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Abstract
Human Resources (HR) department managers have an important role to play in the processes of definition and implementation of organizational strategies. From this perspective, decisions taken by HR managers have a direct influence on the competitiveness of their organizations. There is a gap in the literature on the decision-making process with relation to these managers, and particularly so with respect to the subjective elements of the process. The objective of this study was to analyze the strategic decision-making processes of HR managers from the perspective of reflective practice. A qualitative study was conducted based on an analysis of the decision-making processes of five HR department managers. The study results indicate that (i) reflection-in-action is one possibility for narrowing the gap between action and reflection in management practice, contributing to increasing the effectiveness of the results of strategic decisions; (ii) HR managers’ decisions are delimited by factors internal and external to the organization; and (iii) these decisions involved intensive sharing of information. These results represent a development in understanding one of the subjective elements of the decision-making process of HR department managers – reflection – and should be of help in improving the results of strategic decisions made by these managers and also by managers of other organizational departments.

Keywords: Strategic Decision-Making; Human Resources Managers; Reflective Practice.

Track: Human Resource Management

Words: 7049
1. INTRODUCTION

The Human Resource (HR) department’s functions have direct relevance to both definition and implementation of organizational strategies. The strategic impact of the HR department is manifest in its involvement in organizational change, with emphasis on aligning the HR department with company strategy and on alignment of HR strategies, policies and practices with each other (Bosquetti & Albuquerque, 2005; Coda, Cesar & Garcia, 2005; Lacombe & Tonelli, 2001; Wright & Snell, 1998). Management decisions taken in the HR department therefore impact on the organization’s entire value creation process (Holcomb, Holmes & Connelly, 2009).

Over the last 20 years, scholars studying strategy and decision-making processes (Franz & Kramer, 2010; Nutt & Wilson, 2010; Papadakis, Thanos & Barwise, 2010; Nag, Hambrick & Chen, 2007; Hambrick, 2007; Mintzberg, Ahlström & Lampel, 2007; Bulgacov et al., 2007; Mintzberg, Quinn & Ghoshal, 2006; Langley et al., 1995; Eisenhardt & Zbarack, 1992) have emphasized the need for investigations that connect strategic decisions to leaders and strategy makers, i.e., those players who influence strategy process or control processes that are important to maintaining organizational competitiveness over the long term. This recommendation is intended to improve understanding of the role of the strategist in constructing strategy, taking into account their personal characteristics, life histories, experiences and memories and also their subjective processes such as cognition, reasoning, insights, intuition, affect, inspiration, creativity, judgment, emotion, imagination and reflection.

The focus of this study is an investigation of reflection and its influence on the decision-making processes of strategists. There have been many approaches to the study of reflection, but the primary theoretical framework employed in this study is the concept of reflection-in-action proposed by Schön in 1983. Drawing on work by Dewey (1910), Schön developed the concepts of “reflection-in-action” and the “reflective practitioner”. According to Schön (1983), professionals who are recognized as the most competent have acquired a central core of “artistry”, which they can rely on in situations of uncertainty and in situations that force individuals to take decisions. The study described in this article was therefore conducted with the objective of analyzing the strategic decision-making processes of HR department managers, from the perspective of reflection-in-action.

The relevance of studying HR department managers of Brazilian companies lies in the fact that research has shown that a large proportion of Brazilian companies are out of step with theoretical tendencies in HR management and that their HR departments are unable to fulfill their role in support of organizational strategies (Wood Jr, Tonelli & Cooke, 2011; Tanure, Evans & Cançado, 2010; Bosquetti & Albuquerque, 2005; Coda, Cesar & Garcia, 2005; Lacombe & Tonelli, 2001).

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The next section outlines the results of a literature review, describing the theoretical structure of the study, drawing together work on reflection-in-action, strategic decision making and strategic management of human resources. The sections that follow describe the method employed to conduct the research and present an analysis of the results and the final section contains concluding comments.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

2.1. Strategic Decision-Making Processes and Reflective Practice
The decision-making process is a subject of interest to studies of the strategic process (Bulgacov et al., 2007; Langley, 2007). The authors of such studies point out that people take many decisions during the course of a day, particularly within the context of work. However, not all types of decision are of interest to studies of the strategic process and they distinguish between general decisions and strategic decisions. Strategic decisions are the focus of this paper and these can be classified as follows: i) important decisions; ii) rare decisions; iii) decisions taken by the principal leaders of an organization; iv) decisions with a powerful effect on the course of an organization’s actions and on its survival; v) complex decisions involving many different people; vi) decisions with uncertain consequences; vii) decisions about issues with regard to which those involved have diverging interests; and viii) decisions taken when the decision-maker has a limited quantity of information available (Nutt, 2010; Clemen, 1995; Eisenhardt & Zbarack, 1992).

