

## **Employee Advocacy in Africa: The Role of HR Practitioners in Malawi**

### **Aminu Mamman**

University of Manchester,  
Global Development Institute  
Arthur Lewis Building, Oxford Road,  
Manchester, UK

email: [aminu.mamman@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:aminu.mamman@manchester.ac.uk)

### **Christopher J. Rees**

University of Manchester,  
Global Development Institute,  
Arthur Lewis Building, Oxford Road,  
Manchester, UK

email: [chris.rees@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:chris.rees@manchester.ac.uk)

### **Rhoda Bakuwa**

University of Malawi,  
The Malawi Polytechnic,  
Florence House,  
Chichiri, Blantyre 3, Malawi  
[rbakuwa@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:rbakuwa@yahoo.co.uk)

### **Mohamed Branine**

Dundee Business School  
Abertay University  
Dundee, UK

[m.branine@abertay.ac.uk](mailto:m.branine@abertay.ac.uk)

### **Ken Kamoche**

Nottingham University  
Nottingham University Business School  
Nottingham, UK

[ken.kamoche@nu.ac.uk](mailto:ken.kamoche@nu.ac.uk)

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### **Abstract**

#### **Purpose**

In recognising the weakness of trade unions and the lack of an institutional framework designed to enforce employee rights in an African context, this study examines the extent to which HR practitioners are perceived by key stakeholders to be playing the role of employee advocate.

#### **Design/methodology/approach**

The quantitative data set is derived from a sample of 305 respondents (95 HR practitioners, 121 line managers, and 89 employees) from Malawi.

#### **Findings**

Despite the challenges of the context, HR practitioners are perceived by key stakeholders (including line managers and employees) to be playing the role of employee advocate. Standard multiple regression results indicate that the main factor contributing to the perception that HR practitioners are playing this role is their contribution to 'motivating employees'.

#### **Research limitations/implications**

The study was conducted in Malawi. Further research is necessary to explore the generalizability of the findings to other contexts.

#### **Originality/value**

The findings provide an empirical base for future studies which explore perceptions of the employee advocacy role undertaken by HR practitioners in Africa

## Introduction

The last few decades have seen significant research into the role that Human Resource (HR) practitioners and HR departments play in organisations (e.g. Conner and Ulrich, 1996; Foote and Robinson, 1999; Gooderham and Nordhaug, 1997; Heffernan et al., 2016; Kochan, 1997; Lemmergaard, 2009; Mamman and Al Khulaiby, 2014; Mamman and Somantri, 2014; Ulrich, Losey and Lake 1997). This research activity has culminated in the development of a number of theories and models aimed at understanding the role that HR does or should play (Storey, 1992; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Ulrich, Losey and Lake 1997). Yet, in spite of these developments, there is still a dearth of systematic research into how HR practitioners tackle the conflicting roles they are expected to play. In particular, there is a need for more research in order to understand how HR practitioners satisfy the needs of the multiple stakeholders they are supposed to serve within their employing organisations (Graham and Tarbell, 2006).

The advent of strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) has led to an emphasis on the need for HR practitioners to play a strategic role in order to be of institutional relevance (Lawler and Mohrman, 2003; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Ulrich, Losey and Lake 1997). An appreciable number of studies have been designed to investigate the extent to which HR practitioners are indeed playing their new roles as strategic partners and change agents (Caldwell, 2008; Conner and Ulrich, 1996; Hailey et al., 2005; Lemmergaard, 2009; Ulrich, 1998; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005; Whittaker and Marchington, 2003; Wright et al., 2001). Even in developing countries and transitional economies, there have been investigations of the strategic roles that HR practitioners can play (Antila, 2006; Antila and Kakkonen, 2008; Bowen et al., 2002; Mamman and Al Khulaiby, 2014; Mamman and Somantri, 2014; Rees, 2013; Sumelius, et.al., 2009; Zhu et al., 2005; Zuzeviciute and Margarita, 2010). Other authors call for the roles of HR practitioners to be expanded beyond organisational boundaries, in order to fill the gaps left by weak institutions in developing countries (Mamman, Kamoche and Bakuwa, 2012). However, it has been argued that the emphasis on the strategic role for HR practitioners has pushed the pendulum too far towards the interests of organisations and managers, to the detriment of the employees' own interests (Graham and Tarbell, 2006). As Stark and Poppler (2017:2) state: "... *it is increasingly difficult to reconcile the HRM professional's endeavor to represent the interests of investors and management, all the while claiming to advocate for employee interests*".

Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) and Ulrich, Losey and Lake (1997) have pointed out that, within the context of their new-found roles, there is need for HR practitioners to revisit their traditional roles as employee champions or employee advocates. In essence, the demise of traditional workforce-centered personnel functions has created the need for advocacy within organisations to ensure that employees' voices are heard amid the drive for more strategic types of activities. As Ellig (1997: 91) highlights so succinctly; with the advent of HR and its emphasis on being a business partner, "*Many have gone too far, however, and are in danger of contaminating the HR identifier by excluding the role of employee advocate.* The traditional employee advocate plays a vital role, because the achievement of an organisation's strategic objectives is now widely accepted to be contingent on the effective management of employees (Barney and Wright, 1998; Kochan, 1997; Jackson and Schuler, 1995). Further, aside from this instrumental reason, there are also normative reasons why employee advocacy is a vital role for HR practitioners. Both national employment policies and international labour conventions demand fairness and equity in the treatment of employees as key stakeholders of the organisation (Graham and Tarbell, 2006).

From the HR practitioners' perspectives, it is vital that stakeholders have a positive view of the way they deliver their roles while, at the same time, acknowledging the potential ethical conflicts and compromises that may arise when simultaneously undertaking business partner and employee advocate roles (McCracken, O'Kane, Brown and McCrory, 2017). In the context of developing countries, the absence of strong institutions to regulate employment relations has made the employee advocacy role of HR practitioners critical to ensuring fairness and equity in the workplace. In fact, many countries in Africa, perhaps understandably, do not have equal employment legislation or minimum wage legislation; and where such laws exist, they are rarely enforced. Given that HR practitioners and HR departments are supposed to play a significant role in integrating organisational strategy with HR policy and practice in order to achieve organisational objectives (Kochan and Dyer, 1993), and in so doing, achieve economic development, the neglect of this important area of research requires urgent remedy. Introducing a special edition of this journal on the subject of employee relations in Africa, Wood (2008: 329) states that: "*A major limitation in the literature on employment relations is the very limited coverage of the African continent...*". Similarly, one of the main conclusions drawn by Horowitz (2015: 2802) from his comprehensive literature review of HRM in multinational companies in Africa, is that: "*...there is a paucity of empirical work beyond firm-level case study or small-scale*

*quantitative research often by organization psychology researchers on specific HRM practices such as performance management, remuneration, career development and organizational commitment*". At a more specific level, there is a scarcity of research, especially focusing on developing countries, about the extent to which HR practitioners have adopted employee advocate roles (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005).

### *Research Objectives and the Context of Malawi*

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate the extent to which HR practitioners are perceived to be playing an employee advocate role within an African context where institutions and trade unions are weak. Specifically, the study seeks to accomplish the following: to examine line managers', employees' and HR managers' perceptions of the extent to which the employee advocate role is being played; to test the utility of Ulrich's model of the employee advocate role in an African context; to examine the significance of each element that together constitute the employee advocate role within an African context; and to draw out the research and practical implications of the findings both for employment practice and for future research.

In order to address these objectives, this study draws on primary data which were gathered in the sub-Saharan country of Malawi. According to the World Bank (2018) country profile, Malawi has a population of approximately 18,000,000 and is classed as a low income country with life expectancy at birth reported as 56.6 years for females and 53.7 years for males (Government of Malawi, 2018). The Constitution of Malawi does make certain provisions which relate directly to labour relations. For example, section 31 of the Constitution affords citizens the right to: "*fair and and safe labour practices and to fair remuneration*" and "*to form and join trade unions or not to form or join trade unions*" (see WIPO, 2018). Nevertheless, the *Danish Trade Union Council for International Development Cooperation's* profile of the labour market profile of Malawi (Ulandssekretariatet LO/FTF Council, 2016: 1) highlights the role of the 'vast dominating' informal sector in Malawi with the Council's research indicating that just 2.5% of the estimated labour force of 7.9 million workers are members of trade unions. These statistics may help to explain the dearth of research that has focused on employee relations in Malawi and provide further justification for a study of this nature.

