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# CONCEPTUALIZING HR OPERATIONS IN MULTINATIONALS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

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## RESUMEN

En respuesta a un entorno empresarial cada vez más volátil, organizaciones de todo el mundo buscan transformar sus funciones de Recursos Humanos en unidades más estratégicas y que generen mayor valor, una iniciativa comúnmente basada en el modelo tripartito de Ulrich para la transformación de RRHH. Sin embargo, la ambigua definición del modelo, y especialmente de su pilar operacional, ha dado lugar a diversas interpretaciones prácticas del mismo, generando dudas entre los académicos sobre si el equipo de Operaciones de RRHH tiene la capacidad real de transformar la función.

Así, este estudio tiene como objetivo llegar a una definición concreta de Operaciones de RRHH, evaluar su capacidad para generar impacto transformacional, e identificar las limitaciones a las que se enfrenta en dicho empeño. Para ello, se ha realizado un estudio cualitativo basado en entrevistas sobre la transformación de la función de RRHH en LinkedIn, llegando a las conclusiones mediante una metodología fenomenológica.

Los resultados muestran que el equipo de Operaciones de RRHH es una función de apoyo multifacética, especializada y globalmente coordinada que mejora la eficiencia operativa y la experiencia del empleado a través de su doble enfoque en la prestación de servicios y la mejora continua de procesos. Los resultados sugieren que no sólo tiene la capacidad de posibilitar iniciativas de transformación de RRHH, sino también de liderarlas. Sin embargo, en ocasiones este potencial se ve limitado por retos como un contexto organizacional restrictivo, dificultades en el gobierno del cambio, y limitaciones tecnológicas o de datos. Con todo, el estudio muestra una convergencia del equipo de Operaciones de RRHH hacia un Centro de Excelencia especializado en transformación, reflejando un cambio del modelo de RRHH altamente compartimentado de Ulrich hacia una función de RRHH más dinámica, integrada, y que genera más valor.

**Palabras clave:** Transformación de RRHH; Operaciones de RRHH; Excelencia de Procesos; Mejora Continua; Prestación de Servicios de RRHH.

## **ABSTRACT**

In response to an increasingly volatile business environment, organizations all over the world seek to transform their Human Resources functions into more strategic and value-adding units, an initiative often based upon Ulrich's "three-legged stool" model of HR transformation. However, the ambiguous definition of such model, and especially of its HR Operations leg, has led to diverse practical interpretations of it, raising doubts within the academic literature of whether it can actually transform the HR function.

Thus, this study aimed at reaching a definition of HR Operations, assessing its capacity for transformational impact, and identifying the limitations it faces. To do so, an interview-based qualitative study on LinkedIn's HR transformation process was conducted, reaching conclusions via phenomenological methodology.

The findings show that HR Operations is a multifaceted, specialized and globally coordinated support function that enhances operational efficiency and employee experience through its dual focus on service delivery and continuous process improvement. The results further suggest that it cannot only enable but also lead HR transformation initiatives, although limited by certain key challenges such as a restrictive organizational context, change governance difficulties and technology and data constraints. Consequently, the study shows a convergence of HR Operations towards a transformation-specialized Center of Excellence, reflecting a shift away from Ulrich's highly compartmentalized model of HR and towards a more dynamic, integrated, and value-adding function.

**Key words:** HR Transformation; HR Operations; Process Excellence; Continuous Improvement; HR Service Delivery.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>CI</b>	Continuous Improvement
<b>CoE</b>	Center of Expertise / Center of Excellence
<b>GTO</b>	Global Talent Organization
<b>HR</b>	Human Resources
<b>HRBPs</b>	HR Business Partners
<b>HRSS</b>	HR Shared Service Model
<b>MNC</b>	Multinational Company
<b>PEX</b>	Process Excellence team
<b>SSCs</b>	Shared Service Centers

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Justification of the Study Topic

The evolving dynamics of contemporary business are reshaping the role of Human Resources (HR) in organizations. The challenges of the 21st century are numerous: climate change, the development of new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, and the volatile geopolitical, economic and social macro trends are some of the factors hindering organizational resilience (PwC, 2025; Capgemini Research Institute, 2025). Consequently, companies have started to reevaluate their internal processes and politics, acquiring an “outside-inside” perspective that can guarantee the persistence of their activity and the sustainability of their strategy (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015, p. 191).

This reevaluation has partially shifted attention towards the HR function since, as the literature around it suggests, the function has the potential to become a key player for companies in such uncertain times (see Zhang-Zhang et al., 2022). Consequently, organizations are now asking themselves: how can HR become a more strategic and value-adding function?

This is not a new question; Ulrich already posed it back in 1997 in his book *Human Resource Champions*, a reference for HR transformation both in theory and in practice, and that still today shapes the operating model of HR functions all over the world. Among other things, Ulrich suggested the centralization and standardization of certain administrative tasks in Shared Service Centers (SSCs), leaving room for the rest of the function to be more strategic (Ulrich & Allen, 2009).

Subsequent literature kept expanding on this new model, eventually simplifying it to what became known as Ulrich’s “three-legged stool” model (Boglund et al., 2011, p. 570; Reilly, 2014, p. 19). However, neither Ulrich nor the literature following his model quite defined each of these three roles in practical terms, especially not that of HR SSCs. This has led to heterogeneous interpretations and implementations of the model, oftentimes accompanied by a misalignment of goals, and thus resulting in a lack of consensus on whether HR SSCs, as part of Ulrich’s model, can actually transform the HR function (McCracken & McIvor, 2013; Reilly, 2014; Meijerink et al., 2013). More importantly, this tendency has been exacerbated as a consequence of the rapidly changing environment that companies face, forcing them to drift away from Ulrich’s classical HR operating model to find new ways of transformation (Durth et al., 2022).

## **1.2. Research Objectives and Methodology**

This research aims to 1) reach a definition of what HR SSCs or HR Operations actually is, 2) determine to which extent it can impact HR transformation efforts and what factors influence such impact, and 3) identify what challenges limit its role in this transformation journey. To do so, it will explore the implementation of a global HR Operations team in the rapid growth, Big Tech, multinational company (MNC) of LinkedIn. This will help with the broad understanding of the term, and advance existing literature in terms of geographical scope and types of companies under study. Hence, the study will answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How is HR Operations defined and configured by HR practitioners?

RQ2. To what extent does HR Operations play an important role in the transformation of the HR function, and what factors enable it to do so?

RQ3. What are the challenges that limit HR Operations' role in this transformation journey?

It will do so from a phenomenological approach, reaching theoretical conclusions through the lived experiences of HR practitioners, gathered via semi-structured interviews. Among qualitative research methodologies, phenomenology is the most suitable for this study, since it is a descriptive method that aims to reach a definition of a phenomenon through the identification of its different parts, thus deriving in its essence.

## **1.3. Structure of the Study**

The research will be structured in five parts. The first one will include a theoretical framework on the transformation of the HR function and the role of SSCs as part of such transformation. It will also point out certain gaps found in the literature and the research questions proposed to fill such gaps. The second part will consist of a brief description of the context of the MNC under study on the one hand, and a more extensive explanation of the methodology to be used during the analysis on the other. Thirdly, the findings derived from the analysis will be presented in three parts, each corresponding to the three research questions. The fourth section will be dedicated to a discussion of such findings and a proposal for future lines of research. Finally, the research will be closed by a series of practical implications derived from the study.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. Transformation of the Human Resources Function**

Dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the HR function was born as a direct consequence of the Industrial Revolution and the social demands it generated (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023). Through its almost two-century long history, the function has adopted multiple names and experienced countless changes, continuously fluctuating from a value-creation function to a mere grouping of administrative and cost-control activities (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). The HR function as we know it today would not appear until the 1980s, when factors such as globalization, the loss of power of unions, and the service economy's growth, would require it to transform and contribute to overall organizational effectiveness (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). It is at that very moment that we can start talking about Human Resource Management, otherwise known as HR (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015).

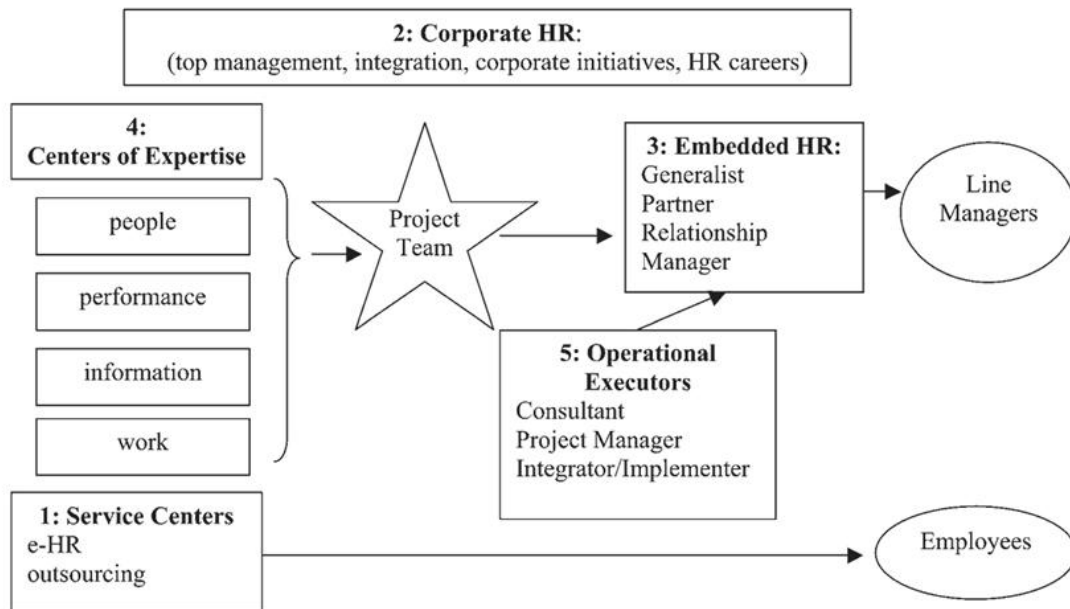
The history of the function reveals a key aspect; that is, that its own nature forces it to deal with certain tensions (McCracken & McIvor, 2013; Cayrat & Boxall, 2023). In the context of this study, the most relevant of those tensions is the constant tug-of-war between its administrative and strategic activities, both being essential for the correct running of the function and the organization as a whole (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023). However, practice shows how challenging it is to focus on either of those aspects without ignoring the other. For instance, many HR professionals, particularly HR Business Partners (HRBPs), often find themselves failing to contribute to the strategic aspect of the function because of their heavy load of administrative tasks (Ulrich et al., 2008; McCracken & McIvor, 2013).

