

# The Utility of Human Resource Managers' Action: A Self-centred Perception by Different Organizational Actors



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**Abstract** This study analyses how different organizational actors perceive and characterize human resource (HR) managers' actions at the strategic, tactical and operational levels. In this study, 257 interviews were conducted with organizational actors, and Grounded Theory was applied to analyse the data. The interviewees were employed at ten companies (three multinational and seven Portuguese companies) and represented different hierarchical positions: top managers, peers of HR managers and collaborators from different organizational functions. The interviewees expressed very clear views regarding desirable axes of action for HR managers, and these actions could improve perceptions of HR managers and departments. These desirable axes of action were as follows: proactive; strategic combined with an operational level of action; demonstrating initiative; pragmatic; simultaneously global and local (*glocal*); transparent; objective; just and impartial; legitimate; and efficient and effective. Therefore, the results highlight three main axes where HR managers need to focus their attention: principles of practical action, principles of communication and ethical values. The results demonstrate that when developing their identities and credibility within organizations, HR managers must consider the perceptions of different organizational actors. The ways in which HR managers are perceived by different organizational actors pose a challenge and have an effect on the roles and influence that HR managers and departments can have at the strategic level in organizations. This study contributes to the literature by exploring an important yet underdeveloped field of research on how HR managers are viewed within organizations.

**Keywords** Human resources management · Human resources managers · Axes of action · Perception · Grounded theory

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## 1 Introduction

HR strategic management presupposes an interconnection with an organization's business and results from alignment between HR management strategies, business strategies and the organization's overall strategies (Bloom et al. 2012; Buyens and De Vos 2001). This alignment should be based on reliable human resources management (HRM) policies and practices that are consistent with those of other internal areas of the organization. Additionally, there must be an equal level of coherence and consistency between the same policies and practices (Aldrich et al. 2015; Boswell 2006; Brewster 1997; Guest 1987, 2010; Guest et al. 2003; Hendry and Pettigrew 1990; Ibănescu 2015; Markoulli et al. 2017; Miles and Snow 1984; Rivero and Dabos 2017; Schuler and Jackson 1987; Stone and Deadrick 2015; Waldman et al. 2012).

In the strategic perspective of HRM, certain approaches assume a more reactive approach through which HR programmes, processes and practices contribute to the achievement of an organization's objectives (Gannon et al. 2015; Miles and Snow 1984; Stavrou and Brewster 2005). HR managers may participate in the strategic planning process through the use of various proactive approaches, and the available HR or characteristics that they have may condition the organization's strategies (Gannon et al. 2015; Miles and Snow 1984; Rivero and Dabos 2017). In daily practice, the routinization of many HRM responsibilities occurs, although it is expected that HR managers and departments will assume a proactive stance and a strategic position within their organizations (Rivero and Dabos 2017; Tung 2016).

This poses new challenges for HR managers, who must reevaluate the way they position their work role (e.g. in legal terms), redefine their goals, values, and roles and develop new competencies and work practices (Cabral-Cardoso 2004; Rivero and Dabos 2017; Stone and Deadrick 2015; Tung 2016; Ulrich and Dulebohn 2015). However, obstacles to the development of HRM must be considered, namely the lack of skills and motivation among many HR managers to effectively play a strategic role in the organizations in which they work (Bloom et al. 2012; Cabral-Cardoso 2004; Scullion and Starkey 2000; Torrington 1998). In addition to these obstacles, top managers sometimes use a discourse through which they advocate the need for a strategic and proactive HR function even though there is no real understanding of what this means. This lack of understanding has implications for specific management measures that may be implemented in an organization by HR managers and departments (Hutchinson and Purcell 2010; Lo et al. 2015; Mirfakhar et al. 2018; Ng 2011; Perry and Kulik 2008; Uyar and Deniz 2012). Other obstacles have been highlighted, such as ambiguities and inconsistencies at various levels of HRM and notably in terms of the nature and exercising of the authority of HR managers (Bloom et al. 2012; Cabral-Cardoso 2004; Davila et al. 2010; Torrington 1998). These obstacles are incremented by the fact that HR departments have to accommodate and serve institutional, instrumental and individual objectives, simultaneously, and serve multiple stakeholders or constituencies (Tsui 1990; Tsui and Milkovich 1987).

This paper investigates the perceptions of the activities and responsibilities of HR managers among different organizational actors at different hierarchical

and functional levels within the organization in the Portuguese context. This focus is related to the role that HR managers play in organizational strategies as perceived by other actors, with a particular emphasis on the different levels of action of HR managers; these different levels are organized according to categories termed axes of action. Therefore, we aim to better understand how different organizational actors perceive and characterize HR managers' actions at the strategic, tactical and operational levels. This study addressed the following research question: What are the current perceptions of HR managers and how are these perceptions affected by the axes of action perceived by different organizational actors?

This empirical study used interviews to collect data; 257 interviews were conducted with different organizational actors, and Grounded Theory was used to analyse our data. The interviewees were employed at ten companies (three multinational and seven Portuguese companies) and were at different hierarchical levels: top managers, peers HR managers and collaborators from different organizational functions. These companies are mainly large companies and leaders in their fields of business and were selected only companies with an HR department and an HR manager who is hierarchically and/or functionally subordinate to an administrator, general manager or superior general HR manager. Although not representative of the Portuguese business structure, composed mainly by small and medium companies, it is important to consider the Portuguese context of HRM. HRM has developed from a purely bureaucratic and administrative role to a people-centred approach to management (Cabral-Cardoso 2004). However, the function of HR manager is a reality mainly in medium and large companies. According to the Cranet survey, Portugal was considered to possess a lower level of strategic integration, but with line managers playing a significant role in HRM (Cabral-Cardoso 2004).

This study contributes to the literature by exploring an important yet underdeveloped field of research on how HR managers are perceived within organizations (Brandl and Pohler 2010; Farndale 2005; Uyar and Deniz 2012; Yamamoto 2013). This study also contributes to the debate on how the perceptions of other organizational members have an effect on the roles that HR professionals play at the strategic level in organizations and, consequently, on the success of HRM practices (Aldrich et al. 2015; Mirfakhar et al. 2018; Sheehan et al. 2014). This study also contributes to practitioners, by highlighting that HR managers and departments serve multiple stakeholders or constituencies, with multiple and diverse objectives (Tsui 1990). As stated by Ulrich et al. (2017, p. 10), "understanding stakeholder expectations defines who HR must satisfy to help the firm succeed". Therefore, the results highlight three main areas of action where HR managers need to focus their attention. First, the principles of practical action, which underpin their practices on HRM. Second, principles of communication, which provide the guidance for a clear and effective communication with the stakeholders of HRM. Third, the ethical values which are the basis both for their practices of HRM and for their interaction with HRM stakeholders.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section presents a brief outline of the literature on HRM and on HR managers from the strategic perspective. The methodology of the present study, specifically the methods of data collection and analysis used, and a description of our participants are presented in the

section following. Next, the perceptions of different organizational actors regarding the axes of action of HR managers are described and analysed. There follows the discussion of the results and the theoretical model. The final section presents the conclusion, limitations and future research.

