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HR Have the Final 'No': Advising, Persuading and Overruling to Navigate the Institutional Logics in HR Practice

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ABSTRACT

Institutional logics of the market, profession, and state act upon and define success in HR practitioners' work. We examine how HR professionals respond to these co-existing logics in their day-to-day interactions with line managers. Findings based on interviews with 41 HR professionals reveal their navigation of logics as they choose whether to advise, persuade, or overrule line managers. This decision-making is guided by their combined knowledge of regulation and their organisational context, as well as their perceptions of the line manager with whom they are interacting. Theoretically, we propose a spectrum of HR practitioners' involvement in line managers' enactment of HRM. We argue that HR practitioners' combined organisational and occupational knowledge enables them to balance the multiple institutional contexts acting upon people management, offering an inimitable contribution to organisations. However, we also highlight the challenges this balancing act creates for building credibility and legitimacy with organisational stakeholders.

1 | Introduction

The HR profession has long been engaged in the pursuit of enhancing its professional status (Wright 2008): a task often involving HR practitioners working to gain credibility with their internal stakeholders and demonstrate their contribution to organisational performance (Keegan and Francis 2010; Syrigou and Williams 2023; Wright 2008). The devolution of HRM to line managers has been presented as a route to enhanced credibility for the profession, allowing practitioners a less involved and more strategic role in the enactment of HRM. However, empirical work examining devolved HRM has problematised the presumed relationship between devolution and HR's strategic influence (cf. Reichel and Lazarova 2013; Trullen et al. 2024). Furthermore, the HRM literature has been identified as overlooking the significance of national regulation on people management (Brewster et al. 2015): a context that may necessitate a compliance role for the HR function and their continued involvement in HRM enactment (Foster and Harris 2005; Holt Larsen and Brewster 2003; Renwick 2003). Compliance work also presents an opportunity for HR practitioners to offer a contribution to organisations as it requires specialist expertise (Kirk 2021). Existing work has highlighted the challenge for HR professionals in embracing devolution while also needing to engage in work focused on ensuring regulatory compliance (e.g., Wright and Snell 2005).

To examine how HR practitioners navigate this challenge, our paper adopts the theoretical frame of institutional logics. Institutional theory proposes certain logics guide behaviour by providing individuals with a set of assumptions and values (Thornton and Ocasio 1999). Thornton (2004) proposes six high-order societal logics: market, state, corporation, professions, family, and religion. Within organisations, professionals rely on

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Summary

- What is currently known:
  - HR practitioners seek to enhance the status of their profession and demonstrate their contribution to organisations.
  - HR professionals are encouraged to devolve people management to line managers and take on a less involved, more strategic role.
  - Yet, the national regulatory context, often overlooked by HR research, creates a compliance role for HR to manage legal risk.
- What this paper adds:
  - HR practitioners adapt their level of involvement in the enactment of HRM based on their perceptions of legal risk and their perceptions of the line manager with whom they are interacting.
  - HR professionals draw on their specialist combined knowledge of employment law and their organisational contexts to decide whether to advise, persuade, or overrule line managers.
  - HR practitioners with high versus low levels of influence over line managers need to take different approaches to persuading and overruling them.
- Implications for practitioners:
  - A more involved compliance role for HR, alongside an advisory approach, is needed and adds value in the contexts of national regulation and market pressures.
  - To highlight the contribution of the HR function, greater acknowledgement is needed of the skill, expertise and resilience HR practitioners require to transition between their less and more involved modes of working with line managers.
  - Practitioners and researchers should develop means of capturing the saved costs of the compliance work undertaken by HR.

their understanding of salient logics in their search for status and influence (Thornton and Ocasio 2008), and a growing body of work considers how different professional groups engage with the multiple logics of their respective fields (Smets et al. 2015; ten Dam and Waardenburg 2020; Voronov et al. 2013). There are calls for more research into how organisational actors use logics in their day-to-day work (Smets et al. 2015; Voronov et al. 2013) and Lewis et al. (2019) specifically invite studies to consider how HR professionals manage the competing logics of the state (requiring regulatory compliance), market (emphasising organisational performance), and their profession (promoting the logic of the HR profession itself). The ability to reconcile multiple logics has been proposed as a route to legitimacy for professionals (Smets et al. 2015), making institutional logics a relevant frame for examining the pressures acting upon HR practice and the profession's enduring attempts to enhance its status.

We adopted a qualitative approach enabling us to probe HR practitioners on their working realities rather than normative constructions of what HR work ought to be. We undertook and analysed 41 semi-structured interviews with HR generalists with varying role titles working across various sectors. Our findings demonstrate how HR practitioners navigate state, professional, and market logics in their interactions with line managers, which can take the form of advising, persuading, or overruling. These interaction strategies reflect HR practitioners' different levels of involvement in the enactment of HRM. Which strategy is adopted depends on the perceived legal risk associated with the specific people management issue, as well as the practitioner's views on whether the line manager will accept or challenge their perspective. Furthermore, the findings reveal HR professionals' exact approach to persuading or overruling (but not advising) can depend on whether they have high or low levels of influence with that line manager.

Theoretically, we propose a model spectrum of HR practitioners' involvement in line managers' enactment of HRM. The spectrum aligns to HR professionals' navigation of the institutional logics of their profession (encouraging devolution) and the state (necessitating regulatory compliance), while consistently drawing upon market logic (concerned with organisational performance) to justify their choice of action and reconcile these seemingly contradictory approaches. We emphasise HR practitioners' ability to balance these logics as an inimitable contribution of the HR function, only made possible due to their combined occupational and organisational knowledge. However, the requirement to reconcile these contexts also creates challenges for HR practitioners and their professionalisation project, given they must seek credibility and legitimacy from organisational stakeholders (Syrigou and Williams 2023) whose own roles may allow them to prioritise one logic over all others. As such, we call for future studies to examine the ways institutional work is perceived by other organisational actors who prioritise different logics, and to specifically consider ways of making the skills and cost savings associated with HR's compliance work, guided by state logic, more visible.

2 | Literature Review

2.1 | Institutional Logics in HRM

Because institutional logics 'shape and create the rules of the game' (Thornton and Ocasio 2008, 112), they define how organisational actors perceive success in their roles (Smets et al. 2015) and how they should proceed in certain situations (Smets et al. 2015; Thornton and Ocasio 2008). Frontline professional work constitutes multiple logics that both enable and constrain the interests and agency of professionals (Thornton and Ocasio 2008). However, rather than always being complementary, multiple logics acting on professional work can co-exist in ways that are both contradictory and interdependent in practice (Smets et al. 2015). The existence of conflicting logics presents professionals with incompatible criteria for legitimacy, as actions that are legitimate according to one logic may not be according to another (Smets et al. 2015). HRM research has only minimally engaged with institutional theory (Boselie et al. 2005) despite its potential for aiding understanding of the contexts within which HRM operates and how these influence HR practitioners' decision making (Lewis et al. 2019). Lewis et al. (2019) suggest HR practitioners act within a complex institutional environment; arguably more complex than any other functional unit within

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an organisation. HR professionals face organisational performance pressures (market logic), the rules and values of the HR profession itself (their professional logic), as well as the demands of government regulation (state logic). To manage this complexity, HR professionals must develop social skills, an awareness of their organisation's internal and external contexts, and the reflexivity to understand their role within the organisation (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006).

