Achieving HR Function Consistency as a Challenge for HR Practitioners in Project-oriented Organizations

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Abstract: In order to maintain a business competitive advantage managers have to make continuous efforts aimed at either introducing new or developing the existing products and processes. Many enterprises implement the so-called project-oriented approach. The enterprises following such an approach are referred to as project-oriented organizations. A project and an organization cannot exist without people. Human capital is developed in the process of HR function fulfillment (R&S, training, HR appraisal, remuneration and HR flow). In every enterprise, which implements the project-oriented approach and uses the matrix structure, HR function takes a two-way course: in an organization-wide perspective (general HR function) and within the framework of a particular project (HR function in projects). The objective of the article is to answer the following research questions: Q1: What kind of gaps occur in the area of HR function internal consistency within the analyzed organizations? Q2: What is the desired role of HR practitioners in project-oriented organizations? The article presents the results of empirical studies carried out in 2014 and 2015 in 100 project-oriented organizations. The surveyed organizations present higher general HR function consistency than the HR function in projects. Moreover, some gaps in consistency between both HR function courses were indicated. The obtained results of empirical studies provide knowledge about the specificity of project-oriented organizations and the desired role of HR practitioners.

Keywords: HRM, HR function, project-oriented organization, HR practitioners, HR business partner

1.   Introduction

The interest in people management, defined as policies and practices which govern how people are managed and developed in organizations (Armstrong, 2006, p. 2), is continuously increasing. The term "human resources management" and "human resources" have largely replaced the concept of "personnel management" describing the activities undertaken in relation to employees. Managing people (human resources management, HRM) can be considered the key management area. Such management is identified with HR function, which covers tasks related to attracting workers, adequate development of their capital and taking advantage of it in the course of any organization functioning. Currently this function is focused on the value-adding activities and achieving organizational goals along with meeting its employees' needs. Its development remains within the responsibility of HR department.

The interest in project management issues is also continuously growing. Already in 1988, Drucker (2006, pp. 7-28) wrote that in twenty years a typical large company would have by half fewer managerial levels, whereas the particular tasks would be performed by specialists concentrated on specific projects, operating alongside traditional departments. Organizations function in a turbulent environment, which requires their flexibility and immediate response to changes. In order to maintain a business competitive advantage managers have to make continuous efforts aimed at either introducing new or developing the existing products and processes.

The first projects were already carried out in ancient times. However, project management, in its modern form, was initiated only a few decades ago. Project-oriented approach, based on appointing interdisciplinary teams and using tools typical for project management, is extensively applied within the framework of managing changes (Young, 2006, p. 21). These enterprises which take advantage of such approach are referred to as project-oriented organizations. Among them there are project-based organizations – in which project implementation remains their core business – and also organizations focused on repetitive actions (e.g. trading or manufacturing companies) which, however, implement projects.

Specific organizational structure represents the factor which differentiates the analyzed organizations from the so-called traditional enterprises. In practice, pure project-based structures (within which no permanent units/line departments have been established) occur very rarely. Therefore, the usual alternative to this type of structure is the matrix structure, in which project teams are formed and dissolved. In this case, the complexity of HR function is increasing. HRM has a two-way course: on the one hand, in the general

organizational field, and on the other, within the framework of a given project. These two ways of HR function have been respectively called the general HR function and the HR function in project (project-oriented HR function). In the course of this function development in project-oriented organizations, "new" subjects, absent in traditional organizations, such as project managers, gain more importance. The problem discussed requires taking a slightly different perspective on HRM issues, including a reflection whether both HR function courses should be developed consistently, relative to each other. It is also vital to identify the desired role of HR practitioners in analyzed type o organizations.

