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Readiness of human resource departments of agricultural enterprises for implementation of the new roles of human resource professionals

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Abstract: This paper is part of a broader study which aims to investigate the success factors of agricultural enterprises. It attempts to present the partial results of a questionnaire survey whose goal was to determine the quality of HRM (Human Resource Management) departments in basic agricultural enterprises. Studies focusing on the HRM of basic agricultural enterprises have been published in many countries. In the Slovak Republic, experts and academics from the Slovak University of Technology in Nitra, and the Slovak Research Institute of Agricultural and Food Economics have arrived at perceptive conclusions on the current state of human capital in the agri-food sector and have proposed innovative directions for further development. Surprisingly, however, academia still fails to perceive HR management as a partner in an enterprise, rather than simply a service unit in the organisational structure of the agricultural enterprise. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of the role of HRM departments is missing and this paper aims to fill that gap. The methodology of research is based on Ulrich's model of the mixed roles of HR departments (2009), which is used as a framework to determine the quality levels of role performance, defined by the model, of HRM departments. The survey sample consists of 70 basic agricultural enterprises.¹

Keywords: HR management, basic agricultural enterprises, roles of HR departments.

Natural conditions dictate that a large proportion of the Slovak population live in rural areas. Slovakia is regarded as the second most rural country in the EU with more than half of its inhabitants living in rural areas. Current trends indicate an increased migration of inhabitants of urban areas to the countryside, hence the need to boost its economic growth, since one of the most important problems of the Slovak countryside is its reduced competitiveness compared to urbanised areas. The essential priority for supporting rural development is to create favourable conditions in the environment conducive to increasing competitiveness in rural areas.

The world is changing fast and the world of business is changing still faster. In the new millennium, business corporations will have to deal with entirely new challenges in order to meet customer demands, to move

from competition to collaborative reconfiguration, to dovetail the supplier and subcontractor processes with the corporate goals and to empower employees to be able to meet and surpass customer expectations. Due to global competitiveness, companies are now taking more effective steps to improve overall productivity and efficiency (Singh et al. 2015). Business entities located in rural areas and, in particular, those related to agriculture and land management, play distinct and irreplaceable roles in rural development. Their significant impact on rural development is determined by their economic power, the continuing restructuring of agriculture, the strengthening of rural economies and the development of social and human capital in rural areas. To help improve their current status in the economy, farmers must repeatedly contend with factors of the external environment, such as

¹The research was conducted in 2015 within the framework of the research project No. 1/0316/14 entitled "Modern Trends in Management and their Application in Enterprises in Slovakia."

natural conditions, as well as legislative, organisational and legal problems. Furthermore, they have to make efforts to operationalise the land market, to supply the internal market with high-quality and cost-effective products, to decrease the migration of youth from rural areas, to fight against declining fertility rates and to deal with an increasing number of older inhabitants. Moreover, they have to focus their energies on handling the internal threats in the management of their own businesses. The primary goal is often strategic management, simply because such entities often concentrate on mere survival, and for this reason agricultural enterprises lack an overall comprehensive plan for future development. Strategic management not only involves HR strategy and the operations of HR departments in the classical sense of administrative tasks related to HR administration, but also HR professionals as strategic partners in the management of agricultural enterprises.

A modern, qualitatively more valuable view of HR departments supports the creation of viable units that can compete with other entities within the subsidy framework, or that can function as adequate partners in the EU. Considerable focus is being put on the growth of long-term competitiveness, such as support for innovation, technology transfer, and targeted competency development of HR (Kokles et al. 2015).

The main challenge for management in the agricultural sector is attracting and retaining high-quality HR. Although external factors significantly contribute to unfavourable indicators in the development of HR in this sector, internal factors should not be ignored, because in such businesses management play a primary role in determining the vision of and the emphasis put on HR management.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

All changes in HR management described here are regarded as inevitable and refer to new trends in HR management, even in agricultural enterprises. Our intention was to scrutinise the position and orientation of HR departments and management in these enterprises. The presented results are part of a broader study focused on modern trends in management and their application in Slovak businesses. The following research questions have been formulated:

- (1) What is the overall level of operation of the HR departments in the surveyed agricultural enterprises in terms of David Ulrich's model of mixed roles?
- (2) Which roles of HR departments exert dominance, and which roles are least applied?