Given this context, Ulrich (1997) laid out his famous HR transformation theory, thus proposing a way in which the strategic and administrative aspects of the function could coexist under the same umbrella. He defined HR transformation as “an integrated, aligned, innovative and business-focused approach to redefining how HR work is done within an organization” so that it can continue to create value for stakeholders such as employees, customers or investors (Ulrich & Allen, 2009, p. 1). In order to accomplish such transformation, Ulrich (2008) believed it was necessary to restructure the HR function. He defined said restructuring based upon five roles or responsibilities, as shown in Figure 1.

In this model, *Corporate HR* acts as an overarching role that aims to give consistency to HR work across the corporation. Under its supervision, on the one hand, and directly assisting employees, we find technology-enabled *Service Centers*, that centralize and standardize administrative processes. On the other hand, assisting line managers, we find *Centers of Expertise* (CoEs), that act as demand-based specialized consulting businesses within the firm; *Embedded HR* or HRBPs, a team of HR professionals that provide the most appropriate HR practices to their assigned organizational units based on their needs and strategy; and finally *Operational Executors*, who adopt the role of implementors of the strategies tailored by CoEs given the path to success traced by HRBPs.

**Figure 1**

*Outline of the HR organization*



*Source:* adapted from Ulrich et al. (2008).

Over time, Ulrich’s model was simplified by the academic and industry literature, and started to be known as the “three-legged stool” model (Boglind et al., 2011, p. 570). As the name implies, the simplified model consists of three key elements: the *Expertise Centers* or CoEs, responsible for the more strategic or transformational activities through the creation of new knowledge and consulting services; the *Service Centers* or SSCs, in charge of the more administrative or transactional activities through centralizing and standardizing them; and finally the *HRBPs*, that link both aspects via an alignment of administrative tasks with the general strategy (Boglind et al., 2011; Reilly, 2014).

Nevertheless, scholars have not dug much deeper into what characterizes each of these parts, leaving the implementation of the model up to the personal interpretation of each company, manager or CEO, and without specifying what, how and why it needs to be done. This is particularly true when talking about the SSCs “leg”, nowadays also known as *HR Operations*. Our research is born from that particular literature gap, with the goal of understanding what exactly makes up the HR Shared Services Model (HRSS), taking into account its conceptual definition and the multiple elements that play a role in this aspect of the transformation of the HR function.

## **2.2. HR Shared Service Centers**

HRSS can be conceived as an ever-changing concept for which there is no fixed definition (Redman et al., 2007). Initially, and in a simplified way, it was considered to be a consolidation and standardization of common administrative and transactional tasks (McCracken & McIvor, 2013). The provision of said tasks led to different internal configurations of HRSS, subject to the existing needs of the company deciding to implement it; nevertheless, the academic literature makes a proposal of the structure of these services in SSCs based on levels of HR employees (Farndale et al., 2009).

In Level 1 we find the front-office employees that work in the contact center, acting as a first touchpoint with internal clients. These employees are also responsible for giving daily support to users through the telephone or any other remote contact system (Farndale et al., 2009; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013). In Level 2 we find the HR advisors, who help solve more particular individual cases, normally related to a specific discipline (Farndale et al., 2009). Finally, Level 3 is made up of HR experts, who are in charge of fixing the most complex problems, and are able to do so both from the front office and a back office that will allow them to administer their knowledge back to the first level (Farndale et al., 2009). At times we can even identify a Level 0: a self-service center that collects general information so that employees can answer their own questions independently (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013).

However, other authors refuse to limit HRSS to a mere centralization process (Meijerink et al., 2013; Reilly, 2014). Instead, they believe it to be a hybrid organizational model, as services and resources are centralized, but control is decentralized, therefore lying in the user of such services (Meijerink et al., 2013; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013). This way, “the user is the chooser” (Ulrich, 1995 as cited in Meijerink & Bondarouk,

2013, p. 489; Reilly, 2014), and an internal client-supplier relationship is established between HRSS and the employees, business areas, and line managers, all of which will make use of the services provided (Redman et al., 2007; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013).

Traditionally, and following Ulrich's vision of dividing the administrative and strategic role of HR (1997), HRSS only included transactional services such as payroll management, compensation and benefits, performance management or personnel administration (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013; Meijerink et al., 2016). Despite it and over time, transformational services such as selection, career training, recruitment or development have also been included, hence spanning over the whole employee lifecycle (Meijerink et al., 2016). This conjunction of transactional and transformational activities within HRSS seems to come from the understanding that transactional activities are hygiene factors and do not add any kind of perceived value to users like transformational activities do (Meijerink et al., 2013). The consequent distancing from Ulrich's original idea, given it is his model that created HRSS in the first place, makes us wonder: what purpose is the introduction of HRSS really assisting? What is the true goal of this HR transformation element?

Broadly speaking, the literature mentions two general and sometimes compatible reasons to adopt HRSS as a model. On the one hand, HRSS presents itself as the perfect alternative to making the choice between the centralization and decentralization models, allowing organizations to reap benefits from both of them (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013; Meijerink et al., 2013). Following this logic, companies can generate greater efficiency thanks to resource standardization and centralization, creating economies of scale out of information units. At the same time, they can also improve the quality of the HR services offered, thanks to the decentralized control model that responds to individual needs (Reilly, 2014). In short, HRSS is seen as an instrument that allows for the improvement of the quality of the service whilst also reducing costs (Redman et al., 2007).

On the other hand, companies may choose to implement HRSS as part of their HR transformation effort (Farndale et al., 2009). In those cases, the main goal is to allow the function to adopt a more transformative or strategic role within the organization, focusing on customer value-creation, as well as performing activities with a more central and participative role within the company's strategy (McCracken & McIvor, 2013; Redman et al., 2007). This goal consequently allows for the enhancement of the broad employee lifecycle and user experience. On many occasions this process requires a cultural change

that pushes forward a Continuous Improvement (CI) mindset both in terms of efficiency and quality of service (McCracken & McIvor, 2013). In order to achieve said transformation, administrative and transactional tasks are gathered in a single place, such as the SSCs, therefore allowing employees to adopt a strategic role when performing their jobs (McCracken & McIvor, 2013; Ulrich, 1997).

The strategic vision of HRSS is often reflected in the place that the SSC occupies in the organization or function, as well as in how it is configured. Literature tends to talk about four ways in which HRSS can fit into an organization (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013; Farndale et al., 2009): a *central service* through which HRSS is part of the corporate team; a *separate business unit* through which the center informs both to the board and the business departments to which it offers its services; a center *inside the business unit*, that is, pertaining to a single business unit to which it reports directly; and finally an *internal joint venture*, through which the center is property of the business units that require its services, and is also completely controlled by them. As a final alternative there could be an externalization of HRSS; this, however, entails its own challenges and clashes with the strategic vision that its introduction aims to accomplish (McCracken & McIvor, 2013).

### **2.3. Literature Gaps and Research Questions**

As this literature review might have clarified, the implementation of the HRSS model generally lacks homogeneity across companies, each of which has decided to implement it following completely different motivations. This might be the reason why scholars cannot agree on whether HRSS can really transform the HR function (McCracken & McIvor, 2013). Some argue that this new method has merely replaced the old business-unit-based silos with an equally harmful siloing of the HR function in strategic and administrative activities (Reilly, 2014). Others put emphasis on the challenge that measuring the real impact of HRSS constitutes, since it is difficult to isolate the positive effects from those of other elements that might also have been introduced as part of the overall transformation of the function (Reilly, 2014).

Nevertheless, there are scholars that remain positive in their beliefs about HRSS's potential to create value despite the fact that the first few employee surveys show their satisfaction with the services offered has decreased after the introduction of this method (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013). Among the optimists we find some who believe that the mistake of implementation is more so a mistake in communication, and who emphasize

the need for top-down communication of the reason for transformation. Pairing it with allowing for bottom-down communication of opinions and perceptions of value-creation, resistance to change could be avoided (McCracken & McIvor, 2013).

Along this theoretical framework, we have resorted to both seminal papers and key authors on HRSS or HR Operations, mapping out a general route of thought regarding this research line. Some of these papers were fully conceptual (Meijerink et al., 2013), while others used data from a pool of companies from a single country (Meijerink et al., 2016; Reilly, 2014; Farndale et al., 2009; Boglind et al., 2012). The rest of them studied a single state-owned company in the public sector (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013; McCracken & McIvor, 2013).

