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PRACTICING STRATEGY: MAKING SENSE OF THE ACTIVITIES AND APPROACHES OF THE HR FUNCTION IN A SRI LANKAN COMMERCIAL BANK.

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ABSTRACT

Human resource practitioners have increasingly gravitated towards a greater strategic positioning of their activities. However, progress towards human resource (HR) practitioner strategic integration has remained elusive. Arguably, HR practitioners need to enact a greater strategic role within organisations, and as such, play a greater role in organisational practices and performance. This thesis reports on a case study undertaken in a Sri Lankan bank, where 65 interviews were conducted with 55 people across 6 hierarchical levels.

The research focused on understanding how the HR function, in conjunction with its organisational partners, attempts to act strategically. Specifically, the research questions were: (1) how strategic are HR practitioners in the development and implementation of practices across different business units; (2) how does strategic integration occur between HR practitioners and business units; and (3) what factors affect strategic integration between HR practitioners and business units?

A review of the literature on organisational strategy and strategic human resource management indicates that while both fields have unique research gaps within their respective bodies of work, when refocused through a Strategy-as-Practice lens, additional gaps emerge at the cross-section of both streams of scholarship. Addressing these gaps would advance HRM and strategic management scholarship’s understanding of strategy activity in the HRM context.

Findings show that there are a complex range of interconnections between external and internal contextual factors determining the extent to which HR practitioners can make a strategic contribution. Business units’ contextual elements were also found to vary significantly as did the integrative frameworks of practices and activities they sought from HR practitioners. Two main factors inhibited HR practitioners from delivering on these expectations: HR practitioner identity structures, and contextual constraints including lack
of clarity in relation to the broader strategic intent. Furthermore, HR practitioners drew on patterns of previous activity when faced with ambiguity. This often involved them making more sense of ‘what being more strategic means’. This study identified contributions in relation to HR practitioners’ willingness and ability to assert agency around strategic change by interpreting cues from line managers, and thus removing them from the broader strategic expectations of the organisation.
Franz Kafka remarked that “writing is utter solitude, the descent into the cold abyss of oneself”. Had it not been for the support of family, friends and colleagues, I think I would have been lost in my own introspection - with no completed thesis ever eventuating. I am therefore eternally grateful to the small army of supporters who over the years kept me motivated and intellectually stimulated while not letting me forget the importance of retaining a sense of humour.

First and foremost, my sincere love and thanks goes my beautiful, kind and incredibly patient wife. It was her playfulness that kept me going. She supported me emotionally and practically in every way possible, picking up the slack around the house or listening to me explain elements of my PhD over and over just so I could verbalize my thoughts. Second, I would like to thank my mother who endured countless hardships as a single mother to ensure I had a first-rate education. I love you dearly and appreciate everything you have done for me.

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Some of the ideas of chapter 2 of this thesis have been published and presented in the following forum:

**Refereed conference proceedings**

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GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

HRF Human Resource Function
HRM Human Resource Management
SHRM Strategic Human Resource Management
BU Business Unit
BUs Business Units
SAP Strategy-as-practice. A swiftly developing body of scholarship that treats strategy as the work of ‘strategists’, rather than an activity of top management alone. It focusses on who does strategic work, particularly focusing on these actor’s micro-activities. Strategy is therefore treated as something that is done rather than something an organisation has.
RBV Resource-based view of the firm
KPI Key Performance Indicator
CEOG Chief Executive Officer Group. A level within an organisation below that of the board of directors. It constitutes a group of senior executives who make decisions to address internal and external environmental factors. This a level where the locus of strategy formation predominately occurs.