Ulrich's model of mixed roles (2009) served as a primary methodological starting point for the survey. This model has informed efforts to determine the focus of HR departments, and has also acted as a tool for self-evaluation in this domain. It has been used to describe the different roles (via questions, or statements) that can be performed by HR departments and management. The total number of questions or statements is 40. These are divided into ten fields, each of which consists of four questions. A scaling technique, with a five-point scale ranging from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest), has been used for assessment. The questions are presented in Table 2.

The aim of this paper is to present the results of a survey aimed at assessing the focus of HR departments in basic agricultural enterprises. The survey was conducted in 70 enterprises of varying legal status in the agricultural sector. In the selection process, we attempted to acquire a homogenous sample of those

Table 1. Points table of the model for detecting the focus of HR departments

Strategic partner		HR administration		Champion for workers		Agent of change	
question	assessment	question	assessment	question	assessment	question	assessment
1		2		3		4	
5		6		7		8	
9		10		11		12	
13		14		15		16	
17		18		19		20	
21		22		23		24	
25		26		27		28	
29		30		31		32	
33		34		35		36	
37		38		39		40	
Total		Total		Total		Total	

Source: Adapted from Human Resource Champions (Ulrich 2009, p. 70)

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production areas which significantly influence the economic results of agricultural enterprises. We also focused on the sizes of enterprises to most reliably measure the level of HRM in the surveyed businesses. The survey was conducted in Western Slovakia, where the most productive agricultural areas are located. The survey was mostly targeted at managers of HR departments in different businesses. The survey was divided into two parts. The aim of the first part was to identify and collect socio-economic data from the respondents. The second part was concerned with the aforementioned roles of HR professionals in businesses.

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the characteristics of respondents as presented in Table 3. The survey database is made up of 70 basic agricultural enterprises operating as agricultural cooperatives (41.43%), limited liability companies (54.28%) and

joint stock companies (4.29%). The average number of employees in the survey sample is 128.6; 92.9% of these businesses have 51 to 250 employees, the remainder are businesses with more than 250 employees. The surveyed HR professionals have 11 to 20 years of experience on the job. The median tenure in a managerial position is 14.73 years. Two-thirds of the survey respondents have completed tertiary education. The remainder (35.71%) are made up of secondary school graduates. Almost two-thirds of the surveyed businesses incorporated an area of more than 1000 hectares (62.86%). The economic results of agricultural enterprises differ considerably. The average profit comes to 23.02 euros per hectare; however, the standard deviation is high (40.79), which indicates that the sample includes both profitable and non-profitable businesses. Limited liability compa-

Table 2. List of questions and statements for identification of individual HR toles

<p>I. The department of HRM helps the organisation: fulfil the tasks of the entire organisation, improves the efficiency of operations, caters for the personal needs of employees, adjusts to change.</p>	<p>II. The department of HRM contributes to: the process of defining organisational strategies, the creation and maintenance of processes in the field of HR, the improvement of employee loyalty and engagement, the changes in the organisational culture to help innovation.</p>
<p>III. The The department of HRM ensures: the interconnection between HR strategies and the strategies of the entire organisation, the efficient organisation of processes in HR operations, the harmonisation of HR policy with the personal needs of employees, the promotion of abilities of the organisation to execute changes.</p>	<p>IV. The What is your opinion about the effectiveness of an HRM department? It is effective, if it is able to: facilitate strategy implementation, guarantee the efficient functioning of HR processes, help employees in satisfying their own needs, support the organisation to anticipate future challenges and adapt to them.</p>
<p>V. The Do you consider, or perceive the department of HRM as: a strategic partner in office management, an expert in HR administration, a champion for workers, a partner in the implementation of changes?</p>	<p>VI. The department of HRM in the organisation devotes the most time to: strategic matters, operational matters, problems with workers, listening to them, and finding solutions, the promotion of behavioural changes to improve the quality of the organisation.</p>
<p>VII. The department of HRM is an active participant in: organisational planning, creating and maintaining the processes of HR operations, reacting to the problems of workers, renewing or changing the organisation.</p>	<p>VIII. The department of HRM aims to: connect and harmonise the overall policies of the office, monitor the administrative processes, offer assistance to workers in satisfying family and personal needs, mould the behaviour of employees to promote organisational change.</p>
<p>IX. The department of HRM generates processes and programmes to: connect HR strategy with the implementation strategy of the organisation, effectively process documents and agreements, respect the personal needs of employees, assist the organisation in its transformation.</p>	<p>X. The credibility of the HRM department is built through: promoting the fulfilment of the strategic objectives of the organisation, increasing productivity, supporting workers to meet their own needs, the efforts to implement changes.</p>

