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Professional authority under pressure in the age of AI: A qualitative study of HR professionals*

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ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly integrated into human resource management (HRM) processes. Existing research has primarily focused on adoption processes, efficiency outcomes, and emerging ethical concerns. However, limited attention has been paid to how HR professionals interpret AI in relation to their professional authority, discretion, and responsibilities. This study aims to examine how HR professionals make sense of AI integration and how they define its legitimate role within their professional domain. Empirical data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 19 HR professionals working across different sectors and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis within a qualitative research design. The findings are interpreted through Abbott's (1988) professional jurisdiction framework and Paradox Theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011). The results reveal three interrelated themes: task standardization versus human judgment, algorithmic objectivity versus algorithmic opacity, and professional enhancement versus professional displacement. It was found that HR professionals tend to support AI in structured, repetitive, and data-driven tasks, while preserving human authority in context-sensitive, relational, and emotionally complex decisions. Although AI is associated with objectivity and efficiency, these perceived benefits are accompanied by concerns regarding transparency, data governance, contextual sensitivity, and the erosion of professional control. AI is interpreted both as an opportunity for strategic role transformation and as a source of uncertainty regarding role continuity and professional boundaries. This study makes an important contribution by conceptualizing AI integration as a layered process linked to the redefinition of professional authority and demonstrates how technological change reshapes professional authority and responsibility.

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Yapay zeka çağında baskı altındaki mesleki otorite: İK profesyonelleri üzerine nitel bir çalışma

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ÖZ

Yapay zeka (YZ), insan kaynakları yönetimi (İKY) süreçlerine giderek daha fazla entegre edilmektedir. Mevcut araştırmalar ağırlıklı olarak YZ'nin benimsenme süreçlerine, verimlilik üzerindeki etkilerine ve ortaya çıkardığı etik sorunlara odaklanmaktadır. Ancak İK profesyonellerinin YZ'yi mesleki otorite, takdir yetkisi ve sorumlulukları bağlamında nasıl yorumladıkları sınırlı ölçüde incelenmiştir. Bu çalışma, İK profesyonellerinin YZ entegrasyonunu nasıl anlamlandırdıklarını ve YZ'nin kendi mesleki alanları içindeki meşru rolünü nasıl tanımladıklarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Araştırmanın verileri, farklı sektörlerde çalışan 19 İK profesyoneliyle gerçekleştirilen yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yoluyla toplanmış ve nitel veri analizi kapsamında refleksif tematik analiz yöntemi kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Bu çalışmada elde edilen bulgular, Abbott'un (1988) mesleki yargı alanı yaklaşımı ve Paradoks Teorisi (Smith ve Lewis, 2011) çerçevesinde yorumlanmaktadır. Refleksif tematik analiz sonucunda, birbiriyle ilişkili üç ana tema ortaya çıkmıştır: görevlerin standartlaştırılması ile insan yargısı, algoritmik nesnellik ile algoritmik opaklık ve mesleki güçlenme ile mesleki konum kaybı. İK profesyonellerinin YZ'yi daha çok yapılandırılmış, tekrar eden ve veri temelli görevlerde desteklediği; buna karşılık bağlamsal değerlendirme, ilişkisel duyarlılık ve duygusal karmaşıklık içeren kararlarda insan otoritesini koruduğu bulunmuştur. YZ'nin nesnellik ve verimlilik ile ilişkilendirildiği, ancak bu algılanan faydaların şeffaflık, veri yönetişimi, bağlamsal duyarlılık ve mesleki kontrolün aşınmasına ilişkin kaygılarla birlikte değerlendirildiği görülmüştür. YZ'nin hem stratejik rol dönüşümü için bir fırsat hem de rol sürekliliği ve mesleki sınırlar açısından bir belirsizlik kaynağı olarak yorumlandığı tespit edilmiştir. Bu çalışma, YZ entegrasyonunu mesleki otoritenin yeniden tanımlanmasıyla ilişkili katmanlı bir süreç olarak kavramsallaştırarak önemli bir katkı sunmakta ve teknolojik değişimin mesleki otorite ve sorumluluk alanlarını nasıl yeniden şekillendirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler:
Yapay zeka, insan kaynakları yönetimi, İK çalışanları, mesleki yetki, nitel analiz

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly becoming embedded in professional work. In human resource management (HRM), AI systems now screen candidates, generate performance metrics, support workforce planning, and assist in drafting policy documents. These developments promise efficiency and consistency. Yet beyond operational improvements, professionals also debate where these systems should support decisions and where human judgment should remain central. In other words, AI integration raises a more fundamental question: when algorithmic systems enter domains traditionally grounded in professional discretion, interpretation, and ethical responsibility, how are the boundaries of authority redefined? This question is particularly important in Human Resource Management (HRM). HR professionals hold a unique position in organizations (Ellehave and Ulrich, 2021). They are responsible for recruitment, performance evaluation, career development, and even layoff decisions, processes that combine structured analysis with relational sensitivity and ethical accountability (Ellehave and Ulrich, 2021; Ferrer, Saville, and Pyman, 2024). As AI tools begin to influence these

processes, HR professionals are not simply adopting new technologies. They are confronted with questions about what can legitimately be delegated to algorithmic systems and what must remain under human control. Thus, AI integration becomes both a technological issue and a professional one.