Strategic decisions are linked to leaders, entrepreneurs or top management, known as strategists in this context, and they impact on the strategy process or take actions that are important to company maintenance and survival over the long term. Therefore, studies of the decision-making process should not be exclusively concerned with company performance, but also with the performance of strategists themselves. Such studies should include analysis of individuals as strategists, considering their profiles, their role in definition of strategies and the way that they work and take decisions (Bulgacov et al., 2007; Clemen, 1995; Eisenhardt and Zbarack, 1992).

As mentioned in the introduction, one subject that has been identified in the literature as a research stream in need of exploration is to investigate individuals as central actors in the decision-making process and therefore attempt to understand their individual characteristics and subjective processes. Reflection is one of the subjective processes that has been identified as important (Langley et al., 1995; Eisenhardt & Zbarack, 1992).

According to Dewey (1910, p. 3), reflective thinking is “the kind of thinking that consists of turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration”. Schön (1983) used this concept as the basis to develop his concepts of reflection-in-action and the reflective practitioner. He (1983, 2000) explains that each professional has a repertoire of technical knowledge which allows them to solve problems with a defined structure, in an instrumental manner. However, situations that are encountered in professional practice are often uncertain, without a clearly delineated structure, which Dewey (1910) described as situations of perplexity.

Schön (1983) considers that when professionals are faced with these situations of perplexity (or practical situations of uncertainty), they have two options: knowing-in-action or reflection-in-action. If they choose to employ knowing-in-action, they will attempt to solve the problem in an automatic manner, without reflecting on other possibilities and will restrict the solution to the tacit knowledge they have acquired through experience. The other option when faced with an unexpected situation, is to establish a process of reflection. Schön (1983) describes two forms of reflection: reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. The first takes place after the action has occurred, or during a pause for thought. Reflection-in-action is when reflection takes place in the during the action, without interrupting it, during the action’s “present”, and in this case thought gives a new form to what a person is doing while they are doing it. This reflection is conscious to some extent (although it is not expressed in words) and its critical function is to question the structure of the assumptions underlying knowing-in-action.

The relevance of studying the influence of reflective practice on decision-making processes is related to the fact that organizations are challenged by complex and rapid changes that create unexpected and uncertain situations for management in their quest for organizational competitiveness. Gosling and Mintzberg (2003) consider that managers live a
contradiction between acting swiftly, on the basis of their knowing-in-action, and reflecting on different scenarios and possible responses. This contradiction imposes limitations on their capacity to manage, since it is common to find people who know how to execute, but do not have the ability to reflect, or the opposite, people who remain involved in the process of reflection and cannot do things quickly enough. It is therefore necessary for management to find a point at which reflective thought meets practical action, because “Action without reflection is thoughtless; reflection without action is passive” (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003, p.56).

Bulgacov et al. (2007), Eisenhardt (2006), Chakravarthy and White (2002) and Silva and Silva (2011) state that to study corporate strategy is to study reasoning in action, since it is this interaction that makes the strategic choices that guide an organization possible, ensuring competitive advantage and efficacy. Actions accumulated over time set the pattern for decision-making that provides the foundations of organizational strategy. Nutt (2010) explains how the ability to deal with taking decisions in environments of extreme uncertainty and ambiguity equips organizations to withstand extreme events and makes them more able to recover rapidly after periods of crisis.

2.2. The Strategic Decision-Making Process and the Human Resources Department

This study attempted to arrive at an understanding of the role of reflective practice in the decision-making processes of HR department managers. Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) and Ulrich (1998) have stated that the current business environment demands that HR managers act strategically, meaning they must be able to fully understand the entire business model, in order to design HR policies and practices that are aligned with the organization’s strategy, thereby adding value for investors, management, employees and customers. The HR department is considered an important support for organizational strategy, generating sustainable competitive advantages by aligning its practices with the firm’s business objectives (Barney & Wright, 1998; Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Bosquetti & Albuquerque, 2005; Coda, Cesar & Garcia, 2005; Fischer & Albuquerque, 2001, 2004; Wright & Snell, 1998).