## 2 HRM and HR Managers

An understanding of the perceptions of HR managers and departments is a topic that continues to attract the attention of researchers (Brandl and Pohler 2010; Farndale 2005; Stavrou and Brewster 2005; Uyar and Deniz 2012; Yamamoto 2013).

Different authors have highlighted that the analyses of HR departments should consider several factors, such as the approach or methods used to manage this department and existing HR development policies and strategies for identifying and recruiting new talent (Stone and Deadrick 2015; Yamamoto 2009). Such research has also emphasized how HR departments are built, formalized and institutionalized and how their image and expectations of their performance are developed (Coda et al. 2009; Yamamoto 2013). Therefore, the study of HR managers and departments, as well as the implementation of HR practices, needs to consider the conditions created by macro-, mezzo- and micro-contextual elements, since the actions taken by different organizational members do not occur in a vacuum (Cooke and Saini 2010; Mirfakhar et al. 2018; Tsui 1990). Important is also the fact that the HR department has to engage and serve multiple stakeholders (Klaas et al. 2012; Mirfakhar et al. 2018; Tsui 1990). As argued by Tsui and Milkovich (1987), the ability of HR departments to meet these stakeholders' expectations or demands may dictate its survival.

### 2.1 *The Nature of Specific HR Departments*

An organization's HR department and its importance can be analysed, on the one hand, from the perspective of the formulation of principles, policy development, guidelines and actions, and the design and implementation of HRM practices (Bloom et al. 2012; Dolan et al. 2010; Lo et al. 2015; Mirfakhar et al. 2018; Pernkopf-Konh ausner and Brandl 2011; Yamamoto 2009). On the other hand, it is possible to analyse these bodies based on the power that they assume or can assume within an organization (Bloom et al. 2012; Hennessy and McCartney 2008; Mirfakhar et al. 2018; Stainback et al. 2010). In addition, the characterization of HR departments can be carried out based on strategic and operational dimensions (Dolan et al. 2010; Farndale 2005; Hennessy and McCartney 2008). From the operational point of view, this characterization is structured in terms of the type of policies, programmes and practices that are conceptualized, developed, operationalized and implemented by these departments. From the strategic point of view, this characterization is carried out through the role that these departments assume throughout the whole process

of planning and strategically formulating nuclear principles, from the vision to the organizational mission. However, it is important to take into consideration that the HR department interacts with a variety of constituencies, including top management, line managers and employees of other functional departments, with multiple objectives and potentially inconsistent (Tsui 1990).

As proposed by Ulrich (1997a, b, 1998a, b), the role of HR departments can also be analysed based on role typology. This typology is based on the roles assumed and developed by the people and on the different HR processes, on the one hand, and on the operational and strategic activities that the HR body develops, on the other. More importantly, HR departments need to create a comprehensive information advantage and deliver measurable business value (Ulrich et al. 2017) to help organizations overcome the different challenges and demands they face (Boon et al. 2011; Truss et al. 2002; Yamamoto 2013).

The relevance of this department, besides its strategic and operational relevance, is also tactical and instrumental, based on multiple factors. These factors include the structure of an organization, the composition and location of a department in an organization's chart, and its nature, scope and level of assigned functions and responsibilities (Aldrich et al. 2015; Dolan et al. 2010; Pfeffer 1998). However, several studies have highlighted that many HR departments are still far from being involved with strategy issues and from contributing to their organization performance (Brandl and Pohler 2010; Farnale 2005).

As with the research on HRM and HR managers, the literature on HR departments has also used two distinct approaches: what they do and what they should be doing. Thus, this study addresses a very important dimension: expectations surrounding the roles and axes of action of HR managers and HR departments. Considering the transformations that have occurred in HRM and the roles and respective expectations of HR managers and departments, key facilitators and inhibitors that may facilitate a better understanding of these changes are discussed below.

## ***2.2 Facilitators and Inhibitors of the Roles of HR Managers and Departments***

The role and status of HRM in an organization, while relying largely on factors internal to the organization, are also dependent on external factors. This is attributed to the fact that any organization as a system interacts with the external environment and is influenced by this same context (Bloom et al. 2012; Stainback et al. 2010; Ulrich 1997a, b, 1998a, b). In fact, the context and its characteristics are paramount in explaining the success or failure of HRM practices (Mirfakhar et al. 2018).

In internal terms, the effective importance that senior managers attribute to HRM is of particular relevance. This importance allows HRM to assume a strategic function within an organization. This strategic function can help HRM actively and proactively anticipate and solve problems while adding value and creating competitive and

distinctive organizational advantages in the short, medium and long terms (Aldrich et al. 2015; Bloom et al. 2012; Cabral-Cardoso 2004; Farndale 2005; Paauwe and Boselie 2003; Waldman et al. 2012; Yamamoto 2013). Another important factor related to the success of organizations and particularly of business concerns the ability to identify, to support and to optimize people's potential and competencies (Bloom et al. 2012; Boselie and Paauwe 2005; Cabral-Cardoso 2004; Mirfakhar et al. 2018; Paauwe and Boselie 2003; Pfeffer 1995; Sheehan et al. 2014; Yamamoto 2013). Also relevant is the capacity of HRM to keep a positive relationship and high-quality communication with HR stakeholders (Klaas et al. 2012; Mirfakhar et al. 2018).

However, obstacles to the development of HRM must be considered, and they may emerge from specific characteristics of different actors. For example, the lack of skills and motivation among many HR managers to effectively play a strategic role in the organizations in which they work (Bloom et al. 2012; Cabral-Cardoso 2004; Scullion and Starkey 2000; Torrington 1998). Other obstacles have been highlighted, such as ambiguities and inconsistencies at various levels of HRM and notably in terms of the nature and exercising of the authority of HR managers (Bloom et al. 2012; Davila et al. 2010; Mirfakhar et al. 2018; Torrington 1998). Other important actors are top managers, who sometimes use a discourse through which they advocate the need for a strategic and proactive HR function even though there is no real understanding of what this means. This lack of understanding has implications for specific management measures that may be implemented in an organization by HR managers and departments (Hutchinson and Purcell 2010; Lo et al. 2015; Mirfakhar et al. 2018; Ng 2011; Perry and Kulik 2008; Uyar and Deniz 2012). Also, line managers' skills, beliefs and attitudes, as well as the support they receive from the organization in developing their work, play a significant role, positive or negative, in the development and implementation of HRM practices (Dewettinck and Vroonen 2017; Mirfakhar et al. 2018). Finally, employees' characteristics, such as ability to organize their work to meet their personal goals and previous experiences with HRM, play a significant role as facilitators or as obstacles in the development and implementation of HRM (Meijerink et al. 2016; Mirfakhar et al. 2018; Piening et al. 2014).