As we can see, the mainstream research on HR Operations is quite limited both geographically, as most studies are focused on the Netherlands, the UK and Sweden, and in terms of the type of organizations analyzed. Research on the effect of HRSS on HR transformation of MNCs is particularly scarce and pessimistic regarding results, as well as geographically limited (Cooke, 2006). Alternatively, there exists literature on the general creation of global SSCs across different business units within an MNC, but it does not account for the specificities of a SSC within HR (Davis, 2005).

These literature gaps elucidate the goal of our research: to examine how HR Operations or HRSS is configured within a rapid growth MNC with a global product in need of a transformation process that will lead to the scaling and standardization of practices, and the role that HR Operations plays in said process. Thus, we set out to resolve the following research questions:

RQ1. How is HR Operations defined and configured by HR practitioners?

RQ2. To what extent does HR Operations play an important role in the transformation of the HR function, and what factors enable it to do so?

RQ3. What are the challenges that limit HR Operations' role in this transformation journey?

Thus, broadly speaking, this research aims to define HR Operations and its impact on a Big Tech company, specifically a social network enterprise, offering a global product and constituting a rapid growth MNC.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Given the goal of this research, that is to broadly define HR Operations and clarify how it impacts a transformation process, it has been determined that qualitative research is the most appropriate methodology. This is mainly because of the interpretative nature of the research questions, and the need to know the *why* of HR Operations' idiosyncrasy in the context of HR transformation.

Among the several qualitative methodologies, a phenomenological approach was chosen, given the descriptive nature of the research question. Particularly, the phenomenon under study will be the transformation of the HR Operations team at LinkedIn, mainly achieved through the introduction of CI tools. This phenomenon will allow us to dig deeper into the change process and the way it is being implemented, in order to assess what HR Operations' role is in both this process and the HR function as a whole. Consequently, we will arrive at a definition for HR Operations.

#### 3.1. Context of the Case Study

LinkedIn is currently the biggest professional network in the world with more than a billion users (LinkedIn, n.d.-a; LinkedIn, n.d.-b). Founded in 2003 by Reid Hoffman, its goal is to foster global connection among professionals in their journey towards productivity and the achievement of their personal goals (LinkedIn, n.d.-b). In 2016 the social media platform was acquired by Microsoft, though remaining as an independent company both in its identity and values (Rosoff, 2016). This merger united two of the most purpose-driven Silicon Valley organizations, both of which are also referents in the business field, and more concretely in HR. In the case of LinkedIn, the concept of "compassionate leadership" promulgated by ex-CEO Jeff Weiner is the main proof of it (Wisdom 2.0 with Soren Gordhamer, 2020).

Despite its fast-paced employee growth, LinkedIn did not establish an HR Operations team to support its workforce until 2015, when a knowledge program and service delivery team were introduced to the HR function. Four years later, a vision for transformation arose within the team, that urgently needed to catch up with dynamic business needs and a rapid employee population growth. Finally, 2020 saw the creation of a Process Excellence (PEX) team for HR transformation assistance, and consequently, the adoption of CI practices, which are still a central part of the team's operating model today.

### **3.2. Phenomenology as a Methodological Process**

Phenomenology as a qualitative research methodology has its roots in Husserl's philosophical school, later followed by Heidegger. These thinkers did not intend to create a structure for scientific analysis; instead, their philosophy is used as the theoretical framework to build methodology, and as a result, research (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). This is the reason why there is no orthodox or specific guide to carry out this methodology; it keeps evolving with the literature and is adapted to each of the phenomena trying to be defined. However, there are certain common ideas that structure the method (Sanders, 1982).

The word "phenomenon" derives from the Greek expression *phaenesthai*, meaning "to appear" or "to show itself" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). Therefore, we can consider that phenomenology is the study of everything that shows itself (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009), and that it tries to obtain the purest vision of what the experience essentially is, making explicit the implicit structure and the meaning of the human experiences (Sanders, 1982). Essentially, it is a descriptive method that tries to identify the principles or elements of a whole, so as to later reach its description, which could sometimes lead to generalization (Sanders, 1982).

In order to achieve our research goal, we have decided to use two seminal papers about the phenomenological methodological process, linking them in a coherent way so as to create a higher quality methodology, and more adequate for our research. Such works are Sanders' article (1982), centered in the application of phenomenological methods in organizational research; and Moustakas' book *Phenomenological Research Methods* (1994), and more concretely, its modification of the Van Kaam method. Thus, we have determined the following steps to develop our analysis based on phenomenology.

#### **Step 1: Determination of research limits**

This study has been conducted with the collaboration of 28 participants who, following in-depth semi-structured interviews, were asked about their particular experience during the HR Operations' transformation journey at LinkedIn. These participants were chosen through intentional sampling, as it was required for them to be either members of the HR Operations team, or stakeholders and users of the services provided by HR Operations. Just as Table 1 shows, the chosen participants varied in range

of responsibility, region of operations, and scope of their work. This was intentionally decided in order to get to know the phenomenon from every possible angle.

**Table 1: Participants’ Profiles**

<b>Role</b>	<b>Interviewees</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Scope</b>
Sr Director	2	EMEAL, NAMER	Global
Director	6	EMEAL, NAMER, APAC	Global & Within Region
Sr Manager	4	EMEAL, NAMER	Global
Manager	6	EMEAL, NAMER, APAC	Within Region
IC Specialist	7	EMEAL, NAMER	Global & Within Region
Supervisor	2	NAMER	Within Region
Non-HR	1	NAMER	Within Region
	<b>28</b>		

Before the fulfilment of each of the interviews, the participants gave verbal permission to record and transcribe the conversation. The transcription was anonymized, as previously agreed upon through email confirmation, and the provided data were treated in an ethical way during the whole process.

**Step 2: Data collection**

Our principal data collection method was the 28 semi-structured interviews conducted on LinkedIn employees, with the characteristics mentioned beforehand. The interviews were carried out through a predetermined list of questions about different themes related to the transformation process or with HR Operations. Even if the list acted as a guide, the questions were modified and altered during the interview process in order to better adapt to each of them. Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached, a point often attained relatively quickly in phenomenological studies; after 12 interviews, no new themes emerged from the data.

In order to complement the data received from the interviewees, internal organizational files were used as a second source of information. As Table 2 illustrates, a final number of five documents were used for this study, each tackling different themes

and thus fulfilling different purposes. They were all acquired directly from the participants, who gave their consent to use them as secondary sources for this study.

**Table 2: Secondary Sources**

No.	Title	Content
D.1	“Global Talent Org.”	Position configuration of GTO, HR Operations and other stakeholder teams
D.2	“The adoption of continuous improvement in HR transformation”	HR Operations journey outline and main documents (employee lifecycle, operating model and service level tier model)
D.3	“HR Operations Target Operating Model”	Former three fiscal year operating model plans
D.4	“Op. Model: Transforming HR Service Delivery”	Operating model workshop for FY24 planning
D.5	“Lean Process 101”	Outline of Lean tools for CI used during trainings

**Step 3: Phenomenological analysis of data**

It was previously mentioned that phenomenology does not offer a systematic procedure that guarantees phenomenological conclusions (Van Manen, 2017). However, many researchers have developed their own guidelines to perform phenomenological analysis. We will follow the guidelines established by Moustakas (1994) in adaptation of the Van Kaam model and maintain the general, though not as detailed, structure of Sanders’ (1982) own method.

**Step 3.1.: Bracketing**

This first step is related *epoché*, a concept through which Husserl originally intended to isolate the researcher’s prejudices or preconceived ideas, in order to be able to face the true essence of the phenomenon to observe (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Nevertheless, Heidegger argued that humans are “beings in the world”, and that we can only make sense of what we observe through our particular context and time (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009, p. 8). In fact, he believed that preconceived ideas cannot be separated from the person, for without them the human being cannot carry out its own interpretations (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009; Eatough y Smith, 2017).

Therefore, this step was treated as an opportunity to become aware of the preconceived ideas or prejudices that could modify the way in which the study’s data is interpreted. Consequently, the impact of these ideas can be minimized without suppressing them.

### ***Step 3.2.: Phenomenological Reduction***

The second step entails describing things just as they appear, so as to afterwards select those ideas that are “horizontal and thematic” for the experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 93). Hence, for each individual interview a list of all expressions will be selected, after which the invariable constituents, that is, those elements that allow us to understand the experience, will be identified and grouped in thematics, to finally validate them against the original transcription. The phenomenological reduction process will lead to a textural individual description of each participant’s lived experience (Moustakas, 1994).

### ***Step 3.3.: Imaginative Variation***

As the third step of the analysis, imaginative variation allows the researcher to attain new meanings on the *how* of the phenomenon through the use of imagination. To do so, every possible structure that could impact on the phenomenon should be taken into account, so as to finally reach a structural individual description of each participant (Moustakas, 1994).

### ***Step 3.4.: Significance and Essence Synthesis***

Finally, a collective textural description of the complete sample will be created, as well as the collective structural description. By combining them, the textural-structural synthesis will be reached, or in other words, the description of meanings and essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

## **4. FINDINGS**

The findings of this study were achieved through a phenomenological analysis of 12 interviews, point at which, as expected, theoretical saturation was reached. The analysis of the lived experiences of the practitioners involved in the transformation journey enabled the elucidation of the different elements that account for HR Operations’ nature and role in MNCs, and more specifically in LinkedIn.