Coda, Cesar and Garcia (2005) consider that a strategy-oriented HR department is essential if a firm is to expand globally, since globalization, technology and changes have brought about more competitive markets, with increasing pressures and challenges. Similarly, Bosquetti and Albuquerque (2005) believe that a strategic approach to HR must take account of the department’s involvement in organizational change, with emphasis on aligning the HR department with company strategy and on alignment of HR strategies, policies and practices with each other. This strategic approach to HR finds support in the Resource-Based View, to the extent that it is capable of generating sustainable competitive advantage by means of effective utilization of an organization’s internal resources (Barney, 1991). From such a perspective, human resources constitute internal resources that contribute to a sustainable competitive advantage, because a well-balanced workforce is understood to be valuable, rare, difficult to imitate and impossible to substitute. It is therefore the responsibility of the HR department to adopt policies and practices that allow such a workforce to be assembled and retained and to transmit the organization’s strategies to its employees, transforming them into agents of competitiveness. Becker and Gerhart (1996) argue that policies are easy to imitate, but that the process of implementation is not, and so they have called on researchers to make greater efforts to understand which factors influence managers’ decisions to adopt certain practices within an HR department.
Tanure, Evans and Cançado (2010) have called attention to a relevant feature of existing HR studies: there are divergences between the Brazilian and international contexts. They concluded that developments in HR departments in Brazil was linked with entry of multinationals into the country, leading to a process of importation of techniques and practices, but that this process only achieved a façade of modernity, with discourse and reality out of step with each other, since HR departments are not aligned with their organizations’ business. Lacombe and Tonelli (2001) point out that there is a clear disconnect between theoretical tendencies and practice, stating that Brazilian organizations still face the challenge of transforming their HR departments, which remain focused on operational and labor issues, with unsophisticated policies and practices that are little diversified. These studies show that the policies and practices adopted by HR departments in companies that do business in Brazil have been unable to ensure that they fulfill their role of supporting organizational strategies.

Once it is accepted that HR departments have an important role to play in creating and sustaining competitive strategies, it becomes necessary to understand the decision-making processes of the managers of these departments with relation to adoption and management of HR practices. Human resources department managers are therefore the object of interest in this research, since they are the central actors in strategic decision making related to the HR department (Holcomb, Holmes & Connelly, 2009). In “The Chief HR Officer: defining the new role of human resource leaders”, the editors, Wright et al. (2011), claim that the manager in charge of the HR department has become the second-most important person in any organization, second only to its CEO. As a consequence, the HR department manager is subject to ever greater internal and external pressures for results.

Holcomb, Holmes and Connelly (2009) see managers themselves as strategic resources who are a potential source of value creation for the organization. They reason that managers affect the productivity of all other organizational resources, since they synchronize different resource bundles in order to achieve performance, and can explain the differences between the results of different organizations. It is not enough merely to own or have access to valuable and rare resources to achieve a competitive advantage; it is also necessary that these resources be effectively managed and synchronized to generate competitive advantage, and this depends on managers’ abilities.

For the purposes of this study, the HR department manager is defined as that professional who acts as the manager, director, chief officer or principal leader of the department responsible for formulating and implementing policies, practices and processes for the management of human resources and who is a member of the organization’s executive management team; in other words the manager of the HR department, which is one of the many different internal divisions or departments of a company (WRIGHT et al., 2011; ULRICH, 1998). Ulrich (1998) points out that HR professionals have a specific body of knowledge, offer certain essential competencies, follow ethical standards and fulfill clearly-defined roles. Human resources professionals therefore constitute a specific body of professionals, suited to positions that cannot be filled by others.

3. METHODOLOGY

Interpretative studies have been emerging recently as an important new avenue for research into the decision-making process (Éricson, 2010; Hacklin & Wallnöfer, 2012). According to these authors, interpretative studies can help researchers to understand human thoughts and actions in social and organizational contexts, giving them the potential to offer more in-depth results in studies of the decision-making process. The literature review undertaken for this study identified (i) a scarcity of studies of the decision-making process in
the Brazilian context; (ii) a lack of research linking the decision-making process with reflective practice; (iii) an absence of studies investigating the decision-making process of HR department managers and (iv) that subjectivity is characteristic of decision-making processes; all of which are indicative of a need to employ an interpretative research strategy.

Research can be classified as interpretative if it is based on the acceptance that knowledge about reality is generated through social constructions and relations and is focused on the complexity of actors’ interpretations in situations that occur in the field (Klein & Myers, 1999). Interpretative studies do not require dependent or independent variables, rather the focus is on the complexity of actors’ “sense making” when situations occur and they attempt to understand phenomena through the meanings that people attribute to them. Interpretative studies are a type of qualitative research, which, according to Creswell’s definition (1998), is characterized by an investigative process that explores social or human problems and their contexts. The researcher builds up a complex and holistic picture, analyzes interviewees’ words and reports their views, conducting the study in a natural manner.