2.2 | Market and Professional Logic in HRM

Market logic tends to dominate within organisations and is arguably the logic best represented by the most powerful organisational actors, such as senior management due to their focus on organisational performance (Lewis et al. 2019). This dominance within organisations explains why professional logics often adopt principles from market logic (Hodgson et al. 2015). Within HRM, the professional logic, drawing on market logic, encourages the profession to adopt a more strategic role focused on improving organisational performance (Keegan and Francis 2010). This has led to the HR profession widely embracing a business partner role within organisations, where practitioners act as internals consultant and attempt to foreground their expertise and ability to improve performance (Wright 2008). To support this more strategic business partner role, the discourse and practice of devolving HRM enactment to line managers has gained traction, though it has also faced criticism for diminishing the emphasis on employee-facing and ethical aspects of HR work (Francis and Keegan 2006; Sheehan et al. 2014).

Devolution has been framed optimistically to HR professionals as freedom from routine HRM tasks (Cunningham and Hyman 1999) and as the ideal trajectory for the HR profession to gain more strategic influence and credibility (Aldrich et al. 2015; Francis and Keegan 2006). However, empirical work examining how devolved people management plays out in organisations challenges the premise that strategic and operational HRM split cleanly and effectively (Renwick 2003; Trullen et al. 2024). Reichel and Lazarova (2013) found that the higher the level of devolution, the lower the strategic position of HR, and argue devolution suggests the HR function is substitutable, with HRM performed by others, leading to reduced power for HR. Furthermore, Holt Larsen and Brewster (2003) identified organisational contexts where despite responsibility for HRM being 'devolved', HR finds it necessary to monitor line manager activity and line managers begin asking for HR's help with 'exceptional' cases. As such, the outcomes of 'devolution' soon reflected more involved modes of HRM enactment for HR practitioners.

Furthermore, much of the devolution literature has primarily focused on line managers' implementation of HRM (Kurdi-Nakra and Pak 2023), while a much smaller body of work considers HR's involvement in devolved HRM. Research that has examined the HR perspective on devolution has identified influencing tactics employed by practitioners when interacting with line managers (e.g., Kurdi-Nakra and Pak 2023; Trullen and Valverde 2017). Trullen and Valverde (2017) categorise such tactics as hard or soft: hard tactics are relatively controlling, leaving line managers little freedom to defy HR recommendations, whereas soft tactics allow line managers more latitude in deciding whether or not to comply. Studies of this nature highlight HR scholars' concern with implementation gaps. Despite the widespread acceptance of devolution, and the potential for differences between intended and actual practice when HRM is devolved (Guest and Bos-Nehles 2013), the HRM literature tends to frame gaps in HRM policy implementation as problematic (Brandl et al. 2022).

2.3 | State Logic in HRM

For HRM, the logic of the state means that one key consideration of HR policy and practice is ensuring compliance with local and national legislation (Kurdi-Nakra and Pak 2023Kurdi-Nakra and Pak 2023). However, when enactment is devolved and HR professionals are less involved, they can lose control of HRM activities, potentially leading to damaging outcomes for their organisations (Gollan 2012). This is particularly problematic for HR professionals as despite devolution requiring them to relinquish power to line managers, they still retain accountability for the outcomes of HRM (Sheehan et al. 2014). This has led to claims that the current HRM literature tends to downplay the influence of national regulation, particularly protective employment laws, on the enactment of HRM (Brewster et al. 2015; Martínez Lucio and Stuart 2011). Dismissing the impact of national regulation and state logic on HRM enactment understates the complexity of the decision-making that HR practitioners face in their everyday interactions with line managers.

A relatively muted and fragmented body of HRM research recognises the national regulatory context, leading to HR practitioners' need to attend to matters of employment law (Brandl et al. 2022; Foster and Harris 2005; Wright and Snell 2005). Such work acknowledges that the HR function may need to be more involved in HRM enactment to protect their organisation (Foster and Harris 2005; Holt Larsen and Brewster 2003). Yet, research recognising a compliance role for HR has often portrayed HR practitioners' approach to such work pejoratively. HR professionals engaged in compliance have been described as risk averse (Jones and Saundry 2012) and accused of citing high-profile legal decisions in ways disproportionate to the actual risks in their organisational contexts (Roehling and Wright 2006). However, despite their role as the interpreters of employment legislation within organisations (Edelman et al. 2001; Legge 1995), there is limited research on how HR professional use the law in their everyday practice and interactions with line managers (Kirk 2021). Examining HR professionals' use of the law can reveal whether and how their judgements balance the different logics acting upon their practice: not only their knowledge of the regulation (state logic), but also their adherence to principles of devolution (their professional logic) and their organisation's specific context and market position (market logic) (Roehling and Wright 2006).

Regulatory compliance activity driven by state logic is both necessary and expected of HR by other organisational actors

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who seek their functional expertise (Gollan 2012) and employment law guidance (Foster and Harris 2005). However, the need to ensure legal compliance places HR in an undesirable 'guardian' role where good, even exemplary, performance is often unmeasured and uncredited (cf. Baron and Kreps 1999; Jacobs 1981). In contrast, mistakes in guardian roles are highly visible and can have disastrous results for organisations, often leading to a preoccupation with rules and secrecy due to the risks associated with underperformance (Jacobs 1981). The existing HRM literature has highlighted that attempting to operate as both a 'guardian' and 'partner' creates role tension for HR professionals (Wright and Snell 2005). To manage this tension, some HR functions adopt the HR business partnering model which embraces devolution but more operational compliance work continues to form part of what the HR team does under the radar (Pritchard 2010; Sheehan et al. 2014). While this approach to operationalising HR roles may help balance market and state pressures, it also underscores the potential conflict between the multiple logics acting upon HRM and the perception that compliance work is incompatible with a strategic partnership role.

2.4 | Navigating Multiple Logics and HR's Professionalisation Project

The co-existing logics of the market/profession and state acting upon people management appear to be in conflict, encouraging HR practitioners to adopt different levels of involvement in the enactment of HRM. The market-derived professional logic devalues compliance-related work required by the logic of the state, as such activity fails to align with the strategic ideal and does not preserve line managers' decision-making prerogative (Wright 2008). Currently we have limited understanding of how HR practitioners experience this tension and how they attempt to reconcile it.

