

The AI Revolution: The Impact of AI Integration on the Identity Work of Human

Resource Professionals

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Abstract

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into human resource management (HRM) is reshaping professional roles and practices, raising questions about how such changes affect individual professionals. While much of the existing research has focused on organisational outcomes, less is known about how AI impacts the professional identity and well-being of HR practitioners. This thesis addresses this gap by exploring the AI-induced identity work process and job flourishing among HR professionals. A qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with 19 HR professionals who have experience with AI-based systems in their work. The Gioia method and thematic analysis were used to identify patterns in how participants perceive, respond to, and make sense of AI within their roles. Findings reveal that AI is neither inherently threatening nor an opportunity. Rather, its impact on professional identity depends on how professionals interpret and integrate AI into their work. Important identity work processes included selective task delegation, reframing AI as a supportive tool, and negotiating role boundaries. These processes influenced the opportunity-oriented identity appraisal of AI, which in turn affected job flourishing. The study contributes to the emerging literature on AI and identity work by highlighting the role of individual sensemaking in technological change. It also offers practical implications for organisations: supporting identity-sensitive change and involving professionals in AI integration can foster more positive outcomes for both professionals and organisations.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence (AI), professional identity, identity work, identity opportunity, identity threat, job flourishing

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a disruptive force, and its integration in business has been reshaping professional landscapes, challenging traditional roles, and influencing how individuals perceive and make sense of their professions (e.g. Ansari et al., 2023; Jussupow et al., 2018, 2022; Mirbabaie et al., 2022; Selenko et al., 2022; Tursunbayeva & Renkema, 2023). AI is the ability of a machine to interpret data, learn from it, and adapt to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019). Among the professions that have been impacted the most by AI implementation, human resource management (HRM) has certainly been one of them. In HRM, AI systems can automate and optimise processes such as recruitment and workforce management (Budhwar et al., 2022; Malik et al., 2022). For instance, companies like Phenom and Beamery have demonstrated this trend, with their AI-driven platforms, whereby they achieved significant investments and commercial success (Kelly, 2021; Lunden, 2021), signalling the growing importance of such innovations in HR practices.

Although the adoption of AI in HR practices is still in its developmental stages, the introduction of AI implementation into tasks such as recruitment, performance management, and employee development stands to alter the role of HR professionals (Charlwood & Guenole, 2022). Therefore, it is important to consider its implications. While current research on AI in HR has looked at the organisational effects of AI (e.g. Budhwar et al., 2022; Malik et al., 2022; Tsiskaridze et al., 2023), the impact of AI at the individual level of HR practitioners remains under-researched. In business in general, the integration of AI sparks debates over its societal and individual implications. At a societal level, AI-driven automation risks job displacement, particularly less skilled jobs are vulnerable to replacement (Chakravorti, 2024). As a result, AI could increase social inequalities between lower-skilled and higher-skilled roles, and reshape the workforce (Chakravorti, 2024). At an individual level, AI could also impact individual workers' job satisfaction, well-being, and identity, because AI could lead to increased psychological stress for individual workers (De Cremer & Koopman, 2024). These debates emphasise the need for research that extends beyond organisational productivity and considers how AI affects workers, for example, its effects on their professional identity.

Because of AI's ability to learn and perform tasks, it can be seen as a quasi-social actor that can act independently on behalf of humans, and this has implications for professionals' identity (Brunn et al., 2020; Endacott, 2021; Selenko et al., 2022). However, to date, there is limited research on the impact of AI on the professional identity of workers (Selenko et al., 2022). Research has suggested that AI can both enhance and challenge professional identity.

However, professionals strive for coherence and a sense of permanence in their self-concept (Petriglieri, 2011) and, therefore, often engage in identity work to create, maintain, repair, or revise their professional identity (Brown, 2017; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Identity work can be triggered by opportunities or threats to identity. On the one hand, AI implementation can complement and support human tasks, replace existing tasks, and/or create new roles (Selenko et al., 2022). Provided that AI enhances a professional's ability to fulfil identity motives, such as job performance or self-enhancement, the professional identity can be enhanced, and "working with AI" can become a positive aspect of a professional identity (Endacott, 2021; Strich et al., 2021). On the other hand, when AI lowers the ability of a professional to fulfil identity motives, it can threaten the professional identity, and "working with AI" can become a negative aspect of the identity. Albeit not directly investigating consequences at the identity level, for example, research on healthcare professionals found that AI can impact all aspects of the sector since AI can mediate diagnosis and treatment, patient engagement and empowerment, and administrative activities. This can affect, ultimately, the autonomy and skills of healthcare professionals as decisions are increasingly influenced by algorithms (Tursunbayeva & Renkema, 2023). Hence, how professionals engage in identity work to make sense of their professional identity can be important in determining whether AI becomes a positive or negative part of a professional's sense of self.

Identity work is not just important for managing an individual's professional identity but can also be important for fostering positive workplace outcomes. Looking at concepts like job flourishing can provide valuable insights into how professionals adapt to challenges and opportunities related to AI. Job flourishing refers to a positive state of mental health and well-being, encompassing emotional, social, and psychological aspects (A'yunnisa et al., 2024a; Keyes, 2002). Research has suggested that both professional identity and job flourishing are connected to outcomes such as job satisfaction, work engagement, and job performance (e.g. A'yunnisa et al., 2024a; Demerouti et al., 2015; Kabeel & Mosa Eisa, 2017; Tang, 2020; Yaakup et al., 2020; Zhai et al., 2023). Although prior research has scarcely looked at AI and job flourishing, research on well-being has suggested that AI can negatively impact well-being by increasing stress and triggering negative emotions (Cheng et al., 2022; Cramarenco et al., 2023). However, research also proposed that AI can enhance employee satisfaction, provided that employees are involved in its implementation (Lopez-Garcia et al., 2024). Involvement allows employees time to adapt and revise. Consequently, identity work could contribute to job flourishing, connecting it with broader outcomes like well-being and engagement in the workplace.

Therefore, more research is needed to identify when, where, and by whom AI-related changes are assessed as irrelevant, supportive, or threatening to the professional identity (Selenko et al., 2022). Understanding how AI impacts professionals requires looking at how professionals construct their identities by addressing the questions “Who am I?” and “What do I do?” and how these self-conceptions influence outcomes such as job flourishing. The identity perspective on AI is also supported by previous research calls, for example Bailey and Barley (2020) call for research on how AI affects professionals and society, including its effects on worker well-being. Charlwood and Guenole (2022) echo this in relation to HR, calling for research on the effect of AI on HR professionals' work and well-being. Taking an identity work perspective on AI can extend the literature on AI beyond the technical and task-oriented discussions by considering how AI reshapes professionals' self-conceptions and enactment of norms and values. Examining the processes through which professionals negotiate their identities in response to AI provides a more holistic understanding of how AI affects professionals, beyond just changes to their roles. This perspective also provides a better understanding of the broader social implications of AI and the outcomes of such processes, such as job flourishing. Moreover, literature on identity work can benefit from researching the impact of AI. As a quasi-social actor capable of interacting with and learning from professionals, AI introduces a novel and ambiguous source of identity threat and opportunity. This challenges traditional theories of identity work, which attribute such triggers to the individual, others, or the material world, none of which captures the complex nature of AI. This establishes the need for research on how AI reshapes the roles, responsibilities, and self-conceptions of HR professionals, and how it complements or challenges their professional identity.

Therefore, building on previous research, the current study seeks to answer the question: *How does the integration of AI into HR practices relate to the identity work and job flourishing of HR professionals?*

The thesis contributes to the literature on identity and AI in two ways. First, through understanding the identity work process HR professionals engage in to manage and adapt their professional identities in response to AI integration and broadening the theoretical understanding of how professionals negotiate both challenges and opportunities to their self-concept. In doing so, the research also sheds light on how identity work is related to concepts such as job flourishing. Second, the thesis extends the application of identity work to the underexplored context of HR professionals, a field positioned at the intersection of AI-driven transformation and historical struggles for legitimacy. The ambiguity around the HR role and expertise, intensified by the impact of AI on core functions, makes HR a rich context for

studying identity work. This research enhances the understanding of how the identity work of HR professionals influences their self-conceptions, both reinforcing and challenging their professional identity, as suggested in previous research.

The current research also offers practical implications for HR professionals and organisational leadership involved in AI integration. As AI continues to transform HR functions, it is important that organisations recognise both the challenges and opportunities it presents for professional roles. AI implementation may lead to uncertainty or disruption in how professionals perceive their value and responsibilities, which can result in resistance or disengagement. To address this, organisations should adopt identity-sensitive approaches to change, offering support mechanisms that help professionals make sense of evolving roles and maintain a sense of purpose and legitimacy. At the same time, the potential of AI to enhance professional work should not be overlooked. Leveraging these opportunities requires involving professionals in meaningful ways during the implementation process and fostering a workplace culture where AI is positioned as supportive, not a threat. The insights from this research can inform organisational strategies to ensure that AI adoption enhances both individual well-being and broader organisational goals.

