

# Professionalization Processes of College Human Resource Graduates Working in the Israeli Geographic and Economic Periphery

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## Abstract.

Constant transformations have led to significant changes in the concept of professionalism. The professionalization processes of young human resource (HR) practitioners have drawn limited scholarly attention. This study explores contemporary professionalization processes undergone by college human resource graduates working in the Israeli geographic and economic periphery. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 young HR college graduates. The participants identified a significant gap between their academic knowledge and the daily practices they are expected to perform as HR practitioners. Furthermore, they are confronted by three obstacles that impede their professional advancement. First, due to the heterogeneity of the HR occupation, young HR graduates are exposed to conflicting practices and concepts daily. Second, employers in the periphery discourage young HR practitioners from investing resources in their professionalism. Finally, digitalization has also negatively affected the professionalization of HR practices. In sum, the participants in this study expressed disappointment with their professionalization processes within firms in the periphery, particularly in comparison to professionalization processes offered to HR practitioners in the center. In sum, the gap between the center and periphery, coupled with the gap between academia and HR practice, threatens the professional advancement of underprivileged young adults in the Israeli periphery. Practical implications are offered.

**Keywords:** college graduates, professionalization processes, human resource management

## 1. Introduction

We live in what has been termed a postindustrial society (Bell, 1973). This concept refers to the centrality of expert labor, the importance of knowledge as a factor of production, and the dematerialization of professional services (Bellini & Maestriperi, 2018). Parding et al. (2021) argued that the transformation towards a postindustrial society has impacted the composition of professional groups, the relations between different professional groups, and the role of professionals in society. The long-established “social contract” between professionals and society, which implied high rewards in exchange for the monopolistic exercise of functions of great significance to society, has been breached due to the digitalization, tertiarization and precarization of work (Parding et al., 2021). These recent transformations call for contemporary explorations of professionalization processes undergone by young higher education graduates entering occupational domains.

### **1.1 The changing concept of professionalism**

Constant transformations have led to significant changes in the concept of professionalism (Beckert, 2010; Bellini & Maestripieri, 2018; Dent et al., 2016; Evetts, 2003, 2006, 2011; Ingellis & Estaban, 2021). Parding et al. (2021) argued that the digitization, tertiarization and precarization of work have affected professionalism. Digitalization has changed how expert knowledge is produced and conveyed, affecting the capacity of professional groups to control labor markets as well as their relationships with clients (Susskind & Susskind, 2015). For example, digital platforms have gained dominance as providers of professional services, a development that has affected the autonomy and firm-dependence of professionals (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017). Tertiarization has changed the workforce structure due to the increase in the stock of intellectual workers as well as in the diversity of professionals (in terms including gender, age and class) (Parding et al., 2021). Finally, the precarization of work has been associated with a general deterioration of working conditions (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017; Pacchi & Mariotti, 2021).

### **1.2 Differentiation and heterogeneity among professions and professionals**

Parding et al. (2021) claimed that differentiation processes have resulted in increasing heterogeneity among professions and professionals. Differentiation is analyzed by three interrelated dimensions, labelled as within, between and beyond (Bellini & Maestripieri, 2018). The “within” dimension of differentiation concerns the increasing distance that separates the constitutive components of a profession, focusing on the processes that differentiate professional groups internally. The “between” dimension of differentiation concerns the geographies of professional groups, focusing on the institutional factors that increase the distance between professional groups. The “beyond” dimension of differentiation concerns how professional groups influence the trajectories of differentiation and define professionals’ public role (Bellini & Maestripieri, 2018). In sum, differentiation processes have changed structural positions, employment situations, and working conditions, leading to increasing heterogeneity among professions and professionals (Parding et al., 2021). This heterogeneity is so significant that Parding et al. (2021, p. 2) aptly concluded that “while the number of those defining themselves as professionals today is greater than ever, a growing proportion of expert labour is situated outside acknowledged models of professionalism.”