In view of this concise contextualization of study types, a purely qualitative research strategy was adopted in order to achieve the proposed study objectives. Patton (1987) has defined this type of strategy as exploratory and naturalistic and points out that the data collected are qualitative in their entirety. The research methodology used in this study employed a combination of qualitative methods, with emphasis on triangulation.

Data were collected in semi-structured interviews with five HR managers from Brazilian companies, whose details are given in Table 1. Theoretical sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 2008) was used to identify human resources managers who had been involved in one or more strategic decisions and who had a minimum of 10 years’ experience in the job. The focus was restricted to HR managers of Brazilian companies in order to reduce the influence of cultural factors on the decision-making process, such as those described by Wood Jr, Tonelli and Cooke (2011), Tanure, Evans and Cançado (2010) and Coda, Cesar and Garcia (2005), who compared the HR departments of domestic and international companies and identified a strong influence from North-American practices in the Brazilian context and a tendency to engage in imitation at certain organizations. The first stage in choosing interviewees was to map possible candidates. This survey involved both electronic searches and opinion surveys, with experts on HR, in order to identify Brazilian companies that stand out in their sectors and HR managers whose careers stand out. This process mapped a total of 16 managers, 5 of whom accepted the invitation to take part in the study.

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<th>INTERVIEWEE</th>
<th>DEMOGRAPHIC DATA</th>
<th>STRATEGIC DECISON DISCUSSED</th>
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| Interviewee 1 | Sex: Male   
Age: 37 years  
Qualifications: Bachelor’s degree in Law;  
MBA in HR  
Time working in HR: 18 years | Negotiations with Union, prompted by a workers’ strike at one of the company’s factories. |
| Interviewee 2 | Sex: Male   
Age: 48 years  
Qualifications: Bachelor’s degree in Social Studies; Postgraduate Diploma in Strategic HR Management  
Time working in HR: 28 years | Implementation of a policy of rapprochement with the union and the workers, prompted by a workers’ strike that was organized by the union. |
| Interviewee 3 | Sex: Female   
Age: 34 years  
Qualifications: Bachelor’s degree in Business Management; Postgraduate Diplomas in Management Development and in People Management. | Implementation of a Strategic Remuneration Policy. |
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<th>Interviewee 4</th>
<th>Interviewee 5</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sex:</strong> Female</td>
<td><strong>Sex:</strong> Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age:</strong> 38 years</td>
<td><strong>Age:</strong> 63 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Qualifications:</strong> Bachelor’s degree in Systems Analysis; Postgraduate Diploma in Strategic Management and Planning; Executive MBA; Master’s Degree in Business Management; Coaching Qualification</td>
<td><strong>Qualifications:</strong> Bachelor’s degree in Psychology; Postgraduate Diplomas in Social and Cultural Anthropology and in Social Psychology; Master’s Degree in Business Management; Doctorate in Production Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time working in HR:</strong> 13 years</td>
<td><strong>Time working in HR:</strong> 12 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Establishment of a Corporate University and adoption of E-learning methodology for training.</td>
<td>Implementation of a Management Development Program.</td>
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Table 1: Presentation of data collected
Source: the authors (2013)

A pilot interview was conducted and the data analyzed to verify whether the semi-structured questionnaire could answer the research questions. Since the results were satisfactory, the questionnaire was adopted for the study. Interviews were conducted from September to October of 2012, with an average duration of one hour each, and were recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

Data were analyzed using the Content Analysis technique, which Rocha and Deusdará (2005) describe as an interpretativist method of analyzing communications. They say that the method is appropriate when it is wished to mine the deeper significance conferred by a speaker in the act of text production, which is a meaning that existed before the text was produced, and claim that what is said by the speaker is equivalent to information with the value of truth. (Rocha & Deusdará, 2005). Bardin (2004) explains that Content Analysis allows for analysis of variables inserted into messages, with the objective of describing, inferring and interpreting the message’s content, and that the process is divided into three phases: i) pre-analysis, ii) exploration of the material and iii) treatment of data.

