the head of HR is most frequently seen as a management position (over 80% in Austria and Germany, nearly 100% in Switzerland). The positions of head of HR administration and head of HR development are also seen as management functions. Whereas in Germany and Switzerland between 50% to 70% of the participating

companies show these results, the percentage in Austria is less than 50%. The other functions are rarely considered as management positions.

Comparing the estimation of the key aspects of HR activities (see Figure 3) and the resources allocated to the HR roles (see Table 3) our results show an interesting gap. In the participating companies most of the resources are assigned to the role of the strategic partner. This might be explained by the fact, that many positions that are related in theory to the role of the strategic partner (e.g. business partner, recruiting) still have a rather operational focus in the daily business. Regarding the employee champion the estimations and the actual allocation correspond. Although the participants consider a current focus on the role of the change agent this is not reflected in the dedicated resources. On the other hand, still many capacities are spent for administrative tasks, despite the fact, that the respondents have a different view in this respect. It seems that the automation of HR processes and technological innovations such as ESS and MSS have not yet reduced the administrative workload as aspired.

	DACH	Austria	Germany	Switzerland
Administrative Expert	21%	19%	17%	24%
Employee Champion	26%	22%	32%	24%
Change Agent	15%	15%	13%	15%
Strategic Partner	38%	44%	38%	36%

**Table 3.** Resources allocated to the HR roles in the DACH region (n=204)

## Conclusion and further research

The results show, that the HR role model of Dave Ulrich (Ulrich 1997) reflects the HR activities in the DACH region. The development and the current situation are very similar in all three countries. Consequently the HR activities in this region can be seen as one cluster.

The correlation between the role of the change agent and the strategic partner on the one hand and the employee champion on the other hand indicates a strong connection of the people orientation and strategic focus of the HR activities. This is also confirmed by the estimation of the development of HR activities.

With the automation of HR processes and the implementation of ESS and MSS systems, the companies the administrative focus of HR tasks has already been reduced. The allocation of resources to these tasks is still higher than the estimation of the focus of the administrative work, but as about 20% of the companies plan to implement such systems in the future, the required resources should decrease. Furthermore these systems allow higher service levels, as they provide a 24/7 service to employees and managers.

Regarding the request to emphasis on strategic issues, the results show that the strategic orientation is already getting more and more in the focus of the HR activities, but is still evolving. As the strategic alignment of the HR activities and the development of sustainable HR strategies are crucial to ensure the long-term success of a company, this development has to be supported. The study shows, that most of the HR positions are not yet seen as management positions. But as strategic management is mostly a management and top-management issue it seems to be necessary to strengthen HR roles as management positions. Hence it seems to be essential to increase the strategic and management competencies of HR

employees to ensure and enable the required and aspired strategic development of the HR activities.

This study led to the establishment of a Research and Teaching Team on “HR Role Models and HR Competencies in International Comparison” funded by the city of Vienna. The researchers are currently working with colleagues from the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia on the development to cover the current state and the European perspective, as suggested by Brewster (2007). For further information please don't hesitate to contact us.

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