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Changes and Challenges in Human Resources Management: An Analysis of Human Resources Roles in a Bank Context (after COVID-19)

Chiara D'Angelo , Diletta Gazzaroli * , Chiara Corvino and Caterina Gozzoli 

Psychology Faculty, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Largo A. Gemelli 1, 20123 Milan, Italy; chiara.dangelo@unicatt.it (C.D.); chiara.corvino1@unicatt.it (C.C.); caterina.gozzoli@unicatt.it (C.G.)

* Correspondence: diletta.gazzaroli@unicatt.it

Abstract: Background: In the coming years, HR in the banking industry will need to play a leading role to develop human capital management, based on people care, evaluation, development, and training. To properly face this change in one of the biggest Italian banks we wanted to contribute to understanding the actual HR areas of change and examine how HR roles are dealing with “being on the frontline” of an unparalleled organisational evolution. Methods: Six focus-group sessions with up to 10 participants per session. Results: The crucial issue that emerged is a profound rupture and crisis that showed the (already existing) fragilities of the HR role interpretation: develop a new synergic relationship with the top management; define a stronger and wider organisational mandate; establish structured moments of discussion between professionals. Conclusion: HR roles in the banking context, especially after the pandemic, entail a high emotional burden related to role assumption. Specifically, our research highlighted the need to discuss the evolution of the HR role with top management, the need for synergies and a definition of the organisational mandate that allows wider participation in terms of decision-making and planning, and finally the need for supervision of HR roles.

Keywords: human resources; human resources management; COVID-19; organisational change; banking industry



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1. Introduction

Over the last few years, macroeconomic dynamics, changes in social and regulatory technology, the European Central Bank's strongly expansive monetary policy, the evolution of consumption habits and the use of banking services by clients have led to profound structural changes in the banking industry that are challenging the current service model of Italian banks. Key challenges include the increasing tendency for concentration and aggregation and the parallel rationalisation affecting the branch network, the necessity to strengthen the offer through innovative services, the need to make cost efficiencies through dimensional growth, consolidation, and a more digital and direct delivery model. Banks' current service model is no longer adequate or sustainable, and it requires profound rethinking about the skills needed to “do banking”. The fundamental choices for banking institutions will concern the balance between internal and external resources, the reshaping of competencies from primarily execution roles to advisory functions, the need to develop performance monitoring and measurement and the duty of safeguarding professional well-being. These are just some of the topics that are challenging the internal structure of Italian banks.

This scenario appears to be a clear confirmation that what the overall literature on human resources (henceforth HR) has been stating in the last two decades can be no longer postponed: HR management should increasingly play a leading role in strategic (and not just operational) terms within organisations [1–11]. Despite the wide body of literature

specifically focused on this organisational domain, it remains clear that, in the coming years, the banking industry will have to completely reconsider its human capital management, basing this evolution on people care, professional evaluation, development and training.

1.1. The Progressive Centrality of HR Role and Functions

Over the last two decades, academics, consultants and practitioners have urged the need for HR to acquire greater centrality and relevance to play more “strategic” roles in the organisation [4,10]. In line with the size and complexity of organisations, HR roles must assume a more enhanced leading role while going through radical and strategic changes. In their pursuit of change, organisations are thus increasingly asked to incorporate social and environmental concerns into their strategy and management systems. Because of its very nature—HR management operates as a ‘means’ to develop a mindset and as an ‘end’ to promote, through employee-centred HR practices—the HR management system can take up this challenge by defining action plans that will support productivity and well-being and meet the needs of internal and external stakeholders [7].

1.2. How Top Executives Define HR’s Role

What is the position of top management with respect to the HR role and functions? HR management is not shaped only by the initiatives taken by the HR representatives themselves but also (and mostly) by top executives and line managers [12]. HR roles have usually been recognised as potentially able to handle both tactical and strategic functions [13]; because the latter functions would allow HR roles to take on proper management of “people-side issues”, it should represent a core expectation in the organisational mandate of HR. It has been widely asserted in contemporary HR research that sustainable and effective employee management is an essential asset for the success of the banking industry [14]. To cover this crucial strategic function, HR management must put forth great effort in creating connections between professionals and top executives. To ensure that concrete, coherent, and effective actions are taken, HR must handle a constant process of promoting top-down and bottom-up awareness [6]. All organisational roles should mutually reinforce each other.

