Human Resource Analytics and HR Practice:

The Microfoundations of Loose and Tight Coupling

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Declaration

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is their own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

Acknowledgements

I remember when I began my doctorate, my eight-year-old daughter asked, "*Dad, what are you studying?*" I replied, "*It's like a cloud - people call it HRA. I don't know exactly what's inside, so I'm exploring it.*" HRA is a field of high interest, yet it remains relatively underexplored. I feel fortunate to have completed this journey, exploring the unknown alongside invaluable companions.

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Note. Accordance with the Thesis Guidelines, I acknowledge the use of ChatGPT in the proof-reading of this thesis before submission. I confirm that the proof-reading undertaken by ChatGPT was in accordance with the Postgraduate Researcher Proof-reading Policy. Because Generative AI tools do not proofread with full consideration of context and nuance, ChatGPT suggestions were taken into account as part of a manual proof-reading process by the author.

Abstract

This thesis examines why Human Resource Analytics (HRA), despite securing symbolic legitimacy within the HR field, remains loosely coupled with everyday HR practice and under what conditions tighter coupling becomes possible. Although widely promoted as a rational, evidence-based approach, HRA often shows a persistent gap between formal adoption and substantive use. The study therefore conceptualises HRA as a contested subfield of HRM shaped by competing institutional logics, identity tensions and relational vulnerabilities. Drawing on a two-year hybrid ethnography in a multinational technology firm, the thesis uses abductive theorising to identify the mechanisms through which loose coupling is reproduced and the conditions under which tighter coupling emerges. To explain these dynamics, the thesis develops an integrated theoretical framework that critically reconstructs selected strands of institutional theory - microfoundations, practice-driven institutionalism, inhabited institutionalism, institutional logics, institutional work - and Archer's morphogenetic approach into a coherent analytical lens. Within this framework, decision episodes are conceptualised as the situated arenas where multiple morphogenetic cycles converge around analytic artefacts, providing the meso-level unit through which the temporal unfolding of institutional work becomes empirically visible. Across twelve episodes, the study identifies three mechanisms that reproduce loose coupling (Defensive Translation, Jurisdictional Distancing and Identity Ambiguity) and three that support tighter coupling (Bridging Translation, Reconfiguring Artefacts and Symbolic Reordering). These mechanisms show that coupling is a recurrent configuration of institutional work involving identity work, translation, boundary negotiation and legitimacy judgements. The thesis advances theoretical understanding by specifying how micro-level interpretive, affective and socio-material dynamics accumulate into meso-level coupling patterns. It offers practical insight by demonstrating that technical investment alone is insufficient: the effective adoption of HRA depends on translation across professional boundaries, artefacts that support everyday routines and attention to identity and relational vulnerabilities. Beyond HRA, this study also extends to other professional fields undergoing technological or data-driven transformation, providing transferable insights into how newly introduced forms of analytics are differentially adopted, resisted, or embedded within established practice. Overall, the thesis provides a theoretically robust and empirically grounded account of how analytic practices are inhabited, negotiated and transformed at the organisational level, illuminating both the promise and the persistent limitations of HRA.

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List of Abbreviations

CAO Chief Administrative Officer

CEO Chief Executive Officer

CHRO Chief Human Resources Officer

CTO Chief Technology Officer

e-HRM electronic Human Resource Management

GT	Grounded Theory
HRA	Human Resource Analytics
HRBP	Human Resources Business Partner
HRM	Human Resource Management
II	Inhabited Institutionalism
PDA	People Data Analytics

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Research Overview

Human Resource Analytics (HRA) has been widely promoted as a means of enhancing the legitimacy of the HR profession and strengthening or expanding its jurisdiction in an era of increasing pressure for evidence-based management (Angrave et al., 2016; Minbaeva, 2018; Marler & Fisher, 2013; Marler & Boudreau, 2017; Van der Togt & Rasmussen, 2017; Rasmussen et al., 2024). Renewal of professional legitimacy is an important issue of all professions (Abbott, 1998) but it has always been a particular preoccupation of the HR profession because of the difficulties the profession has had asserting its exclusive claims over HR work and overcoming persistent perceptions of HR as an administrative rather than a strategic function (Caldwell, 2003; Farndale & Brewster, 2005; Wright & Snell, 2005; Ulrich, 2010). Advocates of HRA position it as an objective, rational, and evidence-based practice that complements the traditional intuition- and relationship-based nature of HR by transforming it into a data-driven function that contributes directly to strategic decision-making within organisations (Samson & Bhanugopan, 2022; Marler & Boudreau, 2017; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015; Diefenhardt et al., 2025; Levenson, 2018). This promise lies in HRA's ability to bring logical and objective measurement-based reasoning to various HR domains, including recruitment, training, performance, rewards, and promotion, thereby enabling broader and more substantive organisational contributions (Levenson & Fink, 2017; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015; Ferrar & Green, 2021; Guenole et al., 2017). HRA-aligned practices include predictive workforce models, performance metric improvements, and fairer processes, all grounded in the promise of generating quantifiable insights (Bassi et al., 2012; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007; Davenport et al., 2010). On this basis, HRA is not merely presented as a technical add-on or analytical tool, but as a means of professional legitimacy renewal - one that tightly connects HR to organisational priorities such as performance, efficiency, fairness, and rational decision-making.

Despite these promises, frustration and disillusionment are pronounced even among supporters of HRA, as its implementation often remains superficial or symbolic, failing to deliver on the expectations initially set by advocates (Boudreau & Cascio, 2017; Minbaeva, 2017; Jörden et al., 2022; Edwards et al., 2024; McCartney & Fu, 2022). Many organisations have formally adopted HRA practices by hiring specialised analytics professionals within HR teams, introducing real-time data dashboards for monitoring HR metrics (Angrave et al., 2016), embedding data-

driven HR in strategic planning processes (Huselid, 2018), or implementing comprehensive HRIS platforms such as Workday and SAP (Strohmeier & Piazza, 2013). However, these efforts frequently result in only superficial integration of HRA into the day-to-day routines of HR work. In such cases, HRA exists symbolically rather than as an embedded set of organisational practices. The interesting point here, in many instances, is not that HRA is perceived as illegitimate because efforts to legitimise HRA are often successful (Belizón & Kieran, 2022; Diefenhardt et al., 2025). This reflects what institutional theorists describe as "loose coupling", where a practice is symbolically legitimised but remains weakly enacted in practice (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1991; Westphal & Zajac, 1994; 2001; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006).

This situation raises broader issues around how and why practices carrying new forms of expertise, particularly analytics expertise, are accepted symbolically while remaining loosely coupled. These issues encompass how the meaning, legitimacy, and practical utility of analytics expertise are negotiated in everyday working life. Addressing these issues calls for a microfoundational approach that can explain how emergent institutions are constituted through micro- and meso-level interactions that are themselves shaped by macro-level institutional forces (Zilber, 2020; Felin et al., 2015; Smets et al., 2012). In fact, HRA is far from the first instance where legitimacy enhancing HR practices have struggled to couple with existing HR and management practices. For example, initiatives such as diversity and inclusion scorecards or competency-based HR systems were often promoted as enhancing legitimacy but frequently remained loosely coupled to decision-making routines (van den Brink & Benschop, 2014; Wright & Snell, 2005). Practices that ostensibly offer opportunities for professional relegitimisation and jurisdictional extension may encounter resistance when they are perceived as threats to existing role boundaries, professional identities, or core values (Sandholtz et al., 2019). Further, this phenomenon is not limited to HR. A growing body of research has shown that emerging analytics-based approaches face similar challenges when integrated into existing occupational, managerial, and professional norms in fields such as financial services, education, journalism, and healthcare (Stice-Lusvardi et al., 2024; Anthony, 2021; Williamson, 2017; Dunn & Jones, 2010; Usher, 2022; Greenhalgh et al., 2017).

Taken together, these patterns highlight a broader theoretical and empirical puzzle: why analytics-based practices, despite being legitimised across multiple organisational and professional domains, so often remain only symbolically adopted and weakly enacted. Existing research provides important insights into capability gaps, technical barriers and organisational constraints, yet offers limited explanation of the situated, interactional processes through which

analytic practices become loosely or tightly coupled with everyday work. This gap necessitates a more integrated institutional perspective that can account for the interplay of competing logics, identity dynamics, boundary configurations and artefact-mediated interactions. These considerations provide the foundation for the aims and research questions of this thesis, which seek to articulate how HRA becomes enacted, negotiated and embedded within organisational practice.

1.2 Research Aims and Research Questions

This thesis aims to advance understanding of HRA by applying theoretical lenses from institutional theory to study and understand the practice of HRA. Commonly used definitions of HRA conceptualise HRA as descriptive and technical terms. For example, Marler and Boudreau (2017: 15) conceptualise HRA primarily as "*a HR practice enabled by information technology that uses descriptive, visual, and statistical analyses of data related to HR processes, human capital, organizational performance, and external economic benchmarks to establish business impact and enable data-driven decision-making.*" Similarly, Strohmeier (2009) frames e-HRM and its analytic extensions as ICT (Information and Communication Technology)-based systems designed to enhance efficiency and support managerial control. In contrast, HRA can be reconceptualised, through an institutional theory lens, as a socially situated practice shaped by competing institutional logics, legitimacy claims, boundary configurations and the meanings that actors construct around analytic artefacts (Thornton et al., 2012; Greenwood et al., 2011; Zilber, 2002). This broadens our perspective on HRA by showing how analytic practices are embedded within broader systems of professional expectations, power relations, and normative assumptions about what constitutes credible decision-making within the HR field (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1991).

This conceptualisation leads me to consider HRA adoption as a contested institutional process in which analytic practices interact with established relational logics, generating tensions over expertise, jurisdiction, identity and evaluative criteria (Abbott, 1988; Bechky, 2011; Sandholtz et al., 2019). Therefore, in this thesis, I conceptualise HRA as an emergent and contested subfield that has partitioned from the broader HR professional field, structured around a logic of data-driven, evidence-based HRM that promotes objectivity and fairness through analytics while striving for improved organisational outcomes (Marler & Fisher, 2013; Angrave et al., 2016; Van der Togt & Rasmussen, 2017). This logic advances the use of the practices of quantitative analysis,

predictive modelling, and measurable performance indicators as the basis for decision-making, reinforcing the legitimacy of traditional HR and expanding its jurisdiction (Bassi & McMurrer, 2007; Huselid, 2018; Davenport et al., 2010), but also risks clashing with dominant relational logics embedded in HR practice. These include the prioritisation of interpersonal judgement, tacit knowledge, human interpretation, and a scepticism toward the idea that people can be understood through numbers (Belizón et al., 2024; Giermindl et al., 2022). Accordingly, HRA cannot be fully understood through strategic adoption or investments in personnel and infrastructure. Instead, we should also examine HRA as a contested professional and institutional process, shaped by competing logics and tensions over legitimacy, expertise, and values.

An institutional theory lens also positions HRA as one in a long line of management innovations that are symbolically adopted but only loosely coupled to core organisational practices (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Westphal & Zajac, 1994; 2001, Westphal et al., 1997). Symbolic adoption happens in situations where the adoption of innovations bestow legitimacy, and actors fear they will suffer losses if they do not appear legitimate (Kennedy & Fiss, 2009). However, different branches of institutional theory posit different types of bottom-up mechanisms through which symbolic adoption becomes a settled institutional arrangement. The microfoundations and practice-based institutionalism literatures focuses attention on how cross-level relationships influence individuals to engage in different forms of institutional work to reproduce or transform institutionalised practices (Barney & Felin, 2013; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Smets et al., 2012; 2015; Zilber, 2020; 2021). By contrast, inhabited institutionalists argue for a focus on the role of meso-level social interactions in influencing coupling processes (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021). This thesis thus aims to integrate these perspectives by drawing on Archer's (1995; 2003) conception of recursive morphogenetic cycles to connect social structures, individuals and their social interactions with the work of reproducing or transforming institutionalised practices over time. This approach allows the study to analyse the organisational conditions under which HRA becomes either coupled or decoupled, and to identify the interactional processes through which analytic work becomes loosely or tightly coupled with HR practice.

In order to scrutinise the coupling processes involved in the organisational adoption of HRA, the research is guided by two research questions (RQs):

RQ1. Why does HRA, despite being symbolically legitimised within the HR field, remain loosely coupled with everyday HR practices?

To explain why this pattern persists, the question examines how organisational actors respond to analytic initiatives, how they interpret analytic outputs, and how structural arrangements such as data ownership, professional jurisdiction and role expectations influence the actual use of analytics in HR work. RQ1 contributes to HR scholarship by explaining the persistence of loose coupling as an outcome of situated negotiations rather than as a failure of implementation. Answering to RQ1 also shows how HR professionals, line managers and adjacent departments interpret analytic claims through their own logics, routines and role boundaries at organisations. The findings identified contribute not only to theoretical debates on loose coupling but also provide practical insights for organisations seeking to introduce HRA by clarifying which conditions, behaviours and interactional patterns limit the substantive use of analytics. RQ2, on the other hand, examines the processes through which tighter coupling becomes possible.

RQ2. What are the mechanisms though which tighter coupling between analytics and everyday HR practices develop?

This second question focuses on the organisational and interactional processes that support more tightly coupled use of analytics. It contributes to broader organisational and institutional theory by identifying the generative mechanisms, such as Bridging Translation, Reconfiguring Artefacts, and Symbolic Reordering, elaborated in Chapter 7, through which analytic artefacts, evaluative criteria and role configurations shift in ways that support tighter coupling over time.

1.3 Research Contributions

In answering these questions, the thesis aims to make the following contributions. It develops a theoretically integrated, microfoundational account of why analytics expertise is often loosely coupled with organisational practices and how tighter coupling can occur. To develop this contribution, this study re-theorises coupling as a form of institutional work between social structures and practice. Drawing on Archer's (1995; 2003) morphogenetic approach, it brings together microfoundational perspectives on individual interpretation and action (Felin et al., 2015; Zilber, 2020) with inhabited institutionalism's focus on meso-level social interaction (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021) and practice-based accounts of institutional change (Smets et al., 2012; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; 2013; Zilber, 2021). This integration provides a framework for a multi-level explanation of how analytic artefacts, professional logics and

evaluative criteria interact in situated settings, and why their coupling to organisational routines varies across contexts.

The thesis also develops the concept of decision episodes (introduced in Chapter 3 and empirically operationalised in Chapter 4) as a meso-level construct that functions simultaneously as an analytic lens and as a unit of empirical analysis, for examining how analytic artefacts are interpreted, contested and potentially incorporated into existing practices over time. It shows how episodes function as practical arenas in which competing logics are translated, identities are negotiated, professional boundaries are worked on and artefacts are mobilised (Smets et al., 2012; Creed et al., 2010). Across these episodes, it identifies six recurrent mechanisms - three that sustain loose coupling and three that enable tighter coupling - thereby offering a processual account of how coupling is produced through reflexivity, interaction and temporally sequenced morphogenetic cycles. This provides a basis for operationalising temporality within inhabited institutionalism (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021) and morphogenetic analysis, making visible how recurring interaction accumulates into patterned coupling outcomes. The thesis, furthermore, extends the microfoundations of institutional theory by demonstrating that coupling is shaped not only by cognitive sensemaking but also by affective, relational, identity-related and socio-material dynamics. It articulates how anxiety, vulnerability and identity threats influence interpretive work; how relational vulnerability shapes receptivity to analytic artefacts; and how socio-material arrangements enable or constrain the enactment of analytic practices. This expanded account contributes to institutional scholarship by specifying how interactional, material and symbolic mechanisms converge within episodes to produce morphostatic or morphogenetic effects.

Empirically, the thesis contributes to HRA scholarship by showing in detail how analytic practices become weakly enacted or more substantively integrated into HR work in organisations. Whereas prior studies have primarily attributed limited HRA uptake to structural, technical or capability-related barriers (Angrave et al., 2016; Marler & Boudreau, 2017; Tursunbayeva et al., 2018; Fernandez & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2021), the analysis demonstrates that loose coupling persists through situated negotiations over meaning, credibility, jurisdiction and identity that unfold within everyday interaction. By tracing how these dynamics accumulate across repeated decision episodes, the study moves beyond factor-based explanations and specifies the concrete and empirical mechanism configurations that sustain or disrupt the enactment of analytics in practice.

In advancing these contributions, the thesis clarifies how the six mechanisms identified in Chapter 6 and 7 differ from, and extend, existing institutional concepts. Unlike general accounts

of decoupling, which characterise loose coupling as symbolic compliance or structural inconsistency (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Bromley & Powell, 2012), the mechanisms of Defensive Translation, Jurisdictional Distancing and Identity Ambiguity specify the concrete interpretive, relational and identity-protective practices through which loose coupling is actively reproduced in situ. Translation work has been understood as the recontextualisation of ideas to fit local settings (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). However, Defensive and Bridging Translation distinguish between forms of translation that constrain analytic uptake and those that render analytic artefacts intelligible and actionable without stripping them of epistemic integrity. The account of Jurisdictional Distancing extends classical boundary work (Abbott, 1988; Bechky, 2003) by demonstrating how actors not only defend or redraw jurisdictional lines but use procedural and epistemic cues to manage exposure to contested evaluative logics. The specification of Identity Ambiguity and Symbolic Reordering draws on identity work scholarship (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Creed et al., 2010; Lok, 2010), particularly its institutional-theoretic formulation, where identity is understood as the site through which institutional contradictions are encountered, navigated, and partially resolved (Creed et al., 2010), to illuminate how identity tensions and symbolic shifts are enacted within the concrete interactional sequences of decision episodes, shaping whether analytics is resisted, reframed or incorporated into organisational practice. These distinctions establish the six mechanisms as analytically precise extensions of existing institutional concepts of coupling and institutional work, rather than as contributions to identity work theory itself.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

To address the research questions and develop the contribution outlined above, this thesis draws on theoretical lenses from institutional theory. First and foremost, this is a study of the microfoundations of institutions, where micrfoundations are understood as the study of ‘how the interactions of individuals lead to emergent, collective’ higher-level outcomes (Felin et al., 2015), and “*how those very interactions are structured by macro-level forces*” (Zilber, 2020: 2). However, different branches of institutional theory scholarship advance different arguments and perspectives about how the microfoundations should be studied. Practice-driven institutionalism highlights how micro-level variations in practice and local improvisations can accumulate into meso- and macro-level institutional change (Smets et al., 2012; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; 2013; Zilber, 2021). Cultural-cognitive approaches within microfoundational scholarship emphasise how actors’ interpretations, identities and emotions mediate their engagement with institutional logics (Zilber, 2002; Roulet et al., 2019; Jonas Frödin, 2024). In a related but distinct way, inhabited

institutionalism argues that institutional processes are fundamentally interactional, unfolding through meso-level encounters in which actors jointly negotiate meanings, roles and boundaries (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021). While several institutional theory scholars have argued for fruitful borrowing between these different branches of scholarship (Glynn & D'Aunno, 2023; Zilber, 2020; Jonas Frödin, 2024) others see them as competing and contradictory, reflecting incompatible ontological assumptions (Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021; Hwang & Colyvas, 2019; Lounsbury & Wang, 2020). Each offers, nonetheless, valuable resources for understanding the recurring empirical tensions observed in this study - between structural logics and lived interactions, between interpretive agency and role expectations, and between symbolic endorsement and practical enactment. Additionally, these difference focuses on microfoundations are particularly valuable for the study of HRA, because the coupling of analytics to HR practice depends not only on formal structures or technical capabilities but also on how actors make sense of analytic artefacts, negotiate their implications, and enact or resist new evaluative criteria in situ.

In iterating between my emerging data and different theoretical ideas as I attempted to abductively theorise what I was seeing around me; I could see utility in the lenses provided by each of these branches of institutional theory scholarship. In microfoundational studies, actors' engagements with analytic artefacts involved cognitive and emotional responses (Voronov & Vince, 2012; Voronov & Weber, 2016), boundary negotiations and relational positioning (Bechky, 2003), while also being shaped by broader professional logics (Greenwood et al., 2011) and organisational context and background. To develop a coherent analytical frame that accommodates these interdependent elements and to provide a more integrated basis for my abductive theorising I have organised insights and lenses from each of the branches into a single theoretical framework by drawing on Margaret Archer's conception of the morphogenetic approach.

Archer (1995; 2003) has argued that social structures (institutions) are transformed or reproduced through repeated morphogenetic cycles, which begin with structural conditioning with individuals formulating their aims and how to act towards them under the influence of existing social structures, including competing institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012; Greenwood et al., 2011) and professional boundaries (Abbott, 1988; Bechky, 2003). These social structures influence how individuals formulate their concerns and orient their actions (Archer & Morgan, 2020), after which they interact with one another while acting towards their respective objectives and priorities. The outcomes of these interactions determine whether institutions are reproduced or transformed. This framework has been put forward as a tool for understanding the social

construction of institutions (Barley & Tolbert, 1997) and it is particularly useful because it integrates the concerns with individual cognition and emotion (or perhaps affect and identity) influenced by institutions at different levels that is central to the microfoundational perspective with meso-level social interactions that are central to inhabited institutionalism (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021).

In this thesis, morphogenetic cycles provide the fundamental mechanism through which institutional processes unfold. Institutional work, understood as the purposive and situated action through which institutions are created, maintained or disrupted (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Hampel et al., 2017), is therefore conceptualised as the distinct forms through which morphogenetic cycles are enacted in practice. Within these cycles, actors engage in recurrent forms of institutional work – identity work (Creed, DeJordy & Lok, 2010; Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018), translation work (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008), boundary work (Abbott, 1988; Bechky, 2003), and legitimacy work (Hudson et al., 2015). These forms do not represent an exhaustive taxonomy, as Hampel, Lawrence and Tracey (2017) argue, institutional work is multifaceted and temporally sequenced, but they capture the principal mechanisms through which competing logics are negotiated. Each involves reflexive interpretation shaped by pre-existing institutional conditions and subsequent interactions through which roles, meanings and evaluative criteria are negotiated. The analysis treats them as practices that draw simultaneously on structural conditioning, individual reflexivity and situated interaction. Before elaborating these processes further, it is important to note that, as developed in Chapter 3, the thesis conceptualises institutional processes as becoming empirically visible when multiple morphogenetic cycles accumulate and intersect around analytic artefacts and organisational routines. This accumulation reflects practice-driven institutionalism's insight that micro-level variations and situated adjustments can scale into meso- and macro-level institutional patterns (Smets et al., 2012; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; 2013; Zilber, 2021), while allowing the interplay of structure and agency through individual reflexivity and social interactions to remain visible (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). The novel mechanisms identified in Chapters 6 and 7, such as Defensive Translation or Bridging Translation, are therefore understood as patterned configurations of repeated morphogenetic cycles observed across multiple actors and HRA projects over time.

Archer's (2003) framework also focuses attention on time, and how institutional change (Beckert, 1999) or reproduction unfolds over time through iterative morphogenetic cycles. However, morphogenetic cycles alone are analytically insufficient for capturing how reflexive interpretation, interaction, material artefacts, and evaluative logics intersect in concrete

organisational moments. Without an intermediate analytic unit, the analysis risks either remaining too micro-focused on isolated interpretive acts - or too macro-treating institutional reproduction as a continuous, undifferentiated flow. To address this analytical gap, I have developed the concept of “decision episodes”, which serves in this thesis as both a theoretical construct and a meso-level unit of analysis. Decision episodes are clusters of morphogenetic cycles organised around an attempt to introduce a new analytical artefact such as a dashboard, report or predictive model in HRA and to develop and embed new practices that make use of this artefact. It makes analytically visible the patterned sequences in which actors interpret artefacts, negotiate boundaries, contest identities and confer or withhold legitimacy, thereby rendering tractable the otherwise dispersed and fragmented processes through which institutional work unfolds. More specifically, it provide a means of observing how translation work (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008), boundary work (Abbott, 1988; Bechky, 2003), identity negotiations (Creed, DeJordy & Lok, 2010) and legitimacy work (Bitektine & Haack, 2015) unfold in practice, and how power and emotion shape whether analytic outputs are incorporated (Voronov & Vince, 2012; Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018). This integrated framework provides a basis for abductive theorising about how the practices of HRA come to be coupled to HR work; whether coupling is loose (largely symbolic) or tight (closely integrated into the routines of HR work). That is, it integrates structural conditioning, interpretive agency, relational interaction and temporal development, offering an analytically coherent means of explaining why HRA often becomes symbolically adopted yet remains loosely coupled, and how tighter coupling can emerge through recurrent cycles of negotiation, artefact engagement and institutional work.

To build on this analytical foundation, it is also necessary to consider how situated interactions give institutional processes their lived and situated dynamics through which actors enact or contest institutional expectations in everyday settings. Inhabited institutionalism’s ethnographic sensibility[1] reveals how institutional logics and inter-subfield tensions are enacted and reconfigured in situ (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett, 2010; Binder, 2007). By foregrounding temporality and reflexivity, this integrated framework is able to show how subfields evolve from the bottom up as simultaneously legitimised and contested, shaped by both institutional infrastructures and the reflexive mediation of actors (Archer, 2003; Archer & Morgan, 2020). This framework furthermore resonates with Zilber’s (2020) call for multi-level institutional analysis. Zilber highlights that institutions operate simultaneously at macro, meso, and micro levels, and

[1] By “ethnographic sensibility” I refer to the orientation within inhabited institutionalism towards lived experience, local practices, and situated meaning-making as central to understanding institutions (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Binder, 2007; Hallett, 2010; Ybema et al., 2009).

that ethnographic research is uniquely positioned to capture how these levels are enacted and reconstituted in practice. Therefore, this framework as a theoretical lens allows the thesis to analyse and understand how organisational actors introduce, negotiate and use HRA in everyday practice, and how these situated processes generate either symbolic, loosely coupled outcomes or more durable forms of tight coupling over time.

In summary, these elements establish the core architecture of the theoretical framework employed in this thesis. Morphogenetic cycles provide the fundamental mechanism through which institutional processes unfold; institutional work represents the distinct forms through which these cycles are enacted in practice; decision episodes serve as the situated arenas in which multiple cycles intersect around analytic artefacts; the mechanisms of loose and tight coupling reflect recurrent configurations of these cycles across actors over time; and the resulting patterns of loose or tight coupling constitute the emergent outcomes of these configurations, manifesting as either morphostatic reproduction or morphogenetic elaboration.

1.5 Research Design and Methods

The research design of this study employs ethnography to develop a theoretical understanding of complex social processes. Ethnography enables the capture of institutional change (Beckert, 1999) as unfolding processes, moving beyond retrospective reconstruction, and allows the researcher to trace how actors interpret, resist, and adapt when new logics of practice arise (Zilber, 2020; Jarzabkowski et al., 2014). Following the imperative of an interplay between theory and method (Van Maanen et al., 2007), the microfoundational focus on situated interactions and meaning-work theoretically conditioned the need for an ethnographic approach capable of providing contextual depth and tracing processes in real-time. In the case of D-company (a rapidly growing multinational technology company, hereafter D-company, anonymised in accordance with the research contract), where emerging HRA practices were being newly introduced and contested, ethnography offered a particularly appropriate means of examining how such practices were negotiated and situated within everyday organisational life.

Ethnography served as a methodological bridge between the theoretical perspectives employed in this study, as it enables in-depth description of lived meaning-making (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Van Maanen, 2011; Zilber, 2020). Inhabited institutionalism highlights how institutions are constituted through situated interaction and meaning work (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021), whereas the morphogenetic approach foregrounds the temporal

sequencing of structure, agency, and elaboration (Archer, 1995; 2003). Ethnography makes these perspectives empirically tractable by tracing how actors interpret institutional pressures and how their situated (or inhabited) practices link micro-level agency with meso- and macro-level institutional changes (Smets et al., 2012; Delbridge & Edwards, 2013).

This study adopts the "problematic" approach (Zilber, 2020), selecting D-company because it vividly exemplified unsettled arrangements and contested meanings around HRA, making the tensions surrounding loose coupling especially visible. As discussed in the previous sections, the central problematic concerns why HRA has emerged and contested in the form of loosely coupled practices despite advocates' aspirations for tighter coupling into organisational decision-making. First of all, the site was particularly appropriate because the formation of a new analytics team in HR created an opportunity to observe, in real time, how HRA practices were negotiated in the context of established HR routines and professional logics. Even though this is one company, the case spans a multinational organisation with multiple subsidiaries and connections to a parent firm, meaning that the single site encompasses diverse organisational layers and cross-border contexts. In this sense, a single-case ethnographic design was particularly well suited to capturing the formative dynamics of HRA as an emergent and contested subfield (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2018), moving beyond retrospective examinations of analytics as a fully established and tightly (loosely) coupled practice (Abbott, 1988; Anthony, 2021).

Secondly, as a rapidly expanding global technology firm, D-company faced both internal and external pressures to demonstrate rational, evidence-based decision-making in HR, moving away from a long tradition of relying primarily on intuition and experiential judgement (Angrave et al., 2016; Marler & Boudreau, 2017; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015). These pressures intensified during the organisation's acquisition by another multinational company, which reinforced the need for formalised, data-driven HR practices. The adoption of HRA within D-company was framed as a strategic solution to these challenges, reflecting a broader global discourse that positions analytics as a means to strengthen professional jurisdiction and legitimacy (Davenport et al., 2010; Bassi, 2011; Sandholtz et al., 2019; Belizón & Kieran, 2022). Yet, HR professionals simultaneously continued to uphold a relational orientation rooted in tacit knowledge and experiential expertise (Guest, 1990; Paauwe & Boselie, 2005). This tension created a distinctive empirical context in which to examine how a data-driven subfield interacted and negotiated with the established HR field (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2021).

Thirdly, the case enabled two years of hybrid (in-person and virtual) fieldwork, offering an opportunity to examine how social structures were reinterpreted amidst long-term changes in

global modes of organising. In particular, the post-COVID normalisation of remote work and digital collaboration meant that ethnography itself was no longer confined to physical sites. This shift did not simply entail the use of new technical and virtual tools, such as Zoom, Google Meet, and MS Teams, but revealed a reconfiguration of institutions and interactions, providing a valuable lens through which to trace how analytic logics translated into situated (or inhabited) practices across diverse organisational contexts (Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021; Orlikowski, 2000; Leonardi, 2013). As such, the contextual and temporal characteristics of this research site contribute to broader debates on the newly normalised hybrid work environment worldwide, illustrating how such practices are specifically shaped, interpreted, transformed, and legitimised within organisational settings (Boxenbaum & Pedersen, 2009; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008).

My fieldwork combined sustained participant observation of HRA team meetings, workshops, and interactions with other teams of the HR department, together with semi-structured interviews with HR professionals, analytics experts, senior managers, and many more. This methodological combination provided insight not only into the micro-processes through which HRA practices were tightly or loosely coupled, but also into actors' reflexivity and claims to expertise (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Archer, 2003). To contextualise these practices and to examine how artefacts mediated institutional work, I also collected organisational documents, presentations, internal dashboards, and reports produced over several years.

Ethnography demanded heightened reflexivity from me as a researcher, particularly in a hybrid environment where the boundaries between presence and participation were fluid (Hine, 2015). My role as both observer and participant was continuously negotiated, in line with what Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) describe as the politics of access and interpretation. I not only recorded empirical events but also maintained reflexive fieldnotes to examine how my presence influenced relationships of trust with participants and shaped analytical framing. In ethnographic research, attending to reflexive dynamics is important to ensuring methodological transparency and acknowledging how the researcher's prior experiences and perspectives shape the inquiry (Finlay, 2002; Berger, 2015). Through this methodological approach, this thesis explores in detail how HRA is enacted within organisational practices and the extent to which it becomes tightly or loosely coupled to existing HR routines.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into eight chapters. The sequence of chapters is designed to build a coherent narrative, beginning with the introduction of the research problem, followed by a critical engagement with existing literature, development of the theoretical framework, an explanation of the methodological approach, the presentation of empirical findings, and a final discussion that synthesises the results, highlighting the theoretical contributions and practical implications.

Chapter 2 reviews existing research on HRA and examines how the field has developed conceptually and empirically. The chapter also defines HRA as an emerging and contested subfield of human resource management (HRM) and identifies the main gaps that motivate the research questions. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework used in the study. It draws on institutional theory, inhabited institutionalism and a temporal sequencing perspective to explain how organisational practices develop through interaction between social structures, role expectations and everyday activity. Chapter 4 describes the methodological approach, including the two-year ethnographic design, the use of decision episodes as the unit of analysis and the abductive analytical strategy. Chapter 5 provides the organisational context for the study. It describes the structure, history and institutional environment of D-company and explains how these conditions shaped and influenced the introduction of HRA. Chapter 6 presents the empirical findings related to the first research question and identifies three mechanisms that explain why HRA remained loosely coupled with HR practice during the early phase of adoption. Chapter 7 addresses the second research question and reveals organisational and interactional mechanisms that support more tightly coupled use of analytics over time. Chapter 8 discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the findings. It explains how the study contributes to research on HRA, institutional processes and the microfoundations of organisational practices, and it concludes by considering how future research may develop these insights further.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1. Concepts, Labels, and Scope

The emergence of Human Resource Analytics (HRA) has been a significant development in HR, driven by the increasing digitalisation of business processes over recent decades (Diefenhardt et al., 2025). This transition to data-driven decision-making aims to improve the quality of strategic execution and decision quality through systematic, data-enabled inquiry within HR (Angrave et al., 2016; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015). Prior to engaging with the substantive discussion of the HRA literature, it is important to clarify the terminology and definition used throughout this thesis. Marler and Boudreau (2017: 15) define HRA as "*a HR practice enabled by information technology that uses descriptive, visual, and statistical analyses of data related to HR processes, human capital, organisational performance, and external economic benchmarks to establish business impact and enable data-driven decision-making.*" Yet, the terminology surrounding this activity is far from uniform, with several competing terms in use. "People Analytics", "Workforce Analytics", "Talent Analytics", and "Human Capital Analytics" used interchangeably alongside HRA in both scholarship and practice. Prior reviews treat these terms largely as near-synonyms with contextual accents rather than as distinct constructs (Marler & Boudreau, 2017; van den Heuvel & Bondarouk, 2017; McCartney & Fu, 2022), but the differences in emphasis are important and have consequences for what is studied, which data are mobilised, and whose problems are foregrounded. For example, this may involve HR professionals addressing employee outcomes, line managers seeking efficiency in workforce deployment, or senior executives assessing the value of human capital investments.

