The Role of Human Resource Practitioners Maintaining Sustainability In Organisations: Some Empirical Evidence Of Expectations, Challenges And Trends

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ABSTRACT
To sustain competitive advantage, organisations rely on technology, patents or strategic positions and on how their workforce is managed. Emphasis on 'people' to compete effectively in global economies requires HR practitioners to live up to the challenges, expectations and trends in HR functions. The aim was to establish if HR practitioners are equipped with the capabilities for the challenges, expectations and trends of HR effectiveness. Data was collected via an e-survey questionnaire, from 364 members of the Human Resource Institute of New Zealand. The response rate was 41%. Five closely related HR themes were focused on: the first two on the HR practitioner’s role as change agent and strategic partner. The three remaining themes focused on HR practitioner’s responsibility of improving relations in the organisation. Findings show high positive results in self-identified HR capabilities. This signifies that HR practitioners in New Zealand possess capabilities that can increase HR effectiveness.

Key words: Expectations, challenges, trends, themes, value add

INTRODUCTION
A company’s workforce is the lifeblood of organisations and they represent one of its most potent and valuable resources according to Du Plessis (2009). Consequently, the extent to which a workforce is managed is a critical element in enhancing internal effectiveness and improving the organisation’s competitiveness. Human Resource (HR) practitioners play an increasingly vital role in maximising the efficiency of the organisation’s human resources since HR practices support employee behaviour that is critical for accomplishing key organisational processes, thus advancing organisational success (Nel, Werner, Poisat, Sono, Du Plessis, & Nqalo, 2011; Stone 2008; Rennie 2003; Wright & Boswell, 2002). It
becomes evident that individuals performing in those HR roles need to be equipped with distinct capabilities that support the expectations, challenges and requirements of their roles and responsibilities. HR practitioners in New Zealand (NZ) have been exposed to challenges and opportunities initiated by the increasing change and complexity of the business environment. The emergence of globalisation, development in technology and telecommunications; the shift towards a knowledge-based workforce, labour legislation and intensifying competition for skilled labour create new competitive realities for organisations. Increasing tightening of competition implies that, regardless of the country in which they operate, organisations are all under pressure to react to these changing conditions by cultivating a competence in human resource management (HRM) (Du Plessis, 2009; Horgan, 2003).

Organisations are now looking to the HR function to go beyond the delivery of cost effective administrative services and provide expertise on how to leverage human capital (Jamrog & Overholt, 2004). Simultaneously the role of HR practitioners as strategic business partners and leaders of change has also received considerable attention (Du Plessis, 2009; Rennie, 2003; Walker & Stopper, 2000). Ultimately, the competitive forces that organisations face today create a new mandate for HR and this necessitates changes to the structure and role of the HR function.

In today’s global economy HR practitioners must be prepared to meet the considerable challenges and expectations posed by the continuing evolution of their role and show how their function is creating and adding value to the organisation. As recognised by Ulrich and Brockbank (2005, 134) HR should not be defined by ‘what it does’ but by ‘it’s contribution to achieve organisational excellence’.

**PROBLEM STATEMENT**

From the research problem, taking into account the broader focus on key HR activities and functions, one realises that there is a need to consider to what extent HR practitioners in NZ organisations are equipped with the capabilities that can fulfil the expectations, challenges and trends in HR effectiveness.

**OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY**

Several studies were done over the past years in NZ among HR practitioners’ future, capabilities challenges and expectations. The ultimate objective of this study is to determine the extent to which the current levels of capabilities of HR practitioners in New Zealand organisations match the challenges, expectations and trends of their current roles and responsibilities. By comparing this study with NZ organisations from previous studies add more value and it informs the reader of how changes have taken place over the past ten years in NZ.

**METHODOLOGY**

The quantitative methodology adopted was an e-survey; a questionnaire containing structured closed questions. This involved the selection of a sample of people from the HR practitioner population in NZ to ascertain how factors differ, and to make inferences about the population, or in other words generalising from sample to population. Reliability of this study was seen as high (41% responded) as previous leading HRM studies conducted in NZ were successful with a response rate of 11% and 34 % respectively.

**Sample selection**

The study focused on HR practitioners in NZ organisations who are registered as members of the Human Resources Institute of New Zealand (HRINZ). HRINZ have 3600+ individual members who are involved in the management and development of HR in private and public sector organisations throughout NZ. The
target population was limited to HRINZ members that had registered to participate in HR research requests that HRINZ provided links to; the total number of HRINZ members in this category was 364.

Data collection
The data was collected via the e-survey, which was specifically designed for this study. The invitation to participate in this study went to 364 members of HRINZ. A total of 179 participants responded to the survey questionnaire, giving a response rate of 41%.

Questionnaire
The questionnaire consisted of six sections with 40 questions (this number was made up of main questions and sub-questions). Several sub-questions were formed to adequately explore each of the five HR themes researched in this study. All the questions in the questionnaire were closed questions. All five themes are covered in this article but due to the size of the study and length limitation for this article not all the information could be discussed. The Tables reflect the research questions used in this article, and the rationale for using the five specific themes is discussed later.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background
For decades HR practitioners have been tagged as administrators, however organisations are now looking to the HR function to go beyond the delivery of cost effective administrative services and provide expertise on how to leverage human capital (Jamrog & Overholt, 2004). Simultaneously the role of HR practitioners as strategic business partners and leaders of change has also received considerable attention (Rennie, 2003; Walker & Stopper, 2000). Ultimately, the competitive forces that organisations face today create a new mandate for HR and this necessitates changes to the structure and role of the HR function.