Even if the potential benefits of handling both tactical and strategic HR issues appear particularly evident and undeniable, it seems that HR functions still play a predominately tactical role, making their status and potential influence in many organisations quite questionable [1,15]. As suggested by Aldrich et al. [1], in the banking sector at least, the “status” of HR—instead of being institutionalised for its own sake—is determined by the strength of individual interpersonal relationships, which renders the roles and functions of HR rather precarious and transient. It also implies that, in many organisations, top executives are still holding a representation of the HR role and its functions deeply rooted in the administrative heritage [12,16]. A change in how HR roles and functions are perceived by key organisational actors should affect not just reciprocal expectations about what constitutes “appropriate” ways to handle HR management issues, but should also shape the resources made available to HR.

1.3. Connecting Performance, Valorisation, and Development

The new economy and its demands are forcing banks towards a fundamental re-definition of all business functions. The current representation of HR roles as a reliable strategic partner is thus linked with their capability to maintain a high level of efficiency among professionals and to create value and competitiveness in a market characterised by dramatically shorter cycle times and constant changes in business models [1,6,10]. The risk that HR may put increasing pressure on and experience rivalry with professionals is quite high [14].

To deal with the expectations of top executives and line managers regarding efficiency and productivity, HR roles cannot refer only to material incentives—they are supposed to provide a more complex approach [14,17–20]. Performance and efficiency need to be

managed in relation to areas of motivation, adaptability, and qualification, which are critical to enhancing employee competence, security, and perception of self-efficacy. This also requires—or better yet, represents a chance—transforming the HR approach in terms of development and evaluation. Specifically, this is a call for HR roles to reflect and implement an integrated measurement and evaluation process to systematically (or, at least, regularly) provide useful data in terms of training needs and potential and for supervising improvement and potential criticisms. The assumption here is that a proper evaluation is not enough in itself; on the contrary, it must be thought of as a tool for the construction of contextual knowledge, to acquire relevant and useable information for professionals and organisational improvement. In doing so, HR management could also cover another crucial function: employee retention. Losing people—not just those defined as the top performers but, in general, losing professionals and their organisational knowledge and skills—thus represents one of the most serious and costly risk exposures.

1.4. Well-Being Not an End in Itself

The strategies adopted by banks to face heightened global competition and unpredictable (but constant) changes have subjected their employees to growing pressure. One example of this is the way rapidly advancing technologies have affected how people work, the kind of work they do and how communications and interactions with colleagues occur [8]. However, there is growing evidence in the literature that to ensure organisational success, mutual gain must be created for both business and human capital [11,14,20–27].

Unpacking the strong connection between HR management practices and employee performance through the promotion of well-being is indeed crucial to reducing both the human and financial costs banks may incur in trying to raise productivity without taking care of the overall organisational quality of life [11,21,22].

Thus, well-being-oriented HR management not only refers to offering a properly equipped and safe physical environment, but should (or better, must) include clarifying the meaning of the work through a shared and coherent organisational mandate and work purpose, recognising and investing in employees' value (e.g., training and development), providing significant engaging work processes (e.g., a job designed to promote autonomy and new incentives), guaranteeing spaces for mutual exchanges and participative processes (e.g., extensive two-way communication) and—last, but not least—assuring relational and emotional support (e.g., giving an opportunity to voice employees' worries about organisational changes). All these facets contribute to increasing a more conscious role assumption and commitment and, ultimately, enhance professionals' willingness to contribute not just to their personal achievement but to the growth of the whole system [11,20,27].

1.5. A New Factor to Be Added to the Equation

Within this conversation, one cannot fail to include the COVID-19 pandemic factor, which has unquestionably played a decisive role as a catalyst and accelerator of the revolutionary change processes that organisations in the banking sector were preparing for and are facing. With COVID-19, a situation of sudden and explosive rupture and a crisis of the previous models arose and made clear the need to understand what challenges lie ahead (alongside the already existing ones) in interpreting HR roles in the future [28].