"People analytics" gained traction through practitioner and technology narratives, for example, Google's People Analytics team (Bock, 2015) and professional guidance, and is often invoked when the analytic gaze extends beyond the HR function to incorporate behavioural data and social network data, as well as business-side indicators (finance, sales, customer metrics), explicitly linking employee data to organisational outcomes. As Bock (2015) recounts, the very adoption of the label "people analytics" was itself a legitimacy-enhancing move, reframing HR work in terms that resonated more positively with senior executives than traditional HR terminology (Peeters et al., 2020; McCartney & Fu, 2022; Rasmussen et al., 2024; Tursunbayeva et al., 2022). "Workforce analytics" is more common in operations-oriented and industrial literatures, emphasising headcount optimisation, workforce planning, and labour market

integration (Davenport et al., 2010; Huselid, 2018; Levenson, 2018; Altman et al., 2021; Edwards et al., 2025). “Talent analytics” narrows to selection, mobility and high-potential pipelines (Davenport et al., 2010; Tursunbayeva et al., 2018). “Human capital analytics” foregrounds value creation and economic returns to HR investments, often coupling HR datasets with financial outcomes and adopting investment logics (Minbaeva, 2017; 2018; Pisano et al., 2017; Poorani & Sullivan, 2019). Read together, these labels do more than name a technique: they recruit different audiences (HR, finance, strategy, operations), sanction different data spans (from HRIS to enterprise data lakes), and embed different evaluative standards (predictive accuracy, cost–benefit, fairness, compliance). The terminology performs boundary work that shapes what counts as legitimate analytics (Marler & Boudreau, 2017; van den Heuvel & Bondarouk, 2017).

A critical implication of this plurality is that definitional choices can tilt analyses towards particular problem framings in HR. People analytics, with its broader data ambit that extends beyond employees to encompass customers and other stakeholders related to business, can invite ambitions that exceed HR’s formal jurisdiction and blur the boundary with business analytics (Lee, 2020), while also raising governance and ethics questions about behavioural surveillance and algorithmic opacity (Tursunbayeva et al., 2018; 2022). Human capital analytics can privilege ROI-oriented questions that align with financial goals but risk narrowing HR problem-spaces to those with measurable near-term payoffs (Minbaeva, 2017; 2018; Pisano et al., 2017). Workforce and talent analytics can lend operational clarity but may reproduce siloed metrics that are weakly coupled to consequential decisions if evaluative criteria are not co-produced with decision-makers (Fernández & Gallardo Gallardo, 2021). These discrepancies underscore a recurrent critique in the literature: early articulations positioned analytics as a largely technical intervention - dashboards, descriptive metrics, predictive scores - while under-specifying how analytic artefacts would be legitimated and embedded in the social organisation of HR work (Angrave et al., 2016; Belizón & Kieran, 2022).

Against this background, this thesis adopts “HR analytics (HRA)” as an umbrella term. This choice aligns with predominant academic usage and anchors the phenomenon in HR’s remit (Margherita, 2022), avoiding the occasionally over-expansive or surveillance-tinged connotations of “people analytics”, while remaining methodologically inclusive (Angrave et al., 2016; Marler & Boudreau, 2017; Minbaeva, 2018; Tursunbayeva et al., 2022; McCartney & Fu, 2022). Concretely, HRA here encompasses analyses ranging from descriptive and diagnostic reporting through predictive modelling to causal-inference and quasi-experimental designs where feasible (Fitz-enz, 2009; 2010; Bassi, 2011); draws on data originating in HR systems (HRIS, ATS, LMS), survey

instruments and digital trace artefacts (e.g., collaboration/communication metadata) in combination with business metrics (Angrave et al., 2016); and is directed at decisions within HR's domain, including resourcing, mobility, performance and reward, workforce planning, employee relations and wellbeing (Guenole et al., 2017; Levenson, 2018). This scope recognises that some initiatives labelled "people analytics" legitimately span functions but retains the analytical focus on how claims are produced, negotiated and used in HR decision processes where HR has primary or shared jurisdiction.

These clarifications underscore that terminology and scope are not neutral descriptors but organising choices: they configure audiences, delimit the reach of data, and pre-set evaluative criteria and accountability for action. In that sense, labels perform boundary work (Gieryn, 1983; Bowker & Star, 1999; Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Langley et al., 2019). Boundary work involves drawing distinctions that classify and differentiate domains of practice (Bowker & Star, 1999; Lamont & Molnár, 2002), authorising certain forms of knowledge while marginalising others (Gieryn, 1983), and allocating professional jurisdiction and authority (Abbott, 1988). In the case of HRA, terminology not only signals methodological orientation but also positions the practice in relation to adjacent domains such as strategy, finance, or operations. Without such work, HR professionals talk past one another, and jurisdictional boundaries are blurred (Abbott, 1981; 1988). Contemporary organisational research further highlights that such work can involve not only demarcating and sustaining boundaries but also negotiating and blending them across domains (Langley et al., 2019).

Accordingly, in what follows HRA is treated not as a set of technical tools and techniques but as an emergent, contested subfield of HRM in which jurisdictional claims, boundary work and competing evaluative logics condition the extent to which analytics becomes loosely or tightly coupled to decisions and processes of people management or HR work (Abbott, 1988; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2021; Sandholtz et al., 2019). Proceeding from this definition, terminological plurality is read as evidence of heterogeneous audiences, data spans and decision loci; the central questions are therefore not only technical but concern how analytic claims are legitimated, translated and coupled to routinised HR practices. In line with this reasoning, broader HRM scholarship indicates that coupling cannot be understood without attention to its microfoundations - namely the affective, cognitive, and identity-related processes through which actors interpret, negotiate, and sometimes resist new practices (Rofcanin & Budhwar, 2025). The remainder of the chapter develops this argument by tracing the field's trajectory and present state, examining how analytics becomes coupled to routinised HR practices,

and identifying domain gaps that motivate the theoretical framework in Chapter 3. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to clarify the ontological positioning of HRA as a subfield of the broader HRM field. This provides a conceptual anchor for interpreting subsequent empirical evidence, highlighting how HRA's distinctive logic, practices, and institutional infrastructure interact with neighbouring other fields.

2.2 Ontological Positioning: HRA as a Subfield of HRM

This review treats HRA not only as a set of techniques but as a subfield of the wider HRM field. Ontologically defining HRA in this way is crucial, because what is at stake is not only the technical effectiveness of analytics but also its professional and institutional positioning related to the field of HRM. As Fleetwood (2005) argues, ontological assumptions shape what researchers consider to be real, causally consequential, and therefore in need of explanation; treating HRA merely as a methodological toolkit forecloses analysis of its institutional and professional dynamics. Research on fields and subfields (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2021; Zietsma et al., 2017) shows that domains acquire meaning through their ontological framing: treating HRA as a toolkit reduces observed difficulties to implementation gaps, whereas positioning it as a subfield situates these difficulties within broader processes of field partitioning, jurisdictional negotiation and institutional complexity (Abbott, 1988; Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton et al., 2012; Muzio et al., 2013). Subfields can be understood as relatively bounded arenas clustered around a dominant logic, routinised practices and distinctive institutional infrastructures of roles, identities, rules and artefacts, though their boundaries are socially constructed, contested and often fluid (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2021; Hinings et al., 2017; Scott, 2014). They remain tied to parent fields through resource and regulatory dependencies yet cultivate symbolic differentiation by developing their own evaluative criteria and professional communities (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2021; Zietsma et al., 2017). In HRM, functional specialisation has historically produced such arenas - learning and development, rewards, workforce planning - each with recognisable tools, standards and communities (Wright & Snell, 2005; Kaufman, 2015). This trajectory has expanded into HRA, which is marked by data-driven, evidence-based decision-making alongside infrastructures and boundary practices that define it as both distinctive and contested.

HRA coheres around a dominant logic of data-driven (or sometimes data-informed according to Bauer et al., 2021), evidence-based decision-making that privileges quantification, prediction and the formal evaluation of people decisions (Angrave et al., 2016; Marler & Boudreau,

2017; Levenson, 2018). This logic differentiates HRA as a subfield from the HRM parent field, which is orientated toward professional judgement and practice-based, relational expertise (Sandholtz et al., 2019; Greasley & Thomas, 2020), thereby creating a site of potential tension and complementarity. Furthermore, HRA exhibits institutional features commonly associated with subfield status. Organisations have created dedicated roles and units (HR analytics managers, data scientists in HR, or business analysts mainly addressing employees' data), routinised artefacts (dashboards, data dictionaries, model governance checklists), and governance arrangements that allocate decision rights over data access, modelling standards and validation (Bondarouk et al., 2017; Tursunbayeva et al., 2018; 2022). Beyond the firm, a recognisable community of practice - specialist vendors, professional associations, conferences, training pathways and handbooks - supplies the resources and classifications that stabilise the subfield (Davenport et al., 2010; Guenole et al., 2017; Ferrar & Green, 2021). Such infrastructures are the mechanisms through which fields and subfields are formed and sustained by orienting practice through codified rules and norms, enabling action through shared resources, and stabilising boundaries through classificatory schemes (Zietsma et al., 2017; Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).

According to scholars studying professions, fields and boundary work (Gieryn, 1983; Abbott, 1988; Zietsma et al., 2017; Bechky, 2011; Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2021), the boundaries of subfields are enacted through processes of classification, categorisation, and jurisdictional negotiation. Labels such as ‘people/workforce/human-capital analytics’ recruit different audiences, establish admissible data repertoires and imply distinct evaluative criteria (ROI, predictive accuracy, fairness, compliance), thereby performing jurisdictional work at the edge of HR and adjacent functions (finance, IT, legal) (Sandholtz et al., 2019; Bechky, 2003; Levina & Vaast, 2005). This boundary work is central to how professions claim and negotiate jurisdictions (Abbott, 1988) and helps explain why HRA often operates at organisational interfaces - where HR meets other functions - rather than being wholly contained within the HR department. McCartney and Fu’s (2022) systematic review shows that unresolved debates over ownership, definitional inconsistency and data quality continue to prevent HRA from consolidating within the HR function, reinforcing its location at cross-functional boundaries where HR intersects with finance, IT and legal. In addition, subfields are typically identifiable through recurrent, materially mediated practices that operationalise their distinctive logic (Abbott, 1988; Smets et al., 2012; Jarzabkowski et al., 2016). HRA exhibits a coherent set of such patterned activities. These include the construction of integrated HR data assets; the use of statistical and machine-learning models for staffing, mobility, reward and retention; the operationalisation of evidence via dashboards and decision briefs; and the emergence of model-risk and ethics routines (validation, bias assessment,

explainability) adapted to HR contexts (Cascio & Boudreau, 2011; Huselid, 2018; Fernández & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2021; Charlwood & Guenole, 2022). Such patterned activities connect the subfield's logic to everyday work and make it observable at the level of practice (Smets et al., 2012; Jarzabkowski et al., 2016).

Positioning HRA as a subfield therefore matters for an empirical review because it reframes recurring findings - symbolic uptake, partial embedding, governance frictions - not as isolated implementation failures but as consequences of interaction between a data-driven subfield and the neighbouring subfields of HRM with their differing logics and infrastructures (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton et al., 2012; Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2021). It also clarifies why much of the salient activity occurs at boundaries: translation and storytelling to align epistemic standards, negotiations over data rights and evaluation criteria - processes often bound up with legitimacy work (Belizón & Kieran, 2022; McCartney & Fu, 2024). On this basis, the next section traces HRA's historical trajectory and current practice landscape, before turning to what existing studies show about how analytic artefacts (tangible outputs of data analysis such as dashboards, scorecards, predictive models, reports, or risk indicators that mediate between analytical work and organisational decision-making) couple (or decouple) with everyday HR practices and decisions.

2.3 Trajectory and Current State of the Field

This section traces the trajectory of HRA as a field of research and practice, and examines why, despite substantial advocacy and investment, its adoption has remained partial or symbolic in many organisational settings. Section 2.3.1 sketches the evolution of HRA from its early technical foundations to its current framing as a strategic capability. Section 2.3.2 reviews the barriers to HRA implementation that recent empirical and review work has consistently identified. Section 2.3.3 then interprets the persistence of these barriers through an institutional lens, setting up the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 3.

2.3.1 Evolution and Strategic Aspirations of HRA

The evolution of HRA reflects a progression from early technical foundations, through strategic aspirations of evidence-based HR, to recent critical evaluations that highlight persistent barriers and limited embedding in practice. In early 2000s, formative roots mainly lay in adjacent

quantitative traditions: industrial–organisational psychology advanced validity generalisation and utility analysis linking selection methods to performance and economic value (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998; Cascio, 2000); personnel economics and quantitative organisational research modelled incentives, productivity, and HR bundles using econometric tools (Lazear, 1995; Ichniowski et al., 1997; Becker & Huselid, 1998; Bloom & Van Reenen, 2007; Bidwell & Keller, 2014; Bidwell, 2011; 2013); and HR measurement/scorecard work sought to connect HR practices to firm outcomes (Becker et al., 2001; Lawler et al., 2004; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005). In parallel, the diffusion of HR information systems and enterprise resource planning created the infrastructures for routine HR metrics and reporting (Kovach et al., 2002; Strohmeier, 2009). In particular, with the 2000s–2010s 'Big Data' turn, advances in storage, processing and digital exhaust further normalised data-intensive management across functions, HR included (McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2012; George et al., 2014; Davenport et al., 2010). Against this backdrop, early HRA scholarship sat within the digitalisation of HR - especially the e-HRM literature - which emphasised automation of transactional work, administrative efficiency, and the prospect of freeing HR for more strategic activity (Bondarouk & Ruël, 2009; 2013; Marler & Fisher, 2013; Strohmeier, 2009). Subsequent scholars argued that HRA was initially cast as a technical intervention, such as dashboards, descriptive metrics, and predictive models aimed at improving decision quality (Davenport et al., 2010; Cascio & Boudreau, 2011; Angrave et al., 2016; Guenole et al., 2017; Levenson, 2018).

As practitioner attention and executive sponsorship grew, the literature moved to an explicitly strategic register. A central claim was that HRA could elevate HR from administrative support to strategic partner by demonstrating measurable links between people decisions and business outcomes (Bock, 2015; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015; Lawler & Boudreau, 2015; Levenson, 2018; Levenson & Fink, 2017). Authors such as Levenson (2018) and Huselid (2018) argued that rigorous analytics could position HR at the centre of evidence-based management. This promise resonated with long-standing debates about HR's quest for legitimacy and jurisdiction in strategic domains (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015; Sandholtz et al., 2019). Accordingly, growing attention to HRA reflects not only beliefs about the objectivity of quantified evidence but also the expectation that analytics will secure HR a seat at the decision-making table and thereby influence business value directly (Hülter et al., 2024; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015; Minbaeva, 2018).

2.3.2 Persistent Barriers to HRA Implementation

Critical assessments have, however, questioned whether practice has matched these aspirations. A growing body of empirical and review work identifies a set of recurrent barriers that together help explain why HRA adoption has so often remained partial or symbolic. Although these barriers intersect and reinforce one another in practice, existing research tends to organise them around four broadly related clusters: technical and data-related constraints; capability and skill gaps within and beyond HR; cultural and professional tensions between established and emerging logics; and concerns about governance, ethics and trust (Angrave et al., 2016; Marler & Boudreau, 2017; Minbaeva, 2017; Tursunbayeva et al., 2018; 2022; Fernández & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2021; Cayrat & Boxall, 2022). Examining each cluster in turn clarifies the range of conditions that research has documented as shaping the organisational uptake of HRA.

The most consistently documented barriers are technical in nature. HR data are frequently dispersed across multiple legacy platforms — recruitment systems, performance-management tools, payroll software, case-management systems and spreadsheet-based records — each with its own data structures, classification schemes and update cycles (Angrave et al., 2016; Strohmeier, 2009; Ferrar & Green, 2021). Integrating these sources into coherent analytic pipelines requires substantial standardisation of definitions (for example, headcount versus full-time equivalent; voluntary versus involuntary turnover), reconciliation of temporal windows, and ongoing cleaning of inconsistent or missing values (Bassi, 2011; Huselid, 2018). Even where modern cloud-based HRIS platforms are in place, data-quality issues persist because underlying record-keeping is often completed manually by HRBPs and line managers whose priorities are operational rather than analytic (Tursunbayeva et al., 2018; Fernández & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2021). As a result, substantial effort is absorbed by data preparation rather than analysis, and analytic outputs are regularly contested on the grounds that they rest on unreliable underlying data (Minbaeva, 2017; McCartney & Fu, 2022).

Closely related are capability and skill gaps within and beyond the HR function. Prior reviews consistently point to shortages of statistical, computational and data-engineering expertise in HR teams, where career trajectories have historically rewarded relational and operational competence rather than quantitative analysis (Angrave et al., 2016; Marler & Boudreau, 2017; van den Heuvel & Bondarouk, 2017; Fernández & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2021). These gaps are not confined to junior analysts: line managers and senior HR leaders often lack the interpretive capacity required to assess the robustness of models, distinguish between descriptive and inferential claims, or translate analytic outputs into operational decisions

(Levenson, 2018; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015; Cascio & Boudreau, 2011). Recent work has further argued that analytical skill alone is insufficient and must be paired with storytelling, framing and boundary-spanning capabilities that connect statistical findings to strategically resonant narratives (McCartney & Fu, 2024; Fu et al., 2023; Henke et al., 2018). Even so, empirical accounts suggest that such combined capabilities remain rare and unevenly distributed across organisations, with many HRA teams concentrating on technical deliverables while lacking the communicative infrastructure through which those deliverables might become consequential (Jörden et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024).

A third cluster of barriers is cultural and professional in character. The established relational logic of HR, grounded in interpersonal judgement, tacit knowledge and discretion, coexists uneasily with the quantification logic underpinning HRA (Greasley & Thomas, 2020; Sandholtz et al., 2019; Guest, 1990). For many HR professionals, the introduction of analytics is experienced not merely as the adoption of a new tool but as a challenge to the epistemic and professional foundations of their work (Giermindl et al., 2022; Ulrich, 2024). Studies document scepticism within HR about whether people, relationships and organisational culture can meaningfully be represented through metrics and predictive models (Fu et al., 2023; Greasley & Thomas, 2020), alongside concerns that analytic framing may reduce the richness of HR's subject matter to a narrow set of quantified indicators. These tensions are compounded by status-related concerns: HR actors may worry that embracing analytics exposes them to unfavourable comparison with numerically dominant groups such as finance or engineering specialists, or that it destabilises the professional identity on which their legitimacy rests (Jörden et al., 2022; Bechky, 2011; Sandholtz et al., 2019). Parallel patterns have been documented across adjacent professional fields — journalism (Usher, 2022), education (Williamson, 2017; Dunn & Jones, 2010), financial services (Anthony, 2021), and medicine (Greenhalgh et al., 2017) — where data-driven methods have provoked similar forms of resistance grounded in experiential authority and professional identity.

A fourth set of barriers centres on governance, ethics and trust. Because HRA works with sensitive employee data, often linked to consequential decisions about pay, promotion, retention and performance management, its use is subject to significant regulatory, ethical and reputational scrutiny (Tursunbayeva et al., 2018; 2022; Giermindl et al., 2022; Kellogg et al., 2020). Data-protection frameworks such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation impose concrete limits on the collection, retention and modelling of employee data, while wider research has documented concerns about bias, fairness and explainability in algorithmic decision-making

(Kellogg et al., 2020; Charlwood & Guenole, 2022; Padmanabhan Poti & Stanton, 2024). These concerns are not only technical but also relational: employees and their representatives, including trade unions and works councils, may contest the use of analytic tools perceived as intrusive or as shifting power asymmetrically toward employers (Wood et al., 2019; Ellmer & Reichel, 2021). Where governance arrangements are weak or opaque, organisations frequently retreat toward interpretable but low-stakes uses of analytics, such as descriptive reporting and benchmarking, limiting the scope of HRA to applications that pose fewer reputational or regulatory risks (Anthun et al., 2024; Căvescu & Popescu, 2025).

The cumulative effect of these four clusters of barriers is that analytics initiatives often remain confined to pilots, specialist teams, or reporting silos rather than becoming embedded in routine decision cycles (Greasley & Thomas, 2020; McCartney & Fu, 2022; Cayrat & Boxall, 2022; Jörden et al., 2022). Cascio and Boudreau (2011) labelled the inflection point a “big wall”: enthusiasm for data-driven approaches collides with organisational reluctance, resource constraints, and limited interpretive capacity among managers, impeding movement beyond benchmarking and scorecards to demonstrable impact of evidence-based HR. The persistence of such obstacles has raised scepticism about whether HRA can genuinely deliver the strategic transformation it promises (Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015). Importantly, however, these barriers are rarely discrete; they cluster and reinforce one another. Weak data quality compounds capability gaps by making analytic outputs harder to trust and defend; capability gaps in turn limit stakeholders' ability to engage critically with outputs, intensifying cultural scepticism; and governance concerns can tighten in response to analytic initiatives that nonetheless sit uneasily with prevailing relational norms. This interactional entanglement means that addressing any single barrier in isolation rarely produces sustained change. It also explains why technical and resource-based explanations for limited HRA uptake, while valuable, have been increasingly seen as insufficient, and why scholars have called for perspectives that can account for how these barriers are enacted and reproduced through everyday organisational practice (Zilber, 2002; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Smets et al., 2012). It is this analytical turn that motivates the microfoundational and institutional framework developed later in the thesis.

Such scepticism points to the need for deeper scrutiny, especially given that similar patterns have been observed in other fields where quantitative methods promised more than they ultimately delivered. A notable example is the history of quantitative finance in the 1990s and early 2000s, where sophisticated mathematical models were celebrated as revolutionary tools for predicting market behaviour and optimising investments (MacKenzie, 2006; Tett, 2009). The

financial crisis of 2008 exposed the limitations of these models, revealing their inability to capture systemic risks and complex, non-linear behaviours (MacKenzie & Spears, 2014). What had been heralded as the future of finance was critiqued as overly complex, fragile, and detached from practical realities. A comparable pattern is evident in the organisational adoption of Total Quality Management (TQM): Westphal, Gulati, and Shortell (1997) show that institutional and network pressures frequently produced conformity to normative TQM templates rather than customisation to local operational needs, resulting in ceremonial or decoupled implementation and modest performance effects.

Extending this account, Kennedy and Fiss (2009) show that late adoption of TQM by hospitals was driven less by operational needs than by concerns over social loss (i.e., anticipated losses in status or legitimacy from not adopting) and potential legitimacy gains from adopting. Their study highlights how meaning-making and framing processes mediated whether adoption translated into substantive implementation or remained largely symbolic. These cases highlight both the allure and the risk of analytical approaches. On the one hand, they project scientific authority and legitimacy; on the other, they remain vulnerable to over-claiming and under-delivering. Such precedents point to the need for further inquiry into the conditions under which HRA, despite widespread endorsement, may remain only loosely coupled to everyday organisational practices.

A further inflection point is now emerging with the advent of generative artificial intelligence (AI). Whereas earlier barriers to HRA adoption were frequently traced to data integration challenges, statistical skill shortages, and interpretive capacity gaps (Angrave et al., 2016; Fernández & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2021; Cayrat & Boxall, 2022; Boudreau & Cascio, 2017; Alam et al., 2025), large language models and related generative technologies are beginning to automate elements of data preparation, analysis, and communication (Brynjolfsson, Li, & Raymond, 2025). Early industry reports suggest that generative AI can lower the technical threshold for analytics by enabling natural-language querying, automatic summarisation of HR data, and simulation of workforce scenarios (Gartner, 2023; Chui et al., 2023). For HR professionals long positioned as analytically under-skilled, this raises the possibility that generative AI could mitigate historical capability barriers and democratise access to insights (Tambe et al., 2019; Tursunbayeva et al., 2022), potentially shifting the balance of power between specialist analytics teams and the wider HR function (Krakowski, 2025; Aguinis et al., 2024). Yet, as Charlwood and Guenole (2022) remind us, AI in HR is inherently paradoxical: it offers simultaneous prospects of greater fairness, transparency and efficiency, while also carrying the risk of intensified managerial control,

increased surveillance, and declining job quality. At the same time, these affordances may amplify long-standing concerns about governance, bias, and the interpretability of automated outputs (Padmanabhan Poti & Stanton, 2024; Yang et al., 2024). Thus, while generative AI is heralded as a technology that can accelerate embedding by integrating analytics more seamlessly into HR decision cycles, its practical consequences for the adoption and use of HRA remain to be substantiated. This uncertainty underscores the importance of examining not only how data-driven approaches - including the use of generative AI - reshape HR workflows, but also how they interact with the cultural, jurisdictional, and ethical dynamics that have historically constrained the impact of HRA.

2.3.3 Interpreting the Persistence through an Institutional Lens

One way to understand why such constraints persist is through the lens of institutional complexity (Greenwood et al., 2011). Organisations - and functional domains such as HR - operate amid competing logics that are frequently in tension (Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2016). This dynamic reflects the broader problem of institutional complexity, whereby organisations - and functional domains such as HR - operate amid competing logics that are frequently in tension (Greenwood et al., 2011; Greve, 2017; Kraatz & Block, 2008; Thornton et al., 2012). Such tensions mean that practices are often pulled in different directions, and the outcome depends on how logics are prioritised or balanced in particular contexts (Besharov & Smith, 2014). In some contexts, relational and experiential expertise continues to dominate, privileging intuition and tacit knowledge over data-driven reasoning (Sandholtz et al., 2019; Greasley & Thomas, 2020). In others, managerial expectations of evidence-based practice create strong pressures to adopt analytics, even when the necessary infrastructure and cultural readiness are absent (Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015; Edwards et al., 2024). This duality frequently results in adoption that is more symbolic than substantive. Organisations signal modernity and professionalism by establishing analytics teams or publishing data-driven reports, but without the deeper integration of analytics into decision-making processes (Jörden et al., 2022). Muzio et al. (2024) remind us of that symbols in organisational life can serve as either a genuine device of meaning-making or superficial markers of legitimacy. In the case of HRA, the evidence increasingly points towards the latter: analytics is widely endorsed rhetorically, but its practical embedding is limited and often peripheral.

On balance, HRA is firmly present in organisational discourse and analytic artefacts (Ferrar & Green, 2021; Guenole et al., 2017; Napper, 2025), yet its influence on HR decision-making is partial and limited (Ellmer & Reichel, 2021; McCartney & Fu, 2024; Jörden et al., 2022). This invites closer scrutiny of the assumptions and promises that underpin adoption. Many organisations treat data as intrinsically more rational than human judgement, positioning HRA as an objective, modern symbol that signals professionalism even before substantive effects are realised (Porter, 1995; Espeland & Stevens, 2008; Giermindl et al., 2022). Yet in practice the logic of action often diverges from the logic of understanding, so that artefacts are translated selectively and repeatedly give rise to states of loose coupling that are sustained over time (Weick, 1976; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Orton & Weick, 1990; Westphal & Zajac, 2001). In this thesis, coupling is therefore treated not as a fixed outcome but as a recurrent pattern that may sustain symbolic adoption or, under certain conditions, shift toward tighter integration. A fuller conceptualisation of coupling, and how it is understood in HRA, is developed in Section 2.4.1.

More importantly, this dynamic does not arise only from rationality assumptions. Adoption is also shaped by wider institutional logics such as legitimacy seeking (Suchman, 1995; Belizón & Kieran, 2022), audit and compliance demands (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Power, 2021), and risk management considerations and ethics (Kellogg et al., 2020; Giermindl et al., 2022; Tursunbayeva et al., 2018; 2022). These multiple logics explain why analytics may be loosely coupled symbolically and only partially enacted in practice. This also emphasis sets up the micro-level account of how actors' affect, identity work, and situated reasoning shape whether analytic artefacts are tightly or loosely coupled with practices of professionals (Bechky, 2011; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). This focus aligns with recent calls in HRM scholarship to reinvigorate the micro foundations of the field by foregrounding employees' lived experiences, emotions, and meaning-making processes as indispensable for explaining the effectiveness of HR practices (Rofcanin & Budhwar, 2025). In this respect, the next sections first synthesise what existing studies reveal about the organisational uptake of HRA and its recurrent difficulties of coupling with everyday decision-making and practices. I then identify gaps in the domain-level evidence base, before drawing together an evaluative summary that motivates the need for a theoretical framework linking micro-level practices of legitimation and translation to the broader patterns of loose/tight coupling observed in the field.

2.4. Coupling in Organisational Practice

Organisations often treat quantified evidence as inherently more rational than human judgement (Aguinis et al., 2024; Barley & Kunda, 1992; Edwards et al., 2024), so HRA (data-driven/-informed and evidence-based HR) is perceived as an objective and technical symbol by a growing number of individuals and organisations (Shet et al. 2021; Bentvelzen et al., 2024); yet in day-to-day use, analytical artefacts such as dashboards, scorecards, predictive models, and analysis reports, are translated selectively and frequently remain only loosely tied to routine decisions and practices. In practice, HRA adoption is shaped not only by beliefs in rationality but also by legitimacy seeking, audit/compliance demands, and risk-management logics - conditions that favour symbolic uptake over substantive use when translation, governance and role alignment are under-specified (Porter, 1995; Espeland & Stevens, 2008; Power, 2021; Suchman, 1995; Bromley & Powell, 2012). Building on this premise, this section reviews academic research on how analytical outputs couple - or fail to couple - with HR practices and decisions, focusing on the situated work through which translation, alignment, legitimation, and governance that differentiates tight from loose coupling. The following therefore examines coupling at three levels: conceptualisation (2.4.1), mechanisms of epistemic alignment (2.4.2), and structural and contextual conditions (2.4.3).

2.4.1 Conceptualising Coupling in HRA Practices

In this thesis, ‘coupling’ is used in the organisational theory sense of the degree of alignment between formal structures and everyday practices (Weick, 1976; Orton & Weick, 1990; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Following classic accounts, loose coupling describes a state in which formal adoption of structures or practices is only weakly connected to their enactment, often preserving legitimacy symbolically while limiting substantive change (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Westphal & Zajac, 2001). More recent work stresses that coupling is a dynamic, interactional accomplishment: loose coupling can be continually reproduced, tightened, or disrupted through everyday negotiations and meaning making (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021). ‘Practice’ is understood here in a socio-material sense: the situated, routinised activities through which actors produce, interpret and modify artefacts in organisational life (Jarzabkowski et al., 2016; Nicolini, 2012). This builds on practice-based institutional research that highlights how situated improvisations and micro-level adaptations can, over time, reshape institutional logics and field-level arrangements (Smets et al., 2012; 2015; Nicolini, 2012; Jarzabkowski et al., 2016). Bringing these together, coupling in HRA refers to how analytical artefacts, such as models,

dashboards, risk flags, scorecards, predictive indices, survey-based metrics, and governance protocols are enacted and negotiated in concrete practices, and how this work shapes whether they remain loosely or tightly coupled with HR decision-making and daily practices.

Empirical studies demonstrate that the impact of HRA depends less on the existence of teams, tools and dashboards than on how artefacts are hooked into concrete decision points and cycles. Typical points of entry include: workforce planning and quarterly business reviews where forecasts and scenario models inform headcount moves (Davenport et al., 2010; Levenson, 2017; Hülter et al., 2024); selection and mobility, where test scores or structured-interview packs blend with hiring panels' judgement (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2016); reward and pay-equity rounds, where diagnostics set tolerable residual thresholds and remediation rules (Aral et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2025); engagement surveys, where analysis of results may trigger action plans or further performance reviews (Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015); attrition risk flagging that identifies employees likely to leave and provides an early warning for targeted retention interventions, for instance through HRBP-led check-ins or support actions (Raman et al., 2019; Rombaut & Guerry, 2018; 2020); and employee-relations classification, where pattern detection helps prioritise casework (Marsden, 2021). Across such settings, coupling strengthens when analytics are timed to established cycles (e.g., calendars for planning, reward, budgeting), and when decision rights and override rules are explicit so that artefacts have a clear route to action (Ellmer & Reichel, 2021; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021).

2.4.2 Mechanisms of Epistemic Alignment for Coupling

A critical condition for tighter coupling is epistemic alignment – making HRA practices intelligible, credible, and actionable to HR stakeholders, such as HRBPs, line managers, HR analysts, employees, and executive sponsors. Ellmer and Reichel (2021) detail how epistemic alignment is accomplished through situated practices: negotiating with data scientists, works councils and privacy officers to negotiate research designs, data access and interpretive frames; customising dashboards by merging and re-ordering KPIs, adjusting visualisations and adding interactive features such as filters or mouseovers to match board-level dramaturgy; and speaking a language of numbers by linking statistical outputs to financial implications so that results resonate with managerial expectations and the organisation's data-driven culture. Related accounts reinforce this perspective. Levenson (2018) argues that workforce analytics achieves traction not by adding more dashboards or alerts, but by embedding analysis into the

organisation's strategic priorities. Rather than focusing narrowly on isolated HR processes, he emphasises a systems approach in which analytics clarifies which business challenges most impede strategy execution and addresses them through integrated attention to capability, opportunity, and motivation (the COM model). McCartney and Fu (2024) also point out this perspective, showing that analytical skills alone are insufficient: they become impactful when complemented by strong storytelling skills that translate complex insights into compelling narratives and actionable messages for decision-makers.