The later chapters of this thesis are structured as follows. First, an overview of relevant literature on AI and identity theory is provided, establishing the theoretical foundation for the research. Following, the data collection and research methodology are explained. The subsequent chapters present and discuss the main findings of the research. Finally, this thesis concludes by addressing its limitations, proposing directions for future research, and offering a comprehensive conclusion.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Artificial Intelligence

Although research on AI has grown significantly, there is no one agreed-upon definition. A common manner to define AI is to make use of the concept of intelligence itself (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019). From the perspective of intelligence, AI has been described as the ability to make machines perform actions that would be considered intelligent if carried out by humans (McCarthy et al., 1955) and “the science of making machines do things that would require intelligence if done by men” (Minsky, 1969, p. 5). More recent definitions build upon this line of reasoning, providing more detail on the mechanisms by which AI achieves its objectives. Therefore, AI can be defined as “a system’s ability to interpret external data correctly, to learn from such data, and to use those learnings to achieve specific goals and tasks through flexible adaptation” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019, p. 17). Given the definition, it is important to recognise that AI can be categorised based on its capabilities and functions. Based on the kind of intelligence an AI demonstrates, it can be classified into analytical, human-inspired, and humanised AI (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2019; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019). Analytical AI merely demonstrates cognitive intelligence and can solve problems using data analysis, pattern recognition, and logical reasoning. In addition to cognitive intelligence, human-inspired AI also exhibits emotional intelligence. This emotional intelligence is not based on actual feeling or awareness; rather, AI analyses and interprets emotional cues and takes that into account in decision-making (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019). Finally, humanised AI, although theoretical for now, would be able to be self-conscious and self-aware in its interactions, making use of cognitive, emotional, and social intelligence (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019). Most AI used in organisations is analytical AI used for particular work-related tasks (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019; Mirbabaie et al., 2022).

The integration of AI in HRM, in general, also refers to analytical AI (Malik et al., 2022). Research has suggested that the integration of AI into HR can be more cost-effective and enhance decision-making and problem-solving (Budhwar et al., 2022; Malik et al., 2022). Within HR, the applications can be used in tasks such as recruitment, onboarding, talent management, and employee engagement. For instance, AI can automate resume screening, facilitate initial candidate interviews through chatbots, and apply predictive analytics to match candidates to roles based on data-driven insights. Furthermore, research has proposed that the development of human-inspired AI provides further opportunities for HR (Budhwar et al., 2022). With the addition of emotional intelligence, AI could facilitate personalised interactions,

providing feedback and recognition. Moreover, human-inspired AI could take on more sensitive tasks such as the development of personalised learning plans.

Even though both analytical AI and human-inspired AI in HR, to date, have not been broadly adopted, the integration of AI can impact the HR profession. The adoption of AI can constitute a change from hands-on administrative tasks to a more strategic role (Charlwood & Guenole, 2022; Gulliford & Parker Dixon, 2019). As AI automates routine and administrative HR tasks, such as payroll management, scheduling, and compliance monitoring, the role of HR professionals shifts towards higher-value, strategic responsibilities. These include interpreting predictive analytics, designing workforce strategies, and enhancing employee engagement through innovative solutions. When the tasks of HR professionals change, so do the skills required. Hence, they need to become skilled in leveraging AI to make data-informed decisions and address complex challenges. Moreover, research has proposed that HR professionals need to develop skills related to curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking (Gulliford & Parker Dixon, 2019). The suggested changes to responsibilities and skills emphasise how the introduction of AI in the HR profession can change the behaviour and identity of HR professionals.

2.2 Professional Identity & Identity Work

The construed identity is the meaning individuals attach to themselves and can be understood using questions such as ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What do I want to be in the future?’ (Brown & Coupland, 2015). The identity is a collection of dynamic self-narratives, it is not a rigid construct but evolves through social interactions and self-reflection. Therefore, the identity encompasses both an individual's personal attributes, like prior experiences, and social attributes, such as group memberships (Brown & Coupland, 2015). Because identity is a collection of self-narratives, an individual does not possess one identity (Brown, 2017). Extending the concept, professional identity is a subset of identity that relates to the meaning individuals attach to themselves in a professional context. The professional identity can be understood using questions such as ‘Who am I as a professional?’ (Chreim et al., 2007). It evolves from self-narratives and professional roles and the related societal predispositions (Cardoso et al., 2014). The professional identity is a co-construct of the social identity, the membership in a group of professionals, and the personal identity, the individual identification and enactment of professional roles (Chreim et al., 2007; Jussupow et al., 2018).

Although identities are fluid, individuals seek a sense of coherence and permanence in their sense of self (Petriglieri, 2011). Therefore, to construct cohesive identities, individuals perform identity work. Identity work can be defined as the interlinked actions through which

individuals create, maintain, repair, display, revise, and discard social, personal, and role identities (Brown, 2017; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Research has suggested that identity work is not just a cognitive process but also an emotional effort that can be affected by emotional labour, attachment, and detachment (Winkler, 2018). Recognising the fluidity and complexity of identities, Brown (2017) identified five approaches to identity work that emphasise the dynamic nature of identities. First, discursive identity work refers to how individuals construct their identities through language and narratives. This approach emphasises the role of self-authorship and dialogue. The second approach is dramaturgical, this approach refers to how identities are constructed through actions. Thirdly, the symbolic approach refers to how individuals adopt, display, and manipulate object symbols to constitute their identities. Fourth, socio-cognitive identity work concerns the cognitive mechanisms and sensemaking used in the construction of identities. This approach emphasises that identities can be affected by processes that shape an individual's understanding and emotions, such as socialisation. Finally, psychodynamic identity work refers to the effects of unconscious ego defences on the constitution of identities. This approach suggests that ego defences such as denial and rationalisation can automatically and unconsciously mitigate conflicts to maintain one's identity. These approaches are best understood when taken together, constituting a perspective on identity work (Brown, 2017). Therefore, the current research will adopt Brown's framework, utilising all five approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the identity work of professionals. Brown's framework changes the perspective from group membership to the individuals and their agency to negotiate, maintain, and revise their identities. This perspective is particularly useful for studying HR professionals, as the field has long faced an ongoing struggle for legitimacy, especially in its transition from administrative to strategic roles (Heizmann & Fox, 2019; Keegan & Francis, 2010; Mahadevan & Schmitz, 2020; Pritchard, 2010). The introduction of AI further complicates the ongoing struggle for legitimacy, as AI reshapes the roles of HR professional, forcing them to redefine their expertise and value within organisations. Identity work, therefore, becomes central to understanding how HR professionals navigate these changes, resist or embrace AI integration, and (re)construct their professional identity.

2.3 Artificial Intelligence & Identity

When professionals work with AI, it can provide both challenges and opportunities for their professional identity. Professionals working with AI develop an AI identity, similar to identity the AI identity can be understood using the question “Who am I as a professional when

collaborating with AI in the workplace?” (Mirbabaie et al., 2022, p. 76). Professionals reflect consciously and unconsciously on what working with AI means for their sense of self. AI can affect how they construct, enact, and interpret their sense of self. HR professionals provide a relevant context for studying these identity shifts due to their ongoing struggle for legitimacy. HR has an ongoing struggle to become a strategic business partner rather than an administrative support function (Heizmann & Fox, 2019; Mahadevan & Schmitz, 2020; Pritchard, 2010). This struggle makes HR professionals particularly sensitive to changes that can affect their professional identity. The introduction of AI could either threaten or enhance their sense of self, by automating decision-making in ways that weaken their sense of professional expertise and relevance, or by freeing them from routine tasks and enhancing their strategic function.

Identity threats can be a strong trigger for identity work. Identity threats are experiences that can decrease the value of the identity, remove part of the identity, or disrupt the relationship between the identity and its associated meaning (Petriglieri, 2011). Identity threats can originate from the individual, others, or the material world (Petriglieri, 2011). Given the definition of AI, based on the concept of intelligence, it can neither be categorised as a threat originating from the material world nor others due to its quasi-social attributes (Selenko et al., 2022). The quasi-social nature of AI can be better understood by considering both its complex algorithms and its ability to take over professional tasks. AI can be seen as a “black box” because the algorithms are complex and difficult to understand (Selenko et al., 2022; Strich et al., 2021). Therefore, professionals cannot make use of their knowledge to control or fully understand the AI results (Strich et al., 2021). Taken together with AI's ability to take over tasks, AI seems like a quasi-social actor that can act independently on behalf of a human (Selenko et al., 2022). Thus, AI can be seen as a different source of identity threat that challenges professional identity.

Research has suggested various AI identity threats that challenge professionals to engage in identity work. Identity threats can arise through intergroup conflicts, prevention of verification, and changes in meaning, which can affect professional self-concept and role perception (Mirbabaie et al., 2022). Intergroup identity threats are related to the reputation and self-beliefs within a team. Threats in this group include threats to job security and loss of status. Prevention of verification threats is related to the personal understanding of self-beliefs introduced or affected by AI. Threats such as loss of skills or expertise and changes in work are included in this group. Lastly, the threats in the group changes in meaning are provoked by changes in work-related tasks. this group includes the threats of loss of autonomy and loss of controllability. Similarly, AI can threaten professional recognition and capabilities, affecting expertise, status, and role enactment (Jussupow et al., 2022). First, threats to professional

recognition refer to challenges to the expertise and status of professionals. Second, professional capabilities concern the enactment of roles related to the profession itself. Furthermore, professional identity can be reduced when AI replaces tasks that are central to an individual's self-concept and understanding of their professional role (Selenko et al., 2022). Similarly, substitutive decision-making AI can disrupt professional role identity by removing core aspects of work previously seen as defining (Strich et al., 2021). Workers can struggle with feelings of detachment or irrelevance when key responsibilities are overtaken. These threats could lead to various forms of identity work, such as psychodynamic identity work, as AI interacts with unconscious ego defences, resulting in denial and protective behaviours. Additionally, it could result in socio-cognitive identity work as professionals must make sense of their value and expertise in the context of AI. However, workers can reframe their professional roles to focus on human skills, such as interpersonal interactions or oversight of AI, enabling them to maintain or redefine their professional identity (Strich et al., 2021). This suggests that professionals can revise their professional identity through identity work, such as discursive identity work, narrating their identities in terms of their collaboration with AI. They might use terms like "AI-assisted decision-maker" or "AI overseer" to reflect their evolving roles.

