CIPD
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work and working lives*

Research report

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HR
professionalism:
what do we
stand for?

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The not-for-profit organisation champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 140,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

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Foreword

'In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and scandals in a variety of organisations, the need for "professionals" to provide leadership and uphold ethical standards remains pressing.'

It's a truism that the world of work is ever-changing, and the standards to which professionals and professional services are held are also evolving. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and scandals in a variety of organisations, the need for 'professionals' to provide leadership and uphold ethical standards remains pressing.

This report is part of the programme of work to guide the shape and standards for the CIPD's People Profession: now and for the future strategy. The study examines the factors shaping professional identity and organisational identification, and how these impact practice in three non-traditional professions: human resource management; teaching; and information technology. The key issues being explored are: what drives the thinking, decision processes and behaviours in these professions? What socialisation factors matter and when?

The results are intended to provide insight into the role HR professionals play within their organisational contexts and, more broadly, their perception of their responsibilities to their peers and to society. In evolving the next iteration of the CIPD's professional standards, where ethical decision-making remains a core requirement, we needed to see how current concerns and environmental pressures are being played out.

Our intention in publishing the results of this study is to share our thinking and deliberations on where we think the future of the HR profession may lie. While the report is not intended to impact practice directly, the link between its findings and the calibration of professional standards in the future should be clear. This report follows on from Zheltoukhova and Baczor's *From Best to Good Practice HR: Developing principles for the profession* and Sam Clark's *Ethical Decision-Making: Eight perspectives on workplace dilemmas*.

We hope that this report will provide food for thought on the wider factors shaping organisations, business models and the professionalisation journey, not just for human resource management, learning and development, and organisation development, but also the other professions that shape organisational life. A better understanding is much needed if we are all to work together to ensure people continue to enjoy good work.

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Executive summary

In the wake of corporate scandals, from Sports Direct to Volkswagen to BHS, and as businesses become increasingly concerned with developing a more balanced view of their stakeholders, creating ethical cultures in organisations must be a priority. The movement for better business is focused on advocating ethical capitalism, where profits are important but not the only outcome at the expense of workers and society. There is a critical role for the HR profession of the future to play, by developing its expertise in human and organisation behaviour and using that to help create business solutions that have lasting benefits for all stakeholders. The CIPD's previous research (2015a) found that while HR practitioners and business leaders want to make ethical decisions, in some circumstances they either deprioritise ethics or do not feel able to apply ethical principles in practice.

In any profession, practitioners will inevitably face situations characterised by conflicts of values between different stakeholders. The ability to apply situational judgement and demonstrate moral integrity are what sets them apart as professionals, and are important characteristics in helping organisations create long-term sustainability. In this report, we examine how professionals perceive themselves, how professional identity interacts with organisational context, and what this means for ethical practice.

Key findings

- HR practitioners have a slightly stronger sense of identification with the organisation than with the profession. When under pressure from the business, organisational identity may take precedence over professional identity for HR practitioners, which could provide some explanation for the gap between ambition to uphold ethical values and actual practice.

- Having a strong sense of purpose in work, and perceiving moral values to be a core part of one's working life, can build HR's sense of professional identity.

- While HR practitioners see their role as 'ethical stewards' in challenging unethical organisational practice, they do not always follow through in their actions. Having a level of perceived authority in one's role to challenge organisational decisions, and viewing the advancement of current organisational practice as central to the role, can enable HR to raise concerns about unethical decisions.

The findings are discussed in terms of how we can develop HR professional identity, and enable HR practitioners to uphold ethical values in organisations.

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Introduction

This report examines how professionals construct their work identities, and how professional identity interacts with organisational context. Building on the findings from the CIPD's *From Best to Good Practice: Developing principles for the profession* report (2015a), we explore in more depth the factors that can enable professionals to champion ethical decision-making in organisations. The earlier report identified the following core elements of what it means to be a professional (see Figure 1):

• social and ethical responsibility
• commitment
• a body of expert knowledge and skills
• continuing professional development (CPD)
• situational judgement
• identity.

These core elements of professionalism are expanded upon later in this section (p6).

The 2015 report identified that, despite practitioners showing a desire to prioritise moral values when making people management decisions, there is often a gap between that ambition and practice. It is important that professions maintain strong ethical values so that their members are trusted when applying their expertise. Using the model of what it means to be a professional (described in Figure 1) as a starting point, the CIPD is developing a new framework of professional standards to build and support professionalism in the HR community. The framework will be underpinned by a set of principles that will help HR professionals

make sound decisions that take into account multiple stakeholder needs and interests. This is discussed in more detail at the end of the report, under 'What's next?'

This report is intended for HR practitioners at all levels. It is a self-reflection opportunity to consider one's sense of identification with the profession and organisation, and how this may influence work behaviour. It is also intended to help HR professionals develop their ability to uphold ethical values in the organisation.

Figure 1: Core elements of professionalism

Social and ethical responsibility	Body of knowledge and skills	Situational judgement
Commitment	CPD	Identity

Summary of 2015 research, *From Best to Good Practice HR: Developing principles for the profession*

This report (CIPD 2015a) combined findings from various pieces of research, and provided insight into the priorities of people management decision-makers, and how those priorities may be challenged in the future. Key findings include:

- HR professionals (n=2,220) and business leaders (n=3,416) are largely aligned on what the best thing to do is, but there is a gap between ambition and practice.

- While people management practitioners believe that workers should be treated as legitimate stakeholders of a business, in practice only 47% said that they always apply the principle 'work should be good for people' in their day-to-day decisions.

- Giving employees a meaningful voice is one way of treating them as legitimate stakeholders in the employment relationship. Yet, just under a quarter of practitioners said they always apply a lens of 'democracy' in their decisions, even though they believe it is the 'right thing to do'.

Purpose of this report

There is a fundamental paradox that characterises HR professionalism: alignment with business strategy lies at the heart of the majority of HR roles, while one of the key attributes of a profession is the ownership of standards that not only go beyond, but actually override, those of the organisation (Farndale and Brewster 2005). We wanted to build an understanding of how to create a sense of professional identity in an organisational context. For example, what is more important to practitioners in how they define their work: 'being' an HR professional or 'being' a member of a particular organisation? Given the importance of professionals in organisations, and given *'the centrality of identity in how individuals make sense of and "enact" their environments'* (Pratt et al 2006 p235), understanding how professional identity is formed is of particular interest. Creating a stronger sense of professional identity within the HR community is likely to build HR's credibility and better enable practitioners to champion better work and working lives.

Methodology

'Professionalisation' can be viewed as a gradual process, since professional techniques usually develop gradually before professions attain the highest levels of professional status (Banning 1999). It has therefore been suggested that professionalism should be perceived as a scale or continuum, rather than as a cluster of characteristics (Hurd 1967). We developed a checklist of the elements of professionalism as we understand it today (Table 1) for the CIPD's (2015a) report; this model was based on a literature review of the evolution of professions.

We compared the views of HR with a well-established profession – teaching – where its representatives are likely to have a shared sense of identity, as well as a profession that is still evolving – IT – to examine the differences in identity dynamics. We selected our samples by comparing each group against the elements of professionalism checklist in Table 1. Since the teaching profession is the most developed in relation to each of these elements (for example, teachers are required to be licensed by completing education requirements), we view it as the most evolved. As commercial functions, HR and IT are still evolving in the process of professionalisation (for example, they do not have a requirement for their members to obtain a licence to practise).

Using a model to explore how professional identity develops in an organisational context, and how different work identities can influence ethical practice (see Figure 2), we compared samples of HR practitioners with IT practitioners and teachers in the UK to ask:

- What are the characteristics of professional identity and organisational identity?
- Is there a link between identity, ethical attitudes and behaviour at work?
- What other factors influence the relationship between intentions to act in a principled way and principled behaviours?

Table 1: Elements of professionalism checklist (at present)

Element of professionalism	Description	Reference
Body of expert knowledge and skills	Based on specialised training or education	Gilmore and Williams 2007
Social legitimacy	Occupational status – the expertise of the professional group acquires authority	van Rensburg et al 2011; Fournier 1999
Ethical responsibility	The use of knowledge for the good of society	Khurana et al 2004
Self-regulation	The prescription of standards of performance	Farndale and Brewster 2005
Identity	A common identity within the professional community and a sense of loyalty to fellow practitioners	Farndale and Brewster 2005; Evetts 2003
Situational judgement	Applying expertise to specific circumstances, while often resolving conflicts of interest between multiple stakeholders; drawing on both knowledge and ethical competence	Arnold and Stern 2006
Service orientation	The importance of trust and quality of service in professional relationships with clients	van Rensburg et al 2011; Fournier 1999; Duska et al 2011; Barker 2009
Continuing professional development	A requirement to regularly update expert knowledge and invest in maintaining the level of professional skill	Gilmore and Williams 2007

The following groups of participants were recruited from a YouGov online panel, covering all levels of seniority:

- 1,013 HR practitioners
- 979 teachers
- 1,032 IT practitioners.

The teaching sample was weighted to reflect teaching phase and school type, and the IT and HR samples were unweighted but provide broad coverage across size and sector. The survey asked participants to reflect on the extent to which they identify with their profession and their organisation, their perceived ability to challenge organisational decisions, and their ethical behaviour at work.

The descriptive data analysis was conducted by YouGov, with further analysis conducted by the CIPD.

What is the value of professionals?

Numerous corporate scandals over the last few years have diminished trust in business. The cases of Volkswagen (who admitted to deliberately cheating on US diesel emissions tests for several years) and Sports Direct (accused of paying staff below the minimum wage and creating a culture of fear) show a lack of accountability in some organisations, and raise critical questions about the future of business, such as how ethical cultures can be created. These scandals have fed into a broader societal erosion of trust in experts, further compounded by revelations in the media of recent political campaigns based on misinformation during the EU referendum and US election. In their report on professions, Blond and colleagues point out that *'in recent times professions have gradually come to be seen as self-serving interest groups propagating their own agenda and interests'* (Blond et al 2015, p2).

In a world of increasing distrust, an essential characteristic of being a professional is moral integrity. An asymmetry of power is created when expert knowledge is used to provide services to others, since one person is relying on the advice of another (Duska et al 2011; Barker 2009). The professional, who is in the position of having superior knowledge, has a responsibility not to use that knowledge to gain unfair advantage. The profession is therefore obliged to ensure its members are worthy of the trust of society, that they will be competent, but will also adhere to high standards and demonstrate integrity in their conduct (Khurana et al 2004). To rebuild their relationship with the public, the professions must go back to their roots of ethical standards and accountability.

Duska and colleagues (2011) suggested that *'advancing the concept of professionalism brings ethical behaviour to the world of business. In short, making a commitment to a profession involves taking on ethical responsibilities that require rejecting a strictly selfish commercial view'* (p71). However, it can be questioned whether 'commercial professions' (Gilmore and Williams 2007) are able to be professions in the traditional sense. HR and other management professions differ from traditional professions such as medicine and law. Unlike these long-established fields, the commercial professions do not have a formal educational requirement or licence to practise, which means they do not have the same level of exclusivity (Khurana et al 2004). However, in the course of protecting the interests of the organisation, they must still conform to both the law and ethics, in order to drive sustainable business performance (Schumann 2001).

Professionals in any context will inevitably encounter situations which raise competing moral choices, and must simultaneously balance organisational, professional and personal ethics (Wooten 2001). For example, HR practitioners are frequently faced with difficult people management dilemmas, such as redundancy and cost management decisions, where there is no clear right answer and the interests of different stakeholder groups are in conflict. Professional judgement must play a critical role here, particularly in a constantly changing environment that is full of ambiguities. Moral courage, or the willingness to stand up for ethical beliefs, is required in situations that threaten professional values (Lachman et al 2012).

The question is to what extent HR practitioners view themselves as independent professionals within organisations (Hirsh, cited in Jacobs 2015). In contrast to most HR professionalism literature, there's an opposing argument that HR practitioners should stop thinking of their roles as being professional, individual contributors, and think of their jobs more as providing organisations with leadership on HR issues (Farndale and Brewster 2005). In this report, we wanted to explore how these two frames of reference can sit together.

How do we examine professional identity?

Professional identity can be defined as:

'the self that has been developed with the commitment to perform competently and legitimately in the context of the profession, and its development can continue over the course of the individuals' careers. A person with such [commitment] identifies with the profession, its role and values. He or she finds meaning in the work' (Tan et al 2015, p2).

As identification strengthens, people are more likely to internalise the values of the profession, and behave in ways that are consistent with its norms (Umphress et al 2010). This suggests that the more someone identifies with their profession and its values, the more likely they are to demonstrate behaviours that are aligned with those professional values. Identity is also viewed as an important element of decision-making (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003).

Through efforts to maintain credibility within a changing world of work, the HR profession has been subject to multiple role shifts and reinterpretations. The various

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roles and specialisation areas in HR might lead to a limited shared vision when establishing HR **professional identity (PI)**. Caldwell (2003) pointed out that *'paradoxically, the push towards professional specialisation can itself undermine the group identity or solidarity essential to the pursuit of professional status'* (p985). But identification with work-based groups (including the profession) is likely to be more important as organisational contexts become more turbulent and relationships between individuals and employers become more tenuous (Ashforth et al 2008). For example, hiring contractors to carry out short-term projects or assignments is an increasingly popular trend, which is fundamentally changing the notion of a 'job for life'.