Existing research on AI in HRM has largely developed along three main streams. First, scholars have examined AI's opportunities and risks, emphasizing efficiency gains, productivity improvements, and ethical challenges such as bias, transparency, and accountability (Andrieux, Johnson, Sarabadani and Van Slyke, 2024; Brown, 2024; Uslu, 2025). Second, studies have explored AI applications in specific HR functions, particularly recruitment (Horodyski, 2023; Ligeiro, Dias and Moreira, 2024) and performance management, documenting how algorithmic tools are reshaping HR processes (Pan, Froese, and Xue, 2025; Varma, Pereira and Patel, 2024). Third, research has focused on adoption dynamics, investigating technological readiness, perceived usefulness, trust, and user acceptance of AI-based recommendations (Alam, Munira, Rahman, Uddin and Akter, 2022; Sengupta, Jaiswal, Shahid and Bisht, 2025; Ochmann, Zilker and Laumer, 2021). While these streams significantly advance our understanding of why organizations adopt AI and how it functions technically within HR processes, they commonly conceptualize AI as a tool to be implemented, evaluated, or accepted. Compared with other areas, less attention has been paid to how AI challenges professional authority or reshapes professional discretion and authority within HR work. In other words, existing research explains whether AI is adopted and how it performs but offers limited insight into how HR professionals define its legitimate scope within their professional domain. Addressing this gap is critical because AI integration is not merely a technical implementation process. It unfolds within established systems of professional jurisdiction. To address this gap, we draw on Abbott's (1988) framework of professional jurisdiction, which conceptualizes professions as arenas where actors claim and defend authority over specific tasks. From this perspective, professions claim authority over specific tasks and defend this authority when confronted with external pressures. Technological change can disturb these jurisdictional arrangements by automating certain tasks, redefining expertise, or redistributing responsibility. In this sense, AI does not simply introduce new tools into HRM; it potentially reconfigures the boundaries of professional authority. Moreover, AI integration does not generate straightforward reactions. Professionals may simultaneously perceive AI as enhancing efficiency and threatening discretion, as increasing objectivity while introducing opacity. Such competing evaluations suggest that AI integration is characterized by persistent tensions rather than acceptance or resistance. Drawing on Paradox Theory (Smith and Lewis, 2011), we conceptualize these competing interpretations as enduring contradictions embedded in professional practice. Within this perspective, we ask, "How do HR professionals make sense of AI integration and define its legitimate role within their professional domain?

By approaching AI integration as a question of professional boundaries and authority, we offer several contributions to the literature on AI in HRM. First, the study shifts the focus from technological capabilities and adoption outcomes to HR professionals' interpretations of AI. We explore how HR actors construct meaning around AI in their everyday practices. Second, we contribute by conceptualizing HR professionals' interpretations of AI as structured by persistent tensions. Drawing on Paradox Theory (Smith and Lewis, 2011) as an interpretive lens, we frame AI integration not as a linear process of adoption but as involving competing expectations within professional practice. Third, the study highlights how questions of professional discretion transform the boundaries of AI integration in HRM. By showing how HR professionals evaluate which tasks can be delegated to algorithmic systems and which must remain under human discretion.

2. Literature review

AI has entered HRM gradually rather than abruptly. HR analytics have been used in HRM practices before the widespread discussion of AI. Organizations have used analytical tools to monitor performance, support recruitment decisions, and plan workforce needs (Espegren and Hugosson, 2025; Okatta, Ajayi and Olawale, 2024). These systems have enabled HR departments to process large volumes of employee data and apply structured metrics in HR practices (Sharma, Bhattacharya and Bhattacharya, 2025). Over time, data-driven tools became part of routine HR operations. Recently, the attention shifted toward integrating AI into HRM. Organizations increasingly adopt AI-driven tools to increase productivity, improve efficiency, and standardize decision processes (Paramita, Okwir and Nuur, 2024; Stone Lukaszewski and Johnson 2024). AI-driven applications provide easier candidate

screening, more consistent evaluations, and the potential to reduce human bias in HR decisions (Brown, 2024; Chilunjika, Intauno, and Chilunjika, 2022; Stone et al., 2024; Tambe, Cappelli and Yakubovich, 2019). These developments emphasize AI's technical capabilities. However, HR work extends beyond metrics and automation (Ellehave and Ulrich, 2021). HR professionals evaluate candidates, interpret performance, and make context-sensitive decisions. They exercise discretion and assume responsibility for these judgments (Ferrer et al., 2024). Because these judgments rely on contextual sensitivity and interpretation, the usage in AI raises questions about how such systems should be positioned within HR practice. As a result, HR professionals engage in ongoing negotiations over the appropriate role, scope, and limits of AI in their work. Such negotiations do not occur in isolation. Shared norms and traditionally established task boundaries define professional roles (Abbott, 1988). Professions claim authority over specific areas of work and defend this authority when external pressures arise (Abbott, 1988; Ng, 2022). When new technologies emerge as external pressures on professional fields, they may transform how authority and responsibility are defined and exercised (Abbott, 1988; Ng, 2022). Technological change can create new tasks or transform existing ones. When tasks become automated, professions may either incorporate these changes into their work or redefine the core aspects of their expertise. (Abbott, 1988; Ng, 2022). To understand the impact of such changes, it is important to examine how professionals interpret and respond to them in practice. Therefore, we need to understand HR professionals' perspectives on AI in HRM.

A few studies have focused on HR professionals as central actors in AI integration. For example, Sengupta et al. (2025) investigate the perspectives of both senior and operational HR professionals on AI use in HRM. They find that performance gains, usability, organizational support, and intention to use are factors that affect AI implementation. Similarly, Alam et al. (2022) investigate HR professionals' intention to use and actual use of AI in talent acquisition. These studies explain AI adoption dynamics and usage behavior. Besides, Ochmann et al. (2021) examine HR professionals' perceptions of AI-based recommendations in recruitment. They find that perceptions of transparency influence professionals' acceptance of AI-based recommendations. Similarly, Malin, Kupfer, Fleiß, Kubicek and Thalmann (2023) investigate HR professionals' perceptions about AI in recruitment. They identify two key themes: the perceived scope of AI and the definition of instruction. The two themes relate to professionals' accounts of whether AI is suitable for recruitment tasks. The research shows that limited knowledge about AI leads to resistance towards AI usage.