Source: Ulrich (2009, p. 69)

Table 3. Socio-economic characteristics of the survey sample of respondents

Variable		Frequency	Percent	Mean	Std. Dev.
Legal form	Agr. Coop.	29	41.43		
	Ltd.	38	54.28		
	Joint-St. Co.	3	4.29		
Number of employees	51 to 250	65	92.9	128.60	30.75
	over 250	5	7.10		
Job tenure	to 5	17	24.28	14.73	8.32
	6 to 10	3	4.29		
	11 to 20	35	50.00		
	over 20	15	21.43		
Education	Sec. Sch.	25	35.71		
	Tert. Edu.	45	64.29		
Agricultural land (ha)	6 to 100	4	5.71	2 009.44	1 524.10
	101 to 500	1	1.43		
	501 to 1000	16	22.86		
	over 1000	49	70.00		
Economic results (Euro/ha)				23.02	40.79

Source: own research results

nies and self-employed farmers are characterised by efficient administration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Management theory perceives HRM as a strategic and logically coherent approach to the management of the most valuable assets of any organisation, i.e., the people who work, individually or collectively, to contribute to the achievement of the set objectives (Armstrong 2015). The theory sees performance as being achieved through individual and collective efforts, whereby considerable support is provided by the organisational culture, leadership, teamwork, and communication. It also emphasises those skills that are prerequisites for the deployment, management and control of workers who need to be motivated to demonstrate heightened performance. Success is achieved through changing mental models, which leads to new ways of thinking about HR and workplace relationships.

Effective functioning of HRM in agricultural enterprises requires the following practices:

- focus on those hard factors of HRM which can be proposed, formally defined and implemented in the organisation,
- focus on those soft factors of HRM which refer to human factors and social relations in the organisation. They are informal and ambiguous.

The prevailing approaches to the management of organisations are various. The intensifying influ-

ence of the soft factors of management has been widely emphasised from theoretical and practical viewpoints. Below, we highlight the most important challenges of HRM in present-day agriculture, and describe the interconnectedness of both fields in terms of achieving synergies in their current forms. By this, we have in mind HRM which is operationally oriented to process management, strategic management, a special focus on skills management, and a focus on shaping the organisational culture. These development trends have been examined through the utilisation of Ulrich's model of the roles of HR professionals. Now, we explain the different trends in the context of current changes in the examined area.

HRM focused on the management of HRM processes is based on the traditional roles of HR departments whose challenge is to serve as administrative experts concentrating on traditional HR activities, such as recruitment and selection, training, evaluation, and remuneration. However, they also ensure the effective planning and implementation of these organisational processes. Although this role of HR is often underestimated, it is important for the business and makes it competitive and successful. At present, many authors support the extension of the roles of HR departments, their acceptance as partners in business, their transition from supervision to partnership, from administration to consultation, and from operational to strategic units (Ulrich 2009; Werner and Desimone 2011; Snell and Bohlander 2012). However, it is necessary to note that this way of perceiving and positioning HR management pre-

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supposes a complete encompassment of expert roles, which then creates a platform for the expansion and advancement of HR management.

Strategic HR management is an approach based on long-term orientation towards solutions aimed at people in the organisation and is part of the strategic management of the organisation. Its importance in the management of agricultural enterprises has been demonstrated by numerous authors (Berde 2006; Barnard et al. 2012; Nigro et al. 2012; Mugeru 2012; Klinger et al. 2015; Riccucci 2015). In connection to strategic HR management, the transformation of HRM departments into business partners has assumed great importance. Strategic business partnership, its principles, implementation and operations have been introduced by Ulrich (2009). HR, originally seen as a supportive operating unit, becomes a fully-fledged partner of its internal client and brings added value to the business. HR business partners are business delegates of HR for internal clients. They help managers fulfil objectives and interact with the HR to jointly implement strategies and concepts. HR business partners are qualified HR professional who can effectively manage processes with added value in the team of the internal client, e.g., talent and career management. They are valued for their experience and direct connection with the internal client. They also provide broad support in rotations and career and skill development of their clients. Several authors suggest that this form of HR management can be implemented via outsourcing (Beregszaszi and Polay 2015; Ratkovič 2015; Zhao 2015). Ulrich refers to an external approach to the performance of HR work (Ulrich et al. 2014). This denotes an external approach to all HR functions, such as recruitment, training, remuneration, performance management, work relationships, or working conditions. Based on these arguments, it is claimed that the main function of HR management is to focus on business activity. In this respect, Ulrich goes beyond the traditional and current perception of HR administration, in which HR management only strives to harmonise with the strategy of the organisation.