In the specific Portuguese context, and in what concerns HR managers, the studies argue that they are still struggling to be listened in the organization and to set the HRM agenda (Cabral-Cardoso 2004). Two additional difficulties to the consolidation of the HRM in Portugal are the lack of credibility of the HR function and the size, ownership and structure of companies (Cabral-Cardoso 2004). The Portuguese HRM context, as described by Cabral-Cardoso (2004, p. 973; see also House et al. 2004), "is sometimes described as one in which 'organization' is seen as an abstract and far away entity most employees would not identify themselves with, thus hindering the development of affective organizational commitment".

Next, we describe methodological and research methods used for the present study.

### 3 Methodology<sup>1</sup>

This study is part of a broader investigation developed under an interpretative paradigm by assuming that reality is a social construction and cannot be understood independently from the actors that create that reality (Urquhart 2013). The empirical study is based on qualitative research designed to understand phenomena through the meanings that individuals attribute to them (Myers 2011). This study used interviews for data collection purposes. Grounded Theory methodology was adopted to analyse the interviews (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Laperrière 2010; Strauss and Corbin 1998; Urquhart 2013). This analysis was confirmed and validated by a specialist in the use of Grounded Theory.

The data collected through the interviews reveals a set of categories that were grouped into broader dominions, which we designate as *axes of action*, to organize the coding process. These axes<sup>2</sup> of action derived from the data convey, from a deeper analysis of the discourse produced, continuums of guiding courses of action or “ways of acting”. They allow us to analyse the perceptions of the activities and responsibilities of HR managers among different organizational actors.

The empirical study examines ten companies, three of which are multinational and seven of which are Portuguese. Two of the Portuguese companies are family run. Of the ten companies, two are medium-sized companies, albeit they are leaders in their fields of business; the others are large companies (in regard to total assets, sales volume and the number of employees). The following criteria were used to select the companies: those with an HR department; those with a person responsible for HRM with the title HR manager and who effectively performed their duties; and finally, those employing an HR manager who is hierarchically and/or functionally subordinate to an administrator, general manager or superior general HR manager.

To collect the data, 257 interviews were conducted, with an average duration of 90 min. The interviewees represented different hierarchical levels, e.g. top managers, peers of HR managers and collaborators from different organizational functions, with or without managerial responsibilities. Although HR managers and their collaborators were also interviewed, given the objectives of this study, they were not considered, leaving 225 potential references. The interview guide consisted of 66 questions, among which were specific questions concerning the perception that the different organizational actors have about the ways of acting of HR managers. Only these questions were considered for the objective of this study. The first contact was made by phone with administrators and HR managers known to the first author, who was for a long period of time HR manager. The purpose of this first call was to explain

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<sup>1</sup>This study was conducted as part of a broader project in which different themes were analysed using the same methodology. Only information corresponding to the objectives of this study was used. The broader study included the definition of research questions and the construction of the semi-structured interview guide used.

<sup>2</sup>According to the Oxford Dictionary, *axis* can be defined as “A straight central part in a structure to which other parts are connected” (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/axis#h70322679174160>, access 04/10/2018).



**Table 1** Classification of the data sample

Business clusters	Activity	Origin	Number of interviews by company	Codification of the interviewees
Multinational companies	(A) Industrial	Sweden/USA	$N = 27$	Sub. 1–27
	(B) Chemistry	Germany	$N = 27$	Sub. 28–54
	(C) Technology	Germany	$N = 28$	Sub. 55–82
National (Portuguese) companies	(D) Industrial	Portugal	$N = 25$	Sub. 83–107
	(E) Technology		$N = 25$	Sub. 108–132
	(F) Commercial		$N = 26$	Sub. 133–158
	(G) Technology		$N = 25$	Sub. 159–183
Family companies	(H) Industrial	Portugal	$N = 26$	Sub. 184–209
	(I) Commercial		$N = 24$	Sub. 210–233
	(J) Textile		$N = 24$	Sub. 234–257

the project and the main goals. I was also schedule a meeting for a comprehensive explanation of the research objectives, the data required, as well as for the definition of the number of interviews and the procedures to select the interviewees. The classification of the companies, their sectors of activity and countries of origin, the number of interviews conducted, and the codification of interviewees are described in Table 1.

The interviewees covered a broad age range, from 19 to 82 years of age, and labour seniority, ranging from 3 months to 67 years, and were at different stages of their careers. The gender distribution of the interviewees was balanced across professional categories with the exception of the administrator category, for which only three of the 24 interviewees were women. Most of the interviews were carried out between 2007 and 2012, and after transcription, given the changes in the financial and political conditions of the Portuguese context, additional interviews were conducted between 2013 and 2015, confirming the previous results.

#### 4 Perceived Performance Axes

The perceptions analysed in this section are based on a discourse that reflects the guidelines that we designate as *axes of action* more so than a listing of HRM activities or practices. According to the words of one interviewee:

What we have as HRM activities are those legal, administrative aspects, and the HR director is very circumscribed to these technical and administrative responsibilities... more recruitment and selection where necessary and training when there is financial capacity to do so. There could be other activities of a very different nature. Something that improved communication in the company, the ability to manage people by the chiefs, or made the company a place where it is worth returning to the next day, for example. (Subj. Manager Peer)



**Table 2** Axes and scope of perceived actions

Scope	Axes of action
Essence	Reactive—Active—Proactive
Levels of action	Operational—Tactical—Strategic
Orientation	Lethargy—Accommodation—Initiative
Decision-making	Immobility—Nim—Pragmatism
Context	Local—Global
Communication	Ambiguity—Transparency
Content	Subjectivity—Objectivity
Attitude	Injustice/Partiality—Justice/Impartiality
Legal perspective	Illegalities—Pseudo-legality—Legality
Result	Inefficiency/Ineffectiveness—Efficiency/Effectiveness

This perspective reflects the existence of two types of action performed at the HRM level: existing/real actions and desirable actions, as evidenced by the perceptions expressed by the participants regarding the adoption of guidelines that influenced the performance of HR managers and HR departments (209 references). This perception is summarized as follows: “I know that the HR manager himself is aware that there is a difference between what is done and what could be done in this very important area of the company” (Subj. Technical Collaborator).

Table 2 provides a categorization of the different axes of action as perceived by the interviewees.

In labelling *axes of action*, the linguistic expressions employed by the interviewees were used to illustrate their perceptions of perceived and desirable actions by HR managers and HR departments. Therefore, the identified axes of action reveal perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of HR managers and departments and of what they could be (i.e. “the real and the desirable HRM” (Subj. Manager Peer)).

