

The Professionalization of Human Resources

Claude Balthazard
Vice-President Regulatory Affairs
Human Resources Professionals Association (HRPA)

On its annual member survey, the Human Resources Professionals Association asks the following question: “Do you agree that the professionalization of HR is, or should be, an important issue for the profession?” In 2013, 89.4% of respondents either ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ with this statement—this represents as much agreement as one is likely to find on any question. Clearly, the professionalization of HR is an issue that is important to HR professionals—but what does it mean to professionalize HR? Where do we currently stand? And what are the next steps or challenges ahead?

Millerson (1964) defined professionalization as the process by which an occupation undergoes transformation to become a profession. More recently, Hodson and Sullivan (2012) stated that professionalization can be understood as the effort by an occupational group to raise its collective standing by taking on the characteristics of a profession. Borrowing from these definitions, we can define the professionalization of Human Resources as the process by which Human Resource professionals collectively strive to achieve the recognition and status that is accorded to the established professions by emulating or adopting the defining characteristics of the established professions.

The process of professionalization is complex—it also doesn’t help that there is a lack of consensus as to the meaning of the term ‘professionalization’, or the term ‘professionalism’ for that matter (Evans, 2008; Hargreaves and Goodson, 1996). Most of the literature on professionalization stems from the field of sociology. When sociologists think of ‘professionalism’ they usually focus on the institutional aspects such as the existence of a regulatory body, legal recognition as a profession, formal training programs, and the existence of codes of ethics. This is different than what most non-sociologists have in mind when they think of ‘professionalism’ (see for instance, the document entitled ‘Elements of professionalism’ authored by the Chief Justice of Ontario Advisory Committee on Professionalism, 2001). Here the focus is often on individual aspects such as the behaviours, attitudes, and values characteristic of the members of a professional group. But even the sociological literature has begun to give more attention to those individual aspects of professionalism (Evans, 2008). Indeed, the term ‘professionalism,’ introduced by Hoyle (1974), has begun to be used to refer to the individual aspects such as the behaviours, attitudes, and values characteristic of members of a professional group.

Although the distinction between ‘professionalism’ and ‘professionalism’ has certainly not made its way into common usage, the distinction between the institutional aspects and the individual aspects of professionalism and professionalization is useful and particularly germane to the profession of HR at this point in time.

Is HR a profession?

Sometimes the issue is put as a question—is HR a profession (as opposed to being ‘just’ an occupation)? Typically, this approach starts by defining the characteristics of professions and then sets out to assess the extent to which HR possesses those characteristics. There are two studies that stand out here.

In 2003, the Society of Human Resources Management (SHRM) (Claus & Collison, 2005) conducted a survey ‘to benchmark the state of the HR profession worldwide.’ This study used Eliot Freidson’s (2001) work to define six dimensions of professionalism: (1) a body of knowledge and skills derived from abstract concepts and theories, (2) recognition as a profession, (3) professional autonomy and internal control, (4) an occupationally controlled labour market requiring training credentials for entry and career mobility, (5) an ideology of service, and (6) limited external controls. Claus & Collison (2005, p.19) concluded that ‘there is still a lot of room left for the maturing of HR in terms of the various dimensions of professionalism.’ Claus & Collison (2005, p.20) noted that HR professionals did not feel that that they were held in high esteem by their organizations, that HR professionals placed a low value on credentials for entering and working in the field of HR, and that HR professionals perceived themselves to have low levels of professional autonomy.

In 2011, Fanning set out to investigate where the HR profession stood on the ‘road to professionalization’ in the US and the UK. Based on a literature review, Fanning (2011) identified nine characteristics that define a profession: (1) a governing body, (2) certification, education and training, (3) a body of knowledge, (4) code of ethics and discipline, (5) legal status, (6) a research base, (7) independence, (8) contribution to society, and (9) recognition. Fanning understood these characteristics as dimensions by which one could measure HR’s progress along “the road to professionalization.” Fanning (2011) used the term ‘semi-professional’ to refer to the midpoint on the evolution from a ‘low professional’ state (occupation) to a ‘high professional’ state (true profession). Fanning concluded that the Human Resources profession was ‘semi-professional’ in so far as it scored highly on many of the nine dimensions of what constitutes a profession but not highly on everything. In particular Fanning noted that the practice of HR does not require a license and expulsion from the governing body would not prohibit an individual from practicing HR.

Although researchers seek answers that are universal, the institutional aspects of professionalization will differ from one jurisdiction to another. For instance, the formal recognition by government of any profession is, by definition, jurisdiction-specific. Professionalization by its very nature will mean something somewhat different in different jurisdictions. The interesting thing to note was that both studies referenced above failed to note

that the HR profession had already achieved statutory recognition in two Canadian jurisdictions: Quebec and Ontario. These two Canadian jurisdictions are at the leading edge of the professionalization of HR—in no other jurisdictions has the HR profession achieved this kind of statutory recognition.

Although HR is no longer ‘just’ an occupation, many would say that it is not yet a true profession—what is it then?

Is HR a ‘semiprofession?’

Whereas Fanning (2011) used the term ‘semi-profession’ to refer to the midpoint on the evolution from a ‘low professional’ state (occupation) to a ‘high professional’ state (true profession), the term ‘semiprofession’ is used by others to refer to occupations which have some of the features of a profession, but are not considered to be quite ‘true’ professions. There are different types of semiprofessions. Many semiprofessions evolved to assist or support professions; other semiprofessions operate independently but with a more limited scope of practice. For example, a dentist would be considered a professional, whereas a dental hygienist would likely be considered a semiprofessional. In engineering, an engineer would be considered a professional, whereas an engineering technologist or technician would be considered a semiprofessional. Likewise, in law, a lawyer would be considered a professional, and a paralegal might be considered a semiprofessional.