The pre-analysis was conducted through the review of the bibliography, conducted in order to situate the researcher with regard to categories. Preparation of the material involved codification of the transcribed data, applying the principles of homogeneity, pertinence and objectivity to each category. The classification criterion was semantic class. Finally, the data treatment phase can be summed up as interpretation of the data using the categories thus created. Measures employed to improve the reliability of the process and the validity of results included the use of a structured research protocol, triangulation of data and constant review of data, codification (categories and relationships) and results, all of which make the research method more robust.

4. PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The decisions discussed with the HR department managers interviewed can be classified as strategic decisions on the basis that they all affect many different stakeholders, and impact several internal departments and external stakeholders. With relation to elements external to the organization, the most evident concerns among the interviewees were related to the community, to employees’ families, to the press, to the unions, to influential people in
small towns (political and religious leaders), to the Brazilian Legislative, Executive and Judiciary, to the competition and to the images of the companies’ brands and products. Subjects of concern related to the internal environment included organizational culture and atmosphere, employee satisfaction and motivation, staff turnover and retention, staff training and qualification, the need to keep updating the business, increasing competitiveness and improving internal processes, and financial issues, which have a direct impact on shareholders. Examples from transcripts of interviewees 1 and 5 speaking are given below:

“[…] this decision is very complex in terms of the impacts it has on the community […] we work very hard to talk to the local union, to the local public prosecutor, to the town’s priest, to the bishop of the archdiocese in that region, basically, we have to mobilize politically […] if they strike there […] work stops and if work stops it affects the schedule, and the schedule’s extremely tight already; the shareholder is monitoring it […] there’s the issue of the internal atmosphere […] We were introducing the company culture in one factory […] and that affects the atmosphere in the organization – people’s commitment and motivation […] the customers felt the impact immediately […]”. (Interviewee 1, excerpt from interview on 3 September 2012).

“the institution was really out of date in terms of management methodology, in terms of worker benefits programs, of implementation of working methods; it was even really out of date in terms of equipment and technology […] we focused on two things. I am developing him, the manager, obviously because I have an interest in his development, but also because I have an interest in something bigger and it is in my interest that he will be able to act differently and take the institution to a new level, so that was the attraction […]”. (Interviewee 5, excerpt from interview on 16 October 2012).

Within the theoretical framework proposed by Ulrich (1998) and Ulrich and Brockbank (2005), the scenario described by the managers can be understood as indicating an on-going transformation in their HR departments, which are beginning to act in a strategic manner and are concerned with creating value for their respective organizations. All of the five strategic decisions analyzed resulted in organizational changes and the adoption of HR practices aligned with organizational strategy, thereby meeting the demands of employees, management, customers and investors and showing that the HR department is a value creator, in line with the proposals made by Ulrich and Brockbank (2005).

Since the strategic decision-making processes of the HR department managers is here seen from the perspective of reflective practice, analysis of the results is based on concepts presented earlier in this article; namely situations of perplexity, knowing-in-action, reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action.

The results of this study show that strategic decision-making processes are not necessarily initiated by a situation of perplexity. Rather, this type of situation often occurs as a result of a routine demand on the HR department manager, as in the case of Interviewee 2, whose decision was related to actions that are to be expected of striking workers. The decision described by Interviewee 3 was related to the organization’s strategic planning, which included a review of the remuneration policy as one of the actions planned for the HR department. In the cases described by Interviewees 4 and 5, decisions were related to adoption of new HR policies and practices. Only in the case described by Interviewee 1 was the strategic decision-making process initiated in a situation of perplexity.

“to be honest, news of a strike is always a surprise. It's hard for us predict a situation like this one […] This was a new situation […] That's how I felt [faced with a situation of perplexity]. I was surprised. Because normally the way they do it is like this: Look, we don't like your proposal and from Monday onwards or from tomorrow onwards we're going to stop working. [...] if they'd done it that way I would have come here earlier and maybe sorted it out before the shutdown.” (Interviewee 1, excerpt from interview on 3 September 2012).
However, while in the majority of cases a situation of perplexity did not trigger the decision-making process, situations of perplexity were identified during the course of the decision-making process, triggering reflective practice. Such situations of perplexity can be perceived in descriptions given by interviewees 2 and 3.

“the union called the strike to celebrate 10 years since the last strike, and that really did perplex me [...] it really created a lot of doubts for me, to the extent that I discussed with the directors whether we should even continue our partnership because the perplexity was so great.” (Interviewee 2, excerpt from interview on 12 September 2012).