In the following subsections, the guiding categories regarding the levels of action are analysed. It is assumed that the established categories are interrelated and are not distinct but exhibit a transversality that forms channels of communication and levels of interpersonal contact, and these interactions can produce useful metaphors for the actions of HR managers and departments.

#### **4.1 Reactive—Active—Proactive**

These three types of performance behaviours were identified for all the studied companies. However, four trends must be noted. First, for this axis of action, the interviewees stated that the behaviours of HR managers “... *should be increasingly proactive...*” (Subj. Administrator). The proactivity of HR managers was discussed frequently by the participants (209 references of 225). However, this frequency assumes

that contextual factors serve as determinants of HR managers' and departments' actions, often leading to reactive performance. The perceptions of 183 interviewees can be conveyed by the following quote: "... *the unpredictability of the object in question - person - and, on the other hand, the mutability of the contexts in which the manager of HR acts, lead to the need for an attitude that is often reactive*" (Subj. Manager Peer).

Second, the more active the actors at various levels of HRM are in terms of being good observers and listeners, organized in their actions, and able to provide and receive feedback from all internal and external interlocutors, the better the knowledge of the organization's workers in terms of hard and soft skills. In addition, when HR managers have a good understanding of the expectations that different actors have of their performance and of the business and its specificities, they are more likely to be more proactive (189 refs).

Third, although *proactivity* is considered the ideal action strategy (209 refs), the behaviour most frequently referenced as the reality is that of *reactivity* (199 refs), which is related to certain types of roles, for example "fireman" and "holy miracle worker". Reactivity largely results from a lack or even absence of an HRM strategy articulated with the company's overall strategy (176 refs) and from the fact that, contrary to rhetoric on the importance of HRM and of people, this area of management remains a second priority in organizations (168 refs). In addition, HR structures are afforded few resources and receive many requests for intervention, and there is a lack of preparedness among most Portuguese managers in HRM as well as a short-term business vision (149 refs).

Finally, there is also the perception that proactivity is linked to an anticipation of negative situations or to "black prophecies" (Subj. Technical Collaborator). These prophecies, which were mentioned by 64 of the interviewees, were always presented as non-existent in the interviewees' companies and were associated with the role of the HR manager as "the prophet of doom". For example, one interviewee stated: "*It is already known that when it is [time] to go to the HR manager, or he appears here, it is because there has been or will be disgrace. He is the true herald of doom...*" (Subj. Manager Peer).

The results of this axis of action, from the strategic HRM perspective, are in line with approaches that take a more reactive approach through which HR programmes, processes and practices contribute to the achievement of an organization's objectives (Miles and Snow 1984; Stavrou and Brewster 2005). Other proactive approaches are used by specialized HR managers during the strategic planning process, and the existing HR or their characteristics may condition an organization's strategy (Miles and Snow 1984; Uyar and Deniz 2012; Wright et al. 2001). In daily practice, the routinization of many HRM responsibilities occurs more often than not, although the expectation is that an HR department will take a proactive stance and a strategic position within its organization (Dolan et al. 2010; Uyar and Deniz 2012).

## 4.2 Operational—Tactical—Strategic

Actions within this axis involved the perception that only what is strategic is valued and that the aim is to view everything from a strategic level. This occurs for the sake of custom or fashion (56 refs); to ensure that one is recognized as of higher status and/or more important by other actors and organizational areas (74 refs); or because the culture and management of a company already attribute a strategic role to HRM (83 refs).

However, HRM in daily practice is still viewed as applying principles, positions and actions of a more operational nature (191 refs), in which an emphasis is placed on short-term and immediate reactive actions and interventions. Numerous organizational actors (173 refs) referred to "... a poor understanding of the relationship between HRM's performance and the company's overall strategy" (Subj. Manager Peer) and "... a relative ignorance of the core of the business" (Subj. Technical Col-laborator). Such views align with those observed in previous studies (Bloom et al. 2012; Boswell 2006; Fabi et al. 2009; Martinez et al. 2013; Waldman et al. 2012).

Other interviewees argued the following:

Of course, the ideal in HRM and in other areas, I say, for example, mine, which is even nuclear, should be more strategic... in my area that is production, as it is more objective and quantifiable, we have to be more strategic, but we still fall short. The HR manager is still very much involved in the day-to-day tasks, and as such his concern is mainly focused on the short term. (Subj. Manager Peer)

I think HR management is often referred to as a way of increasing the credibility and the status of the area itself. However, is it necessary? People are key to the company and that is why HRM has to be strategic. (Subj. Manager Peer)

It is interesting to argue that HRM is perceived as "very operational", given that it is considered a non-objective area with few quantitative indicators (Toulson and Dewe 2004; Ulrich 1997a, b). This is viewed as a handicap by some interviewees (107 refs). According to these participants, limitations on quantification strongly limit the extent to which HRM and HR managers can act and be perceived as strategic.

Nonetheless, others viewed HRM as more strategic (121 refs) due to it being more closely related to the business, to getting to know the business better and to identifying the trajectory of the business (104 refs), as shown in previous studies (Brandl and Pohler 2010; Dolan et al. 2010). Another aspect concerns the better articulation of HRM objectives through the general objectives of the organization and the consequent operationalization of those objectives to contribute effectively to organizational outcomes (118 refs); this finding is in line with previous studies (Bloom et al. 2012; Martinez et al. 2013; Waldman et al. 2012).

The participants discussed several issues, including the following: greater proximity to people by the HR manager (97 refs); confidence in the data provided by HR managers and HR departments (94 refs); and coherence between company values and HRM practices (98 refs). According to the interviewees:

Only by knowing the business and its evolutionary tendencies and the position that the company has at a higher level can an HR manager aspire to have strategic participation ... ours does this very well (Subj. Administrator);

In my opinion, the HRM that we have in this company is both operational and strategic... personally I do not see any problem with being both, and secondly, the mere fact that the HR structure consists of only 3 people makes it necessary to have both roles. In addition, decentralization makes it easier to concentrate on more strategic tasks, and that makes all the difference. (Subj. Manager Peer)

As highlighted in the literature (Aldrich et al. 2015), the interviewees noted that HRM must be strategic but that it is impossible not to consider the operational dimension. As highlighted by Aldrich et al. (2015, p. 109), “the degree of strategic input given to HR professionals is, in part, subject to the CEO/president’s view of what HR can contribute to the realization of business plans”. Nonetheless, this study demonstrates that the perspectives of different organizational actors on the strategic dimensions of HRM are paramount, as HRM affects all levels of an organization and “the choices made by the HR department on the design and implementation of ‘people management’ policies contribute to organizational viability and sustained competitive advantage” (Aldrich et al. 2015, p. 106).