Specifics of contemporary human resource management in agricultural enterprises

It should be emphasised that many agricultural enterprises face significant problems maintaining their own existence, and in this respect, considerable attention should be paid to the issues of strategic

management of HR in agriculture. A comprehensive strategic view, however, not only includes the external changes in the Common Agricultural Policy, but also internal changes, which require that considerable focus should be placed on the professional training of managers in agriculture to acquire and develop their managerial skills at all levels of management. This implies fundamental work-related changes for HR managers. Thus, HR management becomes directed towards competencies, which is a response to highly dynamic environments, and also to changes in the characteristics of employees (Baptista 2012). The central focus of HR strategies, policies and instruments is directed towards employee performance. At present, this cannot be stimulated only by traditional instruments. The classical approach to meeting objectives is not sufficient even in agriculture which is characterised by low-skilled workers. This sector has also become more focused on intellectual, emotional and social engagement (Conto et al. 2012). Employees are expected to exert efforts to identify with the tasks, demonstrate commitment and concentration on performance, since only such behaviour leads to innovation, or improved and efficient performance. Heightened employee engagement enables the organisation to acquire, manage, develop and reward people who have the ability to maximise their contributions towards achieving the objectives. Defining and shaping competencies enable individuals to mobilise and apply acquired knowledge in complex, diverse and unpredictable situations, since, at present, knowledge on its own is not sufficient; rather, its application and utilisation are the crucially determining factors (Noel and Qenani 2013). From the perspective of HR managers, engagement is seen as participation in the creation of a model of the core competencies of the organisation, which connects the strategic level, the level of management and the development of human potential, the level of performance, and the results for the clients. Such a model allows for the precise specification of measurable variables, and thus evaluates the attainment of the set objectives. Competencies are defined in the realm of managerial styles, skills, and client outcomes. It is necessary to adhere to explicitly formulated core competencies and their manifestations at all levels. Simultaneously, it is important to promote the entire process through mindful communication.

Successful agro-managers utilise the corporate culture as a subtle but very effective tool, which is more influential on the behaviour and performance of em-

ployees than the formal instructions and guidelines of the organisation. Corporate culture is not a newly invented phenomenon to be created by an organisation. It is present at all times and is subject to changes, also in agricultural enterprises. This culture is dependent on the people, and thus HR management should possess the direct instruments for its systemic implementation, which need to be identified, defined and applied. Several authors (Bitsch 2009; Berry 2015) claim that the role of HR management in shaping corporate identity includes the determination of internal standards, evaluation systems, motivation policies, inducement of labour, and further instruments forming human potential and the management of performance to promote the key characteristics of corporate identity and its components, i.e., the corporate culture itself. Ulrich (2009) states that one of the roles of HR professionals is to become champions for workers. In this sense, they contribute to a favourable corporate culture by ensuring that the concerns and needs of workers are presented to the management. The role of HR professionals is therefore to foster increased commitment and capabilities in employees.

The failure of efforts of business leaders focused on the implementation of changes is often seen as a result of the underestimated influence of the corporate culture or the disputed existence of its traditions, values and embedded habits. Katzenbach et al. (2012) highlight the urgent need for evolutionary changes in the business model, which involves HR areas and requires a forward-looking comprehension of corporate culture. Changes in the perception of the corporate culture can be achieved through targeted education and training of all employees and the efficient remuneration of the desired performance and work attitudes of employees (Armstrong 2007). In this context, HR management is associated with the corporate culture, and it is necessary to direct the operations of HRM departments towards the identification of its strengths and the realisation of peaceful evolutionary steps which not only ensure its acceptance, but also provide the necessary support for the implementation of changes. Several authors (Goffee and Jones 2007; Edmonson 2012; Groysberg and Slinde 2012; Ulrich et al. 2013) highlight those instruments which are helpful to management, e.g., the utilisation of team decision-making strategies. Such engagement positively influences individual and group relationships within the entire organisation, the selection of the appropriate styles of management (e.g., integration style), the selection of the right co-

workers and decision-making which is supportive of a culture of trust.