Subsequent sections of the paper will review literature to explore the nature and importance of the employee advocate role from an HR perspective. Having stated the

hypotheses of the study, the main findings of the study will then be presented along with conclusions and possible directions for future research.

### **Employee Perspectives on HR roles**

Ever since the popularisation of strategic HRM, there have been growing calls to avoid the neglect of employee perspectives by those undertaking HR roles in organisations (Blyton and Turnbull, 1998; Järlström, Saru and Vanhala, 2016; Renwick, 2003; Turnbull and Wass, 1998). Even advocates of a strategic role for HR practitioners caution against the marginalization of the employee perspective within HR roles (Kochan, 1997; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). Indeed, it has been argued that although various conceptualisations of HR have acknowledged employee perspectives within HR roles, the managerial and organisational dimensions of HR roles have tended to receive more attention (Mabey, Skinner, and Clark, 1998; Graham and Tarbell, 2006; Guest and Conway, 1999; Legge, 1995; Storey, 1992)

In providing broad conceptualisations of HR roles, several experts have, nevertheless, identified the employee dimension of HR as one of its key elements. For example, Ulrich and his colleagues conducted an important study looking at HR professionals' roles involving a sample of 256 HR professionals. The research was used to identify four roles: *change agent*, *strategic partner*, *employee champion*, and *administrative expert* (Conner and Ulrich, 1996). A later conceptualisation of HR roles by Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) separated the employee champion role into *employee advocate* and *human resource developer*. According to Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) HR practitioners should focus on establishing a reciprocal relationship between employer and employee. They argue that HR practitioners should empathise with employees and act as the employees' representative, in addition to performing their other roles towards other stakeholders of the organisation which employs them. However, it has been argued that conceptualising the HR role by placing emphasis on the employee perspective (for example, Storey, 1992) contains an inherent conflict, because it is inevitable that HR practitioners will have to strike trade-offs between the employees' and the organisation's interests (Caldwell, 2003; Graham and Tarbell, 2006). In fact, recent research by Heizmann and Fox (2017: 14) provides evidence to indicate that some HR practitioners are so concerned with being seen to have adopted the role of business partner that they have: '*strongly distanced themselves from the 'soft' employee advocate position*'. In a developing country context this issue of trade-offs is more likely to be at the detriment of employees, in

part because the institutional arrangements to protect employees' interests are very weak and sometimes non-existent (Bakuwa and Mamman, 2012; Mamman, Kamoche, and Bakuwa, 2012). Although there has been a call for HR practitioners to take on a more holistic role, requiring the serious incorporation of employee perspectives (Renwick, 2003), there is little empirical evidence to indicate whether this advice is being heeded in the developing countries of Africa. Hence the focus of this research is on determining the extent to which the employee advocate role evident in an African context. We argue that because of the weak and limited institutional support for employee rights in Africa, the employee advocate role is less likely to be performed by HR practitioners there.

There are many reasons why the employee advocate role is critical to HR roles: the broad reasons are strategic/instrumental and normative (Graham and Tarbell, 2006). As regards the strategic/instrumental reason, it has long been argued that organisations should take a strategic approach to the management of human resources as a means of achieving operational and strategic objectives (Barney and Wright 1998; Schuler, and Jackson, 1987; Wright et al., 2001). In other words, the employees' motivation to achieve organisational objectives is tied to the extent to which their concerns and needs are addressed. Therefore, experts argue that HR practitioners should play a significant role in ensuring that organisations and line managers respect employees' interests to securing employees' commitment to the achievement of organisational objectives (Barney and Wright, 1998; Kochan, 1997; Wright et. al., 2001). The specific HR role which is crucial for achieving this is the employee advocate role (Kochan, 1997). Therefore, it can be argued that the degree to which HR practitioners play an employee advocate role will depend on the extent to which the organisation views employees as a strategic asset. Given that the concept of strategic HR management is yet to take a significant hold in African organisations (Kamoche et al., 2004; Pallangyo and Rees, 2010), it will not be surprising if HR practitioners are found not to be playing an employee advocate role for strategic and instrumental reasons. Conversely, it can be argued that, given that private sector organisations are more likely to face significant competition in both the product and labor market, they are more likely to adopt the strategic approach to HR management (Bakuwa and Mamman, 2012) and therefore that their HR practitioners would be more likely to play an employee advocate role for strategic and instrumental reasons.

