

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

AN INVESTIGATION ON REASONS FOR THE
UNDERDEVELOPMENT OF THE HR FUNCTION IN
LEBANON, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN
INDIGENOUS HR COMPETENCY MODEL

by
ROBINE JOSEPH ABLA

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submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Human Resources Management
to the Suliman S. Olayan School of Business
at the American University of Beirut

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

Robine Joseph Abla for Master of Human Resources Management
Major: Human Resources Management

Title: An Investigation on the Reasons for the Underdevelopment of the HR Function in Lebanon, and the Development of an Indigenous HR Competency Model.

The purpose of this research study is to investigate the reasons for the underdevelopment of the HR function in Lebanon. In addition, this paper aims to identify the competencies that are required by HR professionals in order to successfully operate in Lebanon; hence it aims to create an indigenous HR competency model. In addition to a comprehensive literature review that will tackle the central issue, this field project draws data from 15 structured interviews conducted with HR professionals who hold professional HR qualifications. We believe that the 15 respondents will provide enough insights that will allow for saturation of information since the project is exploratory in nature. Our results show that there are several reasons for the underdevelopment of the HR function in Lebanon which are a result of certain macro characteristics of the country and meso characteristics of organizations. Furthermore, the competency model that was developed appeared to be very-context specific, with a major focus on specific intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies.

CONTENTS

Page

| | |
|-----------------------|----|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | v |
| ABSTRACT | vi |
| ILLUSTRATIONS | ix |
| LIST OF TABLES | x |

Chapter

| | |
|---|----|
| I. Introduction | 1 |
| II. Literature Review | 5 |
| A. A Brief History of HRM | 5 |
| B. HRM competency models | 6 |
| C. HRM in Lebanon..... | 11 |
| D. Factors Contributing to the Underdevelopment of the HR Function in Lebanon.. | 13 |
| III. Research Methodology..... | 17 |
| A. Research Objective..... | 17 |
| B. Research Questions | 17 |
| C. The Sample..... | 18 |
| D. Sampling Methodology..... | 19 |
| E. Data Collection | 20 |
| F. Data Analysis..... | 21 |
| G. Results | 22 |
| H. Section 1: The Reasons for Underdevelopment..... | 22 |
| I. An Indigenous Competency Framework | 35 |

| | |
|--|----|
| 1. HR Knowledge | 37 |
| 2. Intrapersonal Competencies | 38 |
| 3. Interpersonal Competencies | 41 |
| 4. Leadership Competencies..... | 42 |
| 5. Business Competencies | 44 |
| | |
| IV. DISCUSSION | 46 |
| | |
| V. Conclusion and recommendations for further research | 54 |
| | |
| Appendix I: interview protocol | 57 |
| | |
| References..... | 59 |

ILLUSTRATIONS

| | Page |
|----------------------------------|------|
| Figure 1: Competency Model | 36 |

LIST OF TABLES

| | <i>Page</i> |
|---|-------------|
| Table 1: Participants' Demographics | 18 |
| Table 2: Themes derived from template analysis that reflect the reasons of underdevelopment of the HR function in Lebanon | 22 |
| Table 3: Competencies for HR Managers in Lebanon | 36 |

To
My Beloved Family

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the revolution of HR in the 1980's, it has been necessary to enhance the skills of HR professionals in order for them to serve as credible business partners (Ulrich, 2015). Although research has shown that certain skills and experience are essential for a profession in HR (Career Development for HR Professionals, 2008), many people have been able to secure positions within HR in Lebanese organizations without any formal education or professional certification in HRM (Afiouni & Nakhle, forthcoming).

For years, scholars have debated the impact of human resources on an organization's effectiveness and bottom-line (El Bidawi, 2007; Lawler and Mohrman, 2003). At present, we can no longer doubt that HR is a critical function since organizations rely on human capital for success in the marketplace (Career Development for HR Professionals, 2008). Hence, HR professionals must be skilled and qualified if they are to be active in today's competitive environment, and certain competencies are required for a successful career in HR.

The skills that were needed 20 years ago to manage the administrative function are no longer sufficient for an effective HR professional in practice today (Bosch, 2010). Continuous investment in the competencies of HR professionals is vital (Ulrich, 2015). We cannot expect sub-par competent HR practitioners to recruit and develop people for other functions. How can these people develop others if they themselves are not academically qualified and do not possess the necessary skills? It is only natural that organizations become frustrated by ineffective HR professionals,

and thus perceive the HR function as an extraneous one. Moreover, university degrees, as well as professional certifications are vital for HR professionals in order to promote their knowledge and credibility (Career Development for HR Professionals, 2008).

Of particular interest to this study is the identification of the level of professionalism of the HR function in Lebanon. The scarce research that has been done in this field indicates that the HR profession in Lebanon is rather underdeveloped (Dirani, 2006; Ezzedeen and Swiercz, 2001), and a possible cause is the fact that HR positions are regularly filled with employees who have no formal HR education (Afiouni & Nakhle, forthcoming). Education, coupled with robust experience and personal development, is what makes people successful in HR roles (Cohen, 2015); hence people in HR roles who lack the foundations of a successful professional could not possibly be perceived as credible business partners. According to Cohen (2015), “demanding an educational background and experience in HR will signal that HR cannot be done by “anyone” and that credentials are necessary.”

Certainly, the lack of academic qualifications of HR professionals is not the only explanation behind an underdeveloped HR function in Lebanon. This study therefore, with the help of 15 HR professionals who hold academic degrees/professional certifications in HRM, aims to investigate possible reasons for the function’s underdevelopment. Also of interest to this study is identifying the set of competencies that are needed by HR professionals operating in Lebanon. Differences in societal context across different countries influence the nature of HRM (Paauwe & Boselie, 2003). The prevailing universal HR model has its origins in the USA which, according to Dalton (2012), represents western assumptions of

“liberal freedoms and rights, pluralism and a developed civil society, accountability through democracy, and a market economy” which are not well-suited to the fundamental values of the Lebanese culture. We cannot presume that US approaches can be applied in Lebanese settings, therefore each institutional setting demands its own distinctive HR model (Paauwe & Boselie, 2003). While technological improvements have mitigated barriers between countries, and have encouraged a mix of cultures (Cunningham, 2003), it is important to acknowledge the effect of cultural norms on business practices. HRM in any setting is context-specific; hence context plays a key role in shaping HR practices (Afiouni, Karam and Al-Hajj, 2013; Dirani, 2006; Tayeb, 1995).

This project, therefore, is useful and timely as it will provide insight on the level of professionalism of the HR function in Lebanon. Furthermore, while there are professional bodies regulating the HRM profession in the West such as the society of human resource management (SHRM) in the USA and the Chartered Institute of personnel and development (CIPD) in the UK, such professional bodies do not exist in Lebanon. These bodies provide HR professionals with the resources needed to move the professional practice of HRM forward. SHRM has developed the world's largest HR competency model which includes competencies in several domains (Cohen, 2015). Likewise, the CIPD competency map covers ten professional areas and eight behaviors across four bands or across different stages of an HR professional's career (Robinson, 2011). The latter provide standardized models of competencies needed for the success of HR professionals in the west that do not necessarily fit well within the Lebanese context. To date, little is known about what competencies HR managers need to succeed in Lebanon. Hence this study will add

value by also identifying the competencies that are of importance to HR professionals operating in Lebanon, i.e. will offer the foundations of an HR competency model for Lebanon. Unquestionably, the development of HR professionals will drive the field forward (Cohen, 2015).

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. A Brief History of HRM

Initially known as personnel, the HR function has its roots in the Industrial Revolution and the time of Scientific Management (Cohen, 2015). In the late 1800's when factories began to grow in size and production problems increased, manufacturers realized that their existing systems were no longer efficient (Ogilvie and Stork, 2003). As a result, scientific management emerged with new procedures and arrangements to manage the ever-changing production system (Ogilvie and Stork, 2003). As new production systems were implemented, managers (manufacturers) noticed that they also needed administrative support to assist with the increased production (Ogilvie and Stork, 2003).

Administrative support later developed into a centralized planning department that assisted in the creation of policies and procedures, and kept records on production, absences, wage, etc. (Ogilvie and Stork, 2003). As additional responsibilities were allocated to the department, including hiring, the position of "employment clerk" was created (Ogilvie and Stork, 2003).

Although it existed way before, the HR function was formally recognized in the 1800's, when "welfare secretaries" were responsible for supervising the welfare of employees (Cohen, 2015). Welfare workers or secretaries aimed to improve the lives of workers through means that were not directly related to their work, such as providing financial support for housing or education, providing medical assistance, etc. (Ogilvie and Stork, 2003). Employers encouraged welfare work because they

believed that it worked well with scientific management, and like scientific management, it aimed to improve production, although its approach was more discreet (Ogilvie and Stork, 2003).

In the 1980's, factors such as globalization and international competition, employment legislation, demographic changes, and the shift from manufacturing to a service-based economy, transformed the perception of HR from being an administrative function to being an essential business function that could promote organizational success (Ulrich, 2015). As a result, the term personnel management was replaced with human resources (Ulrich, 2015). With the development of corporate structures, and the challenges that organizations faced such as the need to decrease employee turnover and increase productivity, HR continued to mature (Ulrich, 2015).