It is undeniable that COVID-19 transformed the world of work. On one side millions of workers lost their jobs or were placed on payroll subsidies, on the other side millions of workers radically changed their way of working (e.g., moving from their organisations' spaces to their homes or following strict health safety protocol). The subsequent challenges and efforts for HR professionals have been massive, sometimes even immeasurable [28–31].

The COVID-19 pandemic has starkly required HR roles to perform their functions mainly in terms of supporting, accompanying, and listening to people. This unprecedented situation requires new human resource practices to allow HR professionals to deal with the shift to technological processes, such as E-recruitment selection, training, hybrid teamwork, and remote leadership [9]. However, we need to keep in mind as shown by Wang et al. [32],

only with a high HR management capability maturity, digital HRM is more likely to deliver a positive impact and so promoting HR management system strength.

Since organisations' survival and the possibility to evolve strictly depends on employees during unforeseen and unpredictable scenarios, such as the COVID-19 period, the need for stronger HR management has been raised [28,33]. After COVID-19, it is essential to increase HR agency to provide job security, define policies improving job quality and collect worker voices [34,35]. In short, HR managers must help the organisations to confront the moral implications of their decisions and actions.

1.6. A Long-Term Approach

The final aim of the HR management system is to negotiate an ongoing balance between economic, social and environmental issues to allow organisations to successfully handle all of the challenges and changes occurring in the banking sector [7]. Because the banking context is currently facing overall huge changes, with this study we want to contribute to the understanding of how the evolution of HR roles highlighted by the literature translates into professional and organisational issues within one of the largest and most important Italian banks.

Based on these premises and our experience researching and working with organisations, we decided to adopt a psycho-sociological perspective to approach and deepen the complexity of the topic in this specific organisational context [36–41]. This means simultaneously keeping in mind and considering that individuals' personal and professional identity raises questions about the organisational context, and at the same time, the organisational and social context re-shapes individual's issues in terms of limitations and possibilities. Thus, to properly face the future evolution in the field we believe that (before) it is crucial to deeply understand the actual issues, representations and feelings experienced by HR roles. Consistently with the psycho-sociological perspective, this study aims to "give a voice" to the HR professionals, exploring efforts and resources that they perceive and represent to be a priority for their profession to further the knowledge of how HR roles are evolving compared with the evidence in the literature for one of the largest and most important Italian banks.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Aims

One of the largest and most important Italian banks in recent years has been the protagonist of a growing and increasingly rapid policy of business changes and expansion through acquisitions and mergers.

Specifically, our exploratory questions are: what are the challenges HR managers face in this context? How is the role changing? Thus, the aim of this study is to explore areas of change in the HR domain (i.e., organisational mandate and work objects, role-related needs, future scenarios) and examine how HR roles are dealing with "being on the frontline" of an unparalleled organisational evolution (change).

2.2. Sample and Procedures

This specific bank context is characterised by a series of peculiarities that can be summarised as follows.

- Extension: this is a bank organisation that covers the entire national territory, operates as a business abroad and is in a phase of continuous expansion.
- Company population size: more than 70,000 employees distributed in various geographical areas, involved in different types of business.
- HR management specificity: delocalised management (no daily contact with the HR portfolio assigned), with an HR function assumption for internal career or area transitions processes (which quite often are not the result of a personal/professional choice).
- A banking context is characterised by processes of strong change, especially in terms of the acquisition of branches in the territory. However, we cannot speak in terms of a

proper coexistence of temporary and permanent organisations [42]. During acquisition processes, these organisations happen to have a hybrid conformation with “a mix of temporary and permanent structures” [43] (p. 1705), but the final aim is usually to incorporate the temporary/new structures in the previously existing structures.

Six focus group sessions were conducted with the presence of up to 10 participants per session (60 participants overall). The size of the sample was determined based on the total number of professionals (around 300) who hold HR roles/functions and based on the territories/areas of management assignment (see Table 1). We also kept a balance in terms of seniority equally distributing participants into four main groupings: 1–5 years seniority, 5–10 years seniority, 10–15 years seniority and over 15 years of seniority.