An important dimension of the instrumental reason as to why HR practitioners should play an employee advocate role is the need to demonstrate credibility to key stakeholders,

namely employees, trade unions and relevant institutions. Indeed, several experts have reported on the HR practitioners' struggle to gain credibility. The reasons for this struggle range from balkanization to the *deprofessionalisation* of the HR function (Purcell and Ahlstrand, 1994) with the corollary that the impact and influence of HR often derives from multiple experts rather than from a clearly distinct function (Purcell and Ahlstrand, 1994). Other credibility challenges faced by HR practitioners involve maintaining autonomy and influence, powerlessness, marginalisation, porous occupational boundaries, and tension pertaining to balancing the interests of multiple stakeholders (Kochan 1997; Ulrich, 1997; 1998). Therefore, in order to demonstrate their relevance and enhance their credibility to stakeholders, the employee advocate role (among others) is one of the key roles expected of HR practitioners (Kochan; 1997; Ulrich, 1997; 1998; Ulrich et al., 1995; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). While there is some evidence to suggest that such roles are being played by HR practitioners in both developed and developing countries, this evidence tends to be somewhat limited in scope and depth (Bowen et al., 2002; Conner and Ulrich, 1996; Mamman and Al Khulaiby, 2014; Mamman and Somantri, 2014; Sumelius, Smale and Björkman, 2009).

Another important reason why the employee advocate role is important concerns the organisation's obligation to look after the interests of employees regardless of the strategic imperative. This is what is referred to as the *normative* reason. In fact, it has been argued that HR practitioners have an ethical responsibility to protect the rights of employees as a norm of the profession (Graham and Tarbell, 2006). This normative role has been buttressed by international labour standards and conventions (for example, International Labour Organisation, 2005). Similarly, the professional code of HR practice also underscores the need for HR practitioners to ensure the ethical treatment of employees in the workplace (Graham and Tarbell, 2006). In essence, in the absence of highly developed employee relations systems and policies in many African contexts, aspects of the employee advocate role may be seen to complement what Horowitz (2015: 2796) describes as: "... *the collective solidarity [which] is seen in the network of interrelationships, extended family and mutual obligations which is not unlike the Confucian influence on East Asian MNC's culture*".

In spite of the instrumental and normative value of the employee advocate role, due to the inherent conflict surrounding the performance of HR roles, the employee advocate role sometimes does not attract adequate attention, especially where institutional structures or trade unions are weak. Indeed, even when HR practitioners perform their roles adequately,



other stakeholders might not perceive the performance of such roles in the same light or to the same degree. In fact, the multiple constituency approach as well as research evidence suggests that stakeholders vary in their perception of HR departments' performances (Mamman and Somantri, 2013; Mitsuhashi et al., 1999; Wright et al., 2001). Therefore, in addition to the key research objectives outlined earlier, the study tests the following hypotheses:

***Hypothesis 1:*** HR practitioners in Africa are unlikely to play a significant employee advocate role. This is because of the presence of weak trade unions and the absence of other institutions to enforce employee rights in the workplace.

***Hypothesis 2:*** There will be a significant difference between perceptions of line managers, employees and HR managers as to the extent to which the employee advocate role is being performed. This is because multiple constituency theory suggests that the perception of HR practitioner effectiveness will vary across stakeholders.

***Hypothesis 3:*** Given the instrumental reason to demonstrate their credibility, HR managers are more likely to see themselves performing an employee advocate role than line managers and employees are to view them as performing such a role.

***Hypothesis 4:*** Motivating employees as an element of the HR practitioners' role will have a significant influence on the perception of HR practitioners' performance of the employee advocate role. This is because, if done effectively, motivating employees will include all the facets of the employee advocacy role performed by HR practitioners.

## **Method**

This study is based on a survey of of line managers (N=121), HR practitioners (N=95) and employees (N=89). Thus a total of N=305 respondents, employed within N= 162 private sector companies operating in Malawi companies, completed and returned the questionnaires which they had been sent. The sample of 162 companies was drawn from the Malawi

Confederation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (MCCCI) directory. All the N=162 companies are categorised as medium-sized companies that have HR functional areas.