Recent literature on HRM implies that the HR function is in fact playing a strategic role in many regions around the world, and its impact on organizational performance is apparent (Afiouni et al., 2013). Unlike the past, we now see an increased presence of personnel directors on the boards of organizations (Kelly & Gennard, 1996).

B. HRM competency models

According to El Bidawi (2007) there are several forces that have led to change in the HR function, and HR professionals need to account for these forces if they are to manage effective HR departments. These forces include increased interactions with customers and the need to provide greater stakeholder value, utilization of information technology to enhance business productivity, more and

more mergers and acquisitions that form a convergence across industry boundaries, i.e. the need to leverage an organization's capabilities across several industry boundaries, and the importance of increasing value for investors through "intangibles such as quality of leadership, speed of response, ability to innovate, accountability for results, culture, and talent (El Bidawi, 2007)." Additional forces are globalization, increased emergence of MNCs that require international managers who are capable of "thinking globally" and building a "geocentric orientation" which combines worldwide objectives with local objectives, and finally changes in management which include the establishment of new business functions and thus the creation of new job roles (El Bidawi, 2007).

As the role of HR professionals changes, so do the competencies that are required from them. There is an ever growing need for HR to become a strategic partner and to effectively manage the human capital that will be carrying out the organization's strategy (Lawler and Mohrman, 2003). First and foremost, in order for HR to become a strategic partner, there has to be a change in the skills of those within the function (Lawler and Mohrman, 2003). In fact, extensive research has been done on evaluating what skills, knowledge, and behaviors are needed for HR professionals to succeed in their organizational roles (Cohen, 2015; Ulrich, 2015).

In the past, a degree in HR was not a requirement and experience was often acquired on the job and by chance, therefore the HR profession had little to no barriers to entry since not much was expected of them other than handling personnel issues (Cohen, 2007). A job in HR was perceived as a job that could be handled by anyone; hence many have entered the profession with little or no educational background or experience (Cohen, 2015). Moreover, as a result of the lack of barriers

to entry into the field, the occupation has captivated an extensive range of skills and behaviors (Cohen, 2015).

According to a study conducted by Lawler and Mohrman in 2003, 25% of top HR executives come from functions other than HR, including sales and legal, which indicates that organizations still allocate non-HR executives to head their HR function (Lawler and Mohrman, 2003). It is only natural for organizations to assume that in order for HR to be a strategic partner, it needs to be directed by someone who has extensive knowledge of the business; hence organizations appoint a non-HR executive to head the function (Lawler and Mohrman, 2003). This unfortunately puts a strain on the HR function and the business as a whole since merely knowing the business is not adequate to head the function (Lawler and Mohrman, 2003). For HR to be a strategic business partner, the individual heading the function must also be particularly knowledgeable and experienced in several aspects of HR (Lawler and Mohrman, 2003). Put simply, “HR is more likely to be a strategic partner when the head of HR has an HR background (Lawler and Mohrman, 2003).”

Numerous research has been conducted on the traits of individual HR professionals (Farndale, 2005). According to Meisinger (2005), skills such as business knowledge, effective communication skills, solid interpersonal skills, and proficiency in the use of modern technology, are important for HR professionals to have. In an investigation conducted by Yeung (1996), he revealed that certain competencies such as attention to details, empathy, developing others, networking, and self-control, distinguish the best HR professionals. Schuler, on the other hand, believes that HR professionals should be capable of linking HR strategy to business strategy by understanding the business’ competitive and technological environment,

and becoming more customer-oriented (El Bidawi, 2007). Additionally, Lawler and Mohrman (2003) deduce that HR professionals need to possess business acumen and competencies related to strategy development which aid in effective change management and organizational design.

While Lawler and Mohrman (2003) present a number of factors that contribute to making HR a strategic partner, a key factor is the presence of people with deep expertise in HR and the allocation of an HR head that comes from an HR background and is capable of effectively managing human capital. At the most basic level, HR professionals ought to impeccably deliver HR services including recruitment, training and development, appraisals, and rewards (Meisinger, 2005; Ulrich et al., 1995). While some may argue that it would be easy for any business executive to grow an understanding of HR and to enrich the business strategy with a functional HR perspective, this in fact undermines the real density of the function (Lawler and Mohrman, 2003).

Today, the HR profession is better regulated, with well-defined competency models such as the SHRM and CIPD. Recently, the Society of Human Resources Management (SHRM) developed the world's largest and most exhaustive competency model for HR which includes nine competencies within four competency clusters, including technical competencies, interpersonal competencies, business competencies, and leadership competencies (SHRM Competency Model, 2016). As indicated by the name, the technical competency cluster includes the technical HR knowledge which is needed to properly apply behavioral competencies (SHRM Competency Model, 2016). The remaining clusters are composed of three competencies each. The interpersonal cluster includes relationship management,

communication, and global and cultural effectiveness, while the leadership cluster includes leadership, navigation, and ethical practice (SHRM Competency Model, 2016). Finally, the business cluster includes the competencies of business acumen, critical evaluation, and consultation (SHRM Competency Model, 2016). What is more, SHRM has identified key behaviors for each one of the competencies, and has studied the significance of the competencies based on individual's career level (early, mid, senior, executive), organization size (small, medium, large) and organization's work sector (private, public, non-profit, not-for-profit) (SHRM Competency Model, 2016).

As for the CIPD competency map, it covers ten professional areas and eight behaviors across four bands or across different stages of an HR professional's career (Robinson, 2011). The professional areas include employee relations, service delivery and information, organization design, organization development, resourcing and talent planning, learning and development, performance and reward, and employee engagement (CIPD Profession Map, 2015). At the heart of the ten professional areas are two core professional areas which include insights, strategy, and solutions, and leading the HR function (Robinson, 2011). For HR to successfully support businesses in the identified areas, certain behaviors are required (Robinson, 2011); these behaviors include: courage to challenge, driven to deliver, collaborative, personally credible, skilled influencer, decisive thinker, curious, and a role model (CIPD Profession Map, 2015).

Several researchers have offered recommendations to expedite the development of the field. For students, Cohen (2015) recommends that they complete a versatile curriculum in HR and business, gain experience in HR by taking

internships, exhibit proficiency of learning in HR and the capability of utilizing the knowledge, engage in continuous learning, and network with HR professionals. As for HR practitioners, she offers recommendations such as: (1) demanding well-trained, entry-level HR professionals; (2) making use of HR research, and requesting further HR research in domains that will impact practice; (3) consistently pursuing continuous professional development; (4) serving as mentors and role models for professionals with little experience; (5) placing emphasis on succession planning in order to develop and promote HR leaders; and (6) proving competence by becoming certified (Cohen, 2015).

Although many models flesh out the competencies that are needed to succeed as HR professionals in the West, they do not take into account the cultural and institutional factors considered by Afiouni and Nakhle (forthcoming) which include “family centrality, nepotism and patriarchy; sectarianism and wasta; political situation and brain drain; rigid labor laws; weak labor movements; and lack of equal employment opportunities” that determine the nature of HRM practices and policies in Lebanon. Hence, this study suggests that the competencies needed in Lebanon are different from those needed in the West, and it will highlight these specific competencies.

C. HRM in Lebanon

Today, some organizations see HR as a strategic partner (Afiouni et al., 2013), while others consider HR to be an important administrative function (Vosburgh, 2007). Research however has indicated that the HR function in the

Middle East regions still operates as a personnel function although the development of a mature HR function is critical (Afiouni et al., 2013).

Although the HR field has not yet fully matured, undeniably, the role of HR professionals has developed. Their role has shifted from a functional one to a more strategic one (El Bidawi, 2007).HRM, however, is more developed in the West, and minimal attention has been given to the development of human resources in Middle Eastern countries, including Lebanon (Dirani, 2006).In Lebanon, up until the year 2000, the HR function was nothing but a personnel department that handled basic administrative tasks such as employee files, payroll, and social security (Afiouni & Nakhle, forthcoming).

Although the future of the HR profession looks bright and is predicted to be one of the fastest-growing occupations (Cohen, 2015), the HR function in Lebanon is still seen as an administrative function with inadequate budgets and decision making, rather than a trusted business partner (Afiouni&Nakhle, forthcoming). Ezzedeen and Swiercz (2001) share the same concerns since they have identified that the HR function in Lebanon is still one that largely handles personnel administration. Rarely do managers seek HR development advice; instead they go to HR for administrative assistance (Ezzedeen and Swiercz, 2001).

In many instances, the HR function is still perceived as a “soft profession” which is best managed by a female. According to Afiouni, Karam, and El-Hajj (2013), the presence of female HR managers is relatively high given that the region has the lowest female labor participation rate in the world.

Although the HRM function in the AME has made some good progress, actual development will not be realized without taking into consideration the

demographic, cultural, and economic features that are unique to the region (Afiouni et al., 2013). One of the many cultural characteristics, for example, is the *wasta* phenomenon which has dramatically affected HR professionalism in the region (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011). A demographic characteristic, on the other hand, could be the highly educated, yet poorly specialized workforce which HR professionals must account for (Ezzedeen and Swiercz, 2001).