A favourable corporate culture and technique of managing people substantially contribute to the willingness of employees to engage with business objectives, the strengthening of initiatives of employees, and their loyalty and responsibility towards the business. Thus, such a business creates a strategic advantage over its competitors. HR management focused on the corporate culture is closely related to the roles of HR professionals as agents and catalysts for change, whereby they attempt to identify problems, build relationships of trust, solve problems and create and implement action plans. Ulrich, on the basis of extensive empirical research, interestingly proposes that “the abilities of HR professionals related to change management have become the most important aspects in terms of assessing their success” (Ulrich 2009, p. 50).

Application of Ulrich’s model for assessment of the quality level of human resource management in agricultural enterprises

The aim of this paper, based on Ulrich’s concept of the four roles of HR professionals, is to present the results of a survey evaluating the focus of HR departments in basic agricultural enterprises. The research results have identified the extent of implementation of various roles in the surveyed enterprises, and have also contributed to the assessment of the implementation level of the determinants of these roles.

The assessment table (Table 2), described in the methods section of research, provides two types of information. Firstly, it is an assessment of the level and focus of the departments of HRM in the entire enterprise; secondly, it assesses the focus of services of the HR departments in each of the four roles. According to the developers of the methodology, the assessment of the entire HR department or its sub-roles is carried out in such a way that the lower the achieved value, the lower the representation of the role in HRM. The maximum number of points to be achieved in the overall assessment is 200. If the business reaches a total sum of 160 points, then it reflects high quality services provided by the HR department. In contrast, if the total sum is less than 90 points, then the activities of the HR department in a given role are regarded as of low-quality and non-essential.

The mean number of points, obtained by averaging the points for each business, is given to each

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Table 4. Results of the assessment of the focus of HR departments

Strategic partner		HR administration		Champion for workers		Agent of change	
question	assessment	question	assessment	question	assessment	question	assessment
1	3.3	2	5	3	3.0	4	2.3
5	1.3	6	5	7	3.1	8	1.7
9	1	10	5	11	3.0	12	1.1
13	1.1	14	4.0	15	1.7	16	1
17	1	18	5	19	3.0	20	1.7
21	1	22	5	23	2.3	24	1
25	2.7	26	3.5	27	3.2	28	1
29	1	30	5	31	1.3	32	1
33	3.1	34	5	35	2.4	36	1
37	1.2	38	3.8	39	2.6	40	1
Total	16.7	Total	46.3	Total	25.6	Total	12.8

Source: own research results

response. The results of individual roles and all the roles in total are summarised in Table 4.

The basic agricultural enterprises surveyed for this research achieved an average score of 101.4 out of 200 points in the assessment of the overall level of their HR activities. The developers of the applied methodology regard scores of less than 90 points as reflecting poor quality HR department performance; by contrast, scores above 160 points indicate a high level of services. From this perspective, the achieved results indicate a non-optimal situation in the level of HRM in agricultural enterprises. Even though the quality of performance of the HR departments is not alarmingly low, it is, nevertheless, considerably limited.

Assessment of the fulfilment of individual roles by HR departments in agricultural enterprises

The HR departments of the surveyed agricultural enterprises have achieved a high assessment score (46.3 out of 50 points) as administrative experts. This is an indication of a strong focus of HR departments in agricultural enterprises on HR infrastructure development. In this role, HR managers define the individual processes, develop and implement models of HRM. The focus of such departments is to improve the efficiency of HR processes through reengineering. HR departments as administrative experts are well-suited to serve their clients; however, there is a risk of depersonalisation as a result of limited personal contact with clients and alienation from those who have to be served. Ulrich (2009) draws attention to the need to create value for the enterprise, not in terms of how it is viewed by the HR professionals themselves, but in terms of how it is perceived by managers and the clients

of HR departments. Therefore, departments should assess the results of their own work performance in terms of their effectiveness (cost) and quality. They should also measure their impact on the business and its activities. However, it is highly disputable whether this has actually been realised by the HR departments of agricultural enterprises. Thus, it is likely that improving the performance of the administrative expert role and its contribution to synergy with other roles remains a significant challenge for the future. The weakest area of HR management in the administrative expert role lies in the lack of abilities to demonstrate the efficiency of HR processes and to contribute to the worthiness of the business. Senior management positions in business should be upheld through trustworthy participation in productivity.