Collectively, these studies deepen our understanding of how HR professionals adopt, resist, and evaluate AI systems. However, they conceptualize AI integration as an issue of acceptance (Alam et al., 2022; Sengupta et al., 2025) and transparency (Malin et al., 2023; Ochmann et al., 2021). They define AI as a technological tool, and its adoption depends on user acceptance and system transparency. This approach pays less attention to how AI may influence HR professionals' discretion and responsibility. Consequently, questions of professional interpretations remain insufficiently examined. Hence, in this study, we posit:

Research question: How do HR professionals make sense of AI integration and define its role within their professional domain?

We use two complementary theoretical lenses to interpret the interview data. First, Abbott's (1988) concept of professional jurisdiction helps explain how professional authority and task boundaries may be renegotiated. According to Abbott (1988), jurisdiction refers to a profession's authority to define and perform particular tasks. Abbott (1988) argues that both internal and external forces shape professional jurisdiction. External forces such as technological change, economic shifts, or legal reforms can create new tasks and eliminate old ones (Abbott, 1988; Ng, 2022). From this perspective, AI acts as an external force that changes task boundaries and professional authority in HRM. Second, Paradox Theory explains how organizational actors experience change through ongoing tensions (Smith and Lewis, 2011). The theory suggests that some elements may appear contradictory but are also connected and coexist. These tensions do not disappear over time. Instead, actors try to manage and balance them in their daily work (Smith & Lewis, 2011). From this lens, AI integration may create tensions that HR professionals need to navigate rather than eliminate.

3. Research method

This study aims to explore how HR professionals interpret and make sense of AI in HRM. To achieve this objective, we employed a qualitative design. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 19 HR professionals working across different organizations. This approach enabled us to capture nuanced perceptions and competing interpretations of AI's role in HRM.

3.1. Sampling and participant selection criteria

We used snowball sampling to identify participants. Snowball sampling may create the risk of recruiting participants with similar perspectives. To reduce this risk, we included HR professionals from different sectors and organizational contexts. This diversity enriched the data and allowed us to capture a wider range of experiences and perspectives regarding AI in HR processes. We initially reached out to HR professionals within our professional network and invited them to participate in the study. At the end of each interview, we asked participants to suggest other HR professionals who met the selection criteria. This approach enabled us to engage professionals from across different organizations and sectors. We selected participants based on their active involvement in HR practices and their professional experience. All participants were currently employed in HR roles and had at least one year of experience in the field. They worked in core HR functions such as recruitment, talent management, compensation, HR analytics, payroll, and HR systems. We did not restrict participation based on industry size or the level of AI implementation. Instead, we focused on professionals who could provide informed, practice-based insights into HR processes and the potential role of AI in these processes. The final study included 19 HR professionals working across diverse organizational contexts. Of those, 13 participants were women, and 6 were men. This distribution reflects a predominantly female representation within the HR profession. All participants held at least a university degree. Their educational backgrounds were in business, management, or the relevant social sciences, consistent with professional HR roles. Participants worked across multiple industries, including the defense industry, construction, software and training, the public sector, energy, manufacturing, HR consulting, education, production, and commercial aviation. Table 1 demonstrates demographic characteristics of participants.

Table 1
Demographic characteristics of participants

	Sector	Position	HR Function	Gender
P1	Construction	HR Assistant Specialist	Recruitment & Training	Woman
P2	Defense Industry	HR Specialist	General HR Operations	Woman
P3	Construction	HR Specialist	Payroll & Personnel Affairs	Man
P4	Software & Training	HR Specialist	Training & Development	Woman
P5	Public Sector	HR Specialist	Career Management	Woman
P6	Energy	HR Specialist	HR Systems Development	Woman
P7	Defense Industry	HR Manager	Compensation	Man
P8	Manufacturing	HR Specialist	Payroll & Personnel Affairs	Woman

P9	Defense Industry	HR Analytics Specialist	HR Analytics	Man
P10	Construction	HR Specialist	Talent Management	Man
P11	HR Consulting	Founder	HR Consulting	Woman
P12	Education	HR Specialist	Compensation	Man
P13	Production	HR Specialist	Recruitment	Woman
P14	Defense Industry	HR Specialist	Compensation	Woman
P15	Defense Industry	HR Specialist	General HR Operations	Woman
P16	Defense Industry	HR Specialist	Compensation	Woman
P17	Defense Industry	Senior HR Specialist	HR Analytics	Woman
P18	Commercial Aviation Industry	HR Specialist	Career Management	Woman
P19	Production	HR Specialist	HR Analytics	Man

3.2. Context of AI use

We asked participants during interviews about the extent of AI implementation in their organizations. Most participants reported that AI was not formally integrated into core HR systems, often referring to data security or regulatory concerns. However, several organizations used technologies related to digital automation and data analysis, such as robotic process automation (RPA) systems and machine-learning-based forecasting tools. RPA systems refer to rule-based automation technologies designed to perform repetitive and standardized tasks without autonomous learning capabilities. In contrast, machine-learning-based systems rely on algorithms that learn patterns from data and support prediction-based processes. Some participants, particularly those working in the defense sector, described familiarity with these systems in organizational contexts.

In contrast, several participants reported individual use of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT in their daily work. Generative AI tools differ from automation and machine-learning systems in that they generate new content, such as text, summaries, or translations, based on user prompts. Participants described using these tools for tasks such as drafting emails, translating content, generating reports, and supporting training design. These experiences were mostly personal rather than organization-wide practices.