With a service-based economy, however, an effective HR function is vital to the economy's competitiveness if Lebanon is to depend on its human capital to provide services of high quality (Afiouni & Nakhle, forthcoming; Budhwar and Mellahi, 2007). While several factors have been identified as potential reasons for region's underdeveloped HR function, no sufficient research on the region has been done yet; in fact, research on HRM in the Arab Middle East did not begin until the 1990's (Afiouni et al., 2013).

According to Afiouni, Karam, and El-Hajj (2013), "interesting and relevant avenues of research include uncovering the reasons for this lack of strategic focus. Is it due to a lack of HR competency and know-how; a lack of cooperation from line management; a lack of support from the top; a restricted HR budget; an unstable political situation, indigenous cultural peculiarities, a combination thereof or something else?"

D. Factors Contributing to the Underdevelopment of the HR Function in Lebanon

According to Afiouni and Nakhle (forthcoming), the HR profession in Lebanon is underdeveloped and has a low strategic impact because HR positions are

regularly filled with employees who have no formal HR education, and certifications are noncompulsory for admission to the profession(Afiouni & Nakhle, forthcoming). In fact, most HR managers in Lebanon have not acquired any formal education or professional certification in HRM, which gives the HR function a very amateurish representation (Afiouni & Nakhle, forthcoming).

In his 2007 study, El Badawi found that the majority of people in HR roles in Lebanon hold a general business degree rather than a specialized degree in HR (El Badawi, 2007). As a result, he recommended that organizations need to be more rigid with their recruitment requirements to prevent people that do not hold an HR related degree from entering the function (El Badawi, 2007).

Today, hundreds of universities in the U.S. and abroad offer HR degrees at the undergraduate and graduate levels (Cohen, 2015; Kaufman, 1999). Although there appears to be a lack of consistency among the programs, many of them are good HR programs (Fairdale, 2005; Cohen, 2007). In Lebanon, HRM as a discipline was introduced only recently in the academic curriculum with the American University of Beirut (AUB) launching the first MHRM graduate program in English, which suggests that most HR professionals have not received HR education (Afiouni & Nakhle, forthcoming).The absence of any form of HR education, including academic degrees and professional certifications, has hindered the status of the HR function in Lebanon (Afiouni & Nakhle, forthcoming).

HR cannot be seen as a vital and strategic profession unless graduates are qualified to enter the HR field and are capable of contributing to organizational success (Cohen, 2015; Ulrich, 2015).According to Cohen (2015) “human resources is a technical and strategic profession that requires deep expertise, education, and

professional savvy...these skills and knowledge need to be cultivated, taught, and developed.” Even at the entry-level, HR professionals should possess a certain set of skills and knowledge (Cohen, 2015). Furthermore, although HR certification is not an obligatory requirement in any country (Fairdale, 2005), certification/recertification does affirm that an HR professional is engaged in constant learning and professional development in the function (Cohen, 2015).

Certain cultural factors, such as “wasta”, have also shaped HR practices in Lebanon (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011). “Wasta”, or “intermediary” in Arabic, is the use of a personal connection to achieve a desired result (Sidani and Thornberry, 2013). According to Afiouni and Nakhle (forthcoming), the hiring of “superfluous” employees based on wasta is a common phenomenon in Lebanon. Very often, these employees are allocated to the HR department, where the harm they could cause the organization is supposedly kept at a minimum, given that the HR department is seen as an impotent function (Afiouni & Nakhle, forthcoming).

Often, when HR is not functioning satisfactorily, it is an opportunity for an outsider to step in. What is worse however is when an underperforming employee is shifted to HR from another function because HR seems to be the most suitable place to put him or her (Lawler and Mohrman, 2003). This then guarantees that the HR function will never be a strategic partner and will always suffer from a frail image (Lawler and Mohrman, 2003).

According to Iles, Almhedie, and Baruch (2012), certain national factors such as culture and business environment, including dependent variables such as the size of the organization and its ownership, play a key role in shaping a nation’s HRM framework. In the Middle East, using wasta or nepotism to be appointed, promoted,

or transferred is very common (Iles et al., 2012). Hence, selection is frequently subjective, resulting in a lack of equal opportunities (Iles et al., 2012). “The overall institutional framework fails to state and enforce basic ethical/integrity principles in HR strategy” (Iles et al., 2012).

When it comes to the size of organizations and their ownership, the majority of businesses in Lebanon are small to medium enterprises (Asrawi, 2010) that are owned and managed by families (Welsh and Raven, 2006). This study will further examine the effect of several cultural factors and the prevalent business environment on the HR function in Lebanon.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research Objective

The aim of this study is to (1) investigate the reasons for the underdevelopment of the HR function in Lebanon and (2) to identify the set of competencies needed by HR professionals to succeed in Lebanon. Taking into consideration that HRM is context-specific, and giving recognition to the cultural and institutional factors that shape HRM practices in Lebanon, this study seeks to explore if there are competencies that are unique to the country. We hope to be able to develop a competency model that will map the HR competencies needed to successfully operate in Lebanon. Although many HR competency models exist, none are specific to the region. SHRM's competency model, for example, covered 29 cities in eight countries, and included participants from 33 nations (Cohen, 2015).

B. Research Questions

More specifically, the study aims at answering the following research questions:

- What do HR professionals think of the HR function in Lebanon? If they believe it is underdeveloped, what do they think the reasons for this are?
- To what extent does the lack of professional HR bodies and academic education in HR shape the development of the HR profession in the country?
- What would be the needed competencies for HR managers to succeed in Lebanon given the peculiar macro characteristics of the country?

- What would be the needed competencies for HR managers to succeed in SMEs and family businesses such as the ones prevalent in Lebanon?

C. The Sample

The chosen sample through which data was collected includes 15 HR professionals who are currently working in Lebanon and whose HR experience ranges from 5 to 20 years. All participants have experience in working for SMEs and family businesses, and all participants hold professional qualifications relevant to HR (Master's degree or certifications). 40% of participants hold a Master of Human Resources Management, one holds a DBA in HR, and the remaining hold professional certifications such as a post graduate degree in HRM, HRMP, HRBP, PHR, etc. The participants come from different industries including engineering, pharmaceuticals, FMCG, retail, higher education, and consulting services. Furthermore, 27% of the sample are males, while the remaining 73% are females. Table 1 below illustrates the basic demographics and characteristics of the sample.

Table 1: Participants' Demographics

| Pseudonym | Gender | Professional Title | Professional HR Qualifications | Industry | HR Experience (in years) | |
|------------------|---------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|----|
| P1 | Patricia | Female | Resourcing Manager MEA | MHRM, HRMP | Consulting Services | 8 |
| P2 | Rami | Male | HR Manager | MHRM | FMCG | 10 |
| P3 | Lara | Female | Partner/ Recruitment Consultant | Post-graduate diploma HRM | Consulting Services | 5 |
| P4 | Maya | Female | Founder/University Instructor | MHRM, PHR | Higher Education | 9 |
| P5 | Richard | Male | HR Business Partner | Diploma HRM, PHR, TOT | Consulting Services | 10 |
| P6 | Mirna | Female | People & Organization Manager | MHRM, PHR | Pharmaceutical | 10 |

| | | | | | | |
|------------|--------|--------|--------------------------------------|---|---------------------|----|
| P7 | Lina | Female | Staff Development Manager | SPHR, PHR, Certified Trainer & Interviewer | Health Care | 12 |
| P8 | Anna | Female | Group HR Manager | HRBP | Engineering | 13 |
| P9 | Nancy | Female | HR Manager | PHR, Certified Recruiter & Trainer, Assessment Center Design & Delivery | Pharmaceutical | 12 |
| P10 | Roy | Male | HR Manager | MHRM | Engineering | 11 |
| P11 | Rachel | Female | HR Director | Co-Active Coach, Crucial Accountability Internal Trainer, PDI 360 Profilor Internal Practitioner, MBTI (Myers Briggs Type Indicator) Practitioner, Targeted Selection Administrator | IT | 20 |
| P12 | John | Male | HR Consultant | Certified Management and Organizational Design & Development Trainer, NLP Practitioner, HR World Congress (since 2000), HR Middle East Congress (since 2007) | Consulting Services | 20 |
| P13 | Jenny | Female | Senior HR Specialist | MHRM | Retail | 7 |
| P14 | Mary | Female | HR Consultant/ University Instructor | DBA-HRM, PHR | Higher Education | 13 |
| P15 | Mandy | Female | HR Manager | PHR | F&B | 10 |

D. Sampling Methodology

First contact with the participants was done via LinkedIn messages. The message explained the objective of the study and the importance of their contribution. Participants provided me with their telephone number along with a

suitable time to contact them, and an interview was arranged accordingly. All interviews were conducted in the space selected by the interviewee. All interviews were conducted face to face, except for one participant who preferred to answer the interview questions at her own time, hence the interview protocol was sent by email.