Table 1. Distribution of HR roles/functions based on territories/areas of management assignment.

Central Structures (TOT 40)	
Labor Proceedings	5
Personnel management insurance division	2
Welfare	2
Normative-Legal	3
Management Development Areas Coo Citdio	5
Development Management Governance and Control Areas	2
Labor Litigation	2
Infragroup Mobility	2
Executive Management	2
Health and Safety	4
Industry Relations	2
Prevention and Protection	2
People Management Corporate Division	2
Recruiting & Assessment Center	5
Structures in the Territory (TOT 20)	
Personnel Development—Local Banks Division	5
Personnel and network support	
Piemonte, Valle D’Aosta, Liguria	5
Lazio, Sicilia, Sardegna, Abruzzo, Molise	2
Veneto, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Trentino Alto Adige	2
Personnel Management International Subsidiary Banks Division	2
Decentralized Operational Risk Management	2
On-line Branch Personnel Management	2

Each session (of 120 min in duration) was conducted on the Microsoft Teams platform to comply with containment rules for COVID-19 (Focus groups took place in late 2020 and early 2021) and were videotaped after informed consent and research project ethics approval.

2.3. Measures and Data Analysis

Coherently with the psycho-sociological perspective, the focus group draft included the following areas of exploration: current role and organisational mandate; work objects; role-related needs; sustainable future scenarios.

Video recordings of the focus groups were transcribed verbatim. Analyses were conducted via paper and pencil using both theory-driven categories and categories emerging

from the data. Specifically, during the top-down phase, a direct content analysis was applied in accordance with the categories established in the literature. During the bottom-up phase, a conventional content analysis was applied to bring to the surface specific micro-categories. Once coding was completed, a third researcher coded two randomly selected transcripts to verify inter-coder reliability.

3. Results

Although each focus group was characterised by some more specific topics of interest, it is possible to identify crucial points of convergence between all the groups and the individual professionals who took part in the research.

Table 2 summarises the main theory-driven categories and data-driven ones, a more detailed explanation of their meaning is found in the following paragraphs through the use of significant verbalisations.

Table 2. Main theory-driven categories and data-driven categories.

MAIN CATEGORIES (THEORY-DRIVEN)	SUBCATEGORIES (DATA-DRIVEN)
The strategic role of HR people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HR organisational mandate represent the company's values and manage colleagues' malaise • delocalized HR management • listening, empathy, flexibility as core competencies of the role
Well-being-oriented HR management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee's individual malaise • Employee's organisational malaise • increase of silent forms of malaise (disorientation, uncertainty and lack of agency) • HR professionals' discomfort
Performance and efficiency issues in HR role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • constraints at the level of interaction and relationship with employee • pressure to act quickly • lack of appropriate tools
The link between Top management and HR roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • connection with middle and top organisational levels • interventions to support human resources in synergy with the work groups and their managers • Training and supervision actions dedicated to HR

3.1. Role and Organisational Mandate

According to HR managers, their mandate consists of two macro-areas: to represent the company and its values (for example, during onboarding procedures after acquisitions) and to manage colleagues' malaise and problems (for example, colleagues from different cultures, colleagues with disabilities, colleagues who require transfers).

'We can catch the signals and connect the dots ... people's behavior is telling you something. The beauty and the challenge of my job is that when I have been managing a group for a long time I can use my knowledge of people's history to understand more.'

However, the organisational mandate foresees a declination of the HR role in functions and divisions that are also very different from each other (from disciplinary to disability integration), and this very often determines the coexistence of divergent points of view and action strategies among the different HR roles. In this specific banking context, the HR role is very often one that people are assigned to because of their personal sensitivity and/or relocation strategies from other roles. Another peculiar characteristic of the HR role in this context is the delocalised management; in fact, there tends to be no physical/geographical

continuity of relationship and daily management and the main intervention tools for annual monitoring interviews, on-boarding and/or accompaniment interviews during transition phases (transfers, outplacements).

