

Evolving Role of Hr: A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

The rate at which technology is changing is tremendous. Technological disruptions like automation, chat bots, mobile applications and virtual reality are the drivers of this change. The HR has evolved dramatically in response to these technological disruptions. With the fourth wave of disruption happening human resource's role from business partner is now tilting towards a strategic partner by technology drivers. The competencies required by an HR are also changing with evolving role.

The study is done (i) to identify the drivers that are changing the role of HR; (ii) to outline the major competencies essential to the role of HR in future and (iii) to assess the impact of the evolving role of HR on organizations. A systematic review of literature has recognized the presence of five themes i.e. the role of HR in the past and present, technological disruptions, the process of change, competencies of future and impact on organisations. A qualitative research was conducted in which an in-depth study of 30 HR professionals of 5 sectors is done with the use of semi-structured interview approach. Thematic Analysis was used for analysis of qualitative data and for drawing conclusions.

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1. Introduction

In any organisation there is Human resource department for managing all the activities of the employee right from hiring an employee to terminating the employee in an organisation. The rate at which technology is changing is tremendous. With the change in technology, the HR has evolved dramatically as well in response to external conditions. HR's role from its longest running administrative and clerical has over the years shifted to business partner and now is shaping up to be a strategic partner by technology drivers. The competencies required by an HR are also changing with evolving role. Technological

disruptions like Automation, chat bots, mobile applications and virtual reality are the drivers of this change (Cascio, 2005). Technology the main change driver is not only changing HR role but also helping HR to keep up with the change, thus bringing order to this change. This gives HR the chance to close the gaps between individuals, technology and organisation (Richard M. Vosburgh, 2007).

The present paper deals with evolution of HR role in detail affirming the questions based on objectives of the study on the following aspects namely- Which are the drivers bringing in the change? What are the competencies essential to

the role of HR? How will the change in role of HR affect the organisation?(Madhvapaty& Rajesh, 2018) For the answering of these questions we have arranged this paper as follows: first, we have presented the systematic review methodology details and result of reviews; second, we have reported the methodological approaches third, we have identified research themes, have summarised research in every one of it and conclude by explaining impact of the changing and ever evolving role of HR.

2. Systematic review of Literature

Table 1. Database search in the first round

Database	Search and scope	First round	
		Search date	No. of items
Google Scholar	Search:	20-01-19	32
	Journals Abstracts		
Ebscohost	Search:	22-01-19	23
	Journals		
Scopus	Search:	24-01-19	19
	Journals Abstracts		
Total			74

Vast quantities of research can be analyzed, summarised and communicated by using the tool of systematic review. Systematic reviews bring together a vast number of studies conducted which may have conflicting findings and ultimately synthesises the results (Green, S., 2005).

Systematic reviews are also referred to as overviews. Systematic reviews aim to identify and track all the literature available on given topic. Systematic review analyzes all given studies on a given topic, draw conclusions based on evidence so that a through overview of knowledge can be presented.

2.1 Scope of review

The scope review consists of two sets criteria pertaining to form and content. In case of criteria, this research paper includes academic journals, also known as ‘certified knowledge’ as it is going through critical review by fellow researches. It doesn’t include book chapters and articles of non academic articles, consist of articles of magazine, interviews, editorials and viewpoints. The content of this paper focuses on the evolving role of HR due to technological disruptions and its impact on the organisation.

2.2. Identification of relevant literature

The literature identification process and review was conducted in first phases in March 2019 In this phase, we searched for keywords ‘HR’, ‘impact on organisation’, ‘technology disruptions’ ‘changing role’, in three databases: Scopus, Google scholar and Ebsco host. These databases were selected based on their relevance in business and management researches and the quality of the content they provide. This first round of search provided us with 100 results in April 2018 (Table 1). The coding of the 100 extracted articles was done by the author. The extracted information includes the title of articles, years of publication, author, journal, databases and document type. From it, 20 duplicate articles were eliminated, that resulted in an initial sampling of 74 articles. The author read the abstracts of all 74 articles separately to do the verification of their relevance to the research. This screening was done to ensure the content of the research to be included is relevant. The two investigators jointly reviewed all the articles and a final agreement was made. 6 articles in total being non-academic were excluded or off-topic. The screening resulted in a total of 74 articles. Then the articles were in depth examined, read and based on relevance were included in the content.