A different type of group identity that individuals can experience is **organisational identification (OI)**. It refers to the perception of belonging to an organisation (Trybou et al 2013), and has been associated with outcomes such as co-operation, effort and organisationally beneficial decision-making (Ashforth et al 2008). Employees with a high level of OI are more likely to adopt organisational perspectives as their own, so are more willing to work in the interest of the organisation and want to go the extra mile (Trybou et al 2013).

Identification with the values, beliefs and norms of the collective organisation may be associated with behaviours that conflict with personal or professional values. Individuals who strongly identify with their organisation may choose to neglect personal ethical standards and demonstrate unethical pro-organisation behaviour (Umphress et al 2010). Furthermore, if the organisation

encourages unethical decisions or practices, *'OI can foster behaviours detrimental to the long-term interests of the organisation'* (Ashforth et al 2008, p338), which can also be detrimental to society. Previous research has shown that organisational culture can encourage unethical behaviour (or the flipside of normalising unethical practice), if employees believe they will be rewarded for engaging in such acts (Umphress et al 2010). This could provide some explanation for how the previously mentioned corporate scandals occurred, such as the cases of traders abusing trust to amass huge sums of money in hidden trades before the financial crisis (Stothard 2016). The extent to which practitioners behave unethically for the benefit of the organisation is discussed in section 4.

In striving to be a strategic business partner, over the last few decades HR has been encouraged to become more aligned with organisations' strategic goals in order to contribute to the bottom line (Beer et al 2015). Corporate values may therefore be stronger than professional values among HR practitioners (Farndale and Brewster 2005). The literature on organisational–professional conflict addresses the presumed tension between an individual's role as a professional and their role as an employee of a non-professional service organisation (Gunz and Gunz 2007). However, there is a lack of empirical evidence to support this conflict – in fact, studies have shown that organisational commitment and professional commitment can be positively correlated (Cohen 2003). We will discuss the relative importance of these two commitments among practitioners in section 1.

Gunz and Gunz (2007) have suggested that *'identity provides a useful framework for understanding the position of professionals in organisations'* (p854). They further suggested that examining identification with both the organisation and with the profession can help us understand what might affect the ethical decision-making of employed professionals in organisations. According to identity theory, behaviour is shaped by the importance an individual assigns to their adopted identity (Stryker and Burke 2000). We can therefore hypothesise that the degree to which professional employees identify with their profession and organisation influences their work behaviour (Trybou et al 2013); in this case, their approach to making difficult decisions, such as whether to challenge or break organisational rules in order to do the right thing.

The way in which individuals interpret their role also influences their behaviour in the work environment. As a role becomes closely linked with an individual's personal identity, they tend to behave in accordance with this role identity (Jaina et al 2009). We will discuss the possible links between practitioners' role perceptions and ethical behaviours at work in section 2.

Building HR professionalism
In the past, HR has been criticised for exhibiting a 'managerialist' orientation – downplaying the voice of the employee and ethical considerations (Wooten 2001). The focus has instead been on demonstrating the value that HR creates for the business, establishing credibility with top management. In other words, HR has shifted away from its traditional people-centred approach, towards a focus on

organisational performance, in an effort to build strategic influence, set against an external backdrop where competitive pressures are only ever increasing (Keegan and Francis 2010). But, since HR is responsible for making decisions that affect workers' lives, it's important that HR practitioners understand the sensitivities that come with managing human beings, rather than focusing solely on business profits.

Recent CIPD research (2015a) highlighted some of the practical challenges that could compromise practitioners' ambitions to make more balanced people management decisions. The study suggested that despite wanting to create win–win solutions for both people and organisations, many practitioners experience pressure from business leaders or fear of losing their jobs. They also reported a lack of accountability for the outcomes of people decisions. All these challenges were cited as obstacles preventing them from applying principles in practice.

Another possible reason for this is the limited power of HR practitioners in organisations. Academics have questioned the extent to which HR professionals are in a position to uphold ethical values within organisations, because of the boundaries of their role. In particular, Guest and Woodrow (2012) pointed out that although HR managers may want to adhere to ethical standards, including those shared by their profession, organisations may expect them to prioritise alternative values, and restrict practitioners' autonomy in applying moral principles. Furthermore, HR practitioners face tensions in managing the interests of management and staff, which are often conflicting (Caldwell 2003). It could be that HR is viewed as a function rather than as a profession by organisations, which presents a significant challenge for practitioners when it comes to challenging unethical organisational decisions. Practitioners' perceived power to challenge the organisation is discussed in section 2.

Why is professional identity important for HR?

The global trends impacting the world of work are constantly challenging people management practice. For example, the increase in non-standard employment arrangements, with more people working flexibly and on temporary contracts, is raising important questions around how to achieve fairness for a workforce with diverse needs and expectations. For many businesses, the association between positive people outcomes and positive organisational outcomes is becoming apparent, requiring new people management solutions that fit the needs of the specific organisation and workforce. In order to create sustainable solutions that benefit not only organisations, but also their people and wider stakeholders, HR practitioners will need to apply their expertise in a context of explicit core values guiding their professional judgements.

In this rapidly changing organisational environment, it will be increasingly important for HR to be clear on what they stand for as professionals, if they are to be trusted advisers to business leaders. However, as a relatively young profession that has experienced many role changes, the credibility of HR practitioners has been under constant scrutiny. The role of HR has shifted from traditional 'personnel management', as custodians of

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employee welfare (Keegan and Francis 2010), to a focus on driving organisational performance in the context of increasing competitive pressures (Ulrich 1997). Since then, it has been argued that HR has shifted too far towards adopting a strategic business partnering role, neglecting its social role and ethical concerns (Marchington 2008).

Legge's (1978) influential book, *Power, Innovation and Problem-solving in Personnel Management*, argued that HR managers need power and authority to overcome the ambiguities in their role, which could be achieved through two approaches: conformist and deviant innovation (Guest and King

2004). 'Conformist innovators' accept the current organisational system and values, aligning their goals with the business strategy, in order to gain influence. 'Deviant innovators', on the other hand, challenge the status quo, drawing on professional and ethical standards to use new approaches for measuring organisational success (for example, approaches that aim to deliver value for employees as well as shareholders and customers). The way in which practitioners view their role in the organisation is therefore likely to impact their ability to challenge decisions that do not align with their ethical values. This is discussed in section 2.

Based on the reviewed literature on identity and professional decision-making in organisations, we propose a model to explore factors that influence ethical practice (developed from Gunz and Gunz's 2007 paper) (see Figure 2). We will assess HR against this model, with IT professionals and teachers as comparators, to build our understanding of how practitioners construct their work identities, and the role of that identity in ethical decision-making.

Figure 2: Theoretical model for the preconditions to ethical decision-making
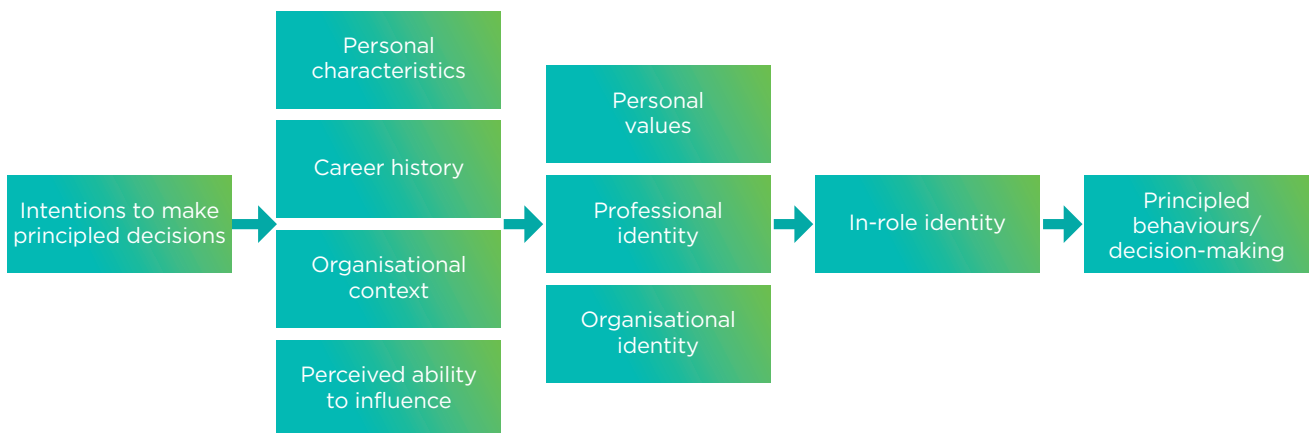
1 Comparing identity sets across three professions

In the survey, we first asked the three groups of respondents to indicate the extent to which they identify with their professions and their organisations. The statements used in the survey were adapted from Lammers et al's (2013) measures of '*perceptions of oneness or belongingness (e.g. to a group, organisation or profession)*' (p517), to identify the shape of an individual's professional and organisational identity.

This section of the report compares the nature of professional and organisational identity (see definition boxes) between the three groups of practitioners, and explores individual characteristics of respondents (such as age and seniority) that can be associated with the different types of identity.

Characteristics of professional identity
Of the three professions, respondents working in IT are the least likely to see themselves as part of a wider profession (56%), compared with HR (67%) and teaching professionals (84%). It's also interesting to note that HR practitioners from the public sector (72%) are more likely than those in the private sector (64%) to see themselves as part of a wider profession.
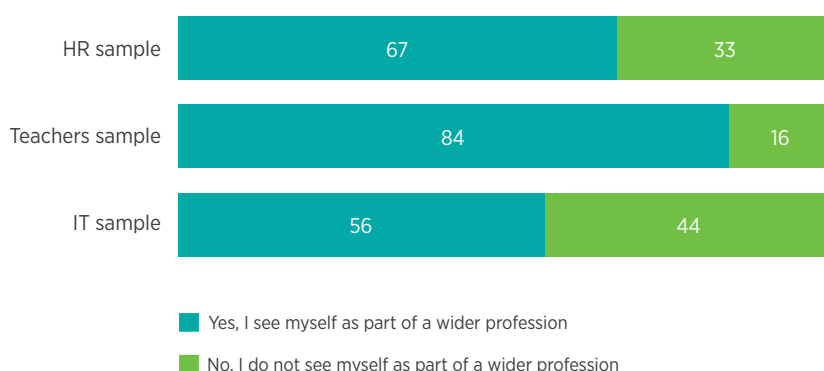
We asked survey participants how strongly they agree with a set of key statements describing professional identity (PI) and organisational identity (OI), including, 'I feel I have a lot in common with others in my profession,' and 'My values and the

values of my organisation are very similar'. The CIPD then calculated composite scores for PI and OI to compare the average levels of these different identities across the professional groups. Agreement across the PI statements is generally strong, but there are differences between groups. The HR professional sample has a mean PI score of 3.66 (SD = 0.71), which is slightly lower than the PI of teachers (M = 3.91, SD = 0.66), and higher than that of IT practitioners (M = 3.47, SD = 0.75).[1] For example, 66% of HR practitioners agree with the statement, 'I find it easy to identify with people in my profession,' compared with 76% of teachers and 60% of IT practitioners. Perhaps because teachers work in a context in which theirs is the dominant profession,

Professional identity (PI) is the identification with, and perception of both belonging to, and commitment to, the profession, its values and norms.

Organisational identity (OI) is the identification with, and perception of both belonging to, and commitment to, an organisation, its values and norms.

Figure 3: Proportion of respondents who see themselves as part of a wider profession (%)

	Yes	No
HR sample	67	33
Teachers sample	84	16
IT sample	56	44

■ Yes, I see myself as part of a wider profession

■ No, I do not see myself as part of a wider profession

Base: HR (n=1,013), teachers (n=979), IT (n=1,032)

Figure 4: Responses to statements measuring professional identity (%)

	Disagree	Agree	
HR sample	15	61	I feel I have a lot in common with others in my profession
Teachers sample	8	72	
IT sample	16	51	
HR sample	11	66	I find it easy to identify with people in my profession
Teachers sample	7	76	
IT sample	13	60	
HR sample	16	54	The challenges faced within my wider profession affect me personally
Teachers sample	5	83	
IT sample	25	44	
HR sample	9	66	My values and the values of my profession are very similar
Teachers sample	9	74	
IT sample	12	50	

■ Disagree   ■ Agree

Base: HR (n=1,013), teachers (n=979), IT (n=1,032)

they are surrounded by clearer 'markers' for their professional identity, which are lacking in a business context where several different professions are working together.

It's interesting to consider whether there are 'optimal' levels of professional and organisational identity. For example, research conducted by Kingston Engagement Consortium for the CIPD (2011) distinguishes between emotional (going the extra mile for the organisation) and transactional (driven by employee's need to earn a living and meeting minimal job requirements) engagement.