According to HR professionals, to be able to interpret their mandate, a series of elements should be required, including listening, empathy, flexibility, and the desire to develop an authentic relationship with their colleagues to activate a confrontation. Because of this, HR roles generally place inherent importance and value on their role.

‘I’m often very proactive and quick when a colleague asks me to listen (in the sense of finding space for an interview even when I’m swamped) but the solution or request may be that it doesn’t “mesh” with the company’s needs—so transparency is key, I think it’s the biggest danger for us is to mislead the colleague.’

In general terms, what seems to emerge from the focus groups with HR professionals with respect to the assumption of their own role and organisational mandate is a critical lack of space and time to reflect on their own functions and work purpose/purposes. Thus, very often the emotional load and the tight timeframe with which they are confronted do not make it easy for them to identify the best moment to act or to understand the “right” limits within which they should remain (e.g., if and how to share personal life details during an interview to get more in touch with their colleagues).

‘We are their point of contact for anything, even for non-work related things just to find comfort/confrontation.’

‘How not to take on your colleague’s anxiety?’

To answer the research question on how HR roles are dealing with “being on the front-line”, the feeling reported by many HR managers is that they need to be more supported and competent than in the past, given the increasing breadth of the organisation and the pressing demand from top management to find concrete and rapid solutions.

3.2. Work Objects and Recurring Themes

A first consideration that participants shared is the fact that malaise is highly present in organisations, and in recent years, new discomforts have emerged, because of changes in the way people live and work. It is necessary to point out that HR professionals’ general tendency is to view well-being and discomfort or malaise as if they were two distinct poles—that is, well-being is the absence of malaise and discomfort (and vice versa). Going into deeper detail, HR has identified two prevalent areas of malaise that they are called upon to deal with nowadays: employee malaise and the new discomfort that the HR roles are experiencing personally. In terms of employee malaise, the implicit assumption emerges from the reflections of HR professionals that discomfort tends to be intrinsically subjective—that is, linked to how the individual experiences an objective difficulty.

After a meta-analysis of HR responses, we can connect employee malaise to two macro-domains: individual and organisational. At the individual level, there is the need to reconcile professional and private life (family needs, illness and disability); relational problems with colleagues or family that spill over into everyday professional performance; problems related to assuming one’s role in terms of the gap between expectation and reality (inability of individuals to manage certain organisational situations; dissatisfaction with the role they play) and resistance to change caused by fear of the future and not feeling “ready and competent” for a new role. At the organisational level, there is the perception of a lack of appreciation for individuals’ work and contribution, which is often traced back to an inability, on the part of the organisation, to recognise the needs and aptitudes of individuals; high stress and excessive workload and growing discomfort in the workgroup generated by ineffective management of “problematic” colleagues. Communication is another source of malaise, including lack of organic communication due to the extensive size of the organisation; ineffective management and communication of organisational changes (poor ability to convey the value of change with the consequent difficulty for employees to

leave their comfort zone and adapt) and how new communication tools have reduced the frequency of direct contact between people and a lack of face-to-face interaction.

'We often see a general lack of communication and listening in and between teams, that leads the colleagues to feel side-lined.'

'What strategies can be found to empathically engage the person at a distance?'

Following the pandemic, discomfort and malaise have increasingly begun to develop in a latent form. It is this latter form that is of greatest concern to HR roles, as it is the one they find in many of their colleagues due to the daily pressures bank employees are exposed to and which leads them to feel the need to “keep it all together”. The pandemic—beyond issues more closely linked to logistical and practical management (e.g., providing all employees with suitable devices for working from home)—would seem to have accentuated the need to address, from a preventive standpoint, those forms of transversal discomfort and malaise linked to a sudden collapse of certainties and a consequent feeling of disorientation that inevitably brings the risk of anchoring to the idealised past and disenchantment with present and future time. Specifically, the pandemic seems to have led to a feeling of alienation caused by being forced to physically go to the workplace (e.g., to the branch) or, conversely, to stay at home, with the potential consequence of psychological deterioration. In this regard, the change generated by smart-working, which does not allow for “a physical” daily contact with colleagues, must also be considered. However, some participants are also of the opinion that the change generated by remote and digital communications has also had several positive impacts, as it has allowed/forced more frequent contact between managers and individuals.