Respondents were asked to respond to 13 items on a 5-point Likert-type scale which incorporated strongly agree to strongly disagree response categories. This instrument was developed from the work of Corner and Ulrich (1996) and Ulrich and Brockbank (2015). Specifically, the items explored the perceptions of the respondents towards the employee advocate role played by HR practitioners in their organisations (*Strongly disagree to Strongly agree*). For example, the items sought to gauge the respondents' perceptions of the extent to which HR: listens to employees; cares for the financial needs of employees; is the first to defend employees' rights; and shares in the happiness and sadness of the staff (see table 1). The scale of 13 items was assessed for reliability using the Cronbach Alpha coefficient. To produce reliable results a scale should have as high an alpha coefficient as possible, and certainly at least 0.7 (de Vaus, 2002: 127). The Cronbach Alpha for the scale of 13 items was 0.916; hence the instrument used in this study can be considered to be reliable.

## Results

### *Perception of Employee Advocate Role*

One of the main objectives of this study is to investigate the respondents' perceptions as to whether African HR practitioners do play an employee advocate role. By extension, this would also test the utility of Ulrich's model for the HR role in an African context. Examining the HR employee advocate role will also enable us to test our first hypothesis, which states that, due to weak trade unions and the weakness of the institutional environment designed to enforce employee rights, HR practitioners are less likely to play such role. As can be seen from Table 1, HR practitioners are indeed perceived to be playing an employee advocate role by all the three categories of the respondents. In fact, apart from two items (*Cares for employee's family needs; Organises trips for the staff members*), the mean score is above 3.00, which we consider as the cut-off point for determining whether HR practitioners play such a role. Therefore, **hypothesis 1 is rejected**. This also confirms the utility of using Ulrich's model in an African context. The three most significant elements are: *Shares the happiness and sadness of the staff; Organises regular meetings with staff for speaking and listening to them; Cares for employee's health needs*. This finding is encouraging for HR practitioners on the continent of Africa. It demonstrates that despite the weak and sometimes absence of institutional mechanisms to regulate employment relations, HR practitioners have

the opportunity to play a vital role generally and, in particular, an employee advocate role. Since their credibility is tied to the role they play in their organisations, the more HR professionals are in a position to identify “niche roles” and undertake them effectively, the more their credibility will be enhanced. In fact, it has been argued that, in order to have access to higher decision making table, HR practitioners must first demonstrate their utility to the organisation through providing solutions to the problems facing the organisation rather than merely assuming that they will have easy access to such decision making structures by virtue of their formal position (Conner, and Ulrich, 1996; Mamman, and Al Kulaiby, 2014; Long, Ismail and Amin, 2011).

[Take in Table 1 about here]

Based on the argument concerning the conflicting roles of HR practitioners, as well as multiple constituency theory which predicts that perceptions of the effectiveness of their roles will vary across stakeholders within the organisation (Mamman and Somantri, 2014; Mitsuhashi et al., 1999; Wright et al., 2001), the study tests hypotheses 2 that there will be a significant difference between line managers, employees and HR managers in the perception of the extent to which an employee advocate role is being performed. Based on the overall mean presented in Table 1 above, **hypothesis 2 is supported**. Specifically, overall, HR practitioners appear to rank themselves higher than other stakeholders rank them. This is not unexpected, and corroborates the findings of previous studies (Mamman and Al Kulaiby, 2014; Mamman and Somantri, 2013; Wright et al., 2001). This finding supports an earlier study of the perception of HR roles (Bhatnagar and Sharma, 2005: 1711) in which it was found that “*Discriminant functional analysis reflected that line and HR managers differed significantly in their perception of both variables*”. Arguably, because of their desire for credibility among stakeholders and fellow professionals, HR practitioners are more likely, in comparison to other employees, to see themselves performing all their roles. Therefore **hypothesis 3 is supported**.