The HR profession has been continuously evolving and changing over the past hundred years, adding more and different roles and responsibilities. When one traces the HR profession one finds that out of the Industrial Revolution, labour unions and the industrial welfare movement arose as well as groundbreaking research in scientific management and industrial psychology. In the 1980’s climate of anxiety over prospects for economic growth, it became apparent that there was a need for the HR function to become more ‘proactive’ and human resource problems needed to be anticipated and prevented or at least minimised (Gilbertson, 1984). This decade also saw the HR profession faced with criticism and questions regarding its validity, which subsequently resulted in a significant body of research that linked HR practices to organisational performance (Stewart, 1996).

From the 1970s to the 1990s NZ experienced major developments in legislation impacting on employment relations, along with more economic restructuring and radical shifts in the labour demand and supply, enforced a growing awareness of the importance of the ‘human asset’ (Gilbert & Jones, 2000). A generally harsher business environment and increasing competitive pressures caused the HR function to be increasingly seen as a ‘specialist’ role (Macky, 2008). This made it necessary for HR practitioners to recognise that they had the potential to play a key part in maximising the efficiency of the organisation’s human resources. At the same time the role of HR practitioners in NZ organisations was becoming more strategic in orientation (Du Plessis, 2010; Du Plessis, 2009; Macky, 2008; Boxall, 1995; Stablein & Geare, 1993). HR practitioners started to depict themselves as ‘strategic’ HR professionals who divided their roles into operations and strategy.
The profile of the New Zealand HR practitioner had also changed dramatically. By the late 1990s the majority of HR professionals (60%) were well educated women with a degree or postgraduate qualification and a previous career in HR (Institute of Personnel Management New Zealand, 1997).

Authors have taken different stances when referring to HR practices, but there was a consistent focus on the contribution of HR practices to enhancing human capital. Shared assumptions of a number of authors result in the definition that ‘HR practices are a set of activities that actively contribute to achieving organisational objectives’ (Macky, 2008) and ‘have the ability to gain competitive advantage over other firms’ (Barney & Hesterly, 2006). HR practices, i.e. the programmes, processes and techniques that direct the management of an organisation’s human resources can complement, substitute for, or even conflict with other organisational practices and at times arise from reactive and ad hoc choices made by HR practitioners in response to circumstances (Wright & Boswell, 2002, Macky, 2008).

HR practitioners are an active element in the implementation of HR practices because of their command of professional and business acumen. Their quality, extent of knowledge and experience, level of training and education, combined with a belief in their ability to achieve set objectives has a significant impact on the successful implementation of HR practices (Murphy & Southey, 2003). The five closest related themes focussed on in this article are: change management, recruitment and retention, work-life balance, diversity management, and HR as a strategic partner. These five themes are closely related and will be compared with earlier studies done in NZ on the same topics.

Change Management
Organisations that effectively manage change by continuously adapting their bureaucracies, strategies, systems, products and cultures in response to the impact of the complex, dynamic, uncertain and turbulent environment of the twenty-first century, are identified as masters of renewal according to Nel, Werner, Poisat, Sono, Du Plessis, & Nqalo, (2011). New Zealand businesses are not exempt from this trend and for the past decade organisations have been facing the need to change in order to remain competitive in the global market (Du Plessis, 2006). Consequently the HR function has become more multifaceted over the years as the pace of change quickens, requiring a transition towards more value-added roles, such as the role of a change agent (Holbeche, 2006).

Unquestionably HR practitioners have a critical role to play to ensure that the change process runs smoothly, as change in itself causes a high level of turmoil in organisations (Nel et al., 2011). In the new economy HR practitioners, as organisational facilitators to change, have to have the capacity and discipline to make change happen and need to be skilled in the management of employee resistance to change (Macky & Johnson, 2003). The focus on the behaviour of employees is important as change has a way of scaring individuals into ‘inaction’, hence change facilitators need to possess the skills and tactics to modify employees’ perceptions and replace any resistance with motivation and excitement to make change more appealing and seemingly more likely (Dibella, 2007).

Managed change is proactive, intentional and goal-oriented behaviour and in order to reduce the likelihood of failure, HR practitioners, in change agent roles, need to develop competencies that enable them to identify and anticipate possible problems that may arise (Cleland, Pajo & Toulson, 2000; Macky & Johnson, 2003; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005; Ulrich & Smallwood, 2003).

Overall, there is clear indication that change happens and the need to ‘change’ is inevitable. Therefore HR practitioners need to facilitate organisational change and implement the necessary HR practices to ensure success (Joerres, 2006). This requires them to develop change management skills which include the capability to think strategically, engage employees, facilitate change and exceed expectations (Hayward, 2006). The need for change becomes evident when there is a gap between organisation, division, function or individual performance objectives and actual performance in the organisation.
Du Plessis, Beaver and Nel (2006) refer to the research of Beckhard and Harris, more than two decades ago (1987) that the world in which organisations exist, and will be operating in future, is continuously changing. It changes in relationships among nations, institutions, business partners and organisations; changes in the makeup of the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots;’ changes in dominant values and norms governing societies. It also changes in the character and culture of business or wealth-producing organisations; changes in how work is done and changes in priorities. The core dilemma for leaders and managers is to maintain stability and at the same time provide creative adaptation to outside forces, change assumptions, technology, working methods, roles, relationships and the culture of the organisation.