'How do we make up for what is missing from an incomplete non-verbal communication? The substance is missing, it's a completely different relationship.'

'In my feelings remote working has an enormous potential and that it has not yet been fully utilized.'

In other words, one of the main changes detected by HR is linked with the increase of more silent and “discreet” forms of malaise that, in a wider perspective, can be brought back to the perception of disorientation, uncertainty and an overall lack of agency and support that, in the long term, can lead to a series of deeper and more complex problems not only for the individual who is directly affected but for the entire organisation.

'In addition to the medical or psychological pathologies (that are under control by occupational medicine), a situation of profound discomfort has arisen between the most of us . . . we can see it . . . and the individuals do not bring it to the surface because they are trying to hold on for the pandemic, for colleagues and family'

'I've seen colleagues resign themselves and it's detrimental not just to their jobs but to their health too . . . and they don't seek help because they say "that's just the way it is'

As mentioned above, the second area of malaise HR professionals are dealing with (which also particularly addresses the second research question) relates to their own new forms of discomfort. Specifically, they reported the perception that they must always have a high level of mental and emotional energy to respond to interfacing with an ever-increasing load of malaise transversally distributed among human resources and the need to reconcile the demands of the organisation with those of the individual while dealing with a series of constraints and limits. In addition, to further complicate the picture, it emerged that HR managers do not have tools for mapping/monitoring discomfort and malaise, inasmuch as, being a very extensive reality, it is difficult to monitor the trend with accurate data and also because there are latent discomforts and malaises of which HR cannot be aware until “it is too late”. The only tool currently available is the climate survey, which, however, reveals a generalised (instead of a localised) picture.

'We are like many small companies in the same company.'

In short, HR professionals' feeling of being constantly under pressure pairs with the lack of organisational devices and time for coordination and supervision among the various HR roles and the consequent lack of structured spaces for discussion to develop a stronger synergy.

3.3. Performance and Efficacy Issues in the Interpretation of the HR Role

The pandemic, with its implications at the level of day-to-day management, emotions and impact on business models, has resulted in multiple consequences that directly and specifically touch HR roles.

More precisely, these include (a) constraints at the level of interaction and relationship due to the impossibility of coming into direct contact with colleagues due to the restrictions to contain the pandemic and the consequent collection of filtered and partial information, as well as the perception of limited effectiveness in terms of proximity and support of colleagues; (b) pressure to act quickly and, therefore, a lack of time to reflect on the situation and the boundaries within which it is legitimate to remain to protect and support all organisational actors and the organisation itself; (c) a lack of appropriate tools (collapse of the certainties given by listening in person, remote listening presupposing different rules with which most feel a lack of competence) to deal with different situations and (d) the need to manage an "emotional detachment" to face situations of fragility and discomfort and to identify possible strategies for action.

'The fatigue sometimes is to manage even your own emotional fatigue . . . you want to help the person, your colleague, but we do not have the spectrum of knowledge and skills necessary to manage the whole range of situations that people may experience . . . and this is frustrating.'

Essentially, in terms of change in the HR domain, professionals feel building new meanings, models, spaces, times, links, and ways of working and living in the organisation is a major issue. However, beyond the high levels of stress due to excessive workload, the main criticality that HR professionals find themselves in is the perception of covering a role, that is not in line with their skills and the tools available that are often valued only in emergency terms rather than in strategic ones. In this scenario, the pandemic has intensified a profound feeling of loneliness and vulnerability ("being saturated despite the role not allowing you to explode") and an awareness of the need for greater support at the organisational level.

'More and more we find ourselves in the position of having to go outside the role's boundaries, so a moment of exchange between us, or with a third part as well, I think it would be a great help.'

'Certainly we will have to find a new balance, not only at the level of individuals management but also at the level of relationship and leadership . . . in the way of interpreting being a leader of a team.'