Research examining other professional groups has theorised various approaches to navigating competing institutional logics. Smets et al. (2015) propose a model of segmentation, demarcation, and bridging of logics. *Segmentation* occurs when different logics are applied to different referent audiences. In HR's case, segmentation may manifest in their interactions with varying stakeholders (e.g., line managers vs. employees), each of whom has different priorities that may align more or less with different logics. *Demarcation*, which shares similarities with the *compartmentalisation* proposed by Creed et al. (2010), involves professionals choosing to follow a particular logic to secure desired outcomes depending on the specifics of a scenario. For HR practitioners, demarcation or compartmentalisation may be predicated on their perceptions of the legal risk associated with a given people management scenario, where either the state or market/professional logic is the most prudent to prioritise. *Bridging* represents a complementarity of two logics where actors may privilege one logic over another at their discretion, but both are honoured. If HR practitioners develop strategies for interacting with line managers that draw upon both state and professional/market logics, this could evidence their bridging of logics. Smets et al. (2015) differentiate their concept of bridging from co-optation (cf. Andersson and Liff 2018) where actors adopt a strategic element from one logic in a way that preserves another more dominant logic. As discussed above, HR's professional logic promoting the devolution of HRM appears to co-opt from the market logic which tends to dominate within organisations (Lewis et al. 2019), as shifting responsibility for the enactment of people management to line managers frees up HR's time to focus on more strategic activities.

Evidence of how HR practitioners attempt to navigate multiple logics in their interactions with line managers can support our understanding of how they can gain credibility and legitimacy within organisations (cf. Smets et al. 2015); an understanding also sought by the literature examining the professionalisation of HR. HR is best understood as an organisational profession (Syrigou and Williams 2023). Organisational professions place emphasis on realising managerial and corporate objectives, in contrast to occupational-collegial professions which derive legitimacy from qualification and codified ethics (Syrigou and Williams 2023). As an organisational profession, HR practitioners must seek credibility and legitimacy from senior leaders by explicitly aligning themselves with the interests of their employer (Higgins et al. 2016; Wright 2008). Thus, HR's professionalisation project is often characterised by practitioners' efforts to build strong relationships within organisations, relying upon their knowledge of their specific organisational contexts (Syrigou and Williams 2023). However, the HR profession also aspires to emulate occupational professions who have shared values and standards that are upheld over and above business needs (Farndale and Brewster 2005). To operate in such a manner, HR practitioners must draw upon occupational rather than organisational knowledge. Efforts to establish and formalise this shared knowledge can be observed in the CIPD and other representative bodies' operation of qualification schemes and work to foster occupation-wide professional values (Syrigou and Williams 2023).

The ambition to operate in an 'occupational' way while simultaneously pursuing alignment with employer interests creates a tension for HR practitioners (Hodgson et al. 2015; Syrigou and Williams 2023). However, much of the existing work fails to acknowledge this tension in discussions of HR's professionalisation. e.g., some authors (e.g., Ulrich and Brockbank 2005) view the establishment of the strategic business partnering approach as key to HR's professionalisation project (Syrigou and Williams 2023). However, such a perspective neglects the expertise and proficiency required in areas considered less strategic, such as employment law and employee relations (Syrigou and Williams 2023). In fact, in light of the growing complexity of employment law, HR practitioners may offer significant value to organisations as quasi-legal professionals (Kirk 2021). Plus, compliance work may present opportunities for HR professionalism to occur on more occupational terms. As such, while adopting a more strategic business partnering approach appears to have helped HR practitioners build organisational relationships, it may be acting as a barrier to the profession establishing a distinct occupational HR identity (Syrigou and Williams 2023; Wright 2008).

In summary, in response to the dominant market logic, HR practitioners are seeking a more strategic role within organisations. Consequently, the devolution of people management to line managers has formed part of HR's professional logic,

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prompting practitioners to reduce their involvement in the enactment of HRM (Francis and Keegan 2006). However, empirical evidence challenges the assumption that devolution is always the ideal route to enhancing HR's strategic influence and credibility (e.g., Reichel and Lazarova 2013; Trullen et al. 2024). Furthermore, literature promoting devolution has been criticised for overlooking the national regulatory context (Brewster et al. 2015), which presents a state logic that may require HR practitioners to remain more involved in HRM enactment to protect their organisations from legal risk (Foster and Harris 2005). These co-existing logics create a tension for HR practitioners during their interactions with line managers, a tension also reflected in the literature focused on the professionalisation of HR. On one hand, HR is an organisational profession and the adoption of the strategic business partnering approach, which encourages devolution, has helped HR practitioners build stronger relationships and enhance their business credibility within organisations (Syrigou and Williams 2023). On the other hand, the profession aspires to operate in a more occupational manner, upholding shared values and expertise, for which opportunities may arise from compliance focused work where HR are more involved in the enactment of HRM (Syrigou and Williams 2023). In response to the lack of understanding of how HR practitioners experience and manage these tensions, our research asks: 'how do HR professionals navigate the coexisting logics of their profession, the market, and the state in their interactions with line managers, and how does this correspond to their level of involvement in HRM enactment?' Next, we present our methods.

3 | Methods

3.1 | Research Sample and Design

This study draws upon 41 semi-structured interviews with HR practitioners. The research took place in the UK, where employment law draws upon a combination of statute and case law, and, at the time of writing and during the period of data collection, claimants do not pay fees to have their case heard at tribunal. The study used a purposive, non-probability sample with potential participants contacted on the LinkedIn social media site. Potential participants were contacted when their profiles indicated they worked with line managers. The message to potential participants asked if they were willing to be interviewed as part of a study examining HR practitioners' relationships and interactions with their organisational stakeholders. An indication of the time commitment was provided, and a consent form was attached providing more details on the nature of their potential involvement in the study. A total of 180 HR practitioners were contacted and all respondents who agreed to participate were interviewed. The final sample comprised practitioners at varying levels of seniority, with a range of HR role titles and who worked in numerous different industries and sectors. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample. It is notable that the sample is female dominated, representative of the profession (CIPD 2021). Non-response bias was checked based on (non)respondents' gender, role title and sector, and with only two exceptions, no (or negligible) bias was identified. Compared to the non-respondents, the sample had a higher proportion of practitioners with a 'Head of HR' role title, and representation from the healthcare sector was lower.

It is both a strength and limitation of this study that only the voices of HR practitioners are included. This offers in-depth insight into their perspectives while being unreferenced by the line managers they are interacting with. The line manager perspective on devolution is already predominant within existing literature (Kurdi-Nakra and Pak 2023) and even within more recent research designs that incorporate both HR and line manager perspectives, it is line manager voices that dominate the dataset (e.g., Kurdi-Nakra and Pak 2023). Our design choice and approach to sampling prioritised giving a voice to as many HR practitioners as possible. It also supported theory building by identifying HR strategies for involvement in HRM enactment across different organisational contexts but within the shared national regulatory context.