The pressures of change threaten many traditional and long-held ways of managing and working. Dealing with change is among the greatest challenges facing managers in NZ and other countries, now and in the future in modern day business management. Managers as change agents planning to implement change must predict resistance to these changes as well. Resistance to change is a common human behaviour. Usually they misunderstand the changes and its implications; they do not want to lose something valuable and the fear for the unknown. According to Nel et al (2011) one key to managing resistance is to plan for it and to be ready for it with a variety of strategies to help employees to negotiate the transition. HR managers should therefore treat resistance as an opportunity to re-evaluate a proposed change and to identify and deal with the real barriers to change.

**Recruitment and Retention**

Organisations promote the idea that employees are their biggest source of competitive advantage. Yet, interestingly enough, too many organisations are unprepared for the challenge of finding, motivating and retaining skilled and talented individuals in today’s labour market (Härtel, & Fujimoto 2010). Attention has been drawn to an imminent shortage of capable workers by a number of global studies. According to two global surveys, conducted by McKinsey Quarterly in 2006 and 2007, finding talented people is the single most important challenge for organisations worldwide (Guthridge, Komm, & Lawson, 2008). The 2007 global Web survey, conducted by the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), established that ‘managing talent’, which involves attracting, developing and retaining all individuals with high potential, was one of the HR challenges demanding the most immediate action and greatest attention (Strack, Dyer, Caye, Minto, Leicht, Francoeur, 2008). The intensifying competition for talent and the increasingly global nature of the competition, makes recruitment and retention a strategic priority and it becomes vital for HR practitioners to rethink the way their organisations plan to attract, motivate and retain employees (Guthridge et al., 2008).

HR practitioners have a key role to play in ensuring that organisations have a continuous supply of suitably qualified and trained employees. Reaching the best candidates in the market requires an advanced approach to sourcing talents. There is a need to ‘renovate’ current recruiting and staffing processes and HR practitioners need to work closely with other departments and pay special attention to staffing issues (Strack et al., 2008). Despite the abundance of researchers offering a variety of techniques for the recruitment and selection of employees it is found that HR practitioners are often overwhelmed by the literature and fail to adopt the most appropriate methods (Heneman, Judge, & Heneman, 2006).

Regardless of the fact that New Zealanders pride themselves on being early adopters of technology in the area of e.g. recruitment, NZ organisations are ‘way behind’ US and UK trends (Kendrick, 2007). If, as alleged by Kendrick (2007,6), “Human capital is a key resource for most companies”, it is vital to recruit and select the ‘right’ people. It also makes business sense to make recruitment an ongoing ‘process’ and not just an ‘event’ (Banks, 2007). This requires the skill to build a system whereby talent can be tapped into at any time rather than starting from scratch each time a vacancy arises (Jacobs, 2007).
While organisations seek to identify, appoint and select quality people in a labour market where particular skills are sought after and personal commitment to organisational life is decreasing in favour of life-style needs, non-standard forms of recruitment (e.g. using recruitment agencies to locate the most appropriate individual) are on the increase (Fish & Macklin, 2004). This trend, on the one hand, gives HR practitioners additional time to deal with the variety of other HR activities that are inherent in their role. Nevertheless, it also has the potential to have negative implications such as loss of control of the recruitment process and extra costs associated with recruitment agencies. From a strategic HRM perspective HR practitioners can help to support the sustainability of an organisation through identification of capabilities specific to sustainability and by seeking to align recruitment and selection practices to these capabilities (Gloet, 2006).

An important issue in the new economy is staff retention because without employees who are well integrated into the organisation and contributing to their best ability, success is short-term (Losey, Meisinger & Ulrich, 2005; Rennie, 2003). Problems, particularly with employees, have incidental effects causing further issues with training, planning and strategic decision-making. When set in a global context, this becomes even more complex and the selection and retention of a stable and committed pool of talent takes careful consideration (Rennie, 2003). As a result this requires more effort in implementing HR practices that can attract, maintain and motivate these employees (Drucker, 2006).

The central conclusion of the Fortune Magazine’s survey of the ‘world’s most admired companies’ summarised the expressed views of the CEO’s stating: “The ability to attract and hold on to talented employees is the single most reliable predictor of overall excellence” (Storey, 2007, 9). On the other hand McKeown (2002, 152) recognises the link between retention and the employee and manager relationship by saying: “Get it right and acceptable retention is almost assured; get it wrong and everything else will count for naught”.

**Work-Life Balance**

Finding the ‘balance’ between work and non-work, with neither of them intruding into the other in terms of time, resources and emotional energy (Macky, 2008) could be an elusive goal for more and more employees as the twenty-four hour, seven day working week gains ascendency (Taylor, 2002). From an HR perspective, this issue causes significant concerns for organisations. The difficulty for employees to maintain a ‘balanced’ life between the paid work they perform and increased responsibilities, such as looking after the elderly or dealing with financial pressures, can cause stress which can translate into decreased productivity and retention issues as employees will look for better working conditions (Härtel & Fujimoto 2010). According to Barratt (2007, 5) employers will need to get serious about work-life balance and go beyond lip-service because: “While organisations talk the talk of work-life balance, the majority are struggling to make it a reality”.