Selenko et al. (2022) argue that the conditions for AI to threaten or enhance a professional's sense of identity depend on its functional deployment (by complementing tasks, replacing tasks, and/or generating new tasks) and how it affects the social fabric of work. Therefore, identity opportunities can trigger identity work. Firstly, AI can enhance professional identity by reducing mundane and repetitive tasks, allowing professionals to prioritise higher-value, creative, or decision-making activities (Selenko et al., 2022). This could result in dramaturgical identity work because professionals' actions change in collaboration with AI. Furthermore, it could lead to socio-cognitive identity work as professionals need to make sense of their value and expertise in relation to AI's capabilities and limitations. Secondly, substitutive decision-making facilitated by AI can enhance the professional identity of a subset of workers, as it can enable them to perform roles previously not feasible (Strich et al., 2021). These workers can feel empowered as the AI is a tool for them to be a part of a professional group or domain that was inaccessible to them. This could result in discursive identity work as AI provides a new framework for self-authorship. Lastly, AI can facilitate identity construction by acting on users' behalf and shaping their interactions with others (Endacott, 2021). When AI aligns with aspirational identities, it supports professionals in enacting professional roles, enabling identity opportunity. This suggests that AI does not just trigger identity work related to the creation and revision of professional identity, but can also assist professionals in identity work aimed at the

maintenance and display of professional identity. Identity work can affect how professionals make sense of their identity when working with AI. Therefore, it is important to understand how identity work can be used to enhance the professional identity.

Overall, the above research posits that AI represent a unique source of identity threat because of its quasi-social nature, which can neither be seen as a threat nor an opportunity to professional identity. Rather, its impact depends on how professionals engage in identity work to navigate its integration into their roles. Therefore, the current research seeks to understand how the different approaches to identity work can be triggered by potential AI-related threats or opportunities. Moreover, the current study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the identity work processes professionals use to make sense of and adapt to AI-driven changes in their roles. Understanding how professionals engage in identity work is crucial, as it can shape both positive and negative outcomes for their professional identity.

2.4 Artificial Intelligence, Identity & Job Flourishing

Job flourishing represents an individual's positive state of mental health and well-being, encompassing psychological, social, and emotional dimensions (Keyes, 2002). In an organisational context, flourishing professionals experience positive emotions, thrive in their roles, build strong social relationships, and exhibit characteristics such as self-determination, competence, and purposefulness (Bono et al., 2012; Rothmann, 2013). Research has suggested that job flourishing can be affected by predictors such as job crafting, psychological capital, autonomy, and a growth mindset (A'yunnisa et al., 2024a). Research has also suggested that job flourishing results in desirable workplace outcomes, including enhanced in-role and extra-role performance, work engagement, and better physical health (A'yunnisa et al., 2024a; 2024b).

Professional identity and identity work could contribute to job flourishing. Research suggests that a strong professional identity is associated with greater job satisfaction and engagement, as well as enhanced workplace well-being (Kabeel & Mosa Eisa, 2017; Tang, 2020; Zhai et al., 2023). Since job satisfaction, work engagement, and well-being are important components of job flourishing, professional identity could have a role in fostering this positive state. Similarly, identity work has been linked to improved job engagement and performance (Demerouti et al., 2015; Yaakup et al., 2020). For instance, engaging in active identity work has been associated with increased work engagement, thriving, and creativity, all related outcomes of flourishing. In the context of the effect of AI on professional identity, job flourishing offers a lens to understand how identity opportunities and threats could affect broader organisational

outcomes. Research on well-being suggests that AI can negatively affect well-being by increasing stress and triggering negative emotions, such as job insecurity and incompetency (Cheng et al., 2022; Cramarenco et al., 2023). As a result, unresolved identity threats could hinder flourishing by undermining factors such as competence, autonomy, and purpose. However, research has also suggested that the integration of AI can enhance decision-making, efficiency, and employee satisfaction, provided that employees receive training and are involved in the AI implementation process (Lopez-Garcia et al., 2024). Therefore, when professionals are able to engage in identity work to reconstruct, revise, and maintain their sense of self in relation to collaboration with AI, they could enhance factors such as competence, autonomy, and purpose, thereby fostering job flourishing. This suggests that identity work is not just important for managing an individual's professional identity but can also be important for fostering positive workplace outcomes.

In conclusion, AI is not just a threat or opportunity to professional identity. Its effect depends on several factors, such as identity work. Therefore, it is important to understand how professionals perform identity work in response to AI and how this shapes not just their professional identity but also broader outcomes such as job flourishing.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The current research makes use of an inductive, qualitative research design to research the understudied relation between identity and AI. The choice for this approach is grounded in its ability to generate new insights and theories, particularly in areas where existing research is limited or fragmented (Boeije, 2009). Qualitative research is especially suited for exploring complex and context-specific phenomena, as it prioritises deep, rich insights into participants' experiences and perspectives (Gioia et al., 2013). Additionally, the inductive nature of this design ensures that theoretical insights emerge directly from the data rather than being constrained by pre-existing hypotheses or frameworks (Gioia et al., 2013). Although qualitative research can be time-intensive and susceptible to bias, its strength lies in capturing the subjective nuances of individual experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This is particularly critical for understanding identity work as it allows the research to uncover how participants' values, beliefs, and actions interact. Overall, the inductive, qualitative design provides a robust framework for generating meaningful and relevant insights.

3.2 Participants

HR professionals were chosen as the research subjects to examine the implications of AI on professional identity. HR professionals were selected because of the potential adoption of AI in HRM, since it can be used for tasks such as recruitment, onboarding, and talent management (Budhwar et al., 2022; Malik et al., 2022). As AI automates administrative processes, HR professionals are transitioning toward strategic roles that involve tasks such as leveraging data-driven insights and designing workforce strategies (Charlwood & Guenole, 2022). The shift necessitates the development of new skills, including creativity, critical thinking, and the ability to work effectively with AI technologies (Gulliford & Parker Dixon, 2019). These changes to the tasks and skills make HR professionals a good research subject because the changes call for identity work. Professionals need to manage the opportunities and challenges presented by AI, reflecting on how these changes redefine their roles and reshape their professional identity. For the sample, HR professionals are defined as individuals working within an HR department of an organisation. These professionals are responsible for managing the organisation's human resources, encompassing tasks such as recruitment, onboarding, performance management, employee engagement, learning and development, compensation and benefits, compliance, and workforce planning. This definition ensures a focus on those directly involved in the day-to-day HR functions and strategic initiatives within their respective organisations. Furthermore,

participants needed to be familiar with AI and have experience with it in a professional setting. To ensure professionals made use of AI rather than tools labelled as such, participants were asked to describe their professional use of AI before the interview. The sample was selected through purposeful sampling to ensure that participants met the criteria and represented a diverse range of positions, seniority levels, genders, and ages. The sample consisted of 19 HR professionals, table 1 provides an overview of the most important demographic and occupational information. The sample of 19 individuals was deemed sufficient based on Hennink et al. (2017), who stated that between 16 and 24 interviews are needed to reach saturation and develop a rich understanding of an issue. Data saturation was considered achieved as no new themes, patterns, or insights emerged from the interviews, indicating that additional data collection would likely result in redundant information.

Table 1

Overview of participants

Participant No.	Position	Years of experience	Gender	Age
1	HR generalist	9	M	29
2	HR partner	26	F	48
3	Coordinator salary administration	20	F	45
4	HR consultant	6	M	31
5	HR business partner	24	F	49
6	HR advisor	4	F	26
7	HR innovation specialist	8	M	30
8	Director total rewards	18	M	43
9	Head of people technology	21	F	45
10	HR advisor	14	F	36
11	Expert terms of employment	25	F	48
12	P&O business partner	11	F	36
13	Senior information manager HR	17	M	45
14	P&O business partner	12	M	33
15	HR manager	6	F	28
16	Absenteeism expert	30	F	57
17	Talent acquisition	22	M	43
18	HR consultant	15	F	37
19	Recruitment	1	F	24

3.3 Research Instrument

For the current research, the data was collected using semi-structured interviews. While interview topics and questions are pre-planned, this format allows for flexibility through the use of probing and additional questions based on participants' responses (Babbie, 2020; Boeije, 2009). Therefore, semi-structured interviews allow for a certain degree of freedom while maintaining a level of comparability across interviews. The freedom provided through this method is notably important given the limited research on the impact of AI on professional identity, because it allows for unforeseen themes and insights. This approach ensures that the data captures the nuanced and context-specific experiences of participants, contributing to a deeper understanding of the relationship between AI and professional identity. The interviews followed a standard set of questions (appendix A) formulated according to previous research on AI and identity. Ethical approval for the interview questions was granted by the BMS Ethics Committee at the University of Twente. Prior to each interview, participants received an information sheet detailing the study and provided informed consent by signing a consent form. The interviews had an average duration of 45 minutes and were conducted in Dutch. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure a comprehensive and accurate representation of the participants' responses. Transcriptions were facilitated using Microsoft transcription. However, because of the potential for transcription errors, the researcher reviewed all transcripts to ensure reliability.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data for this study was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) combined with the structured approach of the Gioia method (Gioia et al., 2013). Thematic analysis is a widely recognised qualitative research method designed to identify and interpret patterns within data. Its flexibility allows researchers to systematically examine complex datasets through six iterative phases, enabling a thorough understanding of the underlying themes and concepts. First, the familiarisation phase involved transcribing all collected materials, followed by thorough reading and re-reading to ensure an in-depth understanding of their content and context (Braun et al., 2019; Neuendorf, 2019). This step enabled the researcher to become deeply acquainted with the data, forming the foundation for subsequent analysis. In the second phase, initial codes were generated. Following the Gioia method, these codes were considered first-order concepts, staying close to the participants' original wording and reflecting their perspectives (Gioia et al., 2013). The coding process was inductive, meaning that codes emerged directly from the data rather than being predefined (Braun et al., 2019; Neuendorf,

2019). This approach ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the participants' experiences and avoided imposing external categories. Subsequently, the third phase involved searching for themes by collating related codes into broader categories. These themes were similar to the second-order themes in the Gioia method, representing higher-level patterns that captured the essence of the data. Once initial themes were identified, they were reviewed and refined during the fourth phase. This process ensured that the themes accurately represented the dataset while maintaining clarity and distinction. Any overlaps between themes were resolved, and sub-themes were created where necessary to capture the nuances within broader categories (Braun et al., 2019; Neuendorf, 2019). The fifth phase focused on defining and naming the themes, ensuring that each theme captured the core ideas it represented. Detailed descriptions of the themes provided clarity on their relevance to the research objectives and theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gioia et al., 2013). Finally, the sixth phase involved producing a comprehensive report of the findings. By combining the structured approach of the Gioia method and thematic analysis, this study ensured a robust and methodical analysis of qualitative data.