3.2 | Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted 50 min on average. HR practitioners were questioned on the nature of their interactions with line managers, including associated challenges; their use of protective employment law; and their sources of guidance and knowledge regarding employment law, including any external legal advice. The interviews took place as part of a broader study examining the relationships and interactions of HR professionals with organisational stakeholders. Here, we focus on practitioners' interactions with line managers. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The initial stages of analysis took place alongside data collection, and analysis of the early interviews highlighted practitioners' consistent references to their role as advisors but also to protective employment law and the need to manage legal risk. Returning to the literature in line with an iterative approach, the need to understand how practitioners navigate this complexity was apparent. To interrogate this further with subsequent interviewees, prompts were added to the interview schedules in line with the questioning described above.

Thematic analysis involved the creation of first order codes based on participant language, and these codes were organised into potential themes that were then reviewed, defined, and renamed to ensure representation of the entire dataset (Braun and Clarke 2006). The data structure illustrated in Figure 1 provides transparency on our analytic process; presenting examples of participant responses that were coded (column 1), and the subsequent themes (column 2) that were then refined (column 3). The refined themes revealed different approaches (advising, persuading, and overruling) that HR professionals adopt in their interactions with line managers, each comprising increased levels of involvement in HRM enactment. Also emergent from the analysis was the relevance of practitioners' influence with line managers, corresponding to how they persuade or overrule these key stakeholders. We connected these findings with existing theory on institutional logics to demonstrate how HR professionals navigate the logics of the state, market and their profession in their work (column 4).

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TABLE 1 | Sample characteristics.

Code	Male/female	Job title	Sector	Size
P1	F	HR manager	Manufacturing	450
P2	F	HR assistant	Manufacturing	450
P3	F	HR advisor	Property maintenance/design	1000
P4	F	HR manager	Manufacturing	96
P5	F	HR advisor	Higher education	4250
P6	F	HR manager	Manufacturing	600
P7	F	HR manager	HR consultancy	Consultancy for firms of 3–200
P8	F	Recruitment manager	Public sector	3500
P9	F	Head of HR	Education	370
P10	F	HR advisor	Public sector	750
P11	F	HR business partner	Public sector	370
P12	F	HR officer	Charity	500–700
P13	M	HR manager	Retail	130,000
P14	F	HR manager	Professional services	80
P15	F	HR and training manager	Manufacturing	150
P16	F	Head of HR	Arts	500
P17	F	HR business partner	Public sector	575
P18	F	HR manager	Manufacturing	160
P19	F	HR business partner consultant	Professional services	400
P20	F	HR manager	Manufacturing	10,000
P21	F	HR/E&D consultant	HR/E&D consultancy	1
P22	M	HR advisor	Public sector	14,500
P23	F	HR manager	Technology	84
P24	F	Head of HR	Housing	820
P25	F	HR business partner	Charity	275–350
P26	M	HR manager	Waste management	1000
P27	F	HR services manager	Social enterprise	365 + 400 'self-employed'
P28	M	Head of HR and training	Manufacturing/aerospace	400
P29	F	HR manager	Professional services	130
P30	M	Head of HR	Hospitality	300–400
P31	F	HR advisor	Public sector	1200
P32	F	HR manager	Digital marketing	66
P33	M	HR advisor	Property management	200
P34	F	Personnel manager	Retail	10,000+
P35	M	HR business partner	Pharmaceutical manufacturing	9000
P36	F	People and organisation BP	Manufacturing	550
P37	F	Divisional HR manager	Elder care/housing	5000
P38	F	HR generalist manager	Software management	150
P39	M	Group HR manager	Agricultural supplies	120
P40	F	HR manager	Fashion retail	60,000
P41	F	Director of HR	Education	400

Despite the numerous differences in our sample of HR practitioners and their organisational contexts (the hierarchical level of practitioners, plus the size, industry and sector of their organisation), the overarching strategies of advising, persuading and overruling line managers emerged consistently across the data. Despite practitioners' frequent references to the influence

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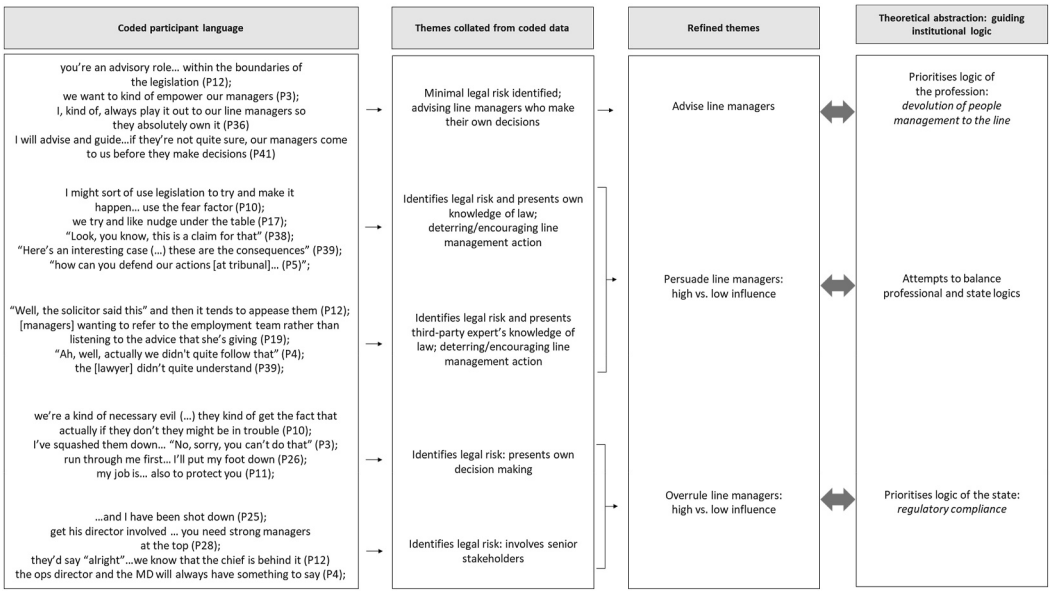

FIGURE 1 | Data analysis structure: illustration of collected data and resultant themes aligned to theoretical abstraction.

of the tribunal system and potential claims on their involvement in HRM enactment, participants were often reticent to identify and discuss the details of specific cases. Some practitioners discussed specific cases only after the recording had finished or asked the researcher to pause the tape. This reluctance to discuss these details highlights the challenges in eliciting data on this clandestine aspect of HR practice. It also somewhat obfuscates some of the fine details of their interactions with line managers and, therefore, when and why they may choose to advise versus persuade or overrule in different circumstances. Nevertheless, the spectrum of these choices and of the practitioners' involvement in HRM enactment remained consistent. Findings are evidenced by selected quotations (presented alongside participant number and job title) which most clearly demonstrate the themes from the range of HR practitioners. Next, these findings are presented.

4 | Findings

Our findings indicate how HR practitioners navigate the logics of the market, state, and their profession in their interactions with line managers. The emergent themes reveal that HR practitioners' involvement in HRM enactment can take the form of advising, persuading, or overruling line managers, depending on their perceptions of the associated legal risk. Their level of involvement may also be influenced by their perceptions of the line manager with whom they are interacting. Additionally, the findings demonstrate that practitioners' approaches to persuading or overruling line managers are shaped by whether they have high or low levels of influence in those relationships.