E. Data Collection

The data used for this research study was all of primary sources which stemmed from one-to-one interviews. The interviews were conducted in the space selected by the interviewee; some were conducted in the interviewees' offices, while others were conducted in a more casual setting such as a coffee shop. The interview consent form and interview protocol were sent to the interviewees in advance. The majority of the interviews were conducted in English although some of the interviewees used Arabic during some parts of the interview in order to better express themselves. The interviews ranged in length from 15 to 35 minutes. 14 out of 15 of the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed at a later stage; one participant preferred not to be audiotaped so notes were taken instead.

The interview protocol (refer to appendix 1 for interview protocol) branched from the research questions whereby the questions were designed to help determine what participants have to share on this topic and thus group their respective insights into meaningful themes that could answer the research questions and would be linked to the literature. Specifically speaking, the interview protocol entailed questions that tackle what HR professionals think of the HR function in Lebanon, and why they think the function is underdeveloped. Another question aims to tackle the effect of the lack of professional HR bodies and academic education in HR on the function.

Several questions attempt to derive what competencies are needed for HR Managers to succeed in Lebanon, taking into consideration the presence of SMEs and family businesses, and other macro characteristics of the country. Furthermore, an additional question addresses how HR professionals in Lebanon can best develop these critical competencies – the answers to this question will serve as recommendations for moving the function forward.

F. Data Analysis

Given the nature of the research questions, qualitative research methods were used to collect and analyze data. The data which was collected through in-depth interviews with HR professionals working in Lebanese companies resulted in detailed answers which helped develop a real sense of the interviewee's attitudes, beliefs, and opinions.

The interviews were analyzed using template analysis to identify potential reasons for the function's underdevelopment, and the competencies that are of importance to HR managers in Lebanon. Template analysis is an effective qualitative research method for an experiential approach. It is a style of thematic analysis that allows a researcher to maintain structure in the method of analyzing textual data while adapting it to the need of the study (King, 2012). Hence, template analysis is a flexible technique, and can handle large data sets (up to 30 participants) comfortably (King, 2012). Since there is barely any research done on this area, and an HR competency model for Lebanon is yet to be developed, this study is considered exploratory. The findings of this study will add new literature to the comparatively untapped field of HR in Lebanon.

G. Results

The aim of this study is (1) to investigate what HR managers perceive to be the reasons for the underdevelopment of the HR function in Lebanon and (2) to identify what competencies they believe are needed by HR professionals to succeed in Lebanon. The results are depicted below with section one including the reasons for underdevelopment, and section two including the competency framework.

H. Section 1: The Reasons for Underdevelopment

Table 2 below summarizes the most significant themes that reflect the reasons of underdevelopment of the HR function in Lebanon. The presence of SME's and family businesses appeared to be a major hindrance. Other themes included the lack of professional HR bodies and education, and the sub-par competence level of people within the function.

Table 2: Themes derived from template analysis that reflect the reasons of underdevelopment of the HR function in Lebanon

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| SME's & Family Businesses (Theme 1) | Organizational Characteristics (Category 1) | HR as an Administrative/Support Function |
| | | Lack of Autonomy in Decision-Making |
| | | Budget Constraints |
| | | Lack of Professional Development |
| | Cultural Characteristics (Category 2) | Lack of Awareness |
| | | Resistance to Change |
| | | Nepotism |
| | | Wasta |
| Lack of Academic Education (Theme 2) | | |
| Lack of Professional HR Bodies (Theme 3) | | |
| Sub-par Competence of HR Professionals (Theme 4) | | |

Theme 1: The Presence of SME's and Family Businesses

The extensive presence of SME's and family businesses, as mentioned by the interviewees, has impacted the development of the HR function in Lebanon for a number of reasons. These reasons fall under both the organizational characteristics of SME's and family businesses (category 1), and the cultural characteristics (category 2). Organizational characteristics of SME's and family businesses include: (1) the way in which they make use of the HR function; it generally serves as an administrative or support function, (2) the decision making process which rarely includes HR's contribution, (3) budget constraints, and (4) limited opportunities for professional development. Cultural characteristics of SME's and family businesses include: (1) management's lack of awareness on the significance of HR, (2) management's resistance to change, (3) the presence of nepotism, and (4) the wasta phenomenon. Each of these characteristics will be addressed individually.

Category 1: Organizational Characteristics

HR as an Administrative or Support Function

All 15 interviewees mentioned that SME's and family businesses treat HR as if it is an administrative or support function. Although many of these businesses have what they call "HR Departments," they are in fact purely personnel, handling necessary paperwork for employees, administering payroll, and monitoring attendance. The majority of SME's rely on HR for recruitment since it's a direct need and they require the 'support'; however they are not aware of any other functions.

Below are several quotes which indicate that HR serves as an administrative function:

“Small and medium enterprises get someone for HR administration...administration and personnel; there is no HR in those companies, it’s very rare.” (Anna)

“The majority believe that they have HR as a full support, and not really a strategic one. They believe it’s related to compensation and benefits and recruitment. They don’t believe that the part of training, succession planning, and performance management is important.” (Maya)

This statement [research has indicated that the HR profession in Lebanon is underdeveloped and has a low strategic impact] is partially true in my opinion, and the main reason for it is that up until 5 or maximum 10 years ago, for most of the companies, the HR was just purely administrative work. This means administering people into social security, checking attendance, ensuring compensation, doing the payroll; in other companies, even the payroll is not in HR.” (Roy)

“Some companies say that they have an HR manager but in reality, they are not...I mean I did the job of an HR manager in the company for two years. I was only doing the personnel issues, but they wanted to call me the HR manager, not the personnel manager.” (Richard)

Lack of Autonomy in Decision-Making

The majority of the interviewees spoke of how the owners of SME’s and family businesses hinder the decision-making process due to excessive interference. Very rarely do HR professionals have the autonomy to make decisions, hence their contribution is minimal. According to Anna:

“They [owners of family businesses] still have a strong interference in decisions and they fear that the decision might not go through them. They even go through the slightest details that delay the process. So if you need the signature of one person, when they get involved, the process is delayed for 2 or 3 days. So it affects the flow of information, it slows down the decision making process.”

Patricia and Mirna share similar thoughts:

“They [managers] are working in a controlling way as if they know it all, and once training and development is being applied they immediately place it at a halt. So this is affecting the function of HR a lot. I mean sometimes you feel you’re just a messenger; you’re not able to do more than that.”(Patricia)

“HR is just an admin function to apply what the manager, what the boss or owner of the company would like to implement because HR is an admin function of implementation. And for instance, an HR who’s educated and strategic in his mind and gives his point of view on things will sometimes get into conflict and the HR will eventually either have to accept or resign from the company.” (Mirna)

As Lina puts it, HR people in family businesses do not have the power to impact major decisions:

“Why it [the HR function in Lebanon] might be underdeveloped in specific areas is because of the whole situation of the country, because we have a lot of family businesses, because when you have family businesses the impact of the owners, the CEO’s or the chairmen have a greater impact than that of the HR. Any policy enforced by the HR to work on or to train or to recruit will witness the enforcement of the owners being stronger than that of the HR, unfortunately.”

The below quote illustrates the frustration of one of the interviewees as the result of lack of autonomy during her tenure as an HR manager in a family business:

“HR managers have to be very flexible and very understanding and they have to let go of their professionalism in a sense that “I cannot influence anything I want the way I think is good, or the way I think it should be” because those people [management in SME’s and family businesses] like to intrude and like to have their input at any cost. So HR managers cannot always influence what they think is proper, they have to listen to those people.” (Mary)

Budget Constraints

The interviewees expressed that SME’s and family businesses face budget constraints which impact the profession in two ways. First, the HR department is not allocated enough financial resources in order to carry out effective training programs and performance management programs. Second, SME’s and family businesses cannot always afford to hire HR professionals who are experienced and well qualified. The below quotes highlight the budget constraints faced by SME’s and family businesses:

“So they [management] say, I will get someone operational with a lower budget, I don’t want her [hr professional] to come up with training plans and succession plans and performance management systems.” (Maya)

“...it’s all about cost and budget. Taking into consideration the traditional way of thinking, companies don’t want to invest and develop HR functions. For example, concerning the personnel, payroll, compensation and benefits, they say ok, it can be handled by the accounting department, why would I hire someone to handle the payroll?” (Lara)

“...basically we don’t have a good range or fair range of salaries especially for the people who have a Master’s degree... so either management didn’t select the person very well, or they don’t have the budget to pay a good package to have a qualified person or a senior person.” (Maya)

Lack of Professional Development

Considering that an SME or a family business does attract a qualified HR professional or someone that has potential, the interviewees believe that he/she is not given the opportunity to develop on a professional level taking into consideration the tasks that he/she will be fulfilling (paperwork, payroll, attendance, etc.). Hence, an experienced/qualified person is likely to leave, i.e. the company has not taken advantage of the knowledge and skills of this person, and a young professional is likely to spend years in a personnel role thinking that he/she is practicing HR. Below are some quotes pertaining to the lack of professional development in SME’s and family businesses:

“You have a pool of competent people who are struggling because the company looks at the function as an administrative one...and they eventually leave.” (Rachel)

“However, the HR’s that have evolved in their career are the people who changed from multinationals to family businesses, from family businesses to multinationals, so they mixed.” (John)