3. Objectives of the study

Three objectives were formulated to conduct this study-

3.1 To identify the drivers that are changing the role of HR

This objective entails finding out all the drivers and reasons behind the continuously evolving role of HR and the degree to which each driver is bringing the change.

3.2 To outline the major competencies essential to the role of HR in future

This objective entails finding out the competencies that will be required by a future HR professional in order to sustain. Also to identify how certain competencies will help HR function in future.

3.3 To assess the impact of the evolving role of HR on organizations

This objective entails finding out the effect that the ever evolving role of HR has had on organizations and how further it will impact it. Also to what degree will organizations be affected by this changing role of HR.

4. Methodology Used- Methodological Review Approach

This methodological review has used the methods to research the evolving HR role and its impact on organisations as well as the procedures used in the review of literature as well. In terms of methodological approaches, it includes (a) qualitative research using interviews of HR professionals especially of those undergoing a change in their roles and (b) reflective essays, taken from various articles. A semi-structured questionnaire was designed including both open ended and close ended questions. This questionnaire was used to conduct in depth interviews of 30 HR professionals. These

interviews were then transcribed and analyzed to find out the common points which became the theme for this research paper and interactive relationships that existed among the variables were also studied. The qualitative methods were used in 50.09% papers (n=37) Reflective essays were used in 50.0% (n=37). This methodological division can be attributed to the various interviews included and analysis done. The use of qualitative and reflective essays in majority is because of the topic's analytical nature. This methodological review will show the impact of evolving role of HR on organisation (Pooja, 2018).

5. Results

The qualitative study conducted with in-depth interviews with HR professionals involved a semi-structured questionnaire with 15 questions. The interviewees belonged to different sectors like IT, Consulting, Manufacturing and Educational. However most of the interviewees belonged to the IT sector and consulting sector. Most of the interviewees responded in favour of strategic role when asked what role HR plays in their organisation. Maximum of the interviewees agreed that technology was the most responsible driver in bringing about the change. Regarding the functions of HR that were affected by the change, the interviewees were of the view that almost all HR functions were affected. When the interviewees were asked about the competencies that they look for in an HR currently maximum responses indicated leadership and analytical skills. When the interviewees were asked what competencies a future HR should possess, most of them listed technological skills, change management, flexibility and strategic bend of mind as the potential competencies. Most of the interviews agreed that the changing role of HR will impact the organisation by formulating strategies and working on virtual mediums.

Content Analysis-A Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis technique used here is Content Analysis. The content of all responses is analysed at great length. Thematic Analysis and Relational Analysis, both types of Content Analysis, are used to analyse content and reach at meaningful observations and conclusions.

(I) Thematic Analysis

Table 2: Showing Themes and Subthemes

Table 1 Main Theses and Sub-Themes		IT Sector	BFSI Sector	Media sector	Education sector	Consulting
Role of HR	Administrative role			1	1	
	Consulting Role	1	1			1
	Strategic Role	1	1	1		1
Potential drivers of change	AI	1	1	1		1
	Analytics	1	1		1	1
	Virtual Reality			1		
	Globalisation	1	1	1	1	1
	Internationalization	1	1			1
Change Process	Fundamental change- Culture, Identity	1				1
	Adapting/Implementing change	1	1	1	1	1
Competencies for future HR	Analytical skills	1	1			1
	Leadership	1		1	1	1
	Strategist	1	1	1	1	1
	Technological skills					
Impact on organisation	More technically inclined	1	1	1	1	1
	HR's business partner role	1				1
	All processes will change	1	1	1		1

Source: Researchers' depiction

The table show the sub-themes of 'Evolving role of HR' selected by the HR professionals across sectors who participated in this study.

'Strategic role' of HR is recognized as an important evolving role of HR by IT, BFSI, Media and Consulting sector; 'consulting role' by IT, BFSI and Consulting sectors and 'Administrative role' by Media and Education sectors.

'Potential drivers of change' have been identified as 'globalization' by IT, BFSI, Media, Education and Consulting; 'AI' by IT, BFSI, Media and Consulting; 'Analytics' by IT, BFSI, Media and Consulting; 'Internationalization' by IT, BFSI and Consulting; and 'Virtual Reality' by Media sector.

Under the theme of 'managing change process', 'adapting and implementing change' emerged as an important evolving role of HR in IT, BFSI, Media, Education and Consulting sectors; while 'managing fundamental change process/culture/identity' emerged as an important evolving role of HR in IT and Consulting sectors.