On the other hand, it should be appreciated that HR management in agricultural enterprises perform the administrative expert role to a high-quality level. This means that individual processes related to HR management are formalised and sophisticated. The creation of such starting points provides them with a high-quality basis for the future development of other roles. The management of the processes of job analysis, HR planning, recruitment, selection and adaptation, trainings, evaluation and remuneration are the main prerequisites for the strategic enlargement of HR management and its interconnection with the business of the enterprise. This is further supported by the high level of expertise of HR management in agricultural enterprises. Research suggests that up to three-quarters of HR managers are university graduates, which indicates significant progress compared to the situation in the past. On average, HR managers in agricultural enterprises remain in

their position for 14.73 years, which is a relatively long period of time. It can therefore be stated that the low turnover of HR professionals to some extent determines the conventional approaches applied in HR management. That is, new trends in this sector can exert their influence only slowly and tentatively as a result of employee stability.

HR departments of the surveyed agricultural enterprises achieved their second highest score (25.6 out of 50 points) as champions for workers. In performing this role, HR professionals secure and manage employee benefits. In general, according to the developers of the applied assessment methodology, this role is the one in which HR professionals feel most secure and the role which they most prefer. In this role, HR professionals deal with the fundamental question of how to ensure that employee benefits remain at a consistently high level. Employee benefits are largely influenced by line managers; therefore, HR professionals must closely collaborate with them. On the one hand, their task is to ensure that the voices of employees are heard; on the other hand, however, they should strengthen employee loyalty and commitment to the business. HR professionals play a critical role in shaping the relationship between employees and the business. Today, employees are constantly expected to meet higher demands, which is regarded as a necessity by businesses. In order to guarantee that employees can meet these demands, it is important to provide them with access to sufficient resources and opportunities to gain the required skills. This can be ensured by decreasing unrealistic, unreasonable demands or by expanding access to resources (e.g., through teamwork, corporate culture, remuneration tools, technological support, training and development). The task of HR professionals, in close cooperation with line managers, is to seek and find creative ways to balance both sides, i.e., ensuring both that demands are met and that employees are given every opportunity to do so. Based on our results this is only partially achieved by HR professionals in agricultural enterprises, since this domain has been largely neglected. The assessment reflects the fact that in their role of champion for workers HR professionals are focused on being available, and on accepting the responses of employees. The surveyed departments do not seek to gain a better understanding of the relationship between employee motivation and commitment, and personal and family life. The role extends only within the realm of the working environment and the employee-employer relationship.

The role as a champion for workers is justified in many agricultural enterprises, and creates a broad scope for HR activities. Agricultural enterprises, with a long tradition of operating in the countryside, have become part of the local community and are characterised by a specific corporate culture. They demonstrate a high level of identification of employees with the business, loyalty and family atmosphere. In many cases, several members of the same family work for an agricultural enterprise, which are thereby heavily involved in the life of the community in which they operate. The surveyed HR professionals have positively assessed their own abilities to reinforce the dedication and commitment of employees, and their own abilities to react to their problems. However, they identified deficiencies in satisfying personal and family problems of employees, which is regarded as one of the basic prerequisites of effective HR management. The application of various flexible forms of work organisation, in compliance with the specifics of production processes and the creation of favourable conditions for the synchronisation of work and private life of employees, have become the hallmark of effective management and business. This would allow more room for new approaches to HR management in agricultural enterprises. Based on the above-mentioned characteristics of corporate culture, agricultural enterprises would seem to be ideal for the easy and efficient implementation of current trends in HR management. However, so-called conventional approaches may still act as barriers in many agricultural enterprises.