“...I mean you see an HR manager who’s close to retirement and has worked all of his/her life as an admin...and you get fresh graduates in HR, they start working in family businesses,

and they're not guided.” (Roy)

“Lebanese professionals working abroad have a very good experience. Even if they return to Lebanon, they'd have an input to do new things. But an HR professional who stayed in Lebanon in a small company doesn't seem like he can develop or even develop the company because the situation doesn't allow it. But they're always bringing experience from outside the country.” (Lara)

Category 2: Cultural Characteristics

Lack of Awareness

The interviews revealed that management suffers from a lack of awareness of the significance of HR, and that there is a need to educate them on the importance of HR as a strategic partner. Many interviewees expressed that HR is considered to be a costly function, rather than a strategic one. The following interviewees expressed that management does not sense the real impact of HR since the function does not derive direct income:

“Senior management or the executive committee, until today, still consider it [HR] as a total support function and not an integral one in their businesses and they see it more as a cost than a profit, especially that the main cost incurred in any HR department are all payments and not direct return on investments, knowing that if you look at it in the long-run your main theme is to have a strong workforce that will increase your profits and your returns.” (Jenny)

“They [management] don't believe that it should be a function that is strategic, especially that they consider it as a support and it's not a commercial function where we can have direct

money from the function, knowing that if we have a retention rate and we don't have a turn-over in the company we will have good revenues and we will have a better image, it will automatically reflect on the financial performance of the company...so I believe that strategic spirit for the HR does not really exist in companies based on the management point of view.” (Maya)

Other interviewees expressed that management needs to look at HR from a different perspective, and of course the only way to do that would be to educate them on the importance of the HR role:

“We should not forget the mentality; we should change the mentality of the business itself, the business management, business owners. In order for them to look at HR from a different point of view that they had previously...” (Richard)

“We need to persuade them [managers], and not by force, but to be able to explain to them that HR is not just theories, not just some leadership theories; on the contrary, it's scientific, it's something close to science. You can use numbers, you can use ratios to prove that HR is a good; a good HR practice would lead to good business results. Like you can use the turnover ratio, the time-to-fill-position ratio, you can mathematically show the importance of training, of safety trainings, of reducing accidents...” (Roy)

Resistance to Change

Although it was not a major theme, one of the interviewees (Mandy) highlighted that employers in SME's in Lebanon, unlike employers in the West, are more resistant to change and have difficulty adopting new or international practices. She emphasized that HR development is affected since employers continue to

implement old habits, and HR professionals face difficulties trying to implement new strategies due to employers' resistance.

Nepotism & Wasta

Several interviewees consider that the presence of nepotism and wasta has hindered the development of the HR function in several ways. First, it has prevented HR professionals from recruiting the right people; second, it has wiped out equal employment opportunities, and third, it has placed sub-par competent people in HR roles (i.e. one can be granted an HR role if he/she is the relative of a key decision maker). The following quotations indicate how nepotism and wasta has affected the HR function in Lebanon:

“In Lebanon, they don't really look at the competencies, until now you see various companies, especially local ones, who look more into references and connection; they don't really look into the competencies of HR professionals and that's a big problem, not only in the HR function but in any function in the organization and that's a main recruitment challenge that we face.” (Jenny)

“In SME's and family businesses we don't have an HR function in Lebanon because these owners like to hire their own relatives mainly, or bring their own family into the business. So we see the marketing manager is his father, the HR is his wife, and so on. And I've been through many companies and this has been the case. So it has definitely influenced the presence of HR in Lebanon.” (Mary)

“In family businesses, sometimes the owner is the HR with an accountant who controls salaries and that's it. Because the Lebanese like to implement projects by themselves and come up with lots of new things, so they start coming up with titles, like having one's daughter who is a fresh graduate to be placed in

an “HR Manager” position...So these, yes, do exist but it’s not something that you and I can control...So someone might be an accountant in his dad’s firm and be able to call himself a general manager. The same thing goes for HR.” (Nancy)

“I think their [hr professionals] ethics should be number one, especially when they need to get rid of the “wasta” that we have in Lebanon because it’s a very crucial thing, especially in Lebanese companies. I’ve worked in pure family businesses or Lebanese companies and this was a major challenge that I faced; you cannot put your ethics into practice because of the “wasta” thing.” (Jenny)

Theme 2: Lack of Professional HR Bodies

All of the interviewees agreed that the lack of professional HR bodies has shaped the development of the HR profession in Lebanon. Professional HR bodies add to the credibility of the function. In addition, HR people gain professional status, are provided with networking opportunities, and are given access to additional knowledge. Most importantly, professional HR bodies give HR professionals the opportunity to contribute their expertise to new assignments, while helping in the development of others. The statements below reflect some of the interviewees’ insights on this topic:

“What will help grow people is not only education; we need HR bodies to learn from each other...the only way to grow is to share experiences.” (Rachel)

“In terms of “core professionnelle” we have nothing. We have an HR association but we have nothing to support us, we’re just a group of friends supporting each other. We meet, we see each

other, five or ten persons, we know that we're good in HR, we're references to people, yes, but what do we do? Do we lobby about it? We can't. I don't have influence in HR in terms of getting HR people from outside, making the move, making Lebanon a help for us, we don't have that, unfortunately.”
(John)

“There should not be any HR manager or officer doing his task without being certified or without being a member of these associations which will make sure that he has the competencies needed and the knowledge needed.” (Richard)

“I'm sure if they [professional bodies] did exist it would have helped because when I went to the Society of HR Management Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada in the U.S., for example, you see a lot of people who are now in their 50's and they have never worked in HR but they have good knowledge about it because of what they are learning and because of all the certifications they are going after because of the existing professional body...this we don't have in Lebanon...we might have specific knowledge...you might have for example HR employees that might have the HR knowledge, a general knowledge, but they will not be able to apply the best practices. They will just apply what they have learned from other people but the best practices, from where are they coming? So this is a problem, I believe.” (Lina)

Theme 3: Lack of Academic Education in HR

While the results of the interviews have revealed that Lebanon has made great progress in the field of academic HR education, there is still room for improvement. The interviewees brought up three key areas to develop academic education: (1) more universities need to offer HR studies at the graduate level; (2)

some changes need to be made to the curriculum of the existing HR Master programs; and (3) HR should be offered at the undergraduate level. Below are several quotations that support these arguments:

“Academic qualifications [in HR] are not offered in all universities, you can’t find HR in all universities. They can be counted on one hand... there’s AUB, NDU...it doesn’t exist in the Lebanese University, for example...all majors are present in LU except HR; you major in management here and then travel to France to continue your studies in HR.” (Lara)

“I’m not criticizing your Master’s, but giving my opinion regarding the HR Master’s, I’ve told them that they have to teach more finance, more strategic planning, to stop focusing on OB, motivation and psychology of the people, this can be taken in one course or read as a single book at home. It’s fine, you can take them not as prerequisite courses, these are elective courses. You should be able to ask HR what P&L means, what EBITDA means...” (John)

“We have universities that do not really educate their students exactly on the practical part [of hr] ... so basically I think that it’s very important to have a more professional academic education in HR in order to have good development in HR.” (Maya)

“Only AUB and USJ provide professional degrees [in HR], I don’t know if LAU has started doing that, I’m not sure. I’m speaking in terms of reputable universities in Lebanon...so I know that USJ has it but it’s old and it’s quite good, honestly. And I do know that AUB has it as well but I really hope more people could be provided with them and mostly at the BS level because here, it’s only offered as a Master’s Degree.” (Lina)

Theme 4: Sub-Par Competence Level of HR Professionals

The interviewees deduce that The organizational and cultural characteristics of SME's and family businesses, coupled with the lack of professional HR bodies and academic education, has led to the presence of sub-par competent people within the profession. Sub-par competent people, who cannot strategically contribute to the development of an organization, highly disturb the development of the HR function on a national level. Below are some of the interviewees' thoughts on the competence of people within the profession:

"I agree with this statement [research has indicated that the HR profession in Lebanon is underdeveloped and has low strategic impact] and I think it all starts from the qualifications of the people that are handling the function. You can find various companies with people in HR who have no qualifications related to HR... you see people with no academic qualifications, they do not really know the basics of HR and the mechanisms of HR and they learn it through experience." (Jenny)

"The percentage of good HR professionals is not really big since I work in recruitment, and I know exactly, and I meet a lot of HR people and I see how they assess candidates, how they assess employees...a lot of HR are occupying senior positions and they don't have the minimum knowledge of HR. They work with full discrimination, they don't take into consideration the right qualifications and skills, they don't believe that candidates should have the opportunity to grow...they don't know how they should train them and do the induction, the exit interview..." (Maya)

"There are lots of people, as you know, who are not HR professionals and are working in HR. There are some who are business-majored and were working in recruitment at some point and are becoming HR managers now. So this has a great effect because one, they are taking the positions of HR majored people. Two, they are not fully equipped, or not fully trained to

be able to do everything regarding HR, whether concerning training, development, recruitment, policies and procedures...so this has a bit of an effect.” (Patricia)

“100%. Of course [agrees that the HR function in Lebanon is underdeveloped and has a low strategic impact]. The reason for this is because most of them [hr professionals] don't have an HR background so they haven't studied that and they don't understand the technicality of it, they think it's pure common sense. And those who depend on their common sense will reach no result.” (Rami)

I. An Indigenous Competency Framework

Based on the interviews, the competencies that HR managers in Lebanon should demonstrate include diplomacy, patience/ persistence, negotiating and convincing, creativity/ innovation, flexibility, crisis management, coaching, integrity/ ethics, driving and managing change, businesses acumen, and strategic thinking.