Under the theme of 'competencies required for future', 'being a strategist' is chosen by IT, BFSI, Media, Education and Consulting sectors; 'leadership' by IT, Education, Media and Consulting; and 'analytical skills' by IT, BFSI and Consulting. 'Technological skills' are not at all chosen.

'Impact on organization' has been observed as 'more technically inclined' by IT, BFSI, Media, Education and Consulting sectors; 'All processes will change in future' by IT, BFSI, Media and Consulting; and 'HR's business partner role' by IT and Consulting.

(II) Relational Analysis

Relationships among the variables were further studied with respect to 'Evolving role of HR' based on the responses received in IT, Consulting and BFSI sectors as the respondents weighed HR's role quite heavily in these three sectors.

IT and Consulting Sectors- IT and Consulting both of these sectors are observed placing more emphasis on consulting and strategic roles of HR as IT and Consulting both are growing fast and are on the path to carve the future of business Here, the HR professionals realize HR's importance as a business-partner (strategic and consulting roles) rather than simply doing administrative role. AI and Analytics are the major drivers of change as the future of business can be written only with simple yet precise technology. Globalization and Internationalization are observed changing the face of the IT and Consulting industry as the industry has to flourish in the present business environment. The IT and Consulting both sectors

are initiating as well adapting to changes as they cannot ignore the change processes happening be it blue or red ocean. The focus of both sectors is on strategic and leadership skills as a futuristic approach rather than technical skills. The reason probably can be understood as easy-grasp of technological skills and rarity of strategic and leadership skills. These sectors also felt that HR's role will become more technically inclined, that of a business-partner and all processes will change over time.

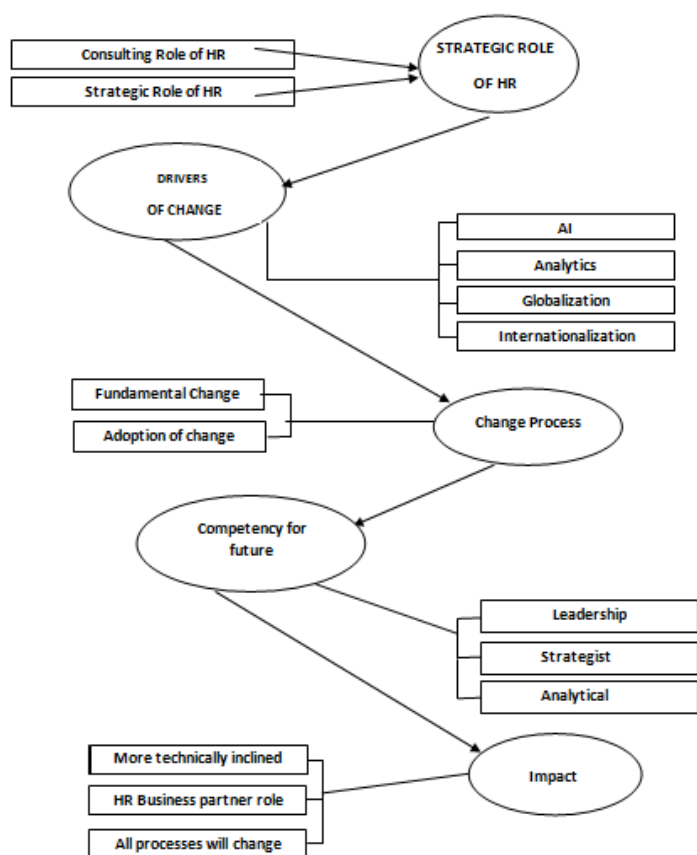


Figure 1: Model of Evolving Role of HR for IT and Consulting Sectors

BFSI Sector

BFSI Sector was found to be placing more emphasis on consulting and strategic roles of HR as the BFSI Sector is growing fast and will be the future of business Here, the HR professionals realize HR's importance as a business-partner (strategic and consulting roles) rather than doing administrative role only. AI and Analytics are the

major drivers of change as the future of business, financial services and insurance can be written only with simple yet precise technology. Globalization and Internationalization are observed changing the face of the business, financial services and insurance as the industry has to flourish in the present business environment. The sector is observed as adapting to changes in the business, financial services and insurance rather than initiating change. The reason seems to be adaptive nature of this sector whereby the business, financial services and insurance are adapting to the needs of the customer. The industry's focus is on leadership and technological skills as a futuristic approach rather than strategist's approach. The reason can be understood as the industry does not seem to perceive a strategist's role for HR because of willing customers and so the industry does not seem to recognize a business-partner's role for HR too.