Consistency can be understood as harmony or compatibility, the condition of cohering or holding together and retaining form, solidity or firmness (Dictionary.com). Nadler and Tushman (1980, pp. 35-51) define consistency or fit as the level at which needs, requirements, goals, the construction of one element remain in compliance with the needs, requirements, goals, structure of another component. As Huselid (2005, pp. 635-672) points out, a HRM system, based on complementary practices, is the source of lasting competitive advantage in an enterprise. The problem of HRM consistency is broadly discussed in the literature on traditional organizations (e.g. Boon et al, 2007, p. 1-6; Kepes and Delery, 2007, pp. 385-405; Banks, 2014, pp. 352-367). Due to the two-way course of HR function in project-oriented organizations, internal fit has been recognized as particularly important. It is worth emphasizing, that the consistency of activities taken up in projects only, along with the existing discrepancies between the practices applied in general HR function and HR function in project, shall result in some organizational disorder. The latter, on the other hand, has negative impact on the effectiveness of the entire enterprise.

It was observed that the discussion presented in subject literature on human resources management persists "in isolation" from the problem of HR function consistency and the role of HR practitioners, in the specific functioning conditions of project-oriented organizations. The purpose of the article was defined, i.e. answering the following research questions:

Q1: What kind of gaps occur in the area of HR function internal consistency in the analyzed organizations?
Q2: What is the desired role of HR practitioners in project-oriented organizations?

In order to carry out the research objective defined in this way the relationships between the two courses of HR function were discussed and the theory referring to HRM consistency was explained. Finally, the results of empirical research were discussed. It constructed the basis for presenting the desired role of HR practitioners and a model approach towards HR function formation. The above-mentioned research constitutes the component of a broader research project covering methods for HR function implementation in project-oriented organizations. The research project was financed by The National Science Centre Poland (DEC-2013/09/D/HS4/00566).

2.   Literature Background

2.1   The two-way course of HR function in a project-oriented organization

On the basis of literature studies combining the problems of project management and HRM two approaches to HR function presentation were identified. The prevailing practice consists in focusing on HR function only, as representing the set of activities addressed to project team members (see Clark and Colling, 2005, pp. 178-191; Melnic and Puiu, 2011, pp. 476-484). The second, quite uncommon approach – with Huemann, Keegan and Turner (2007, pp. 315-323) as its precursors – is based on noticing two courses of this function. The aforementioned authors prepared a presentation of differences occurring between HR function in a traditional organization (managed in a "classical" way, where project-oriented approach is not applied) and a project-oriented one. They indicated that a project involves people already employed in an organization. However, in practice both the recruitment process and the selection of candidates from an external labor market can be arranged specifically for the needs of a particular project.

As it has been indicated before an organizational structure determines the form of HR function. HR function in a project-oriented organization takes a two-way course. HR function in a project is made up of the same components as the HR function at the general organizational level. There are mutual relations between the particular components of HR function in a project and a general HR function, as shown in figure 1.