Therefore, participants often discussed AI not as a fully integrated organizational reality but as an emerging technological development with potential implications for HR work and professional practices. Their reflections mainly focused on perceptions and interpretations of how these technologies could shape future HR practices. Accordingly, participants evaluated AI in terms of its anticipated opportunities, challenges, and possible effects on professional roles and HR processes rather than direct organizational experience with fully implemented AI systems.

3.3. Data collection process

Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling strategy. Initial participants were identified through the researchers' professional networks, and subsequent participants were reached through referrals. We conducted all interviews online. Before each interview, we shared an informed consent form via Google Forms. Participants reviewed the form and provided consent prior to receiving the interview link. With participants' permission, we audio-recorded all interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 40–50 minutes. We obtained ethical approval for the study from the Hacettepe University Social and Humanities Research Ethics Committee on 25 November 2025 (Approval No: E-66777842-300-00004674290).

The interview protocol was designed to explore participants' perceptions and attitudes regarding AI in HRM. Interviews began with contextual questions such as: *"What does AI mean to you?"* and *"Have you had any experience using AI, either individually or at the organizational level?"* We then asked participants to reflect on where AI could be applied within HR functions, what kinds of opportunities and challenges AI might create, and how AI could influence HR roles and professional practices in the future. We used follow-up questions to deepen responses and explore participants' evaluations.

The data collection has continued until no new codes or themes emerged. After the 16th interview, additional interviews did not produce new codes but reinforced the existing coding structure. We conducted three further interviews to confirm the stability of the themes. After completing 19 interviews, we did not identify any new analytic insights.

3.4. Data analysis

We analyzed the data using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to identify and interpret patterns of meaning ("themes") within data, and it provides a flexible yet systematic way to develop codes and themes in relation to a research aim. We adopted a contextualist interpretivist stance, treating participants' accounts as situated interpretations shaped by their professional and organizational contexts. In line with reflexive thematic analysis, themes were understood as co-constructed through analytic engagement with the data. We analyzed the data using MAXQDA. First, we read each transcript several times to become familiar with the data. We then conducted line-by-line initial coding to identify meaningful segments relevant to our research question. This process generated 406 initial codes. Next, we compared codes across interviews and grouped related codes into broader candidate themes. We reviewed these themes against both the coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure coherence and clear distinctions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We noticed that participants often described both positive and negative aspects of AI during this stage. This pattern led us to structure our findings around tensions that emerged from the data. In the final stage, we defined three overarching themes, each including two related subcategories. We developed themes based on conceptual coherence and explanatory power in relation to the research question rather than frequency counts alone.

4. Results

We found that HR professionals frequently expressed competing views about AI during the data analysis. The same participants described AI as improving efficiency and objectivity while also questioning human judgment and AI transparency. These contrasting reflections appeared simultaneously within the same interviews. Drawing on Paradox Theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011), we interpret these recurring contradictions as ongoing tensions rather than inconsistencies. Many of these tensions were closely connected to participants' reflections on task boundaries, discretion, and authority in HR practice (Abbott, 1988). These recurring tensions formed three thematic patterns: task standardization versus human judgment, algorithmic objectivity versus algorithmic opacity, and professional enhancement versus professional displacement. Table 2 summarizes the themes and subcategories.

Table 2

Tension-based thematic structure of AI integration in HRM

Theme	Subcategory	Description
1. Task Standardization vs. Human Judgment	Algorithmic Support in Standardized Tasks	AI is perceived as appropriate for routine, data-driven, and analytically structured HR processes.
	Preservation of Human Touch	AI is considered inadequate for high-discretion, relational, and morally sensitive decisions, where final authority should remain human.
2. Algorithmic Objectivity vs. Algorithmic Opacity	Algorithmic Objectivity	AI is framed as capable of reducing human subjectivity and increasing analytical rigor.
	Algorithmic Opacity	Concerns about bias, data privacy, system transparency, and unclear legal accountability.
3.Professional Enhancement vs. Professional Displacement	Professional Reconfiguration and Skill Shift	AI is seen as enabling HR professionals to focus on strategic and creative tasks.
	Job Displacement Anxiety	AI raises concerns about redundancy.

4.1. Task standardization vs. human judgment

This theme shows how participants defined where AI would be used in HR practices. They described AI as appropriate for structured and repetitive tasks. At the same time, they emphasized that decisions require discretion, contextual understanding, and human touch. In this way, participants drew clear boundaries around the role of AI. Table 3 presents the subcategories and representative codes associated with this theme.

Table 3

Subcategories and representative codes for theme 1

Subcategory	Representative Codes
1. Algorithmic Support in Standardized Tasks	Speed and efficiency gains Workload reduction Automation of routine tasks
2. Preservation of Human Judgment	Need for human empathy and emotions Final decision authority remaining human Sensitivity in dismissal decisions

Participants emphasized AI as appropriate for routine and repetitive HR tasks, particularly recruitment. Participants stated that AI could improve person-job fit by analyzing candidates' experience, education, and qualifications. As P4 explained:

"*Recruitment would be one of the first areas where AI could help us. The system could run algorithms in the background to identify the most suitable candidates and match them with the most appropriate role. By considering their experience, education, and certifications, we could place employees more efficiently and productively."*

High application volume was another justification for the use of AI in recruitment. As P17 stated:

"*Recruitment is well-suited to AI because we receive a large number of CVs. Screening them takes significant time. AI could filter candidates based on predefined criteria, automate communication, and manage interview scheduling. This would make the process more efficient and less time-consuming."*

Participant 11 also highlighted recruitment as a domain where AI could support employer branding and digital communication strategies.