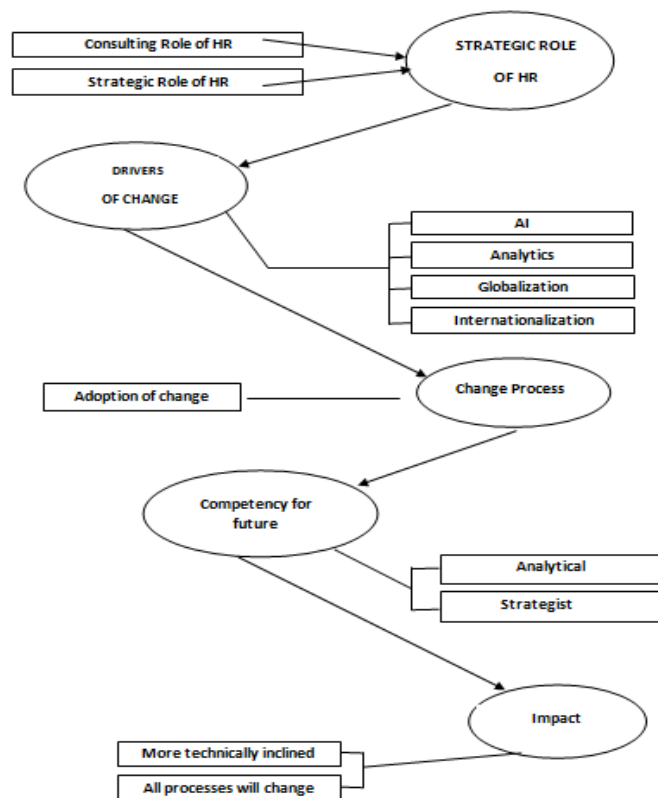


Figure 2: Model of Evolving Role of HR for BFSI sector

6. Discussion

Deriving from the reviewed literature as well as the qualitative study conducted the author identified five major themes that emerged. The in depth interviews were transcribed and analyzed extensively to find out these reoccurring themes. Also the 61 research articles were thoroughly read through as a result of which these themes were decided upon- Role of HR (Evolution), Potential drivers of change, Change process, Competencies for future HR and impact on organisation. These five themes have then been studied in detail.

6.1 Role of HR- Evolution

HR as a profession has been evolving continuously over the past 100 years and in doing so adding more responsibilities (Walker, 2001). The longest running role played by an HR has been clerical and administrative role, often involving legal work as well. For the last few decades the HR has moved to its second role i.e. the business partner. This role demands an HR to implement HR services and practices that comply with the business model of the organisation and satisfy the demands of managers and employees (UNCTAD, 2017). The last decade however has seen HR shifting towards a new role (3rd role) i.e. Strategic Partner (Lawler & Boudreau, 2009). This role gives HR a chance to be a key member of senior management, be a part of critical decisions also formulate strategies that impact the organisation and Implementation of business model of organisation (Lawler *et al.*, 2006). These roles can also be seen corresponding and reflecting compliance, services and decisions, respectively in what they deliver as a function (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007). The perception of HR as a Strategic Partner is increasing as it is supported by the fact that human capital and how it is managed affects organisation's effectiveness (Truss & Gill, 2009). There is enough evidence to show that the human capital and how it is recruited, trained, appraised and managed

ultimately affects the organization (Huselid, 1995; Lawler *et al.*, 2001; Combs *et al.*, 2006). The HR leaders can thus make significant contributions to development of strategies as well as improve the decision making and its quality in an organization (Farndale *et al.*, 2010)

6.2 Potential drivers of change

It has been observed that internationalization as well as globalization is changing how HR functions but these are not the sole drivers of change. Infact Technology is the main driver of change. (Saumya Bhattacharya, 2018). Digitization, growth by acquisitions, labour shortages, downsizing, expansion and demographics of workforce are few trends that have and are making talent a priority (Lawler & Mohrman, 2003; Frank & Taylor, 2004). The traditional approaches to managing the workforce is now being viewed as outdated due to ever changing structures of governance and ever increasing financial pressures (Massey & Pyper, 2005; Bach & Della Rocca, 2000; Jaconelli & Sheffield, 2000; Ferlie *et al.*, 1996; Lupton & Shaw, 2001). The public sector HR departments previously focused on administration and welfare of employees which comprised of the lower two quadrants of Ulrich (1998) model of HR role. However now the importance is on how HR is shifting towards the upper two quadrants of the model to perform role of strategic partner and change agent (Boyne *et al.*, 1999).