### **4.1. Definition and Configuration**

As pictured in Table 3, the analysis of the interviews allowed for a five-point definition of HR Operations, emphasizing the key intrinsic elements that make up this team. Besides, another six-point description of this team’s structural configuration and way of working was achieved.

**Table 3: Phenomenological Reduction of Data (RQ1 Sample)**

Thematic Horizons	Invariable Constituents	General Themes
Employee-Centric Service Purpose	Purposeful Employee-Centric Service Delivery	Definition
Service Delivery & Case Management Infrastructure		
Continuous Improvement & Process Excellence	Process Excellence & Capability Building	
Employee Self-Service & Capability Building		
Strategic Enablement & Value Creation	Global Strategic Enablement & Streamlining	
Process Ownership, Standardization & Scalability		
Global Scope & Structural Reach		
Stakeholder Support & Cross-functional Coordination	Stakeholder Consulting & Ecosystem Coordination	
Consultative Problem Solving		
Digitalization, Data & Knowledge Enablement	Digitalization & Metric Driven Enablement	
Global Talent Organization Support Function within Talent Services team	Global Structure	Configuration
Regional Service Delivery teams & Global Operational Enablement teams		
Lifecycle Service-line Distinction & Global Process Alignment	Service Teams	
Timely and High-Quality Case Management		
Knowledge-based Self-service & Tier-based Globally Aligned Case Management Model		
Continuous Improvement Training & Process Excellence Philosophy Enablement		
Structured Operational Improvement Support	Process Excellence Team	
Transformation Program Driver & Project Management		
Process Operationalization and Ownership for Transformative Scalability		
Knowledge Structure Support & Self-Service Enablement	Knowledge Team	
Cross-functional Partnerships & Collaboration Beyond HR Ops	Working Culture and Composition	
Hybrid and Flexible Workforce Composition		
Global Process Alignment & Regional Integration		
Prioritization of Employee Lifecycle Experience		
Structured Blueprint for Data-based Storytelling	Basic Tools and Partners	
Accessible Data Management System & Support of Reporting Needs		
Technology Partnership for Business Improvement		

## **Definition of HR Operations**

There are five key elements that define HR Operations: (1) a purposeful employee-centric service delivery, (2) process excellence and capability-building, (3) global strategic enablement and streamlining, (4) stakeholder consulting and ecosystem coordination, and (5) digitalization and metric-driven enablement. While the former two are the core purposes and activities of HR Operations, the latter three are the supporting elements without which these could not be pursued.

### *(1) Purposeful Employee-Centric Service Delivery*

The main purpose of HR Operations is to provide an employee-centric service delivery, as described by this Senior Director, “[that] is the core of what HR Operations do, we support employees through the problems that matter” (Senior Director 1). Said service delivery mainly refers to a case management infrastructure through which HR practitioners respond to employee’s frequently asked questions in a timely and high-quality manner: “We do that through a case management system where employees can [...] submit their question and our team will be responsible for answering that question within a set SLA based on set C-Sats” (Senior Director 1). This aspect is oftentimes considered the stereotypical function of the team.

### *(2) Process Excellence and Capability Building*

The second main purpose of the team is to achieve HR processes excellence to drive both their own efficiency in day-to-day support for the function, and the enhancement of the employee experience. One participant considered this strive for efficiency as the key for enabling further support, stating that: “Improvements for us means time savings, cost savings [...]. Thus we can take on more work [...] just a continuous circle of we wanna provide support” (Director 2).

A continuous approach to problem-solving, one manager noted, also allows the sustaining of process improvements through time: “Continuously improving [is] not just about delivering a project and finishing it there. It's also about [...] revisiting your solutions again and again, [...] and also on the circumstances around” (Manager 1). This approach proved itself to be crucial for customer proactivity and self-serving encouragement, allowing the HR Operations team to focus their efforts on strategic-level support. Thus, the HR Operations team helps employees build key capabilities, as

emphasized by the same manager: “We are equipping the employees to help themselves [...] and that's actually our main motto” (Manager 1).

### *(3) Global Strategic Enablement and Streamlining*

The pursuit of global strategic enablement and streamlining of processes is another key characteristic of HR Operations. The team is responsible for creating global, scalable and standardized processes that achieve efficiency without negatively impacting the quality of the experience, as this Senior Director puts it: “What we try and do is apply an art and a science to what we do [...] how do we deliver services that scale [...] to 20,000 plus employees but then how do we have the human touch to it” (Senior Director 1).

Additionally, the streamlining of processes acts as a hub for strategic alignment across the HR function, highlighting the importance of HR Operations in global strategy implementation, and its relevance beyond an operational role. The following director explained how it has also enabled employees and teams to act more strategically within their operational roles: “Our services team are very focused and dedicated on the day-to-day tasks and often it’s very difficult for them to step out of that and think strategic. That’s really where my team is coming in” (Director 1).

### *(4) Stakeholder Consulting and Ecosystem Coordination*

Because of the nature of its work, the HR Operations team deals with multiple stakeholders’ interests and processes. Hence, a key element to its functional role lies in its capacity to both expertly consult on other teams’ day-to-day operating issues and coordinate stakeholder needs cross-functionally. This Senior Manager related such a responsibility to the global and strategic scope of the team: “We have to focus our decisions at the right level of thinking enterprise wide rather than making decisions in silos based on what is best for GTO and LinkedIn” (Senior Manager 1).

### *(5) Digitalization and Metric-Driven Enablement*

Lastly, an HR Operations team requires the use of data and technology as overarching tools for the achievement of their goals; in other words, leveraging digitalization and metric-driven decision-making is a pillar for the fulfillment of their objectives. Accordingly, it is impossible for the team to achieve their purpose without taking into account data or technology as key instruments, or as simply put by this practitioner: “[It] is all about [...] leveraging data to identify new opportunities to better serve customer

skill and transform operations” (Senior Manager 1). Thus, these instruments transcend their nature as tools and become pillars of the HR Operations nature.

### Configuration of HR Operations

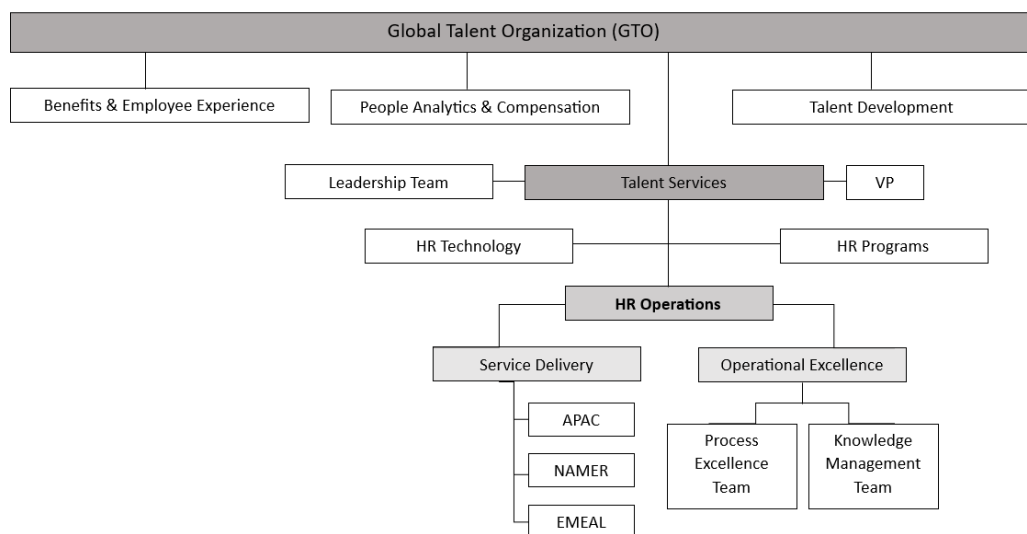
Beyond a conceptual definition of HR Operations’ main elements, the findings also allowed for a description of the configuration of the team, and a better understanding of how its nature can be channeled in practice. According to the participants, the team is firstly configured by a (1) global structure, under which we find the (2) service teams, (3) process excellence team, and (4) knowledge management team; secondly by its (5) working culture and composition; and thirdly by its (6) basic tools and partners.

#### (1) Global structure

As shown in Figure 2, at LinkedIn all support teams are grouped in the “Talent Services” cluster, under which we find the HR Operations team. Within it, we also find certain key sub-teams, as described by this employee, "There’s [...] two pillars within HR operations, [...] there’s the day to day delivery teams, [...] that’s being led by our three directors, Namer, EMEAL and APAC [...] and then [...] the other side [is] comprised of a process [excellence] team as well as a knowledge management team" (Director 1). Thus, HR Operations’ work can be divided into two fundamental pillars: *Service Delivery* and *Operational Excellence*.

**Figure 2**

*Organizational HR Structure at LinkedIn*



*Note.* Own elaboration based on interviews and complimentary files.

## *(2) Service teams*

HR Operations' service delivery pillar involves a regionalized structure of service teams that handle case management performance. One director explained how their goal is to provide previously agreed upon services in both a timely and high-quality manner: "Our services catalog [...] represents the services we agreed to support to the stakeholders that [...] represent those business processes. [We] oversee those service catalogs to make sure that [...] we're meeting [...] our agreements [in] a timely manner [and] we're making sure the employee experience is up to par to what we deem as, you know, top-notch white glove service" (Director 2).