"*During recruitment, AI could be very useful for managing employer perception. It can analyze data from digital channels and social media and deliver the right message in a very smart way. This might even be the area where it is used most intensively, because direct human contact with the company is still relatively limited at that stage."* (P11)

Participants also associated AI with automating repetitive work. They described workload reduction, increased speed, and operational efficiency as key benefits. In performance management, AI was seen as useful for analyzing large datasets, defining criteria, and structuring measurable indicators. As P11 explained:

"*For example, AI could be used in performance management. It could analyze large amounts of data, interpret that data more meaningfully, and help establish a more effective and efficient performance system."*

Across these examples, AI was positioned as effective in structured, criteria-based, and data-intensive processes. Participants supported AI in routine tasks but set clear limits in decisions that involve direct human interaction. They described interviews, leadership, dismissal processes, and parts of performance management as emotionally sensitive areas. They argued that these decisions require empathy, contextual understanding, and human responsibility. As P4 explained:

"*AI may not be suitable for interviews because it does not have emotions. In interviews, we sometimes understand whether a candidate is honest by observing facial expressions or noticing inconsistencies between statements. We also pay attention to eye contact and how the person fits the role. These are things that require human judgment*."

Earlier, the same participant had described AI as useful in early recruitment stages, especially for person-job fit. This contrast shows how participants conditionally accepted AI in structured processes but restricted it in emotional interactions. A similar pattern appeared in performance management. In the structured areas, P11 praised AI for building a complex and efficient performance system. However, the same participant later warned against relying on such systems. As P11 explained:

"For example, we built a very advanced performance system that analyzes many parameters and produces complex structured models. At first, it worked very well, and the data looked positive. But if we leave everything to the AI and IT team and stop understanding how employees perceive the system through face-to-face conversations, we may miss important nuances. As leaders, we might not notice where things start to go wrong."

This concern went beyond technical performance measurement. P11 argued that leaders might miss subtle warning signs if they rely only on system-generated data. In this sense, the issue was not only about technology but also about leadership responsibility. Participants extended these concerns to dismissal-related interactions. They described exit interviews as emotional and sensitive. As P1 stated:

"AI might respond in an overly positive or comforting way in exit interviews. I cannot imagine how a blue-collar employee would react to that. They might even respond with frustration, asking, 'What are you saying?'"

Across recruitment, performance management, and dismissal contexts, participants drew similar distinctions in defining the role of AI. This theme reveals a consistent pattern in how participants positioned AI in HR practices. They did not fully reject or fully accept AI. Instead, they supported AI in tasks that rely on data, measurable criteria, and procedural structure. At the same time, they restricted AI use in sensitive and relational decisions. These distinctions illustrate a tension between automation and the preservation of human judgment in HRM.

Beyond a simple division of labor, these distinctions suggest that participants actively defined the legitimate scope of AI within HR practice. AI was accepted in areas framed as technical, data-driven, and efficiency-oriented, while final decision authority and morally sensitive judgments were explicitly retained as human responsibilities.

4.2. Algorithmic objectivity vs. algorithmic opacity

This theme examines how participants framed AI as objective while simultaneously questioning its transparency. On the one hand, they described AI as capable of reducing human bias, increasing objectivity, and supporting data-driven applications. On the other hand, they expressed concerns about how algorithms generate outcomes, interpret complex contexts, and handle organizational data. Participants did not treat objectivity as an unquestioned advantage. Instead, they evaluated its limits in relation to reliability, contextual sensitivity, and data governance. Table 4 presents the subcategories and representative codes associated with this theme.

Table 4

Subcategories and representative codes for theme 2

Subcategory	Representative Codes
1. Algorithmic Objectivity	Reduction of human subjectivity and bias Data-driven reliability Emotion-free assessment
2. Algorithmic Opacity	Reliability concerns Data governance and security risks Contextual blindness in equity-sensitive situations

Participants framed AI as a tool that could enhance objectivity in HR decisions. They suggested that AI could reduce personal bias, minimize deviations in evaluations, and support more consistent criteria design. As P2 explained:

"*I think it is useful to design platforms where we aim to obtain unbiased results through AI. For example, in performance management, when we develop evaluation criteria and question sets together with AI, we may reduce deviations and personal biases. This could help prevent potential problems related to subjective judgments*."

Similarly, P6 emphasized that AI could reduce subjectivity and generate more data-driven and reliable outcomes:

"*It can reduce the risk of subjectivity. Because it produces more data-driven results, the outcomes may be more reliable*."

Together, these examples positioned AI as a neutral and standardized evaluator. P18 further argued that, unlike humans, AI evaluates everyone in the same way and presents results without emotion:

"*As humans, we cannot always act objectively. That is why competency-based interview techniques were developed. But AI evaluates everyone in the same way and presents data without emotion. At least in that sense, I think it can be more objective*."

However, participants did not view this objectivity as unproblematic. In particular, they questioned how algorithms interpret complex social contexts and whether rigid neutrality may overlook equity-based considerations. P6 initially emphasized AI's ability to reduce subjectivity and produce reliable results. However, the same participant later questioned whether strict neutrality is always desirable. As P6 reflected:

"*Sometimes we may not need to proceed in a strictly objective way… especially when working with disadvantaged groups or different cultural contexts. At this stage, AI may not be able to make such nuanced distinctions*."