Automation as well as other technology driven processes not only reduce cost and cycle time but also improve quality (Schwarz Müller *et al.*, 2018). Technology is making information easily accessible and joining people electronically together which is impacting organisations and work relationships (Prensky, 2001; Shrivastava, and Shaw, 2003). Information systems (IS) are further helping HR to make and implement strategic decisions which will impact organisation (Thite, 2004). Globalization is making

HR see and act beyond local boundaries. With changing times a knowledge based workforce would choose to work in an organisation by choice and not by obligation, even if paid equal or less (Tursunbayeva, A. 2019; Bersin, 2017). Turning this workforce knowledge into productivity and leveraging intellectual capital will become workforce challenges of the future.

6.3 Change process

Change happens at two levels. First - Fundamental change which means changing identity and culture. Firms like Sears, General Motors, IBM which have for decades had a particular identity may find that they fail to create customer value by their traditional culture, as before and are thus in middle of fundamental or identity change (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich, 2008). Fundamental cultural change would affect almost all sectors from Universities learning to serve all students and become inclusive to government agencies becoming more service oriented and responsive to airlines demonstrating customer loyalty (Sahdev *et al.*, 1999).

Second, phase is capacity for change which means reacting and adapting to what is happening around us (Rogers E.M., 2003). Like reducing cycle time for business decisions has now become a demand for HR professionals as a part of change (Razouk & Bayad, 2010). All papers indicate that the workforce of today will be very different from workforce of tomorrow and that change outside of HR would demand change within HR and that HR is at crossroads in its ability to deal with this change (Brynjolfsson, E., 2016). Merely knowing the unpredictability and pace of change does not mean that a firm knows how to manage change. Change also redefines what risk means. (Sundararajan, A., 2017). In a low change world reducing risk would mean getting right answers before acting. In a world of high change it would mean acting without getting all answers but having the capability to adjust mid stream

(Graham & Anwar, 2017). Agility is more important than accuracy when it comes to reducing risk (Van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2015).

6.4 Competencies for future HR

HR professionals to sustain human resource function transformation must develop new set of competencies to fit their changing roles and responsibilities (Ashkezari & Aeen, 2012). HR professionals should think of themselves as business people over HR people.

HR professionals in order to be taken seriously when offering insights must be well versed with the operational side of business (Yeung, & Sullivan, 1996). HR professionals have many images that they want to shed, e.g., bureaucrats, policy police, administrators, regulators, etc. HR professionals, in all probability will play multiple roles in an organization depending upon the business context and proclivity of HR. (Barnett & Maddern, 1996)

The functions and setting of HR would evolve in response to organizational change in arrangement and agreement. This will require the HR professional to be more responsive, dynamic and flexible (Kaufman, B. E., 2015). The HR would be required to build the leadership bench by knowing the competencies for the HR leader of the future, both for the top and middle management of organization. The HR practices would have to be crafted to develop leaders who meet tomorrow's needs today. Also the HR implications which support the development of such leaders (Ojanperä *et al.*, 2018). The HR need to learn about how to codify and create aligned organizational capabilities along with individual competencies (Johnson *et al.*, 2016). This can be done by addressing such questions like: What are critical organizational capabilities? How are they changed? How are they created? HR professions must also master the art of knowledge generation via experimentation, benchmarking, continuous

improvement and competence acquisition. Also Knowledge generalization via moving information, skills, decision making and rewards across boundaries in order to take decisions in the organisation (McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2017; Kazlauskaitė & Bučiūnienė, 2008). HR for decades has done good work by designing programmes that processes and people (Truss, C., 2008; Truss & Gill, 2009). However now more stress should be on the deliverables. The deliverables represent the outcome of good work by an HR (World Bank, 2019). The HR professionals must also master the art of benchmarking and not fall into “if they did it “so must we” trap (Frey & Osborne, 2017; Taylor *et al.*, 2017).