This study found that emotionally engaged individuals are more likely than transactionally engaged individuals to have high levels of well-being and organisational citizenship behaviour. Similarly, identifying with the organisation can be beneficial for employees – for example, feeling more motivated to 'go the extra mile' (Trybou et al 2013) – but it's possible that too much OI could lead to unethical behaviour (Umphress et al 2010). The extent to which levels of professional and organisational identity can lead to ethical behaviours at work is explored in section 3.

Scores across the four indicators of professional identity were added up for each of the respondents, with the sample split into three groups. This was based on the median aggregate scores, representing practitioners with 'low', 'medium' and 'high' PI. Table 2 shows that 60% of teachers fall into the 'high PI' group, compared with 38% of HR practitioners. In contrast, 45% of IT respondents are in the 'low PI' group, compared with only 19% of teachers and 32% of the HR sample.

These findings could be partly explained by the sense of professional status among these groups (Figure 5). Teaching professionals, for example, are most likely to be a member of a union, with half (52%) reporting this, compared with a tenth of HR (10%) or IT (11%) professionals. Union membership is likely to reinforce one's sense of community and identification with the profession, whereas in the HR profession, there may not be such a strong marker for professional identity. This suggests there is a role for the CIPD, as the

professional body, to support and reinforce HR professional identity. In contrast, professional body membership is much less prevalent among IT practitioners, with just 14% saying they're currently a member of a professional body, compared with 44% for teachers and nearly half (47%) of HR practitioners. The professional body membership among HR practitioners is slightly higher than we would normally expect, possibly because the sample is a more senior audience (nearly a quarter of the HR sample is at director level).

Table 2: Proportion of respondents with low, medium and high professional identity (%)

	Low	Medium	High
HR	32	30	38
Teachers	19	21	60
IT	45	27	28

Figure 5: Professional identity, by professional body or union membership (%)
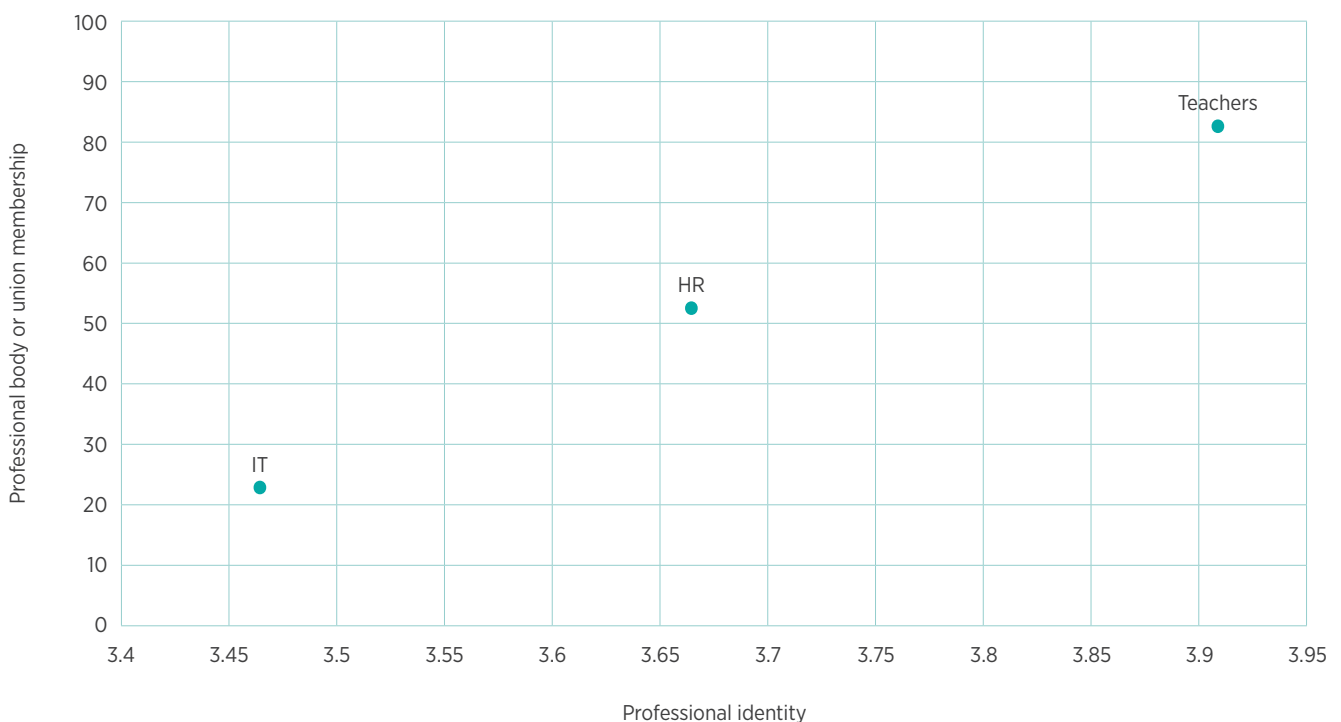
There is some difference in PI between sectors. HR practitioners working within the third sector are more likely than those in the private sector to have a high PI (67%, compared with 54%). This could be explained by third sector employees' stronger sense of purpose or meaning in their work, which is linked to PI (Tan et al 2015). We discuss this further later in this section.

### Characteristics of organisational identity

We found similar differences between professional groups when looking at OI. HR practitioners have a slightly lower score than teachers (M = 3.72, SD = 0.73 and M = 3.80, SD = 0.65 respectively), but higher than IT practitioners (M = 3.38, SD = 0.72).[2] For example, 71% of HR practitioners agree with the statement, 'The challenges faced by my organisation as a whole affect

me,' compared with 83% of teachers and 52% of IT practitioners. Interestingly, HR practitioners are more likely to show identification with their organisation than with the profession. This could be explained by the shift towards strategic HR management (Ulrich 1997), with HR practitioners striving to become more aligned with business goals. It appears likely that the nature of an individual's work influences the extent to which their OI or PI is salient. Gunz and Gunz (2007) demonstrated that the more time a lawyer spent on non-professional work, the more salient was their organisational identity by comparison with their professional identity. If we apply this to HR, perhaps an increased focus on business activities creates a higher OI than PI.

However, the extent to which practitioners identify with their

profession and their organisation is similar for each group (Figure 7). This is consistent with literature suggesting that professional and organisational commitments are positively correlated (Lee et al 2000). However, inevitably, there may be situations where these different identity sets are in tension. Pratt and colleagues' research on physicians found that, when faced with a violation between their work and professional identities, they flexed their identity to fit the work demands. For example, surgeons saw themselves as professionals who *'effected dramatic change in disease'*, and therefore doing menial tasks was at odds with this view of themselves as surgeons (Pratt et al 2006, p245). It's possible that, when under pressure from the business, OI becomes the more important or salient identity (Hogg 2006). The CIPD's (2015a)

Figure 6: Responses to statements measuring organisational identity (%)
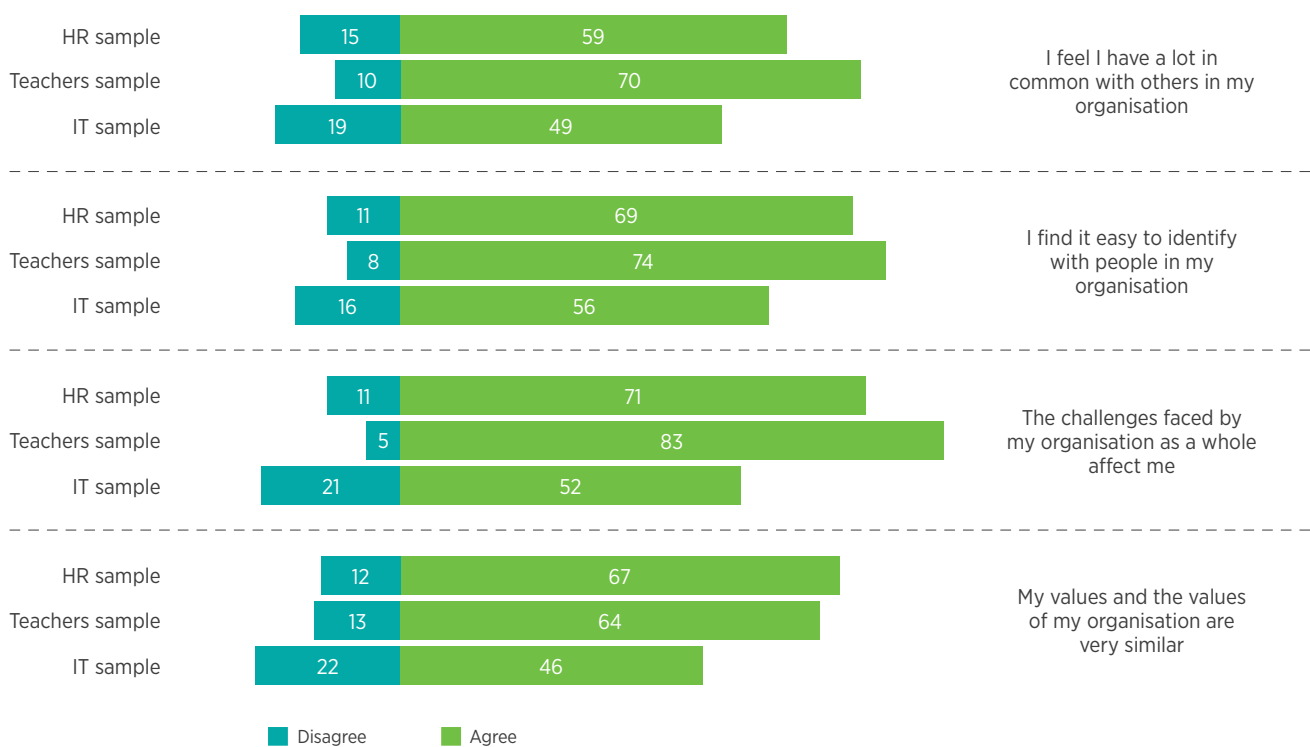
Base: HR (n=1,013), teachers (n=979), IT (n=1,032)

Figure 7: Comparison of professional identity and organisational identity across professional groups
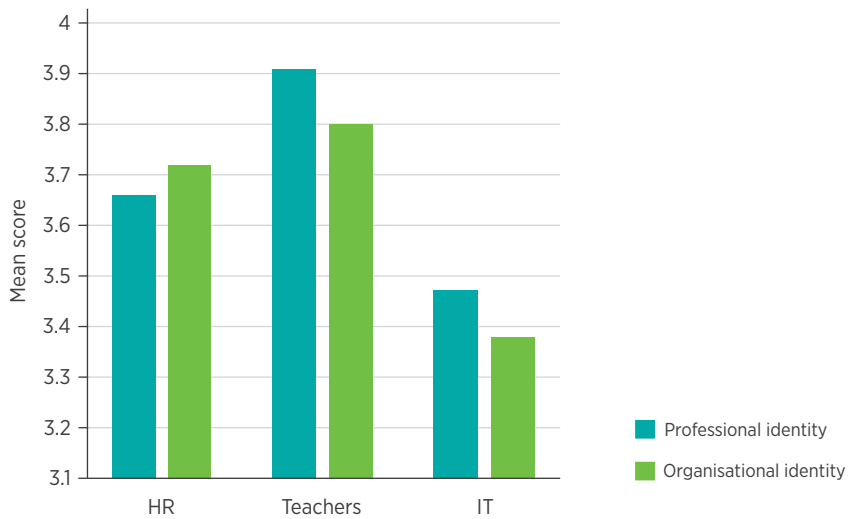
Base: HR (n=1,013), teachers (n=979), IT (n=1,032)

report showed that a quarter of HR practitioners have had to compromise on their principles under pressure from business leaders (24%), or to meet current business needs (34%). Despite wanting to apply ethical principles, they may therefore prioritise alternative values in particular situations when expected to by the organisation (Guest and Woodrow 2012).

It's interesting to compare how each profession responded to statements about whether challenges faced by their organisation and profession affect them. HR practitioners show a much stronger reaction to organisational challenges than professional challenges – 71% agree that 'The challenges faced by my organisation as a whole affect me,' compared with only 54% for the equivalent statement about professional challenges. Teachers are in equal agreement for both statements (83%), and there is a smaller difference in responses to the two statements for IT practitioners

(44% – professional challenges; 52% – organisational challenges). Again, this could be explained by HR's strategic alignment with the organisation's goals, which may mean that they feel closer to the day-to-day running of the business and experience its pressures. As demonstrated in the CIPD's (2015a) research, HR practitioners feel they have to compromise on their principles because of current business needs.

The sample was split into three groups of 'low', 'medium' and 'high' organisational identity, in

the same way the PI scores were. Once again, across the three professions, teachers are most likely to be in the 'high OI' group. However, interestingly, a greater proportion of HR practitioners have high OI, compared with the proportion demonstrating high PI.

As we found with PI, there is a sectoral difference in OI among HR practitioners. Those working within the third sector are more likely than those in the private and public sectors to have a high OI (74%, compared with 60% and 56% respectively).

Table 3: Proportion of respondents with low, medium and high organisational identity (%)

	Low	Medium	High
HR	26	28	46
Teachers	21	26	53
IT	47	25	28

What factors correlate with different work identities?

