

The Work of Being an Executive: Exploring the Interplay of Role Crafting and Agency A Constructivist Grounded Theory Study

Problems Addressed, Aims, and Research Questions

The Chief Human Resources Officer role has undergone one of the most dramatic transformations in contemporary organizational life. Deloitte (2025) documented a 23% expansion in CHRO competency requirements over five years, the highest rate among any C-suite role, with no corresponding reduction in legacy responsibilities. Regulatory shifts, including the EU's Nonfinancial Reporting Directive and the SEC's 2020 amendments to Regulation S-K, have further elevated the visibility and accountability of human capital leadership (Michaelides & Vafeas, 2023). Yet despite extensive documentation of what has changed, scholarly literature provides limited insight into how these executives experience, interpret, and navigate these transformations.

This study addresses that gap. It investigates the lived experience of senior HR executives navigating accelerating role transformation, with attention to how they make sense of expanding demands, cope with competing imperatives, and reshape the organizational contexts in which they are embedded. The primary research question asks: how are senior HR executives making sense of and coping with the demands imposed by widening mandates, regulatory shifts, macroeconomic uncertainty, and technological disruption? The secondary question asks: how are these coping practices shaping and being shaped by the organizational contexts in which these executives are embedded?

Theoretical Foundation

This study subjects the job crafting literature (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) to critical examination rather than treating it as a confirmatory lens. Three constitutive gaps motivate the investigation. First, job crafting theory rests on unidirectional assumptions about agency: individuals craft within organizational structures, yet at the executive level, crafting frequently reshapes those structures, creating recursive dynamics that the theory does not address. Rudolph et al.'s (2017) meta-analysis of 122 studies drew overwhelmingly from individual contributors; executive populations are absent from the record entirely. Second, the literature has developed within an optimistic register, underexploring negative, unintended, and system-level consequences of crafting behavior (Bruning & Campion, 2018; Demerouti et al., 2015). Third, cross-sectional design dominance renders the literature incapable of addressing how crafting evolves across careers in disrupted institutional environments (Zhang & Parker, 2019).

To explore these gaps, I draw on structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), sensemaking (Weick, 1995), identity work (Brown, 2021), temporal agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), Goffman's dramaturgical sociology (1959), and coping theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These perspectives are conceptual lenses that I seek to apply to study the phenomena of interest.

Proposed Methodology and Research Design

The study employs constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). The target sample consists of 20 to 30 senior HR executives, including CHROs, Chief People Officers, and HR Directors, across various organizational clusters differentiated by industry sector, size, and ownership type, selected through theoretical sampling to maximize conceptual diversity.

Data collection consists of semi-structured interviews of 60 to 90 minutes, conducted virtually or in person, with transcription via Otter.ai and Plaud. Analysis proceeds through Charmaz's (2014) constant comparative method, including initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical memo writing in MAXQDA, with a living theory notes document enabling concurrent data collection and analysis. The researcher's professional background as a senior HR practitioner, managed through reflexive memos and autoethnographic reflection, constitutes a methodological asset, providing insider credibility and interpretive sensitivity.

Intended Contributions to Practice and Theory

For practice, insights into how CHROs make sense of expanding mandates, manage competing imperatives, and sustain effectiveness under disruption carry immediate relevance for organizations developing and supporting senior HR leadership. The scholar-practitioner design of the investigation ensures that theoretical contribution and practical application develop in dialogue, reflecting the EMS commitment to rigorous inquiry in service of lasting organizational impact.

Theoretically, this study intervenes in the job crafting literature at the point of a significant boundary condition: the absence of executive-level research. Empirical engagement with CHRO populations may illuminate how crafting operates when agency is recursive rather than unidirectional, when consequences are systemic rather than individual, and when trajectories unfold across disrupted institutional environments. The study is positioned to extend, refine, or challenge foundational theoretical frameworks in ways that advance the field's explanatory reach.

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