4.1 | Advising Line Managers

The findings emphasise practitioners' ascription to the belief their role should be advisory and line managers should have prerogative to make HRM enactment decisions. The practitioners indicated their advisory role applies to what they considered to be a safe zone of low-risk HRM. Practitioners depicted this safe zone using terms such as 'borders', 'boundaries', 'guidelines', the 'edge', with the associated 'tracks' and 'routes' that line managers can take. Within this safe zone, HR afford line managers latitude to make decisions, meaning line managers can seek but subsequently reject HR's advice:

> ...you're an advisory role, you're there to make sure that within the boundaries of the legislation you're working within it, but really managers are free to find their way through that as they wish, you can only advise them on a route. (P12: HR Officer)

Here, HR practitioners' involvement prioritises the logic of their profession which encourages devolution.

HR practitioners' demarcation of a safe zone of low-risk HRM was partly informed by their knowledge of employment law. The practitioners described '*keeping up to date with legislation*' (P3: HR Advisor) as an integral part of their role:

> *I spend a lot of my time reading cases and case law (...) because of the way employment law works, (...) you might have the law but then some decision will be made, and you need to be aware of that; and I see that very much as my job...* (P24: Head of HR)

This diligence in maintaining their employment law knowledge was described as '*a bit boring, like train spotters or something*' (P25: HRBP), but that '*if you work in HR it tends to be in the blood*' (P8: Recruitment Manager).

Our findings also revealed that the strength of their professional logic, and ascription to principles of devolution, encouraged some HR professionals to maintain their purely advisory role, even when line managers sought more involvement from them.

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Practitioners indicated that certain line managers desired a lot of '*hand holding*' (P40: HR Manager) wanting HR to make decisions for them, either '*because they don't want to do something wrong*' (P19: HRBP Consultant), or to avoid accountability for decision making:

> *...they see you more as the person to blame everything on in a way. ... the managers blame HR quite a lot and say, "HR told me I can't!"* (P37: Divisional HR Manager)

The HR practitioners expressed frustration at this:

> *I think a lot of HR*[M] *could and should be devolved to line managers because they are the ones managing their people, and there's nothing that frustrates me more* [than] *when you hear someone saying "well HR have told me to say this", or "I only did this because I've been told to."* (P19: HRBP Consultant)
> *...the most frustrating part of this job is that I want managers to take whatever the situation might be and then learn from it and use it next* [time], *...but they just come back again and want more hand holding.* (P26: HR Manager)

The participants' frustration at such line manager behaviour may reflect the influence of the market logic on the ideal of devolved people management: devolution is intended to free up HR professionals' time to focus on strategic issues, rather than becoming involved in routine people management tasks. Consequently, rather than accepting a more involved role in the enactment of HRM, the practitioners described resisting and trying to maintain their advisory position:

> *So, we've tried to take a step back... so we'll be there for them: "we'll help you, don't worry about it", but they then draw on that themselves and deal with it.* (P12: HR Officer)

However, HR practitioners described other scenarios where simply advising line managers was not considered sufficient, and different strategies for their involvement in HRM enactment were adopted.

4.2 | Persuading Line Managers

The findings reveal scenarios where HR practitioners attempt to persuade line managers to act in a legally compliant manner. In scenarios where they perceive increased legal risk, the logic of the state becomes more relevant to practitioners' interactions with line managers. HR professionals not only draw on their knowledge of employment law to identify such situations, but also leverage this knowledge as their persuasion tool:

> *...I just keep giving them, sort of, bits of information every now and again: "Here's an interesting case...where a manager failed to do this; these are the consequences."* (P39: Group HR Manager)
> *...being able to give them some statistics and some clear information to say "(...) this is what happens, this is what you need to be aware of."* (P29: HR Manager)

These extracts highlight HR practitioners presenting line managers with tribunal statistics (e.g., success rates, awards to claimants, legal costs) in their persuasion efforts. Here, HR are still nominally acting in an advisory capacity, and not overtly dictating line managers' actions, but are also becoming more involved and more strongly attempting to influence outcomes. As such, when in persuasion mode, HR practitioners appear to be drawing on multiple institutional logics: their professional logic promoting devolution (which already draws heavily from the market logic), and the state logic promoting compliance.

In conveying legal exposure and the threat of tribunals, HR practitioners could be accused of inflating the risk of receiving a claim, especially as some HR practitioners acknowledged using '*the fear factor*' (P10: HR Advisor) to scare line managers into compliance. However, participants frequently referenced high volumes of claims in their organisations, stressing that '*we do get them*' (P12: HR Officer) and discussing first-hand, bruising experiences, such as winning a tribunal after '*two and a half years of fighting*' (P11: HRBP).

There was also recognition from the HR practitioners that the strategies adopted in their interactions depended on their perceptions of the line manager. Therefore, as well as in people management scenarios entailing more legal risk, a persuasion approach may be adopted with managers who '*don't just want to accept* [HR advice] *and will maybe want to debate with you...*' (P37: Divisional HR Manager).

> *I kind of work with them in different ways and it depends on the manager... 'cause some of them I know really well and how they're likely to take things. So, I might put things in a different way to how I would put it to someone else. If I've got a manager who I think isn't gonna do something, I might sort of use legislation to try and make it happen...* (P10: HR Advisor)

Furthermore, while presenting their knowledge of the law may successfully persuade a line manager if the HR practitioner has influence over that stakeholder, if this is not the case then other approaches are required. Practitioners spoke of 'tricky' situations where the advice of external employment lawyers is drawn upon to persuade line managers to take specific actions:

> *...we've got an external team that if something is a bit tricky and yes sometimes you've got to go to the solicitor, "I've got this situation, what's your advice?" Then go to the manager, "Well the solicitor said this" and then it tends to appease them.* (P12: HR Officer)

These findings indicate line managers may not always accept the recommendations of HR without the reinforcement of external legal advice. In these scenarios, HR practitioners were

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not necessarily seeking out this support to check their own knowledge but with the explicit intent to persuade line managers who '*are wanting to refer to* [the external employment lawyer] *rather than listening to the advice*' (P19: HRBP Consultant) of the HR team. This suggests part of the 'trickiness' of certain people management scenarios can be the difficulty of gaining the acceptance of line managers and not simply the complexity of the case.