3.4. The Link between Top Management and HR Roles: Future Scenarios

During the focus groups, the following hypotheses emerged as possible paths for improvement/evolution of the HR role:

- Spaces of connection with middle and top organisational levels to promote more coordinated and aligned actions at the system level to allow HR professionals to take on functions that are not only focused on containment;

'What actual and potential power can be taken by HR roles? We should be part of the decisional process because we are the ones that see both sides.'

- Possibility of planning interventions to support human resources in synergy with the workgroups and their managers who live daily in the branches throughout the territory and in the various divisions of the central functions and

‘We need to work with the branches’ managers to be more effective to support not just the single person but the whole team.’

- Training and supervision actions dedicated to HR professionals to allow spaces and moments for coordination and confrontation.

‘It would be nice to have some dedicated planned moments in which we can talk and confront each other calmly and not only when we are in a hurry to solve a situation with the colleague you find in that moment.’

4. Discussion

Those who deal with human capital within an organisation, as a basic mandate, have the goal of maintaining a balance between bond care with people and between people in organisations, as well as maintaining high levels of productivity. Nurturing ties is about making individuals more productive, and to do that, one must monitor what is happening in the relationship between the parties. Thus, to be effective in interpreting a function of care, performance management, and individual-group-organisation connection, HR roles must necessarily work in terms of a conscious negotiation to oscillate between adherence to the organisational mandate and discretion in interpreting the role [1,12,14,15]. However, in contrast to what has been highlighted in the literature, in the bank context examined, the roles of HR professionals appear basically disconnected from the decision-making processes, although they are asked to support colleagues in facing decisions (such as transfers, job changes) taken by the top management. What emerges is an HR role that is still almost purely executive, with no room for developing top-down or bottom-up awareness promotion processes and no decision-making power [6]. However, if we consider the important changes that are taking place in the banking world and the dynamics that characterise this specific banking context (constant acquisitions, a large corporate population, an important territorial extension, delocalised management), it seems clear that the role of HR professionals should be increasingly strategic and not just operational [1–11].

In addition, the pandemic caused by COVID-19 resulted in several constraints and limitations that prevented HR professionals from pursuing their executive functions as they had always been assumed. The impossibility of regular and constant contact in physical presence, the acceleration in the large-scale diffusion of the use of new technologies and the changes in the business model have required HR professionals to invest significantly in terms of developing soft skills to be able to authentically maintain a relationship with human resources despite the impossibility of being physically present in the company. In fact, the pandemic has stressed the fact that it is no longer possible to resort to “consolidated” and standardised tools and strategies and that are necessary to reflect on organisational devices from a critical point of view. For these reasons, it has become fundamental for HR roles to accept the need to sit with uncertainty and operate a “suspension of action” to connect their mandate with the specific characteristics of the situation and the changes happening in the bank context so as not to risk colluding uncritically. Put another way, the main challenge requires HR professionals to take on their role with the awareness that they must “decentralise from themselves” to tune in to their colleagues and the issues they bring, and then return to their role to hypothesise an effective solution that holds together the needs of the individual and the system.

An interesting element that emerged from the HR professionals’ discussion concerns the representations of well-being. First, the general tendency is to view well-being as the absence of discomfort or malaise, as if they were two distinct poles. However, as stated in the literature, well-being can be understood as a form of active adaptation, providing a new meaning to discomfort in a vision of sustainability [44]. Very often, in fact, the manifestation of malaise represents a lack of recognition of one’s needs and is an attempt by individuals to find a new balance different from the previous one [45–47].

Considering the strongly expansive monetary policy of the European Central Bank and the evolution of consumption habits and services, it is thus worth noting the near absence in all of the focus-groups of performance incentives and the development of the potential

of human resources. Thus, this is a topic that is usually strongly intertwined with well-being, both in the literature and in professional practice, in terms of both opposition and synergy [11,14,17–22]. It makes us wonder if this may represent a kind of taboo, or a concern because performance and professional development do not constitute HR's "treatable" matter because they are strongly pushed and managed only by the top-level roles.