This regional structure overlaps with two broader global tendencies within service delivery: a tier-based and incrementally specialized structure of employee requests, and a sub-categorization of experts based on the employee lifecycle. According to this director, those two structures are greatly interconnected: "We provide HR support for our employees from a tier zero level [...] being self-service. [...] Or we offer a kind of a tier one to tier two support where they can submit a request. We have individuals on the teams underneath me that represent particular moments in an employee's lifecycle at the firm. And we can answer questions pertaining from recruiting, onboarding, learning, benefits, promotion, termination, and then to offboarding" (Director 2).

## *(3) Process Excellence team*

The PEX team is quite multifaceted, since it oversees operational aspects of the overall team alongside more strategic and transformative initiatives for the wider HR function. As explained by one director, it plays four major roles: "We really wear four key hats. The first hat that we wear is with respect to process documentation so we will map processes based on standards [...]. The [...] second key responsibility is [...] we'll train people in lean problem solving so [...] taking out wasteful activities and adding value to our processes within HR. I will also support with the implementation of process improvements or changes [...] in HR. And then the final hat that we wear is with respect to large scale projects within the broader HR org" (Director 1).

At its core, the PEX team is responsible for owning and operationalizing processes in order to scale them; they organize and map all process procedures for a better understanding and optimization of them, effectively holding responsibility over said processes. One practitioner claimed this activity as: "[That's] what our expertise is in [...]"

we take it [a process], we operationalize it, we tie service level agreements to it, we put metrics onto it, and then we own it” (Director 2).

In doing so, they follow structured lean methodologies and foster a CI mindset through initiatives such as training other HR practitioners in said methodologies. This Senior Director even goes on to identify this as the main goal of the PEX team: “The introduction of that team was to start to lead us towards that culture of continuous improvement at LinkedIn, to start to look at problem solving in a very different way” (Senior Director 1).

Additionally, PEX workers structurally support other teams in their operational improvement journey, as plainly put by one specialist: "Trying to help them to do their work more efficiently by identifying [waste], removing said [waste], [...] then helping them to come up with the future state-improved process and then implementing that so that we could actually realize those projected savings" (Specialist 2). At a larger scale, the team also acts as a project manager of bigger HR or enterprise-wide transformation initiatives, thus being a driver of change, as this director mentions: “[We] also support the broader transformation program [...] within HR operations [...] supporting larger projects as well in HR” (Director 1).

#### *(4) Knowledge Management team*

The third and final sub-team making up HR Operations is the Knowledge Management team, which acts as a support team for all knowledge needs. As such, it is responsible for creating and organizing information with two purposes: enabling employee self-service and assisting other HR experts in their daily work. One practitioner described its role as crucial for support optimization: “[It's] optimal for us because it allows us to do more support when we can have more self-serve information at your fingertips for an employee” (Director 2).

#### *(5) Working culture and composition*

Beyond the structural composition of the team, HR Operations shows an overall pursuit of contractor-based workforce, as explained by one director: “Now the reason we have contingent workers is that many of the things that we work on [...] are very fluctuating in nature. It actually helps us to give that flexibility in terms of our operating model” (Director 4).

An implicit structure that shapes HR Operations is its global alignment beyond siloes, as this director pointed out: “We're quite centralized in the sense of we have our three hubs, so we're regionalized but we're very well connected” (Director 3). Another director noted that cross-functional partnerships expand this collaborative mindset beyond HR: “We get our strategic priorities from HR and we will support mainly HR but we will also collaborate cross functionally as well wherever needed” (Director 1). Moreover, the team’s main purpose, prioritizing the employee experience, is subtly engrained into their everyday structures. One specialist summarized this idea as: “I think it's just about helping people [...] being just a part of the employee [resources]” (Supervisor 1).

#### *(6) Basic tools and partners*

Finally, data and technology stand out as the key basic tools for HR Operations, hence configuring the team around vital partnerships with other teams. The following employee expressed that technology is a key final step of process optimization, consequently becoming a central theme of daily HR Operations endeavors and rising the technology team partnership to the forefront: “Our technology team [...] when we think about those levers of improving [...] is kind of that final piece of the puzzle” (Senior Director 1).

Furthermore, and as pointed out by this Senior Manager, data is engrained into every decision, task and team as a strategic and identitarian way of working within HR: “The way they were operating is above and beyond the rest of our teams like the way we look at things where we use daily data, we use insights, we’re kind of having just our operating model” (Senior Manager 1). Certain employees, such as this manager, even linked this data-centered approach to communication purposes: “What we've also done is that we've tried to bring in two concepts within the team. One is the data interpretation [...] and then the second is storytelling [...] with that data, how do you tell a story?” (Manager 1).

#### **4.2. Transformation Impact and Enablers**

Beyond its definition, the findings have helped assess the impact of the HR Operations team as an agent for transformation. In particular, as shown in Table 4, three transformation enablers have been identified: a unified structure for transformation governance and enterprise integration, a CI mindset and internal embedding of participatory transformation, and the use of data-based decision-making and technology enhancements. To the extent that these elements have been in place or leveraged, HR Operations has been able to contribute to the transformation of the HR function.

**Table 4: Phenomenological Reduction of Data (RQ2 Sample)**

Thematic Horizons	Invariable Constituents	General Themes
Alignment of HR transformation with business strategy changes	Business Strategy Alignment & Adaptation to the Environment	Unified Structure for Transformation Governance & Enterprise Integration
Small day-to-day transformations for HR Ops to keep pace in hyper-growth context		
Accompaniment of slow long-term transformation program with parallel continuous improvement training program for effective change perception by agents	Foundational Process and People Program at Small-Scale & Transformative Technology Program at Large-Scale	
Technology transformation after process embedding		
Convergence of process and people across geographies for clear structure	Global Operational Architecture for Scalability and Governance	
Cross-functional transformation of moment that matters for globalization, automatization and standardization of process		
Process excellence team as center of excellence for structured impactful transformation and skill gap impediment elimination	Unifying Structured Vision for Transformation under Specialized Team	
HR Ops coordination by process excellence team		
Simplification of processes and realignment of role responsibilities	Tangible Efficiency Optimization & Restructuring of Tasks and Workforce	
Automation or relocation of work		
Enterprise-wide spillover of continuous improvement philosophy through cross-functional transformation projects	Process Excellence Mindset Spillover beyond HR Operations through Cross-functional Project Partnerships	
Cross-functional infectiousness of continuous improvement mindset		
HR Operations support requirement in strategic decisions	Key Proactive Support in Strategic Projects	
Value-adding growth in HR Ops initiative involvement		
Leveraging of continuous improvement mindset	Structuring of Operational Excellence Nature & Embedding of Continuous Improvement Mindset	Continuous Improvement Mindset & Internal Embedding of Participatory Transformation
Intrinsic identity of HR Ops as process improvers		
Continuous improvement problem solving training to enable change at individual level	Lean Methodology Training for Individual Capacity-Building	
Lean training for mindset transformation		
Bottom-up participatory approach of continuous improvement ideas	Bottom-up Improvement Ideas & Structured Process Excellence Assistance	
Structured and rigorous support of initiatives instead of "side of the desk" improvements		
Leadership-level individually-led transformation advocacy	Leadership-Supported Participatory Engagement & Internal Embedding of Transformation	
Operational internal projects as actual sources of change		
Structuring and documentation of underlying operating model as a tool for transformation	Holistic Operating Model as Descriptive and Strategic Tool	Data-Based Decision-Making & Technology Enhancements
Articulation of interconnectivity for operational understanding		
Data-based storytelling for HR Ops' transformation business pitch	Quantifiable Efficiency Benefits & Data-Supported Storytelling	
Data to translate improvements to benefits		
Migration from manual to system-embedded and compliant processes	System-Embedded Technological Enhancements	
Impressive homegrown technology		

## **Unified Structure for Transformation Governance and Enterprise Integration**

A unified and global structure of HR Operations can, as suggested by the interviews, greatly impact the function's transformation journey, especially when the following seven elements are embedded in such structure: (1) business strategy alignment and adaptation to the environment, (2) foundational process and people program at small-scale and transformative technology program at large-scale, (3) global operational architecture for scalability and governance, (4) unifying structured vision for transformation under specialized team, (5) tangible efficiency optimization and restructuring of tasks and workforce, (6) process excellence mindset spillover beyond HR Operations through cross-functional project partnerships, and (7) key proactive support in strategic projects.

### *(1) Business strategy alignment and adaptation to the environment*

Currently, organizations require constant adaptation to fast strategy changes in a volatile environment. During the interviews, one practitioner evidenced the need for HR Operations to constantly align with those changes in order for the transformation initiative to be sustainable: “Every year we go back and we look at like is our strategy right, [...] how is LinkedIn strategy changing and what do we need to do to change that? [...] To just constantly be on that journey with the business as well” (Senior Director 1). Therefore, this adaptation benefits from a unified structure, as it requires coherence in the alignment towards strategic and environmental changes.

### *(2) Foundational process and people program at small-scale and transformative technology program at large-scale*

When referring to the broad transformation initiative set forth by GTO leadership, most participants distinguished technology transformations from people and process transformations. This separation was conscious, as concisely expressed by this director: “In parallel with the broader transformation program it was recommended that we run a continuous improvement program because [...] while people are waiting for technology for example, [...] it made sense to implement a continuous improvement program where people could take a bit more control” (Director 1). Thus, it was inferred that transformational coherence requires participation at both shorter reach levels (people and processes) and larger scopes (technology), enabled by running parallel programs.