One of the useful ways to see how such epistemic alignment is achieved across the HRA domain is through the concept of boundary objects - originally developed in the sociology of science to describe artefacts that are 'plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites' (Star & Griesemer, 1989: 393; Bowker & Star, 1999). While first applied in natural science settings, the concept has since been widely adopted in information systems, organisation theory and management research to explain how heterogeneous groups coordinate and sustain collaboration (Carlile, 2002; Bechky, 2003; Levina & Vaast, 2005). In HRA, dashboards, scorecards, alert rules, data dictionaries and KPI glossaries operate as documented coordination devices that carry analytic claims across HR, finance and legal, and in doing so, can functioning as boundary objects (Becker et al., 2001; Greasley & Thomas, 2020; Guenole et al., 2017; Ferrar & Green, 2021). Read through boundary-object theory, such artefacts function as boundary objects stabilise and embed standards across sites, they increasingly take on infrastructural characteristics in practice (Star & Ruhleder, 1996). Their effectiveness in HRA hinges on agreeing classification schemes and measurement conventions - for example, aligning definitions (headcount vs. FTE; voluntary vs. involuntary turnover), temporal windows (rolling 12 months vs. fiscal quarters), normalisation bases (per 100 FTE), and currency/discounting rules - so that HRBPs, line managers, finance and legal read the same numbers the same way (Carlile, 2002; 2004; Bowker & Star, 1999; Espeland & Stevens, 2008). Without such negotiation work, the same artefact is variably interpreted - finance may read a turnover spike as a cost variance, while HR frames it as a managerial practice issue - yielding debate rather than coordinated change (Ellmer & Reichel, 2021). Boundary-spanning competence is therefore pivotal: individuals who can translate across occupational languages are the ones who make these objects influence decisions (Levina & Vaast, 2005). In the context of HRA, this role is often described as that of a translator - a figure who bridges the common language of HR and business stakeholders with the technical language of data science specialists (Polzer, 2022; McKinsey, 2019). Such actors make analytic artefacts intelligible and actionable by

mediating between professional communities, aligning definitions, and framing outputs in ways that resonate with organisational priorities (Carlile, 2004; Bechky, 2003).

Importantly, the role of boundary objects in HRA also intersects with questions of professional jurisdiction. Sandholtz, Chung, and Waisberg (2019) show that HR's historically entrenched task set (e.g., compliance, employee relations, policy administration) is a double-edged sword: it secures organisational necessity yet constrains strategic repositioning by tethering HR to lower-status administrative identities. Read through this lens, HRA artefacts such as compliance dashboards, grievance trackers, or risk registers can reinscribe that entrenchment when their categories and performance thresholds privilege auditability and procedural control over strategic problem framing. Conversely, when HR co-controls boundary objects - the data dictionary, KPI definitions, exception/override rules, and access/validation protocols - those standards become jurisdictional levers: they shape what counts as a people problem, who is authorised to diagnose it, and which remedies are legitimate, thereby redistributing decision rights at the HR–finance boundary (Sandholtz et al., 2019; Abbott, 1988; Bechky, 2003). In this sense, boundary objects are not neutral mediators but sites of ongoing boundary work, capable of either anchoring HR to inherited administrative responsibilities or opening space for more strategic claims - depending on who defines the categories, who owns the metrics, and how evidentiary standards are set and governed (Carlile, 2004; Levina & Vaast, 2005).

HRA practitioners are routinely asked to perform as scientists (validity, fairness), consultants (actionable framing) and insiders (political and relational savvy). Jörden, Sage and Trusson (2022) show how navigating these identities generates credibility trade-offs: simplifying methods and trimming caveats can aid uptake yet risk scepticism among technical peers; insisting on methodological niceties can cost momentum. Synthesising across cases, McCartney and Fu (2024) describe a dual capability requirement: rigorous analytical capability (problem formulation, data engineering, validation) must co-exist with story capability (audience analysis, narrative coherence, visual framing). Teams tilted too far toward one side either fail to gain traction (high rigour/low narrative) or draw attention but falter under scrutiny (high narrative/low rigour), with predictable effects on coupling (McCartney & Fu, 2024). These identity dynamics are the mechanisms through which artefacts acquire organisational standing. In institutional terms, practices are often loosely connected to the official policies and procedures, such as formal HR guidelines on evidence-based decision-making, analytics-informed appraisal systems, or diversity scorecards that organisations adopt to signal legitimacy while minimising disruption. Translation

and identity work can either reinforce this loose coupling or gradually bring artefacts into consequential use (Westphal & Zajac, 2001; Bromley & Powell, 2012).

2.4.3 Structural and Contextual Conditions for Coupling

Where HRA sits within an organisation condition coupling, as structural placement and the operating model determine who controls intake, which decision cycles the artefacts feed into, and which methodological standards govern their use. When HRA is organised as an HR centre of expertise, proximity to HRBPs can ease problem framing and access to tacit context, but weak alignment with enterprise analytics standards can undermine perceived rigour (Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015; van den Heuvel & Bondarouk, 2017). Conversely, when HR analytics is housed under corporate analytics or finance, methods and tooling support are often stronger (van den Heuvel & Bondarouk, 2017; Ferrar & Green, 2021). Yet such arrangements also risk reframing people-related issues through cost- or compliance-oriented logics, particularly when evaluative criteria are not co-produced with HR users (Greasley & Thomas, 2020). Governance acts as an additional coupling barrier: concerns about bias, privacy and explainability routinely narrow scope or steer teams toward interpretable models and lower-stakes use cases, especially in high-salience or public-sector contexts (Căvescu & Popescu, 2025; Chang & Ke, 2024; Anthun et al., 2024).

Coupling looks different outside large, analytically mature firms. In SMEs and mid-sized organisations, resource constraints and role combination (e.g., HRBPs doubling as analysts) limit time for translation and governance, increasing the likelihood of ceremonial adoption (Harney & Alkhalaf, 2021; Muchowe et al., 2025). Public-sector cases emphasise legal mandates (including union involvement) and transparency expectations as structuring conditions for whether analytics are seen as aids to fairness or threats to discretion (Cho et al., 2023; Anthun et al., 2024; Tursunbayeva et al., 2022). A recurrent blind spot in the HRA literature is the lack of systematic analysis and understanding of the receiving side beyond HR - e.g. sales, finance, and legal. Recent studies highlight that the focus of influence must extend from HR insiders to non-HR decision-makers (Rasmussen et al., 2024), and evidence from local government contexts shows that the responsibility and involvement of line leaders are decisive for actual use (Cho et al., 2023; Anthun et al., 2024). Furthermore, growing evidence demonstrates that for HR professionals and analytics practitioners, the combination of analytical and storytelling capabilities serves as a key mechanism for translating insights to this receiving side (McCartney & Fu, 2024). These suggest

that the coupling of HRA practices is contingent not only on technical and organisational infrastructures but also on the interpretive work performed at the boundaries between HR and other functions. Yet, systematic accounts of how HR and non-HR actors perceive, reinterpret and integrate analytic artefacts remain scarce. This gap is consequential because it obscures the micro-level mechanisms through which analytic artefacts gain, lose or fail to secure legitimacy across occupational boundaries, making it difficult to understand why HRA has become institutionalised in its current, often loosely coupled form. Addressing this gap requires microfoundational research that traces how actors' translation, negotiation and meaning-making practices shape the fate of analytical artefacts - whether they are integrated into multiple occupational jurisdictions or remain confined within HR (Zilber, 2002; Bechky, 2011; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Smets et al., 2012; Rofcanin & Budhwar, 2025).

Practice-level studies reframe coupling as an achievement: the contingent outcome of translation (Fu et al., 2023; McCartney & Fu, 2024), legitimacy work (Belizón & Kieran, 2022) and boundary negotiation (Stice-Lusvardi et al., 2024), conditioned by organisational placement, governance and context. They also clarify why formal structures - teams, tools, dashboards - are necessary but insufficient and highlight the contextual and organisational conditions that inhibit tight coupling even when legitimacy and technical infrastructures are in place (Angrave et al., 2016; Belizón & Kieran, 2022; Peeters et al., 2020). At the same time, the evidence base remains uneven. We still lack longitudinal and processual accounts that trace how translation work accumulates (or unravels) over time; perspectives that centre the receiving side beyond HR; and systematic incorporation of fairness and explainability into day-to-day modelling and decision protocols. Addressing these limitations motivates the next section's review of domain-level research gaps and sets up this thesis's turn to a microfoundational account of how affect, identity work and situated reasoning shape whether HRA is loosely or tightly coupled with HR practices (Zilber, 2002; Bechky, 2011; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006).

2.5. Evaluative Synthesis and Research Questions

Despite the growth of academic publications, professional guidance, related market, and corporate case studies, the evidence base for HRA still exhibits notable blind spots that constrain cumulative knowledge and help to explain persistent loose coupling in practice. Conceptually, terminological pluralism remains a source of ambiguity. Prior reviews show that "HR analytics", "people analytics", "workforce analytics", "talent analytics" and "human capital analytics" are

frequently treated as near-synonyms differentiated more by usage communities than by construct clarity, which hampers comparative accumulation and the specification of scope conditions (Angrave et al., 2016; Marler & Boudreau, 2017; van den Heuvel & Bondarouk, 2017; McCartney & Fu, 2022). This lack of consolidation is mirrored in uneven theorisation of the object of study: a stream of work treats analytics as a technical toolset (Strohmeier, 2009; Davenport et al., 2010; Cascio & Boudreau, 2011; Fitz-Enz, 2010); another frames it as an emergent organisational practice shaped by cultural expectations and legitimacy claims (Angrave et al., 2016; Marler & Boudreau, 2017; Minbaeva, 2018; Belizón & Kieran, 2022); and a further body of work situates it as a contested domain whose embedding depends on negotiations with stakeholders - such as HRBPs, line managers, senior leaders, etc - often marked by boundary tensions and jurisdictional conflict (Greasley & Thomas, 2020; Ellmer & Reichel, 2021; Jörden et al., 2022; McCartney & Fu, 2024). Without sharper conceptual distinctions, it is difficult to adjudicate claims about intended outcomes or to interpret variation in embedding across organisational contexts. This sits uneasily with long-standing aspirations and promises that analytics would elevate HR's jurisdictional status and renew professional legitimacy (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015; Ulrich, 2024).

Methodologically, the literature is dominated by cross-sectional case studies and review (Angrave et al., 2016; Marler & Boudreau, 2017; McCartney & Fu, 2022; Peeters et al., 2020), vendor-enabled exemplars (Guenole et al., 2017; Ferrar & Green, 2021) and retrospective accounts that identify barriers and enabling factors (Cayrat & Boxall, 2022; Fernández & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2021; Vargas et al., 2018; Minbaeva, 2017), but only a small number of studies trace how analytics artefacts move across time through cycles of problem framing, modelling, deliberation, and enactment (Jörden et al., 2022; Ellmer & Reichel, 2021; Stice-Lusvardi et al., 2024). As a result, we have limited visibility into the temporal mechanisms through which early episodes of use reconfigure sponsorship, data pipelines, evaluation criteria, or role boundaries – precisely the dynamics that determine whether loose coupling persists or shifts toward tighter coupling (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Leibel et al., 2018; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021). Longitudinal and processual designs remain rare, and only a handful of studies systematically explore the micro-level mechanisms through which actors translate, negotiate, and embed analytics in practice. While there is growing recognition that coupling depends on situated meaning-making, identity work, and boundary negotiations, microfoundational analyses that trace these processes empirically remain under-developed within the HRA literature, despite insights from adjacent institutional and practice-based research (e.g., Bechky, 2011; Zilber, 2002; Leibel et al., 2018). Selection biases further limit inference: existing studies mainly focused on mature firms and successful pilots, while negative cases, public-sector organisations, and SMEs are comparatively

under-represented (van den Heuvel & Bondarouk, 2017; Tursunbayeva et al., 2022; Anthun et al., 2024). This leaves particularly thin evidence on the formative dynamics of HRA when functions are first established or built from scratch - contexts in which role boundaries, evaluative logics, and governance arrangements are still unsettled, yet precisely where the coupling or decoupling of analytics is most visible and consequential.

At the micro level, several studies have explored analysts' work of translation, storytelling and epistemic alignment (Ellmer & Reichel, 2021; Fu & McCartney, 2024; Jörden et al., 2022), but far less attention has been paid to the actors who receive and use these outputs - such as HR business partners, line managers, finance or legal functions - whose interpretations and decisions ultimately shape whether analytics become tightly or loosely coupled with HR practices. Coupling depends not only on the practices of internal HR analysts but also on the involvement of these wider stakeholders, who co-produce evidentiary standards, set risk and timing thresholds, and exercise veto rights in meetings and governance forums (Rasmussen et al., 2024; Cho et al., 2023; Anthun et al., 2024). Boundary objects such as dashboards, KPI glossaries and data dictionaries are central to whether HRA outputs become consequential in organisational decision-making. These artefacts coordinate across functions while redistributing authority depending on who defines the categories and controls the metrics (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Bowker & Star, 1999; Carlile, 2002; Sandholtz et al., 2019; Abbott, 1988). Yet existing studies suggest that final uptake is rarely determined by analysts alone. Analysts' identity work shapes credibility, but HRBPs and senior managers frequently reframe or simplify outputs to fit established organisational decision routines (e.g., approval processes, reporting formats, or evaluative templates) (Jörden et al., 2022; Ellmer & Reichel, 2021; McCartney & Fu, 2024). At the same time, governance logics of privacy, fairness and explainability constrain what kinds of data and analytical methods can be used, often privileging transparency over technical sophistication (Tursunbayeva et al., 2022; Edwards et al., 2024). These therefore underscore that coupling is decided in situated negotiations at internal organisational and occupational boundaries rather than through technical quality alone. What remains underdeveloped is systematic microfoundational research that traces how such negotiations stabilise - or resist - authority over what counts as good evidence in everyday practice (Zilber, 2002; Bechky, 2011; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Smets et al., 2012), a critical gap because situated action within organisations provides the generative mechanisms through which macro-level institutional arrangements emerge and persist (Zilber, 2020).

Against this backdrop, the thesis addresses two interconnected research questions (RQs):

RQ1. Why does HRA, despite being symbolically legitimised within the HR field, remain loosely coupled with everyday HR practices?

This question aims to clarify the organisational, occupational and interactional processes through which analytics is reframed, resisted, or domesticated in practice. Addressing RQ1 contributes to HR scholarship by explaining the persistence of loose coupling as an outcome of situated negotiations rather than as a failure of implementation. It shows how HR professionals, line managers and adjacent functions interpret analytic claims through their own logics, routines and role boundaries, thereby sustaining symbolic rather than substantive use.

RQ2. What are the mechanisms though which tighter coupling between analytics and everyday HR practices develop?

This second question moves beyond diagnosing decoupling to theorising how analytical practices become more consequential. It contributes to broader organisational and institutional theory by identifying the generative mechanisms - translation, identity work, boundary negotiation and legitimacy - through which analytic artefacts, evaluative criteria and role configurations become recalibrated over time, enabling tighter coupling.

To investigate these questions, the analysis concentrates on two dimensions. The first concerns how HR professionals and related stakeholders negotiate, enact and resist the coupling of analytics with organisational practices, thereby clarifying why loose coupling persists (Ellmer & Reichel, 2021; Jörden et al., 2022; Greasley & Thomas, 2020). The second traces the microfoundational mechanisms through which tighter coupling can emerge and links these mechanisms to broader institutional logics and field-level conditions (Sandholtz et al., 2019; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021; Zilber, 2020).

The evaluation in this chapter points directly to what is theoretically required. Explaining why loose coupling persists - and when and how tighter coupling becomes possible - demands a framework that links micro-level mechanisms of meaning-making, interaction and identity/boundary work to organisational and field outcomes (Felin et al., 2015; Harmon et al., 2019; Zilber, 2020), while keeping temporality squarely in view as briefly introduced in Chapter 1.3. Institutional theory provides conceptual lens for logics, legitimacy and the gap between symbolic and substantive adoption (Scott, 2014; Thornton et al., 2012; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Westphal & Zajac, 1994). Inhabited institutionalism foregrounds the situated, interactional labour through which coupling is accomplished or undone (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021). In parallel, practice-based institutionalism illustrates how micro-level variations,

improvisations and local problem solving accumulate into meso- and macro-level institutional effects (Smets et al., 2012; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; 2013), thereby showing how practices travel, mutate or stabilise over time.

However, this rich but unconsolidated theoretical perspective is divided between different branches of institutional theory scholarship: institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012; Greenwood et al., 2011); microfoundations (Barney & Felin, 2013; Felin et al., 2015; Zilber, 2020); inhabited institutionalism (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021); and practice-based institutionalism (Smets et al., 2012; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; 2013). Because these branches emphasise different ontological entry points into institutional processes, a unifying analytical frame is required to relate structural conditions, interpretive agency and situated social interactions in a coherent way. To provide a coherent basis for abductive theorising, the next chapter develops a theoretical framework that integrates these different scholarly branches into a single framework. In doing this, I draw on Archers' morphogenetic approach to integrate individual cognition, affect and identity under the influence of existing institutions with social interactions and develop the concept of the "decision episode" as a unit of analysis that groups together the iterative morphogenetic cycles that take place around particular analytical artefacts/boundary objects. Against this backdrop, a temporal lens - specifically, Archer’s (1995; 2003) morphogenetic sequencing of structural conditioning, social interaction and structural elaboration - helps to trace how early episodes of use recalibrate roles, routines and evaluative criteria over time.

The next chapter therefore develops an integrated theoretical framework that draws together and synthesises insights from institutional theory, inhabited institutionalism, and Archer’s morphogenetic approach to temporality. It specifies the mechanisms through which HRA might become loosely or tightly coupled in practice, delineates the conditions under which organisational arrangements and evaluative logics can shift towards more substantive, durable embedding that guide the empirical study.

Chapter 3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter develops an integrated theoretical framework that provided a basis for abductive theorising to explain the core empirical issue established in Chapter 2: although HRA has acquired symbolic legitimacy across the HR field (Belizón & Kieran, 2022; Diefenhardt et al., 2025), it remains only partially and loosely coupled with everyday HR decision-making and practice. In order to explore this gap deeply, the thesis brings together institutional logics, inhabited and practice-based institutionalism, and microfoundational perspectives to conceptualise HRA as a contested subfield and to locate coupling processes in situated practice. Section 3.1 sets out the overarching theoretical stance and positions HRA within these debates; Section 3.2 develops the notion of decision episodes and specifies the mechanisms of institutional work that operate within them; Section 3.3 introduces the temporal sequencing of morphogenetic cycles to explain how patterns of loose or tighter coupling emerge over time; and Section 3.4 summarises the integrated framework and draws out its methodological implications for the empirical study.

3.1 Theoretical Stance

As elaborated in Chapter 2, although HRA has acquired symbolic legitimacy, it remains loosely coupled with everyday HR practice. Explaining this pattern requires attention not only to the field-level institutions highlighted in institutional theory, such as competing logics (Thornton et al., 2012; Greenwood et al., 2011), legitimacy concerns (Suchman, 1995) and professional boundaries (Abbott, 1988; Bechky, 2003), but also to how these institutions shape actors' orientations toward analytical practices and influence whether HRA becomes integrated into routine organisational work. Neo-institutional theory is valuable for showing how normative expectations and cultural-cognitive meanings structure organisational action (Scott, 2014; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991), yet it offers limited insight into how these institutions are enacted or resisted in practice. In the field in this study, iterative abductive theorising revealed that inhabited institutionalism was necessary to illuminate how these conditions are worked out in local encounters (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021), and practice-based institutionalism helped explain how micro-level variations, improvisations and situated adjustments accumulate into meso- and macro-level consequences (Smets et al., 2012; 2015; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; 2013; Zilber, 2021). However, as the fieldwork progressed, it became clear that neither perspective could explain the temporal sequencing observed in the empirical episodes: some projects moved from loose to tighter coupling, others oscillated between the two,

and still others fully decoupled. Inhabited institutionalism captured the interactional dynamics within episodes; it offered little guidance on how successive episodes shape one another over time. Likewise, practice-based institutionalism illuminated the cumulative effects of local adjustments, but not why particular sequences unfold in one direction rather than another. This explanatory gap made it necessary to identify a way of linking interactional dynamics with their recursive, time-bound consequences. This led to the adoption of a temporal lens informed by Archer's morphogenetic approach, which makes visible how institutional processes unfold iteratively and accumulate over time (Archer, 1995; Barley & Tolbert, 1997). Bringing these strands together, the thesis treats morphogenetic cycles as the fundamental mechanism through which institutional processes unfold, conceptualises institutional work as the distinct forms through which these cycles are enacted in practice, and positions decision episodes as the situated arenas in which multiple morphogenetic cycles intersect across actors.

Conceptually and ontologically, HRA is approached as a contested subfield of HRM rather than a set of analytical tools (cf. Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002 on field-level transformations driven by professional actors), as elaborated above in the Chapter 2.2. HRA advances a logic of quantification that promises objectivity and evidence-based judgement (Porter, 1995; Espeland & Stevens, 2008), thereby raising the prospect of professional re-legitimation and jurisdictional extension for HR (Abbott, 1988). Yet this logic coexists and often clashes with relational logics that privilege situated discretion, tacit knowledge, long-term tenure, experience, and trust-based evaluation (Bechky, 2011; Sandholtz et al., 2019; Greasley & Thomas, 2020). Accordingly, the expansion of HRA places HR professionals in a position where they are required to decide how analytic practices fit within existing HR roles, evaluative criteria and decision routines. Whether coupling tightens or remains loose depends on how HR practitioners interpret analytic work, how they incorporate it into their responsibilities and how they respond to challenges to established role boundaries. HRA adoption therefore can be understood through institutional work, as the situated and purposive activity of actors who shape rules, reinterpret meanings and contest established roles (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Bromley & Powell, 2012). Loose coupling consequently reflects a recurring pattern in which analytic approaches are formally endorsed but integrated only selectively into practice because they interact with existing routines and professional identities in ways that constrain deeper use (Hallett, 2010; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Interactionally, the thesis draws on insights from inhabited institutionalism to highlight that institutions are *lived* in and are re-shaped through everyday encounters rather than existing only

in formal structures (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021; Bitektine et al., 2020). According to Lawrence and Dover (2015), these encounters take place in concrete organisational sites where interactional dynamics and local power relations shape how work is done. In this thesis, such sites include teams, meetings, project spaces and digital work platforms, where roles, expectations and influence are negotiated in practice. The locus of explanation is therefore the concrete arena where claims to evidence are made intelligible, judged credible or otherwise, and linked, or not linked, to action (Zietsma et al., 2017; Suchman, 1995). In these arenas, the meanings of institutional concepts such as 'evidence-based decision-making' are themselves continually contested, shaping both the symbolic and political outcomes of reform (Hallett & Meanwell, 2016; Gross & Zilber, 2020). Within this theoretical framing, I introduce the notion of the decision episode, as the setting in which morphogenetic cycles unfold and intersect and a way of integrating microfoundations focus on how institutions motivate individual action towards institutional maintenance or change; inhabited institutionalisms focus on social interactions with practice-based institutionalism focus on how and why practices emerge.

It is important to clarify at the outset that decision episodes in this thesis serve a dual role — both theoretical and methodological — and this is why the concept is introduced here in the theoretical chapter rather than in the methodology chapter that follows. Theoretically, decision episodes provide the meso-level analytic construct through which the different strands of institutional scholarship drawn upon in this thesis — microfoundations, inhabited institutionalism, practice-driven institutionalism, institutional logics and institutional work — are brought into a single analytical frame, organised around Archer's (1995; 2003) morphogenetic cycles. Without such a meso-level construct, the analysis would risk remaining either too micro-focused on isolated interpretive acts or too macro-focused on undifferentiated institutional reproduction. Methodologically, the same concept operates as the unit of analysis through which the empirical material is organised and compared: each of the twelve HRA projects at D-company is examined as a decision episode, enabling systematic tracking of how morphogenetic cycles unfold, intersect and accumulate across projects over time. Because the theoretical and methodological dimensions of the concept are inseparable — the analytic construct determines what is observed, and the unit of observation makes the construct empirically tractable — the concept is introduced here, with its methodological operationalisation elaborated in Section 4.6.3.

Decision episodes enable the microfoundational focus on how institutional conditions shape individual orientations, emotions and identity work (Voronov & Vince, 2012; Zilber, 2020); they also capture the inhabited-institutionalist emphasis on situated social interaction, negotiation

and meaning work (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021); and they incorporate the insights of practice-based institutionalism by showing how micro-level adjustments, improvisations and local problem-solving (Smets et al., 2012; 2015; Jarzabkowski et al., 2009; Zilber, 2021) can accumulate into more durable institutional patterns. I use the term decision episode to denote a temporally bounded cycle of interactions that unfolds within specific organisational settings, drawing conceptually on Archer's (1995; 2003) emphasis on temporally sequenced morphogenetic cycles that condition subsequent episodes. These episodes have identifiable beginnings and outcomes yet remain open-ended in the sense that the outcome of each episode shapes the conditions for the episodes that follow in the ongoing morphogenetic process. They are also intrinsically situated: following Lawrence and Dover (2015), the physical or virtual location matters because it structures social dynamics and local power relations that mediate the coupling of HRA practices. For example, HRA projects, such as building a dashboard, risk prediction model, or performance analysis, are first generated and introduced within organisations. The use of the analytical artefact is then negotiated among relevant actors and ultimately either tightly or loosely coupled with existing organisational practices.

The emphasis on *episode* signals that the focus is not a series of isolated events, but a series of formal and informal social interactions organised around decision cycles with a clear beginning and end. A year-end reward committee, for instance, may receive an analytics report, debate its implications, and then decide whether or not to embed the findings in final pay outcomes. Such a sequence constitutes one decision episode. At the same time, decision episodes are not terminal: their outcomes feed into subsequent conditions, shaping the parameters of later episodes in a recursive and open-ended process. Tracking multiple episodes over time makes it possible to see when analytics are consistently sidelined, thereby reproducing loose coupling, and when they become more firmly integrated into decision routines, indicating a shift toward tighter coupling (Westphal & Zajac, 2001; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021). This framing also aligns with the empirical design of this thesis. The study examines twelve HRA projects undertaken by the analytics team at D-company, each of which unfolded as a bounded cycle of proposal, negotiation, and outcome. Some projects failed to gain traction, others stalled before later resuming, and a few became established as regular practice after iterative adjustments. Treating these projects as a series of decision episodes allows the analysis to capture both their internal dynamics and their cumulative and potentially non-linear trajectories. The concrete analytical procedures through which each project was demarcated, coded and compared as a decision episode are set out in Section 4.6.

Although the phrase, *decision episode*, itself is not explicitly established in institutional theory, I propose in this thesis as a way of consolidating insights that are already present in related work. Hallett and Ventresca (2006) emphasise that loose coupling is produced in local struggles over meaning, rather than being a fixed structural condition. Smets, Morris and Greenwood (2012) demonstrate that practitioners' situated improvising can incrementally transform institutional arrangements, showing how micro-level adjustments in practice accumulate into broader patterns of change. Similarly, ethnographic work on practice breakdowns shows how institutionalised routines are sustained through *ad hoc* containment and restoration efforts, underscoring the analytical value of episodes as the locus where settlements are worked out in real time (Lok & de Rond, 2013). These previous studies suggest that the critical empirical issue is not whether analytics exist but how their tangible outputs, such as dashboards, reports or predictive models, are negotiated in specific encounters. What matters is whether these outputs are interpreted as credible, aligned with prevailing logics and ultimately tightly or loosely coupled with consequential action. In related literatures, Hendry and Seidl (2003) explicitly employ the language of 'episodes' to conceptualise temporally situated units of practice in strategy-as-practice. Other scholars, such as Bechky (2011) in her work on occupational boundary negotiations and Hampel et al. (2017) in their review of institutional work, do not use the term 'episode' but share a similar concern with micro-level processes and situated interaction over time.[2]

Therefore, I argue in this thesis that the concept of a *decision episode* provides a means of focusing directly on those encounters. It designates a set of observable moments in which institutional logics collide and are worked through in iterative morphogenetic cycles. These cycles involve individual cognition and affect, shaped by identities and institutional contexts, as well as subsequent social interactions that lead to organisational decisions by HR partners, managers, or other stakeholders. Archer's (1995; 2003) morphogenetic approach provides a framework for analysing decision episodes. Each decision episode takes place at a juncture where pre-existing conditions are mediated through reflexive actions and social interactions, and where they are either reproduced or transformed into institutionalised practices. Each episode is also constituted through multiple iterative morphogenetic cycles. Theorising in this way moves attention away from abstract endorsements of data-driven HR and towards the lived processes through which HRA-related outputs are tightly or loosely coupled with HR practice. It makes visible how symbolic

[2] Hendry and Seidl (2003) introduce and develop the concept of "strategic episodes" in the strategy-as-practice tradition. Bechky (2011) and Hampel et al. (2017) do not explicitly use the term "episode," but their analyses of work practices, occupational negotiations, and the microfoundations of institutional work align with the processual orientation that underpins episode-based perspectives.

adoption is sustained across successive encounters, or how it is gradually reconfigured, and in doing so explains how patterned loose or tight coupling at the field level is generated through the accumulation of episode-level outcomes, often in a non-linear fashion (Meyer et al., 2005; Westphal & Zajac, 2001; Bromley & Powell, 2012; Greenwood et al., 2002). Such accumulation parallels the processes of 'emergence-based institutionalization' identified by Colyvas and Maroulis (2015), in which situated experiments, through repetition and uptake, gradually crystallise into organisational routines.

Temporally, the thesis adopts a sequencing perspective that draws on Archer's morphogenetic approach as an analytical framework to avoid conflating structure and agency. This approach is rooted in critical realism (Bhaskar, 1978; Archer, 1995; 2003), but social constructivists have advocated its use on epistemological grounds (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). The framework distinguishes three analytically separable phases. First, structural and cultural conditioning, which concerns the institutional context of pre-existing rules, resources, identities and meanings that shape how individuals formulate their concerns, including their cognitive and affective orientations. Second, social interaction, which refers to the situated negotiation that unfolds within decision episodes, where actors interpret demands, engage in meaning work and respond to others in practice. Third, structural elaboration, which concerns the subsequent reproduction or transformation of roles, routines and evaluative criteria as the outcomes of these interactions become stabilised or reconfigured over time.

In Actors' recursive morphogenetic cycles, reflexivity mediates between conditions and interaction. Individuals interpret demands, calibrate risks and choose courses of action. This reflexive process is not purely cognitive; it involves the construction of personal narratives and the management of emotional states (Ruebottom & Auster, 2018). This reflexivity is critical, as actors utilise these narratives both to negotiate their professional identities vis-à-vis the new logic of HRA and to shape the eventual coupling outcome. These outcomes then feed back into subsequent conditions and generate either morphostasis, which is ceremonial persistence, or morphogenesis, which is embedded change (Archer, 2003; Archer & Morgan, 2020; Barley & Tolbert, 1997). This temporal commitment explains how local settlements around HRA-related outputs harden into organisational standards, governance routines and decision-making, or fail to do so.

Positioning the thesis in this way also addresses limitations in macro-level accounts that explain why HRA is symbolically adopted but fail to account for its persistent loose coupling in practice. Macro-level accounts that foreground isomorphic pressure, legitimacy seeking or audit

cultures illuminate why organisations adopt analytics symbolically, but they under-specify how, where and when such adoption becomes consequential in practice (Suchman, 1995; Bromley & Powell, 2012; Power, 2021). Conversely, microfoundational accounts risk over-individualising explanation if they privilege cognition while understating the meso-level arenas where meanings are jointly constructed and contested (Haack et al., 2020; Felin et al., 2015; Harmon et al., 2019; Zilber, 2020). These microfoundational perspectives might also give limited attention to the practice-based institutionalist insight that micro-level adjustments, improvisations and locally situated problem-solving can accumulate over time, producing patterned forms of institutional change (Smets et al., 2012; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; 2013). The present stance in this thesis brings these branches together by treating decision episodes as inhabited sites in which institutional conditions shape actors' concerns and orientations, in which meanings, roles and boundaries are negotiated in interaction, and in which micro-level adjustments can crystallise into more durable institutional arrangements. This stance also sets the stage for a closer examination of the mechanisms that operate within situated practice. The next section develops the conceptual tools needed to analyse how decision episodes unfold in practice.

3.2 Mechanisms in Situated Practice

In the preceding section, I introduced the concept of decision episodes as the locus where institutional logics collide, and analytic artefacts are either integrated into or excluded from HR practice. Decision episodes are constituted from multiple iterative morphogenetic cycles through which individuals decide how to act towards analytical artefacts through their own reflexivity and social interactions with co-workers. This section develops the theoretical underpinnings of iterative morphogenetic cycles by drawing on institutional logics, institutional work, the concepts of coupling and decoupling, and recent developments in microfoundational and inhabited institutionalist perspectives. These theoretical concepts add richness and explanatory power to the framework provided by Archer because the morphogenetic approach, while clarifying the temporal sequencing of conditioning, interaction and elaboration, does not specify the concrete mechanisms through which actors interpret analytic artefacts, negotiate competing logics or draw and redrawn professional boundaries within episodes. Institutional logics, institutional work and microfoundational perspectives provide the missing conceptual vocabulary for explaining how these interactional processes unfold in practice, and why different episodes result in loose, tighter, or decoupled outcomes.

Institutional logics provide the overarching frames that define what counts as credible knowledge and legitimate practice (Thornton et al., 2012; Greenwood et al., 2011). In the case of HRA, a data-driven logic of quantification, prediction and objectivity competes with the historically dominant relational logic of trust, experiential discretion and tacit judgement (Sandholtz et al., 2019; Greasley & Thomas, 2020). Whether analytic outputs are coupled tightly or loosely with HR practice depends on how these competing logics are negotiated within concrete organisational episodes. Coupling is not a structural given but an outcome of situated interactions, ranging from ceremonial adoption without behavioural uptake to full integration into decision routines (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021).