The organisation’s response to employees’ needs may range from family responsive programmes, which may include components such as leave programmes, dependent care and health/wellness programmes (Macky, 2008; Stone, 2008). Offering flexible work arrangements, which are the cornerstone of almost all work-life balance initiatives, can have significant beneficial results (Strack et al., 2008). One of the reasons for this may well be the fact that the one factor that helped employees achieve ‘balance’ was something in the control of every employer -- that the company was actively helping to achieve a work-life balance for their employees (Campel, 2002).

Many younger employees tend to have new and non-traditional expectations about work. A particular demographic challenge comes from generation Y (people born after 1980). As observed by Guthridge et al. (2008) these individuals demand, among other things, a better work-life balance. It becomes evident that these employees, who operate in positions based on their perception of the organisations commitment to work-life balance, need to be managed differently. Ultimately employees are interested in having both
a good job and a life beyond work and there is a need for HR practitioners to implement policies and practices that will increase employee commitment (Du Plessis, 2006). This is also noted by Johnson (2000), who states that offering employees work-family balance appears to symbolise an employer’s concern for employees, leading to greater commitment to the organisation.

**Diversity Management**

Managing people from different cultures and backgrounds has become the norm for HR practitioners in NZ organisations because the face of the country is changing continuously. NZ is becoming an increasingly multi-cultural society (Du Plessis, 2009; Jones, Pringle, & Shepherd, 2000). According to Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) worldwide immigration patterns have sharply internationalised the labour force and there is a need for organisations to move beyond intellectual diversity and formally ingrain diversity into their culture. HR as a profession therefore has to recognise and espouse the value of diversity because diversity management has been identified as an emerging strategic necessity for survival in a globally diverse environment (Nel et al., 2011).

Härtel et al. (2010) believe it is the responsibility of HR practitioners to manage diversity and to teach other managers and employees what their role in ‘diversity’ is. This is especially important for organisations in NZ because, like many other developed countries, NZ is experiencing skill shortages; in this context, valuing diversity management takes on a new urgency. Immigrants want to retain their cultural and linguistic identity even though they live in NZ (Rudman, 2010). This is creating further challenges to the HR practitioner’s ability to manage a diverse workforce. The challenge is to overcome stereotypes and prejudices and to welcome dissimilarities and differences because diversity management should view employees as ‘unique individuals’.

It also needs to be noted that NZ has the unique existence of biculturalism, which refers to the influence that both Maori and European culture are meant to have on society and in workplaces (Jones et al 2000). Introducing Maori cultural aspects, such as ‘whanau’ (support) interviews, which is a cultural sensitive selection and promotion method, enables individuals to stay true to their heritage and culture (Macky, 2008). In addition to this biculturalism, there is also a growing number of Pacific Island people, Asians, Indians and many other ethnic groups that can have implications on workplace diversity.

Different interests, backgrounds, competencies, skills and talents, if harnessed properly, can be beneficial to productivity and successful teamwork. This is recognised by Ely and Thomas (2001) who say that diverse groups and organisations have performance advantages and the recurrent aspect among high performing groups or teams is the integration of that diversity. Diversity management also involves conscious efforts to actively recruit members from ethnic minorities (Cleland, Pajo, & Toulson, 2000). Demographic trends in NZ clearly indicate that diversity is here to stay; HR practitioners need to recognise the uniqueness of each individual and the varied perspective and approach to work that they bring to the organisation (Rijamampianina & Carmichael, 2005).

**Strategic role of HR practitioners**

The current normative view of a strategic HR practitioner is depicted as a professional who is able to develop, plan and implement a wide range of organisational activities which are directly linked to organisational performance (Murphy & Southey, 2003). HR practices and policies have strategic implications on organisational performance and in making decisions about any employment related structures HR practitioners must be able to make strategic choices (Boxall & Purcell, 2000). To be seen as truly strategic, important decisions have to be made with a long term perspective (in contrast to day-to-day operational decisions) as changing business conditions, and the organisation’s response to those conditions, influence organisational success (Barney & Hesterly, 2006).
This view fits well with the suggestion by Raich (2002) that there is a clear shift in HRM from a ‘service provider’ to a ‘business partner’. Some companies have even re-titled their HR generalist as ‘Business Partner’ (Jamrog & Overholt, 2004). As pointed out by Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) the capability of providing direct support and to add value to the organisation through the knowledge of the business, will allow the HR professional to join the management team. This increases expectations, new responsibilities, possibilities and opportunities for the HR function. Consequently if HR practitioners want to become key players in the management team they need to have the relevant capabilities to do so (Raich, 2006).

Morley, Gunnigle, O’Sullivan and Collings (2006) refer to the HRM function’s changing characteristics from that of the traditional operational role of personnel specialists, to the strategic role of the HR practitioner. This new approach to design HR practices which develop the strategic value of the organisation’s human capital is termed ‘strategic human resource management’ (SHRM) (Stone 2008; Boxall, 1995; Kane, Crawford, & Grant, 1999). In this role HR practitioners must be able to provide the expertise on how to leverage human capital to create true marketplace differentiation and able to determine how the company’s current culture, competencies, and structure must change in order to support the organisation’s strategy (Cabrera, 2003).

ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

Comparison of the profile of the respondents with a previous study (2000) in NZ

An HRM questionnaire covering 358 items to identify HRM and management trends was jointly compiled in New Zealand and Australia in 1994; the same questionnaire was modified and refined and used again in 2000 by Burchell (2001) in association with HRINZ to determine a future perspective on HR in 2010 in NZ. Results were recorded to reflect the percentage of all respondents selecting a particular alternative for a particular organisation size or occupation. The profile of the respondents is spread over a wide spectrum (refer Table 1 below) and each respondent has some relation to HR.

The profile of the respondents is important to add value to their opinions. In the current (being 2008) study in NZ, the most frequent title was HR Manager (37%), and the next most common title was HR Advisor (27%). Those two titles accounted for 64% of the reported titles. The remaining titles were HR Director (9%), HR Generalist (6%), HR Consultant (3%), and Employment Relations Manager (3%). The category ‘others’ (15%) included titles such as HR Coordinator, HR Administrator, Recruitment Consultant, Research Officer, People Development Manager, Chief Human Resources Officer, Sales & Marketing Capability Leader, Talent Management Consultant and Senior Lecturer HRM (Table 1, below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>New Zealand profile 2000</th>
<th>New Zealand profile 2008</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HR (officer to director)</td>
<td>72.00%</td>
<td>73.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business (line managers to CEO)</td>
<td>10.00%</td>
<td>9.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultants</td>
<td>14.00%</td>
<td>3.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic (all tertiary institutions)</td>
<td>4.00%</td>
<td>(see other)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>15.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is significant that there is not much difference between the respondent’s profile of the 2000 study and the 2008 in this regard in Table 1 above
Table 2: Profile of respondents by organisation size in New Zealand in 2000 and 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of employees in organization</th>
<th>New Zealand profile 2000</th>
<th>New Zealand profile 2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fewer than 10</td>
<td>1.00%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 – 49</td>
<td>4.00%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 – 99</td>
<td>9.00%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 – 499</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>34.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500 or more</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>52.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In NZ most organisations (83%) have fewer than 10 employees. In this study, the participants are from different sized organisations (Table 2 above); the following groupings were compiled for analysis: small organisations with fewer than 100 employees (0-99); medium 100 to 499 employees, large is 500 or more employees. It should be noted that NZ is predominantly a country of small businesses, with 93.3% of enterprises employing 19 or fewer people ("SMEs in New Zealand: Structure and Dynamics," 2006)In Table 2 above, the profile of the respondent’s organisation size for 2008 is very similar to the 2000 study.

Change management

In question five of the survey questionnaire, respondents were asked to give an overview of their self-identified capabilities in the area of change management. A total of 86.1% of respondents are capable of anticipating the effect of internal/external changes. Only 2.5% disagreed and 11.3% gave a neutral response. Similar positive results were received for the other statements for which respondents were asked to hypothesize whether they are equipped with the capabilities that can improve HR effectiveness in change management. A total of 84.7% have the capability to facilitate support to those affected by the changes, 87.4% have the ability to have a proactive role in change management initiatives, 80.1% have the ability to align HR systems with the expected reorganisation and 86.5% have the ability to motivate others through the application of professional credibility & reciprocal trust respectively. Neutral responses were almost identical in the statements referring to capacity to facilitate support (13.2%), proactive role in change management initiatives (11.2%) and the ability to motivate others (10.6%), thus, 16.5% giving a neutral response for the ability to align HR systems with the expected reorganisation. Negative responses were very low (1.9%, 1.2%, 3.3%, and 2.6%). It can be deduced that HR practitioners regard themselves to be able to live up to the expectations and challenges in the change management area.

Table 3: Self-identified capabilities in the area of Change Management

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capable of anticipating the effect of</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>57.0%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>internal/external changes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Capacity to facilitate support to</td>
<td>37.0%</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>those affected by the changes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to have a proactive role in</td>
<td>47.0%</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>change-management initiatives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability to align HR systems with the</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>expected reorganisation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability to motivate others through</td>
<td>31.9%</td>
<td>54.6%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the application of professional</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>credibility &amp; reciprocal trust</td>
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</table>
In comparison to a similar study in South Africa, executed in 2002, only 12% of the respondents indicated that HR is capable of anticipating the effect of internal and external changes on the organisation. This figure grew to 71% who agreed that HR should require this capability for 2010, which is close to the current figure in NZ of 86.1% (Du Plessis, Beaver, Nel, 2006). It is one thing to recognise the need for change, however it is quite another thing to have the ability and discipline to implement and communicate changes in the organisation in such a way that they meet the expectations and challenges of the organisation and support all the employees through the change process. The radical changes in the contemporary business environment increase the need for HR practitioners to support the change process. Nevertheless, managing organisational and cultural change requires HR practitioners to have distinct capabilities in order to address expectations and challenges in both operational and organisational changes.

The focus on the behaviour of employees is vital in the change process as they are predominantly affected by the changes. HR practitioners may get into difficulties if they try to project their own perceptions of the desirability of change to others because a change perceived desirable by some participants or set of stakeholders is often perceived as undesirable by others. Essentially anyone who views change as undesirable is unlikely to help bring it about, or worse may even sabotage the effort of those trying to do so. HR practitioners therefore should possess the capabilities to manage or shape participant’s perceptions because as established by Dibella (2007) participant’s perceptions of change are more critical to successful change implementation than the nature of the change itself.