We explored the factors associated with different types of identity, in order to understand how identities are formed. Continuing professional development (CPD) has previously been linked to establishing a sense of professional identity, through demonstrating an individual's ongoing alignment with the norms, beliefs or values of their profession (Maiden and Kinsey n.d.). Having a professional role model and experience in the field have also been associated with professional identity development (Tan et al 2015).

This section looks at individual and contextual factors associated with PI and OI. The survey asked respondents about their personal values, age, career history, job satisfaction as well as seniority and role in the organisation, in order to examine the characteristics of practitioners with high and low levels of PI and OI. We wanted to look at whether any of these factors could be influenced to increase or decrease identification with the profession or organisation.

First, we found that males and females have similar mean PI scores (*M* = 3.60, *SD* = 0.69 and *M* = 3.64, *SD* = 0.67 respectively).[3]

Age

In terms of personal characteristics, we found that among HR practitioners, the 55+ age category has the highest PI (*M* = 3.74, *SD* = 0.59). They are followed by the 45–54-year-olds (*M* = 3.69, *SD* = 0.71), the 25–34-year-olds (*M* = 3.61, *SD* = 0.80) and the 35–44-year-olds (*M* = 3.57, *SD* = 0.53). 18–24-year-olds have the lowest PI score (*M* = 3.50, *SD* = 0.0) (n.s.).[4] Professional identity therefore does not necessarily increase with age, as we would expect, given that the literature suggests it evolves over time through experiences and social interaction (Ibarra et al 2010).

Career history

Working in different occupations prior to their current one seems to impact on professional identity. For HR practitioners, those who'd worked in a different occupation before HR have a lower PI (*M* = 3.64, *SD* = 0.68) than those who hadn't (*M* = 3.69, *SD* = 0.74). Since many HR directors have had a previous job role outside of HR (CIPD 2015b), this raises questions around whether they can identify enough with the profession. However, HR practitioners who said they left HR to work in a different role, later returning to an HR role, have a higher PI (*M* = 3.71, *SD* = 0.71) (n.s.).[5]

Seniority

The PI of HR practitioners increases with seniority, with a mean score of 3.67 (*SD* = 0.71) among senior-level (director, senior executive, head of functional area), 3.60 (*SD* = 0.66) among mid-level (business partner, manager, senior officer), and 3.53 (*SD* = 0.65) among junior-level (officer, administrator, assistant, graduate trainee) HR practitioners. However, there is no significant difference in PI scores for the three seniority groups,[6] which could be due to insufficient sample. There is a positive relationship between seniority and OI for HR practitioners, with a mean score of 3.89 (*SD* = 0.70) for senior-level, 3.66 (*SD* = 0.70) for mid-level and 3.43 (*SD* = 0.69) for junior-level practitioners.[7]

For HR consultants (either in-house or external), OI (*M* = 3.9, *SD* = 0.90) is slightly higher than PI (*M* = 3.86, *SD* = 0.79). This could be because for many consultants, it's their own business, so they naturally have strong alignment with its objectives. Gross and Kieser (2006) suggested consultants lack a unifying identity, since there is no generally accepted profile of the 'typical consultant'. However, our findings suggest that HR consultants do not differ much from HR practitioners who are not consultants, in terms of PI.

Personal values

Respondents were also asked to indicate the extent to which moral values are meaningful to them in their personal lives and at work. Respondents were asked to read a list of characteristics (caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, helpful, hardworking, honest, and kind), and to decide if having such characteristics is an important part of who they are in their personal and working lives (based on Aquino and Reed's (2002) scale measuring the self-importance of moral identity). Among HR practitioners, there isn't much difference between how these characteristics are rated in their personal life and at work (88% and 85% agree they are important to them respectively) (see Table 5). Across groups, there is a strong, positive correlation between PI and the importance of these moral characteristics at work.[8] This suggests that moral values are a key element of identification with a professional group, consistent with the view that professionalism involves taking on ethical responsibilities (Duska et al 2011).

Interestingly, there is a stronger relationship between moral characteristics at work and PI, over moral characteristics and OI, for HR practitioners. There is also a strong, positive correlation between moral characteristics

in personal life and PI, across groups.[9] This implies moral traits are important to individuals in their professional and personal lives, but less so in their role as an employee of an organisation. Perhaps developing a stronger sense of identification with the HR profession can increase the importance of moral values for individuals. However, since participants were only asked to rate positive traits, there may have been a desirability bias.

Reflective practice
In addition, we were interested in whether participants' levels of reflective practice is associated with PI. Participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agree or disagree with the following statements: 'I would describe myself as a lifelong learner,' 'I strive for constant self-improvement,' and 'I regularly reflect on previous decisions or actions to question and identify assumptions I may have made at the time.' Across groups, there is a correlation between reflective practice and both PI and OI. For example, HR practitioners with high PI are more likely to agree that they 'strive for constant self-improvement' (M = 2.83, SD = 0.45) than those with medium (M = 2.75, SD = 0.51) or low PI (M = 2.58, SD = 0.63).[10] There is a similar positive relationship between striving for self-improvement and OI.[11] This suggests that reflective practice through CPD could be one route to increasing professional identity among HR practitioners (at least from a learning perspective), but also to increasing an individual's sense of belonging in the organisation.

Meaningful work
There is a positive correlation between sense of purpose at work and both PI and OI. Participants were asked to indicate to what

extent they agree or disagree with the following statements: 'The work I do is connected to what I think is important in life,' 'I see a connection between my work and the benefit to wider society,' and 'Overall, I am satisfied with my current job.' For example, the findings show that HR practitioners with high OI are more likely to agree with the statement, 'Overall, I am satisfied with my current job' (M = 2.68, SD = 0.64) than those with medium (M = 2.53, SD = 0.74) or low OI (M = 2.07, SD = 0.86),[12] and there is a similar link between level of job satisfaction and PI.[13]

In other words, professionals who report a stronger sense of meaning in their work identify more strongly with their profession and their organisation. This is consistent with Tan and colleagues' (2015) definition of PI as linked to finding meaning in the work. It has also been argued that *'alignment between identity and work is a fundamental motivator in identity construction'* (Pratt et al 2006, p255). So perhaps finding purpose in work, to the extent that your work reflects who you are as a person, can be important for increasing PI and OI. This may have practical implications for the way jobs are designed, to align with individuals' personal values and thereby enhance their commitment to the profession and organisation.

Organisational support
It is also worth considering organisational characteristics associated with higher or lower identity. For example, perceptions of the profession within the organisation, or different forms of organisational support, could be linked to the way practitioners see themselves in the wider professional community, and the behaviours they display in

'Professionals who report a stronger sense of meaning in their work identify more strongly with their profession and their organisation.'

organisational practice. Learning and adjusting to an organisational context shapes individuals' identity, such as through sense-giving (that is, an adoption of organisational values) (Pratt et al 2006). This suggests that individuals develop an understanding of their identities based on their organisational context. Pratt and colleagues (2006) found that stories and role models are important to identity learning.

Surprisingly, HR practitioners who reported having a career role model or someone who they aspired to be like in their working life have a lower PI (M = 3.59, SD = 0.71) than those who didn't (M = 3.79, SD = 0.68).[14] Similarly, having a role model is linked with lower OI (M = 3.57, SD = 0.72) compared with not having a role model (M = 3.79, SD = 0.70) (n.s.).[15] This contradicts previous studies, which have shown that role models can increase individuals' sense of work identity (Pratt et al 2006). This can have implications for the types of values that are being role-modelled in HR; perhaps there is a need for more peer support in

professional career development, to build a sense of community both within the profession and the organisation.

However, not many professionals overall have role models. Only a third of HR practitioners (35%) report having a role model. Those working in large organisations (250+ employees) (45%) or medium organisations (50–249 employees) (39%) are more likely to have a role model than those working in small organisations (2–49 employees) (27%). HR practitioners currently in membership of a professional body are also more likely to have a role model than those who are not a member of a professional body (40%, compared with 29%).
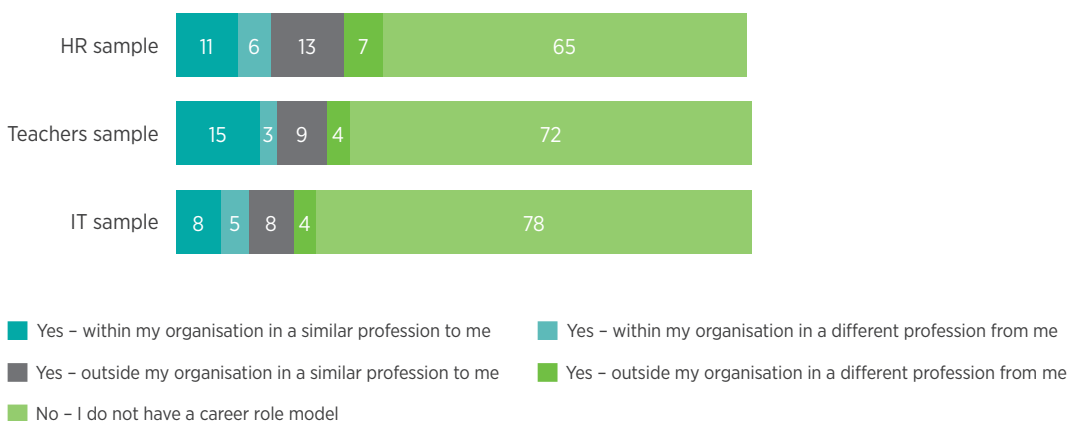
In the HR sample, the respondents are equally likely to have high PI and OI whether they'd accessed support inside or outside their organisation. It also appears that of the three professions, HR practitioners are more likely to seek support outside of their organisation. Twenty per cent of all respondents said their role models are outside of their

organisation. Similarly, when seeking work-related advice, HR practitioners are more likely to share a problem with someone outside of their organisation, while IT practitioners are more likely to share a problem with their manager, and teachers more likely to share with a colleague. This could be explained by the fact that for teachers, a colleague is always a fellow teacher, making it more likely that they seek advice from their peers as they have a stronger sense of community. HR and IT, on the other hand, tend to be small functions within organisations, and perhaps HR practitioners find it easier to look outside the organisation for support because of the sensitive nature of their role (such as dealing with confidential information).

Perceptions of the department
Finally, we asked the professionals how their department is perceived in the organisation, to explore whether the department's perceived level of credibility has any impact on one's level of identification with the profession. There is a strong, positive correlation between perceptions of

Figure 8: Do you have a career role model or someone you aspire to be like in your working life? (%)

	Yes – within my organisation in a similar profession to me	Yes – within my organisation in a different profession from me	Yes – outside my organisation in a similar profession to me	Yes – outside my organisation in a different profession from me	No – I do not have a career role model
HR sample	11	6	13	7	65
Teachers sample	15	3	9	4	72
IT sample	8	5	8	4	78

- Yes – within my organisation in a similar profession to me
- Yes – within my organisation in a different profession from me
- Yes – outside my organisation in a similar profession to me
- Yes – outside my organisation in a different profession from me
- No – I do not have a career role model

Base: HR (n=1,013), teachers (n=979), IT (n=1,032)

Figure 9: Imagine you need advice on a work-related issue. Who, if anyone, would you trust most to share this problem with? (%)

My immediate manager	HR sample	29
	Teachers sample	20
	IT sample	35
A colleague in my organisation	HR sample	22
	Teachers sample	36
	IT sample	30
A peer outside my organisation	HR sample	17
	Teachers sample	9
	IT sample	8
Someone else (eg family/friends)	HR sample	15
	Teachers sample	14
	IT sample	12
A senior manager	HR sample	8
	Teachers sample	11
	IT sample	8
An independent adviser (union representative, professional body representative, etc)	HR sample	6
	Teachers sample	7
	IT sample	3
No, I would not trust anyone	HR sample	2
	Teachers sample	2
	IT sample	5

Legend:
- HR sample
- Teachers sample
- IT sample

Base: HR (n=1,013), teachers (n=979), IT (n=1,032)

the department and PI.[16] We found that the higher the PI amongst HR practitioners, the more likely they are to state that the HR department in their organisation is respected, taken seriously and adds value. For example, HR practitioners with high PI (49%) are more likely than those with medium (29%) or low PI (22%) to agree that the HR department is perceived positively in their organisation.[17]

We found a similar link between perceptions of the HR department and OI.[18] For example, 18% of practitioners with low OI believe that their department is perceived positively, compared with 28% of those with medium OI and 54% of those with high OI.[19] This suggests that both PI and OI are linked to perceptions of the function's

Table 4: Perceptions of HR department, by PI and OI (HR respondents) (%)

Perceptions of HR department's credibility	PI			OI		
	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High
Weak	43	25	33	49	26	26
Medium	38	29	33	35	27	38
Strong	22	29	49	18	28	54

credibility, and therefore increasing awareness in organisations of the value that HR can bring could enhance practitioners' identification with the profession and their organisation.

Six out of ten HR practitioners (59%) agree that 'the HR department is given opportunity to add value to their organisation'. Interestingly, this view is significantly higher than the proportion of teachers (37%) and IT practitioners (40%) who agree that the HR department is given opportunity to add value to their organisation.