A growing body of research has turned attention to the microfoundations of such institutional processes (Felin et al., 2015; Zilber, 2020). These approaches seek to explain macro-level phenomena, such as organisational routines, capabilities, or, in this case, common patterns of institutional coupling which are constitutive of HRA as an institutional subfield at the macro level by analysing the underlying actions and interactions of individuals (Foss & Pedersen, 2016), and in doing so emphasise how institutions are enacted and reconfigured through actors' interpretations, sensemaking and practices (Smets et al., 2012; Smets et al., 2017). Bechky (2011) demonstrates how occupational boundaries are not fixed but continually reproduced or redefined through everyday negotiation. According to Leibel et al.'s (2018) review, meaning dynamics in fields, and by implication processes of legitimation, should be understood not as symbolic residues of past interaction but as the ongoing outcome of situated work in specific encounters. Inhabited institutionalism extends this perspective by showing that institutions are *lived* in practice, mediated through local struggles, identity work and relational negotiation (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Binder, 2007). Considered collectively, these perspectives highlight the situated nature of institutional processes in decision episodes and the associated symbolic politics that surround institutional reform (Hallett & Meanwell, 2016).

Building on insights from the foundational work of neo-institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and the concept of institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012), as well as microfoundational and inhabited institutionalist perspectives (Felin et al., 2015; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006), this thesis also draws on the literature on institutional work. Because these perspectives, while clarifying the structural conditions and interactional settings of decision episodes, do not sufficiently specify the specific forms of action through which actors interpret analytic artefacts, negotiate boundaries and evaluate legitimacy. Institutional work provides these concrete categories of action, such as translation, boundary work, identity work and legitimacy work, which make it possible to analyse

how loose or tighter coupling is produced within episodes. Institutional work refers to the purposive efforts of individuals and organisations to create, maintain (Heaphy, 2013; Dacin et al., 2010), or disrupt institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2013). Crucially, this work is also spatially embedded, constrained by the material arrangements and local social dynamics of the specific place where it is conducted (Lawrence & Dover, 2015). In this sense, work does not denote labour in the narrow sense, but rather the situated practices through which actors interpret, justify, and reconfigure institutional contexts.

Scholars have identified a wide variety of institutional work practices. Institutional work refers to the purposive and situated activities through which actors create, maintain or disrupt institutional arrangements (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2008) and it highlights that institutions are continually reproduced through practices. In the context of this thesis, I focus on four forms that recur most consistently across organisational research and that are particularly salient in relation to professional boundaries, identity, and legitimation: translation work, boundary work, identity work, and legitimacy work (e.g. Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Gieryn, 1983; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Suchman, 1995). These categories do not represent an exhaustive taxonomy – as Hampel, Lawrence and Tracey (2017) argue, institutional work is multifaceted and temporally sequenced – but they capture the principal mechanisms through which competing logics are negotiated in decision episodes. Moreover, following Voronov and Vince (2012), these processes should be understood as suffused with power and affect, which shape how institutions are maintained, challenged, or transformed.

Taking these aspects into account, decision episodes are understood as the situated arenas within which iterative morphogenetic cycles unfold. Within these cycles, actors engage in four recurrent forms of institutional work – translation work, boundary work, identity work, and legitimacy work - that shape how analytic artefacts are interpreted, negotiated and evaluated. These forms of institutional work are not only cognitive or symbolic but are permeated by power relations and affective dynamics, which operate as cross-cutting influences rather than separate mechanisms. Power and affect condition how translation is received (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008), how boundaries are defended or redrawn (Abbott, 1988; Bechky, 2003), how identities are negotiated (Bechky, 2011; Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018), and how legitimacy is secured (Hudson et al., 2015). In this way, decision episodes are inherently political and emotional sites (Hallett, 2010; Lawrence, 2008; Voronov & Vince, 2012), and the unfolding of these processes determines whether analytics become loosely or tightly coupled with HR practice. In particular, these four forms of institutional work represent the interactional dynamics that unfold during the “social interaction” phase of the

morphogenetic cycle. Which form of institutional work actors engage in depends on how structural conditioning shapes their reflexive deliberation, while the outcomes of this work contribute to the elaboration or reproduction of institutional arrangements in subsequent cycles. In this way, institutional work provides the micro-level mechanisms through which morphogenetic cycles are enacted in decision episodes.

Among the four forms of institutional work observed in this study, identity work is foundational. Identity work plays a central role in shaping how actors enter decision episodes. Identity work has been defined broadly as the cognitive, discursive, physical, and behavioural activities through which individuals form, repair, maintain, strengthen, revise or reject their self-meanings within particular social contexts (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Caza, Vough & Puranik, 2018). Reviews of the field show that this concept has been mobilised across multiple theoretical traditions — including social identity theory, identity theory, narrative theory and critical theory — each emphasising different aspects of how individuals construct and negotiate work identities (Brown, 2015; Caza et al., 2018). Within this broad literature, the present thesis draws specifically on the institutional-theoretic formulation of identity work, in which identity is understood as the site through which institutional contradictions are encountered, navigated, and partially resolved (Creed, DeJordy & Lok, 2010; Lok, 2010).. Because identity provides actors with a sense of who they are and what they are responsible for, it operates at the level of structural conditioning in the morphogenetic cycle: pre-existing professional logics, role expectations and actorhood models shape the reflexive concerns that determine whether actors seek to reproduce or modify their institutional environments.

In the context of HRA, identity work is important. The integration of analytics challenges the self-understanding of HR professionals, who have long derived legitimacy from relational expertise and experiential judgement. Research on professions shows that professional identity is closely tied to occupational jurisdictions and epistemic authority (Abbott, 1988; Bechky, 2011), so the introduction of data-driven tools can be experienced as a threat to professional standing. Such challenges to occupational standing have been shown to provoke identity work as actors seek to reconcile competing institutional demands with their established self-understandings (Creed et al., 2010; Pratt et al., 2006). Studies in journalism, finance and education illustrate how data-driven methods provoke identity tensions when they appear to displace occupational values, producing anxieties about autonomy and care (Usher, 2022; Dunn & Jones, 2010; Anthony, 2021; Williamson, 2017). In particular, Anthony's (2021) ethnography identifies 'partitioning' and 'co-construction' as situated practices that determine whether analytic tools are black-boxed or

reflexively integrated into professional work. Similar dynamics have been documented in medicine, where algorithmic decision aids generate resistance by undermining clinicians' experiential authority (Greenhalgh et al., 2017). In HR, these tensions surface within decision episodes as actors reflexively navigate how to reconcile the emerging data-driven identity with the established relational identity. For example, actors may describe themselves as both data-savvy and people-centred to accommodate competing identity expectations (Pratt et al., 2006).

This identity work is driven by emotional energy and reflexive narratives (Ruebottom & Auster, 2018), as actors seek to manage the tension between the old relational self and the new data-driven self. These identity adjustments can be understood as part of the ongoing work through which individuals revise their self-conceptions in response to organisational expectations (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) and the institutional contradictions embedded in their work environments (Creed et al., 2010), and are consistent with prior accounts showing how actors respond to competing role demands in ways that maintain coherence across their responsibilities (Pratt et al., 2006). Through these practices, HR professionals seek to inhabit identities that are analytically credible while remaining relationally trustworthy, allowing analytics to be appropriated without wholly displacing established professional values (Currie & Spyridonidis, 2016). In this sense, hybrid identities illustrate what Bitektine et al. (2020) describe as institutions inhabiting individuals: institutional logics and actorhood models become internalised through communication, shaping actors' reflexive concerns at the conditioning stage of the morphogenetic cycle. As these hybrid identities are enacted in subsequent social interactions within decision episodes, they influence which forms of institutional work, such as translation, boundary work and legitimacy work, are activated, and thereby contribute over time to either the reproduction or elaboration of institutional arrangements.

Within decision episodes, different forms of institutional work are enacted and re-enacted through social interaction. Following the identity work that shapes actors' reflexive concerns at the structural conditioning stage of the morphogenetic cycle, translation work is often the most salient because analytic artefacts rarely enter decision-making arenas in their original technical form. Statistical models or algorithmic outputs cannot simply be transferred into HR meetings without adaptation; they are often translated into terms that resonate with the evaluative criteria of HR professionals and line managers (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008), for example, a regression coefficient may be reframed as an estimated cost saving or productivity gain. This challenge arises because HR actors are typically well versed in business concepts and professional jargon but may lack the technical vocabulary of data science, while the reverse is true for data specialists

(Ledet et al., 2020). Without some form of mediation, each side risks talking past the other, and analytic outputs are unlikely to be perceived as credible or useful.

Scholarship on boundary spanning competence demonstrates how such mediation enables communication across professional communities with distinct languages and evaluative criteria (Levina & Vaast, 2005). Practitioner-oriented literatures often label this bridging capacity the role of the business translator (Henke et al., 2018), here HRA translator, though institutional theory more commonly conceptualises it as a form of translation or boundary work. From this perspective, translation is not a peripheral activity. It is a central mechanism of coupling, as it determines whether analytic outputs are rendered intelligible, credible, and actionable across professional boundaries. This importance becomes even more pronounced in high-stakes environments, such as those involving professional jurisdiction and ethical concerns, where translation is vital for managing risk and securing legitimacy (Lawrence, 2017). Institutional translation research has long illustrated how concepts are modified to fit local contexts (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008), while empirical studies of HRA show that dashboards and predictive models are more likely to gain traction when accompanied by narrative framing that links outputs to strategic or financial priorities (McCartney & Fu, 2024). The high-stakes nature of HRA, which touches on issues of professional autonomy and potential bias, further elevates the complexity of translation (Lawrence, 2017), as actors require to manage competing claims from diverse evaluative audiences to render the practice legitimate.

Decision episodes are also characterised by boundary work. Abbott's (1988) classic theory of professional jurisdiction highlights how new tools often trigger disputes over authority, as professional groups seek to defend or extend their control over tasks and evaluative standards. In the case of HRA, artefacts (or analytic outputs) such as dashboards or predictive models raise precisely these questions, as data analysts, HR professionals, and senior managers negotiate over who owns the methodological choices, who validates the findings, who bears responsibility for their use, and who determines their practical application (Bechky, 2003; Stice-Lusvardi et al., 2024). Recent ethnographic work characterises analytics specialists as 'peripheral experts' who secure symbolic legitimation yet remain weakly embedded in everyday routines, sharpening how boundary negotiations can confine HRA to the organisational periphery (Stice-Lusvardi et al., 2024).

Such struggles resemble what Gieryn (1983: 782) defines as boundary-work, "*the attribution of selected characteristics to the institution of science … for purposes of constructing a social boundary that distinguishes some intellectual activities as non-science*". Research shows

that these struggles are enacted in everyday practice and may involve both defensive and creative forms of institutional work: Bechky (2011) emphasises how occupational boundaries are continually reproduced through situated negotiation, while Kellogg (2009; 2011) illustrates how boundary reconfigurations can enable or obstruct change within organisations. In her ethnographic study of surgical teams, Kellogg (2009) shows how shifts in relational spaces, such as who is authorised to speak, when, and with what authority, can either enable or obstruct the implementation of new practices. In the context of HRA, this means that even technically robust outputs may be sidelined if they are perceived as threatening HR's relational expertise or professional identity, echoing Sturdy's (1997) analysis of how new managerial ideas introduced through consultancy are often resisted or reinterpreted in practice rather than straightforwardly adopted. These localised boundary negotiations are constitutive of whether the HR field expands by integrating the new analytic community or contracts by pushing HRA to the periphery (Grodal, 2018). Coupling, in this sense, is not adequately explained in purely technical terms. It is more appropriately understood as involving contests over professional territory, authority and legitimacy, and these dynamics shape whether analytics become integrated into decision routines or remain largely symbolic and peripheral (Abbott, 1988; Bechky, 2011; Kellogg, 2009).

Legitimacy work is central to whether analytics are eventually adopted or sidelined. Recall that Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) conceptualise institutional work as the purposive action of individuals and organisations aimed at creating, maintaining, or disrupting institutions; viewed through this lens, legitimacy work highlights the active efforts required to render new practices acceptable, for instance by shaping or contesting the grounds on which their legitimacy is evaluated. In the case of HRA, legitimacy is multi-dimensional: technical legitimacy rests on the methodological soundness and rigour of analytic models (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008); moral legitimacy derives from alignment with fairness norms, ethical expectations and transparency demands (Suchman, 1995; Tursunbayeva et al., 2018); and pragmatic legitimacy is tied to the perceived utility of outputs for solving organisational problems and informing managerial action (Suchman, 1995; Bitektine & Haack, 2015), as well as to the perceived opportunities or threats they pose to specific individuals and groups whose interests, authority, or routines may be affected. Importantly, legitimacy is not conferred by a single audience but is subject to evaluation by multiple and sometimes competing constituencies. Bitektine and Haack (2015) argue that legitimacy judgements are micro-level processes enacted by diverse evaluators. In HRA these evaluators include HR professionals, line managers, executive sponsors, and occasionally employees who are the subjects of analytic interventions. Research has shown that legitimacy work often requires tailoring narratives and evidentiary claims to these different audiences, for instance by reframing

complex metrics into strategic value propositions for senior executives while simultaneously emphasising ethical safeguards and fairness criteria to employees or works councils (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Belizón & Kieran, 2022). This underscores that adoption hinges on the continual accomplishment of legitimacy work across organisational levels and evaluative communities, determining whether analytics become loosely or tightly coupled.

Critical scholars have urged institutional theorists to re-incorporate power into institutional analysis, arguing that institutions are rarely neutral and frequently reflect the interests of dominant actors (Munir, 2015; 2020; Lawrence, 2008). This insight underscores that the four forms of institutional work discussed above - identity work, translation work, boundary work and legitimacy work - cannot be understood in isolation from the power dynamics and affective forces that shape how actors engage in them. Therefore, it is essential to recognise the role of power and affect in explaining how HRA becomes loosely or tightly coupled to existing institutional practices. Hudson, Okhuysen and Creed (2015) show that power shapes what actions are possible in the first place and is exercised through everyday interactions, thereby highlighting how institutions and power are mutually constituted. In HRA context, coupling is not only a contest of logics but also a struggle over jurisdictional power and resource allocation (Pfeffer, 1992). In such struggles, cohesive emotions, such as the sense of togetherness among established HR professionals, can mobilise actors to defend a dominant logic and strategically deploy power against challengers like HRA (Sadeh & Zilber, 2019). Yet power alone does not explain variation in outcomes. Recent research demonstrates that institutional work is suffused with emotional energy and that affective dynamics are constitutive of how institutions are enacted (Voronov & Vince, 2012; Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018; Creed et al., 2014). Scholars demonstrate that emotions are integral to the constitution of actors' legitimacy itself, as seen through the concept of emotional competence (Voronov & Weber, 2016; 2020; Linneberg et al., 2021). Viewed through Archer's (1995; 2003) morphogenetic cycle, power and affect operate primarily at the conditioning stage: they shape actors’ concerns, perceived risks and emotional orientations, but they do not determine action. These concerns are then mediated through reflexive deliberation, which influences how actors engage in forms of institutional work in the interaction phase of decision episodes. The outcomes of these power- and affect-laden interactions subsequently feed into the elaboration phase, either reproducing loose coupling or contributing to shifts toward tighter coupling.

Emotions such as enthusiasm, scepticism, empathy, shame or anxiety about analytics can decisively influence whether outputs are embraced or rejected. Zietsma and Toubiana (2018) argue that emotions are not peripheral but integral to institutional processes: they provide value-

laden cues that shape actors' judgements, constitute the very meanings attached to practices, and energise or drain collective action. In a similar vein, Linneberg et al. (2021) show that empathic engagement - understood as the capacity to recognise, share and respond to the feelings of others - enables institutional work by fostering trust and creating relational legitimacy. This reminds us of Creed et al.'s (2014) argument that emotions such as shame are central mechanisms in institutional life: they bind actors to prevailing norms through affective reinforcement yet can also catalyse change when violations provoke collective discomfort. Building on this, Ruebottom and Auster (2018) show that such emotional experiences are often worked through reflexive dis/embedding, as actors narratively position themselves in relation to new logics. In HRA, scepticism or vulnerability expressed by HR professionals may thus function both to reproduce loose coupling and, under certain conditions, to trigger re-evaluation of analytic practices. That is, the introduction of HRA, with its focus on objective metrics, can evoke feelings of shame among traditional HR professionals who perceive their experiential, relational expertise as being rendered unscientific or lacking legitimacy. This underscores that successful coupling depends on technical credibility and discursive alignment, while equally requiring the cultivation of emotional resonance across professional groups. This also suggests that emotions are not simply individual reactions but contextually constituted experiences. As de Rond and Lok (2016) show in their ethnography of war, psychological injury is inseparable from the institutional and relational contexts in which it is experienced. Likewise, HR professionals' anxieties about analytics are shaped by the organisational settings and professional logics that render data-driven practices threatening or legitimate.

These perspectives have the potential to explain why the formal adoption or introduction of HRA frequently remains symbolic and only loosely coupled to practice. Even when technical infrastructures are in place, analytics may falter without the continual accomplishment of identity, translation, boundary, and legitimacy work, supported by political authority and emotional resonance. These insights point to the importance of studying decision episodes as the situated arenas in which morphogenetic cycles unfold and become empirically visible through the enactment of identity, translation, boundary, and legitimacy work. Because these insights still leave unanswered a crucial question: how the outcomes of one episode shape the conditions for the next, and why patterns of loose, tighter or decoupled coupling evolve in particular trajectories over time. While institutional logics, inhabited institutionalism, practice-based institutionalism and institutional work each illuminate specific dimensions of situated action, none of them alone provides an account of the sequential, recursive processes through which these dynamics accumulate. For this reason, a stronger temporal lens and an integrated

framework are required to connect micro-level interaction with meso-level patterns and to explain how coupling stabilises or shifts across multiple episodes. To address this temporal dimension, the next section develops an integrated framework drawing on Archer's morphogenetic approach to capture the sequencing of conditions, interactions and outcomes.

3.3 Temporal Sequencing and the Integrated Framework

It is now important to situate the mechanisms discussed above within a temporal framework that makes explicit how institutions are both reproduced and transformed over time. The framework proposed here sequences the enactments of morphogenetic cycles using Archer's analytical distinction between conditioning, interaction, and elaboration, in order to trace how institutions both pre-date and are reshaped by action (Archer, 1995; 2003; Archer & Morgan, 2020). This temporal orientation can be seen in Barley and Tolbert's (1997) script model, which conceptualises institutional continuity and change as the cyclical encoding, enactment, revision and reproduction of scripts, recurrent patterns of behaviour that provide empirical points of reference for analysing how institutions are sustained or altered. A comparable perspective is advanced by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), who reconceptualise agency as a temporally embedded process comprising iterational, projective and practical-evaluative dimensions.

Recent work extends this view by emphasising how evaluative orientations are not only situational but also accumulate through time. Creed et al. (2022), drawing on Sayer's (2011) account of how valuations are historically embodied and enduring, describe these as sedimented valuations that shape how actors draw on past routines, respond to present contingencies, and imagine future possibilities. Together, these perspectives indicate that temporality is not a background condition but an intrinsic property of institutional processes. This perspective is further supported by research on institutional micro-processes, which shows how context-specific adjustments and practice-level improvisations accumulate and diffuse into broader patterns of institutional change (Smets et al., 2012; 2015), and by Zilber's work, which demonstrates how institutional meanings are sustained and reshaped through the interplay of actions, actors and interpretations (Zilber, 2002), and methodologically elaborates how ethnographic strategies can capture their continuous reconstruction in practice (Zilber, 2020).

Figure 1 shows Archer's (1995; 2003) morphogenetic approach as a temporal cycle. At T1, structural and cultural conditions such as rules, resources, and meanings, pre-date action and influence what is possible. At T2–T3, actors engage in social interaction, mediated by their

individual reflexivity, through which they interpret demands, calibrate risks and select courses of action. At T4, outcomes feed back into the institutional environment, either reproducing established institutions (morphostasis) or transforming them (morphogenesis). Reflexivity is central to this model, as it links pre-existing logics with situated practices, while the iterative cycle captures how institutions are both reproduced and reshaped over time (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Delbridge & Edwards, 2013). Reflexivity also includes a narrative and emotional process (Ruebottom & Auster, 2018), where HR professionals construct personal accounts to justify or reject HRA practices, leading to a reflexive dis/embedding from established or emerging institutional logics.

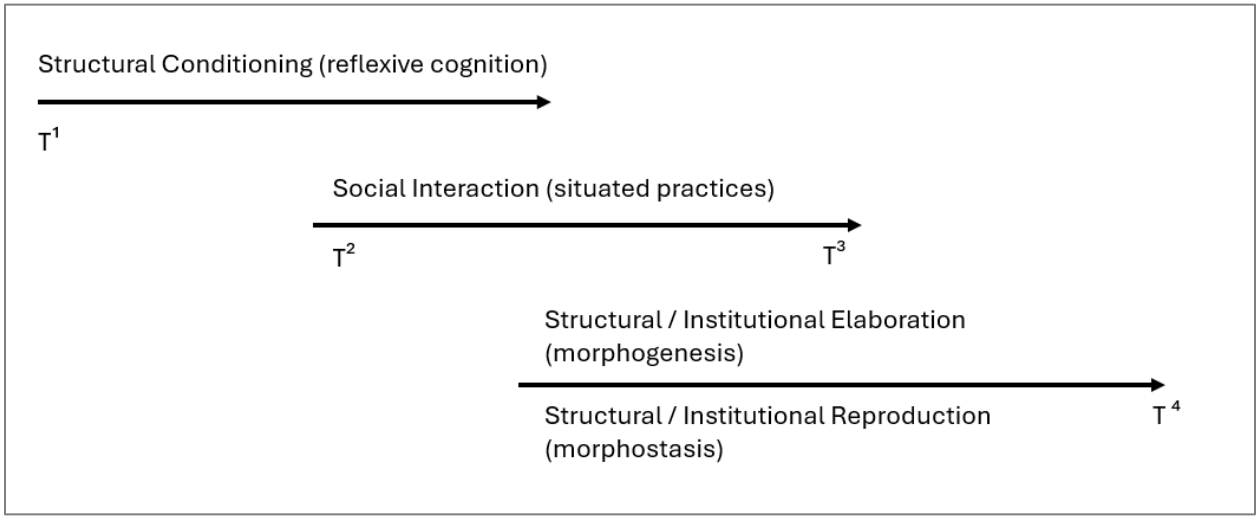

Figure 1. Conceptual Integration of Archer's Cycle and Coupling Mechanisms[3]

To unpack the model in more depth, at T1, institutions pre-date action and configure the possibilities available to organisational actors. Scott (2014) distinguishes regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive dimensions of institutions. Complementing this perspective, Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury (2012) conceptualise institutional logics as meaning systems that structure cognition and behaviour. In the HR context, established routines and calendars illustrate regulative and normative structures: annual performance reviews, pay-setting cycles and promotion windows are taken-for-granted timetables that constrain when and how decisions can

[3] Sequencing coupling: T1 structural conditioning → T2–T3 interaction (translation, legitimation, boundary, and identity work around objects) → T4 elaboration (morphogenesis/morphostasis). Reflexivity mediates the translation of institutional logics into practice; outcomes feedback by codifying conventions, roles, decision, and verification routines.

occur, operating as scripts that pre-date and guide action (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Jepperson, 1991). Data infrastructures and access rules likewise constitute regulative arrangements, distributing resources and stipulating authorisation, for example, who is permitted to query HRIS systems or view sensitive personnel data (Strohmeier, 2009). Prevailing logics of evaluation represent cultural-cognitive conditioning, framing what counts as credible evidence: numerical performance indicators may be privileged in some settings, while others valorise experiential judgement or relational trust (Sandholtz et al., 2019; Greasley & Thomas, 2020). Organisational histories with analytics further exemplify cultural-cognitive path dependence: prior successes may encourage receptivity, while memories of failed projects may fuel scepticism (Mahoney, 2000). The professional values and relational ethos of HR are often deeply ingrained, shaped by experiences that carry lasting emotional weight (de Rond & Lok, 2016; Creed et al., 2014). This sedimented affective foundation of the relational logic at T1 is what makes the collision with the new data logic so intense during interactional episodes (T2-T3). These features constitute the structural and cultural conditioning that sets the stage for subsequent interaction, influencing but not determining whether analytics become loosely or tightly coupled with HR decision-making.

At T2–T3, actors confront the social structures identified at T1, reflexively interpreting and negotiating them through social interaction. Archer (2003) conceptualises reflexivity as the internal conversation through which actors deliberate on institutional demands, calibrate risks and choose courses of action. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) extend this by theorising agency as temporally embedded, comprising iterational, projective and practical-evaluative dimensions that actors draw upon in situated contexts. In decision episodes, these deliberations are enacted through concrete mechanisms. Translation work reframes analytic artefacts into idioms intelligible across professional boundaries (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; McCartney & Fu, 2024). Legitimation and verification work seek to render outputs credible by linking them to prevailing evaluative criteria and fairness concerns (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Bitektine & Haack, 2015). Boundary and identity negotiations unfold as HR professionals, data scientists and line managers contest jurisdictional authority and reconcile competing logics of expertise (Abbott, 1988; Bechky, 2011). Reflexivity shapes how actors mobilise these practices: whether they rely on past routines, address immediate contingencies or orient towards imagined futures. Ethnographic studies provide rich illustrations of this interactional work, for instance in analyses of how HR analytics projects are translated and negotiated within organisations (Jörden et al., 2022; Ellmer & Reichel, 2021). Such work captures the micro-dynamics of interaction in depth but tends to privilege the immediacy of episodes rather than their sequencing over time, thereby leaving temporal accumulation and feedback less visible. T2–T3 therefore represents the critical arena where

institutional logics collide and are reworked in everyday encounters, making the coupling of analytics contingent on interactional processes rather than structural conditions alone.

At T4, outcomes of interaction feed back into the institutional environment, producing either morphostasis or morphogenesis. When episodes repeatedly culminate in ceremonial adoption - dashboards acknowledged but rarely used, metrics displayed but not acted upon - institutions are reproduced without substantive change, exemplifying morphostasis (Westphal & Zajac, 2001; Bromley & Powell, 2012). This morphostasis is not passive inertia; it often results from actors actively using rules and established routines to repair the breaches caused by new demands, thereby preserving institutional integrity and reinforcing the existing loose coupling pattern (Heaphy, 2013). Furthermore, it is sustained through the ritual performance and symbolic work that actively reinforce the taken-for-granted character of existing practices and the emotional bonds among actors adhering to the status quo (Dacin et al., 2010). By contrast, when artefacts become embedded in consequential decisions, morphogenesis occurs: conventions are stabilised, evaluative criteria codified, and roles or decision rights redefined (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Delbridge & Edwards, 2013). According to Colyvas and Maroulis (2015), this process aligns with 'emergence-based institutionalization,' where repeated micro-level interactions and exceptions (e.g., a successful HRA implementation) gradually solidify into shared routines, thereby moving from an exception to a rule. Over time, boundary objects may crystallise into shared standards (Star & Griesemer, 1989), evaluative frameworks may be formalised into governance procedures (Espeland & Stevens, 1998), and translator roles may be established as recognised and valued positions bridging HR and data science (Levina & Vaast, 2005). These feedback processes illustrate Archer’s (1995) principle of structural elaboration, in which institutions are neither immutable nor entirely agent-driven, but are iteratively sustained or transformed through the cumulative effects of situated interaction. In the case of HRA, T4 thus captures the recursive outcomes through which loose coupling is reproduced or, more rarely, tighter coupling is achieved.

This morphogenetic framework provides a structured way of linking institutions (social structures), interactional mechanisms and recursive outcomes in order to explain the dynamic coupling of analytics to HR practice. It moves beyond static or episodic accounts by showing how pre-existing logics condition interaction, how reflexive actors negotiate and rework these logics in concrete episodes, and how the results feed back into subsequent conditions as either morphostasis or morphogenesis. Specifically, it allows us to examine the conditions under which everyday disruptions caused by analytic outputs are explained or reframed in ways that preserve

the existing institutional configuration. Following Heaphy's (2013) study, this configuration is understood not just as a set of static rules, but as an established pattern of institutionalised roles and their taken-for-granted expectations (e.g., who is authorised to make which decisions and how). When those expectations are disrupted, actors draw on existing rules to clarify responsibilities and justify their actions. This theoretical framing also provides a conceptual bridge to the empirical analysis, in which twelve projects at D-company are examined as sequential decision episodes whose outcomes cumulatively shaped the loose/tight coupling mechanisms. The following section reflects on the implications of adopting such a framework for research design and methodology.

3.4 Summary and Methodological Implications

This chapter has developed the integrated theoretical framework that understands the loose (or tight) coupling of HRA as the emergent outcome of iterative decision episodes in which institutional work - identity work, translation work, boundary work and legitimacy work - is enacted through repeated morphogenetic cycles. The framework was developed in response to the abductive theorising that unfolded during the fieldwork. As empirical observations accumulated, it became clear that concepts from different branches of institutional theory resonated with different aspects of the data: institutional logics highlighted the structural conditions shaping actors' concerns; inhabited institutionalism illuminated the situated interactional dynamics within episodes; practice-based institutionalism explained how local adjustments accumulate; and microfoundational perspectives clarified how actors' interpretations and emotions shaped engagement with analytics. Yet no single perspective could account for the temporal sequencing across episodes - why some initiatives moved from loose to tighter coupling, others oscillated, and still others drifted into decoupling. An integrated framework was therefore required to bring these strands together coherently and to overcome the limitations of existing approaches in theorising how structural conditioning, situated interaction and temporal accumulation jointly generate patterned coupling outcomes over time.

The resulting framework conceptualises coupling as a recursive institutional process: pre-existing logics and professional arrangements condition actors' concerns; these concerns are worked through in episodes via different forms of institutional work; and the resulting settlements either reproduce or gradually reconfigure the organisational position of HRA. In this integrated account, institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012; Greenwood et al., 2011) specify the evaluative

criteria and role expectations that shape initial conditions; inhabited institutionalism (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021) clarifies how these concerns are negotiated in situated encounters; practice-based institutionalism (Smets et al., 2012; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; 2013) shows how micro-level adjustments and improvisations accumulate into more durable patterns; and Archer's (1995; 2003) morphogenetic approach provides the temporal mechanism that sequences conditioning, interaction and elaboration. Decision episodes serve as the empirical sites in which these strands intersect, revealing how loose or tighter coupling evolves across time.

Building on this integrated theoretical structure, the thesis treats morphogenetic cycles as the fundamental mechanism through which institutional processes unfold, and institutional work as the specific forms through which these cycles are enacted in situated practice. As elaborated in Sections 3.1 and 3.2, identity work operates in the conditioning phase by shaping the reflexive concerns that actors bring into decision episodes, whereas translation, boundary and legitimacy work unfold during the interaction phase, mediating how analytic artefacts are framed and contested. Decision episodes here provide the empirical arena in which multiple morphogenetic cycles intersect across HR professionals, data analysts and managers, making visible how these forms of institutional work accumulate over time into patterned sequences of settlement, resistance or recalibration. Within this framework, the mechanisms of loose or tight coupling are understood as higher-order configurations of repeated morphogenetic cycles, in which the patterns of structural conditioning, social interaction and structural elaboration re-occur as recursively patterned sequences. In this sense, coupling is the emergent product of how institutional logics, professional identities, power relations and affective orientations are recursively worked through in episodes over time, generating stable patterns of morphostasis or, under specific conditions, morphogenetic change.

Methodologically, the framework has several implications. First, it directs attention to the sequencing of events and the recursive feedback between episodes, underscoring the need for longitudinal and processual analysis rather than cross-sectional or episodic snapshots (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Delbridge & Edwards, 2013). Second, it highlights the importance of capturing micro-level practices and meaning-making, pointing towards ethnographic and qualitative methods that can reveal translation, legitimation, and identity work in situ (Zilber, 2002; 2020). Third, by integrating temporality, it provides a framework for tracing how local improvisations may accumulate into institutional change or reinforce persistence (Smets et al., 2012; 2015; Mahoney, 2000). These implications informed the empirical design of this thesis: a two-year ethnographic

study of D-company's HRA team, focused on twelve projects as decision episodes. This design allows for the observation of situated practices while also tracing how outcomes across episodes fed back into the organisation's structures and routines. In doing so, this framework not only addresses conceptual debates about why HRA remains loosely coupled but also offers methodological guidance for studying dynamic organisational processes. The next chapter builds on this foundation by setting out the specific research design and methodological choices employed in the study.

Chapter 4. Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the methodology used to examine how Human Resource Analytics (HRA) becomes loosely or tightly coupled with everyday HR practices within D-company, a multinational technology firm that was building an HRA capability from scratch during the study period. The study adopts an ethnographic design tailored to capture how new analytic practices were enacted, resisted, and negotiated in everyday organisational life. The focus here is on identifying the mechanisms through which coupling unfolds over time within D-company, through repeated morphogenetic cycles organised around decision episodes that sustain or reproduce loose coupling in practice (Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In line with broader sociological uses of the term, mechanisms are understood as the recurrent causal processes or interactional configurations through which institutional reproduction or change occurs (Hedström & Swedberg, 1998; Stinchcombe, 1991). Within institutional theory, such mechanisms are observed in how logics, identities, boundaries and evaluative practices are enacted and recombined over time (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Smets et al., 2012). Ethnography is well suited to capturing these mechanisms and interactions such as, logics-in-action (McPherson & Sauder, 2013), practice breakdowns and repair (Lok & de Rond, 2013), and relational spaces where micro-institutional change occurs (Kellogg, 2009). In line with calls to treat ethnography as a vehicle for theorising rather than mere description (Wilson & Chaddha, 2009; Locke, 2012; Biehl, 2013; Bate, 1997), the design allows me to observe how analytic claims gain, lose, or negotiate standing in concrete organisational encounters - an issue especially salient when analytic technologies can be black-boxed or reflexively integrated (Anthony, 2021). It also highlights ethnography's potential to uncover the microfoundations of institutions by linking local practices to broader dynamics (Zilber, 2020) and to extend analysis beyond the single organisation to field-level and inter-organisational dynamics (Zilber, 2014).