For the purpose of this study the researchers established that the following capabilities are expected with successful achievement and implementation of change initiatives and for the HR practitioner to be a key driver for the change:

- Capable of anticipating the effect of internal/external changes
- Capacity to facilitate support to those affected by change
- Ability to have proactive role in change management initiatives
- Ability to align HR systems with the expected reorganisation
- Ability to motivate others through the application of professional credibility & reciprocal trust

The results of the survey showed that the majority of the respondents reported their level of capabilities in the area of change management at a positive level. In addition, correlations were done among all of the demographic data and each of the HR capabilities used as measures to increase HR effectiveness in the area of change management. Based on these correlations, the ability to manage change had the most significant relationship with the number of years of experience in the profession. This result is not surprising as experience has long been considered as a possible determinant of the level of technical and professional skills an individual holds, the level of understanding of organisational context or industry characteristics, as well as the level of business related capabilities (Murphy & Southey, 2003).

The level of experience possessed by HR practitioners will also influence their choices on which HR activities are to be adopted. It can therefore be deduced that the extent and quality of a HR practitioner’s experience, combined with a belief to have high levels of capabilities to achieve set objectives has a significant impact on their ability to increase HR effectiveness in the area of change management.

**Recruitment and Retention**

A total of 63.6% of the respondents viewed their ability to align recruitment and retention practices to support the sustainability of the organisation as strength/major strength. In contrast 8.6% considered themselves as ‘needing improvement’/‘significant need of improvement’ in the area of recruitment and retention practices and 23.8% were not sure and gave a neutral response. For 46.9% of the respondents,
identifying, analysing, forecasting and interpreting trends for organisational HR needs in the recruitment and retention area were seen as strength/major strength.

At the other end of the spectrum, 20.4% viewed this capability in need of improvement. Almost a third (32.4%) of the respondents indicated neither a ‘need for improvement’ nor ‘strength’. The last statement had almost identical results in the ‘neutral’ answer option (33.1%). Nevertheless a higher percentage of respondents (54.9%) identified the ability to ensure that the organisation has the skilled and engaged workforce it needs as a ‘strength’/major strength and 11.9% indicated a ‘need for improvement’/major need for improvement. It can be deduced that the majority of the respondents (63.6%) regard themselves as well prepared and capable to retain their skilled employees and to recruit the right people should they need to recruit.

In comparison, the South African study of 2002, the respondents were asked what are their view on retaining skilled employees and 61.9% regarded it as important and interestingly a downwards trend to 2010 was recorded to 53.9%. A similar trend was recorded for attracting skilled people. A total of 55.1% for 2002 and only 44.4% for 2010 were forecasted by the respondents.

Table 4: Self-identified capabilities in the area of Recruitment & Retention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RECRUITMENT &amp; RETENTION</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Align recruitment &amp; retention practices to support sustainability of the organisation</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>52.3%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify, analyse, forecast &amp; interpret trends in organisational needs for human resources</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>32.4%</td>
<td>39.0%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensures that the organisation has the skilled, committed and engaged workforce it needs</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
<td>45.0%</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most commonly cited priority in the HR function was to recruit and retain key staff (91.6%). Clearly, HR practitioners in this survey (being 2008) are preoccupied with this activity. The intensifying competition for talent makes recruitment and retention a key priority for organisations and it is imperative for HR practitioners to rethink their organisation’s plan to attract and retain employees. While it is not clear from this survey whether routine HR activities in the recruitment process are being automated by for example self-service technology, it can be presumed that HR practitioners are using a range of methods to align planning needs, to market the employer and to handle hiring and integration processes effectively and efficiently to address skill gaps. A precise understanding of recruiting needs and a strong monitoring programme also helps HR practitioners to identify areas requiring further improvement.

Some of the capabilities were identified as being associated with increasing HR effectiveness in the area of recruitment and retention and they are challenges for the HR practitioner:

- Align recruitment and retention practices to support sustainability of the organisation
- Identify, analyse, forecast and interpret trends in organisational needs for HR
- Ensures that the organisation has the skilled, committed and engaged workforce it needs

The results of the survey showed that in all of the three areas participants viewed their capabilities to increase HR effectiveness in the area of recruitment and retention as strength or major strength. In addition, correlations were done among all of the demographic data and each of the HR capabilities and the most significant relationship was identified with the number of years of experience in the profession.
The above results indicate that HR practitioners have the ability to attract, develop and retain individuals who can drive organisations that are responsive to both, their customers and future opportunities. Nevertheless in order to move forward HR practitioners need to ensure that organisations have fully automated and flexible systems in place to improve the efficiency of both, their own function and the entire organisation. This will increase the quality of HR, reduce the cycle time for hiring new candidates, lower costs and generally facilitate them to move closer to becoming the organisation’s administrative expert in the area of recruitment and retention.

Work-life Balance
The respondents were asked to state what the developing and implementing policies are in response to changing demographic trends. A total of 54.9% of the respondents regarded it as a ‘strength’/major strength’. The next question was about the capability to be proactive in the approach to overcoming barriers to implement work-life initiatives and 53.6% of the respondents regarded it as a ‘strength’/major strength’. An unexpected high percentage (29.1%) gave a ‘neutral’ response in each of the two statements and negative results were indicated by 15.9%. Statement three i.e. successful in benchmarking and measuring the effectiveness of work-life initiatives, was self-perceived as being a ‘strength’/‘major strength’ by only 23.8% of respondents (see Table 5 below).