### **1.3 Human resource management as an occupational domain**

The occupational domain of human resource (HR) management has been undergoing continuous professionalization processing, particularly with the aim of becoming more evidence-based (Rousseau & Barends, 2011). Evidence-based practice has to do with making decisions, especially consequential or recurring ones, using practices supported by high-quality research. In many countries, there are no regulatory requirements regarding the knowledge or credentials required to become an HR practitioner. Consequently, the importance of high-quality research is less acknowledged by some HR practitioners, and the occupational domain of HR is highly heterogenic (Rousseau & Barends, 2011).

### **1.4 The research context: Human resource management in the Israeli labor market**

The Israeli labor market provides a fascinating setting for exploring the professionalization processes undergone by young college graduates entering occupational domains. As in other countries, in Israel there are no regulatory requirements regarding the education or

knowledge required to become an HR practitioner. This occupation is therefore open also to those with no degree or relevant education. In addition, HR management operates in a highly competitive labor market, in which growing neoliberalism has intensified income inequalities (Mundlak, 2017). Neoliberal pressures also exacerbate the workload of HR managers and practitioners and thus may prevent them from engaging in individual and group professional advancement efforts. Despite their importance, the professionalization processes of young HR practitioners have drawn limited scholarly attention. Considering the impact of professionalization processes on the prospective professionalization of the HR occupation as a whole, the purpose of this ethnographic research is to explore the experiences of young college graduates working in the field of HR in the periphery of Israel.

In the following section, the methodological approach is specified. Then the findings are presented. In the final section, the findings are discussed and practical implications are offered.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Sample**

The participants in this study were 16 (10 women, 6 men) college graduates holding a bachelor's degree in human resource management. All of them had graduated from a college in the southern periphery of Israel, where they live and work for local firms. The participants responded to a written invitation regarding the research that was sent by email to a group of 50 former students of the author. Their average age was 32, and 75% of them were married. Their average tenure as HR practitioners was 4 years. All of them have expressed their aspiration to remain occupied in the HR field and advance their professionalism.

### **2.2 Data Collection**

In-depth semi-structured interviews were utilized to facilitate participants' descriptions of their work and professionalization experiences. The author conducted the interviews individually with each participant. The interviews lasted about 70 minutes on average. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. All interviewees gave their informed consent to participating in the study and were assured confidentiality.

### **2.3 Data Analysis**

The next phase, thematic content analysis, was guided by Creswell and Poth (2017). In the first round, the author coded each interview, assigning codes to units of several sentences. The resulting initial codes, such as professionalization challenges, HR managers, daily tasks, and more, were then sorted into coded categories. As major systematic content themes emerged, further analysis was employed to narrow down the categories. The final stage involved analyzing the interactions between the different themes and their meanings. This systematic process continued until the data was analyzed thoroughly.

## **3. Findings**

### **3.1 Graduates' identification of the gap between academic HR knowledge and daily HR practices**

The young HR practitioners in this study identified a significant gap between what they had been taught in academia about human resource management and the daily practices that they were taught and expected to perform as HR practitioners. For example, HR managers use

unstructured interviews to try to assess a job candidate's fit, even though there is little evidence that typical interviews can do that. In the same vein, HR managers utilize selection tools that have long been established as nonvalid, such as graphology, because they are cheap and fast. Furthermore, HR departments often pursue strict standardization in their policies, despite evidence that flexibility benefits employers and employees alike. The participants in this study reported that their superiors in HR departments often encourage them "to forget what they were taught in academia but rather focus on how things are really done in the business world."

### **3.2 The obstacles to HR professionalism in firms in the periphery**

The participants in this study described three main obstacles that impede HR professionalism for those working in firms in the periphery. First, they reported that their superiors in HR departments have no single credential that authorizes their expertise. There is a wide heterogeneity of HR practitioners and managers both within and between HR departments. Young HR graduates are therefore exposed to conflicting practices and concepts daily, depending on the background of their superiors and the task at hand. This creates confusion as well as a lack of professional coherence.