### 4.3 *Lethargy—Accommodation—Initiative*

Although there were few references made to perceptions of *lethargy* and *accommodation* individually, the two tendencies together were mentioned by several interviewees (57 refs), as shown by the following quotes:

There are many situations and warnings that emerge in many companies that talk about change and even the need for changes in HRM; something could even occur, but the intention is that everything stays the same.... (Subj. Administrator)

There are companies in which the best strategy of HRM is really the accommodation, and in this company, I met an HR director who did it perfectly, he was almost invisible.... (Subj. Technical Collaborator)

*Initiative* was defined as a desirable behaviour and attitude (223 refs), and in many cases, it was considered a characteristic of the HR director’s performance (149 refs).

Yes, the new HR manager is a person with will and initiative; she makes things happen. (Subj. Administrator)

Yes, I can say that even though HR is not a very numerous team, the HR manager has a huge initiative, often with very few resources, and he develops a whole set of activities that are fundamental to the different areas of our company. (Subj. Manager Peer)

However, in some cases (27 refs), *initiative* was associated with less positive aspects, as shown by the following quote:

There is initiative, but for the benefit of oneself and one’s friends ... (silence), it seems that some responsible for HRM in the company divide people into three groups: *children*, *stepchildren* and *non-existent individuals*. (Subj. Technical Collaborator)

This line of action highlights the issue of initiative among HRM professionals. In this context, HR managers and HR departments can engage in other types of

activities, through which they can add strategic and operational value to HRM, and can develop value-added actions for employees and the organization (Gilbert et al. 2011; Lemmergaard 2009; Schuler 1990).

Accommodating behaviour, according to the interviewees, can be interpreted as an organizational survival strategy used by an HR manager who assumes an almost non-existent presence, limiting his activity to not questioning the status quo. The professional de-individualization of the HR manager and the acceptance of a professional stance that gives voice to the *owner's voice* can create perceptions of organizational lethargy and accommodation.

#### 4.4 *Immobility—Nim—Pragmatism*

In this axis of action of the HR manager, the most emphasized aspect was *pragmatism* (189 refs), which corroborates the interviewees' different views on traits valued in an HR manager. On the other hand, *nim*<sup>3</sup> (97 refs) is considered “*very typical of HRM and obviously nothing complimentary*” (Subj. Manager Peer). According to the interviewees, *nim* is perceived in two different ways. On the one hand, it may be tactical or infrequent “... *if it is meant to measure or consolidate a response better, but it must still be quick, which can be tolerated and accepted ...*” (Subj. Manager Peer). On the other hand, when *nim* is systematic, this leads to disbelief, generates mistrust and discourages future contact or requests for help, as expressed by the following quotes:

Nobody likes to be in the middle of a bridge without knowing which way to go (Subj. Undifferentiated Administrative Collaborator);

Unfortunately, *nim* is not only about HR issues, but in my opinion, it is in this area of management that everything gets more complicated; the consequences can be more dire. (Subj. Undifferentiated Operational Collaborator)

Despite the critical issues that this form of action raises, the data analysis revealed that perceptions of *nim* as a mode of action can develop through different situations. An emphasis was placed on situations in which a company culture cultivates a “*chronic ambiguity*” or “*power grey zones and uncertainty*”, as described by the interviewees, and it is up to the HR manager to interpret and/or agree with this mode of ambiguous management. Perceptions of *nim* as a way of acting apply to all companies, with a particular emphasis on the population of peers of HR managers (51 refs) and line managers (19 refs). This can be understood, on the one hand, by the fact that the return of HRM responsibilities is mainly experienced by these populations, making it difficult to fulfil their management obligations to their employees. On the other hand, this perception can be understood as a lack of sensitivity among these organizational actors to issues related to HRM (Bredin and Söderlund 2007; Currie and Procter 2001; Gilbert et al. 2011; Hutchinson and Purcell 2010; Perry and Kulik

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<sup>3</sup>A person unable to say yes or no without hesitation.

2008; Renwick 2003). This lack of sensitivity can lead to expectations including the following:

... if it is in the law, it must be black and white, and there should be no room for doubt... (Subj. Manager Peer);

They [HR] have to be more pragmatic, more operational... We too are asked to be pragmatic in so many things where the easiest [option] was to keep postponing. (Subj. Line Manager)

The issue of immobility also emerged from the data in reference to HR managers “letting go” (13 refs). This action, in comparison to those of *nim*, was different insofar as it did not involve expectations, as reflected by the following quote: “... *we already know that we get nothing but the classic pat on the back ...*” (Subj. Technical Collaborator).

#### 4.5 Local—Global

The term “contextual” was frequently used by the participants. Of the 225 participants, all of them stressed the need for HRM to remain contextualized within the local and/or global context. The participants emphasized that HR managers should seek to frame issues based on the local contexts in which they arise and also that any implementation of actions/practices must account for the contexts considered relevant and should “anticipate the future” (Subj. Manager Peer).

Participants from multinational companies mainly focused on global performance; most of these participants were peers of HR managers (32 refs).

The fact that we are part of a multinational company implies that HRM, and particularly the HR manager’s mode of action, is global and aligned with all other HR directors of other units and with the mother company’s directives. (Subj. Manager Peer of a multinational company)

However, this notion of *global* performance is always framed by the need to adapt to local contexts. Following from the previous quote:

... although we are in tune with the mother company, the reality is that particularly in the issues of HRM, the context must always be considered: not only the context of the country and its culture but also the very particular context of the company. This, at least in our case, has been an added value because even in this area, adaptation to the context has led to situations of improvement of structural policies and even innovation in practices, which make us a case for benchmarking. (Subj. Manager Peer of a multinational company)

#### 4.6 Ambiguity—Transparency

Concerning perceptions of actions characterized by ambiguity, the data showed different results. For companies with “bicephalic” leadership (with two HR directors) and in which HRM is centralized, more comments concerning the perceived ambiguity of the HR manager’s role emerged (26 refs). In the former case (bicephalic

leadership), the ambiguity stems from the different actors perceiving some overlap and a lack of definition of roles and “territorial struggles” between the two HR managers, as highlighted in the quote below. In the second case (centralized HRM), ambiguity is experienced in terms of decision-making processes, with a greater occurrence of *nim*, concomitantly with perceptions of more distance from HR managers and departments.