Employees have changing needs and organisations are required to respond to these flexible work styles. Many employees are now looking for more than just remuneration and organisations need to understand this quest in order to assist their staff to have a better balance. Organisations’ responses to employees’ needs may range from providing flexible work arrangements to addressing employees’ growing desire to have more family-friendly working environments.

Table 5: Self-identified capabilities in the area of Work-Life Balance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORK/LIFE BALANCE</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop &amp; implement policies in response to changing demographic trends</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>41.0%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactive in the approach to overcoming barriers to implement work-life initiatives</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>39.7%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful in benchmarking &amp; measuring the effectiveness of work-life initiatives</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>26.4%</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More flexible time-off arrangements can also encourage more education and training, which ultimately addresses the issue of skill shortages. If organisations accept that HR practices are potentially going to produce beneficial outcomes for the organisation and the employee, then the areas of practice that are more likely to contribute positively should be identified. HR practitioners need to be significantly more proactive in their approach towards improving work-life policies.

Diversity Management
Due to increasing diverse workforces in NZ, the last opinion was related to the area of diversity management. Results are illustrated in Table 6 below. When asked to self-identify the capacity to effectively implement diversity management programmes 28.4% gave a positive result and 28.5% gave a negative result. Almost half of the respondents (43%) indicated a ‘neutral’ view regarding this capability. Competency in the ability to deal with the application of legislative issues of diversity management and the ability to effectively use the talents of people from various backgrounds were identified by 54.3% and 54.2% of respondents as ‘strength’/‘major strength’.
Valuing diversity is still not seen as a key priority for the HR function in NZ organisations. Managing diversity is the practice of understanding and embracing social differences for the mutual benefit of both employees and organisations (Wilson, Gahlout, Liu, & Mouly, 2005). Unquestionably, organisations need an action plan for moving diversity initiatives forward. HR practitioners need to be able to have the capabilities to articulate the changes required, make them explicit and to lead the process (Du Plessis, Beaver & Nel, 2006). It can be deduced that even though HR practitioners in NZ organisations have a moderate level of capabilities in diversity management they must invest time and effort to formally ingrain diversity into the culture if they want to maximise the potential of all available talent.

### Table 6: Self-identified capabilities in the area of Diversity Management

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to effectively implement diversity management programmes</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>43.0%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent to deal with the application of legislative issues of diversity management</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>28.5%</td>
<td>38.4%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to effectively use the talents of people from various backgrounds, experiences and cultures</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>29.1%</td>
<td>41.0%</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Strategic role of HR practitioners**

This question was designed to establish the extent to which HR practitioners possess capabilities that can improve effectiveness in the area of strategic HRM. When queried on the ability to take part in framing business strategies and making key decisions, two thirds (66.2%) of respondents agreed, 17.8% showed a negative result. When asked to indicate their ability to implement coherent HR strategies which are aligned to the business strategy, 78.9% agreed. Developing an achievable vision for the future, whilst envisaging its probable consequences was positively agreed upon by well over half of the respondents (64.2%), and only 10.6% disagreed. The capability of providing direct support to the organisation via strategic input got the highest percentage of agreed responses, 81.4%. The last statement had 73.5% of respondents agreeing. It can be deduced that the respondents do understand the importance of being a strategic partner, to provide support via strategic input (81.4%), and to align HR strategies with the organisation’s strategies (see Table 7 below).

The increasing global nature of competition requires that organisations use all of their available resources to survive and to succeed (Sheehan, 2005). The emphasis on the alignment of all functional activities of an organisation toward the achievement of strategic objectives calls for a strategic role of the HR function. Most discussions of a strategic role focus on two major aspects. Firstly, that the HR practitioner should be able to align people with strategies to enable strategy implementation and secondly the HR function needs to ensure that the HR activities and practices are in place to effectively implement the strategy.
Table 7: Self-identified capabilities in the area of Strategic HRM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capability</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Able to successfully take part in framing business strategies &amp; making key business decisions</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>43.0%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to develop &amp; implement coherent HR strategies which are aligned to the business strategy</td>
<td>31.2%</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity to develop an achievable vision for the future and envisage its probable consequences</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>43.7%</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capable of providing direct support to the organisation via strategic HRM inputs</td>
<td>39.0%</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to develop the relevant portfolio of competencies in order to achieve business objectives</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>53.0%</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given this requirement, it is evident that HR practitioners must have the capabilities to be competent in strategy development, implementation and evaluation. Findings are inconclusive as several factors that emerged from this survey make the researchers question whether the perceived degree of strategic orientation actually reflects reality; HR practitioners only spent 24.2% of their time on strategic input. It can be deduced that HR practitioner’s lack of strategic input is not the result of their incompetence but more likely the result of having to spend most of their time on transactional activities.

Respondent’s level of involvement

To establish the degree of specialisation taking place in HR, question four asked participants to specify their level of involvement in a number of HR activities. A 5-point Likert scale was used to determine survey participants’ level of involvement. The ratings were converted to numerical values – where one equals ‘solely responsible’ and five equals ‘no involvement’. The mean scores identified (Table 8, below) ranged between 2.28 and 2.95 (where 2 equals ‘great deal of involvement’, 3 ‘moderate level of involvement, 4 ‘little involvement’). The standard deviation in conjunction with the mean provides a more accurate picture of HR practitioner’s level of involvement. As the values in Table 8 reveal, responses in fact sit between 1.45 and 4.16, establishing that there was large disparity among responses.

Table 8: Level of involvement in HR activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents level* of involvement in the following HR activities:</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>StD</th>
<th>Value1**</th>
<th>Value2***</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change management</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>3.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic planning</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staffing &amp; retention</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing work-life balance</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>3.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing diversity</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>4.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 1 = ‘solely responsible’, 5 = ‘no involvement’

Value1** = Mean - Std, Value2*** = Mean + Std
Cross-tabulation with all of the demographic variables (gender, position classification, occupational category, number of years of experience, highest educational attainment, industry sector and size classification) and chi-square test results found that two of the variables i.e. position classification/job title (Test statistics A) and number of years of experience in profession/occupation (Test statistics B) show a significance level which is less than 0.05 (Test statistics A and B, Table 8). Findings therefore indicate that the variables are indeed related. All other test results showed values above the significant level of 5 percent (0.05) verifying that the level of involvement in specific HR activities is not associated with any other demographic variable.

**Test statistics A**

Participants’ level of involvement in HR activities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cross-tabulation with position classification/job title</th>
<th>Pearson Chi-Square</th>
<th>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change management</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic planning</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staffing &amp; retention</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing work-life balance</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing diversity</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant level p = &lt; 0.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Test statistics B**

Participants’ level of involvement in HR activities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cross-tabulation with number of years experience in profession/occupation</th>
<th>Pearson Chi-Square</th>
<th>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change management</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic planning</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staffing &amp; retention</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing work-life balance</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing diversity</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant level p = &lt; 0.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data associated with the above cross tabulations also enabled the researcher to look at the representation of individual job classification in relation to a ‘great deal of involvement’ in the specific HR activities. As established in the findings HR managers consider themselves having a ‘great deal of involvement’ in all of the HR activities equally. This is in contrast to other categories such as HR administrators, who only have a great deal of involvement in the area of staffing and retention and HR consultants who indicated a ‘great deal of involvement’ mainly in change management activities.
The Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient for the five constructs or HR themes is illustrated in Table 9. The inter-correlations among the items were considered good by the researcher.

### Table 9: Internal reliability test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>*Cronbach's Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change Management</td>
<td>0.777</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic HRM</td>
<td>0.873</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment &amp; Retention</td>
<td>0.804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-Life Balance</td>
<td>0.862</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity Management</td>
<td>0.827</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*0-1, with 0 indicating no correlation among items, and 1 indicating very high reliability

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HR PRACTITIONERS**

Concrete recommendations addressing the problems identified are proposed in this section. Even though a high level of capabilities is evident in the results in this study (2008), it is recommended for HR practitioners in NZ organisations to increase their exposure to different practices, methods and systems; this can result in a greater ability to identify potential areas for improvement, as well as the identification of previously unconsidered solutions. HR practitioners will have to be the change agents and leaders with the implementation of all the programmes and practices for these changes.

NZ businesses employ thousands of foreign citizens and it becomes a very difficult task for any manager to accommodate all cultures. HR managers will have to learn new skills and, amongst others, to become
competent leaders who will have the capacity to lead their team to outgrow their rivals domestically, internationally and globally. A major challenge for HR practitioners in the future will be coordinating work efforts of diverse organisational members in accomplishing the organisational goals to retain their workers.

To manage work-life balance:

- Develop and implement policies in response to changing demographic trends
- Proactive in the approach to overcoming barriers to implement work-life initiatives

The following capabilities are necessary in the area of diversity management:

- Effectively implement diversity management programmes
- Deal with the application of legislative issues of diversity management
- Use the talents of people from various backgrounds, experiences and cultures

The following capabilities are required to provide significant input into the organisation’s strategy:

- To successfully take part in framing business strategies and making key business decisions
- To develop and implement coherent HR strategies which are aligned to the business strategy
- Develop an achievable vision for the future and envisage its probable consequences

CONCLUSIONS

Findings indicate that the influx of women into HR has gained great momentum in NZ. In 1978 only 22 percent of women represented personnel managers then. Similarly, in 1990, Stablein and Geare (1993) reported that women comprised 31 percent of HR personnel surveyed. However not less than a decade later, women consisted of 59 percent of HR practitioners (Cleland et al., 2000). Consistent with this increasing trend this study established that 76 percent of HR practitioners in NZ organisations in 2008 are female. A comparison of the highest rated results reveals significant changes in some areas from the study done in 2000 and the 2008 study in NZ. The five themes show very similar change management, recruitment and retention, work-life programmes, diversity management philosophies, and strategic roles for HR practitioners in NZ. The most significant one is the expectations and challenges for the HR practitioner in aligning HR strategies with business strategies. Previous studies show an increase in the strategic role from 2000 and 2002 respectively (25% to 2010) and the current study (2008) reflects 81.4%. The researchers trust that HR practitioners will use the information gained in this study about the capabilities of HR professionals, and the recommendations to build on this knowledge base to create additional new knowledge on HR’s current capabilities and the impact on organisational performance. A new kind of HR practitioner as well as a business manager and employee can be expected in successful organisations in the future adding sustainable value.

REFERENCES