Figure 10: Perceptions of HR department (%)
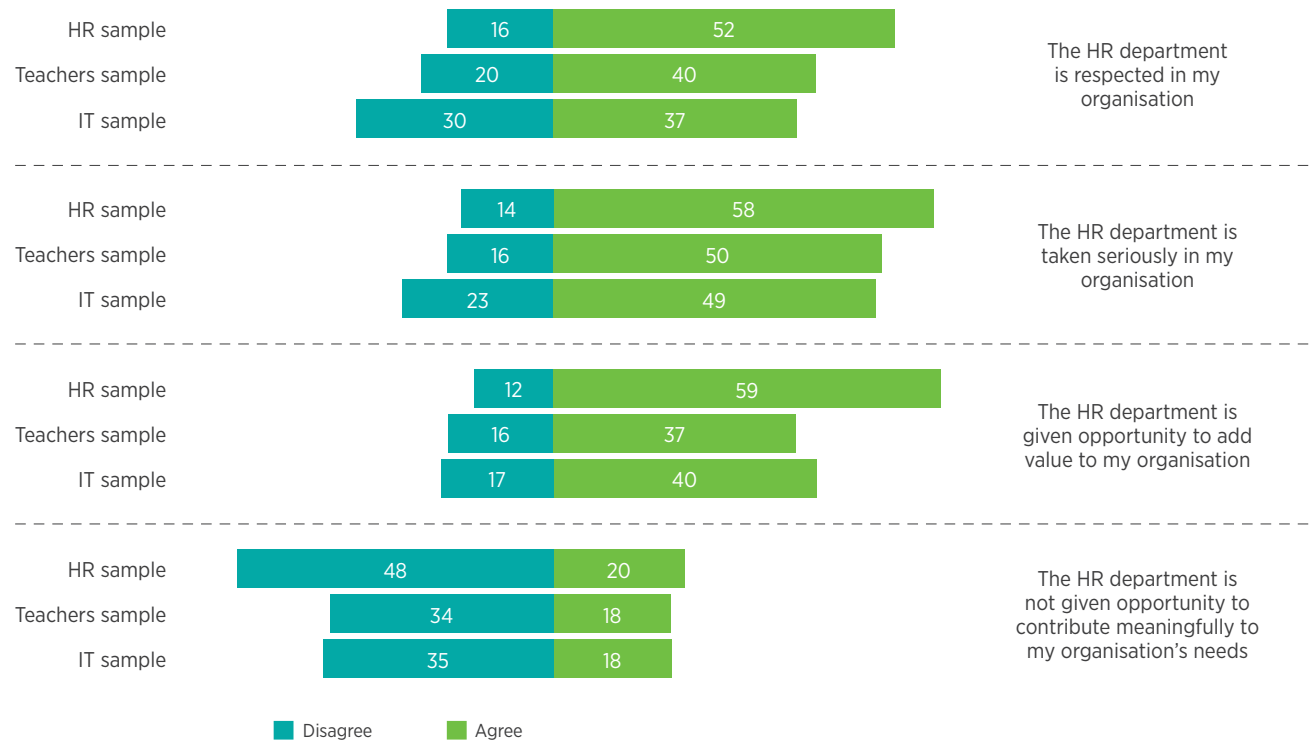
Base: HR (n=1,013), teachers (n=979), IT (n=1,032)

Summary

The findings suggest that both PI and OI are, to some extent:

• evolving over the course of an individual's career (as they correlate with CPD)
• inherent (as they are linked to personal values)
• situational (shown by the association with sense of meaning at work).

Among HR practitioners, perceiving moral traits to be important in both work and personal life are linked to higher PI. Engagement in CPD, having a sense of meaning at work, and perceptions of the function's credibility in the organisation can also develop HR practitioners' sense of identification with the profession.

2 Identity and ethical practice

Within our review of professionalism in HR, the ability of practitioners to act ethically and challenge unethical practice is of particular interest. Diverse workplace contexts present professionals with dilemmas that don't always have an obvious answer, rendering so-called 'best practice' irrelevant to specific business contexts and workforce needs. Instead, practitioners are expected to be attuned to the core values of their profession and the organisation, making situational judgements that translate these values into practice.

Identification with a particular social group influences an individual's goals and beliefs, because the attributes that constitute 'what it means to be [a professional]' are adopted as one's own (Ashforth et al 2008). Previous studies suggest that what practitioners believe about professional autonomy is a key element of PI (Maiden and Kinsey n.d.).

While behaviour is an outcome of identification, the link between the core attributes of a particular identity and behaviour is influenced by other factors, such as situational constraints and competing identities. For example, a worker may act against their ethical principles under strong pressure from a manager. In this section, we explore whether there are links between different identities, organisational culture and ethical decision-making.

In previous research, we've noted that while the majority of HR practitioners would like to adhere to ethical principles, they do not always feel able to challenge organisational decisions, suggesting that a gap exists between their intentions and actual behaviours (CIPD 2015a). The disconnect between practitioners' intentions/values and their ability to behave accordingly in practice is viewed in the context of the debate of the limited power of HR roles in the organisational context. Legge's (1978) work suggests that HR practitioners who view themselves as 'deviant innovators' may have higher perceived power to challenge the organisation. However, it could be that when an organisation has strong ethical values that are aligned with an individual's values, conforming to the status quo could have positive consequences.

Drawing on the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen 1991), in this section we explore the relationship between this gap in ethical attitudes and behaviours, and the way professionals view their role and responsibilities. To do this, the survey first asked respondents to indicate the extent to which moral values are meaningful to them in personal life and at work. As demonstrated in Table 5, although few respondents disagree with the importance of these values overall, IT practitioners are the least likely to agree with the significance of these values in personal life (80%) and at work (73%), compared with HR practitioners and teachers.

'Diverse workplace contexts present professionals with dilemmas that don't always have an obvious answer, rendering so-called "best practice" irrelevant to specific business contexts and workforce needs.'

Table 5: Ethical values (%)

Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am…	%	Practitioners		
		HR	Teachers	IT
…in my personal life	Net agreeing	88	88	80
	Net disagreeing	2	3	3
…at work	Net agreeing	85	89	73
	Net disagreeing	4	3	5

Figure 11: Perceived ability to challenge organisational decisions (%)

Base: HR (n=1,013), teachers (n=979), IT (n=1,032)

Disagree ■ Agree ■
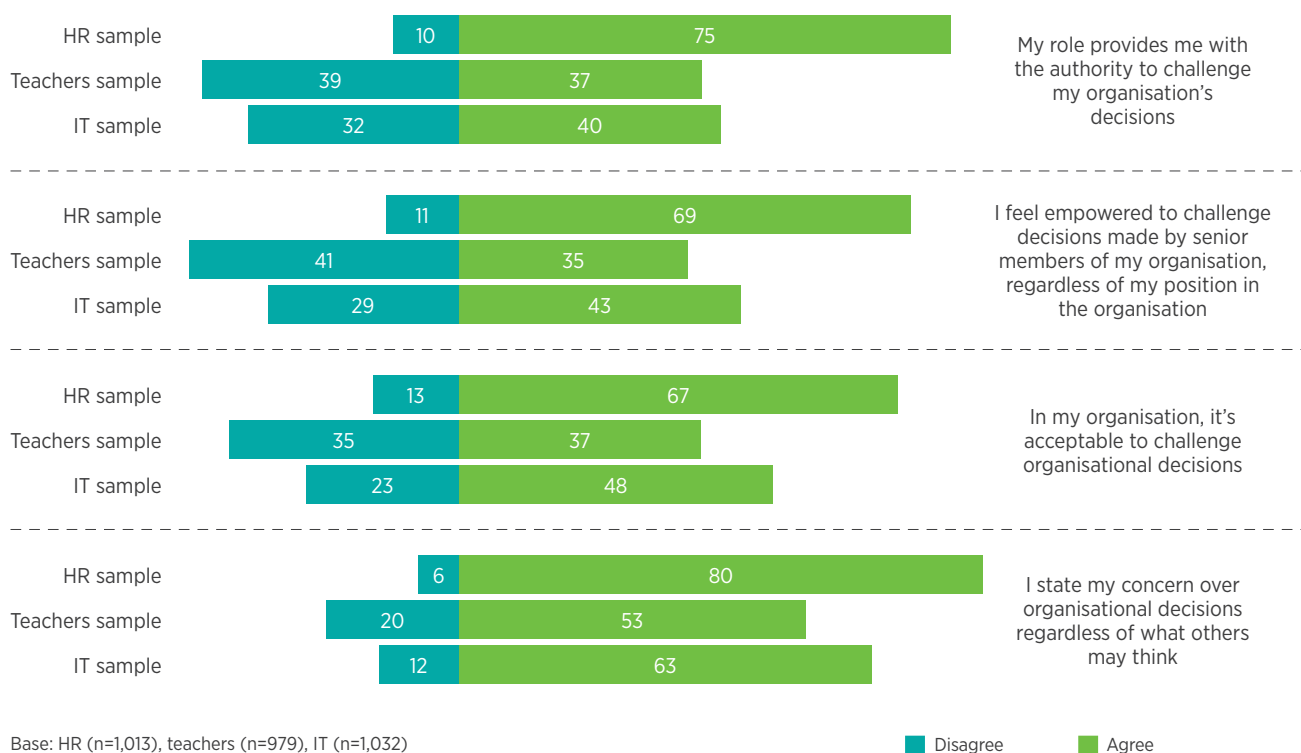
Perceptions of role and empowerment

To explore the ability of practitioners to challenge organisational decisions, we considered a range of attitudes that can form the basis of their actual behaviour, from following organisational rules to their perceived level of control over their ability to challenge organisational decisions (see Figure 11). We proposed that ability to challenge would be influenced by organisational level (such as role and seniority), and business context (such as size, sector and structure).

Previous research suggests that lack of power and poor perceptions of the effectiveness of HR in organisations reduces HR's ability to influence organisational decision-making (Guest and Woodrow 2004). Legge (1978) argued HR needs to assert power and authority to overcome role ambiguities, but we can question to what extent HR practitioners have a desire to act as 'independent professionals' (or deviant innovators), or to take a 'management' approach. While deviating from business norms in positive ways (Spreitzer and Sonenshein 2003) is an appealing approach, Parkes and Davis (2013) suggest that this is oversimplistic, and that *'many prescriptions of good HR practice are based on the assumption that managerial*

prerogative will prevail and that either there would be no ethical issues or these could be resolved by "good management"' (p2418). For example, Guest and Woodrow (2004) found a negative reaction to the idea that the HR department might exercise an independent role among senior business leaders. We wanted to explore HR's current attitudes towards their ability to assert power in their role in the organisation.

One factor potentially influencing ability to challenge organisational decisions is organisational culture. This is defined as *'a set of beliefs and values shared by members of the same organisation that influences their behaviours'* (Schein 1990; O'Reilly et al 1991), or, more simply, as *'how we do things around here'* (CIPD 2016). For example, it's possible that individuals who, on a personal level, are prepared to state concern over organisational decisions would not do so when operating in a context which doesn't find this kind of behaviour acceptable. Parkes and Davis (2013) demonstrated that the presence of organisational policies and commitment to ethical behaviour is important for HR's willingness to challenge. Encouragingly, our findings show that HR practitioners are the most likely to agree it's acceptable to challenge organisational decisions (67%, compared with 48% of IT practitioners and 37% of teachers).

We also explored the perceived authority of different professional groups and the degree to which they feel empowered to challenge decisions in their organisations. HR practitioners are most likely to feel empowered to challenge decisions made by senior members of their organisations, regardless of their position (69%, compared with 43% of IT practitioners and

35% of teachers); and are also more likely to agree their role provides them with the authority to challenge organisational decisions (75%, compared with 40% of IT practitioners and 37% of teachers). Perhaps this is because HR tends to be viewed as the 'rule-makers' or guardians of organisational ethics (Parkes and Davis 2013); but our evidence suggests that this does not always translate into behaviour when faced with an ethical dilemma. For example, our previous research found that in a scenario dealing with redundancies, only 15% of HR practitioners thought the decision should take into account employees' expectations of what is fair (CIPD 2015a). Other studies have shown that although HR have strong ethical intentions, they often struggle to enact the role of ethical stewardship because of competing tensions in the organisation (Parkes and Davis 2013).

Looking specifically at the HR profession, practitioners working in third-sector organisations are the most empowered of the respondents, as 83% agree they feel empowered to challenge organisational decisions, compared with 69% in the private sector and 63% in the public sector. This could be due to the flatter structures and less hierarchical cultures that tend to characterise third-sector firms, enabling people to feel that they can speak up. HR practitioners in the public sector (63%) are much less likely than those in the private (77%) or voluntary sector (86%) to agree that their role provides them with the authority to challenge decisions, and that it's acceptable to challenge organisational decisions (57%, 69%, 82%).

Additionally, those in medium-sized organisations (50–249 employees) feel most empowered to challenge decisions made

'HR practitioners in the public sector (63%) are much less likely than those in the private (77%) or voluntary sector (86%) to agree that their role provides them with the authority to challenge decisions.'

by senior members of their organisation (80%, compared with 75% of respondents in small organisations (2–49 employees) and 67% of respondents in large organisations (250+ employees)). This may reflect that HR practitioners in larger organisations experience a greater power distance between themselves and their senior leaders, while 38% of those surveyed in small organisations are standalone HR practitioners.