It was adopted that the recruitment and selection of candidates (R&S) is not finished while signing an employment agreement or a contract. In practice the so-called trial period agreements are frequently used. The term of HR flow is understood as promotions (horizontal, vertical), transfers (organizational unit changing while remaining at the same or similar position), demotions and layoffs. The feedbacks occurring between HR function components are marked by a dotted line. For example, staff leaving implies the need for recruitment activities (for more see: Piwowar-Sulej, 2014, pp. 249-253). At this point it is worth emphasizing that the presented perspective is a model oriented one. The result of HR appraisal, either formal or informal, should imply offering adequate training in terms of remuneration and transfer.
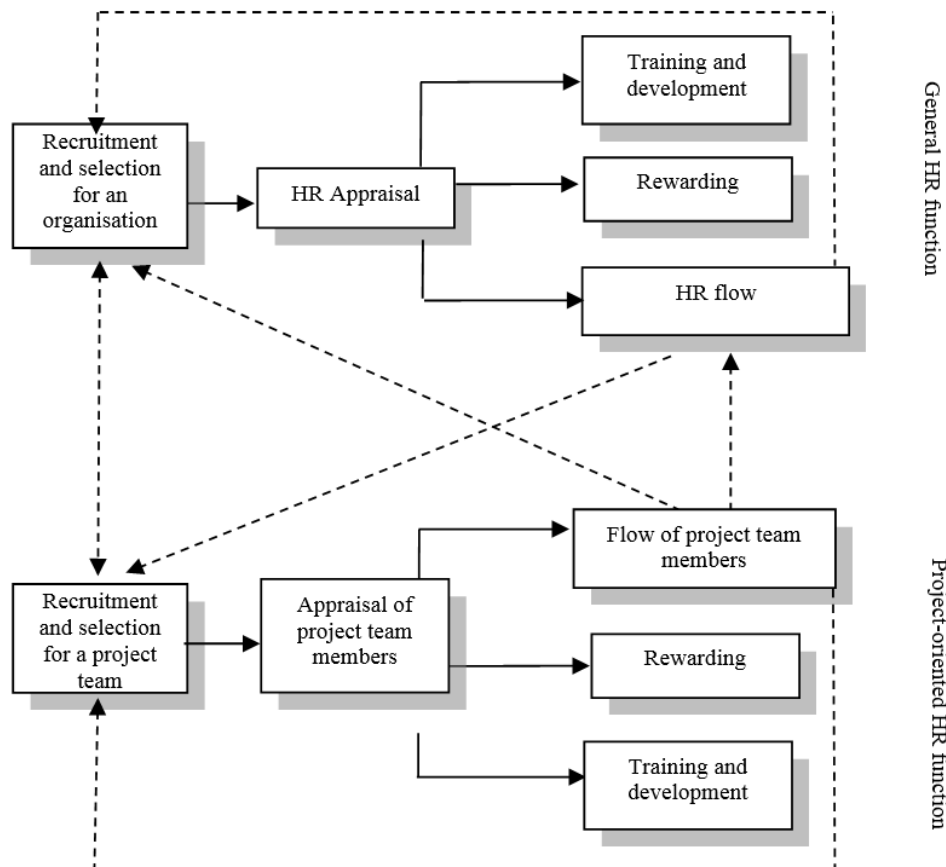

Figure 1: Two-way course of the HR function in a project-oriented organization

Source: Piwowar-Sulej (2014, p. 250)

2.2   HRM internal consistency

Academic literature distinguishes between four different types of fit in terms of HRM, i.e. (Wood, 1999, pp. 391-417):

1. Strategic fit: the relationship between the HR system and strategy. HR practices can facilitate organization and employees concentrate on the achievement of organizational goals since the implementation of strategy is based on the matching between HR system and strategy.
2. Organizational fit: the relationship between the HR system and other relevant systems in an organization. Relevant systems might, for instance, contain technological systems, production systems and control systems.
3. Internal fit: the relationship between different HR practices. According to this view, the HR system should be an internally coherent system of HR practices.
4. Environmental fit: the relationship between HR system and the external environment. According to this logic, HR system should adapt to changes in the environment and to the rules and expectations of the institutional context which affect the organization.

Due to the specific nature of HR function in a project-oriented organization it was decided that the problem of internal fit in terms of HR practices is worth discussing. How should the internal consistency of HR function be approached in the analyzed organizations? The problem of interest for the author refers primarily to:

1. internal consistency within each course of the discussed function,
2. consistency between both courses of HR function.

It is also important to achieve consistency in the context of horizontal alignment. Baron and Kreps (1999, p. 29-54) identify three different forms of this consistency:

1. single-employee consistency: each individual employee's experiences of HR system should be consistent,
2. among-employee consistency: treatment of different employees should be consistent,
3. temporal consistency: HR philosophy should be consistent over time.

Internal consistency within a particular course takes the form of making staff oriented decisions based on the results of an employee appraisal. Training should result from the needs defined in the course of periodical staff appraisal. The consistency between HR function courses means, on the other hand, that the practices applied within the framework of a general HR function and a HR function in project remain mutually fit. Not only are they linked by the relationships presented in figure 1, but also use similar methods in both courses within the particular stages of HR functions implementation. It is not about applying exactly the same techniques e.g. candidates' selection for work on positions in an organizational permanent structure and techniques for project members selection. It is about the same general rules applied in both identified cases. It is also about proper communication and consequence.