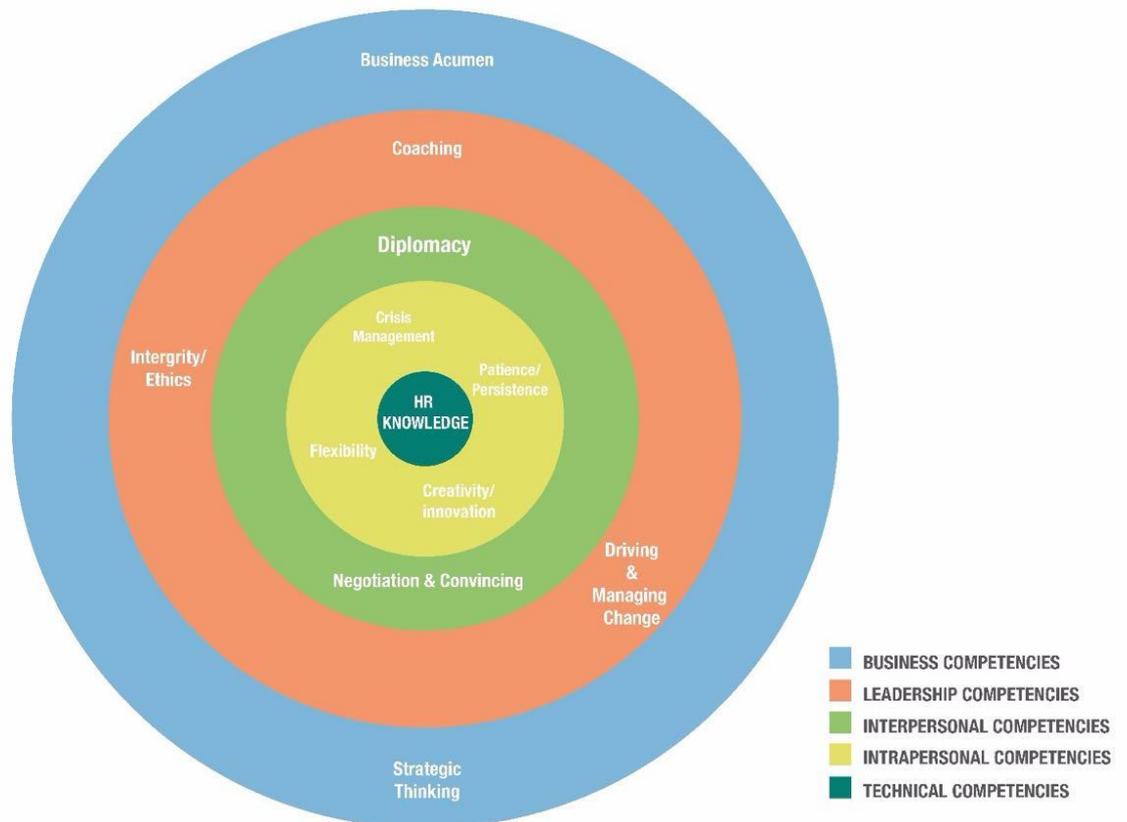
In light of the SHRM competency model which categorized the competencies into four clusters, the competencies that were identified by the interviewees were analyzed to see if any similar patterns existed. The categories appeared to be very similar to those of SHRM, i.e. it was apparent that some competencies were interpersonal, while the others were related to leadership, business, etc. One category however, the intrapersonal category, was added to the indigenous competency model. Hence, the competencies were divided into four categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal, leadership, and business. This is depicted in table 3. Table 3 includes the competencies that were identified, the category to which they belong, and the number of times the competency was mentioned.

Table 3: Competencies for HR Managers in Lebanon

| Intrapersonal | Interpersonal | Leadership | Business |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| Patience/Persistence (4) | Diplomacy (3) | Coaching (3) | Business Acumen (4) |
| Creativity/Innovation (5) | Negotiating & Convincing (4) | Integrity/Ethics (3) | Strategic Thinking (5) |
| Flexibility (10) | | Driving & Managing Change (4) | |
| Crisis Management (4) | | | |

This led to the following competency framework:

Figure 1: Competency Model



1. HR Knowledge

The interviewees expressed that it goes without saying that any HR practitioner, anywhere in the world, should be able to effectively apply/implement all of the core HR functions. These technical skills, they believe, should not change anywhere across the globe. Hence, HR knowledge (technical competencies) has been placed at the heart of the competency model.

“No, I don’t think they are different [competencies needed for hr managers in Lebanon vs. those needed in the West] because I think people are the same everywhere around the world. So it’s the same competencies. The laws differ but in the end any policies or any competencies related to managing people are the same... in the end the HR is a people champion everywhere. So he needs the same competencies everywhere.” (Mary)

“I believe HR is HR everywhere; it doesn’t differ from one place to another... when we learned about HR, we did it through foreign books, we seek knowledge from them because they’re more advanced. When I look for articles for example, I look into the Harvard Business review and their studies. And definitely, as it is in everything, you have to look into the norms of the country and you always have to see whether a certain country has norms which exist in my own or not. So you encounter norms but eventually the big umbrella is the big umbrella of HR.” (Nancy)

“Generally speaking the competencies needed for HR managers in Lebanon should not differ from those needed in the West...the knowledge should be the same...but context does differ, and every company has its own culture and needs to adapt to the market it is competing in.” (Rachel)

2. Intrapersonal Competencies

The intrapersonal competencies that were identified include: patience/persistence, creativity/innovation, flexibility, and crisis management. Each competency will be defined based on the context in which it was placed by the interviewees. Also, to put the competency in perspective, one quotation will be provided for each one.

Patience/Persistence

The interviewees who mentioned patience spoke about the difficulties they face in convincing both employees and management about the significance of HR. HR managers in Lebanon require patience to be able to tolerate uninformed people, and persistence to help these people overcome their resistance. When Mirna mentioned patience, her explanation was the following:

“They need a strategy not only on how to implement HR, but on how to send messages on what is HR as well. I think it’s even more difficult to work in a local company in HR than to work in a multinational one...I think it’s a struggle. It’s energy consuming because you’re not only working in HR, you want to prove yourself; you want to prove that HR is much more than this. So you’re doing both at the same time and I think it’s tough; it’s not easy.”

Creativity/Innovation

As per the results of the interviewees, HR managers in Lebanon have to be creative and innovative for two major reasons. First, as already mentioned, HR professionals face major resistance from management; hence HR professionals need

to be innovative in the things they do to get management's buy-in. Second, HR professionals almost always have a very limited budget and sometimes no budget at all. For this reason, HR professionals need to be innovative in optimizing the minimal resources that they have.

“HR professionals need to always think outside of the box...they would say “to retain employees, to do activities, etc. we should have a budget”. They can do something internal without having 10K budget. Let them be creative, I mean they can create something for example in a company that is a small or medium enterprise, that has for example 50 to 100 employees, they [hr managers] can come up with something, if someone is really experienced, they can do a training and employees will attend the training and then they will vote for an employee to do the training for other employees. So if you say I will create incentives, I will create a newsletter, I will give him an appreciation letter, it might be something. So do a small activity to create the value and the good culture, it's important. I mean an HR should be a bit creative because management would stop when they would ask for a budget.” (Maya)

Flexibility

Flexibility appeared to be the most critical competency (mentioned by 10 out of 15 interviewees). HR managers in Lebanese organizations have to be flexible for a number of reasons. First, given the political and economic instability of the country, the business environment is constantly changing. Hence, HR professionals should be capable of adjusting their schedules accordingly, and delivering under a lot of pressure and stress. Moreover, they need to be flexible enough to work different mindsets of management, and with people who do not always want to operate their businesses in an optimal way. HR professionals also have to comprehend that they

cannot always influence things the way that they would like, and thus have to learn to give-in to management at certain points in time.

“HR managers have to be very flexible and very understanding, and they have to let go of their professionalism in a sense that “ I cannot influence anything I want the way I think is good or the way I think it should be” because those people like to intrude and like to have their input at any cost. So HR managers cannot always influence what they think is proper, they have to listen to those people and that is the most important thing that they need to have as a competency, they need to flexible, understanding, to take into consideration the needs of the business, not what they think is good as an HR manager. Though this is not proper, but this is what should be done.” (Mary)

Crisis Management

The interviewees mentioned that Lebanon is a country of crisis, and at any point in time the business strategy may change. Hence, HR professionals need to account for this and should have contingency plans in case of any sudden changes.