“The first reaction is: Oh my God! Where do we start? Then I started to worry [...] when the financial crisis hit in 2008: ‘Suspend the wage rise model, nobody can have a raise any more.’ What do you mean suspend the model? We can’t stop. We’re creating a business, we’ve got a policy, workers have to be assessed, what do you mean? ‘This year they’ll be no assessments, suspend the model’” (Interviewee 3, excerpt from interview on 21 September 2012).

The decisions analyzed showed that the managers drew on prior knowledge, accumulated during their academic training, professional experience and on training courses and at conferences. However, the interviewees were unanimous in believing that this repertoire of knowledge was not enough to solve the problems they were describing. Therefore, they were forced to use this previous knowledge in a deliberate and considered manner, in contrast with knowing-in-action in which, by definition, knowledge is employed in an unconscious manner. These managers initiated processes of reflection and were forced to seek out information in order to construct new concepts and understanding, as can be observed in the extracts that follow.

“[...] there’s no doubt I used knowledge I already knew [...] From visiting other organizations, from conferences I’ve attended [...] you’re faced with a demand, you fall back on everything you have behind you, but I also needed new knowledge [...]”. (Interviewee 4, excerpt from interview on 28 September 2012).

“[...] built on a foundation of my knowledge and experience, but with contributions from team members as well. [...] when I took over as head of human resources [...] I already had 20 years in the profession [...] and I’d been through many different situations, I hadn’t been director of human resources in any previous organization, but I had experienced many situations demanding leadership or decision-making [...]” (Interviewee 5, excerpt from interview on 16 October 2012).

Although the managers’ responses show that they felt the need to acquire new knowledge, they also show that they drew on prior experience to deal with the situations of perplexity described in the interviews. These experiences are part of the professional repertoire, within Schön’s conceptual framework (1983). He believes that even when faced with different problems, professionals fall back on familiar cases that they have experienced, trying to find references in their repertoires that provide examples, images, understandings and experiences from the past. When Schön (1983) presents his concept of repertoire, he explains that professionals construct a body of knowledge and understandings based on their experiences and that at moments in which they are faced with situations of uncertainty, they make use of this framework for problem resolution. In his terminology, the greater the capacity to use this repertoire, the greater the practitioner’s artistry, in other words, such a professional exhibits greater competence and more skilful performance in taking decisions in unique, uncertain and conflict-ridden situations. (SCHÖN, 2000).

The data collected in this study showed that the decision-makers employed their accumulated knowledge in the decision-making process. Notwithstanding, this does not entail that their decision-making processes are based on tacit knowledge, which Schön (1983) defined as knowing-in-action, showing that reflection was employed in the decisions
investigated in this study. Two forms of reflection-on-action were identified in the decision-making processes of the HR department managers. One of these is the propensity to think about the decision after it has taken and has been implemented, with the intention of evaluating what has been done, which can lead to learning that will support future decisions and improve the processes already implemented, as explained by Interviewees 1, 2 and 3.

“you are always going to reflect on many things: Did I have to do that at this point? Have I improved things? Have I worsened things? You are always reflecting on whether you could have done something differently [...]”. (Interviewee 1, excerpt from interview on 3 September 2012).

“I wouldn't say that reflection occurs every day after implementation, but as projects run you establish how they are going and obviously after a process of maturing, of professional growth, you end up looking back and asking yourself if, back then, if you had done it this way could you have added something extra [...] you end up using the reference”. (Interviewee 2, excerpt from interview on 12 September 2012).

“The programme is in a constant process of construction [...] we file it all and come back to all of this, all of our notes, we come back to them when we start to discuss the subject next year [...] every year that we make a rule, we complement that rule [...] every year we think a lot before we launch this policy [...]”. (Interviewee 3, excerpt from interview on 21 September 2012).

The other facet of reflection-on-action interferes in a decision before it is taken, but also without a relation with the immediate action, in the form of a pause in action. Phrases uttered by the Interviewees such as "go home to think about it" and "take one or two days to give an answer", are examples of this process in which ideas are matured, as is the following extract from Interview 5.

“I reflected [...] and came up with strategies built on these reflections and sometimes I would reflect with my team: Lets do it this way, lets do this, you know this might work that way, let's think about it until tomorrow... When tomorrow came, sometimes it wasn't that way that we wanted to go, so we really, one of us would come in from home, someone else would say: But if we do it that way we're going to come up against this. Or I would say myself: No, we're going to find another way because I think if we do it this way so-and-so in the team won't do it right, he's not going to accept doing it this way. So it was a process of reflection [...] in some of the more complex processes I had to chew it over a little.” (Interviewee 5, excerpt from interview on 16 October 2012).