3.   Empirical research methodology and research results

Within the framework of empirical research an idiographic approach was used (for more see: Piwowar-Sulej, 2016, pp. 89-98). It covered 100 enterprises based in Poland, applying a project-oriented approach. The research sample was balanced, i.e. covered an equal number of project-based enterprises (with projects as their core business) and the other ones which carry out projects. In the process of the research sample construction it was considered that while a defined number of project-based enterprises is operating on the market, it is difficult to identify the other organizations which apply a project-oriented approach. There are no objective registers to define the entire population of project-oriented organizations and allow representative sampling. The study covered enterprises offering a position or a function (role) of a project manager. An additional condition to include an enterprise in a research sample was HR department presence in an organizational structure. Thus, medium and large enterprises participated in the research.

Having considered the above-mentioned problems in obtaining a representative sample, along with an intention to ensure higher quality of the conducted research, data triangulation was used in the research process. A structured interview (using PAPI method) with a project manager, project executor and HR specialist was performed in each enterprise. The research was of a descriptive-, explanatory- and application-oriented nature.

Research tools were developed in the form of structured interview questionnaires. The questionnaires addressed to each group of respondents contained 300 questions including 24 questions which referred directly to internal consistency of HR function. Kruskal-Wallis test was applied to check the convergence level of the answers provided by representatives of various respondent groups (for more see Piwowar-Sulej, 2017, pp. 243-244).

Having taken into account the first research question (Q1) it should be said that higher internal consistency of the general HR function than the project-oriented HR function was confirmed. In the responding organizations the general HR function remains internally consistent. It, however, does not support HR function fulfillment in a project. It results, e.g. in the absence of individuals, in an organization, featuring the skills and abilities required for work in interdisciplinary teams and under time pressure. The shortcomings in the consistency of both HR function courses are presented in table 1.

Table 1: Main shortcomings in the HR function internal consistency – summary of the empirical research results

Stage of HR function	Revealed shortcomings
Recruitment and selection (R&S)	There are certain discrepancies in the area of recruitment between both HR function courses. Recruitment to permanent structures – whether internal or external – takes an open form, whereas project-oriented recruitment is usually based on addressing the offer for project participation to the individuals selected from an internal labor market. It often happens that project managers do not decide about the composition of their team, whereas line unit managers recruit staff for their projects themselves. Competence profiles are used in the process of selecting candidates for permanent organizational units, whereas it is not applied in the course of project-oriented selection. The criteria for getting a job in the first case are of substantive nature. In recruiting project team members, however, availability remains the crucial attribute of a candidate. While selecting candidates for permanent structures their project-oriented competencies are not verified. HR specialists participate in all R&S process to permanent structures, but rarely in R&S for the projects' needs (mainly in external recruitment).
HR appraisal	The appraisals – but rather the organization-wide ones – result in the decisions about salaries, HR flow and training. HR specialists do not create HR appraisal tools for projects' needs.
Rewarding	Project staff do not know the rewarding system used in projects (the lack of proper communication and consequence). In case of long-term projects bonuses are paid in the form of advance payments after achieving the subsequent milestones. There is, however, no relationship between the project phase and the amount of such bonus fraction.
Training and development	The so-called "hard trainings", related to project-oriented topics, are mainly organized. The effectiveness of trainings is not the subject of verification.
HR flow	Formal "career paths" do not exists in case of projects.

Source: Author's research project

In respondents' opinions – from the perspective of an organization efficiency, the same operational schemes should be used within both HR function courses. Project managers mainly emphasized the importance of internal HR function consistency in project's success achievement. The executors of project work and HR specialists underlined the impact of such consistency on the HRM efficiency. The consequences of inconsistent operations occurring in the discussed area are reflected in e.g. reduced work motivation.

The lack of HR specialists' involvement in projects is visible. According to project managers HR employees do not have sufficient knowledge of the project substance, which constitutes the main barrier to their more extensive inclusion in project staff management. In the academic literature various classifications of HR departments' roles are presented. It is also stressed that the general role has changed from a strictly administrative one to a business partner role. HR specialist as a business partner knows and understands the business needs and is a real support for his/her internal clients. In the next paragraph the second research question will be answered (Q2).