The problem is that sometimes, and more than it should happen, we end up not knowing which of the HR departments we should contact. We are unsure, and even after solving a problem, it does not mean that the next time, when faced with a similar problem, we would not have the same doubts, but the company must know what it wants ... and it seems that is how it wants it. (Subj. Line Manager)

In this continuum, multinational companies have the advantage of being considerably more formalized. However, and this emerged in the three companies, when a complex or unpredictable HRM problem arises, an intense and ambiguous situation results but is usually quickly remedied, as expressed in the following quote:

In general, this type of company deals poorly with ambiguities and seeks to plan everything, formalize everything. However, this is obviously impossible, and then I think that the fact that we are Portuguese, like MacGyver style, we managed to get everything going, we get off the ground... I think this characteristic of us in a normally planned environment but in unpredictable contexts helps us to pioneer many things in HRM. (Subj. Manager Peer)

The positive aspects emphasized included the training and the strategies that are acquired in addressing such ambiguous situations in business life (2009–2015), which is very unpredictable, ambiguous and uncertain, as mentioned in the following quote:

The resourcefulness, combined with the ability to work, makes Portuguese emigrants out of this world, the best in the world. Obviously, being well led and having organization and planning are essential. But not everything can be planned, and not always what is planned is met, and there arises this ability of ours to go around... call it a resourcefulness, improvisation, whatever you want... we can even drive the Germans, Canadians, Norwegians to despair, but then we save the situation. Surely, you know the anecdote that says that all companies should have a Portuguese in your service ... only placed in a glass display case with a sign saying: «break in case of emergency» (laughs)... We are in the best and the worst [situation]. (Subj. Administrator) (59 refs express the same idea)

Transparency was referred to as a behavioural trait that should guide the performance of all departments, not only HRM; in fact, it “... *should be understood as a value of the company*” (Subj. Technical Collaborator; 179 refs). According to another participant, “*It would be excellent if there were transparency at all levels, but this is a dream that for some would surely turn into a nightmare ... because they would discover many bad things, many illegal schemes ...*” (Subj. Technical Collaborator).

However, it is emphasized that transparency must have limits (110 refs). These limits stem from the confidentiality associated with HRM: “*Transparency is not, nor can it be, having doors wide open. The information must be accurate, serious, useful, and transparent, but it must be disseminated in appropriate doses according to the levels of responsibility*” (Subj. Administrator).



Aligning organizational and HRM strategies and having principles, policies and practices consistent with business strategies can help increase levels of effective transparency (Bloom et al. 2012; Fabi et al. 2009; Guest 1987; Hendry and Pettigrew 1990; Martinez et al. 2013; Miles and Snow 1984; Schuler and Jackson 1987; Waldman et al. 2012).

#### 4.7 *Subjectivity—Objectivity*

Regarding this line of action, the participants argued for positioning HRM and HR managers at the pole of subjectivity (193 refs), without any pejorative value attributed to them. They highlighted that subjectivity is unavoidable and results from managing people: “... *the ability to deal with the subjectivity of workers is an asset to the HR manager and department*” (Subj. Manager Peer) (148 refs). Others stated the following:

HR managers cannot and should not stay or feel diminished by saying that this area is subjective ... knowing how to deal with subjectivity is fundamental (Subj. Manager Peer);

I consider HRM's subjectivity to be its main strength, and I even think that if there is something that HR managers and departments should do, it is to place their bets on what is specific and unique to them. (Subj. Undifferentiated Operational Collaborator)

Objectivity appears to be associated with the need to assess the contributions of HRM to company outcomes and to the quantification of measurable subjects. Peers of HR managers were the group who most often referred to this quantification as ideal for HR managers and for their respective departments (91 refs). At the real/everyday level, perceptions of objective performance were considered superior in quantifiable situations (e.g. wage processing, contracting indexes, hours of training, absenteeism and turnover rates).

It is interesting to note the positions of 14 of the 24 administrators regarding objectivity. By conducting a deeper study of HRM, a better understanding of what objectivity means in HRM and a more detailed understanding of how each HR functional area can contribute to an organization's results can be obtained. Further analysis highlighted the need to operationalize performance indicators for HRM and for HR managers and departments. On this point, all 24 managers reported a need for specific metrics, also highlighting the specificities of this area and the difficulties inherent to the development of indicators, as highlighted by the following quote:

Sometimes I feel in the management meetings a desire to demand metrics for the performance of HRM, and I feel some discomfort on the part of the HR manager who takes refuge in what he already obtains, such as the social report. In this specific case, I even consider that we have metrics that go beyond the official legal balance sheet, but I'm not even sure if it's still done. I know, however, that here in the company with this director, what is done and always has been made is an in-depth social report. Of course, at these meetings, I do not stop challenging all the managers, like “let's see, here and now, what indicators can be built”; that's where the shoe pinches, they start to move around a lot in the chairs and then... it's

not two plus two. But this is a situation that we have to improve, and we will never know when the level of satiety is reached (laughs). (Subj. Administrator)

This perception is aligned with previous research, as the use of metrics is considered to be decisive in demonstrating HR capabilities and value added for an organization (Aldrich et al. 2015; see also Toulson and Dewe 2004; Ulrich 1997a, b, c).

#### **4.8 *Injustice/Partiality—Justice/Impartiality***

Although all interviewees noted that it is ideal to promote justice in addressing HRM issues (225 refs), 86 participants made direct references to situations of injustice perpetrated by those who have to manage or lead people. It was noted that:

In this company, many things are done well and many things bad ... in this aspect, we should be like most. Now, with regard to the management of people, there are double standards, which is not justified, or better only justified if in fact one person is excellent and another is intractable. In this case, there must be differentiation, but sometimes it is the opposite; the good employee is the one who is discriminated against... Boot-licking is always gotten away with, and why? Well, that too I would like to understand! (Subj. Undifferentiated Operational Collaborator);

Leaving a worker, for years, facing a wall with no assigned function, with nothing to do, is what? Where is HR? What does the HR manager do? The HR manager has conversations to get the person to accept ridiculous compensation and leave. Of course the person I am talking about is already numb and can handle everything ... now she got tired and put the company in court ... Sometimes a mouse and a few ants shake a group of elephants. A shame.... (Subj. Technical Collaborator)

The issue of partiality and impartiality was discussed similarly by the interviewees, as shown by the following quote:

...Good professional performance must be distinguished from poor professional performance. Professional pride, the effective commitment of people must be distinguished and rewarded; we cannot treat the same what is different. (Subj. Manger Peer)

The interviewees referred to impartiality as a form of justice, as shown by the following quote (corroborated by 112 refs):

... I do not agree with "equal work, equal pay" because the work may even be the same, but the performances are different, it is undeniable. If there is a colleague who does the same as me and is better than me, then he should receive more, receive a prize and I should not! We are talking about justice and injustice, and there are still many injustices. (Subj. Undifferentiated Operational Collaborator)

#### **4.9 *Illegalities—Pseudo-legality—Legality***

Compliance with legality emerged as a form of action that was desired by the participants, many of whom consider this to be the form of action adopted by HRM

hierarchies, mainly as an example of ethical values. Pseudo-legality was considered a form of action that was largely not assumed, mostly by administrators and managers' peers. The references regarding this form of dubious action involved issues of labour law and arose primarily at the contracting level, more specifically, as there are some legal rules that must be fulfilled in that process. As mentioned:

In my area, I have to dig up information and invent to get results. My fellow HR manager has to do the same. I talk to friends of mine from other companies, and I think we are very legalistic; if the HR department only sees illegalities and fines, there will be ways to circumvent the law .... (Subj. Manager Peer)

The interviewees from multinational companies considered the issue of legality to be one of the most significant problems faced in Portugal. Curiously, the three administrators already knew of the expression *chico-esperto* [clever clogs]: “*They say it’s a country of chico-espertos (laughs), in my country there are also ... (laughs), sorry, no joke*” (Subj. Administrator). They also referred to the idea that “*... working within the law is difficult, but if it were easy, we would certainly not be needed (laughs) ... but working without law is impossible*” (Subj. Administrator).