“They [hr managers] should be able to manage with crisis because we’re a country of crisis. So if we have a certain depression or the business is not working, the HR should no freak out and start firing people, they should have different plans in mind. I think this is the main thing they need for this country or this is the additional thing they need to acquire.” (Mary)

“At anytime we can have a certain crisis, and for the company I work for, most of our people work in sales so suddenly all our priorities can change. Like if we have a long-term project and we suddenly have a bombing, we need to stop everything and our priority, which is the security and safety of our employees, comes first. So we can stop any long-term or mid-term or even short-term project or we can stop anything, just to make sure that our employees are doing well. It even affects the business

as well because if the situation is not good, then the employees will not go to the field then we would not have sales. So it's all affected by the situation in Lebanon." (Mirna)

3. Interpersonal Competencies

The interpersonal competencies that were identified include diplomacy and negotiation.

Diplomacy

When the interviewees spoke of diplomacy, they spoke about taking into account the politics within a Lebanese SME or family business, and finding a way to get the correct message across in a “diplomatic” manner in order to gain approval for a certain idea/ plan.

“He [hr professional] has to understand the politics inside the family, he has to know how the family functions, the “rapport de force” between the family members, and he has to have a way to pass his ideas and his knowledge and implement it.” (Roy)

Negotiation

Given the fact that management is not convinced of the strategic role that HR plays, the interviewees believe that HR managers in Lebanon need to possess excellent negotiation skills in order to convince management of any HR initiative that they wish to implement. HR professionals need to “package” HR in a way that is convincing to management.

“It is a great challenge for Lebanese HR Managers as the belief in HR as a business function does rarely exist; so HR Managers should demonstrate excellent negotiating and convincing skills.” (Mandy)

4. Leadership Competencies

The leadership competencies that were identified include coaching, integrity/ethics, and driving and managing change.

Coaching

For HR to be viewed as a credible business partner, the interviewees believe that HR professionals need to be effective coaches, i.e. developing people and boosting performance of the organization. Moreover, especially in family businesses, the HR needs to play the role of a consultant or a coach. According to the interviewees, good coaching is what drives change.

“First of all, the HR should be someone who could be excellent in coaching executives and driving change. He should manage change. Family businesses are changing from one generation to another and HR should be capable of being the back-up and the support in this ...so it's important for the HR to be able to do this. Coaching an executive is not easy and it's not about telling someone to sit on a chair to psychoanalyze him, it's different from this.” (John)

Integrity/Ethics

Some interviewees expressed that it is sometimes difficult for them to put their ethics into practice because of the presence of nepotism and wasta. More

specifically, nepotism and wasta makes it extremely difficult for an HR professional to be an equal opportunity recruiter. Hence HR managers in Lebanon need to find a way around these cultural characteristics while still remaining ethical and just.

“First of all, they should have integrity. Ok? This is in terms of values for each one, they should have integrity because considering the country, they should be able to say no...not to hire someone if the person is not qualified. Not because the person is referred by a political person or a renowned person. They should have integrity in terms of really doing what should be done and they should have the accountability too...they have been accountable for this position then they have to present it as per its real profession, which means that in terms of recruitment, the HR manager needs to take into consideration, or the HR professionals need to take into consideration the minimum requirement of the job; if the person can perform the minimum requirement of the job then the person can be recruited.” (Lina)

Driving & Managing Change

As per the interviewees, SME's and family businesses have been doing the same thing for such a long time, which makes it extremely difficult to implement change. For management to agree to change, they need to be able to trust that HR can indeed make a difference and is capable of managing and driving change.

“...And on top of that, they should be change agents; they should act as change agents because HR is not easy, it's not easy for you to go to a company and to impose a specific policy or to implement a specific recruitment procedure while they have been used to recruiting for the past 10 or 15 years based on the preferences.” (Lina)

5. Business Competencies

Business Acumen

Several interviewees emphasized the importance of HR being involved in all business functions. In fact John and Rachel believe that very few HR professionals in Lebanon speak the language of business, which is why they are not seen as strategic business partners. HR should speak the language of marketing, supply chain, finance, etc. Business acumen results in sound strategic alternatives that generate profits, which in turn helps earn management's trust.

“In my opinion, first of all the HR does not play an important business role; he doesn't have financial acumen, he's outside any business processes, business value chain, the understanding of the business, the industries, the products... they [hr people] put himself or herself outside the finance department; no!!! The partner of HR is finance; he should be present with the HR as two, Laurel et Hardy in the company, in order for the HR to move forward like it should.” (John)

Strategic Thinking

Again, in an ever-changing business environment ruled by political and economic instability, the interviewees are convinced that an HR professional needs to be capable of coming up with strategic business solutions. A central aspect of strategic thinking in Lebanon is planning for the unexpected and coming up with solutions that generate profit in a deteriorating economy.

“First of all, he [hr professional] has to have strategic thinking in accordance with the economic situation that we're going

through. You always have to think how to reflect that in your business because we have things that change a lot in many places, so you have to have strategic thinking to reflect on how to improve the business in many aspects.” (Nancy)

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that the HR function in Lebanon is underdeveloped for several reasons, including the lack of professional HR bodies and academic education in HR, the significant presence of SME's and family businesses, and the sub-par competence level of people within the function. This research study also indicates that there are several competencies that are specific to HR professionals in Lebanon. More specifically, interpersonal and leadership competencies appeared to be very context-specific due to the country's micro and macro characteristics. Like indicated in previous research done by Dirani (2006), Ezzedeen and Sweircz (2001), and Afiouni and Nakhle (forthcoming), the results of this study suggest that the HR function in Lebanon is indeed underdeveloped and has low strategic impact.

Although several universities in Lebanon have introduced HR programs at the graduate level, these programs still require extensive revision. Universities ought to consider teaching more on change management, coaching and developing leaders, business strategy, etc. (courses that would really help students understand the business and the strategic role that HR should play). Several interviewees mentioned that very few HR professionals in Lebanon speak the language of business, hence are not considered to be strategic business partners. They also expressed that people shift from other business functions into HR because CEO's/General Managers look for people with business knowledge. Not only should students be taught such courses, they should also be required to apply their theoretical knowledge into practice. In

addition, what we lack in comparison to the West is HR programs at the undergraduate level.

Lebanon suffers from lack of professional HR bodies which would add credibility and status to the function. A long-term goal for HR professionals in Lebanon should be the creation of a union, or “professionalization of employee groups through formal education programs” (Paauwe & Boselie, 2003). This would mean that HR professionals, like lawyers and surgeons, would need to complete certain professional trainings before performing their jobs (Paauwe & Boselie, 2003). HR governance, or an external body to oversee the way HR practitioners are fulfilling their jobs, will also help move the function forward. This external body should also be responsible for regulating the issuance of HR licenses and professional titles.

Some of the factors that were identified to be reasons for underdevelopment appeared to be more significant than others; for example, as per the results of the interviews, the presence of SME’s and family businesses appeared to be more of a drawback to the HR function than any other factor. Hence, the most significant factor affecting the development of the HR function in Lebanon, as indicated by this study, is the size and ownership of businesses. As denoted by Asrawi (2010) and Welsh and Raven (2006), the majority of businesses in Lebanon are small to medium enterprises that are owned and managed by families.

First and foremost, SME’s and family businesses still treat the HR function as if it is a support or administrative function. As indicated in the research conducted by Afiouni, Karam, and El-Hajj (2013), this study revealed that the HR function in Lebanese organizations operates as a personnel function with insufficient budgets

and decision making. In addition, as previously denoted by Ezzedeen and Swiercz (2001), the interviewees believe that HR still does not play a consultative role; instead it plays more of a support role.

Additionally, certain aspects of our culture cannot be overlooked. Wasta and nepotism are still common phenomena in SME's and family businesses, thus greatly impacting the professionalism of the HR function in Lebanon. Tlaiss and Kauser (2011) and Afiouni (forthcoming) have also made similar observations. Very often, HR professionals in Lebanon cannot undergo a proper recruitment process due to the presence of nepotism and wasta. Moreover, the candidates that have been selected as a result of wasta are often placed in the HR department to fulfill basic administrative tasks such as payroll, attendance, etc.

The perception of the HR function in SME's and family businesses could also be a possible explanation for its underdevelopment. For example, according to Afiouni, Karam, and El-Hajj (2013), the HR function in Lebanon is still perceived as a "soft profession" which is best managed by a female. Looking at the sample of this study, 73% of the participants are females. In addition, out of the 51 HR professionals who were approached for this study, 34 are females (67%). Hence, perhaps the HR function in Lebanon is indeed seen as soft profession that is best handled by a female.

Comparing the SHRM competency model to the indigenous competency model that resulted from this study, as expected there are some similarities and some differences. On the surface, it appears that the categories are very similar. After analyzing the data however, it appears that although the categories are the same, the manifestation or the operationalization of the theory is very different.