Whether or not HR practitioners present their own or third-party knowledge of employment law to persuade line managers, their associated talk also revealed how their involvement in HRM enactment adds value through their ability to balance the legal position and the specific needs of their organisation:

> *I'm always looking for a precedence that we've done* [here] *before (...) I'm always thinking what, how have we done this before to make that then fair in doing the same thing again?* (P5: HR Advisor)

HR practitioners emphasised the importance of understanding their organisational context to promote effective HRM. For example, they described the need to adjust their approach compared to what had worked in their previous roles within different organisations:

> *You do have to make sure that you are mindful of what best practice is for the company. I think that when I first joined here you tend to have preconceptions, because of your previous experience about what is right and wrong. I think that the one thing about this company was that those things just don't work... it doesn't match with our behaviours.* (P23: HR Manager)

This balancing of the law and their organisational context is only possible due to HR practitioners' knowledge of both, potentially making this expertise non-substitutional by external lawyers. Some HR practitioners explained how '*the third-party didn't really understand* [their] *business...*' (P39: Group HR Manager). As such, at times they '*go back and say, "Ah, well, actually we didn't quite follow that...*"' (P4: HR Manager) to employment lawyers because they adapt the advice provided to their specific organisational context and/or its management of similar cases. However, and again reflecting the low influence of HR in such scenarios, this aspect of their practice is not necessarily disclosed or highlighted to line managers because it may undermine the force of using the third-party advice as a persuasion tool. As such, while obtaining third-party legal advice may be an effective strategy for persuading line managers, it does not necessarily equate to enhanced credibility and influence for HR practitioners. It may, however, reduce the possibility of further damaging their legitimacy as there are risks to HR's credibility if the results of devolved HRM are damaging to the organisation:

> *I would be really ashamed, I think, if you thought, "Mmm, I could have done something about that and I kept my mouth shut" (...) your credibility becomes undermined...* (P30: Head of HR)

Discussed next is HR practitioners' talk of when their involvement in HRM enactment goes further still, leading them to overrule line managers.

4.3 | Overruling Line Managers

Despite their ascription to devolution (as per the logic of their profession), the risks posed by possible legal wrongdoing (driven by state logic) can be such that HR practitioners are compelled to pre/proscribe line manager's HRM enactment:

> *...I basically always start off and say, "I need to ask these questions because I need to make sure we're going down the right route and that I'm protecting you guys and my job is not just to advise you, but it's also to protect you".* (P11: HR Business Partner)

These are scenarios where HR professionals act to overrule line managers, seemingly prioritising state logic over that of their profession. In doing so, HR's involvement in HRM enactment is undeniably unitarist: seeking to protect their organisation from legal risk.

As with their approaches to persuading line managers, the way HR practitioners go about overruling depends on whether they have influence with that manager. When they have influence, they present their own decision making:

> *First of all, they'll seek my advice and I will advise them. If the exposure's high then I'll put my foot down and say, "No, you're not doing it like that, you're doing it my way (...) and you can learn why I've reached the decisions that I have", occasionally, yeah, I overrule and I say, "No, we're doing it like this."* (P26: HR Manager)

In this extract we still see the practitioner emphasising their advisory role that preserves line management prerogative (as per devolution), but then moving to overrule the line manager. This was common in the practitioners' talk, often constructed as '*the line manager has the final "yes", but HR have the final "no"*' (P36: People and Organisation Business Partner). Therefore, even where HR practitioners state that '*HR doesn't make that decision*' (P15: HR and Training Manager), their actions can be such that line manager decision-making is restricted by HR.

In contrast, when HR do not have influence with line managers and are unable to dictate their action, a different approach to overruling is required:

> *...we'll advise them and guide. ...*[I] *had a case only this morning where I've had to... say to a manager and get his director involved to say, "By taking the attitude and stance that you are, you're putting the company at grave risk of a claim for discrimination."* (P28: Head of HR and Training)

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Here, the HR practitioner involves senior stakeholders to ensure certain HRM enactment from the line manager. Such data reveal that even in scenarios where HR practitioners cannot personally overrule line managers, they have methods for upholding the logic of the state. Again, the practitioner foregrounds their advisory mode, aligned to devolution and their professional logic, before describing their approach to overruling the line manager. This not only emphasises the strength of HR practitioners' ascription to devolution principles, but also suggests that to achieve the right outcome for their organisation, they may go through multiple involvement strategies during their interactions with line managers. HR practitioners may initially attempt an advisory approach before becoming more involved if they believe HRM enactment will not align to state logic.

For this reason, practitioners described most likely having to overrule managers who hold attitudes in counter to progressive HR policies or protective employment legislation:

> *There are* [occasions] *when you say "you need to make these reasonable adjustments", for instance. ...most* [managers] *I think are generally pretty good, but every now and again you get the kind of, what I like to term as a dinosaur manager* [laughs]. *...you know, there are prejudices out there. ...You can see some of them probably saying, "Oh I don't want to interview her, she's probably gonna be getting married and going off to have children."* (P11: HR Business Partner)

HR practitioners suggested their overruling of line managers who hold such views was necessary because those managers can be unreceptive to considering alternative perspectives and be resistant to less involved strategies, such as persuasion:

> *...they can have a tendency to make comments like "we've got too many females" ... "I don't want another female because I don't want someone going off on maternity leave in a couple of years' time". So initially it's trying to explain, actually, the benefits of having different types of employees ...but if they don't come round, you've got to put your foot down.* (P19: HR Business Partner Consultant)

Our findings also revealed that overruling line managers can require significant levels of resilience from HR practitioners, as these interactions can involve slights to their professional relevance/status as well as scepticism from line managers. Claims by managers that '*you don't understand, you're HR*' (P4: HR Manager) and '*people arguing, questioning you, your experience and behaviours*' were described as '*really hard, it can really affect you*' (P12: HR Officer).

Finally, the findings highlight that when enforcing legally compliant HRM enactment, HR practitioners can face challenges in evidencing their contribution:

> *I think HR is one of the functions where it's difficult: you need to be adding, you try to add value to that team or business unit or business or whatever it might be. It's difficult to quantify what you might have saved them. ...I think sometimes they see HR as quite a big cost, even if they think you're doing a good job and everything.* (P10: HR Advisor)

However, according to the practitioners, even their work ensuring compliant behaviour from line managers is commercially driven, with the overarching goal of securing the right financial and reputational outcomes for their organisation:

> *You're saving them money in the long run 'cause I don't know what they might have ended up losing had things gone the wrong way.* (P10: HR Advisor)
> *No, I don't bring in money but if something goes wrong it'd probably cost more than your payroll* (P11: HRBP)

These extracts reinforce the strength of the market logic within organisations, and specifically here on HR professionals and their interactions with line managers. Even when engaging in activity aligned to the competing logic of the state, HR practitioners reconcile contradictions within their profession by justifying and framing such work as aligned to market logic and in the commercial interest of their organisation.