Other participants from three national companies (27 refs) addressed this issue using ethics-based terminology that reflected the continuum of *unethical behaviours/ethically irreprehensible behaviours*, as shown by the following quote:

I’m even afraid to speak in ethics, in a world where the word of a man is worthless or worth very little, which is basically the same thing. If there is one thing I like to do, it is watch people, and I try hard to understand how the competition works. I hear and see things that are absolutely unfortunate and unthinkable from an ethical point of view. What amazes me is seeing certain companies referred to as the best companies to work for! Someone is deceived or absolutely mistaken. I do not understand! (Subj. CEO)

Legality is relevant to the functioning of HRM, HR managers and HR departments, according to our interviewees and to the literature (Yamamoto 2009). Authors such as Coda et al. (2009) and Yamamoto (2013) emphasize how HRM boards are institutionalized, formalized, and built and how expectations surrounding their performance are developed, where ethical standards and issues of legality are presented as principles to follow.

#### **4.10 Inefficiency/Ineffectiveness—Efficiency/Effectiveness**

Although there was a clear appreciation of efficient and effective actions (216 refs) in HRM and in other organizational areas, the effectiveness and directed behaviour of HR managers in the *practical* resolution of situations were perceived as more relevant by the interviewees.

The main barriers to effective action described are reflected by the following quotes: “*there are still many nim*” (Subj. Line Manager) and “*Problems are postponed, and things do not go as they should; we postpone decisions and we lose opportunities*” (Subj. Manager Peer). The very nature of HRM is considered to be

complex: “when you ask for a simplification of processes, sometimes we tend to connect the complicometer [ability to complicate], and this removes the discernment to do what has to be done. It reduces efficacy and generates dysfunctions and entropies in the right way of doing things, and in that sense, efficiency is lost” (Subj. Administrator). In addition, several interviewees emphasized that, in an exaggerated way, HRM involves “... effectiveness and efficiency to the limit” (Subj. Technical Collaborator). Interestingly, one administrator referred to these excesses and inadequacies as follows:

Everything that is exaggerated is harmful. Using medical language, one can say, as Paracelsus said, that “the dose is the poison”. The role of our HR manager is to diagnose and act... to detect the inefficiencies in his area and from there to adopt the correct management measures. This is how the HR manager has positioned himself, and he has done very well. Sometimes we have to sacrifice efficiency for efficacy, and, as the Spaniards say, «no pasa nada» [nothing happens]. If I have a fire that I can control with a fire extinguisher and if I know how to use it, I do not set up a meeting to discuss how to extinguish the fire .... (Subj. Administrator)

## 5 Discussion

Through the perceptions of different organizational actors, this study aimed to better understand and characterize HR managers' actions at the strategic, tactical and operational levels. The existing perceptions of HR managers are related to perceptions of the direction of HR, especially at the lowest levels of the organizations analysed, and are influenced by the perceived axes of action adopted by all actors involved in HRM. This finding is confirmed by the gap identified in the discourse of several of our interviewees between the current and the desired HRM practices. This gap has been widely reported in HRM research (Cabral-Cardoso 2004; Dolan et al. 2010; Guest 1987, 2010; Mirfakhar et al. 2018; Pfeffer 1995). More interesting, in this study, is the fact that this gap is usually identified in reference to the HRM practices of other companies and not in reference to the interviewee's company. In addition, the axes of action perceived by the participants are somewhat similar, which can be explained by the transversality attributed to HRM in terms of principles, policies and practices. Although classified under different scopes, such axes of action are not independent and autonomous; there are common features between them.

The study shows that there are eight axes of action, each one representing a continuum, with our interviewees highlighting their views of what the real and desirable practices are. In terms of effective axes of action, the results highlight that HR managers are reactive in essence. Their level of action is mainly operational but also tactical. HR managers are perceived as adopting an accommodated orientation, in an attempt to maintain the status quo and professional survival, although some initiative is recognized. In terms of decision-making, HR managers are characterized by immobility and pragmatism, but above all, they are viewed as incapable of making firm decisions (*nim*). Within a company and its context, HR managers are perceived as capable of considering both local and global contexts. In terms of communication,

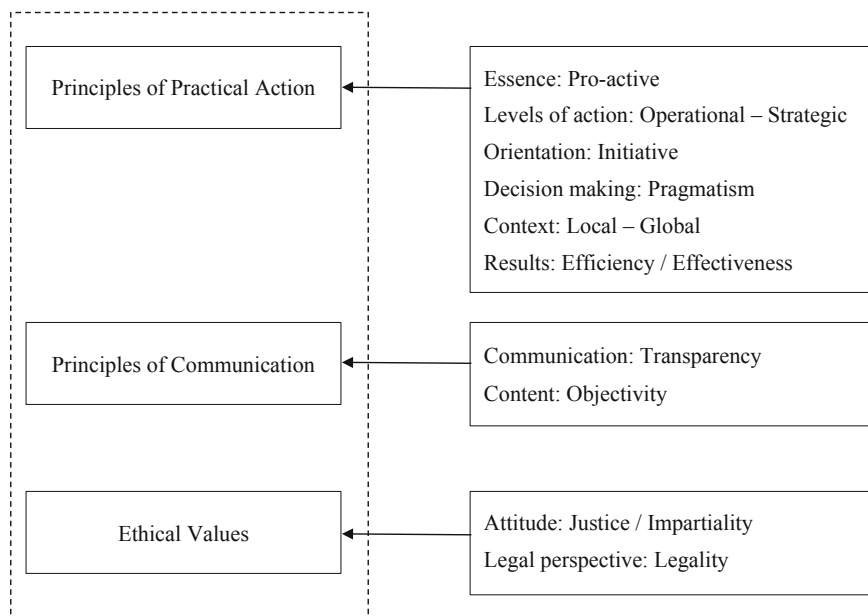
HR managers are viewed as ambiguous, and concerning content, they are viewed as subjective. Regarding their attitudes, they are perceived as acting with some level of injustice and partiality combined with a position of pseudo-legality. Finally, in terms of results, HR managers are viewed to a certain degree as inefficient and ineffective. These results are aligned with the development of HRM in Portugal, reflecting the move from a purely bureaucratic and administrative role to a people-centred approach to management (Cabral-Cardoso 2004).