In view of the above, it can be seen that reflection-on-action was present in all of the cases studied, whether after implementation of the decision or during a process of review and improvement, or whether in pauses during the decision-making process, contributing to maturing the decisions. In the opinion of the managers, these moments to pause for reflection during and after the decision-making process have an effect on the results achieved with the decisions that is taken, since the results themselves have characteristics that are very different from those of decisions taken without this reflective process.

In reflection-in-action, reflection takes place during the action, without interrupting it, but imposing a new form on what is being done while it is being done. This process is rarely manifest clearly and is difficult to describe verbally. In general, such processes are described as intuitive judgment or knowledge (SCHÖN, 1983, 2000). Reflection-in-action can be identified in the decision-making processes described by the interviewees. However, as predicted by Schöen (1983), the managers' perception is that this reflection, that interferes immediately in action, is linked to concepts such as feeling, perceptiveness and intuition, making it difficult to explain. Examples of evidence of this can be seen in excerpts from utterances by Interviewees 1 and 5.
“ [...] I had to have a really good feeling when I started to enter into negotiations. [...] many of the decisions I have to take during negotiations I have to take at once [...] so it’s a very intuitive thing and it means you take certain small decisions that will form a large decision by the end. [...] one more intuitive elements there was to turn up at the negotiations the way I did [...] as soon as I arrived I realized that my negotiator was destabilized, he had been weakened, he had no strength left and I had to find a way to win the union over [...] I had to be the facilitator of negotiations and I had to realize that immediately”. (Interviewee 1, excerpt from interview on 03 September 2012).

“I reflected [...] at certain points, I can also be an intuitive person, at certain points I just work it out and, perhaps based on the experiences I’ve had, I work it out really quickly and find a solution [...]”. (Interviewee 5, excerpt from interview on 16 October 2012).

Reflection-in-action during the decision-making process was characterized by situations that demanded rapid thinking and immediate execution. According to Interviewees 2 and 4, in these cases, during the decision-making process they sought out information, formed scenarios mentally and asked themselves questions in the middle of the action.

“none of this process was automatic, it was all thought out. I could not just take any kind of action in front of a union [...] what kind of result would there be after the conversation? So I need to lay it out [...] Lay out the problem in front of myself, the different possible approaches and what I can expect in terms of positive or negative results from each one.” (Interviewee 2, excerpt from interview on 12 September 2012).

“After I had imagined a way forward, you go collecting information and a decision gets taken in this context. I don’t think it was like this: Now I stopped, I reflected on everything I had to and now I decided. No. You go forming in your head a scenario where you feel comfortable with that decision and ready to face obstacles and objections and take the idea forward [...] but this scenario, will it work out? Will they [...] buy-in to the idea? [...] But it is a mental process [...] during the project, yes, we hesitate, question and play the devil’s advocate as well [...] To find new ways of doing things “. (Interviewee 4, excerpt from interview on 28 September 2012).

As predicted by Schön (1983), moments of reflection-in-action are difficult to explain for those who experience them. Nevertheless, the hesitations, the reflection described by interviewees and the direct influence this reflection had on the ongoing action all characterize reflection-in-action. Despite being based in reflection, the decision-making process was neither slow nor had a negative impact on organizational performance. Rather, all of these decisions were strategic and contributed to constructing competitive advantages for their respective organizations.

Therefore, the results of this research indicate one option for filling the gap described in literature between action and reflection, demonstrating that a reflective practitioner has the capacity to execute and to make rapid, strategic and high-quality decisions. Employing reflection-in-action, it is possible to reflect and act at the same time, making rapid and optimum decisions more likely.

Jehn and Waigelt (2001) analyze decision-making along a dichotomy between Western agility and Eastern reflection. They consider that the Western approach can lead to less than ideal decisions, whereas the Oriental approach may be inadequate in times of crisis. It would therefore be ideal to combine the strong points of each method of taking decisions, optimizing them and maintaining both agility and reflection. Leite (2011) also highlights the cleavage between action and reflection, considering that managers privilege action to the detriment of reflection.

Therefore, reflection during the present of an action is a possible point of balance at which a professional can meet the demand for action and reflection in their professional practice, and the perspective of reflection-in-action is an important lens through which to understand this process.
5. CONCLUSIONS

The research described here was conducted with the object of analyzing the strategic decision-making process of HR department managers from the perspective of reflection-in-action. The relevance of attempting to understand the decision-making processes of these professionals lies in the extent to which organizations recognize the role the HR department has to play in creating and maintaining competitive advantages and, because of this, demand that their managers act strategically.