In summary, the findings demonstrate the varying levels of HR practitioners' involvement in HRM enactment, manifested through different strategies in their interactions with line managers: advising, persuading, or overruling. Their choice of strategy is influenced by the institutional logics shaping HR practice. In scenarios where legal risk is perceived as low, making state logic less significant, HR professionals prioritise their professional logic, adopting an advisory role and devolving decision-making to line managers. However, in people management scenarios where state logic is more influential due to the associated legal risk, HR practitioners become more involved and seek to persuade or overrule line managers. Despite such action being seemingly in conflict with their advisory mode and professional logic, practitioners justify this increased involvement as being market driven, emphasising the potential associated cost savings. The need to advise, persuade or overrule can also depend on the line manager with whom they are interacting and the extent that line manager is perceived as willing to accept or likely to challenge HR's perspective. Furthermore, our findings demonstrate how HR practitioners' approach to persuading or overruling line managers can depend on whether they have high or low levels of influence in those relationships. When HR practitioners have influence, presenting their own knowledge of the law or decision making may be enough to persuade or overrule the line manager. However, when their influence is low, the involvement of third parties (external legal experts or senior management) may be required.

5 | Discussion

Our paper examines HR practitioners' navigation of multiple institutional logics in their interactions with line managers. Based on our findings, we propose a theoretical model of a spectrum of HR practitioner involvement in line managers' enactment of HRM. This model illustrates the judgements HR practitioners make when reconciling seemingly competing

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logics in their everyday practice, and reveals the influences on their decision-making regarding which logic(s) to prioritise in various scenarios. Our work reintroduces the currently overlooked national regulatory context (Brewster et al. 2015) to the study of HRM while also emphasising HR practitioners' need and approach to balancing this against the demands of their specific organisational context. We extend existing theorising by highlighting that this balancing act is only made possible due to practitioners' combined organisational and occupational knowledge, and constitutes a potential inimitable contribution of the HR profession. Based on our findings, we also emphasise the challenges that HR's dual professionalisation project creates for building credibility with organisational stakeholders whose roles allow them to prioritise one logic.

5.1 | HR Involvement in Line Managers' HRM Enactment: Reconciling Multiple Institutional Logics

Figure 2 presents our proposed spectrum of HR practitioners' involvement in line managers' HRM enactment. To successfully move along this spectrum HR practitioners require social skill (cf. Lawrence and Suddaby 2006), resilience, and expertise. They must draw upon their combined knowledge of their national regulatory and organisational context, as well as their perceptions of the line managers with whom they are interacting. On the left of the spectrum there is the least involvement and HR's interactions with line managers are purely advisory. In their advisory mode, HR practitioners consider line managers' enactment of HRM to be associated with minimal legal risk. Practitioners move right along the spectrum as their perceptions of the legal risk associated with HRM enactment increases. With this, their involvement intensifies to persuading and then overruling line managers. HR professionals also adopt certain approaches to their persuading/overruling dependent on their levels of influence over the line manager with whom they are working. HR professionals may present their own knowledge and decision-making if their levels of influence are high, but if not, they are required to recruit the input of others (third party legal experts or senior stakeholders).

Our proposed spectrum of involvement explicates HR practitioners' need and approach to reconciling the competing institutional logics that act upon HRM, and their positioning along the spectrum reflects them prioritising different institutional logics at given times. When in advisory mode, HR practitioners are predominantly being guided by their professional logic which encourages the devolution of HRM enactment to line managers. However, as their perceptions of the legal risk associated with HRM enactment increase, the state logic becomes more influential and practitioners move right along our spectrum of involvement. Taking a persuasion approach reflects HR professionals attempting to balance their professional and state logic, whereas overruling is the point at which state logic becomes prioritised. While state and professional logics appear to act in conflict, HR practitioners reconcile their varying levels of HRM involvement by consistently drawing on the market logic that dominates within organisations (Hodgson et al. 2015). When in advisory mode, their professional logic promoting devolution frees up HR professionals' time to engage in more strategic activity (cf. Cunningham and Hyman 1999), but when moving to overrule, practitioners justify that state logic requiring compliance ensures financial and reputational savings for their organisation.

5.2 | Theoretical and Practical Implications

Our research emphasises the benefits of institutional theory as a lens for understanding HR activity and decision-making in organisations, encouraging the consideration of the various contexts within which HRM operates (Lewis et al. 2019). Our spectrum highlights the influence of the logic of the state and the national regulatory context (the consistent context acting upon all our respondents) on HRM enactment. Our work therefore supports claims that the tendency of the HRM literature to 'write off the state as a player' (Martínez Lucio and Stuart 2011, 3664) constitutes an unhelpful omission and misrepresents the realities of HR practice. Nevertheless, our findings also emphasise that HR practitioners balance their knowledge of employment law against their knowledge of the demands of their specific organisational context. Our proposed model therefore offers opportunities for future work to apply

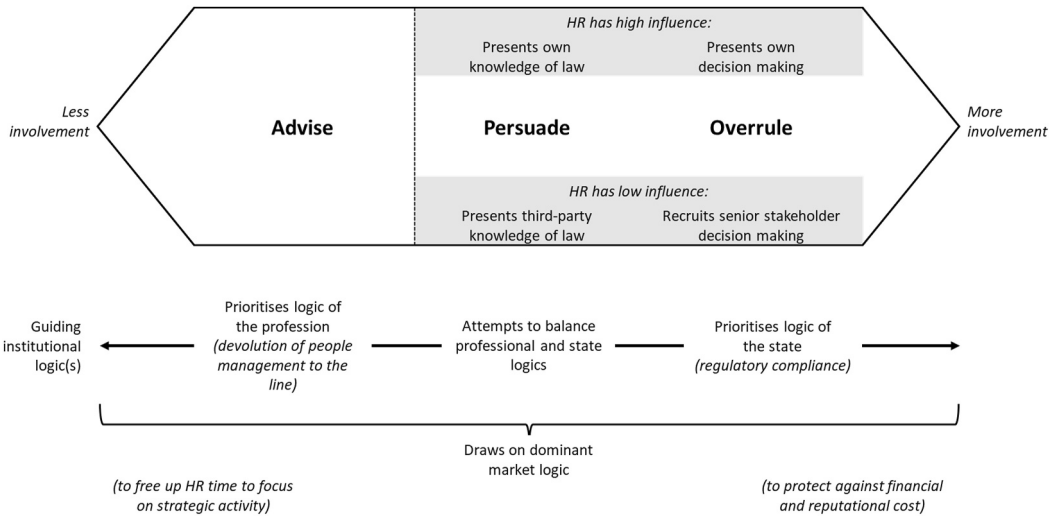

FIGURE 2 | Spectrum of HR practitioners' involvement in line managers' HRM enactment.

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and test this spectrum in different regulatory and organisational settings. Different regulatory contexts may influence the bandwidths of practitioners' advising, persuading, and overruling line managers (cf. Gooderham et al. 2015). Plus, HR professionals in different organisational contexts (e.g., private vs. public sector) will likely move along our proposed spectrum differently based on their organisation's ownership, financing and approach to and threshold for legal risk. Vignette studies may be beneficial for this purpose and help navigate HR practitioners' reluctance to discuss the details of specific cases and employer responses to them.