4. Results

This thesis explored the impact of AI integration on the identity work and job flourishing of HR professionals. The findings are presented based on the first-order concepts and second-order themes developed through the Gioia methodology. Figure 1 illustrates how the data was coded and organised following the approach by Gioia et al. (2013).

Given the interrelation between identity work and job flourishing in the data, the findings have been organised under one overarching dimension with three central themes. This chapter is structured around these three themes: Anchoring the human-centred professional identity, Adjusting the professional role, and Maintaining relational meaning. Together, they explain how HR professionals reinforce their human-centred identity through core values and human qualities while adapting to the integration of AI in their roles. These dynamics also reveal how tensions between human-centred identity and AI adaptation influence the experience of job flourishing within the HR profession.

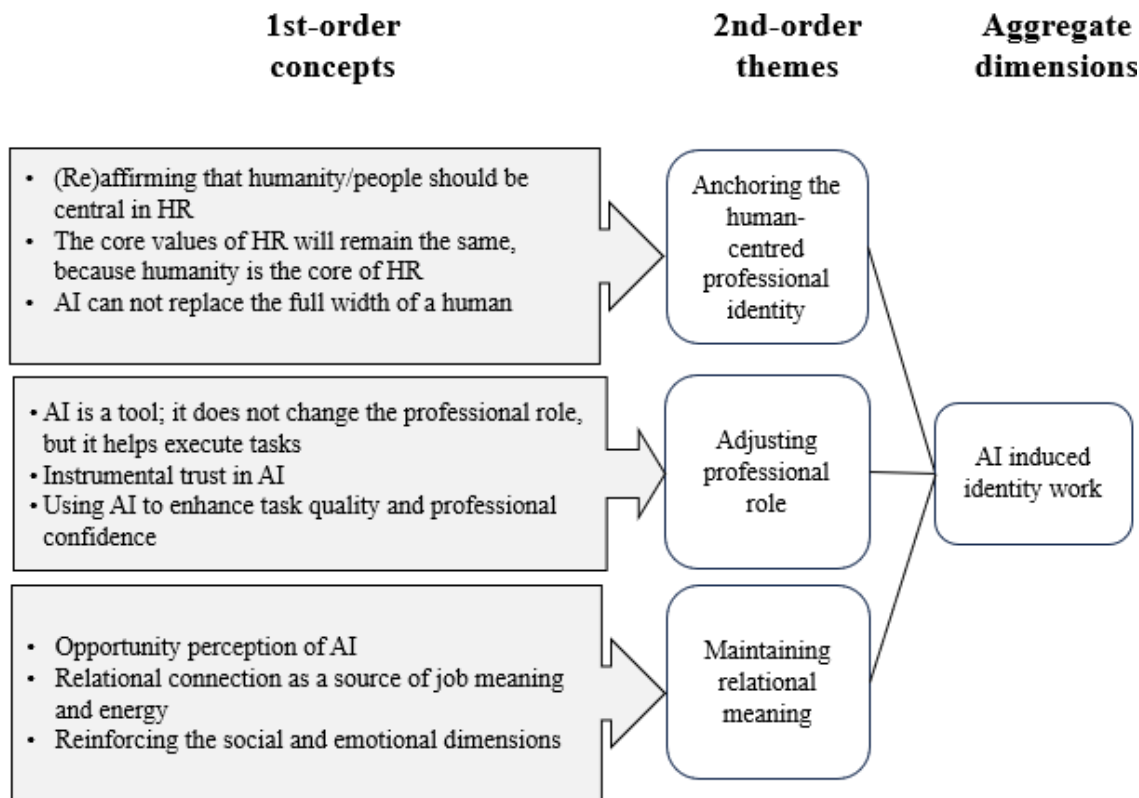


Figure 1. Data structure

4.1 Anchoring the Human-Centred Professional Identity

HR professionals described their professional identity as human-centred and grounded in human qualities and values. These human qualities and values were often not seen as just practical competencies but as defining and at the core of the HR profession. Participants stated that a connection to people and a desire to make a positive impact on individuals' working lives were the primary drivers behind their career choices. Reflecting on their initial motivation for choosing HR as a career, various participants described their motivation as people-oriented, wanting to work with and for people. For example, one participant stated, *"I like people (...). Therefore, I made a conscious decision that I wanted to do something with people"* (P.5). This quote represents the intrinsic motivation to engage with people at the core of HR professionals' career choices and sense of purpose. Some participants also mentioned interest in organisational development as a motivating factor; this was never mentioned independently of a people-oriented motivation. For example, one participant who valued both organisational goals and supporting individuals stated, *"Helping develop and empower people is one of the most fun aspects of HR"* (P.4). This quote illustrates how participants viewed the human development aspect of their work as not only professionally rewarding but also central to their identity. For them, HR was not an administrative or procedural career but rather one rooted in interpersonal meaning, relational fulfilment, and purposeful engagement. Also, when describing the qualities of a good HR professional, qualities such as empathy, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal communication were often mentioned as indispensable. These qualities were seen as essential for building trusting relationships and fostering a supportive workplace, as one participant explained, *"That is the human in HR, you have to engage with people and talk to them, people need to know who you are (...) otherwise I do not think you are doing your job right."* (P.1). This reflection shows that approachability, and relational engagement were viewed as vital professional responsibilities rather than optional soft skills. Altogether, these reflections demonstrate that for HR professionals, people-oriented motivations are not peripheral but fundamental to their identity.

The discussion of professional values further underscored this human-centred orientation. Participants mentioned various core values that they viewed as integral to both their professional identity and their day-to-day decision-making. Most notably, humanity, integrity, and transparency were mentioned often. These were not framed as abstract ideals, but perceived as pivotal to maintaining ethical and just HR practices:

“I believe integrity is really important, because you are handling a lot of sensitive information” (P.15)

“Humanity, really as a basic premise the human/person” (P.17)

“I believe honesty and transparency are immensely important” (P.2)

These core values were not only embedded in participants’ professional identities but were also described as enduring and non-negotiable. They were presented as the moral backbone of the HR profession, values that would or should withstand change, including the integration of AI. Participants expressed that AI integration would not undermine or alter these ethical commitments. One participant stated, *“The values will remain the same, that is the core of HR (...) caring for each other, that will not change.”* (P.4). another affirmed, *“These values are at the core of what you need to stand for as HR, and I do not believe that will change”* (P.18). Moreover, some participants perceived AI as a development that makes their preservation even more important. They argued that in a landscape where automated systems and data-driven tools increasingly mediate workplace interactions, an intentional emphasis on human values is even more necessary. As one participant reflected, *“Humanity will become more important, because putting the interest of people first should not be dependent on a tool”* (P7). This sentiment illustrates that AI was not seen as a force that redefines HR’s core, but as a context in which the commitment to human values must be actively upheld. For these professionals, the enduring responsibility to safeguard integrity, empathy, and transparency in HR practice becomes more important in an AI-enhanced work environment. These reflections suggest that rather than passively adapting their values to new tools, HR professionals see themselves as stewards of ethical practice.

Building on this understanding of the human-centred professional identity of HR professionals, it becomes clear that it is not only human values but also distinctly human qualities that must be upheld. Among participants, there was a shared belief that AI could not replicate or replace the human traits that define the HR profession. Rather than expressing fear of replacement, participants emphasised what AI lacked in human qualities to perform the HR profession. Participants mentioned various qualities that AI does not possess, such as qualities related to emotional intelligence and connection. The perceived limitations of AI served to reinforce and reassert the unique strengths and indispensability of human connection in their roles. Participants often emphasised specific human qualities that they viewed as irreplaceable. One participant reflected, *“AI could never become a coworker, it cannot replace the full width of a person”* (P.2). This quote illustrates the sentiment that the qualities of an HR professional

are inherently human and cannot be automated or reduced to data. Participants further defended this belief by describing HR as a feelings-based profession, grounded in understanding, nuance, and social presence. As one participant stated, *“I do a lot on feeling”* (P.3). This sentiment was further illustrated as participants emphasised what AI lacked in interpretive qualities *“AI cannot feel, it cannot sense how its surroundings is feeling”* (P.7) and another elaborated *“AI is going to see tears, but will not recognise the feeling. Are those tears of happiness or tears of sadness (..) that human aspect will never go away”* (P.4). These quotes illustrate a deep-rooted belief that the core qualities of a good HR professional are outside the scope of algorithmic processing.