### *(3) Global operational architecture for scalability and governance*

As this employee points out, a global scope for standardization and scaling allows for a better governance of processes, consequently enabling a more coordinated transformation of said processes across the organization: “So it’s kind of just putting that bit of structure and rigor and governance around it but also looking at it more from a global perspective as well” (Senior Manager 1). Thus, this natural characteristic of HR Operations also contributes to its transformative capacity.

### *(4) Unifying structured vision for transformation under specialized team*

During the interviews, it was made evident that the PEX team plays a crucial role in driving transformation within HR Operations: “When the process excellence team was formed, it really enabled and empowered our team to start thinking about process improvements. [...] and then they created this whole structure [...] and so it's really changed the way that we worked because [...] it's a very formalized way to [get] a proper review by everyone on the leadership team, um, as well as all of our process improvements too” (Manager 2). The existence of a specialized team to drive the transformation agenda is a particularly important enabler, as it acts as a complement to an otherwise heavily operational HR Operations team.

### *(5) Tangible efficiency optimization and restructuring of tasks and workforce*

One director pointed out that another key transformation facilitator is the redistribution of tasks and workforce, for it allows optimization of resources for further improvements: “We are realigning on the role responsibilities. Through that, we are eradicating the inefficiencies that are existing in the process” (Director 4). This redistribution fulfills a key goal for both HR Operations and transformation, as explained by this other director: “We’re having to reassess our operations and look at ways of how do we become more efficient and more cost effective so we are looking at implementing new processes and new ways of working to reduce those costs” (Director 1).

### *(6) Process excellence mindset spillover beyond HR Operations through cross-functional project partnerships*

One practitioner pointed out that HR Operations’ influential role in cross-functional project partnerships allows for a wider scope of the transformation program, as it creates a process excellence spillover in other functions: “I think where we’ve started to plug in

process excellence beyond HR Operations is the strategic projects right so we've now been able to show the value and the impact the process and continuous improvement and lean thinking has made within HR Operations and now start to kind of plug them into different initiatives that are broader than just HR Operations" (Senior Director 1). Thus, the team can foster a transformative mindset beyond its own limits by collaborating across functions and influencing them to assume a CI mindset.

*(7) Key proactive support in strategic projects*

Finally, the interviews helped deduce that the team's growing support in strategic projects allows it to proactively support the transformation project. This director reiterated the importance of the team at a strategic level: "We're definitely a partner [...]. We're not an afterthought. So they will not launch a project or a process without having representation from HR Ops [...]. They value the partnership, um, that is there and the structure, um, that we bring when we go into an initiative or a project" (Director 3).

**Continuous Improvement Mindset and Internal Embedding of Participatory Transformation**

Beyond its crucial role in structuring the transformation program, HR Operations, and particularly the PEX team, have also enabled an internal culture shift by establishing a CI mindset that would foster a highly participatory approach to change. The findings show four elements that enabled building such a culture: (1) structuring of operational excellence nature and embedding of CI mindset, (2) lean methodology training for individual capability-building, (3) bottom-up improvement ideas and structured process excellence assistance, and (4) leadership-supported participatory engagement and internal embedding of transformation.

*(1) Structuring of operational excellence nature and embedding of continuous improvement mindset*

During the interviews, most participants recognized the PEX team's role in fostering operational excellence within the team through engraining a CI mindset. One participant expressed how this brings structure to an already existing operational excellence nature within HR Operations: "For me continuous improvement is something that we should all be doing anyway within our roles, within our companies [...]. It's the responsibility of the business to adopt it and my team will provide the tools and the coaching and the support

and the templates and the expertise” (Director 1). Such structuring allows for the embedding of a CI mindset and consequently enables the creation of a transformative culture within the team.

*(2) Lean methodology training for individual capability-building*

Another key enabler for a transformative culture is the development of lean methodology trainings so as to build individual capabilities for change. This was plainly described by one director: “I think without the Lean 101 training, we would not have been educated enough to deep dive into the processes and identify problems. Once the problem is identified, clearly the solution also come out and then the impact also come out” (Director 4). The centrality of CI training for the proactive democratization of change was broadly recognized across the pool of participants, who regarded trainings as a key tool for cultural change.

*(3) Bottom-up improvement ideas and structured process excellence assistance*

Beyond the construction of a CI mindset, HR Operations has the capacity to encourage a participatory transformation process too, as explained by this manager: “I would say that they really encourage the team to come up with new improvements because they're not that close to the work that the team is doing or the processes. [...] But if they do have a problem that they're trying to overcome, it is encouraged that you talk to the PECS person, um, for your team” (Manager 3). In other words, a bottom-up system for improvement ideas is an important element of effective process transformation.

*(4) Leadership-supported participatory engagement and internal embedding of transformation*

Finally, many participants expressed that achieving recognition from the leadership team after participating in change and improvement initiatives acts as a motivator for embedding such working tendencies within the team. The idea is best described by the following practitioner: “That in itself is its own reward for that individual who came up with that idea because we allow that individual to be a part of the change [...] you got development opportunities for your team members. You have visibility to leadership that they may not have had. So it's self-rewarding for them to get that. [...] They're always looking for ideas, they're always operating in this manner” (Director 2). Thus, the role of leadership acts as the final puzzle piece for establishing a new working culture.

## **Data-Based Decision-Making and Technology Enhancements**

The final cluster of transformation enablers identified are related to a data-based decision-making process and the use of technology enhancements. More specifically, there are three elements that participants regard as having transformed the way they work towards change: (1) a holistic operating model as a descriptive and strategic tool, (2) quantifiable efficiency benefits and data-supported storytelling, and (3) the use of system-embedded technological enhancements. Together, all three of them make up an innovative ecosystem for transformation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### *(1) Holistic operating model as descriptive and strategic tool*

The operating model was regarded by most participants as a crucial tool for change, as it documents and structures the underlying operations that make up a team. As this director explains, the goal of the operating model is two-fold; it is both an operational tool for communication and a strategic tool for planning: “This [operating model] is a tool we can use [...] to communicate to your partners and to our team members in HR operations how we function as a team, as a department. So that was really the genesis [...], how do we use it as a communication tool for our various stakeholders and then not just that, [...] but how do we leverage this for planning and then to be able to use it even further for impact assessments as well” (Director 1). Hence, it acts as a holistic tool for both describing the present position and interconnectivity within the team, and establishing future goals based on the company’s strategy.

### *(2) Quantifiable efficiency benefits and data-supported storytelling*

In terms of data, the participants stressed the benefits of its use to quantify the benefits reached through process improvements and identify the possible problems that would need to be addressed in the future. Moreover, they emphasized the importance of data for storytelling purposes, that would later on translate into tangible benefits, as this Senior Manager mentioned: “We’re standardizing and making it consistent but also like now you’re able to have benchmarks, trends, all of that different stuff that we haven’t had before. [...] We were very successful this financial year in securing everything we asked for because we used data to tell that story” (Senior Manager 1).

*(3) System-embedded technological enhancements*

Finally, the findings show that technology holds an important role in consolidating improvements within processes, and as a consequence is also a key tool for overall transformation. This employee pointed out that this positive effect is enhanced when technology is grown in-house: “That efficiency of being more empowered to implement, execute, and deliver within our own technology that we use primarily ourselves is a night and day difference in impact to the, to teams” (Director 2).

**4.3. Transformation Limitations**

Throughout the interviews, certain limitations to HR Operations’ capacity for transformation were encountered, spanning across the following categories: a restrictive organizational context, the general change alignment challenge, and technology and data limitations. As described in the following section and depicted in Table 5, each of these categories can be further extended into two main challenges, accounting for the final six limitations for transformation that the participants set forth. While most of these were related to external factors out of the control of the HR Operations team itself, some were certainly avoidable at an organizational level.

**Table 5: Phenomenological Reduction of Data (RQ3 Sample)**

<b>Thematic Horizons</b>	<b>Invariable Constituents</b>	<b>General Themes</b>
Underprioritized and Inconsistent Transformation under Dynamic Context	Volatile Environment	Restrictive Organizational Context
Resource and Capacity Constraints	Organizational Restrictions	
Contingent Workforce Dependence & Capability Instability		
Leadership Dependency & Chronic Operational-Strategic Reprioritization	Global Strategic Alignment	Change Alignment Challenge
Regional Tensions under Global Alignment	Change Governance	
Behavioral Resistance to Change		
Limited Potential of People and Process Improvements		
Stakeholder Contextual and Perceptive Misalignment & Communication Challenge		
Underdeveloped and Inaccessible Data Structure	Operational Obstacles	Technology & Data Limitations
Technology-Induced Time Delay		
Technology Infrastructure Integration Errors & Wasteful Process Workarounds		
Technology Dependency for Transformation Development	Strategic Governance and Partnership Constraints	
Inefficient Technology Prioritization Process & Technological Support Capacity Impediments		
Limited HR-Technology Partnership		

## **Restrictive Organizational Context**

The first challenge to become evident during the analysis of the interviews was the context in which HR Operations pursued such change. This limitation referred to both (1) a volatile environment, and (2) restrictions at an organizational level.

### *(1) Volatile environment*

LinkedIn, like many other MNCs in the tech industry, experienced a remarkable hypergrowth period during the 2010s, resulting in a need for quick changes under a fast-paced and ever-changing environment, as explained by this Senior Director: “We just didn’t have the capacity to take the time to focus on it so [...] we were trying to you know go on this transformation journey but people were trying to do it on the side of their desk along with their day job [...]. Because we were just taking small little chunks out of you know improvement and changes, we were actually never going to get anywhere” (Senior Director 1). Such a circumstance, though challenging, was the main precursor for the transformation program, aimed at making up for the low-impact and dispersed change of support functions such as HR Operations.