The HR departments of the surveyed agricultural enterprises scored 16.7 out of 50 points as strategic partners. This indicates a relatively weak focus of HR departments in this domain. HR departments as strategic partners help businesses achieve their objectives and launch their own strategies. In close cooperation with line managers, HR professionals identify and shape abilities that are necessary for strategy implementation. The execution of this role also includes the ability to transform strategic objectives and statements into concrete actions in HRM. This implies the ability to propose questions related to HR processes, and in some cases, to dispute them. HR professionals as strategic partners must understand business operations and activities, and have the ability to pursue the path set out by the management. But they should also strive to gain respect and trustworthiness, rather than acting as servants in such roles. In many instances, the

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domain of strategic management is not regarded as a strength of businesses or agricultural enterprises in Slovakia; therefore, the role of HR departments as strategic partners is not considered to be of primary importance. Our research findings point to the fact that HR departments as strategic partners are only seen as followers who fulfil the formulated objectives, complete the HR strategy in order to formalise HR procedures, processes, programmes, and then actively participate in the functional plan of the numbers and sources of human resources of the business. The strategic partner role in a business, whose objective is to proactively formulate challenges to senior management, and fully participate in the formulation of the long-term direction of the business, is interpreted differently. The surveyed HR professionals have claimed that the strategic matters of the business are neglected and they do not regard themselves as strategic partners. They have attached very low values to the linking the HR strategies with the strategies of the enterprise. They have stated that HR activities do not help in the realisation of the strategic goals of the business. Their responses have indicated significant deficiencies in the role of champion for workers. Moreover, they have stated that changes in this area would be difficult and slow and would require changes in the perception of the role of HR by businesses. However, HR professionals should be more proactive in this regard; they should formulate suggestions and demonstrate how HR processes can contribute to the success of businesses. Their qualifications are, however, the main prerequisite. This basis is then influenced by the inflow of new ideas and approaches into HR management.

Based on the survey of agricultural enterprises, the role of agent of change is seen as the least developed and applied role with a score 12.8 out of 50 points. This finding is concerning, simply because changes have become an inseparable part of the business environment even in the agricultural sector. The inability to adequately respond to changes may constitute serious threats to a business. Successful implementation of organisational change may involve HR departments performing multiple roles. As facilitators, they are a source of professional support in the implementation of change through the transformation of work processes for which they are responsible. They can also effectively support employees to accept change and manage its consequences. They are the creators of change through the processes of changing and implementing the systems of HR departments. As demon-

strators, they should be the first to implement change, thus becoming a part of it. To equip HR departments with the ability to help enterprises manage change, they must truly understand the processes of change and perceive them as an opportunity and a source of value, rather than risks and barriers (Ulrich 2009). If these functions are not satisfied by HR departments, and they do not serve as agents of change, then their own positions are weakened in the business. Ulrich claims that this role is often found on the “tail” of the interest of HR departments, and, therefore, they often lag behind in these demands. In performing this role, HR professionals are often expected only to help in the implementation of change without a clear conceptual framework and utilisation of tools, and without any relation to the creation of the corporate culture. HR professionals of agricultural enterprises have evaluated their own role in promoting changes very critically. The highest rating (2.3 out of possible 5 points) has been granted to their own ability to adapt to change, but their own efforts to implement and support change are seen rather negatively. They do not seek to initiate or implement these changes, and, similarly, they do not support the behaviour of employees in this respect. This demonstrates the high risks associated with the unpreparedness of agricultural enterprises, since changes can only be made through the involvement of human resources. However, if HR management is not prepared, then the implementation of necessary changes will be considerably longer and more complicated.

CONCLUSION

Based on the survey results, the overall level of performance of HR roles in basic agricultural enterprises is relatively low; however, it does not enter the “risk zone”. Pure process orientation has not been confirmed; however, a dominant focus on the administrative support processes of HRM departments has been proven. The results indicate that basic agricultural enterprises focus the activities of HR professionals on areas of administrative support, and simultaneously utilise them as employee ombudsmen. Both of these roles are established in the dimension of short-term management. Basic agricultural enterprises underestimate and neglect the roles of strategic partners and agents of change, and thus rob themselves of the synergistic effects in engaging in the four above-mentioned roles. This is a serious handicap, simply because modern HR

management is assessed based on its contribution to business performance, as opposed to the traditional approach which regarded this domain as a service facility and concentrated mainly on its contents and processes. Competitive HR management has gained a strategic character and has become a creator of added value for all stakeholders, i.e., the organisation, its employees, as well as clients. The increasing pace of change in all relevant contextual interactions with businesses mean that the entrenched views and behavioural patterns which were created and exhibited in the past must now be overcome as they are no longer adequate.

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