While participants initially framed AI as objective and data-driven, they also raised concerns about its transparency and reliability. They questioned whether algorithms always function as intended and whether hidden errors could lead to unintended outcomes. As P17 explained:

"*It may not always be fully reliable… if there is an issue within the algorithm, it could filter out the wrong profiles."*

Participants also expressed concerns about data governance and security. Some described AI systems as "open" or cloud-based infrastructures that require uploading organizational data. This created uncertainty about how data are stored, protected, and managed. As P15 noted:

"*It feels like an open system, and we are providing data to it. That creates some concern for me. I am not sure whether this concern is fully justified or whether there are measures to prevent risks... it remains a question mark for me."*

Participants also emphasized the dependency of AI systems on data quality. They noted that even if algorithms are designed to be objective, inaccurate or poorly normalized data can generate misleading reports. As P14 explained:

"*The data must be accurate. If we are unsure about the data's accuracy, the system will produce incorrect reports. The frequency and evaluation criteria must also be appropriate. Otherwise, data that fall far outside the normal range may distort the results."*

Participants also noted that AI systems may struggle with extraordinary or exceptional situations. They suggested that algorithms are designed to recognize patterns based on existing data but may fail to understand unusual cases.

These findings show that participants did not treat algorithmic objectivity as automatic. They valued data-driven consistency and the reduction of human bias. At the same time, they questioned how algorithms operate, how data are selected and processed, and how privacy is protected. Some participants trusted AI because it relies on data. Others argued that data dependency can reproduce bias or ignore context. This reveals a tension between the promise of objectivity and uncertainty about how algorithmic systems operate in practice.

4.3. Professional enhancement vs. professional displacement

This theme examines how participants interpreted the professional implications of AI in HR practices. They discussed AI not only in terms of technical efficiency but also in relation to changing roles, responsibilities, and career trajectories. While some viewed AI as an opportunity for professional growth and role transformation, others expressed concerns about role restriction, job elimination, and loss of professional control. These contrasting evaluations reveal how AI reshapes professional boundaries within HR work. Table 5 presents the subcategories and representative codes associated with this theme.

Table 5

Subcategories and representative codes for theme 3

Subcategory	Representative Codes
1. Professional Reconfiguration and Skill Shift	Focus on strategic and relational work Role transformation Skill expansion and upskilling
2. Professional Displacement and Role Restriction	Role limitation or elimination Loss of professional control Future job insecurity

Several participants framed AI not as a threat but as an opportunity for professional development. They suggested that as routine and procedural tasks are delegated to technological systems, HR professionals will move toward more advanced, creative, and human-centered roles. As P11 noted:

"Let me give the example of automation in the automotive industry. When automation was introduced, some tasks were transferred to machines. Today, some tasks will be delegated to machines again. But this is also an opportunity for development. We will take on new, more advanced roles that require more refined human capabilities. Perhaps our work will become more artistic or more craft based."

Similarly, P18 rejected the idea that AI would eliminate HR roles:

"*I do not think AI will take our jobs and leave us unemployed. We will be doing something else at that time. We will support and develop AI systems and explore new areas where AI is needed. I do not see it as an obstacle."*

Participants frequently emphasized AI as reducing operational workload and creating space for human-centered work. They emphasized that delegating routine tasks to technological systems would allow HR professionals to focus more on relational processes. As P19 explained:

"In organizations with many employees, there is a heavy operational workload and a lot of paperwork. By distributing this operational burden through AI, we can allocate more time to employees and provide more human-centered HR solutions."

However, the same participant also reflected on the longer-term implications of this shift. While automation may initially relieve operational pressure, it may also reshape the structure of HR roles. As P19 noted:

"In the future of HR, certain roles may become restricted or even eliminated. Since AI reduces operational workload, in some areas human involvement may no longer be necessary."

This contrast illustrates a tension between professional enhancement and emerging uncertainty about role continuity. Beyond role restructuring, some participants expressed broader concerns about the future of HR practices. As P16 explained:

"When we look at the future of HR processes, we may face certain challenges. AI systems and similar technologies will likely become more integrated and automate many processes. However, this development may also take away some people's jobs."

Some participants articulated even stronger concerns regarding full technological integration. As P9 stated:

"If AI becomes fully integrated, there may be no need for HR employees at all. It could take control of all processes. That is why we should not give it too much responsibility. There still needs to be a human mechanism in place."

These findings show that participants did not interpret AI solely as a tool for operational improvement. Rather, they viewed it as a force that reshapes professional roles and responsibilities. While many described AI as enabling new tasks, skill development, and strategic engagement, they also expressed concerns about role restriction, redundancy, and loss of professional control. This pattern reveals a tension between professional reconfiguration and professional displacement in the evolving field of HRM.

The three themes form a layered interpretive structure. Participants first addressed AI at a task layer by defining where it could operate within HR practices. They then moved to a legitimacy layer, questioning whether algorithmic processes were truly objective, transparent, and trustworthy. Finally, they reflected on a professional layer, considering how AI might reshape authority, discretion, and role continuity. These layers are interconnected. Decisions about task allocation triggered concerns about legitimacy. Questions about legitimacy, in turn, intensified reflections on professional roles. Through this layered structure, HR professionals did not evaluate AI in a single step. They assessed its scope, its legitimacy, and its professional consequences in relation to one another.

5. Discussion

Prior research on AI in HRM has developed along three main streams. The first stream has largely emphasized AI's potential benefits and risks, focusing on efficiency, productivity, and ethical concerns (Brown, 2024; Paramita et al., 2024; Stone et al., 2024; Andrieux et al., 2024; Manroop et al., 2024). A second stream has examined AI use within specific HR functions such as recruitment and performance management, documenting use cases and process-level impacts (Horodyski, 2023; Ligeiro et al., 2024; Purohit and Banerjee, 2025; Nie, 2024; Pan et al., 2025; Varma et al., 2024). A third stream has focused on adoption dynamics by examining factors such as technological readiness, perceived usefulness, trust, transparency, and user acceptance (Ochmann et al., 2021; Alam et al., 2022; Malin et al., 2023; Sengupta et al., 2025; Arora and Mittal, 2025; Goswami et al., 2023).