The defining characteristics of a ‘semiprofession’ were published by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) way back in 1976 (Howsam, R. B, et al., 1976). Among these criteria are: shorter training periods, a less specialized and less highly developed body of knowledge and skills, markedly less emphasis on theoretical and conceptual bases for practice, a tendency for the individual to identify with the employment institution more and with the profession less, and less autonomy in professional decision making, with accountability to superiors rather than to the profession.

The interesting question is whether the endpoint for the process of professionalization in HR is a ‘semiprofession’ or a ‘true profession?’ According to the AACTE list of criteria, the HR profession would still have many of the characteristics of a ‘semiprofession,’ but, then again, many of the more recent changes in the HR profession point to a semiprofession that is doing its best to become a true profession. In other words, the target for the HR profession seems to be a ‘true profession’ rather than a semiprofession.

Is HR going to make it?

Although professionalization may be described as a process with a certain end-point, there is no certainty that an occupational group on the path of professionalization will make it to the end of the process. Indeed, Abbott (2001) noted that most occupational groups that have embarked on the professionalization journey will achieve autonomy and authority only slowly—if at all. Wilensky (1964, p. 137) noted: “many occupations engage in heroic struggles for professional identification; few make the grade.”

This begs the question: ‘is HR going to make it?’ Wilensky (1964) described some of the factors that impede professionalization: organizational contexts that threaten autonomy, contexts where commercialization has made any notion of a service ideal nonsense, or occupations for which the knowledge base is either too general and vague or too narrow and specific. Of course, the process is still in motion and calling the eventual outcome would be premature, but in the opinion of this author, the HR profession might just have what it takes to ‘make it.’ In support of this position, one could consider the recent debates in the Ontario Legislature leading to the passage of the *Registered Human Resources Professionals Act, 2013* (Dhillon, 2013). The tenure of these debates clearly demonstrated that Legislature considered HR to be a true profession.

Looking forward

As noted earlier, most of the literature on professionalization has focused on the institutional aspects of professionalization. A perspective which has received less attention is the extent to which HR professionals have adopted the behaviours, attitudes, and values characteristic of members of established professions. Given what has recently been achieved in matters of professional regulation and governmental recognition of the profession, focus on the behaviours, attitudes, and values may well be the next frontier.

There is a difference between being ‘professional’ and being ‘a professional.’ Being ‘professional’ means demonstrating at least some of the behaviours, attitudes, and values we associate with being of professionals; being ‘a professional’ goes beyond that. Members of regulated professions are accepting of all sorts of professional obligations such as paying dues to their regulatory body, the requirement to carry professional liability insurance at least in some circumstances, the requirement to engage in continuing professional development, and so on. There is also a certain loss of freedom that comes from being a regulated professional. For instance, true professionals must submit themselves to the authority of a professional regulatory body. Members of regulated professions accept that their regulatory body can set limits on how they can practice their profession, that their regulatory body can scrutinize their work, and that their regulatory body can hold them to account should their work fall short of professional standards. There are some HR professionals who would describe themselves as

'professionals' who, nonetheless, do not readily accept the obligations of being true professionals.

Understanding that the profession is somewhere in transition between being a semiprofession and a profession also sheds some light on the nature of the changes that the HR profession is currently undergoing not only at the institutional level but at the individual level as well. The distinction between semiprofession and profession explains a lot of the diversity in the opinions of HR professionals on a whole variety of topics. Indeed, there are some HR professionals whose behaviours, attitudes, and values are more consistent with a 'semiprofessional' than a 'professional' stance.

For example, individuals who have a semiprofessional stance are more likely to identify with their employer and less with the profession; on the other hand, professionals are more likely to identify with the profession and less with their employer. Individuals who have a semiprofessional stance are less comfortable with being subject to regulation from their regulatory body; individuals who come from the professional stance are more likely to be comfortable with being subject to regulation from their regulatory body.

Although it could be said that the HR profession has had a fair degree of success, at least in Ontario and Quebec, in regards to the 'institutional' aspects of being a profession (what sociologists usually think of when they use the term 'professionalism'), it would appear that the profession still has a way to go in regards to the 'individual' aspects of being a profession (what non-sociologists usually think of when they use the term 'professionalism'). For instance, in a 2011 survey conducted by the Queen's University Industrial Relations Center (Juniper & Hill, 2011) on the 'State of HR in Canada,' the authors noted that those HR professionals who reported that they are 'pessimistic' or 'not sure' about the future of HR were, in general, concerned about the lack of professionalism in the profession and the credentials that are required in order to obtain the CHRP designation.

In striving for the status and recognition that is accorded to true professions, HR professionals will have to adopt more of the behaviours, attitudes, and values characteristic of the professions. The next step in the professionalization of HR may well be described as a 'battle for the hearts and minds' of HR professionals as we move forward in evolving the behaviours, attitudes, and values of members of the profession.

About the Author



Claude Balthazard is Vice-President Regulatory Affairs at the Human Resources Professionals Association (HRPA). Claude's responsibilities include ensuring that all regulatory policies and processes are in place in order for HRP to fulfill its obligations under the Registered Human Resources Professionals Act, 2013, and other acts which HRP is subject to as a professional regulator. Claude is responsible for ensuring that registration and certification processes at HRP meet all regulatory and technical standards. Claude is also HRP's Privacy Officer. Claude has a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Waterloo, is a registered psychologist in the Province of Ontario, and holds the CHRP designation. He joined HRP in March 2007.

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Industrial Relations Centre (IRC)
Queen's University
Kingston, ON K7L 3N6
irc.queensu.ca



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Policy Studies
QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY