



'An army of our own': Legitimizing the professional position of HR through well-being at work



Sara Lindström^{a,b,*}

^a Aalto University, Department of Management Studies, P.O. Box 21230, FI-00076 Aalto, Finland

^b Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Work Organizations, P.O. Box 40, FI-00251 Helsinki, Finland

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on how HR practitioners legitimate their position in municipal organizations through the discourse of well-being at work. I show how HR practitioners draw upon the desirability and appropriateness of well-being as a value of work life in municipalities and the wider societal context. I also show how, as a result, they reflect and reinforce formal structures, individual choice and responsibility, performance, and the meaningfulness of work as discursive themes of well-being that require and justify the position of HR practitioners as 'an army' of management programmes, practices and resources.

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1. Introduction

The interest of this article lies in scrutinizing how HR practitioners draw on institutional and societal values that are linked to the discourse of well-being at work to legitimate their position in Finnish municipal organizations. In studies of HR practitioners, their concern regarding well-being at work is a constant bone of contention (Keegan & Francis 2010; Renwick, 2003). The historical background of HR practitioners as promoters of welfare in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, and as developers of the quality of work life in the 1970s (Jacoby, 2004), is something both public and private sector HR practitioners have shunned away from. Instead, their focus has been on managerial and market logics of strategy and performance (Harris, 2007; Wright, 2008), in line with the adoption of New Public Management (NPM) in the Nordic context (Christensen & Laegreid, 2007). Still, the strategic aspirations of HR practitioners in public organizations have been difficult to realize, due to the absence of transparent linkages between long-term planning, line management and their contributions to performance (Harris, 2004). Kochan (2004, 132) has also stated that the HR profession 'faces a crisis of trust and a loss of legitimacy' due to overlooking employees as stakeholders.

Among academics and practitioners, the weak status of HR practitioners has been a recurring concern (Caldwell, 2003; Wright, 2008). In the public sector, the position of HR is even more precarious (Farndale & Hope-Hailey 2009). HR practitioners are affected by both external and internal expectations arising from municipal top management demands for strategic contributions to services needed by citizens (Lindström & Vanhala, 2011; Truss, 2008). Moreover, the pressures of managing a proportionally smaller staff in larger entities due to municipal mergers – which seek cost-effectiveness in all occupations – cause uncertainty for HR practitioners, such as the risk of being outsourced themselves.

Adding to these pressures, over the last decade, well-being at work in the Nordic context has evolved into a large-scale societal concern. The number of senior workers in Finnish municipalities is growing, as in the other Nordic countries (Lindström et al., 2008), spurring the agenda for well-being at work. The financial impact of ill-being at work through absenteeism, underachievement, turnover, and early retirement has prompted employers to implement diverse well-being programmes and practices in Nordic organizations. The institutional pressures on municipal organizations to improve well-being at work stem from policy-makers, employer organizations and trade unions jointly propagating well-being at work as an objective, and from discussions regarding the ageing workforce and the raising of the retirement age (e.g. Ministry of Employment and Economy, 2012). Since institutional pressures create a situation in which HR practitioners need to evaluate and possibly reconstruct their work (Boon, Paauwe, Boselie, & Den Hartog, 2009; Boxall & Purcell, 2008; Guerci & Shani, 2013), this

* Correspondence to: Aalto University, Department of Management Studies, P.O. Box 21230, FI-00076 Aalto, Finland.

E-mail address: sara.lindstrom@aalto.fi (S. Lindström).

study asks how the strengthened well-being at work discourse is adopted and employed by the HR practitioners themselves.

Through a detailed study of ten semi-structured interviews with Finnish HR managers, I show that HR practitioners in Finnish municipalities have not only accepted well-being at work policies but have, in fact, embraced well-being at work as a field to be coordinated and managed. HR practitioners position themselves, for example, as a structured ‘army that can support well-being in different situations’. The article contributes to research on the role of public sector HR practitioners (Harris, 2007; Lindström & Vanhala, 2011; Truss, 2008) through the lens of discursive legitimation—an approach unfamiliar to this line of research. Even though HR practitioners are building their position through the discourse of well-being at work, well-being is still strongly represented in an instrumental sense, as a means to an end; i.e. better performance of municipal work. I also add an empirical study to the nascent research on the legitimation of professional roles and positions and the importance of the institutional environment in the legitimation process (Goodrick & Reay, 2010). When the well-being at work discourse is employed in the legitimation process, the interviewees combine discursive strategies from both the previously theorized legitimation of practices (Van Leeuwen, 2008) and the legitimation of professional roles (Goodrick & Reay, 2010).

The article is structured as follows. First, I present an overview of previous research on HR and well-being at work, and explain why the discursive legitimation of professional positions is a suitable angle for this study. I continue with the methodology, followed by the results. The article ends with a discussion and conclusions section.

2. HR practitioners, well-being at work and legitimation

The roots of HR can be traced to the growth of industrial organizations in the 19th century (Morley, Gunnigle, O’Sullivan, & Collings, 2006) when ‘early HR’ developed as an administrative function to secure the well-being of industrial workers. Early representatives of the occupation were involved in organizing basic worker needs such as housing, recreation and the teaching of hygiene (Jacoby, 2004). It is argued that the weak status of HR practitioners stems from the occupation’s origins as a provider of paternalistic ‘welfare work’ as opposed to the business approach of, for example, production managers (Legge, 1978).

In order to strengthen their position in organizations, HR practitioners have taken steps towards organizational professionalism as a distinct occupational value and discourse, which is reflected in their (self-)organizing and control of work (Evetts, 2011). In organizational professionalism, organizational priorities are discernible as the guiding values of occupations. Here, managerial aims such as efficiency, control and bureaucracy; and practices such as performance assessments, are employed by, for example, HR practitioners, project managers, and controllers, to strengthen their professional positions in organizations. This is in sharp contrast to the more traditional strategies of occupations that strive for status, for example, building independent professional standards or collegiate controls (Evetts, 2011; Muzio, Hodgson, Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, & Hall, 2011; Wright, 2008).

Organizational professionalism is coupled with the incorporation of NPM into public sector HR before the end of the 1980s. NPM can be seen as an identity project in which public professionals’ source of identification in particular is redefined as the managerial direction of financial priorities and performance values (Du Gay 1996), thereby threatening the traditional professional logic of relying on expert judgments and professional discretion. As distinct professional actors, HR practitioners in public organizations were pressured to adopt NPM managerial and

market logics, in order to become more business-oriented and, consequently, contribute to individual, organizational and financial performance (Harris, 2007; Truss, 2008, 2013). The shift in HR professional identity from one that provided support for balancing employee and firm interests to a ‘business partner’ with line and senior managers, aligned HR practitioners with the interests and goals of management (Kochan, 2004). At the same time, the rhetoric of HRM promoting alignment with business strategy and the contribution to performance emerged, and pushed employee interests to the side line of HR practitioners’ work (Harris, 2007; Keegan & Francis, 2010; Woodall & Winstanley, 2001).

HR practitioners are identified as an occupation using the skilful strategy of constant redefinition to improve their position (Caldwell, 2003). This is accomplished through meaning creation, by making their initiatives ‘legitimate, desirable, rational, and inevitable’ (Sheehan, De Cieri, & Greenwood, 2014). Legitimation is a process through which a phenomenon becomes perceived as desirable, appropriate or taken for granted within a certain socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman, 1995). In this study, I use the approach of discursive legitimation (e.g. Van Leeuwen, 2008) to study how HR practitioners attempt to strengthen their position. This approach stresses language use in relation to social phenomena, which means that I perceive well-being at work, as well as social positions in relation to it, as phenomena that are constituted by how they are defined, and talked and written about. Consequently, the discursive construction of the positions in relation to well-being at work both reflect and alter the social contexts in which they are expressed.

Legitimation strategies are specific ways of using discursive resources to construct a sense of either legitimacy or illegitimacy (Fairclough, 2003; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). In their seminal study of discursive legitimation, Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) differentiated four general strategies for legitimation or delegitimation: authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation (or moralization), and mythopoesis, which may all occur either separately or simultaneously. Authorization is legitimation by reference to, for example, tradition, law or authoritative persons. Rationalization, on the other hand, is a two-way approach in which either the utility of something is emphasized (instrumental rationalization) or in which legitimation is accomplished by reference to the ‘natural order’ of things (theoretical rationalization). The third category of legitimation – moralization – means that shared value systems are drawn upon in order to legitimate something. Finally, mythopoesis is an implicit form of legitimation, conveyed through narrative accounts (Van Leeuwen, 2008).

HR work in organizations is constructed in relation to changing institutional-level pressures (Boon et al., 2009; Boxall & Purcell, 2008; Guerci & Shani, 2013). In line with this, the societal- and municipal-level calls to enhance well-being at work in Finnish public sector organizations create a situation in which HR practitioners need to respond to these demands by evaluating and reconstructing not only their work, but also their professional positions in these organizations. Today, the concept of well-being at work is engrained in the Nordic context. Kindred concepts are job quality (Findlay, Kalleberg, & Warhurst, 2013), wellness at work (Farrell & Geist-Martin, 2005) and health promotion (Holmqvist & Maravelias, 2011). However, these notions all emphasize partly different phenomena. Job quality stresses workers’ rights and fair pay, whereas wellness and health promotion relate especially to the physical and psychological aspects of well-being. Well-being at work as a concept often takes distance from pay and working conditions, while incorporating social aspects in physical and psychological well-being. Well-being at work can thus be broadly viewed as an entity consisting of physical (e.g. ergonomics), psychological (e.g. exhaustion, engagement) and social (e.g.

atmosphere, levels of trust) perspectives (Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012). What these concepts have in common is the idea that they should be managed and, if properly so, expected to produce improved performance (Danna & Griffin, 1999). The well-being of employees is supported through practices, campaigns and programmes; and ill-being, for example, stress, overweight and poor fitness, are targeted by assessments, courses and referrals (Farrell & Geist-Martin, 2005).

Studies that focus on the discursive legitimation of new practices or phenomena are numerous, and the study of discourse in legitimation processes is already established in organization and management studies (e.g. Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004; Vaara & Tienari, 2008). Influential studies include, for example, the discursive legitimation of Total Quality Management practices (Green, Yuan, & Nohria, 2009), the legitimation of restructuring activities (Vaara, Tienari, & Laurila, 2006), and new organizational forms (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). In contrast, the attention paid to legitimating professional roles is surprisingly scarce (Goodrick & Reay, 2010; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Studying how professional roles are discursively legitimated is, however, different from legitimating practices, firstly because roles are usually more persistent than practices, and secondly, the discursive strategies generated *within* a profession should be the focus of attention instead of, for example, media texts, which are typically used as data in explaining practice legitimation (Goodrick & Reay, 2010).

Research on the use of discourse and rhetoric in professional role legitimation was initiated by Goodrick and Reay (2010), who identify five ways of using language to legitimate new professional role identities: naturalizing the past, normalizing new meanings, altering identity referents, connecting with the institutional environment, and referencing authority. Naturalizing the past means that the new role identity does not contradict previous roles. This is accomplished by using ideas already considered as legitimate. Normalizing new meanings involves gradually eroding and replacing the old meanings connected to a role by new ones. Altering identity referents involves changing reference groups to which the profession compares itself or is coupled. In connecting with the institutional environment, role legitimation is accomplished by using language that portrays the institutional environment as enabling or constraining a professional role. Finally, in referencing authority, a new role is legitimated by connecting it to authorities such as researchers, authors and professional associations. The strategies used in role legitimation both somewhat overlap and diverge compared to the legitimation of practices.

However, the frameworks of neither Van Leeuwen (2008) or Goodrick and Reay (2010) seem sufficient on their own as a basis for this study. Since previous studies show that HR practitioners simultaneously occupy several roles (Lindström & Vanhala, 2011; Truss, 2008), the rather static professional role approach of Goodrick and Reay (2010) is not applicable on its own. Also, since the phenomenon this study looks into – well-being at work – is so strongly associated with different practices (Danna & Griffin 1999; Farrell & Geist-Martin 2005), we cannot neglect the insights of practice legitimation. Hence, as a foundation for understanding how HR professionals' professional position is legitimated, I suggest that a combination of practice and role legitimation is suitable, and use the notion of 'position' in doing so. While professional role identities refer to a highly resistant sense of self and the values, norms and interaction patterns that are associated with being a professional (Ashforth, 2001; Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007; Goodrick & Reay, 2010), professional positions refer to more fluid, dynamic and relational stances (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Positions are changing stances from which to speak and act. They are constructed through the characteristics

and duties agents discursively assign to themselves and others (Maguire & Hardy, 2009; Thomas & Davies, 2005).

The unstable ground of public sector HR in the struggle for strategic influence and contributions to organizational performance (Farndale & Hope-Hailey, 2009; Lindström & Vanhala, 2011; Truss, 2008), and their reaction to institutional and societal-level pressures (Boon et al., 2009; Boxall & Purcell, 2008) which promote well-being at work, sets a compelling setting for studying the positioning of HR practitioners.

3. Data and analysis

The empirical materials of this study consist of ten interviews with HR managers from ten different Finnish municipal organizations, conducted in 2010. The interviews were part of a large research project focusing on the relationship between HRM, well-being and performance. The Finnish municipalities provided an especially fruitful setting for this study, as during the last decade, policy shifts combining pressure for improved performance with a strong emphasis on well-being at work have also been promoted by central government as well as trade unions and employer organizations.

The interviewees were employed by both large city organizations (cities with over 100 000 residents and over 10 000 employees in the organization) and medium-sized municipalities (30,000–100,000 residents and 2000–4000 employees). They were invited to take part in the interviews if the municipality they were employed by was large enough to have a separate HR department and a person appointed as HR manager, and if they were geographically located in the southern region of Finland. They were all top HR managers, responsible for HR in its entirety, and members of the city management teams. They directed the work of the HR function in environments in which the amount of employees ranged from twenty to almost a hundred. Their mean number of years as head of HR was six. Table 1 shows their background variables.

The semi-structured interviews took place at the offices of the interviewees and lasted approximately an hour each. We discussed the same themes in all the interviews, mainly, how the interviewees perceived the phenomena of well-being and performance, how they reflected upon the relation between these, and how they perceived the role of HR in relation to well-being at work. The interviewees were encouraged to explain these key areas of interest from their own perspective, to exemplify them in the day-to-day work of municipal HR, and to talk about anything they associated with the themes. Since the interest of this study is professional positioning, the use of interview data allows for the analysis of the legitimation strategies employed by the professionals themselves (Goodrick & Reay, 2010). The interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

Table 1
Background of interviewees.

ID	Years in current post	Years in municipal HR	Gender
Interviewee 1	10 years	10 years	M
Interviewee 2	4 years	4 years	F
Interviewee 3	17 years	17 years	F
Interviewee 4	1 year	N/A	F
Interviewee 5	9 years	9 years	F
Interviewee 6	2,5 years	10 years	F
Interviewee 7	6 years	30 years	M
Interviewee 8	1 year	15 years	M
Interviewee 9	8 years	12 years	F
Interviewee 10	5 years	5 years	M

Although the analysis consisted of a number of overlapping steps, some phases are nonetheless distinguishable. First, I read the transcribed interviews several times. As an initial observation, I identified that well-being at work was a strong agenda that the HR practitioners were pushing forward in the municipalities. As a second step, I approached the interviews by examining the patterns and repeated conceptions that the interviewees linked to well-being at work. These patterns were traceable in several parts of the interviews, and were identified as discursive themes. Third, I analysed how the interviewees expressed their own position in relation to these themes, and scrutinized how they reflected the meanings of well-being at work in municipal organizations and society (Fairclough, 2003). Again, I searched for expressions that were used in multiple parts of the textual whole. I present the results of my analysis in the following section.

4. Legitimizing the professional position of HR through the discourse of well-being at work

In the interviews, the position of HR was legitimated by drawing upon the desirability and appropriateness of well-being as a topical value of work life in the Finnish municipal context. Formal structure, individual choice and responsibility, performance, and the meaningfulness of work were all constructed as discursive themes of well-being that required and justified the position of HR practitioners in management programmes, practices and resources under the umbrella of well-being at work.

4.1. 'A small army of our own': HR as a manager of formal structures

The position of HR as a manager of formal structures was constructed through talk of a coherent, organized well-being agenda with established practices, programmes and professional titles, portrayed as providing instrumental value to the municipality. The analysis of how the interviewees talk about well-being at work reveals that the concept of well-being is used in very diverse connections, framed by a vast, continuous field of different 'tools', 'practices' and 'activities' related to employees. These included, for example, coaching, the early intervention model, physical exercise programmes, risk assessments, surveys, and work-life balance facilitation. In addition, training, occupational health services, job rotation, age management, and support of line managers were mentioned as practices that contribute to well-being at work, and were thus seen as rational investments. A closer look revealed, however, that very few of the practices that associated with well-being at work were, in fact, new. Instead, the interviewees drew upon and renamed previously accepted and established personnel management and HR practices as well-being at work practices. This linking of old practices with well-being at work can be interpreted as a way with which to normalize their new position as managers of formal well-being practices.

As another example of building structures to manage well-being at work, I distinguished talk of explicit 'well-being at work programmes' with accompanying knowledge production through repeated well-being surveys and development activities. This gave the impression of well-being as something manageable, and the position of HR as vital in orchestrating these surveys and ensuring that their results are 'taken into consideration'. One of the interviewees explained the municipal well-being at work programme as follows:

There are a bunch of different operations in it (. . .) which we have implemented afterwards. There's money reserved for work ability promotion events, measures to reduce sick leaves, all kinds of stuff related to it.

Another interviewee further explained how significant the position of HR is in managing the implementation of the well-being survey results:

We've written clear instructions for how these results should be treated: how they should be discussed in the sections and units, how to set goals and work towards them. I'm actually quite proud of the guidelines we've produced.

Moreover, the interviewees mentioned IT systems that gather this data as a channel for upgrading the influence of HR practitioners in the organizations: 'The HR systems have developed and we're thinking about ways in which to use this data in management'. Another interviewee explicitly stated the importance of information and its link to power within the organization, reflecting the profession's growing interest in HR analytics:

This amount of data has raised the question as to how we should use all the information related to employee well-being and other phenomena. In a way it's increased the importance of human resource management.

Another feature of normalizing new meanings through formal structures is how the HR practitioners were relabelled 'well-being professionals', and how new professional titles and areas had arisen. Among the titles were, for example, the 'Well-being Co-ordinator', who had the task of encouraging employees to adopt an active, healthy lifestyle. HR Planner, HR manager, and HR Co-ordinator titles had also changed to 'Employee Well-being Planner', 'Well-being Manager', and 'Well-being Developer'. One interviewee exemplified this by clarifying the position of HR in training their own practitioners:

We've trained mentors, coaches and internal consultants (. . .). So we have a kind of small army of our own that can support well-being in different situations.

The position of interviewees as 'managers and co-ordinators of the formal structures' of well-being at work was accomplished discursively by employing strategies of both practice and role legitimation. As forms of role legitimation, the interviewees normalized new meanings attached to their role and naturalized the past. They described their positions as managers of well-being practices and carriers of well-being titles that had previously been labelled personnel or HR practices and titles. Furthermore, their new position as managers and co-ordinators of well-being structures did not contradict their previous role as a gatherer and analyst of employee data. On the contrary, the new well-being position relied very much on data collection through well-being surveys. They also used the strategy of rationalization by presenting themselves as owners of a coherent, organized agenda with established practices, programmes and professional titles – something of instrumental value to the municipality.

4.2. 'Like being on a picnic': HR as a provider of individual opportunities

In the second discursive theme drawn upon by the interviewees – individual choice and responsibility – the HR managers legitimated the position of HR as a provider of individual opportunities. This was accomplished by highlighting their ability to plan and offer individual flexibility in working hours, locations, tasks, and responsibilities, for example. In reference to the well-being practices on offer, one of the HR managers explained how the municipality encouraged employees to exercise:

We've developed a sort of tray of activities from which everyone can choose what they want (. . .) everyone can find something they like on it. And we also offer personal work ability vouchers worth 200 euros, which can be used for almost anything.

The theme of responsibility was repeatedly brought up in connection to positive phenomena such as 'involvement' and

'opportunity', as in the excerpt below, which mentions motivation as a part of psychological well-being:

Employees have to take responsibility for well-being as well. Employees are motivated when they are included, participate actively and get the chance to think together about how to improve the performance of their work.

The interviewee continued by pointing out further benefits of involving employees. Employees could 'carry an even bigger weight on their shoulders' and 'accept changes more easily' if they were as involved in them as possible. This demonstrates how the responsibility for well-being at work trickles down to the employees themselves, rather than being a result of collective arrangements. HR practitioners were the mediators or providers of these responsibilities which were framed as opportunities. In the quotation below, one interviewee illustrated the individual responsibility in social contexts by using the metaphor of a picnic:

Being at the workplace is like being on a picnic where everyone is supposed to bring a dish to share. Every employee has to understand that if you bring a bad dish to the table, then other people will get sick. And if you bring good dishes, everyone will feel well. And also, if you don't bring anything then you'll be eating other people's food.

Paradoxically, responsibility for work was also presented as a joint venture in which interests were 'common' and gain was 'mutual'. Here, well-being at work created a 'win-win situation' in line with well-established HRM rhetoric, in which employer and employee interest are seen as mutual. What is by-passed in the interviews is the role of trade unions, which have a relatively strong role in Nordic countries compared to the rest of Europe. Collective agreements concerning working hours, wages, the work environment, and whether there are enough workers to share the work tasks were not discussed by the interviewees. Moreover, well-being as an individual responsibility contradicts the fact that well-being at work as an objective for municipal management originates from nationwide policies and agreements in which trade unions are strongly represented. The interviewees seemed to distort this origin and repackage well-being in an individualized form.

In discursively legitimating the position of HR in 'providing individual opportunities for employees', I identified the discursive practice legitimization strategy of moralization and role legitimization strategy of connecting with the institutional environment. The interviewees drew upon the strengthened western value of individualism by offering individualized HR practices which they coupled with the institutional environment of municipal HR, enabling themselves to be the providers.

4.3. *'It's common sense': HR as an upholder of the well-being agenda*

The third discursive theme that the interviewees drew upon when legitimating the position of HR was performance. According to the interviews, well- or ill-being at work either 'affects', 'creates possibilities for' or 'hinders' performance. By linking well-being at work to the performance of the municipality, investment in it becomes rational, and a workforce that feels well is perceived as a utility. Consequently, HR is needed to uphold and manage the agenda.

The instrumental value of well-being was also presented as saving money: 'We've continuously stressed that at some point, the investments put into employee well-being will pay for themselves.' By 'flipping the scales too much towards savings', a 'backlash' is possible. The balance is 'delicate', and HR's expertise in managing this balance and guarding well-being against too much savings is portrayed as crucial. Further, the interviewees described the connection between well-being at work and performance as common knowledge and even a natural law. As one of the

interviewees stated: 'Performance and well-being are absolutely connected. Happier people produce better services, and more of them'. One interviewee used the metaphor of performance and well-being as 'walking hand in hand' to describe the connection between these two factors. In exemplifying the position of HR in this 'natural order', one interviewee explicitly pointed out its use as a marketing strategy: 'We speak a lot about results, a lot about productivity. Here in HR we've very much marketed it as being paired up with well-being at work'.

The interviewees further referred to policy agendas at national and municipal levels, and to research that stresses the importance of well-being as a gate to higher performance and, subsequently, the task of HR in executing this. They repeatedly referred to the national policy, which emphasizes the need for longer careers, as a reason for improving well-being at work, and furthermore, a solution to financial problems in municipalities. This was exemplified by an interviewee who linked longer careers to well-being at work practices developed by HR:

One of our objectives is to reduce early retirement, and so far we've improved our numbers by five percent each year. In order to support line managers in this we've developed early intervention models and the likes.

The interviewee continued by emphasizing the importance of HR in managing this: 'If you think of management as well, then, absolutely, well-being at work also needs to be managed. It's not a disconnected thing but an essential part of management'. Further, the position HR takes in emphasizing the connection between well-being and performance mirrors the popularity of well-being at work as an objective approved by local policy-makers. The interviewees referred to strategy documents when upholding well-being at work and their own position in managing it. One of them spoke of how HR influenced the strategy process:

We need something positive as well in this dark age (. . .) productivity is strongly presented in our strategy. So we look for productivity while simultaneously increasing well-being.

Another part of the legitimization of HR positions through well-being at work involves highlighting their essential expertise: 'If HR isn't involved, then the totality of municipal work isn't under control'. The expertise is further emphasized by their knowledge production of issues concerning employees and the utility of practices that support well-being. Consequently, the position of HR in relation to well-being at work is constructed by speaking of their own authority: 'We've tried to teach everyone how well-being and performance go together. There's even research about how they correlate'.

The position of HR in 'upholding the agenda of well-being at work as a link to performance' is accomplished through practice legitimization strategies, especially of rationalization and authorization, coupled with the role legitimization strategies of naturalizing the past and referring to national and municipal policy as embodying authority. Through rationalization, the interviewees present how well-being practices save the municipalities money and create possibilities for individual or organizational performance. They do not delegitimize their recent history as propagators of performance, but instead integrate performance with well-being at work, supporting Goodrick and Reay's (2010) argument that legitimating professional positions involves strategies which normalize new meanings, i.e. they are made to fit previous meanings attached to HR work. Here, they build upon the strengthening of organizational professionalism in which practitioners aim to strengthen their professional position by promoting efficiency, control and other organizational objectives (Evetts, 2011). Sheehan et al.'s (2014) conclusions on how HR practitioners propagate the view that what is good for business is ultimately good for everyone also supports the findings. There has been a clear shift from the humanitarian focus of well-being at the

beginning of the 20th century to the current pairing of organizational professionalism and well-being. Moreover, the interviewees deployed authorization as well as used the strategy of connecting with the institutional environment by referencing the national and municipal policy striving for longer careers through increasing the well-being of employees. Lastly, the interviewees naturalized the past of their position by building upon the importance of performance, stressed in public sector HR since the middle of the 1990s (Harris, 2007; Truss, 2013).

4.4. 'Understanding the bigger picture': HR as a reminder of the meaningfulness of municipal work

In this position, the interviewees drew upon the ideal of municipal work as meaningful per se, and the strengthened trend of western work life which seeks meaning. They also used metaphors to describe the lack of well-being as 'greyness', depicted as a situation in which 'there is nothing more to "give" or "squeeze" out.'

Moreover, meaningfulness in work life is described as doing work that has clear objectives. A statement by one of the interviewees illustrated this: 'Everyone wants to achieve results in their work. I see it as one of the guarantees of well-being: to have a meaningful job in which the value of one's work is recognized'. Another interviewee explained how the meaning of municipal work is accomplished through the end results, i.e. the services produced: 'In day care centres, health centres, hospitals, and on the streets, where roads are constructed, the employees are there for the municipal residents, to produce municipal services.'

Hence, the interviewees portrayed recognizing the results of one's work as meaningful. However, there is no talk of day-to-day work itself as a source of meaningfulness, which results in a very goal-oriented view of meaningful work. In addition to their work being recognized by others, meaningfulness requires that employees themselves 'see the point of what they're doing'. This is where HR expertise is needed. It 'increases both productivity and employee well-being when tasks are well-defined, and the process runs smoothly'. One interviewee explained this in more detail:

Well-being at work will increase if employees understand the bigger picture they're contributing to, and why they're involved in the process. So that they don't feel like their efforts are pointless which, of course, doesn't happen often if you're taking care of sick people, but it is possible to feel that way if you're doing office work.

Another interviewee emphasized the position of HR in this goal-oriented meaningfulness: 'We have to ensure that people are given the opportunity to achieve their objectives'. Yet another implied that employees can find the essence and meaning of municipal work through the right kind of management:

Well, there's never enough information about what's going on in the organization. Even if you're not a part of the issues or even if you can't solve the problems or influence the agendas, being

informed creates a unified us-spirit. That you're somehow involved.

In legitimating this position of 'assuring and reminding of the meaningfulness of municipal work', the interviewees mostly employed the practice legitimation strategy of moralization together with the role legitimation strategy of connecting with the institutional environment. Meaningfulness is an ideal of current work life, which the interviewees portrayed themselves as able to manage in the context of municipal work.

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study shows how HR practitioners in Finnish municipalities have not only accepted well-being at work policies but have, in fact, embraced the discourse of well-being at work as a field to be co-ordinated and managed. In the results, I have identified how HR practitioners in municipal organizations legitimate their position as managers and co-ordinators of the formal structures related to well-being at work, providers of individual opportunities, upholders of the well-being at work agenda and, lastly, reminders of the meaningfulness of municipal work. In particular, the quest for formal structures, individual choice and responsibility, performance and meaningfulness of work are constructed as discursive themes that require and justify the position of HR practitioners in management programmes, practices and resources under the umbrella of well-being at work. Table 2 provides an overview of the results.

Next, I elaborate on the findings in relation to the socio-political context in municipalities and society at large, and discuss the discursive legitimation strategies employed. Firstly, I suggest that the discursive theme of formal structure is traceable to the traditional norm of bureaucracy in municipal organizations. Hierarchical structuring, specialization and formalization categorize Weberian rational bureaucratic organizations—a traditional ideal type for the public sector. This traditional view of management as a heavily structured and specialized area is reflected and reinterpreted in the findings, which manifest the position of HR practitioners as 'managers and co-ordinators of formal well-being structures'. Despite predictions of more flexible post- and neo-bureaucracy in the public sector, bureaucracy has in fact partly intensified through, for example, centralization, formal reporting and the monitoring of practices (McSweeney, 2006). The finding supports Meyer, Peitler, Höllerer, and Hammerschmid's (2014) example of public sector professionals hybridizing values of the bureaucratic state logic with new managerial concepts and practices.

Secondly, in stressing the discursive theme of individual choice and responsibility in well-being at work, the interviewees reflect and reinforce the values of individualism in contemporary society. The individualization of well-being at work is supported by HR being a provider of certain practices framed as opportunities. This can be interpreted as the 'commodification of professional service

Table 2
Discursive themes of well-being at work employed in legitimation of HR positions.

Discursive theme of well-being at work	Position of HR practitioners in managing well-being at work	Empirical example
Formal structure	Managing and co-ordinating formal structures i.e. programmes and practices	'So we kind of have a small army of our own that can support well-being in different situations.'
Individual choice and responsibility	Providing individual opportunities for employees	'We've developed a sort of tray of activities from which everyone can choose what they want. (. . .) Everyone can find something they like on it.'
Performance	Upholding the agenda of well-being at work as a link to performance	'We've continuously stressed that at some point, the investments put into employee well-being will pay for themselves. That's our starting point.'
Meaningfulness	Assuring and reminding of the meaningfulness of municipal work	'Everyone wants to achieve results in their work. I see it as one of the guarantees of well-being: to have a job in which the value of your work is recognized.'

work' linked to the expansion of organizational professionalism (Evetts, 2011), which HR as an occupation is linked to. In this study, employees and line managers are portrayed as the customers to which HR provides services in line with the norms of individualized society.

Furthermore, well-being is associated with overall positive valence that appears automatically desirable and defies critique (Ganesh & McAllum, 2010; Sointu, 2005). Consequently, how HR practitioners frame themselves as well-being experts has certain political and social consequences. A linking stream of studies on wellness at work (Farrell & Geist-Martin, 2005) and health promotion at work (Zoller, 2003; Holmqvist & Maravelias, 2011), claim that wellness or health promotion is a form of social control of employee behaviour. Through activities targeted at physical and mental conditions and lifestyles, organizations attempt to change employee behaviour towards alignment with organizational norms. This requires self-management of health on the part of the employees themselves. Consequently, the construction of employees as being active, responsible, self-monitoring, creative, and self-reflexive ultimately creates a norm for the individually accountable employee of his or her own health and well-being (Holmqvist & Maravelias, 2011). People who fail to follow these norms are stigmatized as weak or lazy. Although surrounding circumstances might be against them, employees are internalizing the idea of a moral obligation that they are in control and the ones to blame even for success or failure in the pursuit of well-being (Cederström & Spicer, 2015).

Thirdly, performance, as a discursive theme in the findings, can be traced back to the municipal context. Municipalities are extensively targeted by policies that couple performance and well-being at work (Findlay et al., 2013). Consequently, I interpret the strong connection between well-being at work and performance constructed by the interviewees as a strategy to draw upon this intense policy-making, and to position themselves within in this political context.

The last theme identified, meaningfulness, also echoes the societal level connotations of well-being at work. HR practitioners predominantly portray recognizing the results of one's work as a source of meaningfulness. In contrast, there is no talk of day-to-day work itself as a source of meaning, which constructs a very goal-oriented view of meaningfulness in work life. Meaning is accentuated as the end result of one's work efforts, in which HR has a part to play as a reminder and verifier that these results are met. Despite the desirability of well-being as a state per se, meaningfulness as a norm defies critique in a way that might result in a frenzy of promoting positive norms and jeopardizing the discussions of the causes of, details concerning, and solutions to ill-being (Costea, Crump, & Amiridis, 2008). Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) discuss how the management of meaning usually avoids the questions of whether and how meaningfulness has emerged in the first place. Moreover, the HR practitioners did not discuss the problematic fit between meaningfulness as a free choice and a personal discovery, and the assumptions that management can and should provide meaning for work.

At first, some of the discursive themes drawn upon appear somewhat conflicting. The interviewees, however, reinterpreted them through the use of discursive strategies and, consequently, legitimated their own position by bridging themes, which intuitively appear to be conflictual. Formal structure is contrasted in the theme of individual responsibility, in which responsibility for well-being is devolved to the employees themselves. The HR practitioners reinterpret the popular discourse of well-being at work with its connotations to individual characteristics to suit the bureaucratic organization of municipalities. In this way, they legitimate their position as a provider of individual opportunities and still conform to the traditional municipal organization.

Furthermore, the themes of performance and the meaningfulness of work first appear as opposites. However, in the legitimation strategies employed, the meaningfulness of municipal work draws on performance as a fundamental objective. This makes the view of meaningfulness constructed by the interviewees extremely goal oriented.

In the themes of meaningfulness, and individual choice and responsibility, we can see how HR practitioners reach outside their own occupational sphere to meet current societal trends. This supports Wright's (2008) findings of how the HR occupation is fragmented and very open to influences of societal trends rather than building closure. Although HR practitioners, in the light of this study, build upon the strengthened discourse of well-being at work, they might attach themselves to coming trends stressing different values in the future.

This study contributes to research on the role of HR practitioners by providing the perspective of discursive legitimation—an approach so far unfamiliar to this line of research. Studies of the public sector suggest that the organizational position of HR practitioners is unstable and lacks credibility. The aspirations of HR practitioners to align with NPM ideals – becoming strategic and contributing to performance – have not succeeded as intended (e.g. Farndale & Hope-Hailey, 2009; Harris, 2004). Consequently, work aimed at employee well-being has been framed as less valuable, and 'business partnering' is considered to enable strategic, core, and valuable HR work (Keegan & Francis, 2010). The findings of this study suggest more elaborated conclusions. Even though HR practitioners are building their position through the discourse of well-being at work, well-being at work is still strongly represented in an instrumental sense, as a means to an end; i.e. better performance of municipal work.

I also add an empirical study to the nascent study of the importance of the institutional environment in legitimating professional roles (Goodrick & Reay, 2010). The institutional, municipal environment is apparent in the identified discursive themes of formal structure and performance. Furthermore, the legitimation process also draws upon the societal values of individualism and meaningfulness. Through the notion of position, I am able to show how HR practitioners intertwine the discursive strategies of both practice and role legitimation in constructing their professional stance. I suggest that the use of both types of strategies is due to the nature of well-being at work as a phenomenon. Well-being at work is conceptualized as something to be managed and controlled (Danna & Griffin, 1999), thus evidently linking it to management practices in an organizational setting. When studying how HR practitioners employ the discourse of well-being at work in relation to their professional position, practice and role legitimation become combined strategies.

A typical limitation in discursive studies is the non-generalizability of their results. Nevertheless, this study provides valuable insights into the use of language in HR work, which shapes the position of HR practitioners in the public sector. Moreover, this research examines a specific institutional context. Municipal organizations in Finland and other Nordic countries are distinct from other settings, which means that the municipal-level meanings attached to well-being at work most probably vary to some extent in other contexts.

Furthermore, the interview data of this study do not capture the entire discussion of positioning in the field of HR. I am unable to show how the interviewed HR managers enacted these positions in practice or in situations regarding other municipal actors. As a suggestion for future research I urge further examination of the discursive legitimation of professional positions, in order to better understand how HR practitioners use discourse when addressing other municipal stakeholders; for example, other practitioners, employees, and municipal residents.

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