4.2 Adjusting Professional Role

While participants strongly defended the human qualities central to HR practice, many also acknowledged the role of AI as a functional tool. Rather than perceiving AI as a threat, it was frequently described as a system or tool that can enable task completion more efficiently. AI was not considered capable of replacing the human core of HR, but it was seen as instrumental in supporting routine aspects of the role. Participants described it as a tool to assist, not to replace:

“It is still a person controlling the AI, you are making use of the tool. I also do not give my laptop credits for my work because I do not need to use pen and paper to write”

(P.16)

“It is a tool in the process, but it is not like AI can completely take over the process”

(P.8)

Although participants viewed AI as a tool, it was not completely dehumanised. It was not perceived as capable of replicating human emotions or intuition, but some participants recognised that AI possesses quasi-social characteristics. Participants described AI as something that could be spoken to or collaborated with, referring to it as a 'discussion partner'. As one participant stated, *“I see it as a nice discussion partner”* (P.2). Participants also stated that although not human, AI still felt conversational and invited a polite or professional tone of voice:

“Using the voice commands, I was having a whole conversation with AI, and it is quite weird but I kept being nice and polite to the AI even though it's a computer to which you can just give a command without being nice” (P.9)

“I always say thank you to AI when it provides me with feedback” (P.18)

Because AI was perceived as a tool, participants often engaged in selective task delegation and named administrative and repetitive tasks as appropriate areas for AI support. One participant stated, *“AI is best used for the things that are repetitive (...) those are the tasks AI can be useful for”* (P.14). The administrative and repetitive tasks are not seen as core tasks of the HR professional's role. As one participant reflected, *“AI is an opportunity to outsource repetitive tasks, leaving you with more time for your role, which is advising or planning around strategic plans”* (P.17). Another stated, *“My role will remain the same, AI can take over repetitive tasks which are not the tasks that give me energy”* (P.11). The selective use of AI allowed professionals to streamline operations and gain time for more strategic and relational aspects of their roles. Participants often stated *“My role does not disappear, but the execution will change”* (P.7) and *“The work I do is exactly the same, the manner I do it has changed”* (P.14) emphasising that AI does not change the nature of their role, but rather changes the execution of their tasks. While HR professionals expressed confidence in the stability of their own strategic roles, several participants acknowledged that for administrative HR workers AI might be a threat. The tasks most commonly delegated to AI are mostly administrative responsibilities. As one participant noted, *“Because I myself work more in a tactical strategic function I think it is less threatening, but I can imagine if you are in HR and you answer questions from employees in the first line you would see it as a threat”* (P.11). Another explained, *“One of my targets is to then be automated using AI to such an extent that those FTEs no longer need to be replaced”* (P.7). The selective delegation of administrative tasks to AI was seen as a practical adjustment that did not compromise the professional identity of HR professionals. Participants emphasised that while AI could take over repetitive or operational tasks, their core responsibilities, rooted in human interaction and strategic thinking, remained unchanged. This distinction did not just preserve the essence of their role but also the meaning professionals derive from it. Participants stated *“I believe my work is meaningful and that will remain, because I do not think my role will change that much”* (P.11) and *“The meaningfulness of my job will not change, because to me it depends on the personal value I attach to my role”* (P.16). Because their human-centred work continued to form the foundation of their role, the use of AI was not experienced as a threat to their identity or values. As a result, the meaningfulness of their role remained intact, supporting their ongoing experience of job flourishing.

This tool-based perspective on AI also affected how participants trusted AI. Participants did not inherently trust AI in the same way they trusted human colleagues, however, they did express a willingness to rely on it conditionally as a tool. One participant stated, *“It might sound a bit strange, but if I hear it from a colleague, I do not necessarily know it is true either but*

there is a feeling, and with AI there is not and there is some caution” (P.12). The quote illustrates a psychological distance between the trust in a person and a tool such as AI. Trust also appeared to be related to familiarity and knowledge. Several participants explained that the more they understood AI, the more confident they felt using it in their daily work. As one participant stated, *“After following a training on AI, my opinion on using it has become more positive”* (P.5). This trust, however, was never absolute. Participants often mentioned struggling with the opacity of the AI algorithms and sources. As one participant reflected, *“You need to trust the outcomes of AI and the assistance it gives in the process (..), but that is quite difficult because AI develops itself in such a way that it is hard to understand what is happening in the system and how the outcomes come about”* (P.8). Participants also often feel the need to evaluate the outcomes of AI. One participant stated, *“It would be nice to have the sources, because then I can check whether it is indeed as AI stated it to be”* (P.16). Another said, *“I am also quite sceptical, you have to be careful and always check whether AI is correct. I would never send something without having checked it thoroughly myself”* (P.15). Another participant summarised it as *“I want to remain in control a bit”* (P.17). Because AI was seen as a tool, participants did not resist its integration, but rather the trust in AI had a determining role in what tasks could be delegated to AI. Participants often made use of selective task delegation, delegating clearly defined tasks, administrative or procedural, where correctness could be verified through logical or transparent algorithms. Some participants also reflected on the appropriateness of entrusting HR tasks to AI. One reflected, *“AI might be able to confirm or disconfirm whether something is scientifically or numerically reliable or logical, but the question is, do we want to use it like that?”* (P1). Another participant stated, *“AI does not know your employees, it just looks at the data and of course there is much more to it than data”* (P.2). These quotes illustrate how participants emphasised the relational understanding required for HR and the qualities a tool such as AI lacks for such tasks to be entrusted to it. However, rather than undermining their professional identity, the limitations of AI served to reinforce the participants’ confidence in their own human qualities. By drawing clear boundaries around AI’s role, participants reaffirmed the enduring importance of empathy, intuition, and interpersonal connection in HR.

In addition to describing AI as a tool to improve the execution of their role, participants described how the use of AI strengthened their professional identity. Participants expressed that AI assisted them with communication, argumentation, and problem-solving. As one participant explained, *“I have a more dominant leadership and communication style, which does not match a ‘greener’ organisation, therefore I use AI to rewrite my emails in a more friendly manner. Helping me put it a little nicer on paper”* (P.18). Others noted how AI provided useful

suggestions or support that boosted their self-perception and confidence, “*Because of better substitutions using AI, I feel more confident when presenting ideas*” (P.17) and “*AI helps support your creativity, it can come up with different ideas which I can use in my work. I think that can boost my self-confidence sometimes*” (P.12). This perspective on AI appeared to be related to participants' attitudes towards learning and development. Rather than resisting change, professionals approached AI as an opportunity and a resource to strengthen their current professional identity. AI enabled greater depth and quality in the work they already valued, reinforcing their self-image as capable and strategic professionals. As one participant reflected, “*My role involves a lot of interaction, a lot of talking to people about systems and different things. I think an AI adds value to that as well. Because it increases the quality of what I do (...) with that I present myself better*” (P.13). Another stated, “*It helps me improve the quality of my work (...) It makes my position as a professional stronger*” (P.14). This forward-looking and growth-oriented mindset fostered a sense of continued development and adaptability to change. One participant explained, “*AI is going to have an impact, but that growth mindset will help me generate more value, because everything can be done faster and better substantiated*” (P.18). Another growth-oriented participant stated “*Well, then I will adjust myself again to AI or another change*” (P.4). Moreover, participants stated that AI allowed them to add more value in their work, which resulted in an increase in meaningfulness. As one participant stated, “*I actually feel a lot more useful myself, now that I am able to do more than mindless click-and-go chores*” (P.7). Another explained, “*I believe AI might even increase our value if we can start working more efficiently and deliver a lot more pieces to make sure we can showcase our added value*” (P.10). Ultimately, by enabling greater efficiency, enhancing communication, and supporting continuous professional growth, AI was not seen as diminishing HR professionals' roles but as empowering them to deliver higher-quality work, reinforcing their sense of competence, confidence, and meaningful contribution.

4.3 Maintaining Relational Meaning

Because participants did not believe AI to be capable of replicating or replacing the human-centred aspects of their professional role, they largely framed AI as an opportunity rather than a threat. This instrumental understanding of AI allowed HR professionals to preserve a positive and stable sense of professional identity. Rather than experiencing anxiety or defensiveness about potential disruption, participants interpreted AI as a means to enhance the efficiency and quality of their work, especially in administrative or repetitive tasks that were not central to their sense of purpose. One participant encapsulated this optimistic perspective, stating, “*I think*

the possibilities will be huge in the future, so I think it's a great development" (P.8). Another participant expressed similar excitement, *"Enthusiasm, I think it's just a cool new tool"* (P.13). By drawing clear boundaries between what AI could assist with and what remained inherently human, participants reaffirmed the irreplaceable value of their human-centred competencies. This distinction enabled a positive identity appraisal, where participants not just maintain confidence in the relevance of their role but also recognised AI's potential to elevate their contribution.

Building on their perception of AI as an opportunity, participants articulated a vision of their future professional roles in explicitly relational terms. Rather than merely defending the irreplaceable human qualities of their work, they actively emphasised how relational connection would continue to be a central source of job meaning and energy in an AI-augmented context. For many, connection with others was not just an enduring element of their role but one that would gain prominence as routine tasks were automated. As one participant explained, *"I will focus more on becoming a conversation partner, for example"* (P.3), signalling an intention to deepen interpersonal dialogue and advisory relationships. This future-oriented framing was echoed by others who anticipated a sharpening of relational responsibilities. One participant emphasised, *"What will remain is making connections, advising and thinking along, so those qualities will become more important"* (P.8). Even participants with a more technology-forward outlook echoed this sentiment, viewing automation as a means to enhance, not erode, human qualities. As one participant described, *"I believe it is the art of keeping the human touch where needed (...) taking out the admin tasks will leave more time for HRBP's to include the human touch where it is needed"* (P.9). These reflections show how professionals see their human qualities as not only enduring but growing in relevance. This belief in the increasing importance of human connection also shaped how participants envisioned their future roles. *"We can start working more efficiently or faster and therefore indeed spend more time with people"* (P1). Through these forward-looking statements, participants engaged in identity affirmation, positioning themselves as future professionals whose roles would be increasingly defined by personal interaction, empathy, and meaningful engagement.