#### *Significance of the elements that constitute the Employee Advocate Role*

Amongst the objectives of this study is an examination of the significance of each element that constitutes an employee advocate role within an African context, and an

exploration of the extent to which the elements relate to employee motivation. To address these objectives, regression analyses were conducted. The regression was first used to establish how well the set of variables is able to predict respondents' perceptions that HR practitioners play an employee advocate role, and second to determine which variable among the variables is the major predictor of the respondents' perception that HR practitioners play an employee advocate role. The results of the first regression analysis revealed that there is at least some relationship between all the independent variables and the dependent variable. However, the two variables *HR practitioners care for employees health needs* and *HR practitioners care for family needs* had the lowest correlations (0.245 and 0.212 respectively), along with *HR practitioners as employees' advocate*, while the rest of the variables had correlations above 0.4. Therefore, *HR practitioners care for employees health needs* and *HR practitioners care for family needs* were not included in the further regression analysis. In addition, the bivariate correlation between *HR practitioners listen to employees* and *HR practitioners implement employees suggestions* was high (0.751) indicating the existence of multicollinearity. Tabachnick and Fidell (1996: 86) suggest that one should 'think carefully before including two variables with a bivariate correlation of say, 0.7 or above in the same analysis.' Therefore, *HR implement employees suggestions* has been dropped, while *HR listen to employees* has been retained because the latter has a higher correlation with *HR practitioners as employees' advocate*. Likewise, the bivariate correlation between *HR practitioners organise regular meetings with staff* and *HR practitioners contribute in motivating employees* was high (0.733), therefore *HR practitioners contribute in motivating employees* has been retained and *HR practitioners organise meetings with staff* has been dropped, since the latter has a lower correlation with HR practitioners as employees' advocate. Therefore, eight factors were used for the second regression analysis and the results are presented in tables 2 and 3.

[Take in Table 2 about here]

The results presented in table 2 reveal that the regression F is significant ( $F = 39.884$ ;  $df = 8, 287$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and the variance accounted for is substantial ( $R^2 = 53.4\%$ , adjusted  $R^2 = 52.0\%$ ). However, when all the eight variables are taken together, *HR contribute in motivating employees* makes the strongest unique and statistically significant contribution

(beta = 0.561) towards explaining the respondents' perception that HR practitioners in Malawi play the employee advocate role. These results seem to suggest that the respondents perceive HR practitioners as playing an employee advocate role when HR practitioners contribute to motivating employees. Perhaps this is because motivating employees includes most of the facets of the employee advocate role. Therefore **Hypotheses 4 is supported.**

To further explore the relationship between the perceived motivating role of HR practitioners and the employee advocate role, a further regression was conducted. The same elements under the HR employees' advocate construct were used. The only variable with the lowest correlation with *HR practitioners contribute in motivating employees* was *HR practitioners care for family needs* (0.238); therefore this variable was dropped from further analysis. Also, the bivariate correlation between *HR practitioners implement employees' suggestions* and *HR practitioners listen to employees* was (0.751), therefore *HR practitioners listen to employees* has been retained because it has a higher correlation with *HR contribute in motivating employees*. Therefore, further regression analysis was performed using the nine variables and the results are presented in table 3.

[Take in Table 3 about here]

The results presented in table 3 reveal that the regression F is significant ( $F = 68.885$ ;  $df = 9, 289$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and the variance accounted for is substantial ( $R^2 = 68.9\%$ , adjusted  $R^2 = 67.9\%$ ). However, when all the nine variables are taken together, *HR practitioners organise regular meetings with staff* makes the strongest unique and statistically significant contribution (beta = 0.387) towards explaining the respondents' perception that HR practitioners contribute in motivating employees. Therefore, based on the results of this study, the perception that HR practitioners perform an employee advocate role is mainly associated with the perception that HR practitioners contribute in motivating employees through organising regular staff meetings. Perhaps, by organising regular meetings with staff, HR practitioners are able to listen to the views and concerns of the employees. In fact, literature on employee motivation found that the presence of enabling structures, which provide employees with opportunities to air their concerns in the workplace, has a direct and positive impact on employee motivation (Salin, 2003). Our findings are consistent with this research as they indicate that the presence of a structure to enable regular meetings with

employees is associated with employees' perceptions that HR professionals are fulfilling an advocacy role. Similarly, research by Ulrich, Brockbank, Yeung, and Lake, (1995) indicates that, when HR professionals demonstrate competencies in delivering HR practices, they are perceived as more effective. Arguably, this is further indication that employees believe that the regular meetings offered by HR professionals are positively seen as advocacy-type activity.