4. HR practitioners as business partners in a project-oriented organization

As Kenton and Yarnall (2010, p. 12) point out "business" implies the level of strategic intervention, which extends beyond an individual. The word also conjures up a level of professionalism and credibility, a matter of factness, which sets people in this role apart from those in more traditional and operational HR roles. They recognize that business partners will not always be working on strategic level in an organization and come on this later. At whatever level of working, the element of supporting the business and helping turn strategy into action remain important aspects. "Partnership" implies working alongside, equal responsibility and shared skills and expertise, supporting clients within the business, including providing an expert perspective when appropriate. Armstrong and Taylor (2017, p. 26) claim that HR business partners work alongside their line manager colleagues in order to develop and implement the HR agenda which contributes to achieving the business goals of an organization or function.

Figure 2 presents the formula for shaping HR function in project-oriented organizations. The Author modeled the formula on an integrative approach which summarizes the main contributions of the universalistic, contingency, configurational and contextual approach and builds them into one model (for more see: Martín-Alcázar et al, 2005, pp. 633-659).

Company general policy is concerned with overall directions (mission and vision) that an organization will follow. This policy implies company strategy. This is the question about which lines of business a company will choose to be engaged in. Corporate-level issues concern the geographical scope of the business, the products and services offered, the methods used to grow the business and how resources are allocated in the organization (Johnson et al, 2014). At this point it is worth pointing out that a project-oriented approach is the method for achieving company goals. HR specialists' task, at the stage of project-oriented approach implementation, is to provide the Board with information about the project specific competencies presented by employees and the characteristics of organizational culture. An organization culture represents the basic factor in fulfilling its mission and carrying out its strategy, in improving its organizational efficiency and in managing changes. Based on the conducted research Morrison, Brown and Smit (2008, p. 35) found that if organizational culture is excessively bureaucratic and internally concentrated, it is difficult to achieve the expected project results.