These forward-looking aspirations were not abstract ideals but were anchored in how participants experienced their roles on a daily basis. The human-centred nature of HR professionals' identity not only reinforced their sense of professional purpose, but also played a crucial role in how they experienced job satisfaction and personal fulfilment. Human connection was not simply a feature of their work, it was a foundation for flourishing. Participants emphasised that fulfilling HR work was closely tied to supporting and empowering

people. Relational engagement was often described as the most energising and rewarding part of the job. As one participant reflected, *"The repetitive tasks are not the tasks that give me the most energy in my role"* (P11), while another stated, *"Getting the best out of people within organisations, that is what gives me energy"* (P7). For many, the ability to build relationships was integral not just to the role but to its meaningfulness. One participant explained, *"As long as the human aspect remains, I think my work will remain meaningful. At least for myself, because then I have an idea that I can build a relationship, and that is something that is very important to me"* (P6). Although the importance of human connection was a shared value, participants expressed differing views on whether AI would impact these interpersonal dynamics. Some professionals were confident that their connections with colleagues would remain unchanged. Participants expressed that AI could not disrupt the social and emotional nature of these interactions:

"I do not see AI change how I connect with colleagues, there is a social aspect to that"
(P.5)

"That connection with people and the warmth in a conversation when you really connect with people, I do not believe that will change very quickly with the emergence of AI." (P.19)

Others, however, expressed concern that increased reliance on AI could erode the personal aspects of communication. These participants emphasised the importance of preserving warmth, empathy, and social presence in their interactions:

"Taking over, I do not believe that would be right, but then you come back to that social aspect and the human piece. I think that would get forgotten or left out." (P.6)

"You have to be careful that it doesn't become very impersonal very quickly, so you do have to find a balance there" (P.3)

Together, these reflections emphasise that participants consistently viewed human connection as a non-negotiable aspect of meaningful HR work; the social and relational aspects of their role were seen as essential to both their identity and their professional fulfilment. Building on the importance of social connection, some participants reflected on how broader societal changes have affected the quality of relationships in the workplace: *"Look at work life before corona and after corona, it's just very different. It is also a matter of acceptance. It was much more personal"* (P2). However, despite shifts in work structures and increased digitalisation, participants continued to prioritise maintaining meaningful connections. For example, one

shared, *"Sometimes I make a conscious effort to call people to ask how it's going because if I am working at the office does not mean others are also working at the office"* (P3). Similarly, another observed, *"That's also something that just happens in the world, but we must make sure we keep that personal connection with each other"* (P7). These efforts underscore an intentional commitment to relational preservation, even in hybrid or remote work contexts. These reflections acknowledge the reality of evolving work norms while simultaneously reinforcing the need to preserve interpersonal connections.

In conclusion, because HR professionals framed AI as a non-threatening, supportive tool, they maintained a positive identity appraisal. This outlook allowed them to absorb and manage concerns without those concerns becoming barriers to adoption. Their confidence in the enduring relevance of human qualities and values enabled them to approach AI with openness and adaptability.

5. Discussion

This thesis revealed how HR professionals engaged in identity work in response to AI integration. The findings, as structured around the three main themes visualised in Figure 2, indicate that professionals engage in identity work in response to AI integration. Figure 2 also includes potential outcomes of identity work, such as job satisfaction, engagement, and job flourishing, which is not an independent part of the data structure. Although not enough data was acquired to support an independent theme, the potential outcomes of identity work are grounded in participant narratives and prior research, and are therefore included in the model. The results suggest that HR professionals make use of identity-protection measures that emphasise the human-centred nature of their professional identity. The results indicate that HR professionals frame AI as a tool, rather than a quasi-social entity. The tool-based perspective on AI is important in understanding the identity work process of HR professionals, as it guides how professionals engage in the creation, maintenance, repair, display, and revision of their professional identities. Professionals engaged in selective task delegation, often assigning repetitive, administrative, or procedural tasks to AI while maintaining tasks rooted in human connection and strategic decision-making. Through this deliberate delegation, HR professionals protected the core aspects of their human-centred professional identity. The findings suggest that the tool-based and instrumental perspective on AI enabled HR professionals to adapt to the integration of AI without compromising their core human-centred values and qualities. Moreover, the results indicate that AI is perceived as an opportunity for their professional identity, making work more efficient and allowing more time for tasks aligned with their sense of purpose. Overall, by framing AI as a supportive tool and engaging in selective task delegation, HR professionals were able to reinforce their professional identity while enhancing their experience of meaningful and fulfilling work. This approach not just protects their core values but can also contribute positively to outcomes of identity work linked to these positive experiences, such as professionals' sense of job flourishing and engagement.

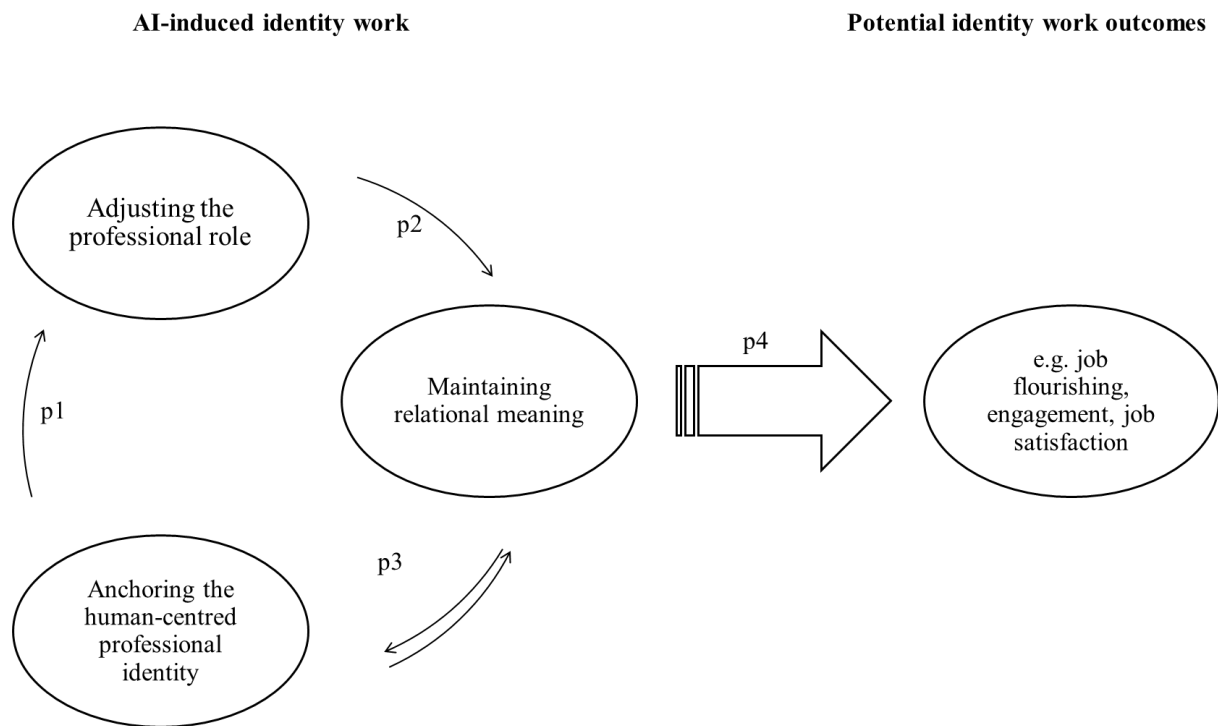


Figure 2. A process model of identity work in response to AI integration

5.1 Theoretical Implications

The current thesis contributes to the AI and identity literature through understanding the identity work process HR professionals engage in to manage and adapt their professional identities in response to AI integration. The findings of this research suggest that HR professionals often frame AI as an instrumental tool, rather than a quasi-social actor capable of independent decision-making or professional replacement. The framing of AI as a tool could act as an important identity-protection measure to mitigate perceived threats to the professional identity. AI is theorised to be a threat originating neither from the material world nor others due to its quasi-social attributes (Petriglieri, 2011; Selenko et al., 2022). Therefore, AI can appear like an entity that can act independently on behalf of a human (Selenko et al., 2022). However, the findings suggest that HR professionals resisted anthropomorphising AI and rather emphasised its role as a supportive tool controlled by a human. This protective measure could be rooted in the principles of social identity theory, in which individuals make sense of themselves through processes of social comparison (Hogg et al., 1995). HR professionals made use of discursive, dramaturgical, and socio-cognitive identity to make a distinction between human and machine capabilities. Engaging in identity work emphasising the dissimilarities between their own human-centred qualities and the dehumanised qualities of AI, HR professionals were able to maintain and reinforce their (positive) self-concepts. This tool-based perspective on AI allowed

HR professionals to engage with the perceived threats of AI as a threat from the material world rather than a special source of identity threat, neither attributed to the material world nor others. This finding contributes to identity work research as it illustrates that professionals can cognitively reframe a quasi-social threat to a material world threat through deliberate interpretative measures. Moreover, it refines the functional deployment perspective (Selenko et al., 2022), providing that the manner in which AI is socially constructed and narratively framed has an important role in whether it is perceived as a threat.