Unsurprisingly, senior HR practitioners, and those working as in-house or independent consultants, are far more likely than junior HR practitioners to feel they have authority to challenge organisational decisions, and that it is acceptable in the organisations they work in.

Higher levels of perceived empowerment and in-role authority are associated with higher levels of both PI and OI. However, the relationship between organisational identity and these perceptions is stronger, which suggests that in order to feel greater ability to challenge organisational decisions, HR practitioners need to be able to identify with the values of their organisation. This is somewhat counterintuitive, since as individuals are increasingly encouraged to identify with the organisation, speaking out may be perceived as disloyalty, and may threaten continued organisational membership (Parkes and Davis 2013).

We asked respondents to describe where they see their role on a continuum between *alignment with existing organisational practice* and *offering solutions that challenge and advance organisational processes and objectives*. Forty-two per cent of HR practitioners lean towards the latter and 27% use their expertise to offer solutions aligning with and contributing to organisational processes and objectives. However, demonstrating 'conformist innovation' and offering solutions that align with the status quo could have positive outcomes when organisational practice is driven by strong ethical values.

HR practitioners working in large organisations are more likely than those in medium and small organisations to see their role as challenging and advancing organisational processes and objectives (54%, compared with 44% and 36% respectively). This could be because larger organisations are likely to have more formalised ethics policies, reinforcing expected ethical behaviours (Parkes and Davis 2013). Professional body members (50%) and senior HR practitioners (52%) are also more likely to fall into that 'challenging' space, compared with 34% of non-members and 30% of junior HR practitioners. This has implications for the role of the professional body, and senior role models, in supporting and developing these behaviours. For example, challenging the status quo may be desirable in certain organisational situations, but it's important that practitioners can apply situational judgement to decide on the best possible approach.

Table 6: Perceived ability to challenge organisational decisions, by PI and OI (HR respondents) (%)

% agreeing	PI			OI		
	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High
My role provides me with the authority to challenge my organisation's decisions.	69	74	82	61	72	85
I feel empowered to challenge decisions made by senior members of my organisation, regardless of my position in the organisation.	64	71	75	59	71	77
In my organisation, it's acceptable to challenge organisational decisions.	63	67	74	50	70	77

Table 7: Conformist and deviant innovation (%)

% agreeing	Professions			Seniority levels within the HR sample			
	HR	Teachers	IT	HR directors and senior executives (n=432)	HR business partners and senior officers (n=476)	HR officers, administrators and graduates (n=80)	In-house and independent consultants (n=35)
I use my expertise to offer solutions that align with and contribute to existing organisational processes and objectives.	27	27	30	23	29	49	0
I use my expertise to offer solutions that challenge and advance existing organisational processes and objectives.	42	20	30	51	37	13	71

Summary

Out of the three professions, HR practitioners feel the most empowered to challenge unethical organisational decisions. This is a unique role for HR to play in organisations, in light of recent corporate scandals where there was a lack of accountability for unethical practice. It appears that organisational identity is more important than professional identity for increasing levels of perceived empowerment to challenge decisions. Organisational context influences individuals' perceived ability to challenge, with those working in third-sector and large organisations feeling the most empowered. This raises questions about how we can create organisational structures that enable individuals to speak up when they are concerned about a decision.

3 Challenging organisational rules and decisions

'HR practitioners are most likely to agree that they state concern over organisational decisions, regardless of what others may think (80%, in contrast with 63% of IT practitioners and 53% of teachers).'

When it comes to translating the perceived empowerment to challenge into actual behaviours, the picture is less consistent. Basing our questions on Hannah and Avolio's (2010) moral courage scale, we asked practitioners about the frequency with which they state their ethical views, challenge or go against organisational decisions if faced with an issue they perceive to be unethical.
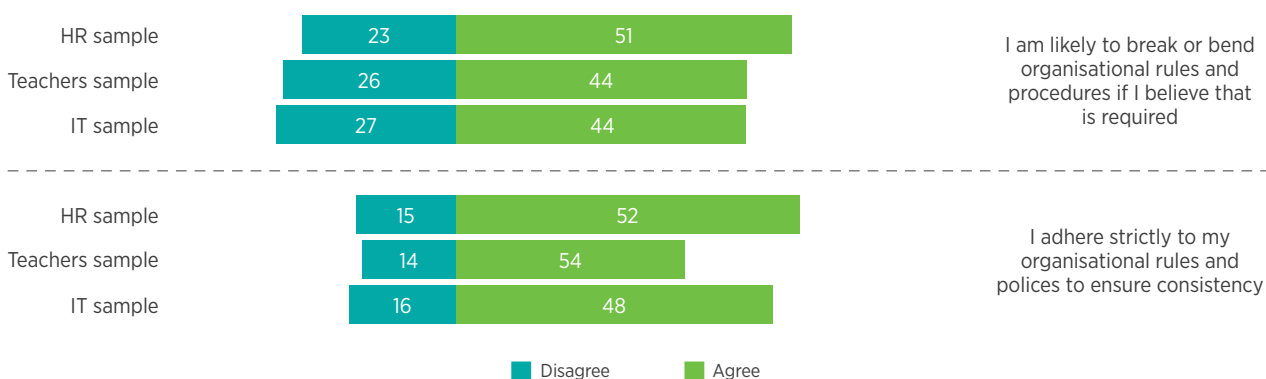
On the one hand, HR practitioners are most likely to agree that they state concern over organisational decisions, regardless of what others may think (80%, in contrast with 63% of IT practitioners and 53% of teachers). At the same time, only about half (51%) of the HR sample state that they will bend or break organisational rules and procedures if they believe it's required (compared with 44% of IT practitioners and 44% of teachers). Another 52% of HR practitioners agree or strongly agree that they adhere strictly to their organisation's rules and policies. A recent study by Alvesson and Spicer (2016) found

that professionals (specifically business school academics) often surrender their professional values and autonomy, by complying with the bureaucratic system, in order to progress or maintain their position within the organisation. Our finding could similarly be explained by the notion that HR may often play along with organisational rules, rather than challenge management practices.

Once again, roles have a part to play: 59% of those working in senior HR roles are likely to bend or break organisational rules, if required, compared with 41% of those in junior roles, and 37% of in-house or independent consultants. Still, 77% of junior HR respondents would state their concerns about organisational decisions, compared with 81% of senior HR managers.

Interestingly, 26% of HR practitioners who are members of a professional body or union are more likely to say they won't break or bend organisational rules and procedures, compared with 19% for non-members. It

Figure 12: Conformity to organisational rules (%)

I am likely to break or bend organisational rules and procedures if I believe that is required

	Disagree	Agree
HR sample	23	51
Teachers sample	26	44
IT sample	27	44

I adhere strictly to my organisational rules and polices to ensure consistency

	Disagree	Agree
HR sample	15	52
Teachers sample	14	54
IT sample	16	48

■ Disagree ■ Agree

Base: HR (n=1,013), teachers (n=979), IT (n=1,032)

could be that professional body or union membership encourages conformist behaviour, which may be problematic in situations where unethical decisions are being made in the organisation.

There is a small positive correlation between levels of PI/OI and adhering strictly to organisational rules and policies: for instance, this is true for 61% of HR practitioners with high PI, compared with 46% of practitioners with low PI.[20] On the other hand, it appears that the level of identity has no impact on the likelihood of breaking organisational rules and procedures, if believed to be required.

In the HR sample, only levels of OI, but not PI, are linked with practitioners' stating concern over organisational decisions regardless of what others might think. In the high OI group, 84% agree or strongly agree they would do so, compared with 77% of those in the low OI group. Although the same is true for IT practitioners, the relationship disappears in the sample of teachers. It may be that this group of respondents feels it is necessary to state concerns regardless of their sense of identity with the professional community, or the organisation.

Those who report that they state their concern over organisational decisions regardless of what others think are more than twice as likely to say they 'often' or 'always' state their views about an ethical issue to their manager (41%) than those who do not state their concern (19%).

Stating concern over organisational decisions is also linked to higher likelihood of going against managers' decisions if they violate ethical standards. For example, 19% of those who agree to stating concern say they tend to go against managers' decisions, compared with 10% of those who disagree.

Interestingly, the way the respondents' department is perceived in the organisation does not have an impact on whether they'd challenge an ethical issue or not.

Encouragingly, 43% of the HR sample say that although they accept the tasks given, they find new and different ways to carry them out. In contrast, teachers are least likely to rethink the organisational requirements: only 16% say they challenge the purpose of what they are asked to do and propose alternative ways of contributing (see Table 9).

Table 8: Adhering to rules by ethical behaviour (HR respondents) (%)

		Always/often state their views about an ethical issue	Always/often go against managers' decisions if they violate ethical standards
I adhere strictly to my organisation's rules and policies to ensure consistency.	Agree	37	16
	Disagree	45	27
I will bend or break organisational rules and procedures if I believe that is required.	Agree	40	21
	Disagree	34	11
In my personal life I find it important to follow society's rules and norms.	Agree	34	15
	Disagree	44	22
I state my concern over organisational decisions regardless of what others may think.	Agree	41	19
	Disagree	19	10

Table 9: Proportion of respondents stating that in the past year they have always or often… (%)

	HR	Teachers	IT
… challenged the purpose of what I was asked to do and proposed alternative ways that I could contribute	35	16	31
… accepted the tasks given, but found new and different ways to carry them out	43	31	40

'There is an indication that HR practitioners who see their role as advancing organisational practice are more likely to challenge unethical organisational decisions.'

Those in the high PI group are more likely to have found alternative solutions for organisational tasks in the previous year, compared with those in the low PI group. This suggests that increased identification with the profession can give HR more courage to challenge organisational processes or practices. On the other hand, high OI makes HR practitioners less likely to challenge the purpose of the tasks and offer new ways to solve problems. Perceptions of the HR department in the organisation has no meaningful impact on whether an HR practitioner would challenge tasks given to them.

HR practitioners who agree their role provides them with the authority to challenge decisions are more likely to say they 'often' or 'always' state their views about an ethical issue to their manager (40%) than those who disagree (28%). They are also more likely to have gone against managers' decisions if they violate their ethical standards (18%) than those who disagree (10%). This suggests that perceived in-role empowerment to uphold ethical practice is linked to willingness and ability to enact these behaviours. As Parkes and Davis (2013) pointed out, whether HR practitioners feel motivated to challenge the organisation can be influenced by professional standing or credibility.

There is an indication that HR practitioners who see their role as advancing organisational practice are more likely to challenge unethical organisational decisions, or offer alternative ways of solving problems. HR practitioners who use their expertise to offer solutions challenging and advancing existing organisational processes/objectives are more likely to have always/often stated their views on an ethical issue (40%) in the past year. This could reflect the trust these individuals possess by virtue of recognition from the organisation that they have contributed positively to solving organisational problems. HR practitioners who are members of a professional body (37%) are also more likely to have always/often stated their views on an

Table 10: Deviant and conformist innovation, by professional identity and organisational identity (%)

% agreeing	PI			OI		
	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High
I am likely to break or bend organisational rules and procedures if I believe that is required.	52	49	52	47	51	54
I adhere strictly to my organisation's rules and policies to ensure consistency.	46	48	61	44	54	56
I state my concern over organisational decisions regardless of what others may think.	78	81	82	77	80	84
% stating they have always or often...						
...accepted the tasks given, but found new and different ways to carry them out	45	43	49	47	47	44
...challenged the purpose of what I was asked to do and proposed alternative ways that I could contribute	38	37	41	38	45	36

ethical issue in the past year compared with non-members (25%). So, the way that HR practitioners view their role in the organisation impacts on their motivation or ability to uphold ethical standards at work. This implies that role identity has some influence in the gap between intentions to challenge unethical practice and actual behaviour, and supports the deviant innovation approach (Legge 1978). The findings also suggest that professional body membership can increase people's likelihood of raising concerns about ethical issues.

Higher PI is not only linked to HR practitioners challenging the purpose of tasks they are given, but also to stating their views about ethical issues to managers, and going against managers' decisions in case of a breach of ethical standards. While high OI has a similarly positive correlation with the likelihood of practitioners raising issues with their superiors, the association between OI and actually going against managers' decisions is not strong. This suggests that increasing individuals' identification with the HR profession can encourage them to speak out against unethical organisational practice. We can therefore argue that having a sense of PI helps to develop HR practitioners' moral courage (Lachman et al 2012).

Table 11: Ethical behaviour, by professional identity and organisational identity (HR respondents) (%)

% stating they had always or often...	PI			OI		
	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High
...stated my views about an ethical issue to one of my managers.	32	36	42	34	33	40
...gone against managers' decisions if they violated my ethical standards.	14	17	19	16	17	17

Summary

Out of the three professions, HR practitioners are the most likely to speak up when concerned about an organisational decision, and to break or bend organisational rules if necessary. It could be that HR is privy to more business information, and therefore more aware of such decisions. Both of these behaviours are correlated with OI. However, both PI and being a member of a professional body decrease the likelihood of breaking organisational rules if needed. This has implications for the behaviours that the CIPD supports in developing HR professionalism. The findings suggest that building professional identity can encourage practitioners to challenge the purpose of organisational tasks and find alternative solutions, which is important in ensuring sound organisational decisions are made. Perceived authority to challenge decisions and feeling responsible for advancing organisational practice appear to facilitate ethical behaviour, suggesting that role identity is also important in ethical decision-making.