In both models, the technical and business competencies are more or less the same. Anywhere in the world, an HR professional should be knowledgeable in recruitment, training, performance management, compensation and benefits, etc. Likewise, an HR professional anywhere should understand the dynamics of the business and be capable of developing strategic plans that result in increased revenue. The intrapersonal, interpersonal, and leadership competencies however were rather different. The greatest difference appeared in the intrapersonal and interpersonal clusters which were quite complex and multi-faceted. To re-cap, the intrapersonal competencies that were identified include diplomacy, patience/persistence, creativity/innovation, and flexibility, while the interpersonal competencies include diplomacy and negotiating and convincing. All of the intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies, except for one, were related to the micro characteristics of the country, specifically the size and ownership of Lebanese organizations. To clarify, as indicated by the interviewees, the competencies of diplomacy, patience/persistence, negotiating and convincing, creativity/innovation, and flexibility are all needed to help in overcoming management's resistance to change and to help raise awareness of the significance of HR. This mentality is something that is specific to the managers of SME's and family businesses in Lebanon. The remaining competency, crisis management, is related to the macro characteristics of Lebanon, particularly the economic and political instability of the country. The leadership competencies which include coaching, integrity and ethics, and driving and managing change, are also all related to the micro characteristics of Lebanon. Again, all of these competencies were defined in light of the presence of SME's and family businesses.

According to Afiouni and Nakhle (forthcoming), the HR profession in Lebanon is underdeveloped and has a low strategic impact because HR positions are regularly filled with employees who have no formal HR education, and certifications are noncompulsory for admission to the profession (Afiouni & Nakhle, forthcoming). I believe however, taking into consideration the micro characteristics of the country, there is no room for highly competent HR professionals within the HR departments of SME's and family businesses. Even if HR people were to complete formal HR education, where would they apply the knowledge they have acquired? It goes without saying that of course academic HR education would be an added value and would definitely make a difference, but how much difference would it make? Faced with the inability to actively participate in the decision making process, and not to forget the budget constraints, how much can these HR people contribute? Hence the reason for underdevelopment is not the lack of competent people within the function; instead, unfortunately, the types of businesses that operate in Lebanon do not give HR people the opportunity to develop into competent HR people. If one holds a Master's degree in HR, and several professional HR certifications, but is assigned to do payroll and attendance, how will he/she develop? Likewise, if an extremely skilled HR professional is appointed to work in an SME or family business but is faced with budget constraints and lack of autonomy, how long will he/she last within the organization? Hence, SME's and family businesses will always have underdeveloped people within the function, because the skilled ones would leave and the junior ones would not develop.

The HR function in Lebanon, like the HR function in any other country, is heavily influenced by micro, meso, and macro features, with the micro including

individual characteristics, meso including organizational characteristics, and the macro including national characteristics (Paauwe & Boselie, 2003). Although these characteristics play a major role in the underdevelopment of the function, HR professionals in Lebanon have the responsibility of moving the function forward to the greatest of their abilities. Although these micro, meso and macro characteristics are stable for the time being, our job as HR professionals is to develop critical competencies that could possibly help us find our way around these characteristics. We must recognize that we cannot apply everything that we have learnt from Western text books, and instead must account for the context we live and work in. HRM in Lebanon, like HRM in any other country in the world, is context-specific. Businesses do not operate in Lebanon the same way they operate in the West, and the management styles in Lebanon are certainly different from those in the West. Hence, there are certain competencies that HR professionals in Lebanon can develop, including diplomacy, patience, negotiating and convincing, innovation, flexibility, crisis management, integrity and ethics, and driving and managing change, that would make their roles more effective.

Lebanon has suffered from one war after the other, and has been greatly impacted by the wars of neighboring countries. Hence, economic recovery has been difficult and Lebanon has not yet been able to enjoy stability. With this in mind, Lebanese organizations have not yet witnessed the growth that the West has seen which is why they still do not feel the immense need to effectively manage their human capital. The ones that have witnessed substantial growth, such as Azadea, Fattal, and Averda, in fact have a sophisticated HR structure in place. The same applies for businesses within the GCC that have seen immense growth. Dubai for

example, due to the growth witnessed by its businesses, has “adopted an economic development model which has been described as strongly pro-business, emphasizing market liberalism, economic openness and globalization” which has in turn created the need for advanced HRM models (Connell & Burgess, 2013). Likewise, the Kuwaiti Alshaya Group, the largest retail company in the Middle East, has in place a very advanced HRM model which has spearheaded its growth and the company today is a reference to many retail companies around the world.

I believe that the HR function in Lebanon will take the same historical course as the one in the West. The only difference is that we are many, many years behind. When businesses start growing in size and production problems increase, new procedures will have to evolve in order to manage new production systems. The challenges that businesses face will increase, and they will need additional support to be able to reduce turnover, increase productivity, etc. This is how HR evolved in the West, and this is how HR will evolve in Lebanon.

On an ending note, if we are to compare the HR function in Lebanon to the one in the West, then yes, it would be fair to say that we have not yet reached that level. If we are however comparing the HR function that existed in Lebanon 10 years ago, to the one we have today, we cannot but acknowledge the great progress that has been made. While many people say for example that the HR function in Lebanon is underdeveloped because it is still perceived as an administrative/support function, I say that we have made some great progress because 10 years back even a support function didn't exist. At least now, managers and employees come to us for “support.” And we only hope that HR professionals in Lebanon will undergo

continuous professional and personal development in order to make any difference possible, and to advance the function to the best of their abilities.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In this research study, 15 interviews were conducted with HR professionals who hold professional HR qualifications. The purpose of this study was to examine the possible reasons for the underdevelopment of the HR function in Lebanon. In addition, it aimed to identify the competencies that are required by HR professionals operating in Lebanon in order to develop a context-specific HR competency model. By adopting a qualitative approach with a focus on the template analysis perspective, the research project managed to generate several themes through which it was possible to answer the research questions and accordingly propose implications for future research.

Implications for Future Research

The following research study gave insight on what HR professionals believe to be the reasons for the underdevelopment of the HR function in Lebanon, which in turn makes room for future research topics. The participants associated the underdevelopment of the HR function with the considerable presence of SME's and family businesses, lack of professional HR bodies and academic education, and the presence of sub-par competent people within the profession. The most significant theme however was the presence of SME's and family businesses. Because HR professionals within SME's and family businesses are not given the autonomy and

sufficient resources to function in a proper way, the function is powerless and will not move forward. Very little research has been done on the HR function in Lebanon, and what currently exists is not sufficient enough to validate the reasons for the underdevelopment of the function. However there are so far two major indications, one being the size and ownership of the businesses in Lebanon, and two being the considerable number of HR people who do not have professional qualifications that are relevant to HR. Hence this opens room for future research on the academic qualifications of HR professionals operating in Lebanon, and a further examination of the HR function within SME's and family businesses. While several studies have collected the insights of HR professionals in Lebanon, no studies have been made on the insights of management on the HR function and perhaps what can be done, in management's opinion, for HR to be more effective. This research study also gave insight on the competencies that are needed by HR professionals in order to successfully operate in Lebanon. While there are a number of competency frameworks that identify the competencies that are needed for HR professionals to successfully operate in the West, no research has been done on the competencies that are needed by HR professionals in Lebanon. The results indeed suggest that the competencies needed for HR professionals in Lebanon differ from those needed in the West, especially the interpersonal ones. From the research that has been conducted so far, there are indications that HR is context-specific and hence requires a competency framework of its own. Although this study highlighted some critical competencies, it is not enough to draft a comprehensive indigenous competency framework. Hence, further research needs to be conducted on the competencies required by HR professionals in Lebanon, and data needs to be collected from

multiple sources including the owners and managers of SME's and family businesses.

Limitations

The most evident limitation of this research study is the sample size which is relatively small and thus creates barriers when attempting to find possible reasons for the underdevelopment of the HR function in Lebanon, and the competencies that are needed by HR professionals to successfully operate in Lebanon. Thus the results that were generated from this research study are overgeneralized and need to be validated further before being used for any possible reason.

An additional shortcoming is the fact that the participants who were selected for this study are HR people who hold professional HR qualifications. Although the reason for this was to ensure that the data is being collected from credible sources, perhaps HR people who are highly experienced but do not hold professional HR qualifications had something to add to this study.

Additionally, the participants were approached through LinkedIn meaning that HR professionals who do not have LinkedIn or are not active on the platform did not have the opportunity to participate in this study.

APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Name: _____

Professional title: _____

Organization: _____

Years as an HR professional: _____

Professional Qualifications relevant to HR (Certifications, trainings, conferences etc.):

| | Title | Year |
|-----------|--------------|-------------|
| 1. | | |
| 2. | | |
| 3. | | |
| 4. | | |
| 5. | | |

Interview Questions:

1. Research has indicated that the HR profession in Lebanon is underdeveloped and has a low strategic impact. To what extent do you agree with this statement and what do you believe the reasons for this are?
2. How does the lack of professional HR bodies and academic education in HR shape the development of the HR profession in Lebanon?
3. Do the HR competencies needed for HR managers in Lebanon differ from those needed in the West? If so, why? In what way are they different/.
4. Given the peculiar macro characteristics of the country, what competencies should today's HR managers demonstrate?
5. How has the presence of SMEs and family businesses affected the HR function in Lebanon?
6. What competencies are needed for HR managers to succeed in SMEs and family businesses?

7. Based on the competencies you have listed, what is your assessment of HR professionals in Lebanon?
8. How can HR professionals in Lebanon best develop these critical competencies?
9. Would you ever consider hiring someone for an HR position if he/she has no formal HR education or HR certification? Why or why not?

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