The function of HR manager is a reality mainly in Portuguese medium and large companies, as in our sample, and interviewees are very clear about what they consider to be desirable axes of HR manager actions, and these behaviours would support more positive perceptions of HR managers and departments. These desirable axes are as follows: proactive; strategic and operational; demonstrating initiative; pragmatic; simultaneously global and local (*glocal*); transparent; objective; just and impartial; legal; and efficient and effective. These results are consistent with the GLOBE analysis of Portugal, where future orientation is valued more than the actual practice and where power distance is a reality both in Portuguese society and organizations (House et al. 2004).

Three major axes of action emerge from this analysis as per Fig. 1: principles of practical action, principles of communication and ethical values. The principles of practical actions are related to the most relevant aspects of everyday life of the different stakeholders of HRM (Buyens and De Vos 2001; Dolan et al. 2010; Guest 2010; Tsui 1990; Ulrich 1997c, 1998a; Waldman et al. 2012). That is, better systems of recruitment and selection, reception and integration, evaluation and performance management, career management, remuneration policies, benefits and incentives, coordination and motivation of people and teams, and effectiveness and efficiency in results. However, the different stakeholders can only effectively perceive this if the HR managers and department adopt a transparent and objective communication system. Importantly, and although not particularly highlighted by the literature (Bloom et al. 2012; Dolan et al. 2010), ethical values are perceived as very important in this study and need to be connected with the practical actions and communication principles of HR managers. It is of significant importance that the different stakeholders perceive HRM as fair, coherent, impartial and capable of fostering the happiness and optimism of its workers.

## 6 Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate that when building their identity and credibility within organizations, HR managers must consider the perceptions of different organizational actors. The ways in which HR managers are perceived by different organizational actors pose a challenge and affect the roles and influence of HR managers and departments at the strategic level of organizations. On one hand, the organization aims to have collaborators, from different levels, committed and motivated with their work and with the organization, and flexible to adapt when confronted with the



**Fig. 1** Framework on axes of action of HR managers—desirable actions

challenges inherent to processes of change (Hendry and Pettigrew 1990; Guest et al. 2003; Cooke and Saini 2010). On the other, the different organizational actors aim to have their personal and professional goals satisfied by the organization to which they belong (Bloom et al. 2012; Brandl and Pohler 2010; Dolan et al. 2010; Guest 2010; Tsui and Milkovich 1987; Ulrich 1997c, 1998a; Waldman et al. 2012).

The study has demonstrated that three major axes of action emerge from the perception of the different stakeholders of HRM: principles of practical action, principles of communication and ethical values. It is paramount that HR managers are aware of these perceptions and adopt the principles to help enhance the role HRM assumes within an organization. This will help them in proactively anticipate and solve problems while adding value and creating competitive and distinctive organizational advantages in the short, medium and long terms (Aldrich et al. 2015; Bloom et al. 2012; Cabral-Cardoso 2004; Farndale 2005; Paauwe and Boselie 2003; Waldman et al. 2012; Yamamoto 2013). The identified axes of action, in this study, may contribute to overcome some of the obstacles to the development of HRM. One of those obstacles is created by the ambiguities and inconsistencies at various levels of HRM and notably in terms of the nature and exercising of the authority of HR managers (Bloom et al. 2012; Cabral-Cardoso 2004; Davila et al. 2010; Mirfakhar et al. 2018; Torrington 1998). Of significant relevance is the capacity of HR managers to keep a positive relationship and high-quality communication with HR stakeholders as well as high ethical values (Klaas et al. 2012; Mirfakhar et al. 2018). In the specific Portuguese context, a focus of HR managers on the three main axes of action may

help them to be listened in the organization, to set the HRM agenda, and improve their credibility in organizations (Cabral-Cardoso 2004).

The study reveals a concern with the activity of HRM and the HR manager, which can be genuine, instrumental, strategic or operational but always related to the specific interests (personal and/or professional) of the different organizational actors. This finding is aligned with previous studies, which highlight the relevance of HRM to keep a positive relationship and high-quality communication with HR stakeholders and consider their specific needs (Klaas et al. 2012; Mirfakhar et al. 2018). Therefore, several practical implications for HR managers in their activities within organizations emerge. These implications are described below and are related to the need for HR managers and departments to develop approaches and behaviours that promote organizational empathy for all actors of an organization. First, it is necessary to understand and characterize the perceptions of different organizational actors. Second, it is paramount to consider the personal and professional expectations of organizational actors and to incorporate them into HRM policies. The objective is for HRM practices to more closely reflect the practices desired by the different actors without detracting from its role in organizations and while making its guidelines clear. Third, the organizational decision-making process should be contextualized by creating conditions that promote the involvement of different organizational actors whenever possible. Fourth, training and communication systems that favour the development of proactive, strategic and systemic ways of acting in an organization must be developed. Fifth, the hard and soft skills in an organization, as well as the main gaps, should be identified while taking into account the vision, mission and strategic objectives of the organization. Sixth, internal marketing programmes for HRM activities involving different organizational actors must be developed, so that such actors can also contribute to improve HRM. This can also help reveal facilitators and obstacles that the implementation of HRM policies and practices may face when encountered by the different organizational actors in real life. All these implications for HR managers are related to the fact that HR stakeholders' expectations are derived from their role or functional responsibilities, their positions in the organizational hierarchy, but also from their career and personal circumstances, as argued by Tsui and Milkovich (1987).

This study contributes to the HRM literature by exploring an important yet underdeveloped field of research on how HR managers are perceived within organizations, and specifically within the Portuguese context (Aldrich et al. 2015; Brandl and Pohler 2010; Farndale 2005; Markoulli et al. 2017; Uyar and Deniz 2012; Yamamoto 2013). By focusing on the perceptions of different organizational actors, this study contributes to the debate on how the perceptions of organizational members affect the roles and impact that HR professionals can have at the strategic level of organizations. This contribution is of particular relevance, and is aligned with previous research, which argued that a major source of complexity for HR managers and departments is the plurality of stakeholders (Klaas et al. 2012; Mirfakhar et al. 2018; Tsui 1990; Tsui and Milkovich 1987). For HR practitioners, this study contributes to a better understanding on how stakeholders' expectations define who and how HR must satisfy to help the firm succeed (Ulrich et al. 2017), since HR managers and



departments serve multiple stakeholders or constituencies, with multiple and diverse objectives (Tsui 1990).

Notwithstanding the contribution of this study, this is focused on the Portuguese context and there is still the need to better understand the perceptions of HR managers' activities, which is a topic that has been of genuine interest to HRM scholars for many years now and still needs further research, in different macro-, mezzo- and micro-organizational contexts.

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