Second, economic pressures exacerbate the workload of HR practitioners and managers. Consequently, young HR practitioners have less time to engage in continuous professional advancement efforts, such as learning in HR workshops and conventions. The latter are typically held in the center of the country and therefore demand taking a day off work and commuting, not to mention paying admission fees. Most firms in the periphery do not enable their young HR practitioners to attend such events, nor do they encourage them to invest resources in acquiring a master's degree in HR.

Third, the participants report that digitalization has also negatively affected the professionalization of HR practices. For example, HR managers encourage practitioners in their departments to utilize available digital information (e.g., free websites), which often turns out to be unreliable or misleading.

In sum, the participants in this study expressed disappointment with their professionalization processes within firms in the periphery. They claimed that their colleagues employed in HR departments in firms in the center of Israel undergo better professionalization processes thanks to the prominent HR professionals employed in these firms. The participants have learnt from their colleagues that their superiors invest in their professional advancement (e.g., encourage them to become more evidence-based and invest in professional activities). The gap between the center and the periphery, coupled with the gap between academia and daily HR practice, threatens the professional advancement of young HR graduates in the Israeli periphery.

## **4. Discussion**

Professions and professionalism have witnessed a transformation of what "being a professional" means (Ingellis & Estaban, 2021; Maestriperieri, 2021). The occupational domain of human resource (HR) management, which is open to all practitioners regardless of their credentials, has been undergoing constant professionalization processes, particularly with the aim of becoming more evidence-based (Rousseau & Barends, 2011).

Despite their importance, the professionalization processes of young HR graduates have drawn limited scholarly attention. Through the analysis of semi-structured interviews with a sample of college HR graduates, this study aimed to explore their professionalization

processes in the HR occupation. The findings indicate that HR practitioners employed in the Israeli geographic and economic periphery confront obstacles that may hamper their professionalization. These findings echo prior evidence in regard to the significant gaps between academic knowledge and the practitioner knowledge base (Rousseau & Barends, 2011; Rynes et al., 2007). Furthermore, the study's findings illustrate the increasing heterogeneity among professionals (Parding et al., 2021). Considering that the career advancement of young adults in contemporary labor markets is also dependent on their professionalism, these findings have implications for both the HR occupation and professional domains undergoing differentiation (Parding et al., 2021).

While the findings of this study do not pertain to the Covid-19 pandemic, insofar as the pandemic is still affecting labor markets and workers globally, it is also expected to impact professionals and professionalism. It is possible that the pandemic will affect the capacity of professionals to secure their sources of income, and the capacity of relatively new occupations, such as HR, to successfully professionalize. Such changes may trigger tensions threatening the professional image of practitioners in new occupational settings (e.g., Bourgoin & Harvey, 2018). Considering the significant impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable segments of societies, such as the low-income classes (Maestriperi, 2021), it is vital to understand the pandemic's threat particularly to young underprivileged adults aspiring to advance their careers.

Practical implications are offered. The findings shed light on the role of academic institutions in preparing their graduates to confront foreseen obstacles in professionalization processes in the labor market. In addition, human resource management, which has played a significant role during Covid-19 (Collings et al., 2021), should actively advance opportunities for the professionalization of its young practitioners.

#### **4.1 Limitations and suggestions for future research**

This exploratory qualitative study has some limitations. First, it was based on a relatively small sample of college graduates in a specific occupational domain. Second, it focused on the perceptions of young practitioners and did not obtain data from other sources, such as managers and employers.

Future research may overcome the limitations of this study and delve further into the transformations undergone in the field of professional work. For example, which factors may foster graduates' successful professional advancement in HR? It would also be fascinating to explore how the pandemic will affect the public role of the HR occupation in the post-Covid-19 era. It is my hope that prospective research will endeavor to provide scholarly insights.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study explored contemporary professionalization processes undergone by college human resource graduates working in the Israeli periphery. In sum, the gap between the center and the periphery, coupled with the gap between academia and HR practice, threatens the professional advancement of underprivileged young adults in the Israeli periphery.

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