4 Unethical practice for the benefit of the profession and the organisation

While alignment of individual values with those of a professional or organisational group is overall seen to be positive, in some instances it can also lead to negative outcomes. Through experiencing strong identity with a particular group or community, individuals might engage in behaviours which, although unethical, are ultimately beneficial to either the organisation or the profession (Thau et al 2015; Umphress et al 2010).

The proportion of practitioners saying they have never demonstrated unethical behaviours to support their profession is high across the three groups. However,

teachers are less likely than HR and IT practitioners to purposely exclude someone from a meeting or conversation to make their profession appear more valuable or convincing (88% had never done this, compared with 83% HR and 81% IT). They are also less likely to deliberately not tell someone in a different profession they have done something wrong, for the purpose of making their own profession look good comparatively (84% had never done this, compared with 80% HR and 75% IT). Some of these findings could be due to the social desirability effect, but we have discounted this for the purpose of the report.

We calculated the average figures for responses across the questions measuring pro-profession behaviours among HR respondents, and found a correlation with age and sector. The likelihood of HR practitioners reporting that they have never engaged in these unethical behaviours to support their profession increases with age; 85% of those aged 55 and over say they have never engaged in these behaviours in the previous year, compared with only 65% of 18–24-year-olds (Figure 14).

HR practitioners in the third sector are also more likely to

Figure 13: Proportion of practitioners reporting they have 'never' engaged in these pro-profession behaviours in the previous year (%)

Withheld information to put your profession ahead of another profession or another profession member
- HR sample: 86
- Teachers sample: 86
- IT sample: 82

Bad-mouthed another profession or another profession member to take them out of the competition for opportunities in the organisation
- HR sample: 84
- Teachers sample: 86
- IT sample: 81

Purposely excluded someone from a meeting or conversation to make (your profession) appear more valuable or convincing
- HR sample: 83
- Teachers sample: 88
- IT sample: 81

Failed to tell someone not in your profession that something they did was done wrong so that they do not seem to perform as well as your profession
- HR sample: 80
- Teachers sample: 84
- IT sample: 75

Spoke negatively about a different profession to make your profession look better
- HR sample: 77
- Teachers sample: 80
- IT sample: 72

■ HR sample   ■ Teachers sample   ■ IT sample

Base varies for each statement. Data rebased to exclude not applicable.

say they have never engaged in these behaviours (90%), compared with those working in the private (82%) or public (79%) sector. This suggests that organisational context influences ethical behaviour, and can be linked to the finding in section 2 that HR practitioners working in the third sector feel more empowered to challenge decisions than those working in the private or public sector. It could also be that working in flatter, less hierarchical organisations makes it more difficult to engage in unethical behaviours, and increases accountability, since people have stronger relationships with their colleagues through working more closely together.

Figure 14: Proportion of HR respondents reporting they have 'never' engaged in these pro-profession behaviours in the previous year, by age (%)
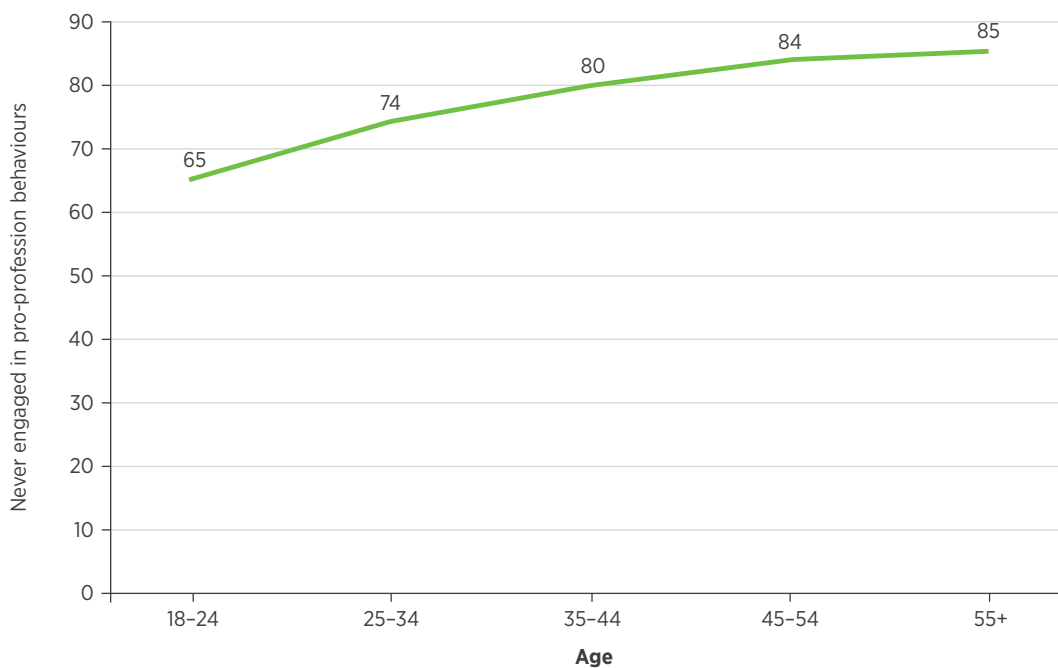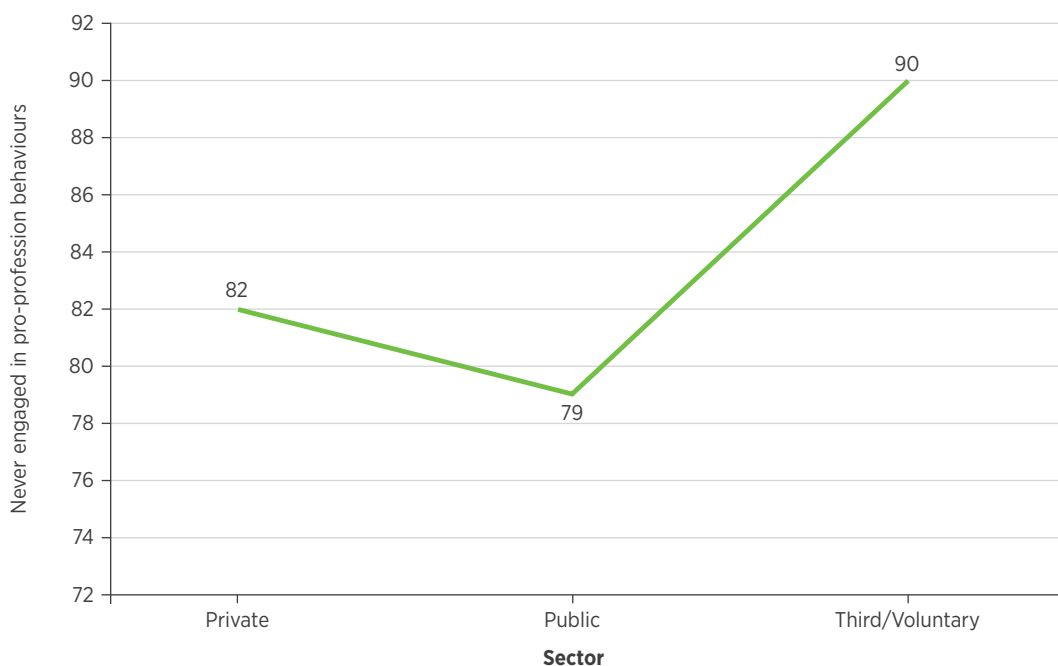

Figure 15: Proportion of HR respondents reporting they have 'never' engaged in these pro-profession behaviours in the previous year, by sector (%)
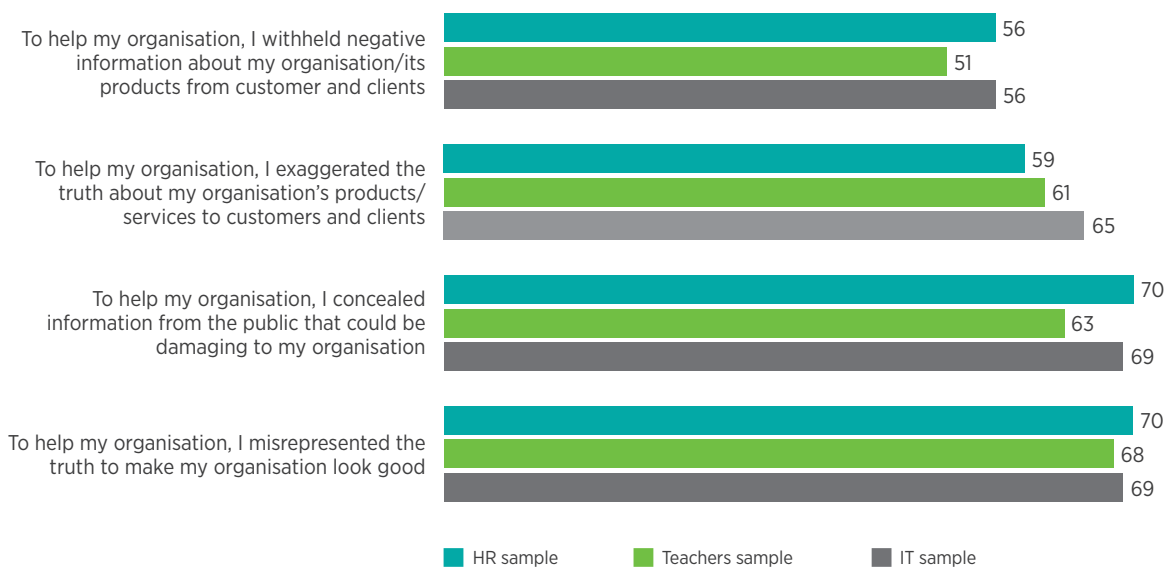
Fewer respondents (across the three groups) report they have never acted unethically to benefit their organisation. For instance, although 59% of HR practitioners say they have never exaggerated the truth about products and services to customers and clients

to help the organisation, 12% responded 'sometimes' and 8% 'often' or 'always'. It appears that it's more likely that a professional will engage in unethical behaviours for the sake of their organisation rather than for the sake of their profession.

Similar to pro-profession behaviours, there are correlations between pro-organisation behaviours and age/sector. For example, 70% of HR practitioners aged 55 and over say they have never engaged in these unethical behaviours to support their

Figure 16: Proportion of practitioners reporting they have 'never' engaged in these pro-organisation behaviours in the previous year (%)

To help my organisation, I withheld negative information about my organisation/its products from customer and clients
- HR sample: 56
- Teachers sample: 51
- IT sample: 56

To help my organisation, I exaggerated the truth about my organisation's products/services to customers and clients
- HR sample: 59
- Teachers sample: 61
- IT sample: 65

To help my organisation, I concealed information from the public that could be damaging to my organisation
- HR sample: 70
- Teachers sample: 63
- IT sample: 69

To help my organisation, I misrepresented the truth to make my organisation look good
- HR sample: 70
- Teachers sample: 68
- IT sample: 69

■ HR sample   ■ Teachers sample   ■ IT sample

Base varies for each statement. Data rebased to exclude not applicable.

Figure 17: Proportion of HR respondents reporting they have 'never' engaged in these pro-organisation behaviours in the previous year, by age (%)

Never engaged in proorganisation behaviours

Age	Value
18–24	57
25–34	49
35–44	61
45–54	66
55+	70
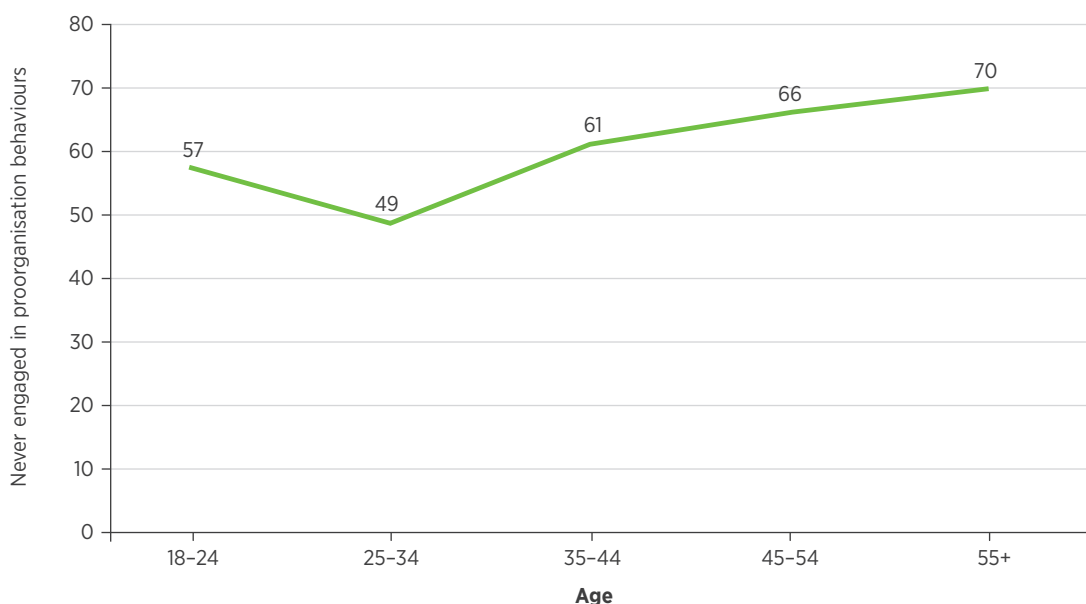
organisation, compared with 57% of those aged 18–24 (Figure 17). Interestingly, practitioners aged 25–34 are less likely (49%) than those aged 18–24 to say they have never engaged in these behaviours.