### **Conclusion**

The main aim of this study was to examine perceptions of the employee advocate role in an African context where trade unions and other institutional structures designed to enforce employee interests are weak. The study found that, despite the challenges of the context, HR practitioners are perceived by key stakeholders (such as line managers and employees) to be playing an employee advocate role. This is very encouraging from the point of view of the strategic and normative role of HR practitioners in Africa in general and Malawi in particular. The study corroborates the findings of similar studies of HR roles in developing and transitional countries (Akuratiyagamage, 2005; Antila, 2006; Antila and Kakkonen, 2008; Bowen et al., 2002; Mamman and Somantri, 2014; Mamman and Al Khulaiby, 2014; Zuzeviciute and Margarita, 2010). Therefore, the study has contributed to the existing literature. It also lends support to the utility of Ulrich's model for the HR role.

To date, there has been a scarcity of research which has investigated the relative significance of key elements used to measure the importance of the employee advocate role in a developing country where the institutional and socio-cultural context differs from the contexts of developed countries where the model originated. Our study of the relative significance of the elements in the HR construct has opened up potential avenues to examine not only how HR practitioners perform the employee advocate role, but also to consider whether certain elements should be included in future HR models. For example, researchers could develop an instrument that measures the importance of each element in the construct before asking respondents to determine whether HR practitioners fill the roles or not. The instrument could also ask respondents to suggest which other role they would like HR practitioners to perform.

Another contribution made by this study concerns its corroboration of previous studies and its support for multiple constituency theory; that is, due to the conflicting roles of

HR practitioners, the perception of the effectiveness of the roles they perform will vary across groups of stakeholders. This inherent conflict in the HR role is unlikely to be resolved. However, consciously striking a balance between the normative and instrumental dimensions of the employee advocate role should enable HR practitioners to address the potential perception of bias when they perform their roles. The achievement of this balance should also improve the credibility of HR practitioners in the eyes of stakeholders.

A significant finding from this study is the revelation that the motivating role of HR practitioners can be perceived as a significant factor that influences stakeholders' perceptions of whether HR practitioners are performing an employee advocate role. We consider this finding to be a significant contribution of the study, because, as far as we are aware, experts appear to view all the elements that constitute the employee advocate role as of equal significance. Our finding suggests otherwise. The finding suggests that more research is needed to determine whether certain elements are more important than others not only regarding employee advocate role but in other roles such as strategic partner, change agent and HR leader roles. If certain elements within a particular HR role (that is, construct) are more important than others, it is essential to determine which element is relatively important, to whom and why. This finding is particularly instructive for HR practitioners who are seeking to enhance their credibility in the eyes of line managers and employees. We argue that because the motivating role will involve several elements within the construct, HR practitioners would do well to consider the motivating role seriously. For example, it would be informative to establish how stakeholders would like HR practitioners to perform the employee advocate role in addition to asking the respondents about the effectiveness of the role performed. We hope complementary research will address this issue in the future.

In relation to the geographical context of our research; we have sought to emphasise that the labour context of Malawi is characterised by an informal sector which dominates the national economy. Our findings, derived from respondents employed in the formal sector, highlight that HR practitioners are seen as employee advocates though these findings are not intended to shed light on any advocacy processes that may be taking place in the informal sector. Further research is needed to establish the extent to which the network of interrelationships, to which Horowitz (2015) refers, operates in the informal sector Malawi as a mechanism to compensate for the absence of an HR presence.

## Limitations

This research has limitations which serve to highlight further opportunities for further research on the topic of HR roles, especially in developing countries. We highlight that the study findings are, in part, based on the self-perceptions of a sample of HR professionals and note that self-perception has theoretical foundations that extend beyond the pragmatic need for survival in an organisational setting. For example, researchers have reported that personality traits and defense mechanisms contribute to favorable self-perception. In this vein, Paulhus, and John, (1998: 1025) that: “... *sequences of values, motives, and biases form two personality constellations .... associated with an egoistic bias, a self-deceptive tendency to exaggerate one’s social and intellectual status*”. The findings of our study, when coupled with literature in fields of psychology such as personality theory, emphasise that more research is needed to appreciate the dynamics and complexity of both research and practice based on the self-perceptions of HR professionals. At a fundamental level, a caveat attached to our findings is that more research is needed to determine the accuracy of the self-perceptions of HR professionals in relation to their status, contribution and effectiveness in organisational settings.