### *(2) Organizational restrictions*

Internal challenges were also identified, as participants faced two key organizational challenges. One Senior Director mentioned resource and budgetary constraints as a main setback for transformation: “I think ultimately the issue we have is it’s capacity and budgets right, it’s capacity to be able to do everything that we need to do” (Senior Director 1). Such limitations not only hindered the capacity for growth but also required the creation of a contractor-based workforce, resulting in further challenges. The following practitioner put it simply: “We have a high utilization of contract workers too and that creates its own, sense of churn because contract workers are only here for a set period of time [...]. By the time they get [...] highly impactful to the team and really valuable, [...] we got to let them go and start all over again” (Director 2).

## **Change Alignment Challenge**

Another set of crucial challenges for transformation are those set forth by the actual change process. These can be divided into two sub-categories: (1) the organizational alignment of change, and (2) change governance in itself.

### *(1) Global strategic alignment*

HR Operations' global strategic alignment, as previously discussed, can be highly beneficial for a consistent transformation of the HR function. Nevertheless, it also poses a threat to effective change within the different teams. For instance, one participant explained how leadership dependency poses a challenge for the daily consecution of transformation tasks, and how that ties back to resource constraints: "If we're always consistent-consistently delivering and going above and beyond [...] leadership is gonna look at that and say, [...] you don't need those resources. You're doing everything well. We're doing everything, but to the cost-- to what degree? You know, we have stretched out resources. [...] So the LTs leadership support is the most impactful" (Director 2).

Additionally, many alignment issues emerged both at the operational-strategic level and at the regional-global level, thus requiring a constant renegotiation of team priorities. Such tensions are better exemplified by this director: "There is a little bit of negotiation occurring is when we have a global initiative that is being kicked off, and we have no capacity left. Because we've all- we're already taken up with our regional. [...] We may have to pause and just stop doing it and go after whatever that global initiative is. So [...] we're constantly reprioritizing" (Director 3). Thus, the sustained need for reprioritization based on global or strategic shifts heavily impacts both the regional and operational level, constraining transformation at the small-scale.

### *(2) Change governance*

In times of transformation, the findings show that there are three key change governance challenges. The first one relates to the behavioral resistance to change experienced by the employees, which this specialist regards as the reason for the slow introduction of transformative practices: "The most common challenges that you face of when you are a process improver is the behavioral or the resistant to change. People doesn't understand, [...] that when you are asking questions, like when you are challenging the process, this is not something personal. [...] I am not saying that you are not good enough to run the process, right? I'm asking because [...] I wanted to understand in with the information you give to me" (Specialist 1). This resistance is common in times of change, thus accounting for an easily recognizable yet hardly completely avoidable challenge for transformation.

Another practitioner pointed out how, the more improvement practices are sought within the organization, the more the chances for actual improvement decrease: “The biggest challenge is that as the processes get more matured, the opportunity of transformation decreases” (Director 4). In other words, there are certain existential limitations to people and process transformations.

Change agents also need to face the challenge of properly communicating the purpose and elements of transformation. Several participants linked the existence of a communication barrier to a contextual and perceptual misalignment between the change drivers and their stakeholders, as this director explains: “No, it's-it's challenging because in their minds, you know, we don't do nothing else but their particular process, so that should be top priority. So, you're always going to have that, um, back and forth, need to be transparent in a very good line of communication with those stakeholders to-to have them understand [...] the ups and downs of, um, volume of work” (Director 3).

### **Technology and Data Limitations**

The final and most frequently mentioned limitation for the consolidation of a HR Operations-led transformation is related to the tools needed for its fulfillment: data and technology. Two main challenges emerge from it: (1) operational obstacles, and (2) strategic governance and partnership constraints.

#### *(1) Operational obstacles*

During the interviews, several HR practitioners reiterated the presence of certain operational obstacles in data and technology implementations for transformation. Some were quite expected, such as the time delay induced by technology enhancements described by this specialist: “That's a challenge [...] because a project that would be one, two weeks it going to be right now three months because we have to create a [technology] enhancement request” (Specialist 1). Others, which mainly related to accessibility of data, were challenging but easily fixable, as the same participant pointed out: “As a PEX team, we don't have access to the information. I need to pull out the reports to avoid going and ask to the people, "Hey, can you pull me a report about how many cases?" That's in terms of process improvement” (Specialist 1).

However, a more critical operational error was identified by another specialist, mainly relating to the failed integration of different technology-based systems that would

prevent process optimization: “So now you have this conflict between what our process is and what the technology is able to do and deliver. [...] if the technology solution doesn't align to the process, then the people are going to create a circumvented process around the technology piece, and that's just going to create more waste” (Specialist 2). This poses a big threat to simplification of processes, as it does not allow the teams to extract all of technology's potential for transformation.

## *(2) Strategic governance and partnership constraints*

At a more strategic level, the main problem encountered is a clear dependency of technology for an actual transformation of HR Operations, plainly put by this practitioner: “You can [...] improve the process, and make them more mature, but if you really want to transform [...] you would need technology. [...] I think technology dependency is the biggest impediment towards process improvement” (Director 4). This dependency can not only restrict transformative initiatives to a certain extent but also intensify or provoke some of the previously identified challenges, such as a restrictive budget or the role of the leadership team in reprioritization.

This dependency is extensible to the technology team as one of the main HR Operations stakeholders. Many participants, such as the following manager, discussed prioritization dynamics between their team and the technology team as another big challenge: “So it's a challenge [...] of our technology team versus our HR Ops team and how they prioritize that” (Manager 3). Moreover, the limitations of the technology team in itself extend to their collaborators, as explained by this director: “There is a lot of really good technology there [but] I think there's more of a demand there for it than what the teams can actually support. And I don't think their intake process is effective and this feedback has been shared. [...] that's where the challenge is with technology” (Director 3). Consequently, the partnership with the technology team becomes a crucial obstacle in the way to transformation.

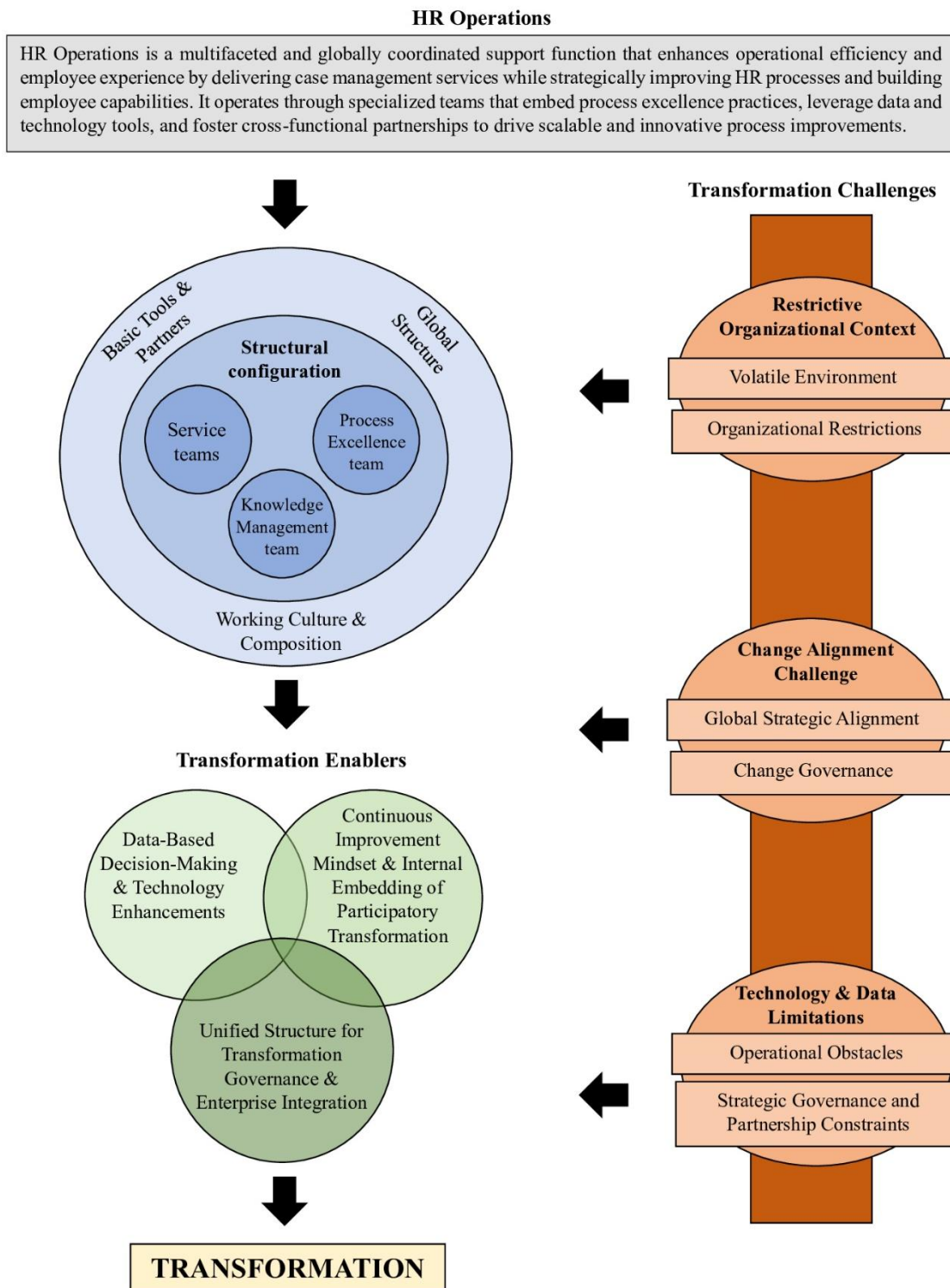
## **5. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE LINES OF RESEARCH**

### **5.1. Discussion of Study Results**

This study posed three main objectives aimed at expanding the knowledge on HR Operations both in practical and theoretical terms. The findings, summarized in Figure 3, show that all three of them were accomplished to a certain extent.