Another element on which it is useful to reflect concerns the need to integrate a systemic perspective on malaise that can involve various levels. In fact, the implicit assumption emerges from the reflections of HR professionals that discomfort tends to be intrinsically subjective—that is, linked to how the individual experiences an objective difficulty. However, the discomfort of the individual and the discomfort of the organisation are inseparable, because they contaminate each other. This means that to grasp and understand malaise, it is necessary to observe the relationship between individuals–groups–and organisations [36]. For HR roles, this requires placing the management of discomfort/malaise (even when it is found "only" at the level of the individual) in a systemic reading. This, in fact, can make it possible not only to grasp any misalignment between the individual's representations/perceptions/expectations and the constraints/possibilities of reality, but also the tightness of the relational fabric in which the person is placed. The need to implement a system for mapping and monitoring the human resources with which HR roles interface thus clearly emerges, to prevent certain situations of discomfort from becoming chronic over time. Even more so, considering the huge size of the company and the consequent fragmentation over the territory, equipping HR roles with tools to carry out monitoring and analysis by zone and observing the contextual data seems more crucial than ever to guarantee effective management of human resources.

This is what would make it possible not only to promote a preventative approach but also to protect HR roles from excessive emotional (as well as work) overload because it would make it possible to focus attention on the real conditions and possibilities of the context and to generate a synergistic relationship involving all organisational levels: the person presenting the discomfort, the HR role, and managers. The theme of prevention, in fact, is decisive not only with respect to the well-being of human resources but also the HR professionals themselves who, increasingly frequently during the pandemic, have found themselves having to respond to an organisational mandate oriented towards immediate action/resolution that does not allow for moments of confrontation with HR colleagues to generate solutions that are sustainable and become organisational capital. Providing moments of confrontation and supervision for the roles that deal with HR management regarding workloads, their experiences, their frustrations, and concerns means protecting, not only these professionals directly, but also the chance to identify "what is sustainable and a priority" for the company itself. In summary, as many studies have already pointed out [4,10,14,17], those in charge of HR functions cannot be effective and impactful if the organisational culture and devices for a proactive and strategic assumption of the HR role are lacking.

5. Conclusions

The role of HR professionals in the banking context is increasingly required to take up the challenge of accompanying in the construction of new meanings, models, spaces, times, and ties. This is even truer after the pandemic because HR professionals are now being called upon to help human resources understand the meaning of what is happening, integrating historical know-how with what is new in terms of tools, processes, and business models. This, of course, entails a high emotional burden related to role assumption, with the risk—if not adequately recognised and managed—of "feeling crushed and overwhelmed" by this effort. Very often, in fact, those who take care of others in organisations do not have available structured moments or devices dedicated to confrontation, connection and supervision. The crucial issues and consequent practical implications that emerged from this research work are summarised below.

With COVID-19, a situation of profound rupture and crisis has arisen, and this has explosively brought to the surface the (already existing) fragilities of HR role interpretation in this specific banking context. In turn, this has highlighted the need to discuss the evolution of the HR role with top management, the need for synergies and a definition of the organisational mandate that allows for greater decision-making and planning influence. It means thinking about a growing engagement of HR in board meetings, in the evaluation process to better supervise the organisational and professional well-being and areas of potential growth and development.

In the current context, it is no longer sufficient to take individual actions (often based on urgency) among the figures in the organisation who are involved in HR management—what is needed are more structured systems of action that allow for the construction of processes and actions at multiple levels in HR management. In other words, it is necessary to build and nurture constant convergence between decisions and actions at the individual, middle and top organisational levels to make them more effective based on a more consistent, sustainable, and conscious approach. Once again, planning organisational spaces and times is specifically defined to promote and monitor coordination between top management, HR structure and professionals. Closely linked to this is the need for supervision of HR roles. On several occasions, the HR professionals themselves have highlighted how indispensable it is for them to have structured moments of accompaniment and support for their role, not only from a strategic point of view but above all to face and contain a load of emotionality (their own and that of others) which requires priority attention.

We hope that future studies can further expand the understanding of the dimensions explored in this research not only to monitor their development over time but also to allow the definition of a theoretical and intervention model.

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