HR strategy is one of the functional strategies, which reflects the general philosophy of senior management with regard approaching people and addresses various activities related to their management. The underlying premise here is that the HR function supports company goals by developing and implementing HR practices that engage employees and encourage them to direct their efforts towards the achievement of the organization's goals (Foot et al, 2016, pp. 126-127). All functional strategies (e.g. marketing, research and development, HR) should be coherent and support each other. HR specialists' task is to verify and, if necessary, change the HR strategy in order to support the goals followed by an organization. Costs and time needed to ensure competent people working on projects in an organization should be estimated (e.g. external recruitment of project managers, or trainings for employees).
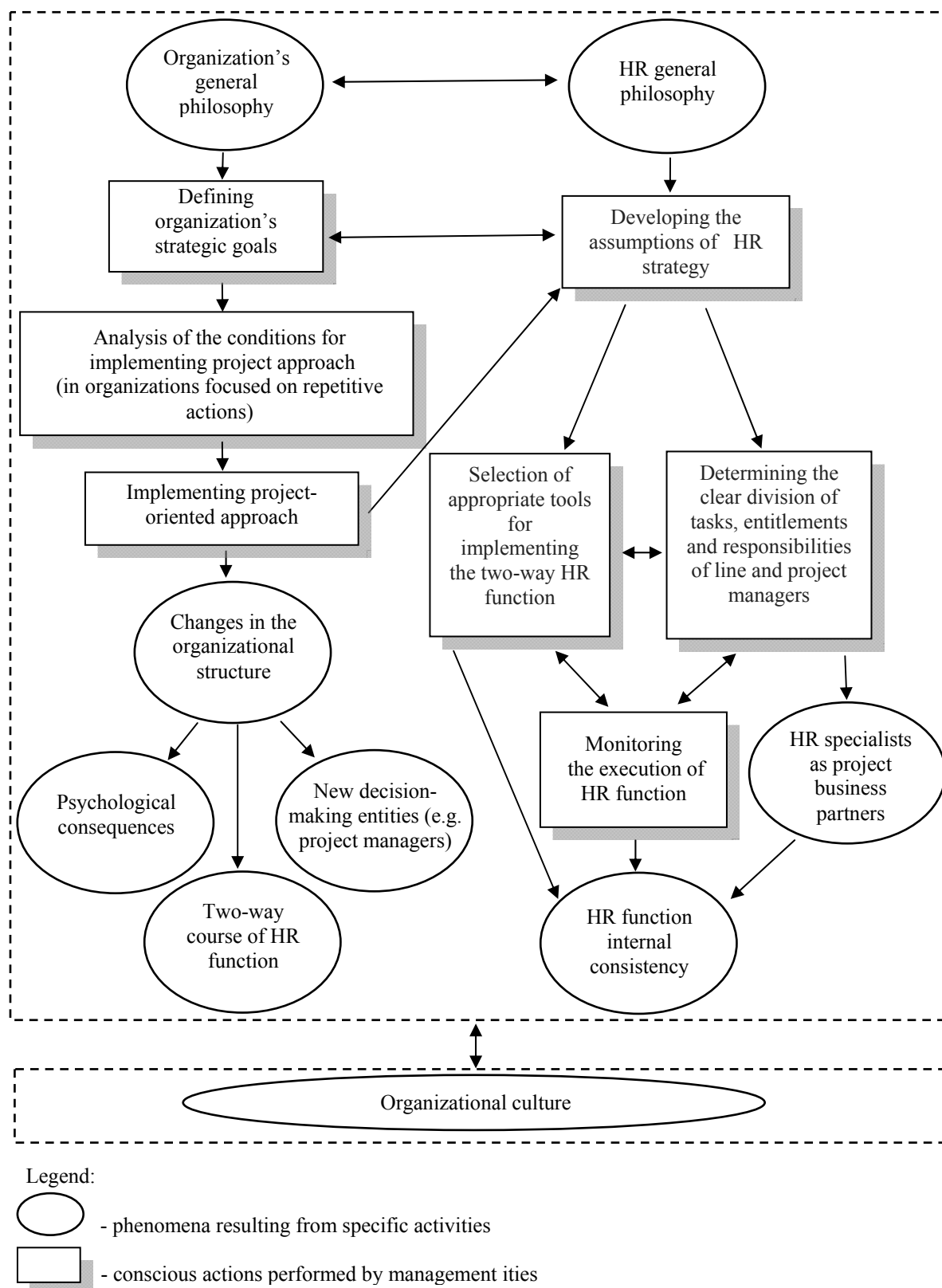
Figure 2: The formula for HR function forming in project-oriented organizations

Source: Author's research project

HR specialists' tasks in a project-oriented organization cover as follows:

- adjusting the tools for HR function implementation to the specificity of project management activities and developing transparent regulations referring to project-oriented work (e.g. project team members recruitment, or the rewarding system for work in a project),
- defining, along with the remaining decision making entities, i.e. at least with the Board, functional units' managers and project managers, the desirable division of entitlements related to HR function.

As mentioned before, in every enterprise which implements management by projects, the level of HR function complexity is increasing. HR function development is significantly influenced by "new" entities – absent in traditional organizations – e.g. project managers, steering committees or project management offices. HR department staff should decide, along with other decision making entities, i.e. at least with the Board, line managers and project managers, the desirable division of entitlements related to HR function. Such approach – aimed at the integration of interests presented by the indicated groups of decision making entities – has not been, as yet, presented in the subject literature discussing project management problems. In turn, in the publications on human resources management, where the attention is primarily focused on traditional organizations, the entities specific for project management area remain unnoticed. Thus, at this point it should be emphasized that project-oriented activity and repetitive activity do overlap. It is about developing such solutions which do not create the sense of injustice in people who work in an organization.