The study adopts an analytical framework informed by Archer's morphogenetic approach, which distinguishes structure, culture, and agency while maintaining their temporal interplay (Archer, 1995; 2003) following Barley and Tolbert's (1997) argument that separating structure and agency is analytically necessary for tracing institutional change. Morphogenetic sequencing keeps temporality and multi-level interactions analytically distinct - conditioning (T1), interaction (T2–T3), and elaboration (T4) - while empirically locating action in inhabited encounters (Archer,

1995; 2003; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). This choice strengthens the thesis's theoretical integration: inhabited institutionalism foregrounds the interaction order in which myths and practices are (re)coupled, and the morphogenetic approach supplies the temporal scaffolding to follow episode-to-episode feedback (Hallett, 2010; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021).

I conducted the fieldwork over two years, from January 2022 to December 2023, combining traditional and digital ethnographic methods in response to the hybrid work environment intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Participant observation took place both in offices and in virtual spaces (Zoom, Google Meet, MS Teams, and Slack), supplemented by the analysis of digital artefacts such as dashboards, presentations, and collaborative documents. This hybrid ethnographic approach (Hine, 2015; Leonardi, 2021; Przybylski, 2020) enabled the study of how institutions are enacted through talk, text, and artefact-mediated communication (Blommaert, 2007; Kalou & Sadler-Smith, 2015). Considering that the adoption of HRA is not simply a technical process but one embedded in organisational routines and institutional changes, extensive data were required to capture how practices unfolded and were contested across multiple sites and over time (Smets et al., 2012; Zilber, 2020). Longitudinal and in-depth data collection reveals how actors within D-company respond to social structures and facilitate the coupling of HRA through the lens of the morphogenetic approach (Archer, 1995; 2003).

A distinctive feature of this research was my dual positionality as both an academic researcher and a part-time HR analyst within D-company. As a condition of access to the organisation for my fieldwork, D-company asked me to assist and advise on several HRA projects. This meant that I was formally incorporated into the HRA function in a paid part-time role (working two days a week) during the first nine months of fieldwork, undertaking analytical tasks alongside team members. This insider status shaped the relationships, expectations and obligations that structured my role in the organisation, as colleagues understandably viewed me simultaneously as a contributor and as a researcher. As Labaree (2002) notes, such dual positions require explicit recognition of the ways in which organisational membership influences what can be observed, what is disclosed, and how interactions unfold. My position was therefore not simply a methodological convenience but an epistemological condition: I was also inhabited by the institutional logics, routines and identity expectations of the HRA subfield, and reflexive attention to this was essential throughout the study (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Labaree, 2002). Reflexivity functioned as an analytical resource for understanding the emotional and identity tensions that accompanied the introduction of HRA, drawing on Archer's (2003) account of reflexivity and recent studies emphasising the affective dimensions of institutional work (Voronov & Vince, 2012; Creed

et al., 2014). The corpus of data gathered was extensive: I attended more than 60 meetings and 12 workshops, conducted formal and informal interviews, and collected internal reports and analytic artefacts. Across the two years of fieldwork, this amounted to approximately 1,636 hours of direct observation and interviews, combining office-based and online participation with both formal and informal interactions. This longitudinal design allowed me to follow temporally a series of HRA projects as decision episodes and fed back into subsequent conditions.

In line with other recent institutional theory research on the microfoundations of analytical work (Stice-Lusvardi et al. 2024), the analytical strategy drew on constructivist grounded theory (GT) protocols (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021; Charmaz, 2006) as a set of systematic procedures for coding, constant comparison, memoing, and iterative engagement with the data. However, I did not employ grounded theory as a full-fledged theory-building methodology, because institutional theory already provides a rich theoretical language which resonated with my experiences as an HRA practitioner. Rather I use GT protocols as a well-established analytical framework for the iterative abductive analysis of my data. I believe this approach is legitimate. While classic grounded theory prescribes theory generation without prior frameworks (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), subsequent developments acknowledge that analysis inevitably involves abductive reasoning - the creative formulation of explanatory hypotheses when surprising findings arise (Charmaz, 2009; Reichertz, 2007; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). In this study, I examined my data drawing on the rich theoretical language of institutional theory explained in the previous chapter. Unexpected outcomes or puzzles in the projects I worked on (for example, why some projects became loosely coupled while others became tightly routinised) prompted me to iteratively develop the framework developed in chapters 2 and 3 as a way of identifying the mechanisms driving coupling processes and outcomes. Thus, grounded theory informed the practical organisation of data analysis, ensuring systematic coding and transparent engagement with the material, while abductive reasoning provided the inferential logic linking data to theory. Although this thesis is not a grounded theory study, employing GT-inspired abductive coding enhanced the rigour and reflexivity of the analysis, enabling the systematic capture of anomalies across episodes and generating insights that might otherwise have remained implicit. This approach has been applied in other qualitative studies that used GT-inspired abductive coding primarily to structure analysis while theorising through different frameworks, such as Vaughan's (1996) historical ethnography of the Challenger disaster and Jarzabkowski, Balogun, and Seidl's (2007) practice-theory study of strategising.

The coding process was carried out abductively and iteratively. Analysis began during participant observation, where surprising patterns in employees' work practices - for example, HR professionals informally reinterpreting statistical outputs to align with relational norms or reverting to experiential judgement despite having dashboards available - prompted follow-up interviews to understand why these discrepancies occurred. The abductive character of this process lay in moving back and forth between data and emerging theoretical ideas: puzzling observations in the field led me to consult concepts from institutional logics, inhabited institutionalism and practice-based institutionalism, which in turn suggested new angles of inquiry that were checked and revised against further data. This abductive process moved beyond simple induction by treating anomalies and unexpected behaviours as opportunities to develop provisional explanations, which were then refined through continued engagement with participants and field material (Charmaz, 2006; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). For example, when HR managers dismissed a workforce prediction model as "too analytical (without regarding reality)" despite acknowledging its accuracy, I initially interpreted this as identity-protective resistance and refined this explanation as further episodes revealed how translation work and relational concerns shaped the selective uptake of analytic outputs.

As the analysis developed, focused codes were generated by grouping initial codes that captured recurring actions, tensions and interpretations observed across the twelve decision episodes. These focused codes and themes were refined through abductive reasoning, drawing on constant comparisons both within and across the twelve episodes. In practice, this meant treating each project outcome - whether stalled, rejected, revived or routinised - as a potential theoretical puzzle, and iteratively checking emerging categories against empirical detail and the evolving theoretical framework. This involved examining whether the categories aligned with, extended or challenged concepts drawn from institutional logics, inhabited institutionalism, institutional work and the morphogenetic cycle. For example, when an emerging category appeared to reflect boundary negotiation, I compared the empirical material with existing concept of boundary work (Abbott, 1988; Bechky, 2003) and refined the category when the data suggested that jurisdictional distancing operated differently from classical boundary defence. Conversely, when patterns of oscillation across episodes did not fit existing theory, I drew on morphogenetic sequencing to reinterpret these patterns as shifts in conditioning–interaction–elaboration cycles, using this theoretical lens to sharpen and reorganise the category. This process is underpinned by what other ethnographers describe as progressive focusing (Barley, 2019) and the recursive refinement of theoretical constructs through ongoing interaction with field material (Smets et al., 2012). Memo-writing and repeated revisiting of earlier coding cycles ensured transparency and

reflexivity, while the longitudinal design of the fieldwork enabled me to trace how categories evolved over time rather than being fixed at a single point of analysis (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013).

A substantial re-coding and re-organisation phase occurred when the thesis shifted from an earlier thematic structure to the revised theoretical framework informed by institutional logics, institutional work and morphogenetic sequencing (outlined in Chapters 2 and 3). In the earlier stages of analysis, the development of themes had been only partially informed by institutional theory; while concepts such as institutional logics implicitly shaped my interpretation of certain episodes, the analysis did not yet systematically apply the broader institutional theories. Following questions and constructive feedback from my PhD examiners, I revisited these analytical decisions and undertook a more comprehensive engagement with institutional theory. This involved abductively re-theorising the emerging themes by systematically considering a wider range of institutional concepts and constructs and assessing how well they accounted for the patterns observed in the data. This required returning to earlier focused codes and systematically re-examining them in the light of the broader range of institutional theory concepts and constructs, and reclassifying or combining them where necessary. For instance, initial categories concerning ‘conflict’, ‘hesitation’ and ‘role confusion’ were revisited and eventually re-integrated into the broader theoretical category of ‘Identity Ambiguity’, whereas early descriptive codes related to ‘data rejection’ and ‘dashboard avoidance’ were re-specified as components of ‘Defensive Translation’. Therefore, moving from focused codes to themes, the analysis involved several cycles of re-engagement with empirical material, critical reflection on the adequacy of existing categories, and re-alignment of codes with the theoretical commitments of the revised framework. Through this process, the analysis moved from focused codes to themes that described the theoretical mechanisms of coupling explained in chapters 6 and 7 while at the same time extending their theoretical specification in line with recent calls to use ethnography for advancing the study of the microfoundations of institutions (Zilber, 2020). In response to constructive feedback from my PhD examiners, I also systematically documented this development by producing a coding structure that shows how the initial codes generated during early fieldwork were gradually consolidated, discarded, merged, or elevated into theoretical categories. An example of this coding progression is presented in Section 4.6 in the form of a table.

In the following sections, I provide a detailed explanation of the research philosophy underpinning this study, the impact of COVID-19 on the research design, the sampling strategy and rationale for selecting D-company, the process of gaining access to the field and managing

dual positionality, the specific data collection methods employed, the analytical approach, and the ethical considerations that guided the research.

4.2 Research Philosophy

The research philosophy underpinning this study combines an analytical framework informed by Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach with an epistemological orientation that treats knowledge as situated, interactional, and historically contingent. As discussed in the earlier section, much of institutional theory has developed within a broadly social constructivist tradition (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Giddens, 1984; 2013; Bourdieu, 1990; Schatzki, 2002). While this perspective has been valuable in highlighting the socially constructed nature of organisational practices, it has been critiqued for conflating structure and agency, thereby limiting the capacity to trace how institutions are reproduced or transformed over time. Following Barley and Tolbert's (1997) argument that separating structure and agency is analytically necessary, I adopt Archer's morphogenetic approach (1995; 2003) as a framework that distinguishes structural, cultural, and agential strata while maintaining their temporal interplay. This approach avoids collapsing structure into agency or vice versa, and it provides the temporal scaffolding for understanding how the introduction of HRA is conditioned, enacted, and elaborated through recursive social interaction.

From an epistemological standpoint, the study adopts an interpretive orientation consistent with inhabited institutionalism (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021) and the microfoundational perspective (Felin et al., 2015; Smets et al., 2012; Zilber, 2020). Both perspectives emphasise that institutions are lived and reconstituted through local interactions, and that explanations of organisational phenomena must be traced through the situated practices of actors. This position recognises that multiple realities coexist in organisational life and that meaning is continuously co-constructed through interaction, negotiation, and reflexivity. In this regard, ethnography is not treated as a neutral data-collection technique but as a methodological stance that allows for theorising from within lived practice (Wilson & Chaddha, 2009; Locke, 2012; Biehl, 2013).

The analytical strategy is also informed by constructivist grounded theory protocols (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021), but not as a full-fledged theory-building methodology. Rather than aiming to generate theory entirely inductively, I draw on grounded theory procedures - systematic coding, constant comparison, and memoing - as tools for

structuring analysis. Importantly, these are combined with abductive reasoning (Reichertz, 2007; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), which treats surprising findings as opportunities to refine and extend the theoretical framework developed in earlier chapters. This abductive orientation allowed me to engage iteratively with the empirical material and theoretical concepts, ensuring that categories such as decision episodes and coupling mechanisms were both grounded in the data and theoretically elaborated.

In this light, the study's research philosophy can be summarised as follows: analytically, it draws on Archer's morphogenetic approach to maintain distinctions between structure, culture and agency across time, without adopting her full critical realist ontology; epistemologically, it adopts an interpretive stance consistent with inhabited institutionalism and microfoundations, recognising that organisational practices are socially constructed and enacted in local interaction; methodologically, it employs ethnography as a vehicle for theorising, supported by GT-inspired abductive coding to ensure rigour and transparency in linking empirical observations to theoretical explanation.

4.3 Hybrid Ethnography: How the Covid-19 Pandemic Affected the Study

The first year of fieldwork, which began in January 2022, was profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitating significant adjustments to data collection techniques, particularly those involving direct interaction with other employees of D-company (Keen et al., 2022; Suadik, 2022; Lobe et al., 2020). For example, D-company operated under a 100 per cent remote-work during the pandemic and, as government restrictions were gradually eased, transitioned to a work pattern in which employees attended the office one or two days per week. Because my fieldwork commenced during this transition period, much of my fieldwork observation inevitably took place in a hybrid format that combined online and offline engagement. My efforts to adapt to hybrid fieldwork during this period led to the adoption of a hybrid ethnographic approach, which greatly shaped the methodological framework of this study. Hybrid ethnography utilises both online and offline data collection techniques to study human behaviour and social phenomena in both physical and digital environments (Przybylski, 2020; Pink et al., 2016). Hybrid ethnography enabled me to conduct both remote and in-person research to examine how social structures influence the processes of the HRA adoption and shape the agency of key stakeholders in D-company through the lens of the morphogenetic approach (Archer, 1995). This method is not intended to replace traditional offline data collection with online methods. It combines both

approaches to compensate for the limitations of each methodology, offering new perspectives that were previously unavailable (Przybylski, 2020). In this section, I elaborate on the hybrid ethnographic approach, its implementation, and its impact on the study, while also discussing unexpected benefits, limitations, and several integrative perspectives.

4.3.1 Phases of Hybrid Fieldwork and Data Collection

My fieldwork progressed through three distinct phases, shaped by D-company's evolving work policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first phase (January - March 2022) was conducted entirely remotely, as the company operated under a full remote-working policy. During this period, I conducted participant observation primarily through online meetings, focusing on internal discussions, strategic planning, and technology adoption efforts. For researchers, including myself, who had to conduct studies remotely during a global pandemic, online collaboration software was an inevitable tool for data collection (Howlett, 2022). During the first phase in my fieldwork at D-company, I conducted video conferences and remote interviews to maintain communication with study participants while mitigating the potential spread of COVID-19. The second phase (April - September 2022) coincided with the gradual return of employees to the office and enabled me to conduct most of the fieldwork on-site. I carried out direct participant observation at D-company, documenting employee interactions, informal work routines, and unstructured discussions in shared spaces such as meeting rooms and the office kitchen. These settings occasionally facilitated spontaneous interactions, allowing employees to share unfiltered perspectives on organisational culture and HRA-related challenges with me. These interactions between organisational actors provide insights into how HRA practices are enacted, discussed, and influenced within the organisation, as part of the 'social interaction' process in Archer's (1995) morphogenetic cycle. The final phase (October 2022 - December 2023) saw a transition to a hybrid working model, incorporating follow-up online interviews and remote participant observation of company-wide meetings. This phase enabled a longitudinal analysis of how the loose/tight coupling of HRA practices was shaped and reproduced through interaction, and how it evolved over time. Although data collection during this period remained primarily remote, I conducted in-person visits to D-company as needed for additional interviews and field observations.

Over the two years of fieldwork, I attended more than 60 formal meetings and 12 workshops, gaining insights into the decision-making processes and stakeholder negotiations in

relation to HRA adoption. During the first nine months, I spent an average of 1.6 days per week in the office, accumulating a total of 468 hours of observations, while dedicating an average of one day per week to online participant observation, amounting to 304 hours. Subsequently, from October 2022 onwards, I conducted intermittent online interviews and in-person participant observations over a 15-month period, refining the direction of additional data collection in accordance with grounded theory protocols based on the initial data analysis (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013). In this 15-month period, I dedicated a total of 480 hours to follow-up formal interviews and participant observations. Throughout the entire fieldwork, I conducted 26 formal interviews with key stakeholders, including executives, HRA team members, and other department stakeholders. Additionally, I conducted approximately seventy informal interviews with a diverse range of employees, from senior executives to new recruits, spending a total of 384 hours in informal interviewing. Time spent with participants outside formal working hours, such as during meals and social gatherings, provided a broader understanding of the research topic and a deeper appreciation of the contextual and organisational background of HRA at D-company. For instance, John, the HRA team leader, frequently encountered challenges in securing data from other departments at the beginning of establishing HRA team. During an informal dinner with the CHRO, I learned about John's short tenure at D-company and his limited relationships with other employees due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This insight helped me better understand the underlying reasons for his difficulties in obtaining data.

As a technology-driven firm, D-company had already been using digital platforms and software such as Google Meet, Zoom, Slack, and Jira prior to the pandemic. These tools facilitated access to virtual meetings, work processes, and digital interactions, enabling real-time remote ethnographic observation (Przybylski, 2020). In particular, platforms such as Google Meet and Zoom enabled meeting participants to share relevant documents via screen-sharing functions in real time, providing immediate and enriched references. For formal interviews, I obtained explicit consent by providing an interview briefing sheet in advance to ensure transparency. I primarily used semi-structured interviews, focusing on identifying the technical, cultural, and structural aspects related to HRA adoption. Insights gained from informal conversations and spontaneous discussions further refined the core interview questions (Spradley, 2016). For example, during my formal interview with John, I added a question about his tenure to clarify my understanding, as it had emerged as an interesting consideration during my conversation with the CHRO.

For formal interviews, I took real-time notes by either typing on a laptop or writing key points in shorthand in my fieldnotes. In contrast, informal interviews were often scheduled ad hoc, which meant that while I occasionally took notes in my fieldnotes during the conversation, I did not use a laptop for real-time transcription. In formal interviews, interviewees were already aware of the questions or topics to be discussed. As a result, they did not express discomfort with me taking real-time notes using a laptop during the interview. However, in informal interviews, which were often conducted in response to spontaneous requests, it was more important to focus on the informant's responses, engage attentively, and communicate additional queries arising during the conversation. Therefore, I chose not to transcribe the informal discussions in real time. According to Khan and MacEachen (2022), using a laptop for real-time transcription during qualitative interviews may cause discomfort for informants due to the noise of typing and the lack of eye contact, potentially reducing their engagement. Instead, I noted keywords or important insights in my field notebook during the informal interview and subsequently reflected on the conversation to record detailed notes after the interview. In addition, I did not audio-record either formal or informal interviews. Many D-company employees were uncomfortable with the idea that their spoken comments might be captured as a permanent artefact. For instance, in the early stages of fieldwork, I requested permission to record a formal interview, but the participant appeared visibly cautious, continually monitoring her responses and checking whether any comments might be sensitive or critical once she realised that the conversation was being recorded in real time. Because collecting real and genuine thoughts in a state where actors did not feel resistance or discomfort was more important for the quality of the data, I chose not to use audio-recording for subsequent interviews.

Document analysis was also an important method for data collection. I accessed five years of records through D-company's cloud-based document system, Wiki, which included internal communications and historical HR reports. Through document analysis, I was able to verify key insights gained from the interviews and deepen my understanding of the implicit social structures shaping HRA adoption, such as the history of organisational structure changes at D-company. Moreover, insights that emerged during observations or document analysis frequently prompted follow-up interviews, and themes identified in early analysis informed the refinement of later interview protocols. This iterative process reflects an abductive orientation to fieldwork, where surprising findings guide the formulation of new questions and subsequent data collection (Charmaz, 2006; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). These methods expanded my contextual understanding of D-company and facilitated the collection of substantial data relevant to this research.

4.3.2 Reflexivity and Considerations in Hybrid Ethnography

The hybrid ethnographic fieldwork for data collection presented several challenges that required careful consideration and methodological adaptation. The biggest challenge was establishing rapport early on. Building trust and rapport is fundamental to effective ethnographic research (Emerson et al., 2011; Hine, 2015; Van Maanen, 2011). Especially during the first three months of fieldwork, when all work was being done remotely due to Covid-19, it was more difficult to build relationships with participants as there were no opportunities for in-person meetings. To mitigate this, I engaged in informal virtual chats and regular check-ins outside of formal interview settings. According to Henke et al. (2022), informal communication is important for supporting social and professional networks, as it enables leaders and individual contributors to stay connected and contributes to success in a remote work environment. Furthermore, to deepen rapport, I increased the time spent in the office and met with employees in person when government COVID-19 quarantine policies were eased. Occasionally, with the consent of key employees, I visited their local areas in person to conduct informal meetings or interviews at nearby cafés. During these informal meetings or interviews, I did not use a laptop for real-time transcription but instead noted keywords and later recorded insights from my reflections, including HRA-related events, potential follow-up questions, etc. Given the challenges in establishing close personal relationships, reading documents and meeting records before participating in meetings and asking related questions during opening talks helped enrich prior knowledge and build initial rapport.

However, there were still limitations in observing non-verbal cues. The reduced ability to observe body language and other non-verbal signals in virtual environments could potentially limit the depth of understanding of participants' emotions and reactions (Harvey et al., 2024). To address this, I conducted emotional coding separately during the analysis process by remotely recording the emotions expressed by participants in meetings. For example, when coding interview transcripts or fieldnotes using NVivo, a qualitative research analysis software, I created a separate category called 'Emotion' and conducted emotion coding such as 'exciting', 'frustrating', 'cautious', 'suspicious', etc. Analysing the emotions of research subjects helps researchers understand the nuances of the situation and context in ethnographic research (Down et al., 2006). This focus on emotion also reflects and extends institutional research that highlights how emotions are constitutive of institutional work and change, rather than peripheral to it (Voronov & Vince, 2012; Voronov & Weber, 2016; 2020; Creed et al., 2014; Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018). I was able to capture both cognitive and affective dimensions of actors’ responses by systematically coding and analysing emotions, thereby extending the analysis of HRA coupling to include the

emotional and embodied foundations of institutional processes. Additionally, with the increasing use of digital tools, ensuring data security and confidentiality for research participants has become paramount (Quach et al., 2022). Scholars have raised ethical concerns regarding transparency in screen capturing and data sharing during remote meetings (Newman et al., 2021; Sim & Waterfield, 2019). In this study, I addressed this issue by obtaining prior consent before collecting or recording data during remote meetings and by updating the consent forms to include provisions related to screen capturing and screen sharing, thereby ensuring participants' privacy and data protection.

Working conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic were an unprecedented phenomenon, while applying the hybrid ethnography in this study, that have rarely been dealt with in traditional ethnographic research. Based on these experiences, I discuss three revealing perspectives. Firstly, hybrid fieldwork allows for the preservation of the advantages of traditional offline participant observation while compensating for its shortcomings. Traditional offline participant observation refers to immersing oneself in the physical environment relevant to the research topic (Hine, 2000), which includes attending conferences, workshops, and other informal face-to-face interactions to observe the dynamics of the research topic (Van Maanen, 2011). For example, I attended dinners or social gatherings outside of working hours to gain additional and unexpected insights into the surroundings and background related to the research topic. Informal interactions are valuable in ethnographic research as they provide crucial opportunities to build relationships and understand cultural differences within the research setting (Hammersley, 2006; Kramer & Adams, 2017). One example from my research involved discerning the conflict between the external presentation and internal psychological state of a member of D-company’s HRA team. While this employee confidently presented the HRA team’s strategy and role during its HR department town hall meeting, this person revealed a contrasting perspective at an informal conversation with me at a social gathering. In contrast to the confidence displayed during the formal presentation, the employee expressed concerns about internal team conflicts and exhibited signs of potential burnout. I gained these insights through social gatherings and documented my reflections, which contributed to the data.

Interestingly, the rapport established through in-person engagement during the early stages of fieldwork, along with a deep understanding of D-company’s context, continued to provide a sufficient grasp of the field setting when collecting data remotely in the later stages of the study. While in-person fieldwork participation typically allows for direct observation of subtle relational dynamics, it also demands substantial time and resources (Hammersley, 2006). In this

study, adopting a hybrid strategy - where an initial period of in-person fieldwork established familiarity with the setting, followed by remote data collection - enabled me to conserve time and energy without compromising the depth of contextual understanding. For example, during the later stages of the study, when conducting remote interviews in which participants recalled the office optimisation project and discussed the physical layout of the workplace - such as its location, structural features, and the division of offices across two floors - my prior experience of having spent time in the office with them enabled me to understand the contextual nuances of these discussions far more easily. Furthermore, combining remote participation with online ethnographic observation helped mitigate the limitations posed by physical distance and time constraints (Fosu, 2024). For instance, even when I was unable to be physically present at D-company's site due to unavoidable circumstances, I was able to attend regular HRA team meetings remotely and maintained participant observation online. This approach also allowed me to transition seamlessly between meetings held in different locations, reducing time delays in data collection. Through this remote access, I was able to gather data more efficiently, maximising the breadth of insights obtained within a given timeframe.

Secondly, in hybrid ethnography, the extent to which research participants accept being observed online is a critical and sensitive factor in remote participant observation, significantly influencing their level of engagement in the study. As D-company adopted a remote working model due to COVID-19, its employees were accustomed to working and collaborating remotely, demonstrating minimal resistance to online participant observation, remote meetings and interviews, and digital document collection. As remote or hybrid working environments became more widespread in the post-Covid era (McPhail et al., 2023), the level of receptivity to remote online practices is a key factor for ethnographic researchers studying organisations. Traditional ethnographers have highlighted the time-saving benefits of online participant observation or the use of technological tools for data collection (Archibald et al., 2019; Morgan-Trimmer & Wood, 2016; Reeves et al., 2013). Some focusing on online communication have noted that while online participant observation limits the ability to fully engage with participants' body language and emotional exchange (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020), it provides valuable insights into virtual interactions and discourses on the subject of interest (Hacker et al., 2020; Karl et al., 2022).

However, this study extends the existing scholarly discussion on hybrid ethnography by emphasising the importance of considering the degree of research subjects' receptivity to remote observation. In this study, because the employees at D-company were accustomed to remote online work, I faced little difficulty obtaining consent from research participants. For example, in

video meetings conducted via Zoom or Google Meet, I sought consent from participants to record meetings or observe discussions, and they accepted this as a familiar practice. In a meeting discussing the adoption of Workday, a cloud-based software for data-driven strategy transitions, most of the over ten participants were unfamiliar to me, yet they did not find my presence or observation during the virtual meeting awkward. The same was true for D-company's town-hall meetings, where hundreds of participants attended remotely at once. Since remote online working was a routine aspect of the field environment, participants reacted naturally, which greatly aided in accurately understanding the interactions and context within the organisation. Had the study subjects been unfamiliar with remote online participation, my remote presence might have influenced their behaviour or mindset, potentially distorting the data collected. In ethnographic research, the presence of the researcher may itself alter participants' behaviour, prompting them to act or speak in ways that differ from their routine practices (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Fine, 1993). In this regard, the internal receptivity of the field to remote online participant observation in hybrid ethnography has a significant impact on the quality and reliability of the data collected by the researcher.

Thirdly, hybrid fieldwork allowed me to significantly expand the boundaries of document data collection. Traditional ethnography often involves the use of document collection in addition to field observation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Van Maanen, 2011), but access to digital documents has been limited. Incorporating digital artefacts such as email communications, project management tools, and software interfaces expands the scope and range of accessible data (Kraus et al., 2021). D-company manages all its documents in real time through a cloud-based document-sharing platform called Wiki, particularly within the context of remote work environments. Through this platform, I was able to access and collect documents written not only by the HRA team but also by other departments, such as finance and technology, which had indirect stakes in the project. Additionally, because this platform stored past documents in an archive, I could collect retrospective data, such as HR reports regularly presented to executives, spanning several years. These digital artefacts functioned as traces of the interpretive work through which HRA was negotiated, contested, and embedded in practice. In this study, they provided longitudinal evidence of how meanings and practices around HRA evolved across departments, thereby informing the analysis of coupling processes. For example, at D-company, a dedicated HR recruitment team operated within the technology department, specialising in hiring data engineers. As this team was part of the technology department rather than the HR department, which managed HR-related issues for the entire organisation, a subtle tension existed between the two teams. Positioned within the HR department, I found it challenging to

engage in smooth communication with the technology department's HR recruitment team due to the political tensions between the two teams. However, by utilising the digital document platform, Wiki, I could indirectly gather information about the operations and functions of this HR tech team, which facilitated a broader understanding of recruitment processes within D-company. This hybrid ethnographic approach not only expanded methodological possibilities and flexibility for data collection during unprecedented times but also uncovered valuable insights into HRA adoption.

4.4 Research Site Selection and Gaining Access to D-company

In this study, three key aspects informed the selection of D-company as the research site: organisational readiness for HRA adoption, the viability of remote research, and insider accessibility. These considerations align with core principles in ethnographic research, where data saturation, sampling strategies, recruitment access, and participant observation play a fundamental role in determining the research setting (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Emerson et al., 2011; Bernard, 2017). I employed purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002; 2015) to select D-company, a rapidly expanding, technology-driven multinational firm. With more than 2,000 employees and a business model built around digital platforms and data-driven decision-making, D-company provided an ideal environment for analysing the early adoption of HRA through an institutional lens, particularly how new practices gain legitimacy, encounter resistance, and become loosely or tightly coupled with existing routines. The company's merger-and-acquisition-driven growth created an environment of institutional complexity, where competing logics from the subsidiary and parent company collided and required continual negotiation (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton et al., 2012). Such contexts often generate tensions between established practices and newly imposed governance structures, leading organisations to adopt strategies of selective coupling or, as Pache and Santos (2010; 2013) argue, hybridisation, whereby elements of competing logics are deliberately combined into new practices that allow organisations to respond to multiple institutional demands simultaneously. In D-company, these competing logics were visible in the tensions between relationally oriented HR practices and data-driven managerial expectations. Hybridisation was also evident in attempts to merge trust-based, experiential HR processes with new analytics-driven tools, directly shaping the approach to HRA strategy. This environment also made the site particularly suited to an inhabited institutionalist perspective, as it allowed observation of how institutional logics were not abstract rules but were lived, negotiated, and reconstituted in the everyday practices of organisational actors (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021).

At a more fundamental level, the selection of D-company reflects a logic of theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) combined with what Zilber (2020) terms a "problematic" approach to case selection: the choice of a site where the tensions and unsettled arrangements at the heart of the study's theoretical concerns are especially visible and actively being worked out in practice. For research on the microfoundations of loose and tight coupling in HRA, this meant seeking an organisation where coupling processes were neither fully stabilised nor wholly absent, but were being actively negotiated across identifiable episodes of analytic practice. Three criteria guided this judgement: (i) the presence of organisational conditions that brought competing institutional logics into sharp relief, (ii) the methodological viability of sustained ethnographic engagement in a hybrid organisational environment, and (iii) a level of epistemic access sufficient to trace situated interaction and meaning-making over an extended period. The three aspects elaborated below — organisational readiness for HRA adoption, hybrid research viability, and insider accessibility — each operationalise one of these criteria, and together constitute the rationale for selecting D-company as a theoretically informative rather than merely convenient research site.

The first major aspect in selecting D-company was its organisational readiness for HRA adoption. Viewed through the lens of institutional theory, the early stages of HRA adoption at D-company offered a rare opportunity to observe the conditions under which new practices become embedded within organisational structures or remain loosely coupled at the periphery (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Tolbert & Zucker, 1996). This formative stage is theoretically consequential for the research questions motivating this study. Studies of institutional change consistently argue that the moments at which new practices are first introduced are particularly analytically productive, since it is during these early episodes that structural conditioning, reflexive interpretation and situated interaction are most visibly entangled (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Smets et al., 2012). Established practices, by contrast, tend to naturalise their underlying negotiations, making the interactional foundations of coupling harder to trace. This marks a key point of difference from previous studies that examined already established and operational HRA teams through ethnography (Ellmer & Reichel, 2021; Jörden et al., 2022). Whereas such studies necessarily approach coupling as a stabilised outcome to be examined retrospectively, the present study was able to observe coupling processes as they were being actively constituted, reconfigured and at times unravelled across successive decision episodes. At the outset of my fieldwork in January 2022, D-company had just launched its HRA team in December 2021 with only two employees. This nascent stage provided a unique vantage point to conduct an in-depth, processual analysis of how HRA was shaped, legitimised, and contested, thereby illuminating how the dynamics of

coupling unfold - or stall - in its earliest phases. The site thus offered what Yin (2018) would describe as a "revelatory" case, rendering observable a phenomenon that is theoretically central but methodologically difficult to access once it has stabilised.

A second and closely related aspect concerns the institutional complexity that characterised D-company during the period of fieldwork. This complexity was not incidental to the site but was one of the conditions that made D-company theoretically informative for a study of coupling. Three features of the organisational context were particularly consequential. First, the company operated as a subsidiary of a larger multinational parent firm, generating cross-border institutional pressures and multi-layered governance structures in which competing expectations about HR practice were continuously negotiated (Kostova et al., 2008; Greenwood et al., 2011). Second, during the fieldwork period the company underwent a merger-and-acquisition process that reinforced the need for formalised, evidence-based HR practices, intensifying the co-existence of a relational HR logic and an emerging quantification logic (Sandholtz et al., 2019; Greasley & Thomas, 2020). Third, the rapid workforce expansion, driven by platform-based growth, placed established HR routines under strain, opening space for new analytic practices to be introduced but also inviting resistance from actors committed to the incumbent relational logic. These conditions produced precisely the kind of unsettled institutional arrangement in which the interactional mechanisms of loose and tight coupling — the central phenomenon of interest in this thesis — could be observed in concentrated form. As Greenwood and colleagues (2011) note, sites in which multiple logics co-exist without a stable prioritisation are theoretically productive settings for examining how actors negotiate competing institutional demands in practice.