The tool-based framing of AI also shaped how HR professionals extended their trust in AI. Rather than extending interpersonal-style trust, participants expressed a form of pragmatic or functional trust towards AI, trust grounded in expectations of reliability, predictability, and task performance. This distinction mirrors the difference stated by Weiss et al. (2020), who argue that trust in people is relational and emotionally rich, whereas trust in tools and systems is calculative and based on functionality. Similarly, Matthews et al. (2020) emphasise that trust in autonomous systems depends on perceived transparency and consistent performance, not on relational warmth. From an identity work perspective, this pragmatic stance enables professionals to delegate specific tasks to AI without giving up control or exposing themselves to unnecessary vulnerability. As Lahno (2001) noted, emotional trust in people involves risk and expectations of goodwill, conditions HR professionals deliberately avoided with AI by maintaining clear functional boundaries. Therefore, this form of conditional trust ensured that professionals retained oversight and control over “the tool” AI and its integration into their roles.

Having cognitively reframed AI as a non-threatening tool, HR professionals were not just able to protect their professional identity conceptually, but also able to act on this perception in their work practices. This reframing enabled them to integrate AI in a manner that reinforced, rather than undermined, their roles. Specifically, it allowed professionals to engage in selective task delegation. Previous literature suggests that AI introduces potential identity threats that can disrupt professional self-concept and role enactment. As Mirbabaie et al. (2022) suggested that identity threats arise from intergroup conflicts (e.g., loss of status or job security), prevention of verification (e.g., loss of skills and expertise), and changes in meaning (e.g., loss of autonomy and control). Similarly, Jussupow et al. (2022) suggest that AI can threaten both professional recognition (status and expertise) and professional capabilities (the ability to enact core roles). When AI replaces tasks central to an individual’s professional identity, as Selenko et al. (2022) and Strich et al. (2021) argue, professionals risk feeling detached, irrelevant, or diminished. In light of these threats, selective task delegation represents a form of identity work (Brown, 2017)

and an important identity-protection measure in response to AI integration. By assigning routine, administrative, or procedural tasks to AI, but maintaining tasks rooted in human connection and strategic decision-making, HR professionals protect the core of their identity and maintain a sense of control over their roles. This finding supports what Strich et al. (2021) describe as a reframing of professional roles, where workers shift their focus to human-centric tasks that AI cannot replicate, such as relational work or oversight. In doing so, professionals enact socio-cognitive identity work, reinterpreting their expertise and value within an AI-augmented context. This task differentiation not just protects the professional identity but also preserves role legitimacy and professional purpose. This finding also supports Selenko et al. (2022) proposition that the conditions for AI to threaten or enhance a professional's sense of identity depend on its functional deployment. The delegation of routine, administrative, or procedural tasks to AI allows professionals to prioritise higher-value, creative, or decision-making activities that reinforce valued aspects of their professional identity. The results illustrate that HR professionals consciously delegated low-value tasks (e.g., data processing, scheduling) to AI, while maintaining the high-value tasks requiring human qualities, which are seen as irreplaceable and fundamental to their role. This selective delegation can be interpreted as dramaturgical identity work (Brown, 2017), as professionals actively shape their actions and role execution to protect their self-concept. Moreover, this finding refines the functional deployment perspective (Selenko et al., 2022) as it illustrates that the conditions for AI to threaten or enhance a professional's identity are not inherent, but can be affected by selective control over how AI is integrated into their role. Using selective task delegation, professionals are able to pragmatically benefit from AI without compromising their identity. This leads to the first proposition:

Proposition 1: *Anchoring the human-centred professional identity enables HR professionals to frame AI as a functional tool that supports, rather than threatens, their role. This tool-based framing protects core relational aspects of their professional identity.*

While selective task delegation allowed HR professionals to pragmatically protect the human-centred aspects of their roles and identities, the findings indicate that these identity-protection measures did not just function to defend against perceived threats. Rather, maintaining control over task allocation and reinforcing their professional value, professionals created the conditions to perceive AI not just as manageable but as beneficial. The results indicate that the identity-protection measures enable HR professionals to construct an opportunity-oriented view of AI integration, emphasising how AI could enhance their role and professional self-concepts.

This aligns with recent advances in identity work theory by Bataille and Vough (2022), who argue that identity work is not limited to repairing threatened identities but also involves strengthening and expanding identities in response to perceived opportunities. Positive identity appraisals, such as viewing AI as an opportunity, are associated with positive feelings, cognitive flexibility, and approach motivation, conditions that foster self-enhancement and movement toward desired identities. Moreover, the findings suggest that AI does not just trigger identity work related to the maintenance and revision of professional identity, but can also assist professionals in identity work aimed at the display of professional identity. This is in line with Endacott (2021), who argued that when the use of AI aligns with professionals' aspirational identities, it not only supports role enactment but also strengthens identity maintenance and display. The results of the current research indicate that when HR professionals are secure in their professional boundaries, they are able to appraise AI integration as an opportunity to strengthen their professional qualities. This finding contributes to both identity work and AI literature by illustrating that identity protection can be a precursor to identity opportunity. This results in proposition two:

Proposition 2: *By reducing perceived threats through a tool-based perspective, HR professionals create the conditions to appraise AI as an opportunity that strengthens their professional qualities and supports engagement in meaningful, relational work.*

Although the identity-protection measures have an important role in enabling HR professionals to view AI as an opportunity, these measures cannot be seen in isolation. The confidence with which professionals engaged with AI is also grounded in deeper structural aspects tied to their professional values and the nature of their roles. The findings indicate that the confidence of HR professionals in their continued relevance might not just stem from identity-protection measures but also from deeper embedded professional logics and the emergence of a “feeling economy”. Huang et al. (2019) argue that modern economies are increasingly shifting towards a “feeling economy”, where emotion-intensive, relationship-driven tasks grow in importance as AI assumes greater responsibility for cognitive and analytical work. It has been argued that AI can match humans in cognitive intelligence therefore, the feeling tasks within jobs are becoming more important, and are projected to surpass the importance of thinking tasks. The professional logic of HR professionals is based on the human-centred and relational nature of their roles. Unlike other professions that might experience a mismatch between their traditional logic and emerging technological demands, HR professionals find their core expertise aligned with the priorities of the feeling economy. For example, Kyratsis et al. (2017) showed that

medical professionals confronted with shifts in institutional logic experienced identity threats and had to engage in identity work to align with a new professional paradigm. In contrast, HR professionals do not face such dissonance. The congruence between their enduring professional logic and the increasing importance of emotional and relational qualities means they are less likely to perceive AI as a threat. Moreover, the human-centred identity of HR professionals forms the basis for their commitment to relational work, which not just aligns with the emerging feeling economy but also motivates the protection and continued enactment of that identity in the face of AI integration.

Therefore, apart from reducing perceived threats, HR professionals' alignment between professional logic and the emerging feeling economy might also shape how professionals integrate AI into their roles. The findings suggest that professionals did not perceive AI as a competitor; rather, they perceived AI as a supportive tool that allowed them to focus on core aspects of their role. HR professionals perceived increased value in their relational, empathic, and strategic contributions. AI's automation of routine, administrative, and procedural tasks enabled them to invest more time in activities that were both professionally valued and personally meaningful. HR professionals made use of the congruence between their existing human-centred professional logic and the emerging feeling economy to reinforce and strengthen their professional value. Rather than displacement, HR professionals moved towards higher-value, strategic responsibilities where human capabilities remain indispensable, as described by Charlwood and Guenole (2022) and Gulliford and Parker Dixon (2019).

Moreover, this task-oriented approach resonates with research on human-AI task complementarities. Research on intuition and decision-making (Dane et al., 2012; Vincent, 2021) demonstrates that humans retain a distinct advantage in complex, ill-structured, and relational decision contexts, such as the HR context. By delegating structured, repetitive tasks to AI and maintaining responsibility for nuanced, judgment-intensive tasks, HR professionals reinforced both their value and their role legitimacy. Furthermore, the strategic use of AI also intersects with HR professionals' long-standing struggle for legitimacy within organisations. Historically challenged to reposition themselves from administrative support to strategic partners (Heizmann & Fox, 2019; Mahadevan & Schmitz, 2020; Pritchard, 2010), HR professionals used AI integration to strengthen their professional standing. Leveraging AI for routine tasks and emphasising their human-centred, strategic contributions, HR professionals present themselves as more capable and indispensable. This supports Endacott's (2021) suggestion that AI can reinforce professional identity by enabling professionals to enhance

expertise and strategic value. Rather than undermining their role, AI served as a motive for reinforcing professional legitimacy. This leads to proposition three:

Proposition 3: *HR professionals' human-centred identity motivates the preservation of relational work and enables alignment with the feeling economy; together, these reduce perceived identity threats from AI and reinforce an opportunity-oriented view of AI as a supportive tool for professional activities.*

The preceding propositions demonstrate how HR professionals' human-centred professional identity, combined with deliberate identity-protection measures, enabled them to both minimise perceived threats from AI and leverage its integration to reinforce valued aspects of their roles. These processes not just protect their professional identity but also create conditions conducive to job flourishing. Job flourishing reflects a positive state of psychological, social, and emotional well-being, characterised by autonomy, competence, purposefulness, and meaningful relationships (Keyes, 2002; Bono et al., 2012; Rothmann, 2013). Prior research suggests that professional identity and identity work are important contributors to flourishing, as they enhance job satisfaction, work engagement, and well-being (Kabeel & Mosa Eisa, 2017; Tang, 2020; Zhai et al., 2023). The findings of the current research indicate that the identity work HR professionals engage in contributes to these flourishing dimensions, as professionals had more time for the energy-giving tasks and preserved a sense of meaning in their work. By maintaining control over core, human-centred tasks, professionals maintained their sense of competence and purpose, while the reduction of routine burdens enhanced their autonomy over how work was structured. These are established predictors of job flourishing (A'yunnisa et al., 2024a). Furthermore, by engaging in identity work that maintained or strengthened their value in an AI-mediated environment, HR professionals avoided common AI-related threats such as job insecurity and feelings of incompetence (Cheng et al., 2022; Cramarenco et al., 2023). Instead, AI integration controlled by the HR professionals themselves supported self-determination and meaningful contribution. This finding supports Lopez-Garcia et al. (2024), who suggested that the integration of AI can enhance employee satisfaction, provided are involved in the AI implementation process. These findings underscore that (AI-induced) identity work can do more than maintain, repair, or revise professional identity; it can foster broader psychological and organisational benefits associated with job flourishing. This results in proposition four:

Proposition 4: *Identity-protection measures support job flourishing by preserving professionals' engagement in meaningful, purposeful, and relational work.*

In summary, these findings contribute to the literature by showing how a tool-based perspective on AI serves as a form of identity work that both mitigates perceived threats and enables opportunity construction in the context of AI integration. By framing AI as a functional tool rather than a quasi-social actor, HR professionals were able to reduce identity threats, maintain control over task allocation, and create conditions to enhance their professional roles. This directly builds on Selenko et al. (2022), who argue that the functional deployment of AI shapes its impact on professional identity. The findings demonstrate how professionals, through deliberate framing and selective task delegation, used AI to complement human capabilities and strengthen engagement in meaningful, relational work. In doing so, they navigated potential disruptions and reinforced their professional value. These insights also extend understanding of how alignment between professional identity and the emerging feeling economy (Huang et al., 2019) supports role enhancement (Charlwood & Guenole, 2022; Gulliford & Parker Dixon, 2019). Finally, the study advances identity work theory (Brown, 2017) by illustrating how deliberate interpretative strategies can strengthen professional legitimacy in a context marked by longstanding struggles for recognition (Heizmann & Fox, 2019; Mahadevan & Schmitz, 2020).

5.2 Practical Implications

The findings of this research also offer practical implications for organisations integrating AI into human resource functions. In particular, they highlight the importance of managing not only technical implementation but also the professional and psychological dimensions of change. Supporting HR professionals through identity-sensitive change processes is critical for enabling constructive engagement with AI.

First, the findings posit that organisations should recognise that professionals' ability to view AI as an opportunity depends on having a secure foundation in their roles and identities. When identity threats are acknowledged and addressed, professionals are better positioned to reappraise AI as a resource for role development and personal growth. In line with the identity work theory (Brown, 2017), supporting this process involves more than technical training. Organisations can support professionals through identity-sensitive change management by offering guidance and spaces for reflection and dialogue where professionals can explore how AI aligns with their values, aspirations, and evolving responsibilities. Such efforts can facilitate a shift from threat-based to opportunity-oriented appraisal of AI, fostering not only individual well-being but also more sustainable integration outcomes.

Second, the manner in which AI is introduced and framed within an organisation has a significant impact on how professionals relate to it. As noted by Selenko et al. (2022), the effect of AI on professional identity depends on its technical functionality, whether it complements, replaces, or reshapes tasks, and how it alters the social fabric of work. Consistent with this, the findings of this research suggest that when AI is framed and understood as a tool that supports human judgment rather than replacing it, professionals are more inclined to perceive it as beneficial. Such a framing reduces identity threat and allows professionals to retain agency in how they apply their expertise. It also enables identity work processes that support positive reinterpretation of roles, rather than defensive reactions. Organisations should therefore adopt clear, consistent communication strategies that frame AI as a partner in enhancing human value, not undermining it. Doing so can help foster a more opportunity-oriented view of AI, one that emphasises enrichment of professional tasks and supports long-term engagement with technological change.

Third, the findings suggest that for AI integration to be meaningful and useful to an organisation, professionals need to be involved in decision-making on how AI will be used in their roles. This aligns with findings by Lopez-Garcia et al. (2024), who emphasise the importance of inclusive and participatory design approaches in fostering ownership and reducing resistance during technological transitions. In the current research, selective task delegation emerged as an important mechanism through which professionals maintained control and protected core aspects of their identity. Rather than imposing AI from the top down, organisations should engage professionals in participatory design processes that allow them to shape the division of tasks between humans and machines. This inclusion not just enhances the relevance and acceptance of AI solutions but also respects the experiential knowledge of HR practitioners, reinforcing their sense of ownership and legitimacy.

Together, these implications highlight the importance of identity-sensitive change management. Rather than treating AI implementation as purely a technical or efficiency-driven initiative, organisations must attend to the human and professional dimensions of transformation. By supporting professionals in using AI as a tool and by involving them actively in the integration process, organisations can not only mitigate resistance but also foster engagement, innovation, and sustainable value from AI adoption.

5.3 Limitations & Future Research

While this study provides important insights into how HR professionals engage in identity work in response to AI integration, several limitations should be acknowledged to guide the interpretation of the findings and inform future research. Firstly, the sample consisted of 19 participants, which is generally considered sufficient for qualitative research aimed at identifying patterns and achieving data saturation (Hennink et al., 2017). However, although the sample consisted of high-quality informants who provided rich insights, a larger and more diverse sample might have captured additional variation in how HR professionals approach AI integration. Future research could benefit from including a broader range of participants across different organisations, industries, and roles to develop a more comprehensive understanding of identity work processes in relation to AI.

Secondly, the study made use of purposive sampling, which introduces potential sample selection bias (Rai & Thapa, 2015). Participants who volunteered may have been more enthusiastic or open towards AI, as no explicit non-users or AI-resistant professionals were interviewed. While this allowed for a focused exploration of how engaged professionals navigate AI, future research might want to adopt alternative sampling strategies to include the voices of professionals who actively resist it. This could deepen understanding of contrasting identity work strategies, such as resistance or disengagement, in response to AI.

Thirdly, all participants were based in the Netherlands, which could limit the generalisability of the findings to other cultural or institutional contexts. Dutch culture, characterised by egalitarianism, openness, and consultative decision-making (Enklaar, 2007) might have influenced participants' approaches to AI and identity work. Future comparative studies in different national or professional settings could explore how cultural factors shape identity responses to AI integration.

Fourthly, the research made use of a cross-sectional design, thus capturing participants' perceptions and experiences at a single point in time. Consequently, it does not allow for definitive conclusions about causal relationships between identity-protection measures and opportunity-oriented views of AI. Although associations between these processes were identified, future longitudinal research could provide a better understanding of how identity work processes and perceptions of AI change over time, offering a better grasp of the potential relationship and its direction.

Lastly, although the primary researcher conducted all coding and analysis, potential researcher bias was mitigated through regular discussions and consultations with a supervisor.

These collaborative discussions enhanced reflexivity and strengthened analytical rigour. Nonetheless, future studies might benefit from involving multiple coders or conducting inter-coder reliability checks to enhance the credibility and robustness of qualitative analysis. Taken together, these limitations do not undermine the value of the current findings but rather highlight important avenues for future research to build on and extend the insights presented.

6. Conclusion

This thesis explored the AI-induced identity work process of HR professionals. Against the backdrop of a growing body of research on AI's disruptive potential, this study responded to calls for more nuanced, individual-level understandings of how intelligent technologies affect professional identity and well-being. Drawing on identity work theory, this research addressed a gap in the literature, namely, how AI reshapes self-conceptions of HR professionals and how it complements or challenges their professional identity.

The findings reveal that AI is not inherently a threat or an opportunity for the professional identity, but that the impact depends on how professionals interpret its role in their work. This underscores the importance of considering AI not just as a technical transformation, but also as a social change that reshapes how professionals understand and relate to their work. The research contributes to identity theory by showing how AI can act as both a trigger for identity threat and identity opportunity, depending on how it aligns with professionals' core values and role conceptions. It also extends our understanding of identity work, illustrating how professionals manage the meaning of their roles through discursive, dramaturgical, and socio-cognitive identity work. Furthermore, this study contributes to the literature on well-being and job flourishing by connecting identity work with broader outcomes. While previous research has suggested that AI may heighten stress and reduce job satisfaction, this thesis offers a more nuanced view; when professionals are given opportunities to reflect, adapt, and shape AI's role in their work, they are more likely to maintain a positive self-concept and experience greater engagement.

In conclusion, this research underscores that the human dimension of AI integration is not a peripheral concern; it is central. Supporting identity work and involving professionals in shaping the future of their work is not just an ethical imperative, but a strategic one that can determine whether AI becomes a barrier or an opportunity for growth.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Interview Guide

Theme	Question	Probing question
Professional identity	Why did you decide to become an HR professional?	
	What does a normal workday look like for you as a (profession)?	
	What do you believe are the qualities of a good (profession)?	Can you elaborate? Why do you think ... is a good quality of (profession)?
	What do you believe are key values of a good HR professional? (e.g. integrity of doctors or mentorship for education)	Can you elaborate? Why do you think ... is a key value of (profession)?
AI	What is your attitude towards AI?	Why do you think so?
	Has your attitude towards AI changed over time?	
	What do you think about AI-generated information compared to human-generated information?	Why?
AI & the HR professional	How do you think your (profession) will change, in both a positive and negative way, because of AI?	In your opinion, what are the opportunities/ limitations of AI?
	How do you believe the qualities of a good (profession) will change because of AI?	Why? Can you give examples?
	How do you think the values of an HR professional will change working with AI?	Why? Could you elaborate?
	How do these changes make you feel?	Why does it make you feel ...?
Job Flourishing	Do you believe AI will affect your ability or confidence in expressing your own ideas at work?	Why?
	Can you describe how AI has influenced how meaningful or purposeful your work feels?	Can you elaborate?
	How do you think AI will impact your ability to connect with colleagues or employees?	Why?