A further limitation of our study is that it is focused upon a single country context, namely, Malawi. Within the broader context of Africa, a comparative study is needed since the various country contexts within which HR roles are performed differ across the continent. Without further study, therefore, our research cannot necessarily be generalized to other countries in Africa. In addition, other contextual variables such as organisational size and sector could shed further light on how HR practitioners perform an employee advocate role both within Malawi and other also in other countries in Africa. This is another line of inquiry that may be pursued by researchers in the future.

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**Table 1.** Perceptions of Employee Advocate Role

		<b>Overall Mean N=305</b>	<b>HR practitioners N=95</b>		<b>Line Managers N=121</b>		<b>Employees N=89</b>
<b>No.</b>	<b>Elements in the Construct</b>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>S.D</i>	<i>Mean</i>
1	Listens to employees	3.77	3.79	.5160	3.72	.4840	3.80
2	Tries to implement their valued suggestions or comments.	3.37	3.38	.6240	3.34	.5570	3.39
3	Cares for employees' financial needs.	3.41	3.45	.6840	3.39	.5540	3.39
4	Cares for employees' family needs.	2.67	2.72	1.107	2.61	.8010	2.67
5	Cares for employees' health needs.	<b>3.93</b>	4.01	.8490	3.90	.4740	3.87
6	Is the first to defend employees' rights.	3.17	3.26	.7060	3.13	.6600	3.11
7	Seeks to keep talent and encourage staff.	<b>3.82</b>	3.85	.8620	3.76	.7740	3.85
8	Strive to be fair to all employees without favoring members of staff.	3.09	4.22	.8440	4.05	.8120	3.99
9	Shares the happiness and sadness of the staff.	<b>3.99</b>	4.05	.7310	4.00	.7210	3.92

10	Organises trips for the staff members.	2.76	2.80	.9810	2.75	.9180	2.72
11	Organises regular meetings with staff for speaking and listening to them.	<b>4.09</b>	4.20	.7080	4.11	.6370	3.95
12	Contributes in motivating employees in achieving their work.	<b>3.82</b>	3.98	.8790	3.85	.9000	3.62
13	See themselves as the employees' advocate.	3.78	3.99	.8550	3.76	.7640	3.58

**Table 2:** Regression Analysis – Employee Advocate Role

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	<i>t</i>	Sig.
		<i>B</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>Beta</i>		
1	Constant	.598	.193		3.090	.002
	HR listen to employees	.010	.053	.012	.192	.848
	HR care for financial needs	.026	.054	.030	.473	.636
	HR defend employees	.051	.063	.051	.803	.423
	HR encourage employees	.086	.055	.092	1.582	.115
	HR strive to be fair	-.019	.051	-.023	-.361	.719
	HR share happiness and sadness	.059	.053	.058	1.113	.267
	HR organise trips	.044	.039	.055	1.132	.259
	HR motivate employees	.502	.058	.561	8.670	.000
	<i>R Square</i>	53.4%				
	<i>Adjusted R Square</i>	52.0%				
	<i>Regression F (df = 8, 287)</i>	39.884				
	<i>P</i>	.000				

a. Dependent variable: HR practitioners employees' advocate

**Table 3:** Regression Analysis – HR Practitioners Contribute in Motivating Employees

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	<i>t</i>	Sig.
		<i>B</i>	<i>Std. Error</i>	<i>Beta</i>		
1	Constant	-.471	.224		-2.103	.036
	HR listen to employees	-.022	.049	-.023	-.445	.657
	HR care for financial needs	.066	.049	.070	1.339	.182
	HR care for health needs	.135	.055	.095	2.464	.014
	HR defend employees	.128	.057	.114	2.236	.026
	HR encourage employees	.234	.048	.224	4.915	.000
	HR strive to be fair	.101	.047	.112	2.175	.030
	Share happiness and sadness	.034	.050	.030	.692	.489
	HR organise trips	.068	.035	.076	1.930	.055
	HR organise regular staff meetings	.353	.042	.387	8.334	.000
	<i>R Square</i>	68.9%				
	<i>Adjusted R Square</i>	67.9%				
	<i>Regression F (df = 9, 289)</i>	68.885				
	<i>P</i>	.000				