Furthermore, rhe second key aspect was that, given the widespread prevalence of hybrid working around the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, hybrid ethnography was a necessary choice. In this context, D-company was structurally well suited to hybrid ethnographic research. Its long-standing reliance on digital platforms such as Google Meet, Slack, and Jira made the company highly compatible with a hybrid methodology, enabling the study of decision-making, collaboration, and informal interactions across both online and offline environments (Hine, 2015; Leonardi, 2021; Przybylski, 2020). This study approaches digital tools as part of the socially structured settings in which interaction, meaning-making, and negotiation around HRA took place (Orlikowski, 2000; Zilber, 2020), rather than treating them as infrastructures. This view also aligns with inhabited institutionalism (Hallett, 2010; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021), which highlights how institutions are enacted through the interaction order and artefact-mediated practices. This digital infrastructure facilitated continuous engagement with participants, ensuring that remote observations could be

as analytically meaningful as in-person ethnographic fieldwork. Moreover, D-company's data-driven culture and openness to new technological practices aligned with the methodological need for longitudinal access to decision episodes related to HRA, thereby providing a fertile environment for examining how new practices were enacted, contested, and coupled over time.

Last but not least, another important aspect in selecting D-company was insider access, which significantly facilitated my ability to conduct deep ethnographic research. From a microfoundations perspective (Felin et al., 2015; Smets et al., 2012, 2015), insider ethnographic access provides a distinctive vantage point for tracing how institutional change is enacted, resisted, or reconfigured through the everyday practices of individual actors (Barley, 1986; Bechky, 2011; Jarzabkowski et al., 2015). This kind of access was particularly important for the present study because the mechanisms of coupling identified in Chapters 6 and 7, such as *Defensive Translation, Jurisdictional Distancing* and *Identity Ambiguity*, operate in part through subtle, interpretive and affectively charged practices that are seldom fully articulated in formal settings or made available to external researchers. Observing these mechanisms required prolonged co-presence in the team's everyday working life, access to informal as well as formal conversations, and the trust necessary for actors to disclose concerns about vulnerability, accountability and identity strain. D-company offered a rare combination of organisational conditions in which such access was possible without compromising analytical distance, and the ethical and reflexive implications of this dual positionality are examined in detail in Section 4.5.

My dual role as both an academic and an industry expert allowed for sustained engagement with organisational actors who were actively shaping or resisting HRA adoption. This dynamic can be further understood through Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach, which illustrates how actors navigate pre-existing social structures to either reinforce or transform institutional arrangements. Insider roles in ethnography are often complex, requiring careful reflexivity (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), yet they provide unparalleled opportunities for micro-level observation of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Accessing corporate settings for ethnographic research is frequently constrained, particularly when studies involve sensitive employee data (Hammersley, 2006; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). However, my professional networks within the industry positioned me to overcome these barriers. One of the key founding members of D-company's HRA team, a former colleague, facilitated my introduction to senior management, ensuring smooth entry into the field. Additionally, my prior experience as an HR strategic consultant, combined with my published book on HRA (Lee, 2020), reinforced my legitimacy as a competent researcher. In business ethnography, pre-

existing professional relationships often function as critical enablers of access (Kim et al., 2023), and in this study, they were essential in securing an unprecedented level of insight into the internal dynamics of HRA implementation at D-company.

Although I was eventually able to gain access to D-company for fieldwork, it was a difficult process that took over six months. My initial strategy for securing a research site involved broad outreach through a research recruitment webpage and leveraging professional networks. However, most organisations were reluctant to allow an external researcher to observe their internal HR processes. Several companies, including two multinational corporations in the technology and energy sectors, expressed discomfort with participant observation, highlighting a common corporate tension between ethnographic immersion and concerns over external auditing (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). To overcome these barriers, I attempted to gain internal access by seeking formal employment in an HR analyst role within a company. However, even when my expertise was recognised - for instance, when I was invited to a final-round interview for a senior data analyst position at a financial technology firm - employers were ultimately unwilling to integrate ethnographic research into the role, which led to rejections. The breakthrough came through targeted networking with HRA professionals, which enabled me to reconnect with a former colleague who had been directly involved in the development of the HRA function at D-company. This alignment between my research and the organisation's needs facilitated access, as it allowed me to contribute to HRA initiatives within the company while simultaneously conducting my fieldwork.

In concluding this discussion of case selection, it is important to acknowledge that a single-case ethnographic design carries recognised analytical boundaries, and the rationale outlined above should be understood in relation to these boundaries. A single case cannot support statistical generalisation to a population of organisations, and the specific institutional context of D-company, a rapidly expanding multinational technology firm undergoing acquisition, inevitably shapes what the analysis is able to render visible. What the design can support, however, is analytical generalisation (Yin, 2018): the identification of theoretically informative mechanisms whose relevance extends beyond the single site through their grounding in institutional and microfoundational theory. The six mechanisms identified in Chapters 6 and 7 are developed in this mode, specified in sufficient conceptual detail to permit transfer and testing across other organisational and occupational settings in which analytic practices intersect with established professional logics. The broader implications of this design choice, including its limitations and the avenues it opens for comparative research, are discussed further in Section 8.4.

4.5 Dual Positionality: Both HRA Academic Researcher and Professional HR Analyst

In this study, my positionality was not only dual but also central to the very processes I was investigating. I was an external researcher studying how HRA-related practices became loosely or tightly coupled with organisational routines at D-company through fieldwork, while simultaneously working as a fixed-term part-time HR analyst, providing consultancy on HRA matters and undertaking practical projects for the company. A dual role of this kind is fairly uncommon in HRM research and in organisational ethnography more broadly, where researchers are rarely embedded as contracted employees. This dual role, however, positioned me both as an observer and as an active participant in the adopting process of HRA. I was, to some extent, directly involved in shaping how HRA projects were defined or implemented, which meant that I occupied a position of influence in the organisational decision-making surrounding the adoption of HRA. This centrality is analytically significant: I was not merely observing HRA being loosely/tightly coupled or decoupled but was at times one of the actors whose decisions, interpretations and negotiations contributed to those outcomes. Acknowledging this upfront is essential, because it means that the data I collected, the interactions I participated in, and the conclusions I drew were partially shaped by my involvement in the unfolding practices I sought to analyse.

D-company approved my fieldwork, on the condition that I undertake a partial work commitment as an employee during the research period. During the first six months (January to June 2022), I mainly provided consultancy services on setting up and organising HRA projects. Then, for the next three months (June to September 2022), I signed an official contract as an HR analytics expert, working as a paid employee at 40% FTE, contributing to the HRA projects. Sometimes, being officially employed meant that I could not always focus exclusively on observation and interviews for the research. For example, internal HRA team meetings sometimes coincided with scheduled interviews with members of other departments, or HRA project-related tasks overlapped with meetings involving other departmental meetings. When such clashes occurred, I rescheduled interviews to non-working hours or followed up by reviewing the documentation of other departments' meeting recorded in D-company’s internal Wiki system.

I sometimes influenced the HRA team’s decisions and practices, for example by suggesting the Remote Work Effectiveness project or advising on the importance of the HR data governance initiative. This meant that I was not only observing HRA adoption processes but also contributing to them through my own choices and judgements as an HRA expert. Recognising this centrality is important for understanding how my presence shaped both the empirical material

and the analytic interpretations developed in this thesis. Within this context, D-company recognised my dual role and granted me considerable flexibility, placing no restrictions on my work location or fixed working time. Although my position in the newly established HRA team was that of a team member, I rarely worked subordinately under the direction of the team leader or other colleagues. I assisted them with consultancy and advice on their requests, in turn, I had considerable autonomy over my tasks. However, it is important to adopt a sensitively reflexive approach to critically evaluate the impact of my direct field participation on the research (Morgan-Trimmer & Wood, 2016). Because, in ethnographic research, researcher's background, beliefs, and relationships can significantly influence data collection and interpretation (Holmes, 2020). Considering my unique positionality, this section explores how I maintained reflexivity throughout the research process and examines the influence my role as an HR analyst had on the study.

While my dual role as both researcher and HR analyst involved active participation in organisational practices, this study does not constitute auto-ethnography or action research. Auto-ethnography typically centres the researcher’s personal experience and self-reflexivity as the primary source of data (Ellis et al., 2011), and action research is explicitly interventionist and oriented towards solving organisational problems in collaboration with participants (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Although this study contains elements associated with both traditions, my aim was neither to theorise from personal experience nor to drive organisational change as a formal intervention. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that my role cannot be separated from the organisational processes I observed. As a part-time HR analyst contributing to ongoing HRA projects, my actions occasionally shaped the outcomes that the research sought to understand, for example, influencing how certain projects were framed, advanced, or deprioritised. This means that I was not a neutral observer but an actor who participated in, and sometimes affected, the coupling and decoupling of HRA in practice. My positionality therefore created an emic perspective shaped by my prior experience with, and commitment to, HRA, which inevitably informed how I interpreted events and interacted with organisational members. This reminds us of long-standing debates in participant observation concerning the implications of insider–outsider positionality for knowledge production (Labaree, 2002; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

I approached them reflexively rather than treating these influences as methodological flaws. For instance, at earlier stages of fieldwork, this dual role created interpretive tensions: I found myself experiencing disappointment when several HRA projects had limited organisational impact, and I initially read these outcomes as signs of failure. Reflexive engagement later enabled me to re-frame these moments not as personal or team-level shortcomings, but as empirical

evidence of a broader institutional process in which analytics was only partially taken up. This shift in perspective became an important analytic resource, alerting me to the patterned dynamics of loose coupling that might otherwise have been overlooked. Therefore, reflexivity was used not only to monitor how my relationships and work responsibilities structured access, communication and trust, but also to consider how my assumptions as an HRA practitioner shaped the sense-making that underpinned my analysis. In this respect, my dual role heightened the need for ongoing reflection on how I inhabited the field. Following Cunliffe and Karunanayake's (2013) account of "working within hyphen-spaces", my position occupied the boundary between participation and observation, requiring continual negotiation of identity and role. Acknowledging these tensions clarifies that this study is not auto-ethnography or action research, but an ethnographic investigation in which the researcher's activity is treated as one of the forces shaping the organisational processes under examination.

Reflexivity requires continuous self-examination by the researcher, with particular attention to subjective reactions, potential biases, and the overall impact on the research process (Finlay, 2002; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Pillow, 2003). Reflexivity has also been theorised as a central mechanism that links structure and agency: it is through reflexive deliberation that actors interpret institutional conditions and select courses of action (Archer, 1995; Creed et al., 2010; Voronov & Vince, 2012). Malterud (2001) emphasises that reflexivity begins with recognising preconceptions, which are shaped by personal and professional experiences, prior knowledge, and theoretical influences. In my case, my background as an HR analyst and familiarity with existing HRA research shaped certain preconceptions about what constitutes a 'successful' HRA implementation. Prior studies suggest that strong executive sponsorship, high-quality data, and employees with analytical skills are key enablers of HRA adoption (Angrave et al., 2016; Guenole et al., 2017; Minbaeva, 2017; Ferrar & Green, 2021). Entering the field, I initially viewed these factors as critical benchmarks for evaluating D-company's progress in adoption of HRA. However, during my fieldwork, I realised that these theoretical assumptions did not fully capture the organisational reality. While data quality and analytical skills were indeed discussed, I observed that the presence of a well-connected individual with strong communication skills - someone who could facilitate access to data and foster cross-functional collaboration - was equally, if not more, crucial in enabling HRA's adoption. My reflexive process led me to critically reassess the extent to which my academic and industry-driven assumptions influenced my observations and interactions.

Reflexivity is particularly salient in ethnographic research where the researcher occupies dual roles, as the boundaries between participation and observation are continuously negotiated and contested (Finlay, 2002; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Ide and Beddoe (2024) argue that a researcher's background inevitably shapes not only their observations but also their research questions, data collection methods, and the interpretation of findings. In my case, I participated as a researcher but also influenced the HRA adoption and implementation processes under study. For example, during team meetings I contributed analytical suggestions, advocated particular approaches and helped frame several HRA projects - actions that were expected of me as a contracted HR analyst. These tensions of my dual role were especially clear in conversations with senior leadership. For example, during a three-hour dinner with the CHRO, I realised that my comments about HRA projects directly informed his thinking and decisions. I treated these moments as data, recognising that my own conduct illuminated the same dynamics - boundary negotiation, identity work and legitimacy work - that shaped other actors' responses to HRA.

To engage with these tensions analytically (Holmes, 2020; Berger, 2015), I adopted a structured reflexive practice. I maintained research diaries documenting observations, emotional reactions and interpretive reflections following meetings and informal interactions. The colour-coded system I used - black for descriptive observations, red for analytical reflections and blue for practitioner-oriented tasks - was not intended to impose a strict division between roles (which would be epistemologically impossible), but to provide an analytical device for interrogating how my actions, assumptions and affective responses were shaped by different institutional pressures. For example, reviewing my reflections after the dinner with the CHRO enabled me to see how my own behaviour was influenced by concerns about his professional identity - mirroring patterns I later identified as Identity Ambiguity in the empirical chapters. This reflexive work was strengthened further through regular discussions with my supervisors, whose outsider perspective helped surface assumptions I had normalised in the field and pushed me to connect my experiential reactions to the conceptual tools. Through this iterative reflexive process, my positionality became a source of analytical insight into the coupling dynamics that the thesis seeks to explain.

In ethnographic research, furthermore, the researcher's insider status needs to be critically examined, as it shapes both access to data and the ways in which field participants perceive and respond to the research process (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; McCambridge et al., 2014; Berger, 2015). At D-company, rumours circulated in the early stages of fieldwork that a doctoral researcher had joined the organisation to study HRA and that the findings might influence

employee evaluations or HR policies. Such perceptions highlight that research is always inhabited within existing organisational dynamics: employees' interpretations of my role affected how openly they engaged with interviews and collaborative discussions, and in some cases may have produced caution or partial responses. This illustrates the reflexive challenge of ethnographic research, where the researcher's presence is not neutral but becomes part of the interaction order through which meanings are constructed. It also mirrors the wider challenge in corporate ethnography, where HR professionals' access to sensitive information - such as performance records or recruitment data - can heighten participants' concerns about surveillance and the uses of data (Tursunbayeva et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2020; Sturdy, 1997).

To mitigate these concerns and foster trust, I consistently clarified the purpose, scope, and anticipated outcomes of the study through both formal and informal communication channels. I stressed that the research did not involve evaluating individual-level quantitative data but rather sought to generate qualitative insights into the extent to which HRA practice were being negotiated and coupled with existing organisational routines. For employees who found some theoretical concepts difficult, I prepared a short research summary and made it available via a shared online folder. For example, I uploaded materials to the company's Wiki documentation software explaining what qualitative research means in the context of HRA and outlining the basic principles of ethnographic methodology. To further enhance transparency, I compiled an internal report nine months into fieldwork, documenting both research observations and practitioners' contributions to HRA projects. The report was required under the initial research agreement between D-company and myself as a practical deliverable in return for my three-month period of paid advisory and consultancy support on D-company's HRA projects. This report was circulated among key stakeholders, followed by individual meetings in which different interpretations of the same organisational practices were shared. These actions were not only practical strategies for maintaining trust but also reflexive practices that positioned me within the social interactions through which HRA was interpreted, legitimised, or resisted (Zilber, 2002; Binder, 2007). Engaging in reflexivity thus meant recognising that my dual positionality influenced the very coupling processes I was studying, making me simultaneously an observer and a participant in the situated work of translation, boundary negotiation, and legitimation. My presence at D-company therefore became part of the recursive interaction between agency and structure described by Archer's morphogenetic cycle (Archer, 1995; 2003), illustrating how the coupling of HRA with organisational routines was shaped not only by organisational actors but also by the reflexive practices of the researcher.

4.6 Data Analysis

This section sets out the analytical procedure that informed the findings presented in subsequent chapters. The analysis followed grounded theory protocols (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021) within an abductive framework (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), unfolding through iterative cycles of coding that were integrated with the thesis's theoretical framework. The subsections that follow describe, in turn, the analytical strategy adopted (4.6.1), the coding procedures applied (4.6.2), and the integration of these procedures with the theoretical framework and the software tools that supported the analysis (4.6.3).

4.6.1 Analytical Strategy: Grounded Theory and Abductive Reasoning

The analysis drew on grounded theory (GT) protocols (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021) as systematic procedures for coding, constant comparison, and memoing, while not claiming GT as a full-fledged theory-building methodology. I used these protocols to organise and interrogate the data in dialogue with the theoretical framework developed in Chapters 2 and 3. This approach was particularly suited to examining how HRA practices became loosely or tightly coupled with organisational routines, as it facilitated close attention both to the micro-level processes through which actors made sense of analytic artefacts and to the meso-level interactional dynamics through which those meanings were negotiated in decision episodes. Iterative cycles of coding supported abductive reasoning (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), enabling surprising findings to be treated as opportunities to trace the micro- and meso-foundational mechanisms that shape coupling dynamics (Felin et al., 2015; Bechky, 2011; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021). Analysis began with line-by-line initial coding, proceeded through focused coding to identify recurring patterns in both individual reflexivity and situated interaction, and culminated in the consolidation of theoretical categories. As per grounded theory protocols, data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively: early insights informed subsequent interviews and observations, refining the sampling strategy and ensuring that emergent patterns guided ongoing fieldwork.Early findings highlighted discrepancies in how different organisational actors perceived HRA adoption, revealing tensions between strategic leadership expectations and operational-level challenges. For instance, while senior executives emphasised the role of advanced analytics in driving strategic decision-making, frontline HR professionals frequently expressed concerns about the practical feasibility of data integration and the usability of HRA tools in daily workflows. These initial insights prompted refinements in the research design, leading to the inclusion of

additional interviews with mid-level managers who played intermediary roles in translating executive strategies into operational practices. This iterative adjustment of data collection reflected an abductive approach to analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), in which surprising findings guided further sampling and sharpened the analytical focus.

4.6.2 Coding Procedures: Initial, Focused, and Theoretical

During the initial coding phase, qualitative data - including field notes, interview transcripts, and internal organisational documents - were segmented into discrete units and coded line by line using NVivo and Excel. Because most fieldnotes were written in my mother tongue, Korean, to allow for faster real-time documentation, and because NVivo does not support Korean, I conducted the initial coding in Excel using parallel Korean–English annotations. The English-translated segments were then imported into NVivo for further analysis. This process facilitated the identification of emerging themes and patterns across multiple data sources, resulting in a total of 239 codes. These codes were then categorised based on frequency and core thematic dimensions such as data quality concerns, boundary tensions between HR and technical teams, identity and accountability anxieties, and the perceived legitimacy of analytic outputs, and subsequently mapped to the corresponding HRA projects.

Table 1 provides a sample illustration of how initial line-by-line codes were grouped into focused categories and then developed into the theoretical mechanisms explained in the following chapters, showing the sequential analytical progression that underpinned the findings.

Table 1. Example of Sequential Coding Progression (Initial → Focused → Theoretical)

Stage 1: Initial Line-by-Line Codes (in NVivo examples)	**Stage 2: Focused Coding** (patterned concepts)	**Stage 3: Theoretical Coding** (mechanisms in Ch. 6 & 7)	**Coupling Implication**	**Abductive Insight / Influence**
"I don't want to be blamed if the numbers are wrong."	Fear of accountability; risk aversion	Defensive Translation	Loose	Revealed accountability anxiety that discouraged engagement with analytic outputs.
"If we use this and it goes wrong, HR will be held responsible."				Showed how perceived personal exposure prompted distancing from analytics.
"Analytics feels too risky — people will question my judgement."				Demonstrated fear of professional scrutiny as a barrier to analytic use.
"The dashboard looks good, but I'm not sure I can use it."	Scepticism toward artefacts; trust deficit			Highlighted the legitimacy deficit surrounding analytic artefacts.
"We don't know how this algorithm works — it's a black box."				Revealed representational opacity and lack of explainability concerns
"I don't fully trust the data feeding into this model."				Identified epistemic doubt about data quality and model foundations.
"I worry the model oversimplifies the reality of our people."	Perceived mismatch			Pointed to reductionism concerns about analytic abstraction
"Analytics can't capture the nuance of performance like we can."				Revealed conflict between relational judgement and quantified evaluation
"These numbers miss the context — HR is not quantifiable like this."				Demonstrated the tension between situated HR expertise and numerical logic.
"It feels safer to stick to what we already know."	Preference for familiarity			Showed reliance on habitual practice that reinforces avoidance of analytics.
"I can explain my intuition, but I can't explain an algorithm."				Identified narrative legitimacy as a preferred mode of justification.
"We don't really know what 'data quality' even means in HR."	Epistemic discomfort			Highlighted conceptual uncertainty around analytic standards.
"I don't know how to judge whether this model is good enough."				Revealed skill and evaluation gaps inhibiting analytic adoption.
"I'm not sure what our role is in this analytics project."		Identity Ambiguity	Loose	Exposed uncertainty about HR's analytic mandate.

"Isn't this the data team's responsibility?"	Role confusion (Who should do analytics?)			Pointed to displaced ownership due to ambiguous role boundaries.
"I don't know where HR fits into this process."				Revealed jurisdictional confusion limiting engagement.
"If analysts lead this, what does that leave for us?"	Unstable identity boundaries			Demonstrated perceived loss of ownership over valued HR tasks.
"Analytics makes our role unclear."				Showed identity destabilisation driven by analytic expansion.
"It feels like our expertise is sidelined."				Indicated erosion of HR's epistemic authority when analytics enters.
"I didn't join HR to analyse numbers."	Threat to professional identity			Revealed dissonance between self-concept and analytic demands.
"Analytics is not what HR is mainly supposed to be about."				Showed perceived misalignment between HR's normative identity and analytics.
"This is not the kind of work our team values."				Highlighted resistance rooted in established professional norms.
"Jone (team leader) keeps changing what she wants."	Strategic ambiguity & shifting ownership	Jurisdictional Distancing	Loose	Revealed unstable project framing that prevented analytic ownership
"Direction from the top is unclear."				Showed ambiguity that discouraged HR from committing to analytics.
"The project scope changes so frequently."				Identified expectation volatility undermining analytic role clarity.
"If the model is wrong, that's on the data team—not us."	Responsibility shifting / error displacement			Demonstrated risk displacement from HR to data specialists.
"We're not taking the blame for bad numbers."				Highlighted fear of consequences reinforcing non-ownership.
"Tech should sign off on accuracy — not HR."				Showed accountability avoidance via invoking epistemic boundaries.
"This belongs under Strategy, not HR."	Boundary defence ("not HR's jurisdiction")			Indicated efforts to reposition analytics outside HR's jurisdiction.
"Data science teams should own this work."				Revealed boundary reinforcing that limits HR's analytic scope.

"I don't understand why HR should be accountable for this statistical accuracy."				Showed epistemic demarcation designed to maintain HR's traditional role.
"We reframed it as a business problem rather than an analytic matter. (about algorithm accuracy)"	Narrative reframing for legitimacy	Bridging Translation	Tight	Demonstrated reframing that translated technical outputs into strategic language.
"Explaining it in business terms got leadership on board."				Highlighted how business-value framing enhanced executive legitimacy.
"Whenever it (HRA project request) happened, we tried to tell the story in a way that made it relevant to operations."				Revealed contextual tailoring as key to analytic acceptance.
"CHRO and I tailored the visuals for directors."	Audience-specific sensemaking			Showed adaptation of analytic representation to hierarchical audiences.
"Managers needed it explained differently."				Identified differentiated communication as crucial for uptake.
"I adjusted the narrative depending on who we talked to, especially for the C-level leaders like via one-to-one talk"				Revealed strategic sensegiving to overcome interpretive barriers.
"We (HRA team) linked the model to potential cost savings."	Value-aligned communication			Demonstrated alignment with organisational priorities to enhance legitimacy.
"Jessica and I (Emily) emphasised how it affects workforce planning KPIs."				Showed effectiveness of attaching analytics to measurable indicators.
"They (the management) agreed when we (HRA team) showed how it solves a real strategic pain point."				Indicated that operational relevance accelerated uptake.
"This tool (Excel Power Query) now fits how we do HR."	Workflow alignment / fit with HR routines	Reconfiguring Artefacts	Tight	Demonstrated how socio-material adaptation enabled integration.
"I integrated it (Dashboard) into the weekly planning cycle."				Showed embedding within existing organisational routines.
"It (Dashboard) can be matched the way HR works day-to-day."				Revealed alignment with routine practice as key to sustainability.
"We rebuilt the dashboard, so managers only see what matters."	Artefact simplification / usability redesign			Highlighted cognitive load reduction as an enabler of use
"The team (HRA team) cut out features no one used."				Demonstrated removal of unnecessary complexity to improve usability.

"HR professionals made by themselves the output much simpler to interpret."				Showed participatory artefact redesign enhancing ownership.
"I (Jessica) automated the data checks, so HR doesn't need manual work."	Reducing friction / automation			Identified burden reduction as critical to adoption.
"The (HR) work is now synced it with the HRIS so it updates automatically."				Showed how automation made the tool maintainable and reliable.
"We could remove steps that slowed people down."				Demonstrated friction removal as key to workflow integration.
"Now I feel bit more confident discussing analytics with others."	Identity reinforcement (analytics as competence)	Symbolic Reordering	Tight	Revealed emerging analytic identity strengthening HR legitimacy.
"I feel more professional using data."				Demonstrated symbolic enhancement of HR's professional self-concept.
"Analytics makes me look more credible in meetings. (with satisfactory voice)"				Showed analytics operating as an identity marker of expertise
"Analytics signals professionalism to leadership. (after elevating HRA team to the CHRO level)"	Status elevation of analytics			Demonstrated how analytics became a status-signalling practice.
"We (HRA team) have higher status internally now. (within the HR department)"				Revealed intra-HR prestige gains linked to analytic capability
"Now we are officially called (People) Data Analytics team."				Showed organisational-level symbolic upgrades of analytic identity.
"With Laura as the new CEO, the focus has changed (from engineering development to cost-efficient projects"	Leadership-driven logic shifts			Highlighted macro-symbolic realignment of HR under new strategic priorities
"When Robert (ex-CEO) was here, HR was seen as a peripheral function supporting recruitment and administration, but..."				Revealed shift toward data- and evidence-based HR under the competing institutional logic prioritisation
"Once Jessica (new HRA team leader) took over, the expectations became much clearer."				Demonstrated leadership-driven reframing of HR's analytic role.

Following the initial coding phase, focused coding was conducted to systematically group and refine the initial set of codes into broader conceptual categories. This stage involved identifying relationships between codes, allowing for the emergence of structured themes that captured the dynamics of coupling related to HRA adoption. One key relational pattern highlighted during this stage was the tension between formal policy mandates and informal workarounds developed by employees to address practical constraints. For example, while formal HR policies mandated the use of a centralised analytics platform, many HR professionals relied on parallel data management practices to compensate for gaps in the system's functionality. Focused coding also revealed the significance of internal champions - individuals who played pivotal roles in legitimising and coupling HRA with organisational routines. These actors acted as brokers across stakeholder groups, facilitating cross-departmental collaboration and mitigating resistance to change (Battilana & Dorado, 2010). By mapping out these relationships, focused coding provided a clearer understanding of the mechanisms that shaped whether HRA practices were taken up in ways that tightened or loosened their coupling with existing organisational processes.

The third stage was theoretical coding, which involved integrating the patterned insights generated through focused coding into a broader conceptual framework (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2013). In this thesis, theoretical coding enabled the abductive theorising of the novel mechanisms that are presented in Chapters 6 and 7. These mechanisms, such as Defensive Translation, Jurisdictional Distancing, Identity Ambiguity, Bridging Translation, Reconfiguring Artefacts, and Symbolic Reordering represent the higher-order conceptual mechanisms that explain how HRA practices became loosely or tightly coupled with existing HR routines.

4.6.3 Integration with Theoretical Framework

The theoretical coding described above proceeded in active dialogue with the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 3, drewing on institutional theory, inhabited institutionalism and microfoundational perspectives in complementary ways. Institutional theory, and particularly inhabited institutionalism (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021), directs analytical attention to the meso-level coupling processes through which practices are enacted or decoupled in everyday organisational encounters. Microfoundational and institutional work perspectives help explain why and how individuals act toward these coupling processes, illuminating the interpretive, emotional and identity-related dynamics that underpin their engagement with analytic artefacts (Felin et al., 2015; Bechky, 2011; Voronov & Vince, 2012). Because these processes unfold over

time, the analysis integrated these perspectives through Archer's (1995; 2003) morphogenetic approach, which conceptualises institutional change and reproduction as occurring through recursive cycles of conditioning, interaction and elaboration. The twelve HRA projects were therefore analysed as decision episodes, functioning as the meso-level analytical unit through which the theoretical framework developed in Section 3.1 was empirically operationalised. As set out there, the concept of decision episodes serves both as a theoretical construct — locating the meso-level intersection of morphogenetic cycles — and as the unit of analysis through which the empirical material is organised. This section focuses on the latter, methodological dimension. Within these episodes, actors' reflexive concerns, boundary negotiations, identity tensions and legitimacy considerations shaped how practices stabilised over time. Through iterative comparison across episodes, these patterned sequences were grouped into the theoretical mechanisms (as shown in the 3rd column in Table 1) that structure the analysis in Chapters 6 and 7, thereby providing a coherent bridge between abductive coding and the integrated theoretical framework of the thesis.

I used mainly NVivo (version 14), a qualitative data analysis software, to analyse the data collected from the fieldwork. NVivo offers managing, organising, and analysing large amounts of qualitative data, and it supports deep-level data analysis such as matrix coding and frequency network mapping, allowing researchers to identify unclear themes and patterns (Bazeley, 2019; Maher et al., 2018). I entered all written data into NVivo, including notes from the observation process, daily fieldwork diaries, D-company documents collected through Wiki, and interview scripts. During this process, I translated all fieldwork documents and materials written in my native language, Korean, into English. This was necessary because Korean is not among the seven languages supported by NVivo. Given the extensive volume of material requiring translation, I utilised software such as Google Translate. However, as the automated translations did not fully capture the context and nuances of my field notes, I manually reviewed and revised all translated materials. This process took over six months to complete. Nonetheless, NVivo was particularly helpful during the initial coding process to sort and organise the large volume of data. By treating each code as a node, I was able to visualise connections between nodes, which proved especially useful during focused coding to examine how categories related to one another (Silver & Lewins, 2023). I also used NVivo's query tools to explore the data and detect recurrent patterns across the dataset (Bazeley, 2019).

In this study therefore grounded theory protocols functioned as analytic structured tools for organising and interrogating the data. These procedures supported abductive engagement with the data (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), enabling the research design to remain flexible and responsive to emerging insights. Iterative adjustments to interview questions and sampling ensured that key stakeholder perspectives were incorporated, while the integration of coding stages facilitated the identification of coupling dynamics and institutional patterns that informed the subsequent Findings chapters. Organising the dataset in this way also ensured that the analysis could move beyond descriptive coding toward identifying the situated mechanisms - translation, boundary work, identity work, and legitimacy work - that structured each decision episode. This provided a systematic basis for examining how coupling unfolded across the twelve projects over time (Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021; Smets et al., 2012).

4.7 Ethical Challenges and Measures

Ethical considerations are paramount in all research, especially in ethnography, where the depth of social interaction and the sensitivity of the information collected can lead to serious ethical dilemmas (Kaiser, 2009; Newman et al., 2021). This section explores the ethical issues I encountered while studying HRA adoption at D-company and the measures I implemented to address them. One of the primary ethical objectives of this study is to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. This is particularly important not only for individual participants but also for the company itself. In qualitative research such as ethnography, where the researcher observes the field over an extended period, there is the advantage of gaining a deep and broad understanding of the research subject. However, from the perspective of the organisation, company, or individuals being studied, there is a significant potential risk and concern that their situations and details could be exposed externally in great detail (Elo et al., 2014). This concern is particularly heightened in this study, as it explores not only the positive aspects but also the challenges and difficulties encountered during the initial stages of HRA adoption, rather than focusing solely on successful cases where the management strategy has been firmly established within the company. As I discussed in the section on entering D-company, I actually faced many difficulties and complications in gaining access to the company. I had to thoroughly explain the purpose of the research and the potential risks and secure the trust of D-company's management and key stakeholders.

Given the sensitive nature of this research, which discusses potential criticisms of D-company's internal practices and current organisational processes during the introduction of HRA, it was crucial to conduct the research in a manner that protected the anonymity of the company as well as the individual participants. If participants in observations or interviews were not assured of confidentiality and anonymity, there was a significant risk that they would engage in deliberate behaviour or speech, which could ultimately result in considerable distortion of the overall quality of the research data (McCambridge et al., 2014; Saunders et al., 2015). To ensure the ethical aspects of the research, the first step I took was to obtain approval from the University of Leeds research ethics committee, ensuring the legality of the data collected in the research, including the study's planning and design, the scope of fieldwork, and the types of data to be collected. Additionally, I sought legal review from D-company's legal advisory team to ensure that conducting fieldwork at D-company and the future anonymous publication of the organisation's name and participant names in academic presentations would not damage the company's reputation. D-company's legal team, consisting of expert lawyers from the country where the research was conducted, reviewed the research proposal and contract documents line by line to ensure there were no legal issues or ethical risks. Through this process, I signed a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) with D-company as a researcher affiliated with the University of Leeds. For instance, the NDA included provisions on the object of confidential information, restrictions on its use, the term, disclosure to courts and government agencies, the return of confidential information, compensation for damages, representatives and agents, the effect of the contract, the competent court, and special terms and conditions.