**Figure 3**

*Conceptual Framework of HR Operations for HR Transformation*



*Note.* Own elaboration based on study findings.

Firstly, the main elements of both the defining and configurative nature of HR Operations were identified, allowing for the emergence of this broad definition:

HR Operations is a multifaceted and globally coordinated support function that enhances operational efficiency and employee experience by delivering case management services while strategically improving HR processes and building employee capabilities. It operates through specialized teams that embed process excellence practices, leverage data and technology tools, and foster cross-functional partnerships to drive scalable and innovative process improvements.

Secondly, it was assessed that HR Operations does not only have the capacity to impact HR transformation efforts, but also to lead them. Such capacity is found in its naturally unified, global and specialized structure, which facilitates the implementation of strategically aligned initiatives and ensures governance across the team; its focus on CI practices and techniques, enabling the democratization of change at an individual level; and its data and technology centric approach to enhancements and decision-making, that elevates transformation for environment adaptation through innovative and state-of-the-art tools.

Finally, the findings put forth the three main limitations that impede HR Operations from realizing its full potential as a change agent, namely: a restrictive context both at an environmental and organizational level, the change-induced challenge of aligning organizational priorities and properly navigating change at a stakeholder level, and operationally and strategically induced technology and data constraints. The identification of such limitations also recognizes the future efforts required for further transformational leveraging within HR Operations.

In conclusion, HR Operations' nature materializes in the form of a complex and integrated system that combines the structural configuration of teams and workflows with certain key design principles and transformation enablers. This system is inherently dynamic, as it requires adaptation to face the numerous challenges that endanger the transformational purpose it serves. Overall, this integrated perspective highlights HR Operations' capacity to drive transformation and its strategic potential for the accomplishment of such goal.

## **5.2. Contributions of the Study**

The fulfillment of all three objectives allows for some contribution to academic literature. First and foremost, the findings align with many of the academic descriptions of HR SSCs, such as its level-based distribution of inquiries (Farndale et al., 2009; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013), the emergence of a customer-provider relationship as opposed to a mere centralization of administrative processes (Meijerink et al., 2013; Reilly, 2014; Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013) or the conjunction of transactional and transformative activities under HRSS (Meijerink & Bondarouk, 2013; Meijerink et al., 2016; Meijerink et al., 2013).

Among those confirmations, it is especially significant that, as considered by Farndale et al. (2009), the introduction of LinkedIn's HR Operations team followed a transformative effort. The literature also implies that the centralization of operational and administrative tasks and adoption of a CI culture push both the efficiency and the quality of service within HRSS, thus allowing other parts of the HR function to become more transformational or strategic (McCracken & McIvor, 2013; Redman et al., 2007; Ulrich, 1997), which can also be concluded through this study.

However, its contributions transcend such mere confirmations by also concluding that, in the particular case of LinkedIn, HR Operations has followed a seemingly natural path away from transformational enablement and towards an active leadership of the transformation process. In other words, the findings show the beginning of a convergence of HR Operations as both an SSC and a transformation-specialized CoE, making Ulrich's perfectly compartmentalized "three-legged stool" model wobble. This ultimately challenges the well-established view of HR as a highly compartmentalized and mainly operational function, suggesting a shift toward a more integrated and dynamic value-adding function.

## **5.3. HR Operations from an Employee-Centric Perspective**

Beyond the main results, the study of LinkedIn's HR transformation journey has allowed for one last contribution, inferred through its employee-centric perspective. Even though customer centrality is commonly considered by scholars as a key aspect of the HRSS model and its success (Farndale et al., 2009), other studies have proved that, in practice, the introduction of an HR Operations team has oftentimes been considered as a

cost-based transformation, hence delivering a fragmented change process to employees (Reilly, 2014). However, the experience at LinkedIn seems to have been different.

Across the 12 interviews analyzed, participants consistently showed a strong commitment to a customer-centric transformation of the function, as well as general satisfaction with the outcomes derived from it. The results indicate that LinkedIn has recognized the intrinsic link between HR Operations and employee experience, as well as the potential for the latter to become a primary driver of transformation. Moreover, this perspective seems to have been clearly and coherently communicated to HR Operations practitioners, as reflected by their use of a shared language and alignment of understanding of what HR transformation requires.

This alignment of purpose around the employee has allowed HR Operations to achieve a more tangible, consistent and efficient transformation of the day-to-day activities, thus enabling employees to add value at more strategic levels. Though with its transformation journey still underway, LinkedIn's approach underscores how prioritizing employee experience does not only allow for service delivery enhancement, but also for broader organizational transformation and more meaningful improvements in employees' everyday realities.

#### **5.4. Limitations and Future Lines of Research**

Despite its contributions, this phenomenological study also shows certain limitations, which at the same time could be canalized into future lines of research. One of its main constraints is the limited generalizability of the results, since they only refer to one organizational context. In order to contrast and confirm the results across different contexts and industries, a comparative study of a broad group of MNCs would be the most useful. This could also be taken as an opportunity to include a broader stakeholder group among the research participants, making up for the high concentration of HR practitioners in this study.

Another limitation of this research project is its temporary constraints, as the findings reflect a very specific period of time at LinkedIn. Given the importance of CI, a longitudinal case study of an organization's transversal introduction of a HR Operations team would be a more interesting approach to understand its impact on the transformation journey.

Finally, it is encouraged that this qualitative study be reinforced by a complementary quantitative study based on survey data. This would allow for both a confirmation of correlation between the introduction of an HR Operations team and the transformation of the function, and for a more effective handling of a bigger pool of data.

## **6. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

At a practical level, these findings can act as a guide for other MNCs in future need of transforming the HR function through the introduction of an HR Operations team. The most important takeaway is for them to address this team's potential role as a leader of transformation from the very beginning, thus enabling an enterprise-wide prioritization of such change initiative and aligning cross-functional interests. This would help avoid challenges such as resource constraints or misaligned partnerships with key stakeholders such as the technology team. If, on top of that, this project's purpose and importance was effectively communicated across HR and the whole organization, many change governance challenges would be mitigated.

Furthermore, it is recommended that the introduction of an HR Operations team includes a set of specialized teams on both service delivery and operational excellence, and the two of them with a particular strive for CI if they are to perform both operationally and strategically in the path for transformation. This measure should also be followed by a predisposition for an organizational culture change through different trainings and the embedding of a CI mindset, so as to not pursue transformation in siloes and promote the overall change of the company.

Such measures, accompanied by leadership-led recognition of HR Operations as a multifaceted team and a prioritization of its transformative efforts as critical for the function, would allow for a better leverage of its unified, global and specialized configuration. Moreover, it is encouraged for this structure to be aligned to an employee experience enhancement purpose, as it allows both transformation at an organizational level and an empowerment of employees in their everyday tasks. Taking all of it into account, a greater transformative impact could be achieved, and HR could have a better chance of becoming a driver of organizational change.

## 7. Declaración de Uso de Herramientas de Inteligencia Artificial Generativa en Trabajos Fin de Grado

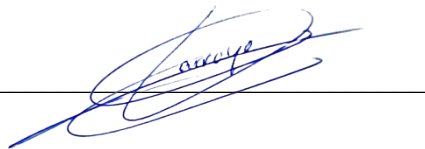
Por la presente, yo, Leyre Arroyo Mendivil, estudiante del Doble Grado en Administración y Dirección de Empresas y Relaciones Internacionales [E-6] de la Universidad Pontificia Comillas al presentar mi Trabajo Fin de Grado titulado "Conceptualizing HR Operations in Multinationals: A Phenomenological Approach", declaro que he utilizado la herramienta de Inteligencia Artificial Generativa ChatGPT u otras similares de IAG de código sólo en el contexto de las actividades descritas a continuación:

1. **Referencias:** Usado conjuntamente con otras herramientas, como Science, para identificar referencias preliminares que luego he contrastado y validado.
2. **Corrector de estilo literario y de lenguaje:** Para mejorar la calidad lingüística y estilística del texto.
3. **Sintetizador y divulgador de libros complicados:** Para resumir y comprender literatura compleja.
4. **Revisor:** Para recibir sugerencias sobre cómo mejorar y perfeccionar el trabajo con diferentes niveles de exigencia.
5. **Traductor:** Para traducir textos de un lenguaje a otro.

Afirmo que toda la información y contenido presentados en este trabajo son producto de mi investigación y esfuerzo individual, excepto donde se ha indicado lo contrario y se han dado los créditos correspondientes (he incluido las referencias adecuadas en el TFG y he explicitado para que se ha usado ChatGPT u otras herramientas similares). Soy consciente de las implicaciones académicas y éticas de presentar un trabajo no original y acepto las consecuencias de cualquier violación a esta declaración.

Fecha: 24 de marzo de 2026

Firma: \_\_\_\_\_



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