While these streams have substantially advanced knowledge on why AI is introduced and how it may function. These studies commonly conceptualize AI as a tool to be evaluated or adopted. As a result, comparatively less attention has been paid to how HR professionals interpret AI in relation to professional discretion, authority, and accountability. Existing studies often examine whether HR professionals accept AI recommendations, whether they trust them, or how they respond to opacity concerns (Ochmann et al., 2021; Malin et al., 2023). However, these studies rarely examine how HR professionals define what counts as legitimate AI involvement in HRM and how such definitions reflect boundary negotiations within HR's professional domain.

This study addresses that gap by shifting the analytic focus from implementation outcomes to professional meaning construction. We explore that HR professionals do not merely form attitudes toward AI. They construct jurisdictional boundaries around it by specifying which tasks can be delegated and which decisions require human authority. In this sense, our contribution is not simply to add another account of AI acceptance or transparency. Rather, we conceptualize AI integration as a professional boundary process that reconfigures discretion, legitimacy, and authority in HR work.

5.1. Synthesizing the findings: A layered tension structure of AI boundary work

Our analysis revealed that HR professionals did not evaluate AI in simply positive or negative terms. Instead, their reflections were structured around recurring tensions. Participants frequently emphasized contradictory positions within the same narrative. For instance, several described AI as capable of increasing objectivity and reducing human bias while expressing concern that rigid objectivity might disadvantage vulnerable groups. We did not treat these contrasts as inconsistencies. Instead, we identified them as patterned tensions that repeatedly emerged across interviews. Importantly, the same participants often do these competing evaluations at once. They did not interpret AI as either an opportunity or a threat. They emphasized both interpretations simultaneously. We explain these

findings through Paradox Theory (Smith and Lewis, 2011). This perspective suggests that organizational actors confront persistent and interdependent tensions rather than clear trade-offs. In line with this view, we argue that HR professionals experience AI integration not as a problem to be solved, but as a set of ongoing contradictions embedded within HR practice. Efficiency coexists with empathy. Objectivity coexists with contextual sensitivity. Professional enhancement coexists with displacement anxiety. As we examined these tensions more closely, we noticed that they clustered around three interrelated domains: task delegation, legitimacy evaluation, and professional authority. This pattern led us to move beyond reporting separate themes and to synthesize our findings into a layered interpretive structure.

As we examined how participants expressed these tensions, we observed that their evaluations were not limited to technical assessments of AI. Participants differentiated between routine, operational, repetitive, analytically structured tasks and nuanced, relational, emotionally sensitive, or strategically consequential tasks. They actively mapped the boundaries of professional expertise. Tasks framed as standardized and data-driven were delegated to AI. In contrast, tasks requiring contextual interpretation, empathy, strategic judgment, or moral responsibility were retained as core elements of HR's professional domain. Through these distinctions, participants defined what remains within human judgment and what may be transferred to algorithmic systems. We interpret this pattern as a form of professional jurisdictional boundary work (Abbott, 1988), in which professionals negotiate and defend the scope of their authority in response to technological change.

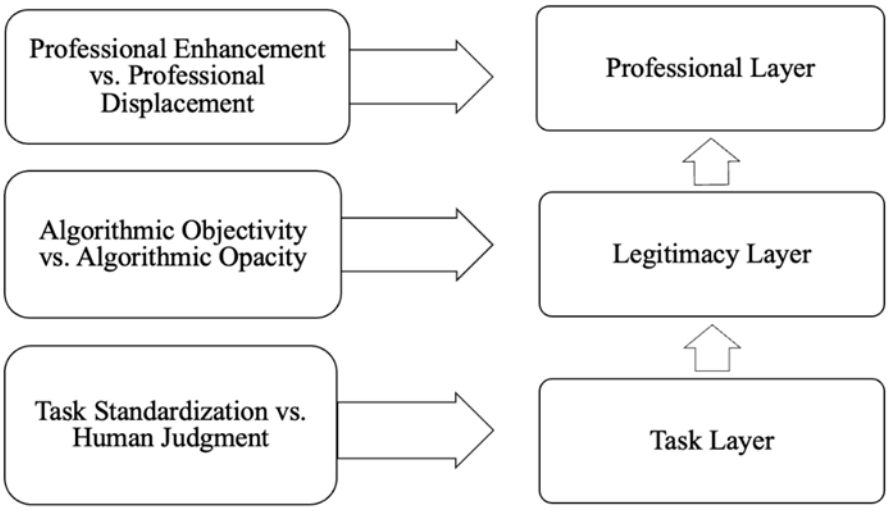

Figure 1. A layered structure of tensions in AI integration within HRM.

Source: Author's own work.

Figure 1 illustrates the layered structure identified in our analysis. We conceptualize AI integration not as a single-level evaluation but as a cascading boundary process in which task-delegation decisions activate legitimacy concerns, which, in turn, trigger reflections on professional authority. The model suggests that HR professionals evaluate AI across three interconnected layers: task allocation, legitimacy assessment, and implications for professional authority. Evaluation typically begins at the task level, where AI is considered appropriate for structured, data-driven processes. These considerations activate legitimacy concerns about objectivity, transparency, and data reliability. Legitimacy evaluations, in turn, intensify reflections on professional authority, role continuity, and jurisdictional control. Although this process often unfolds upward, concerns at higher layers inform how AI's acceptable scope is ultimately defined. AI integration thus emerges as a layered boundary negotiation rather than a simple adoption decision.