Despite the NDA being in place, some participants during the fieldwork emphasised the need to ensure their anonymity, and several HR professionals were particularly concerned about D-company's reputation and brand. Emily, who was one of the two founding members of the HRA team and had led the recruitment team at D-company for the past five years, was precisely aware of the importance of the company's reputation in talent acquisition. In fact, a company's reputation significantly affects not only recruitment but also employee engagement and turnover rates within the organisation (Auger et al., 2013). Due to her sensitivity to the potential impact of this research on D-company's reputation, Emily (a pseudonym) hesitated to share HRA project-related data with me at the beginning of the fieldwork. To address the concerns of Emily and others who were worried about the potential risks of this research, I had to repeatedly and clearly explain the purpose and scope of the research, the data to be collected, the methods and the data retention period, and the expected outcomes. I also documented this information and uploaded explanatory

materials about the research to D-company's shared folder so that other employees could access and review them at any time. Additionally, when recording videos or specific interviews, I sought separate verbal or written consent for data collection to protect the identity of the research participants. I shared my contact details and email address so that participants could ask questions about the research at any time and provided a channel for expressing any concerns. Ensuring voluntary participation in the research is significant for eliminating bias in the data collected and the participants' intentions during fieldwork (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). This consent was entirely voluntary, and participants were assured that they could withdraw at any time without any consequences for their employment or professional relationships.

In this study, where ensuring the confidentiality of both the company and individuals is crucial, ongoing consideration and ethical reflection on how the research findings might impact participants in the future were also of paramount importance (Kaiser, 2009). In this regard, I made continuous efforts throughout the research to address any concerns raised by participants about their involvement or the outcomes. For example, not only during the initial stages of fieldwork but also regularly in the second year, I alleviated their concerns by informing D-company during face-to-face or remote interviews and meetings that I was fully aware of the ethical challenges related to the progress of the research and the associated data. During and after the fieldwork, I took the following specific measures to maintain the confidentiality of the research and protect the personal information of the subjects. I securely stored all data collected, including interview recordings, notes, and digital communications, using encrypted storage solutions. I protected sensitive data by setting passwords on files and marked confidential information on the front page of documents when sharing them with the research team and other authorised individuals.

As a researcher, it was valuable for me to ensure the anonymous publication of the research in the future. Therefore, I requested that D-company's legal team and management include special provisions in the contract specifying that the research could be published for academic purposes. Additionally, I agreed that D-company would have the right to review the final research before publication . Since I was formally employed by D-company, I signed all the ethical commitment contracts required of regular employees, including consent to the processing of personal data, a confidentiality agreement, and a commitment to legal compliance. Based on this background, I anonymised the data by removing or altering all identifying information during the process of documenting the research and officially presenting it at academic conferences. I assigned pseudonyms to all stakeholders involved in the research, and where details about the

organisation or specific practices could potentially be identifiable, I generalised those details unless they were critical to the research findings.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework adopted to investigate how HRA practices became loosely or tightly coupled with organisational routines at D-company. The study employed a hybrid ethnographic design that integrated direct and remote participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, enabling the capture of both in-person and digitally mediated practices (Hine, 2015; Leonardi, 2021). By combining these methods, the research traced how analytic artefacts, conversations, and routines were enacted across hybrid workspaces and how these practices shaped the evolving dynamics of HRA. The analysis drew on GT-inspired coding protocols (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021) as structured tools for coding, comparison, and memoing, complemented by abductive reasoning (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This approach provided systematic engagement with the data while remaining responsive to surprising findings, which were used to refine the theoretical framework.

Importantly, the twelve HRA projects were analysed as decision episodes - situated empirical arenas in which multiple morphogenetic cycles unfolded around the introduction, negotiation and use of analytical artefacts. These were understood, following the theoretical framework in this thesis, as the distinct enactment forms through which actors engaged with institutional conditions during the interaction phase of morphogenetic cycles. Within each episode, actors' reflexive concerns, boundary negotiations, identity tensions and legitimacy considerations shaped how analytic artefacts were interpreted and acted upon, and how these interactions accumulated over time. Analysing the projects as decision episodes provided a meso-level, processual lens for tracing how recursive morphogenetic cycles produced the coupling mechanisms that structure Chapters 6 and 7, explaining why some practices remained loosely coupled while others gradually achieved tighter integration with HR routines.

A distinctive and valuable feature of this study was the researcher's dual positionality as both academic and practitioner, which offered unparalleled access to everyday practices while requiring ongoing reflexive attention to potential biases and relational dynamics (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Finlay, 2002). Framing the analysis through the integrated theoretical framework developed in Chapter 3 - which combines institutional logics, inhabited institutionalism's focus on situated

interaction, microfoundational and practice-based accounts of institutional work, and Archer's morphogenetic sequencing of conditioning, interaction and elaboration - enabled a systematic examination of how HRA-related practices unfolded over time. This integrated perspective made it possible to trace how institutions shaped actors' concerns, how these concerns were negotiated in decision episodes, and how the recursive accumulation of morphogenetic cycles produced the patterns of loose and tight coupling observed in the study.

Before turning to the findings, it is important to establish the broader organisational and institutional context in which these decision episodes were situated. The next chapter provides a detailed exploration of D-company, including institutional structures and logics that conditioned both the adoption of and resistance to HRA. This contextual grounding is significant for interpreting the findings and situating the observed coupling dynamics within the broader institutional landscape of the HR field.

Chapter 5. Context

Understanding the organisational context in which HRA is introduced is essential for examining how practices become loosely or tightly coupled with existing routines. This chapter introduces D-company, a technology-driven multinational firm, and outlines how its structure, strategy, and institutional context conditioned the development of HRA-related projects. The chapter also approaches D-company itself as constitutive of the coupling processes under study: the organisational structure, stakeholder relationships, and post-acquisition challenges created conditions under which competing logics were enacted and negotiated. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic further reconfigured working arrangements, intensifying reliance on digital infrastructures and hybrid collaboration, thereby shaping the arenas in which decision episodes unfolded. By situating the emergence of HRA within these dynamics, the chapter provides the basis for interpreting the empirical findings and highlights how organisational contexts both enable and constrain the coupling of new practices - insights relevant to other organisations grappling with similar institutional complexities.

5.1 Introducing D-company

D-company is a technology-driven multinational corporation that has rapidly established itself as a market leader in its product market. Since its foundation, D-company diverged from traditional producer-consumer dynamics by developing an innovative application platform that operates as an intermediary, facilitating the matching and connection of platform consumers with suppliers. The rapid expansion of gig economy activities, which increasingly rely on digital platforms to support short-term contracts and freelance work (Parry & Battista, 2019; Wood et al., 2019), contributed significantly to D-company's growth. The company's workforce doubled annually, reaching approximately 2,000 employees at the time of this field study, while its annual revenue approached £2 billion. Companies employing gig economy business models, such as D-company, experienced substantial benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period characterised by restricted face-to-face interactions (Agrawal et al., 2022; Muzio & Doh, 2021). The global surge in remote and contactless activities during this time further accelerated D-company's expansion.

As a result, it secured its status as a "unicorn[4]" startup - a designation applied to privately held firms that exhibit exceptional growth and are valued at over $1 billion. Recognised as a unicorn firm, D-company embodies a set of institutional logics that emphasise rapid expansion, technological innovation, and platform-based business models. Its technology-driven growth imperatives generated strong pressures for evidence-based practices, while simultaneously clashing with the relational logics historically embedded in HR. This set of organisational logics and practice created a distinctive environment in which to examine how HRA practices were coupled or decoupled with existing routines.

Approximately one year before the commencement of my fieldwork, D-company was merged with another global corporation operating within the same industry. The post-acquisition relationship between D-company and its parent firm was shaped by competing strategic priorities rather than hierarchical dominance. Although the parent company was of a similar scale in revenue and market valuation, its approach to business differed significantly from that of D-company. While D-company pursued aggressive expansion strategies, such as active recruitment and the introduction of cutting-edge technologies, the parent company emphasised cost reduction and profitability. These divergent priorities created tensions that influenced organisational behaviour and strategic decision-making. According to Greve (2017), conflicting logics between parent and subsidiary firms, such as market-driven growth versus efficiency-focused governance, can generate inefficiencies during mergers and acquisitions.

This was also evident in D-company's struggle to align its innovation-driven initiatives with the parent company's preference for centralised control. These tensions demonstrated in D-company's daily operations, particularly in decision-making processes concerning strategic investments like HRA. My ethnographic observations documented frequent clashes between D-company's senior executives, who prioritised market responsiveness and rapid product deployment, and the parent company, which sought to enforce global standardisation and cost-efficiency measures. This friction exemplifies what institutional theorists' term 'institutional complexity' - the challenge of navigating contradictory institutional pressures within a single organisation (Greenwood et al., 2011; Kraatz & Block, 2008). In D-company, the innovation-oriented logic of rapid growth and product deployment coexisted uneasily with the parent firm's

[4] Unicorn companies typically introduce disruptive innovations to existing markets or create entirely new market segments, with many emerging from technology-based startups, particularly in platform businesses, artificial intelligence, fintech, and health technology (Kenney & Zysman, 2016).

efficiency-oriented logic of centralised control. D-company also became a site where these tensions were enacted most visibly: regional executives sought to experiment with data-driven practices to enhance responsiveness, while the parent company-imposed governance rules that restricted local autonomy. In D-company, these strategies frequently constrained innovation, illustrating how institutional complexity can limit not only strategic alignment but also the capacity of emergent subfields like HRA to gain traction within multinational corporations.

D-company's workforce composition and organisational structure reflect a dominant institutional logic of technological rationality, where technical expertise is central to value creation and strategic decision-making. Approximately 40% of the workforce consists of data engineers and system developers, highlighting the prioritisation of technical expertise in shaping the company's core identity. This logic is evident not only in the company's structural arrangements but also in its cultural practices: product development relies on iterative feedback cycles, rapid prototyping, and immediate market testing, privileging agility and short-term responsiveness over extended planning horizons. Within this framework, engineers and developers enjoy considerable autonomy, initiating projects and proposing improvements without requiring hierarchical approvals.

The hybrid organisational structure reinforces this orientation: technology teams operate within a relatively flat hierarchy to sustain innovation, while operational departments retain more traditional structures to preserve stability. Such arrangements exemplify the coexistence of multiple logics with low compatibility but high centrality, generating persistent tensions rather than stable alignment. In this sense, the dominance of technological rationality not only structured decision-making but also conditioned how the emerging subfield of HRA was positioned, often requiring alignment with technical expertise and innovation-oriented norms to gain legitimacy. This pragmatism- and innovation-oriented culture can be seen as the normative manifestation of D-company's technological rationality, embedding agility and decentralised decision-making into everyday routines. However, this fast-paced, innovation-driven environment also presents unique challenges for researchers and external stakeholders engaging with the organisation. The nature of D-company's work demands a deep understanding of technical jargon, processes, and expertise, as research conducted within such environments must take account of the institutional logic of technological rationality.

5.2 HR in D-company

5.2.1 Structural Evolution of HR at D-company

The evolution of HR at D-company reflects structural arrangements shaped by a dominant logic of technological rationality, which positioned HR as peripheral and loosely coupled with strategic decision-making practices. Initially, HR was situated as a compliance-oriented support function, responsible for recruitment, employee relations, and policy enforcement. In technology-centric organisations such as D-company, however, where engineering and product development functions are institutionally privileged, HR's scope was further constrained by structural arrangements that prioritised technical expertise. This was visible in the presence of two distinct HR teams: a central HR recruitment unit with firm-wide responsibilities, and a separate HR recruitment team embedded within the technology department. These constituted structures that shaped how HR professionals interacted with other functions, producing tensions over jurisdiction and legitimacy.

These structures within D-company generated persistent tensions in decision-making, particularly regarding compensation policies and workforce governance. The HR recruitment team embedded in the technology function, while formally performing HR tasks, operated under the authority of the technology department, often pushing for higher salaries to attract scarce engineering talent. In contrast, the central HR department emphasised equity and standardised pay frameworks across the wider workforce. My field observations and interviews highlighted how this structural division complicated the early introduction of HRA, especially in areas such as recruitment data governance and compensation standardisation. These conflicts were lived in day-to-day negotiations between HR professionals and managers, shaping how authority was enacted and contested and, in doing so, acting as barriers to the tighter coupling of HRA with organisational practices. The continuous negotiation of competing logics in everyday interactions made it difficult to stabilise a common evaluative framework, thereby sustaining loose coupling with organisational routines.

The limited structural authority of HR was also observed in executive reporting lines. At D-company, the CHRO did not report directly to the CEO but to the Chief Organisational Culture Officer (CCO), who in turn reported to the CEO. This reporting arrangement meant that, despite being a C-level executive formally responsible for the entire HR function, the CHRO occupied a hierarchically lower position than other C-suite leaders, illustrating HR's peripheral status relative to the company's core strategic priorities. This reporting arrangement created resource

asymmetries, with technology-driven projects consistently prioritised over HR initiatives. One HRA project involved implementing Workday software and provided a concrete example: although formally approved, the project was repeatedly delayed and deprioritised. From my fieldwork, one HRA team member said, "*Even when we provide clear evidence of investment value for our HRA initiatives, technology projects always take priority*" (Field notes, April 2022). This episode exemplifies loose coupling, where HR technologies are symbolically endorsed yet only weakly enacted in practice, a dynamic examined in greater detail in the subsequent Findings chapter. These observations demonstrate how structural positioning and live practice combined to shape the early trajectory of HRA, setting boundaries around how tightly or loosely analytics could be coupled to existing routines.

5.2.2 A Dual Structure: Traditional HR Function and Organisational Culture Team

At D-company, the overall HR function was divided across two organisational layers. As previously elaborated, at the company level, a central HR department oversaw all HR operations, while the Technology department maintained its own specialised recruitment team responsible for hiring and rewarding engineers. Within the HR department itself, responsibilities were further divided between traditional HR teams handling administration, recruitment, onboarding, and compensation, and a separate organisational culture team focused on employee engagement and value-based activities. Due to this dual-layered structure, multiple institutional logics on workforce management coexisted at D-company. While the HR function followed regulatory logics emphasising compliance, recruitment, and compensation frameworks, the organisational culture team was guided by normative and cultural-cognitive logics rooted in the founder's vision of employee happiness, well-being, and value alignment. This organisational structure elevated culture-building to a formalised function, positioning it alongside core HR operations. For example, the organisational culture team spearheaded initiatives such as the "D-Culture Ambassadors" programme, which supported employee onboarding, strengthened value alignment, and created structured opportunities for leadership–employee dialogue through town hall meetings.

The role of the organisational culture team became particularly prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it maintained employee engagement and facilitated the transition to hybrid work models. Research by van der Lippe and Lippényi (2020) highlights that organisational support and communication were critical for sustaining engagement and coordination during the shift to remote work, a dynamic reflected in how D-company's culture team organised feedback

sessions and collaborated with department heads to ensure that evolving workplace policies addressed employees' needs while aligning with broader organisational priorities. Based on my field observations and interviews, several practices, such as mentoring sessions, virtual coffee chats, and milestone celebrations (e.g., birthdays, promotions, graduations), were introduced to sustain cohesion, while CEO–employee Q&A sessions provided a visible arena for the negotiation of meaning and legitimacy. This emphasis on employee experience as a dominant organisational logic distinguishes D-company from many technology startups, where early-stage firms typically prioritise scalability over culture-building (D'Andrea et al., 2023). D-company established organisational culture as a strategic function from its inception, reinforcing a hybrid HR framework that coupled employee well-being with operational efficiency.

5.2.3 Scaling HR with Organisational Growth

The rapid growth of D-company reshaped the role of HR, shifting it from a personalised, relationship-oriented function toward a more structured and data-driven model. As organisational structures changed with rapid workforce expansion and shifting strategic priorities, HR practices were reconfigured in ways that conditioned subsequent episodes of negotiation and adaptation. In its early stages, when the company employed around 200 staff, the HR team maintained a highly personalised approach, attending closely to individual employee milestones and preferences. For example, the team organised celebrations for birthdays, welcomed new hires with personalised events, and arranged collective acknowledgements of life events such as marriages or childbirths, ensuring that employees' personal milestones were recognised and celebrated across the organisation. Such individualised engagement supported HR's cultural initiatives and reinforced its identity as a relationally oriented function.

However, as the workforce approached 2,000 employees, sustaining this personalised approach became increasingly difficult. The HR team, which had once engaged with employees on a detailed individual basis, struggled to maintain the same level of contact amidst both rapid organisational expansion and a geographically dispersed workforce. At D-company, this involved a gradual move toward formalisation and the adoption of analytical tools to manage workforce planning and employee engagement more systematically. These shifts highlight how HR's role was reconfigured under conditions of institutional complexity. Even though cultural and relational logics remained significant, they increasingly had to be aligned with a data-driven logic that emphasised evidence-based decision-making and efficiency at scale in order for HR practices to

gain legitimacy and traction. This reconfiguration of HR provides a critical contextual foundation for analysing how HRA practices became loosely or tightly coupled with existing organisational routines during the fieldwork period.

5.3 Key Actors

In this study, the term *actor* refers to individuals and groups who exercise reflexive interpretation and purposeful action within the organisational and institutional context of D-company. This understanding draws on Archer's (1995) view of actors as reflexive agents who respond to structural and cultural conditions, and on Bitektine and Haack's (2015) account of actorhood as institutionally constituted through processes of social evaluation and legitimacy. Their interests, priorities, ongoing negotiations, and social interactions played significant roles in determining how HRA became loosely or tightly coupled with existing routines. Actors at D-company include the HRA team members, other individuals within the HR department who collaborated with them, the CHRO leading the HR function, and senior executives who used HRA insights in their decision-making processes. Their primary interests laid in establishing reliable data sources, integrating analytics into HR processes, and demonstrating tangible business outcomes. At the same time, they expressed concerns about data integration with existing systems and achieving buy-in from other departments. These concerns were lived in everyday interactions. HR staff and managers repeatedly contested the credibility and ownership of analytics. Therefore, understanding the structural positions of these actors was important in this ethnographic study, as these positions conditioned the subsequent interactions that directly influenced whether HRA projects were more tightly or loosely coupled with existing practices.

In addition to these actors, several external conditions shaped the organisational environment in which HRA projects unfolded. D-company operated within the gig economy value chain, where debates about data use and labour conditions exerted growing institutional pressure on organisations to demonstrate fairness and accountability in workforce management. Studies of the gig economy (Wood et al., 2019; Kaine & Josserand, 2019) highlight how platform-based employment models have intensified concerns about data transparency, algorithmic control, and the erosion of traditional employment protections, prompting public and regulatory scrutiny of firms' HR practices. These debates influenced D-company's HR agenda and external monitoring of its workforce policies. The parent company also exerted influence by directing strategic priorities, including the adoption of the SaaS-based HRIS, Workday, thereby shaping the scope

and direction of HRA initiatives. These external institutions constituted part of the structural conditioning that framed how internal actors negotiated HRA practices with existing organisational routines.

Competitors within the same sector also formed part of the field-level institutions that influenced D-company's HR practices, particularly through inter-firm talent mobility. As Mawdsley and Somaya (2016) demonstrated in their study, competitors are not only rivals but influence HR practices by reshaping patterns of retention and attrition. Talent flows and labour market pressures had pronounced effects in D-company's context, where demand for skilled engineers intensified competition. The Covid-19 pandemic further heightened these dynamics, as companies experimented with post-pandemic work policies. For example, one major competitor's decision to mandate a full return to office immediately COVID-19 rules on working from home were relaxed generated employee dissatisfaction, prompting many skilled staff to move to D-company, which at the time had introduced a flexible working policy. These conditions directly impacted HRA projects, such as the Remote Work Effectiveness initiative, which resonated with employees, executives, and external pressures alike. This background is important for understanding how external conditions and contextual trends shaped the coupling of HRA with organisational routines.

To provide clarity for the reader, Table 2 summarises the backgrounds of D-company's HRA team members and key actors. To protect anonymity, pseudonyms are used, and the table details each individual's role, responsibilities, and professional background. In addition, Figure 2 presents a timeline of significant events that affected these actors during the two-year fieldwork period, illustrating when individuals joined or left D-company and how major events shaped their positions and interactions. This section introduces the main actors, while the next section will explain in greater detail the organisational events and decision episodes that influenced the coupling of HRA projects.

Table 2. Overview of key actors at D-company

Pseudonym	Position	Detailed Role	Feature at D-company	When Joined D-company	Professional Background
John	HRA team leader	Leading HRA team	Founding member of HRA team; Six months since joined D-company	Before Fieldwork	Over 10 years in HR consulting
Emily	HRA team member	HR analyst	Founding member of HRA team; Five years since joined D-company; Previously acting HR recruitment team leader	Before Fieldwork	Over 10 years in HR recruitment
Michael	HRA team member	Job design and planning	Joined four months after the foundation of the HRA team; Left the company after two months	Early-stage of Fieldwork	5 to 7 years in HR strategic planning
Sarah	HRA team member	Evaluation & compensation	Joined four months after the foundation of the HRA team	Early-stage of Fieldwork	5 to 7 years in HR compensation
David	HRA team member	Change management consulting	Joined four months after the foundation of the HRA team; John's junior colleague at his previous workplace	Early-stage of Fieldwork	5 to 7 years in HR consulting
Jessica	HRA team member	Senior HR analyst	Joined seven months after the foundation of the HRA team; Appointed as the HRA team leader following John’s departure	Mid-stage of Fieldwork	Over 10 years in HR planning and analysis
Jaejin	HRA team member	External researcher	Joined at the beginning of the HRA team; a researcher and an advisor; observed the HRA team's activities including project meetings and conducted interviews with key stakeholders.	Early-stage of Fieldwork	Over 10 years in HR analytics
James	CHRO (Chief Human Resources Officer)	Leading HR department	As D-company experienced rapid growth, James was swiftly promoted from HR rewards team leader to acting CHRO shortly before the commencement of this study’s fieldwork.	Before Fieldwork	Over 10 years in HR and management consulting
Jennifer	HRA team member	Junior HR analyst	Joined 18 months after the foundation of the HRA team; Jessica's direct junior colleague at her previous job	Late-stage of Fieldwork	3 to 5 years in HR analytics
Robert	CEO	CEO at D-company (~Dec 2022)	2nd CEO following the founder of D-company; Tech and developer background	Before Fieldwork	PhD in Engineering

	(Chief Executive Officer)				
Laura	CAO (Chief Administrative Officer)	Leading administrative department	Promoted to the 3rd CEO (January 2023)	Before Fieldwork	From a global management consulting firm
William	CCO (Chief Organisational Culture Officer)	In charge of people/employee-related work	Co-founder of D-company; Senior leader above CHRO in organisational chart; Leaving in mid-2022 due to generational change in management	Before Fieldwork	Over 10 years in Management Strategy
Megan	CTO (Chief Technology Officer)	Managing all engineers and developers	Authority is concentrated in Megan as the leader of this department within D-company that is centred around engineers. Less than 1 year since joining D-company.	Before Fieldwork	Previously, CTO of D-company's competitor
Christopher	HR Administrative team leader	Leading HR admin team	6 years since joining D-company; has full authority over the basic functions (compensation/operation/system/policy) of the HR team	Before Fieldwork	Over 10 years in HR admin
Amanda	Project Manager of employee voice	Leading employee voice-related projects	Leading the organisational engagement survey and employee voice analysis project conducted annually at D-company	Before Fieldwork	3 to 5 years in HR strategy

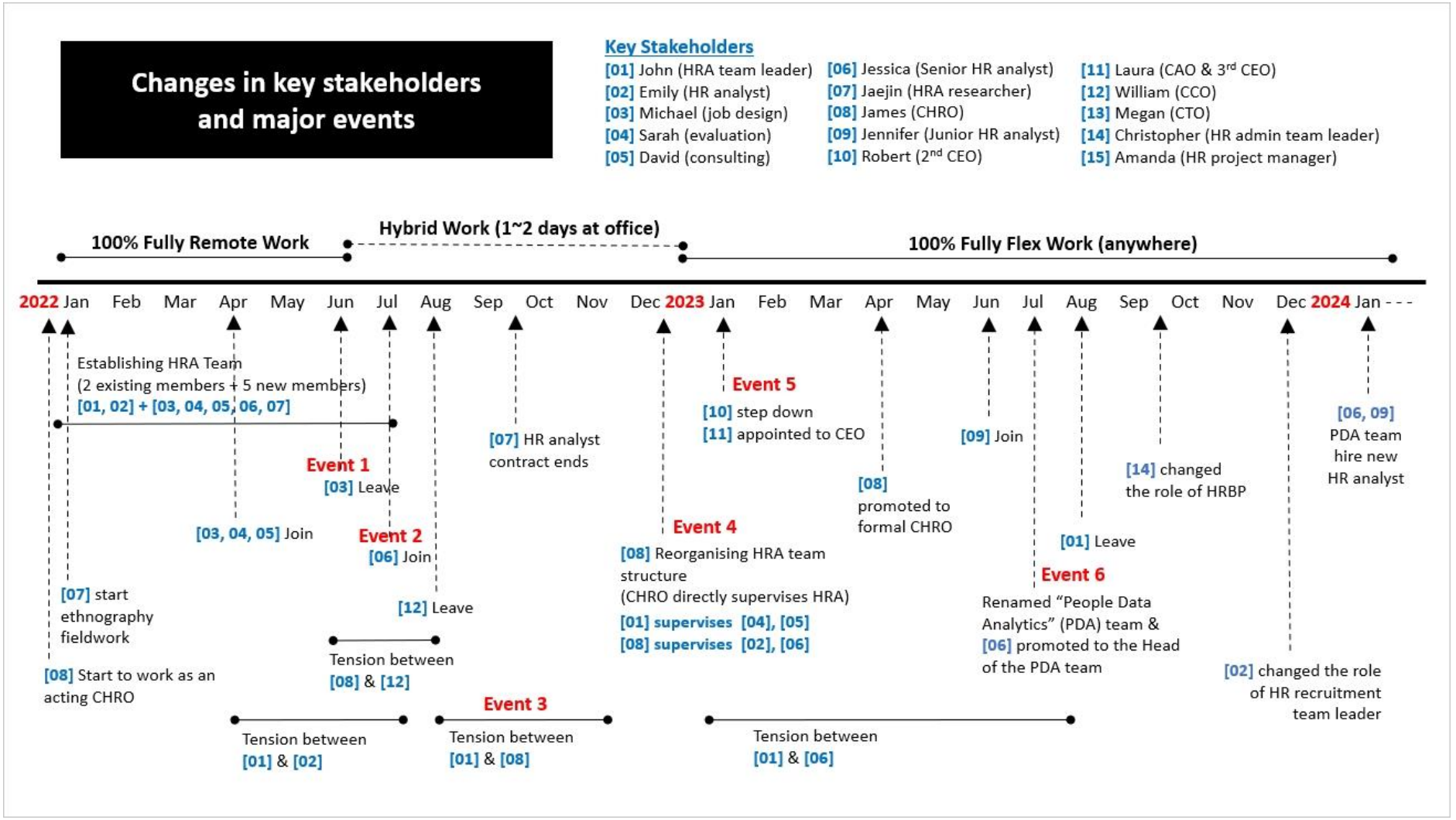

Figure 2. Timeline of Six Key Events and Stakeholder Changes at D-company

5.3.1 Two Key HRA Team Founding Members: John and Emily

The first set of key actors in this ethnographic study comprises the HRA team members, with particular focus on the team's leadership. The team's initial leader, John, was a seasoned HR consultant with over a decade of experience in external consulting firms, specialising in strategic HR. One of D-company's major challenges during its rapid expansion was the lack of mid-level HR leaders, and John was recruited in autumn 2021 to strengthen HR's strategic capacity. Having been exposed to data-driven decision-making in his previous roles, John quickly recognised the potential of the HRA team as a vehicle for reframing HR in data-analytic terms. In early 2022, as the HRA team began to take shape, John invested significant effort in one-to-one meetings with C-level executives to identify pressing business challenges. From my field observations, his approach began with defining business problems, similar to the strategic framing advocated as best practice in the HRA literature. (Guenole et al., 2017; Ferrar & Green, 2021). Yet John's entry coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, which limited opportunities for face-to-face interaction and weakened his ability to build relationships. This difficulty later complicated the HRA team's efforts to secure interdepartmental data access, illustrating how attempts to couple processes were mediated by situated relationships and informal networks.

Emily, another founding member, played a pivotal role in establishing the HRA team in January 2022. Unlike John, Emily had worked at D-company for over five years and developed strong internal connections. These ties were invaluable in navigating interdepartmental communication and gaining access to datasets for HRA projects. With extensive recruitment experience, she contributed operational HR knowledge that proved critical for project design, hypothesis formulation, and scope definition. Scholars studying HRA emphasise that the adoption of HRA requires not only data analysis skills but also deep HR expertise and contextual knowledge (Ferrar & Green, 2021; Rasmussen et al., 2024). Emily embodied this combination, while her relational capital complemented John's strategic orientation. Beyond John and Emily, the team expanded in April 2022 with Michael, Sarah, and David, followed by Jessica in July 2022 and Jennifer in June 2023 (see Table 2 for their details of roles and experience). These additions enhanced analytical capacity and HR expertise. As a part-time analyst and advisor within the team, I also contributed to this work to some extent.

5.3.2 Other Key Members Outside of the HRA Team

Among the key internal actors within the HR department, Christopher and Amanda held significant influence despite not being directly part of the HRA team. Christopher, a seasoned HR manager with over a decade of experience, had spent six years at D-company cultivating close relationships with C-level executives. Leveraging these ties, Christopher, the leader of the HR administration team, and his team members frequently conducted their own analyses using HR data under their control, often bypassing collaboration with the newly established HRA team. These analyses were presented directly to senior management, reinforcing his team's jurisdictional authority over HR data. My field observations during the first year of the HRA team's establishment captured recurring tensions between Christopher's HR administration team and the HRA team, particularly concerning data access, the reporting of analytical findings, and the delineation of authority. This contestation over the legitimacy of "who owns analytics" illustrates how HRA became a site of jurisdictional struggle within the HR department.

Amanda, a HR project manager, also played a pivotal role in shaping the HR landscape at D-company through a long-term project on employee voice, which generated regular reports for HR executives and senior leadership. Unlike conventional HR reporting, Amanda frequently joined the CHRO in meetings with C-level executives, directly influencing organisational decision-making. Her work helped reduce scepticism among senior leaders toward data-informed insights, thereby strengthening her position within the HR function. However, despite the overlap between Amanda's project and the HRA team's mandate, their relationship was characterised by competition and boundary contestation. A notable instance occurred when the HRA team requested access to employee voice data to apply advanced analytical techniques. Amanda and her team repeatedly delayed and eventually refused, citing concerns that potential errors in their earlier analyses could be revealed, exposing them to accountability risks. My fieldnotes and interviews with Amanda revealed that her reluctance reflected anxieties about vulnerability and professional reputation. This dynamic situation and boundary tension will be examined in greater detail in the subsequent analysis of HRA project interactions presented later in the Findings chapter.

5.3.3 C-level Leaders as Key Actors

The C-level executives at D-company were key stakeholders due to their strong interest in data-driven decision-making and their direct influence on the strategic positioning of HRA. James, the

CHRO, was promoted rapidly despite his short tenure, reflecting both the company's accelerated growth and the scarcity of senior HR leaders. In interviews, James described his intrinsic motivation to reposition HR as a strategic business partner, a role he sought to legitimate through the introduction of HRA. His prior experience in strategic consulting and as head of the rewards team had convinced him of the potential value of analytics as a means to strengthen HR's standing within the business. This background, combined with his rapid promotion within D-company, generated a strong intrinsic motivation to demonstrate his capability and leadership by initiating and embedding new analytical practices across the organisation. However, my field observations revealed that James invested significant effort in engaging with C-level executives, yet his efforts to couple HRA with broader decision-making processes repeatedly encountered structural barriers, such as fragmented data ownership and competing priorities. This also will be analysed and discussed in more detail in the Findings chapter.

Megan, the CTO, also played a decisive role. With 40% of D-company's workforce in her department, she commanded substantial influence over resource allocation and recruitment. Upon joining in 2021, she created a dedicated HR tech recruitment team within the Technology department to manage the hiring and rewards of engineers. The establishment of this separate team generated recurrent friction with the central HR department led by James, the CHRO, as overlapping responsibilities and data ownership issues complicated the HRA team's efforts to standardise governance and promote cross-departmental collaboration. As a senior engineer, Megan initially underestimated HR's relevance, often viewing it as administrative. However, her perspective shifted in concrete decision episodes. For instance, she initially resisted a HRA project focusing on workforce planning prediction but later endorsed it once she recognised its direct business value. As another example, during the parent company's post-merger data integration project, her negative experience with external platforms shaped her scepticism toward the planned SaaS-based HRIS, Workday[5]. Nevertheless, the parent company's continued pressure and repeated requests for system alignment eventually led Megan to reconsider the initiative and evaluate the adoption of Workday more positively.

[5] SaaS-based HRIS (Software-as-a-Service Human Resource Information System) refers to a cloud-based platform that provides integrated HR functions such as recruitment, payroll, performance management, and workforce analytics through a subscription model. Workday is a widely used commercial HRIS platform that enables organisations to manage employee data, automate HR processes, and generate analytics in real time.

5.4 Establishing HRA Team from Scratch

To recap a key point made in section 5.1 above, this study is particularly significant as it observes and explores the formative dynamics of coupling in building D-company's HRA function from scratch. Unlike existing ethnographic studies that focus on established HRA teams operating within stabilised routines (Ellmer & Reichel, 2021; Jörden et al., 2022), this research uniquely captures the early-stage negotiations through which an HRA team was first constituted. Previous studies provide valuable insights into how analytics is organised and legitimised within mature teams, but they often pay less attention to the foundational narratives, jurisdictional tensions, and contestations of institutional logics that shape the emergence of analytics as a subfield at the microfoundational level. This study, on the other hand, examines the formative phase of the HRA team's development at D-company through a longitudinal lens, uncovering the mechanisms through which institutional work unfolded, and new practices were negotiated and coupled with existing organisational structures. Additionally, the study shows how an emerging team navigated competing logics - the dominant technological rationality of the engineering function, the traditional HR logic centred on compliance and relational expertise, and the nascent strategic growth logic promoted by new leadership. The study, by examining these dynamics, contributes to understanding how analytics is variably coupled with existing routines and how its legitimacy is constructed in a rapidly evolving organisational context. From this perspective, it is important to closely examine the background, context, and circumstances surrounding the initial formation of D-company's HRA team.