HR specialists' task is to ensure proper communication regarding the developed tasks of HR function implementation and support in solving social nature problems. Such problems may occur because – as figure 2 indicates – the implementation of project-oriented approach, particularly in the organizations so far performing repetitive activities, can have consequences of psychological nature. According to the research results conducted by Chiocchio et al. (2010, p. 208), traditional organization workers are characterized – as a result of project-oriented approach implementation – by worse mental condition, as compared to the employees of organizations predominantly focused on carrying out projects. Moreover, Asquin, Garel and Picq (2010, p. 166) have correctly observed that the nature of modern flexible work – so characteristic for project team members – can have highly adverse effect on a worker and even result in addiction to various drugs, in occupational diseases, accidents at work and in consequence the increase of absenteeism.

The major task of HR business partner, at the stage of maintaining and developing project-oriented approach is to monitor the "two-way" consistency of HR function (i.e. the activities performed in relation to employees working within the company permanent structure and activities addressed to project team members), analyzing employee attitudes related to project approach implementation in an organization as well as raising employees' project awareness, and thus developing the "project-oriented" organizational culture. It is also necessary to monitor periodically the adopted methods for HR function realization. The postulated action at this stage is to involve employees by allowing them to comment on the results of their actions. It is also about identifying workers' attitudes associated with project-oriented work.

Figure 2 presents the option of structuring HR specialists' role in a project-oriented organization. The formal role of HR business partner in particular projects is required. His tasks would be corresponding to those of HR business partners in multi-entity or geographically dispersed enterprises, i.e. ensuring the consistency of HR practices across the organization.

According to the conducted research, project managers do not benefit from the support of HR specialists, because they do not value highly their competences in project management. The transition from operational role to HR business partner is a difficult one. HR department in an organization is responsible for the development of others. Therefore, its staff should see the relationship between the effects of work resulting from the components of human capital and the outcome of projects. Hence, due care should be taken to ensure that HR staff actually presents adequate competencies and if they do not, efforts should be taken to support them in obtaining such competencies. In case of the analyzed example it refers to combining knowledge and project management (including team management) with the knowledge about HR function implementation. It is becoming increasingly important to gain practical experience, understood as the participation in projects prior to taking up the role of HR business partner. It is about active work in HR

projects and involvement in other projects implemented by an organization – even as an observer at an initial stage.

5.   Conclusions

Nowadays such factors as rapid changes in the environment require a project-oriented approach and flexible organizational structures, including matrix ones. Such situation is implied by the two-way course of HR function. This particular function, in accordance with the theory of management and empirical studies presented in the article, has to remain internally consistent. Such consistency should be analyzed in terms of practices applied in the area of each functional course and with regard to mutual relationships between both HR function courses. Moreover, the conducted empirical research leads to the conclusion that the general HR function is characterized by higher consistency than the project-oriented one. The analyzed organizations revealed numerous consistency gaps between the two HR function courses.

Having the application-oriented objectives in mind, an attempt was made, in the final part of the article, to present the desired role of HR practitioners. Such specialists can become strategic partners for the entire organization and take the role of dedicated partners in particular projects (which take the form of specific micro-organizations). This solution could ensure higher consistency of the activities undertaken within the framework of both HR function courses.

The problems occurring while implementing the project-oriented approach represent a relatively new area within the scope of management sciences and still remain only fragmentarily researched but, at the same time, their importance is increasing. The deficit of research implies the absence of theoretical basis for management practitioners. Thus, investigating opportunities for increasing the project-oriented organizations' efficiency, through HR function changes represents an important, continuously up-to-date subject matter, requiring further in-depth analyses. The practical significance of this research project consists in supplying HR practitioners and those involved in project management with information in how many dimensions the HR function should be analyzed and how its particular components should be arranged to facilitate an effective project implementation and increase the effectiveness of the entire organization.

The Author hopes that the publication will contribute to higher professionalism of the activities related to managing people in the analyzed organizations and will remain an inspiration for further empirical research. The organizational structures in current enterprises are more and more complicated. There are organizations which also implement the so-called process-oriented approach and process manager positions. If permanent units (departments) coexist not only with projects (project teams) but also with well-described and formalized cross-functional processes, the complexity of HR function shall increase even more. Today this issue seems to be an interesting research problem. Increasing the consistency of HR function in such conditions is the next challenge for HR practitioners.

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