5.1.1. Task layer: Delegation with conditional limits

Participants did not fully reject or fully accept AI across HR activities at the task layer. Instead, they distinguished between tasks that can be delegated to AI and tasks that should remain under human control. Participants generally supported AI in structured, repetitive, and criteria-based tasks where automation promised speed, efficiency, and workload reduction. In contrast, they restricted AI use in contexts requiring empathy, contextual interpretation, communication, and morally sensitive judgment.

This pattern appeared consistently across participant narratives. For example, some participants described AI as useful in early recruitment stages, CV screening, and performance data analysis, while restricting its use in interviews, dismissal processes, and leadership-related decisions. In several cases, the same participant supported and limited AI depending on the nature of the task.

These recurring distinctions suggest that participants evaluated AI through a selective and conditional logic of delegation. Importantly, these evaluations mainly reflected participants' perceptions, expectations, and interpretations regarding the potential future role of AI in HR practices. Based on these patterns, we conceptualized this tendency as delegation with conditional limits, where human authority is preserved in high-discretion and relational domains.

5.1.2. Legitimacy layer: Objectivity claims meet opacity concerns

Task delegation then triggered legitimacy concerns. Although participants associated AI with neutrality and consistency, they simultaneously questioned reliability, transparency, and data governance. Notably, even when participants valued objectivity, they did not treat it as self-evident legitimacy. They raised concerns about contextual blindness and the dependence of algorithmic outcomes on data quality. This suggests that legitimacy is not a secondary concern but a central component of how HR professionals define the acceptable scope of AI.

Importantly, these concerns mainly reflected participants' anticipated risks and interpretations regarding the potential future use of AI in HR processes. This suggests that legitimacy concerns emerge how HR professionals imagine and evaluate the possible implications of AI for professional judgment, fairness, and accountability.

5.1.3. Professional layer: Reconfiguration coexists with displacement anxiety

As legitimacy concerns intensified, participants moved to a professional layer where they reflected on authority and role continuity. They described AI as enabling HR to become more strategic and human-centered. However, they also expressed concerns about role restriction and redundancy. This tension indicates that AI is interpreted not only as a tool but also as a professional force that pressures HR to redefine its jurisdictional core.

Taken together, the three themes form a coherent synthesis. HR professionals' boundary work begins with delegating tasks but quickly expands into evaluating legitimacy and defending professional authority. This layered structure illustrates how AI integration becomes negotiated within HR as a professional domain. Furthermore, in line with Abbott's (1988) view of professions as systems of negotiated jurisdiction, AI integration appears not as an external takeover but as a contested redistribution of task boundaries within HR.

5.2. Limitations and future research suggestions

This study has several limitations. First, we relied on qualitative interviews with HR professionals. While this approach enabled in-depth exploration, it limits statistical generalizability. Second, our data reflect self-reported perceptions rather than direct observations of AI use. Participants described their evaluations and experiences, but future research could complement interviews with organizational documents or system-level data. Third, our sample focused on HR professionals operating within a specific institutional context. Different regulatory or technological environments may produce different boundary dynamics. Despite these limitations, this study provides a structured interpretation of how HR professionals negotiate AI integration within their professional domain.

Future research can examine whether the layered boundary structure identified in this study appears in other professional domains. Researchers may explore AI integration in fields such as

academia, finance, or information technologies to test the transferability of the layered evaluation logic. Second, scholars can investigate how organizational context shapes boundary negotiations. Factors such as firm size, digital maturity, regulatory environment, and national culture may influence legitimacy and authority concerns. Third, longitudinal research can examine how boundary evaluations evolve over time. As AI systems become more embedded in HR processes, tensions between efficiency, legitimacy, and authority may shift. A process-based perspective would deepen understanding of AI-driven professional transformation. Finally, future studies may also compare different types of digital technologies and varying levels of AI experience to examine how these differences shape HR professionals' perceptions, legitimacy evaluations, and boundary negotiations. Such comparative approaches may contribute to the development of more differentiated conceptual models regarding AI integration in HRM.

5.3. Practical implications

Our findings suggest that organizations should not treat AI integration in HRM as a purely technical implementation process. Participants evaluated AI both in terms of efficiency and its implications for professional judgment, legitimacy, and role boundaries. Therefore, managers should recognize that AI integration may trigger professional boundary evaluations among HR professionals.

First, organizations should clearly define which tasks can be delegated to AI and which require human judgment. Participants supported AI use in structured, repetitive, and data-driven tasks while restricting its use in emotionally sensitive and high-discretion processes such as interviews, dismissal decisions, and leadership-related evaluations. These findings suggest that organizations should maintain explicit human oversight in areas requiring contextual interpretation, empathy, and ethical judgment. Second, organizations should actively address legitimacy concerns. Participants frequently questioned transparency, data quality, contextual sensitivity, and data governance issues. Clear communication regarding data sources, algorithmic logic, accountability mechanisms, and the limits of AI-based evaluations may strengthen perceived legitimacy and trust. Third, organizations should involve HR professionals in AI design and governance processes. Participants emphasized the importance of remaining professional authority and expressed concerns regarding role restriction and loss of control. Involving HR professionals in defining the scope and boundaries of AI use may reduce displacement anxiety and support a more collaborative integration process rather than a top-down implementation approach. Overall, our findings suggest that effective AI integration in HRM requires both technical implementation and structured delegation boundaries, transparent governance practices, and explicit recognition of professional judgment and authority.

Author statement

Research and publication ethics statement

This study has been prepared in accordance with the ethical principles of scientific research and publication.

Approval of the ethics board

We obtained ethical approval for the study from the Hacettepe University Social and Humanities Research Ethics Committee on 25 November 2025 (Approval No: E-66777842-300-00004674290).

Author contribution

All authors contributed equally to the design, implementation, and analysis of the research, and to the writing of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest arising from the study for the authors or third parties.

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