Apart from all this to truly become a strategic partner a HR would have to improve decision making. It is also one of the ways it can add significant value to a company (Autor, D. H., 2015). There are a lot of ways this can be achieved. One of ways is to use rules and regulation to improve compliance. Another approach that can be adopted is talent focused approach which would focus on hiring of talent whether internal or external to the HR function with respect to how talent is selected, developed and managed (Dorn, D. H., 2015). HR can also improve by showcasing and giving insights about the connection between strategy and human capital. Also identify the key points where human capital is major contributor to strategy (Horton, J. *et al.*, 2017).

6.5 Impact on organisation

The fourth print (2002) of the Human Resource competency study conducted by the University of Michigan Business School found that 43 percent of HR's impact on business performance came from its strategic contribution (Pulyaeva *et al.*, 2019 March; Gordon, R. J. (2014). Another study conducted by the human resource institute (HRI) found that strategic thinker and Business partner

had become most significant roles of HR professionals in organizations (Thite *et al.*, 2012; International Labour Organization, 2017). The changing role of HR can help the organizations to move away from the inertia and rigidity involved with the routine nature of ERP i.e. enterprise resource planning (Brewster, C., 2006). ERP software applications are a set of integrated database applications or modules that perform the most basic business functions, including HR, accounts payable, general ledger, accounts receivable, inventory control, order management and customer relationship management (Jamrog, J. J., & Overholt, M. H., 2004). HRM's emphasis on human capital stewardship knowledge management and relationship building will provide assistance in the implementation and use of ERPs in organizations (Lengnick Hall & Lengnick Hall, 2006). Hence, involvement of HR is important in the introduction and functioning of ERP so that the organizations can realise the strategic benefits of it (Dery & Wailes, 2005; Ricardo de Souza *et al.*, 2011).

Technological disruptions have changed the way of working (Barley, 2015), in terms of the conditions in which employees work and how they do so (Parker, *et al.*, 2001). Cloud services and mobile devices are effecting the private and work life of employees as it lets them be constantly in touch with work (Mazmanian, 2013). Apart from this, virtual teamwork has replaced the regular teamwork in work spaces (Gilson, *et al.*, 2015), so communication with teammates is through various teleconferencing ways i.e. messengers, chats etc., (Colbert *et al.*, 2016; Haas, *et al.*, 2015).

Furthermore the new changes and development in the land of technology also has affected the leadership in a company. Easy access to any information made available by mobile internet and IT (Oldham & Da Silva, 2015) and instant messaging services and social networks allow for

direct communication with leaders on all organizational levels (Pfeffer, 2013), this leads to dramatic change in the level of power and influence of a leader. Also nowadays the decision making of a leader is also relied upon big data (Van Knippenberg, et al., 2015) instead of basing it on intuition and experience (McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2012). Since work from home is on a rise and so are virtual teams implies that contemporary leaders might need very different skills and behaviours than they did a couple of years ago (Serban *et al.*, 2015).

7. Limitations

There are certain limitations to this research paper. The first being restricted search using key words. Although the combination of all keywords was used to search and the search was meant to be broad and inclusive of all the related articles on the concerned topic and literature but some of them could have been overlooked. The second limitation is bias to certain themes included; the third limitation is the inclusion and exclusion of some articles that deviated from the topic.

8. Directions for future research

There are various recommendations on HR of future and its effect on the organisation. We need to take those recommendations into consideration and draft a model showcasing the competencies of future HR professional. Also quantitative studies could be conducted to take this research forward.

In the field of effectiveness that the changing role will have on organisation we need to identify the role that will be played in particular and how it will impact the employees in the organisation. Most of the organisation's effectiveness depends on the human resources as it involves using of the skills, abilities of the individual (Nawaz M., and Gomes M., 2014).

We could also identify the negative effect of the continuously changing role of HR on organisation

as well as on an HR professional. A survey can be conducted to find out how many organisations are undergoing a change in role of HR and how are they handling it.

9. Conclusion

This research paper on Evolving role of HR encompasses a lot of themes out of which five have been elaborately studied. Although it is very limited in scope, but this paper provides a lot of important insights into how the HR role has evolved and is further changing and what effect it would have on an organization. A qualitative study was done using a semi-structured questionnaire (based on systematic review), which revealed that the organisations are undergoing a change in HR role and are very well adapting to it. It also showed how HR future competencies need to be mapped and worked towards in order to be ready for the Future of work. Thus the study identifies the drivers that are changing the role of HR (Objective 1); outlines the major competencies essential to the role of HR in future (Objective 2); and assesses the impact of the evolving role of HR on organizations (Objective 3).

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