We extend existing theory by highlighting that it is the dual nature of HR's professionalisation project, as they attempt to operate on both occupational and organisational terms (cf. Syrigou and Williams 2023), that provides HR practitioners with the knowledge required to balance their organisational and national regulatory contexts. Only via this combined knowledge are HR practitioners able to reconcile the seemingly competing logics acting upon HRM in their day-to-day interactions with line managers, in order to promote positive organisational outcomes and ensure compliance with national regulation. This knowledge and ability may constitute a non-substitutable contribution from HR, as other relevant actors who prioritise one logic do not have the combined knowledge of the multiple contexts acting upon people management activity. For example, external lawyers who emphasise the state logic have knowledge of national regulation but not of the internal organisational context, and management who are driven by KPIs and market logic are unlikely to have the required employment law expertise. Practically, our findings and model also hint towards the skills and competencies that HR professionals require to navigate the multiple pressures acting upon their work, for example the negotiation skills needed to advise and persuade line mangers, and the resilience required to overrule them. To further support the development of established HR professional skills and competencies, future research should more directly examine the requirements of HR practitioner's interactions with their stakeholders.

However, HR practitioners' dual professionalisation efforts and requirement to reconcile multiple logics also creates challenges for the profession. Despite trying to justify their compliance work and acts of increased involvement in HRM enactment as in the interest of organisational performance, their concern with state logic means their claims to understand and foreground market logic can be met with scepticism by line managers. While existing literature has presented the ability to navigate competing logics as a route to enhanced legitimacy (Smets et al. 2015), empirical work has often examined professional groups where professionalism is likely derived more exclusively on occupational terms (e.g., healthcare professionals cf. ten Dam and Waardenburg 2020; or city traders cf. Smets et al. 2015). For HR practitioners, whose professionalisation must balance their use of occupational and organisational knowledge, the ability to navigate logics has not so clearly served the profession in enhancing its status or legitimacy, particularly in the eyes of other organisational actors. As such, our work prompts future research to consider how the navigation of logics by organisational professions is interpreted and perceived by stakeholders who are guided by different logics or who perceive the relative importance of certain logics differently. Such understanding is needed to support HR in its professionalisation project and to enhance its status, credibility and legitimacy within organisations.

An additional challenge faced by HR practitioners is that, as they operate in low-glory guardian roles (cf. Baron and Kreps 1999), their contribution in the form of savings, as they work to insulate their organisations from significant financial and reputational costs, is not currently measured and is challenging to quantify. In contrast, the costs of being taken to or losing at tribunal are quantifiable, visible and attributed to HR. The accusation of HR practitioners being overly risk averse (cf. Jones and Saundry 2012) reflects suggestions that those in guardian roles are preoccupied with rules due to the risks associated with under performance, and that they tend not to innovate given the lack of reward for high performance (Jacobs 1981). As such, the HR profession would benefit practically from methods of measuring casework, including cases that do not reach the stage of a tribunal claim, in order to assess the different costs saved and to render this constituent of HR work more tangible and visible. While operational cost-saving is perceived as less indicative of high-performance HR than strategic value creation (Ulrich and Brockbank 2005), our study indicates that HR's compliance work requires considerable skill and has financial benefits for organisations. Future studies focused on establishing metrics associated with HR's compliance work can support a more innovative HR profession where high performance is recognised.

In illustrating HR professional's reconciliation of state, professional and market logics, our spectrum demonstrates various theorised approaches to navigating institutional logics. The overall spectrum appears to demonstrate compartmentalisation or demarcation of logics (cf. Creed et al. 2010; Smets et al. 2015) where different logics inform actions in different situations. However, at specific points on the spectrum other theorised approaches to navigating multiple logics are potentially evidenced. For example, persuasion mode, which does not explicitly dictate but strongly attempts to influence line manager action, may be an example of a complementary bridging of logics (cf. Smets et al. 2015). Given that line managers represent only one referent audience of HR practitioners, future research that considers HR professionals' interactions with a broader range of organisational actors (e.g., employees and/or trade union reps as well as line managers) may indicate practitioners' segmentation of logics to meet the different interests of these stakeholder groups (cf. Smets et al. 2015). The design of the HR function and interactions within the HR function (cf. Bennett et al. 2023) may also be influential. That we exclusively focus on HR's interactions with line managers may explain the unitarist frame within which our participants presented their activity. Studies examining HR's interactions with additional stakeholders may indicate a more pluralist perspective, and potentially highlight even more logics relevant to HRM activity, or indeed provide evidence of a wholly unitarist stance in HR practice in the UK (and beyond).

Co-optation (cf. Andersson and Liff 2018) of market logic may be taking place throughout the spectrum. Market logic has already been established as heavily influencing HR's professional logic promoting devolution. Our findings also suggest HR

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practitioners co-opt from market logic to justify their increased involvement in HRM enactment when drawing upon state logic, emphasising the financial and reputational imperative to insulate against tribunal claims. As such, our work highlights that the HR professionalism project is encroached upon by the market and state logics in such a way that little room is left for the professional logic itself. For traditional occupational professions (e.g., healthcare professionals), the professional logic is distinct from market and state logics. Our findings indicate that, for HR, co-optation of the market logic and the need to balance this with the state logic are the focus of practice in the absence of an established, codified professional logic. The relatively weak and nascent HR professional logic faces erasure in this context, reflecting existing concerns regarding HR professionalism, for example, that HR has lost a grip of its human and ethical dimension that attends to employee welfare and advocacy (Francis and Keegan 2006; Keegan and Francis 2010).

Finally, we contribute to literature examining the HR perspective on devolution and HRM implementation. While HRM implementation gaps are often presented as inherently troubling (Brandl et al. 2022), we provide evidence for such 'gaps' being productive given the complex institutional environment that HRM operates within (cf. Brandl et al. 2022). Our findings suggest that when in advisory mode, HR professionals are allowing for policy-practice decoupling. While our data does not evidence HR practitioners actively promoting policy-practice divergence, they are determining situations where tight versus minimum implementation is acceptable. This pragmatic approach from HR practitioners, to understand and balance the needs of their organisation while reducing legal risk, has often gone overlooked. Furthermore, our proposed spectrum of involvement partially aligns to Trullen and Valverde's (2017) soft and hard influencing tactics: soft tactics are less involved and prioritise HR's professional logic/devolution, whereas harder tactics are more involved and emphasise state logic/compliance. Trullen and Valverde (2017) found that HR use soft influencing techniques more frequently. Based on our methods, we do not attempt to make claims regarding frequency, but our findings did reveal a tendency for HR practitioners to foreground their advisory (i.e., 'soft') mode even if their actions go on to be more involved (i.e., 'hard'). Such foregrounding suggests certain methodological approaches may face difficulties in accessing the details of HR practitioners' interactions with line managers beyond respondents' first answers that privilege their professional logic. Future work examining HRM implementation from HR's perspective, especially survey-based designs which may have limited probing opportunities, should be aware of this challenge as a particular form of social desirability bias.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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