The decisions described by the interviewees can be defined as strategic in terms of the theoretical characteristics of a strategic decision, i.e., they were complex, they involved several people with different interests, there was uncertainty with relation to their consequences and they had a direct impact on the organizations' strategic direction. Furthermore, these decisions were subject to pressures from customers, shareholders, communities, employees' families, the press, unions and local political and religious leaders. The fact that the decisions taken by the HR department managers were all strategic indicates that the profile of the HR department's role is changing in the companies analyzed here. This leads to the belief that these departments may be taking on a more strategic position without importing practices that lead to a facade of modernity, against which theoretical literature warns, and serves to indicate the need for further studies with other organizations to discover whether this is a trend.

The decisions were also considered strategic because of their relationship with the implementation of HR department policies and practices tailored to the context of their respective organizations. None of the decisions described here involved direct importation of HR practices from other organizations. In all cases they had a direct relationship with organizational reality, in contrast with findings of studies conducted by Wood Jr, Tonelli & Cooke (2011), Tanure, Evans & Cançado (2010), Coda, Cesar & Garcia (2005).

In general, the decisions described changed the course of organizations' activities, since they changed working practices, allowed for strategic alignment and resource optimization, and also lead to improved relationships between organizations and their employees, communities and other institutions. With relation to reflection-in-action, the strategic decision-making processes analyzed here began with routine situations and normal demands on the HR Department. The situations of perplexity, which Schön (1983) says cause hesitation and doubts about the most appropriate decision for the situation and can trigger reflective practice, emerged in the course of the decision-making process. The results indicate that when the interviewees were faced with situations of perplexity they did not restrict themselves to knowing-in-action in their decision-making processes. None of these decisions were resolved spontaneously on the basis of a manager's tacit knowledge. It was necessary to seek new knowledge and new methods of understanding in order to solve the problems.

When challenged by unexpected situations, the managers interviewed employed reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action when taking decisions. Reflection-on-action took place after implementation of the decision or during pauses in the decision-making process. Pauses for thought mean that reflection can take place both individually and collectively, and sharing of information during the decision-making process was a characteristic common to all five cases studied. This sharing of decisions reveals that a decision is not a rational and logical act, but is a process-based phenomenon that has a dynamic link with context.

Use of reflection-in-action was evident in situations in which managers hesitated and reflected, altering their actions as they were taking them. Reflection during the present of an action is one possible balance point at which a professional can both meet the demand for
action and the demand for reflection in their professional practice, filling the gap between reflection and action that has been identified in the literature (Leite, 2011; Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003; Jehn & Waigelt, 2001).

During these reflective processes, individual characteristics of the decision-makers, such as personal values, age, job title, professional experience and academic qualifications also had an effect on their decision-making processes, bearing out observations by Hambrick (2007), Hambrick and Mason (1984) and Schön (1983) on the use of an individual's repertoire or background in decision making. Strategic choices are taken on the basis of these characteristics, impacting on organizational performance and, more specifically, on profitability, growth and survival (Hambrick, 2007).

In view of these results, the major contributions of this study can be considered to be (i) the interface created between studies of strategy, the decision-making process and reflective practice, opening up an advantageous avenue for research; (ii) the additional knowledge accrued on decision-making processes in HR departments in the Brazilian context; (iii) better understanding of one of the subjective elements of the decision-making process, namely reflection (which has been identified as an area in need of research by many studies); (vi) identification of examples in which other Brazilian organizations can find alternative options for the strategic management of HR departments.

One further contribution is the identification of a possibility for narrowing the gap between action and reflection in management practice by means of reflective practice and thereby contributing to increasing the effectiveness of the results of strategic decisions. For managers, reflection-in-action facilitates an effective decision-making process, increases self-knowledge, contributes to the processes of individual and organizational learning and improves managers’ global overview of their organizations.

Suggestions for future work include an attempt to combine study of the strategic decision-making process with study of management and organizational learning from the perspective of reflective practice. Using techniques such as the research-action method and ethnography, shadowing management and their teams could help to better understand the process and the relationships between reflection, decision, learning, the decision-maker’s characteristics and the team’s influence, with the researcher embedded in the present of the action. A comparison of HR department managers’ strategic decision-making processes with those of management from other organizational departments could also provide new knowledge relevant to improving management practice. It is also necessary to continue investigating use of reflective practice in other decision-making situations to continue to increase knowledge on the subject.

REFERENCES


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