HR practitioners from the third sector (72%) are less likely than those in the private (63%) and public (60%) sector to have engaged in any of the unethical practices listed (Figure 18). The same is also true of practitioners with ten and more years' experience, compared with those with less than two years' experience in the profession. This suggests that the likelihood of behaving unethically to support the organisation (as well as the profession) decreases with experience and is influenced by organisational sector.

Surprisingly, there are no meaningful associations between the average scores for pro-profession unethical behaviours and HR practitioners' professional identity, nor between the average scores for pro-organisation unethical behaviours and the strength of HR practitioners' organisational identity. Perceptions of the HR department in an organisation (for example, whether it is taken seriously or given an opportunity to add value to the business) similarly has no significant effect on behaviours.

However, one factor that makes a difference to the likelihood of HR practitioners engaging in unethical behaviours is the extent to which they consider themselves to be an ethical person at work. Those who say that characteristics such as caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, helpful, hardworking, honest, and kind describe an important part of who they are in professional settings are then less likely to say that they behave unethically to benefit their profession or the organisation. Describing themselves as having these values in personal life makes no difference to the likelihood of engaging in unethical behaviours.

Figure 18: Proportion of HR respondents reporting they have 'never' engaged in these pro-organisation behaviours in the previous year, by sector (%)
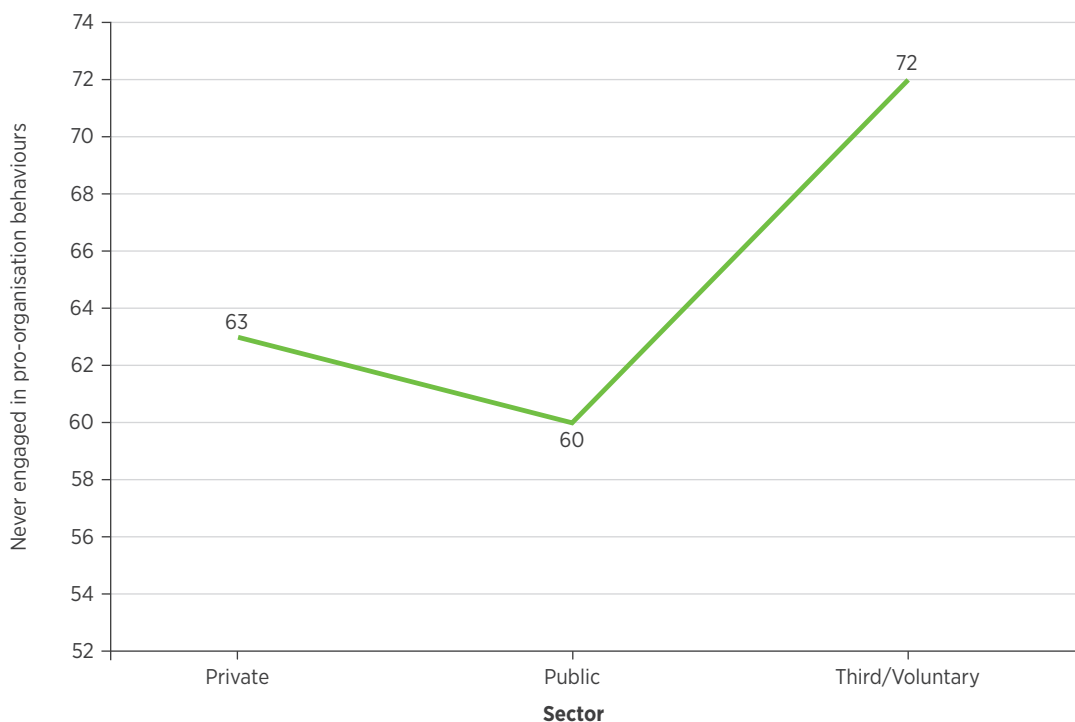
Summary

Across professional groups, practitioners are more likely to say they have behaved unethically to support their organisation than to support their profession. In HR, professional identity and organisational identity do not appear to influence unethical behaviours. However, considering moral traits to be an important part of their working life reduces the likelihood of engaging in unethical behaviours at work.

Key findings and conclusions

'In the current climate of uncertainty and distrust, the ability of professionals to demonstrate moral integrity is of critical importance.'

In the current climate of uncertainty and distrust, the ability of professionals to demonstrate moral integrity is of critical importance. As the experts on people and organisations, the HR profession must play a fundamental role in creating work that benefits all stakeholders, building ethical and sustainable cultures. However, since the remit and identity of HR has been closely tied to organisational goals, the ability of HR practitioners to operate as independent professionals, with the power to challenge organisational decisions when they violate ethical values, has been questioned. The aim of this report is to explore how professional identity develops in an organisational context, comparing the work identities of younger, commercial professions with the long-established teaching profession. We were interested in whether different work identities influence practitioners' ability to uphold ethical values at work.

How do professionals create a sense of professional identity in an organisational context?

In today's transient labour market, in which loyalty to a single organisation over the course of one's career is no longer the norm, identification with professional groups may become more important (Ashforth et al 2008). Previous research has suggested that a person's role as a professional can be in conflict with their role as an organisational member (Gunz and Gunz 2007). Our findings suggest that practitioners in

the three fields examined can identify with their profession and their organisation to a similar extent. As predicted, based on our elements of professionalism checklist, teachers are the most likely of the three professional groups to feel personally aligned with the norms and values of their profession, and also with their organisation. HR practitioners have a slightly stronger sense of identification with the organisation than the profession, which is unsurprising given HR's shift in focus towards contributing to overall business performance (Beer et al 2015). When under pressure from the business, organisational identity may take precedence over professional identity for HR practitioners (Pratt et al 2006; Hogg 2006), which could provide some explanation for the gap between ambition to uphold ethical values and what actually happens in practice (CIPD 2015a).

Our findings demonstrate that embedding moral values as a core part of one's working life, and having a sense of purpose in work, can develop HR professional identity. Equipping practitioners with a set of ethical guidelines, clearly defining what they stand for as professionals, is likely to build their identification with the professional community.

How can we develop moral character at work?

The crisis of trust in institutions and corporate firms, brought about by scandals such as Volkswagen and Sports Direct, has brought the importance of professional integrity to the fore.

According to the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (n.d.), *'exemplary (professional) practice requires practitioners who are not only knowledgeable concerning the values and principles of their occupations, but who are agents of moral character'* (p2). Following the financial crisis, many commentators asked, 'Where was HR?' when unethical management practices were being driven in organisations (CIPD 2011). To help build sustainable organisations that create value for all stakeholders involved, HR needs to play an active role in challenging unethical behaviour and cultures (Parkes and Davis 2013), asking good questions of management about the real impact their practices are having on the organisation as a whole. This study looks at how far HR practitioners feel able and willing to operate as autonomous professionals, upholding strong values of their own within organisations.

Our findings show that while HR practitioners tend to see their role as 'ethical stewards' in challenging unethical organisational practice (more so than teachers or IT practitioners), they do not necessarily always enact that role. Previous authors have highlighted the ambiguity about how far one should act as a 'professional' or a 'manager', and that practitioners may deal with such tensions by treating their work as a game and complying with the system (Alvesson and Spicer 2016). From our findings, it appears that developing a sense of identification with the profession can help HR practitioners to challenge the way things are done in the organisation.

Having perceived in-role authority to challenge organisational decisions, and viewing one's role as being there to advance current practice, can enable HR to speak out when they feel it's necessary. Perceiving moral traits to be an important part of one's sense of self at work may also reduce the likelihood of an individual behaving unethically. Therefore, as well as building professional identity, the presence of strong moral values in people's working lives is key in enabling ethical practice.

Implications for HR

Identifying with the profession, and having a clear sense of purpose within the role itself to help organisations examine their values and beliefs, can enable practitioners to uphold ethical standards. This has implications for the way in which HR jobs are designed and the types of behaviours that are rewarded, to ensure that ethical competence is given as much weighting as technical expertise. The finding that not many HR practitioners have a career role model, and that they tend to look outside the organisation for support, raises the question of what support mechanisms can be provided within teams.

HR professional identity can be developed over the course of one's career through CPD. Perceptions of the function's credibility in the organisation can also build a sense of professional identity, which raises questions about whether business leaders champion HR's role in helping to build an ethical culture in the organisation. Leading conversations about ethics in organisations can help HR to create understanding in the rest of the business of the value that HR can bring, as the experts on people, and their contribution to long-term organisational sustainability. What types of organisational structures can be put in place to enable individuals to raise concerns about ethical practice?

'It appears that developing a sense of identification with the profession can help HR practitioners to challenge the way things are done in the organisation.'

'In order for a profession to be trusted, its members must have strong ethical values and integrity.'

Future implications for the CIPD

This report highlights some of the behaviours the CIPD could help develop in HR professionals to enable them to uphold ethical values in organisations. It can do this by setting the standards for good HR practice and building professionalism in HR. Challenging organisational rules or processes where necessary, stating concern over decisions regardless of what others may think, and advancing organisational practice are examples of behaviours that have been linked to ethical decision-making in our findings. Having a sense of authority in one's role to challenge decisions is also linked to raising ethical concerns.

Giving HR professionals a strong sense of purpose in their role, to help organisations make ethical decisions, will enable them to challenge unethical practice. Setting clear expectations about the role of HR, and embedding this into CIPD training and qualifications, could help to support this. Moreover, including teaching on ethical values as a key element of HR qualifications at all levels could enable practitioners to apply these values in practice.

The data has raised questions around the extent to which we expect HR practitioners to identify with their organisational versus professional values, and how far they should operate as independent professionals. This has implications for the development of the CIPD's Professional Standards Framework and the type of guidance the CIPD can provide to help practitioners recognise situations where organisational demands threaten their professional values, and prioritise values to 'do the right thing'. Further research could look at whether it is possible to meet all the elements of what it means to be a professional, without having a strong sense of professional identity, as well as what other factors influence ethical behaviours in organisations.

What's next?

In order for a profession to be trusted, its members must have strong ethical values and integrity. People Profession: now and for the future is the CIPD's strategy to ensure the people professionals of the future are equipped with the skills, knowledge and behaviours they'll need to be effective, including in areas such as situational judgement and ethical competence.

We started this programme of work two years ago by collaborating with our members, the wider HR community and business leaders to develop principles for better work and working lives. Those principles will represent the CIPD's fundamental beliefs about what good work looks like. They will guide practitioners to make the best workplace decisions by prioritising the right things, regardless of the context or the situation.

We are now in the next phase of the journey – embedding the principles at the heart of a new Professional Standards Framework. The framework will create a clear standard for HR and L&D professionals at every level, but will also set an international gold standard for Chartered members, in which the profession and wider society can have confidence.

You can find out more about People Profession: now and for the future and the Professional Standards Framework at **cipd.co.uk/pff**

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Endnotes

1   χ2 (2, n = 2,963) = 222.03, p = 0.000

2   χ2 (2, n = 2,957) = 186.49, p = 0.000

3   U = 5,568, z = –0.259, p = 0.81

4   χ2 (4, n = 985) = 1.70, p = 0.790

5   χ2 (2, n = 982) = 0.866, p = 0.649

6   χ2 (2, n = 958) = 2.41, p = 0.299

7   χ2 (2, n = 953) = 39.12, p = 0.000

8   HR: r(1,005) = 0.21, p = 0.000; teachers: r(965) = 0.25, p = 0.000; IT: r(1,005) = 0.28, p = 0.000

9   HR: r(1,003) = 0.16, p = 0.000; teachers: r(965) = 0.25, p = 0.000; IT: r(1,005) = 0.19, p = 0.000

10   χ2 (2, n = 988) = 34.35, p = 0.000

11   χ2 (2, n = 974) = 20.87, p = 0.000

12   χ2 (2, n = 975) = 178.98, p = 0.000

13   χ2 (2, n = 987) = 58.17, p = 0.000

14   U = 89,437, z = –5.23, p = 0.000

15   U = 102,020, z = – 1.55, p = 0.12

16   r(971) = 0.23, p = 0.000

17   χ2 (2, n = 932) = 45.15, p = 0.000

18   r(961) = 0.31, p = 0.000

19   χ2 (2, n = 923) = 61.46, p = 0.000

20   χ2 (2, n = 987) = 21.25, p = 0.000

CIPD