The establishment of the HRA team coincided with a generational shift in leadership at D-company. The first-generation executives, who prioritised rapid expansion, were replaced by a cohort that emphasised structured and sustainable growth, focusing on building scalable systems and pursuing a more stable, long-term business model. This transition created a rare window of opportunity to reposition HR from an administrative support function to a strategic partner. Despite the CHRO's subordinate position within the executive hierarchy, the role gained prominence as shifting organisational logics made HR's strategic contribution more visible. However, this transition also provoked resistance from actors inhabited by existing organisational logics who continued to frame HR as peripheral to core business decision-making. A particularly illustrative example, which will be discussed in greater detail later, was the growing perception of inconsistency within D-company: while the HR department tightly controlled headcount changes in other functions under the pretext of labour cost management, it simultaneously expanded its own capacity, including the HRA team. This led to scepticism and frustration among employees

in other departments regarding the direction of organisational growth and workforce allocation. Also, the contractual status of the CHRO, James, operating on performance-based annual contracts rather than permanent tenure, reflected the company's broader emphasis on measurable outcomes. This institutionalised practice reflected D-company's emphasis on measurable outcomes and created a strong incentive for James to demonstrate short-term results. The establishment of an HRA capability became a key vehicle for this objective. Sponsoring the creation of an analytics team enabled James to symbolically demonstrate HR's contribution to evidence-based decision-making. As a result, the team expanded rapidly, from two members in January 2022 to seven within six months, largely due to his active sponsorship.

Initially, the HRA team at D-company was called the Change Management Team. CHRO James and the founding team leader, John, deliberately avoided the term "analytics" to mitigate potential resistance in an organisation unfamiliar with data-driven HR practices. This early naming decision reflected an awareness of existing social structures that positioned HR as peripheral and driven by the traditional relational logics of the profession. Yet, as my field observations indicated, the ambiguous label generated confusion among employees and managers regarding the team's purpose. In newly formed organisations, a team's name often acts as a symbolic boundary marker that signals its function and legitimacy; the term "change management" failed to provide that clarity. Eighteen months later, the team was renamed the People Data Analytics (PDA) team. This rebranding marked a critical coupling episode, clarifying the team's identity and signalling its alignment with D-company's data-driven strategy. The renaming not only improved recognition across departments but also strengthened the position of HRA within D-company by more closely aligning the meanings, and identities of the HR and HRA subfields within D-company's organisational field.

The interplay between John and Emily, the founding members of the HRA team, illustrates the hybridisation of institutional logics within HRA. This is a critical dynamic in understanding the formative stage of coupling analytics with HR practices. Hybridisation refers to the coexistence and blending of multiple institutional logics within organisations, often resulting in tension, adaptation, and innovation. Preceding studies by Pache and Santos (2010; 2013) show that such hybridisation is a process in which conflicting logics are selectively combined through ongoing negotiation and experimentation, enabling new organisational forms or practices to emerge. In the context of HRA, this entails combining a data-driven, evidence-based logic with traditional HR logics centred on relational, experiential, and compliance-based practices.

John brought diagnostic expertise from his consulting background, while Emily contributed insider organisational knowledge grounded in her extensive recruitment experience. During the first few weeks of setting up the HRA function, John focused primarily on building relationships with C-level and senior executives, conducting a series of individual meetings, both online and in person, to identify organisational priorities and define problems that required analytical attention. During this process, Emily, with her longer tenure and contextual understanding of D-company, made a significant contribution by helping to interpret and contextualise the issues raised by senior leaders, enabling both to redefine organisational problems in a way that resonated with internal realities. For instance, the initiation of the HR data governance project reflected Emily's awareness of weaknesses in D-company's data management practices. This diagnostic phase was meaningful and successful in securing legitimacy and managerial support for the nascent HRA initiative. However, John's limited rapport with other HR team members, including line managers and team leaders, later posed challenges to obtaining their cooperation and access to internal data. Because he had joined D-company during the COVID-19 pandemic, opportunities for in-person interaction were scarce, and much of his early communication took place online, limiting the depth of relational trust with colleagues across the organisation. This contrast highlights that while his strategic engagement helped align HRA with executive priorities, the absence of strong relational ties within the HR department.

The expansion of the HRA team in the early stage marked an important point in consolidating its position within D-company. The addition of new members - Michael, Sarah, and David - broadened the team's professional expertise, while the subsequent recruitment of specialised analysts, Jessica and Jennifer, enhanced its quantitative capabilities. The recruitment of mid-career professionals such as Michael, Sarah, and David was especially significant: they brought credibility and domain knowledge from compensation, consulting, and workforce planning, reinforcing the perception of the HRA team as a group of specialists within the company. However, the team's early composition also revealed a skill gap in advanced analytics. In addition, some of the newly hired members, such as Michael, struggled to adjust due to the ambiguity of role boundaries and the lack of clearly defined responsibilities, which led to early turnover during this formative stage. Nonetheless, the later inclusion of Jessica and Jennifer - both with strong data analysis and modelling skills - addressed this gap and enabled the team to undertake more technically complex projects, including predictive workforce modelling and HR dashboard development. This growth therefore reflected ongoing negotiations of expertise and identity within HRA, as practitioners with different backgrounds (e.g. HR generalists, consultants, and data analysts) learned to align their professional logics and practices. Therefore, examining the

formation of D-company's HRA team from its inception reveals how competing logics were negotiated and practices loosely/tightly coupled within a complex organisational environment.

5.5 Key Events that Occurred during D-company's Two-year Fieldwork

For the reader's clarity, Figure 2 presented earlier in this chapter summarises the key stakeholders involved in the formation and coupling of HRA practices at D-company, alongside the major events and interactions that shaped them during the two-year fieldwork period. The thick horizontal line at the top of the timeline represents the duration of the two-year fieldwork, while the six events marked in red (Events 1–6) indicate major contextual turning points that shaped the organisational environment within which the twelve HRA projects - later analysed as decision episodes - unfolded and evolved. During the first six months of fieldwork, D-company operated fully remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Following the national government's relaxation of restrictions after the rollout of vaccination programmes, the company gradually introduced partial office attendance in mid-2022. Between June and December 2022, most employees worked in the office one or two days per week on a rotating schedule, spending the remainder working from home. In 2023, D-company formally adopted a "Flex Work" policy, granting employees full autonomy over workplace and schedule. These contextual shifts are analytically important because they altered not only work routines but also the motives and background for embarking on HRA projects at D-company. As Czarniawska (2007) and Van Maanen (2011) highlight, exploring stakeholder-centred events is also crucial in ethnographic field studies for understanding longitudinal dynamics and contextual change. Building on these insights, the following examines six key events that illuminate how contextual factors, such as leadership transitions, interdepartmental negotiations, and post-pandemic restructuring, influenced the coupling processes of HRA initiatives within D-company's organisational environment.

The first significant event occurred in June 2022 with Michael's resignation, which marked the voluntary departure of an early HRA team member shortly after joining. Michael was one of three external hires recruited following the establishment of D-company's HRA team. Within six months, the team had expanded rapidly from two to seven members (including myself), with three of the five new recruits arriving within the first quarter. This swift growth reflected the team's broader ambitions - initially formed as the Change Management Team - to strengthen underdeveloped HR areas such as compensation, performance evaluation, planning, and consulting while promoting data-driven practices. Within this structure, Sarah focused on

performance evaluation, David on consulting, and Michael on job design. Yet Michael's experience revealed the fragility of these newly created roles: as the team expanded faster than its underlying systems and support structures, he struggled to adapt to a role that lacked well-defined responsibilities, adequate data infrastructure, and collaborative support from colleagues. His resignation two months later signalled the difficulties of building a new analytics function within an organisation where HRA was loosely coupled to existing practices. Follow-up interviews and informal conversations with Michael revealed how the HRA team's early structural and relational ambiguities affected members' experiences. Expecting to approach job design through a data-driven lens, he found that the datasets, analytical tools, and interdepartmental cooperation required for such work were largely absent. The team had expanded faster than its supporting systems and routines, leaving him to build much of his role from scratch. This imbalance between expectations and available resources created frustration and uncertainty, illustrating the practical difficulties of launching a new analytics function within the organisation.

The second significant event was the arrival of Senior HR Analyst Jessica, who joined D-company's HRA team in July 2022. Her entry exemplifies how the inclusion of a new actor can significantly reshape the interactions within the team and the organisation and played a pivotal role in advancing the early coupling of HRA projects. Before her arrival, the first six months of the team had been fraught with challenges, including growing fatigue and misalignment among its founding members. A particularly notable issue was the strained relationship between John and Emily, which eventually led to Emily experiencing burnout. Both were founding members and shared a strong belief in the strategic importance of HRA, yet their approaches diverged. John, coming from a consulting background, prioritised aligning HRA initiatives with operational HR needs, while Emily sought to deepen the analytical rigour of projects.

Emily's commitment to the new HRA function was especially remarkable. She had voluntarily stepped down from her former position as Head of Recruitment to join the HRA team as a member - a decision that ran counter to typical hierarchical norms within D-company. Her passion for analytics, however, was soon challenged by a series of obstacles well-documented in prior HRA research: the absence of adequate data resources; limited collaboration across departments; internal politics; and systemic constraints on innovation. John's frequent requests for her to prioritise HR operational tasks over data analysis further compounded the issue, leaving Emily unable to focus on the analytical work she had envisioned. She found herself overwhelmed with ad hoc administrative tasks and eventually reached a point of severe burnout. In an informal conversation with me, she expressed serious thoughts about leaving the organisation.

At this critical juncture, Jessica's arrival brought both capability and stability to the team. With extensive experience in data analytics across several organisations, she provided the technical expertise that had previously been lacking. Jessica's systematic approach to designing and executing analytical projects gave the team renewed clarity of purpose. Her collaboration with Emily, in particular, helped to reorient the team's focus toward structured analytical practices and restored Emily's confidence and motivation. According to my ethnographic observations and fieldnotes, had Jessica not joined the team, or had her entry been delayed, Emily would likely have left D-company. Jessica's timely arrival therefore proved instrumental in sustaining the HRA team's momentum and legitimacy.

The third significant event was the escalating conflict between John and James, which unfolded between August and November 2022 and became one of the most frequently documented episodes in my field notes. The relationship between the two initially appeared complementary: James, recently promoted from Head of Compensation to CHRO, had recruited John to lead a newly created change management team designed to strengthen HR's strategic capacity. John's consulting background made him a strong advocate for positioning HR as a central actor within D-company, while James, drawing on his understanding of the startup environment, sought to align HR initiatives with business-critical areas such as technology and sales. As their collaboration progressed, these differing orientations evolved into visible tensions. John criticised what he saw as D-company's overemphasis on short-term sales metrics and its neglect of long-term workforce planning. His commitment to repositioning HR as a strategic function was channelled through the workforce planning and forecasting project, which he viewed as an opportunity to demonstrate HR's analytical capability. However, the project clashed with D-company's immediate business focus, as the post-pandemic environment demanded cost control and operational agility. James repeatedly advised that workforce forecasting was not a short-term priority, but John persisted, regarding the project as essential for strengthening HR's legitimacy and influence. In this regard, John's commitment to the workforce planning project had the opposite effect to that which he intended. The disagreement culminated in James's decision to remove HRA functions from John's direct supervision, prompting a realignment of responsibilities within the HR department. Ultimately, the confrontation between John and James simultaneously exposed the fragility of HRA's early adoption and catalysed the HRA team's structural change at D-company.

The fourth significant event was the division and restructuring of the HRA team in December 2022. This reorganisation separated Emily and Jessica, who were primarily

responsible for analytical work, from the HRA unit led by John and repositioned them under the direct supervision of the CHRO. From my observations and interviews, the restructuring represented a strategic repositioning intended to preserve the visibility and legitimacy of HRA activities within D-company. The restructuring enhanced the perceived authority of the team and improved collaboration with other HR units that had previously resisted data sharing by associating the analytics function more closely with the CHRO. In fact, prior to this change, when the HRA team operated as a sub-unit within the HR department, requests for data access were frequently delayed or contested, particularly by Amanda's team and the HR administration team. These tensions were rooted in jurisdictional boundaries typical of parallel teams within HR, which tended to guard sensitive data and resources. After the restructuring, however, Emily and Jessica acquired a CHRO-level authority in terms of requesting data. Their requests issued under the CHRO's authority were now treated as direct mandates, effectively reducing resistance and enabling new data-sharing processes. The reorganisation thus provided a basis for strengthening the alignment between analytical work and organisational decision-making.

The fifth significant event was the appointment of Laura as new CEO, which occurred between December 2022 and January 2023 following the resignation of the previous CEO, Robert. Leadership transitions at D-company had a decisive influence on efforts to HRA practices with the organisation's broader strategy, as the two leaders embodied contrasting professional backgrounds. As argued by Finkelstein, Hambrick, and Cannella (2009), a CEO's prior experience and cognitive frame strongly shape strategic priorities and patterns of organisational change. At D-company Robert, an engineer by training with a doctorate, exemplified the company's prevailing technological logic. His leadership reinforced norms that privileged engineering and product development, positioning HR as peripheral to the firm's strategic core. Although he formally endorsed the creation of the HRA team, his support remained passive: my field observations and interviews indicate that he seldom engaged with its activities or outcomes during 2022.

Laura's succession in January 2023 however introduced a markedly different orientation. Having built her career in strategic consulting, she brought a managerial-strategic logic that emphasised organisational design, cost discipline, and evidence-based workforce management rather than purely technological innovation. Her arrival immediately altered the institutional logic under which the HRA function operated. For instance, projects that had previously been contested, most notably the workforce forecasting initiative, gained renewed legitimacy and visibility. Laura viewed data-driven workforce planning as integral to strategic cost management and expressed strong support for the team's analytical work. Within three months of her appointment, she

confirmed James as CHRO, ending his interim status, and authorised additional hiring of junior analysts. The HRA team, also renamed People Data Analytics (PDA), became a recognised component of D-company's workforce strategy. The CEO change reconfigured the meaning of strategic HR, enabling actors to align their practices with a new legitimacy narrative. This event illustrates how leadership shifts can recalibrate institutional logics.

The sixth significant event was John's departure and Jessica's subsequent promotion. Both were central figures within D-company's emerging HRA function and had substantial influence on the social interactions that shaped its development and coupling with organisational routines. John had played a pivotal role in establishing the HRA team, while Jessica had strengthened its analytical capabilities through her direct involvement in multiple data projects. As noted earlier, the December 2022 restructuring positioned Jessica and Emily under the direct supervision of the CHRO. Consequently, John formally retained the title of team leader but effectively oversaw only the evaluation and compensation functions, losing authority over analytics-related work. This realignment fundamentally altered the relational dynamics between John and Jessica. My field interviews revealed growing tension and competition: John expressed a sense of loss, feeling that the HRA function he had built was "taken away" by senior leadership, while Jessica felt constrained by the lingering hierarchy of her former superior. These tensions persisted through the first half of 2023 until John's eventual resignation, after which Jessica was promoted to lead the rebranded People Data Analytics (PDA) team. Her promotion marked the formal consolidation of HRA as a recognised and stable organisational function.

The six key events elaborated in this section represent the critical contextual milestones observed during the two-year fieldwork. Each demonstrates how changes in leadership, team structure, and interpersonal relations over time provided the context in which efforts to couple analytical practices to HR practices within D-company played out. These events reveal how the HRA evolved through recursive cycles of conflict, negotiation, and structural adjustment. Also, the interactions among key stakeholders, John, Emily, Jessica, and James, constituted the lived processes through which new logics and routines were enacted, resisted, and gradually embedded at the microfoundational level. These contextual dynamics provide an essential foundation for the next section, which turns to the analysis of the twelve HRA projects, examining how coupling unfolded in practice across specific decision episodes.

5.6 Overview of the Twelve HRA Projects as Decision Episodes

During the two-year fieldwork, twelve HRA projects were undertaken at D-company. Figure 3 provides a chronological overview of these projects at D-company. These HRA projects were the empirical sites in which analytic work materialised, and each project is analytically reconstructed as an empirical instantiation of a decision episode. Each project also unfolded through multiple recursive morphogenetic cycles in which analytic artefacts were proposed, interpreted, contested and variably incorporated into organisational practice. Some HRA projects were discontinued at an early stage or rejected outright, while others remained loosely coupled for extended periods before gradually becoming more tightly integrated into HR routines. For analytical purposes, and as developed in Chapters 3.2 and 3.3, I conceptualised these projects as decision episodes - situated temporal sequences in which clusters of morphogenetic cycles became empirically visible as actors engaged in reflexive deliberation, negotiated meanings, boundaries and identities, and worked with analytic artefacts in practice. Examining these episodes made it possible to trace how analytics work followed different trajectories of coupling, contestation and adaptation over time.

The twelve projects can be grouped into three broad domains according to their substantive focus: *Data Management and System Development*, *Organisational and Work Environment*, and *Talent Management and Strategic HR*. Table 3 summarises their objectives, approximate timing, principal actors, and outcomes, but several features warrant elaboration here. These projects reveal how the HRA team's efforts to couple analytics with HR and organisational practices were shaped by changing social structures, evolving leadership priorities, and continuous negotiation with other functions across D-company.

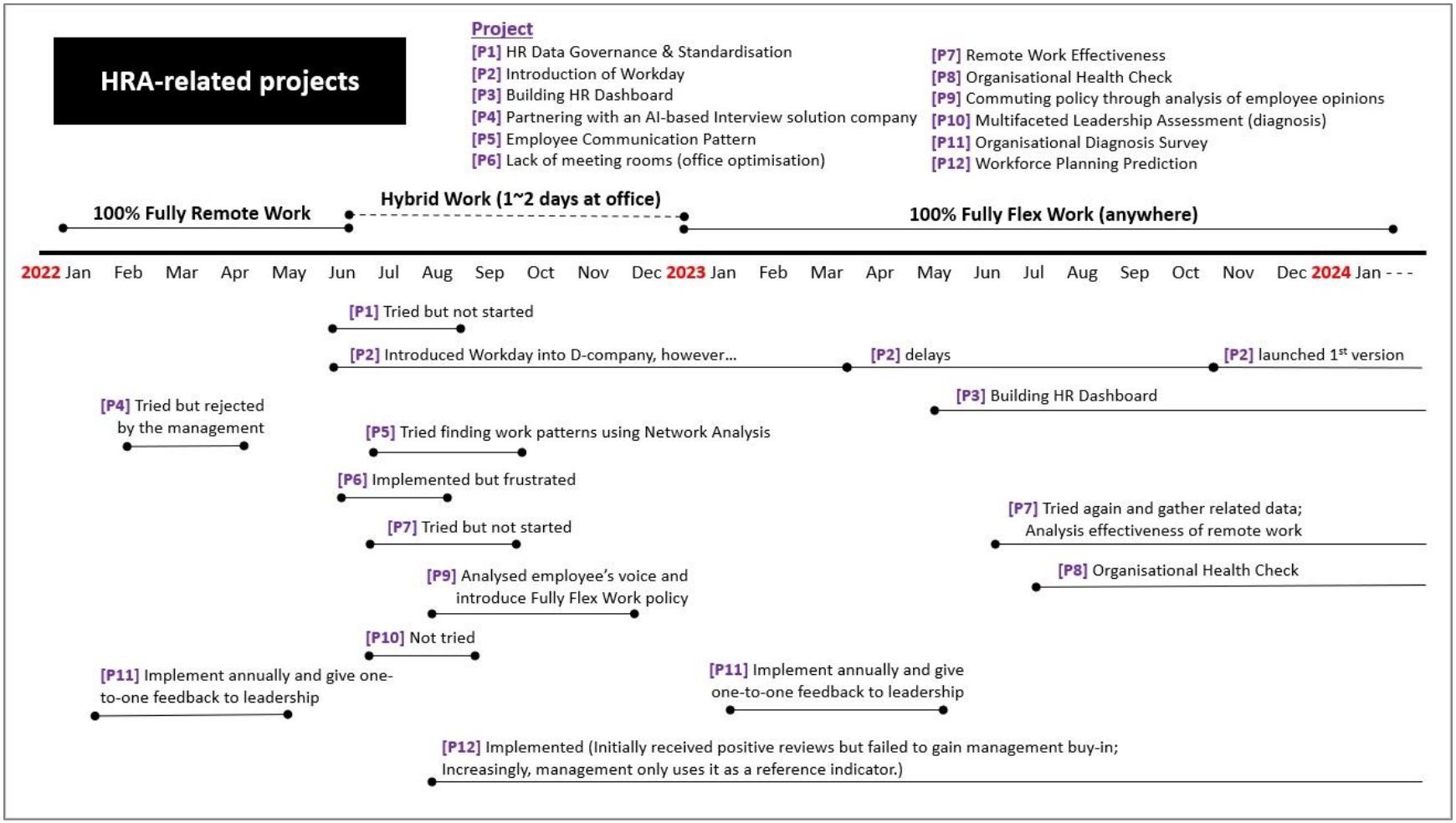

Figure 3. A Chronological Overview of 12 HRA-related Projects at D-company

Table 3. Summary of the Twelve HRA Projects during Fieldwork

Group	Project ID & Title	Core Objective	Period / Key Actors	Outcome & Analytical Significance
Data Management & System Development	**P1 – HR Data Governance & Standardisation**	Establish common HR data definitions and governance framework.	Q2 2022 / Emily (HRA) + cross-HR teams	Discontinued due to inter-team distrust and low collaboration; revealed early *relational vulnerability*.
	P2 – Introduction of Workday	Integrate HR data through global SaaS system mandated by parent company.	Q3 2022–Q1 2024 / Lena (Project Mgr), James (CHRO)	Eventually implemented; highlighted *technological alignment* and centralisation tensions.
	P3 – HR Dashboard Development	Build internal dashboard enabling real-time HR metrics and analytics access.	Q1–Q4 2023 / Jessica & Emily (HRA)	Tightly coupled as core analytical tool; example of *incremental alignment*.
	P4 – AI-based Interview Analysis	Pilot AI partner system for automated candidate assessment.	Q3 2022 / John (HRA Lead) + CTO (Tech Dept)	Cancelled after ethical and cultural objections; demonstrated *value-based resistance*.
Organisational & Work Environment	**P5 – Employee Communication Pattern**	Map digital communication networks during hybrid work transition.	Q2 2022 / Emily (HRA) + Facilities Team	Halted due to data-sharing refusal; typified *boundary and trust issues*.
	P6 – Office Optimisation	Analyse meeting-room usage to guide post-Covid space allocation.	Q2–Q3 2022 / Emily (HRA) + CAO Dept	Abandoned after poor cooperation; exposed lack of legitimacy and authority.
	P7 – Remote Work Effectiveness	Evaluate productivity and wellbeing under hybrid-work arrangements.	Q3 2022 → revived Q2 2023 / Emily & Jessica (HRA)	Initially loosely but later tightly coupled once leadership priorities shifted; case of *strategic realignment*.
	P8 – Organisational Health Check	Monitor overtime, wellbeing, and workforce fatigue trends.	Q4 2022–Q4 2023 / Jessica (HRA)	Sustained quarterly reporting; became long-term and tightly coupled practice.

	P9 – Flex Work Policy Analysis	Inform design of flexible work policy post-Covid.	Q4 2022 / HR Admin Team (Christopher)	Conducted outside HRA team; revealed *hierarchical disruption* and loss of jurisdiction.
Talent Management & Strategic HR	**P10 – Leadership Assessment Project**	Diagnose leadership capability gaps among mid-level managers.	Q2 2022 / John (HRA Lead) + CHRO Office	Never executed owing to lack of collaboration with Tech Dept; reflected *institutional complexity*.
	P11 – Organisational Diagnosis Survey	Internalise annual engagement and culture survey previously outsourced.	Q3 2022–Q4 2023 / Amanda (Employee Voice Mgr)	Tightly coupled; illustrates *relational legitimation work*.
	P12 – Workforce Planning Prediction	Forecast long-term workforce demand and cost using predictive models.	Q3 2022–Q4 2023 / John → Jessica (HRA Leads)	Initially loosely but later tightly coupled under new CEO, Laura; demonstrates *cognitive institutional shift*.

The first group, *Data Management and System Development* (P1 - P4), represented the organisation's initial effort to create a technical and governance foundation for analytics. The HR Data Governance and Standardisation project sought to establish common data definitions and a unified governance framework, but it was discontinued when cooperation across HR sub-units broke down. In contrast, the Workday implementation, a global SaaS-based HRIS mandated by the parent company, gradually evolved toward tighter integration within D-company, although the process exposed differences between its flexible, technology-driven culture and the parent firm's preference for centralised control. The HR Dashboard project, developed by Jessica and Emily, became one of the first initiatives to be tightly coupled with everyday HR routines and was subsequently used as a regular tool for reporting and monitoring workforce metrics. The AI-based Interview Analysis pilot, however, was cancelled following concerns from employees and senior leaders about its fairness and cultural suitability. Overall, these data infrastructure projects demonstrate how technical initiatives at D-company evolved through uneven progress, alternating between successful implementation and early termination.

The second group, *Organisational and Work Environment* projects (P5 - P9), examined how people worked and interacted during and after the pandemic. These projects, which correspond to decision episodes P5 - P9 in Table 3, varied widely in their progress and outcomes. Several of these episodes struggled to advance because of limited collaboration and data-sharing constraints. The Employee Communication Pattern Mapping and Office Optimisation projects were halted for these reasons, while the Remote Work Effectiveness project initially faced similar scepticism but was later revived as leadership priorities shifted toward hybrid work. This revival marked one of the few instances where a loosely coupled initiative gradually evolved into a tightly integrated and sustained practice. The Organisational Health Check also continued beyond its pilot phase and developed into a regular reporting process on workforce conditions. By contrast, the Flex Work Policy Analysis, conducted by the HR Administration team rather than the HRA team, created overlap and some friction between HR sub-functions. These projects reflected the changing organisational priorities and the challenges of sustaining analytic collaboration across departmental boundaries.

The final group, *Talent Management and Strategic HR* (P10 - P12), addressed more strategic aspects of workforce planning and leadership development. The Leadership Assessment Project, which aimed to identify capability gaps among mid-level managers, was never implemented. Despite initial interest especially from CHRO, it received low organisational priority amid competing ad-hoc demands, and cross-departmental collaboration remained limited

as non-HR functions showed little engagement with the project. The Organisational Diagnosis Survey, led by Amanda, was implemented and gradually embedded as an internal process, replacing the previously outsourced survey. The Workforce Planning Prediction project evolved from an initially low-priority project into a more visible initiative after support from the new CEO, Laura, who emphasised the importance of data-driven workforce management. These projects reveal how D-company's interest in analytic approaches to talent management expanded over time but remained contingent on leadership attention and interdepartmental coordination.

Overall, the twelve HRA projects as decision episodes show how HRA-related projects were initiated, negotiated, and developed within D-company's organisational context. Some were discontinued, others re-emerged in revised forms, and a few became part of regular HR practice. These projects provide the empirical foundation for the analysis in Chapters 6 and 7, which examine in depth how the dynamics of coupling, resistance, and change unfolded across these episodes.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter has elaborated the organisational context within which HRA was introduced at D-company. It showed that the company's rapid growth, post-acquisition restructuring, and technology-centred business model created both opportunities and constraints for HR to establish itself as a strategic function. HR's limited structural authority, fragmented responsibilities, and the dual focus on compliance and organisational culture positioned it as peripheral to the firm's strategic core. External pressures amplified these dynamics. The pandemic and changing labour market intensified interest in hybrid work, data governance, and workforce planning, prompting the organisation to seek more systematic approaches to decision-making practices. At the same time, the persistence of competing priorities, limited collaboration, and concerns about accountability constrained the full adoption of analytics. These conditions shaped how the emerging HRA team was formed, interpreted, and supported across the organisation.

The chapter also highlighted the importance of leadership transitions and interdepartmental relationships. The formation of the HRA team was strongly influenced by individual actors, particularly the CHRO and early team members, whose efforts to build credibility and secure data access were shaped by wider organisational politics and shifting executive priorities. Key events, such as the company's merger, team restructuring, raised conflict between team members, and the appointment of a new CEO, significantly altered resource flows,

leadership support, and perceptions of HR's legitimacy. These contextual factors provide foundations why HRA at D-company developed unevenly, becoming more tightly coupled with existing practices in some areas while remaining loosely coupled in others. The next chapter builds on this foundation by examining twelve HRA projects in detail, showing how these organisational conditions were expressed in practice and how analytics became either loosely or tightly coupled with everyday HR routines.

Chapter 6. Mechanisms of Loose Coupling Reproduction

6.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters laid the foundation for the findings. In the literature review, Human Resource Analytics (HRA) was conceptualised as a subfield that is symbolically legitimised yet only partially embedded within the professional field of HR. It also emphasised that HRA has both a technological and a social dimension and highlighted the persistent gap between formal support for analytics and its use in everyday HR practice. Chapter 3 then developed the theoretical framework that guides this analysis, integrating institutional theory, inhabited institutionalism, practice-based institutionalism, and Archer's (1995; 2003) morphogenetic approach to explain how coupling evolves through the recursive interplay of structural and cultural conditioning, actors' reflexive deliberation, and the situated interactions that unfold within decision episodes. This framework positions coupling as an emergent accomplishment of institutional work enacted over successive morphogenetic cycles. The methodology chapter outlined the ethnographic approach used to capture the microfoundational processes of coupling, and the context chapter described the organisational and cultural environment of D-company, a technology-driven multinational corporation in which HRA was newly introduced and contested.

Building upon these foundations, this chapter directly addresses the study's first research question (RQ):

Why does HRA, despite being symbolically legitimised within the HR field, remain loosely coupled with everyday HR practices?

The following chapter will then address the second RQ: *What are the mechanisms though which tighter coupling between analytics and everyday HR practices develop?*

Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork at D-company, this chapter addresses the central theoretical puzzle established in Chapter 1: why HRA, despite securing symbolic legitimacy within the HR field and receiving visible organisational support, remained loosely coupled with everyday HR practice during its early development. As conceptualised in Chapter 2, loose coupling does not reflect a technical failure to implement analytics, but a structural and cultural conditioning in which the data-driven logic of HRA and the relational logic of HR coexist yet remain only partially connected in situated work. This chapter consequently examines how these logics were interpreted, negotiated and enacted within early decision episodes, and how

the microfoundational and interactional processes identified in the theoretical framework, such as reflexive deliberation, identity work, boundary negotiation, and legitimacy concerns, reproduced loose coupling in practice.

To understand loose coupling at D-company, I analysed twelve HRA projects as decision episodes, each representing a situated attempt to connect analytic artefacts such as metrics, dashboards, and models to managerial decisions. Using an abductive and comparative coding strategy, I examined interactions between actors and how they linked to observable coupling outcomes, whether data were shared or withheld, artefacts adopted or ignored, and routines adjusted or unchanged. Through this process, I identified several mechanisms, understood in line with the definition adopted in Chapter 4.1 as the recurrent causal and interactional configurations through which institutional reproduction or change occurs (Hedström & Swedberg, 1998; Stinchcombe, 1991). In the context of this study, these mechanisms appear as patterned sequences of reflexive concerns, situated interactions and observable outcomes that stabilised or disrupted the coupling between analytics and HR practice over successive decision episodes.

The analysis identifies three mechanisms that reproduce loose coupling, specifying how interpretive, jurisdictional, and identity processes combine to sustain separation even under formal endorsement. The persistence of loose coupling was not simply a consequence of technical or structural barriers but was maintained and reproduced through affective and relational processes that shaped how the analytic logic was inhabited in practice. These findings extend existing understandings of decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and loose coupling (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021) by revealing their microfoundations in the *lived* experiences and practices of organisational members. This theoretical perspective will be elaborated further in Chapter 8, Discussion.

Table 4 shows a brief overview of the three mechanisms identified in this chapter. Each mechanism represents a distinct dimension through which loose coupling between analytics and HR practice was reproduced. The first, ***Defensive Translation***, is an interpretive mechanism that captures how actors avoided perceived threats by adopting analytics symbolically rather than substantively. The second, ***Jurisdictional Distancing***, is a structural mechanism that explains how authority and control over analytics were formally relocated to other departments or hierarchical levels. The third, ***Identity Ambiguity***, is a cognitive mechanism that reflects how unclear roles, mandates, and professional boundaries limited cooperation and weakened analytic legitimacy.

Table 4. Overview of Mechanisms of Loose Coupling

Theme	Mechanism Type	Core Feature / Process	Illustrative Description	Example Quote / Vignette
Defensive Translation	Interpretive mechanism	Threat-avoidance and symbolic adoption	Analytics was reinterpreted to appear legitimate while maintaining existing HR routines.	*"We can mention the dashboard in the report, so it looks evidence-based, but in reality, we'll make the decision the same way we always have."* (HR Business Partner)
Jurisdictional Distancing	Structural mechanism	Formal relocation of authority and control	Authority for analytics was shifted to other units (e.g., Technology, HQ), sustaining separation from HR practice.	*"Data decisions really sit with Tech. We just wait for them to tell us what's possible."* (HR Manager)
Identity Ambiguity	Cognitive mechanism	Unclear role and purpose of analytics	The uncertain mandate and professional boundaries of the HRA function reduced engagement and legitimacy.	*"I still don't fully understand what the HRA team actually does (…) are they analysts, HR, or something else?"* (Line Manager)

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. Section 6.2 examines Defensive Translation, analysing how analytic requests were reinterpreted as potential threats and transformed into symbolic rather than substantive collaboration. Section 6.3 explores Jurisdictional Distancing, showing how actors-maintained separation by relocating authority and control over data and analytic decisions to other organisational units. Section 6.4 discusses Identity Ambiguity, explaining how unclear roles and responsibilities weakened cooperation and reinforced the defensive and distancing responses identified earlier. Finally, Section 6.5 summarises the findings and synthesises how these four mechanisms together reproduce loose coupling through interpretive, structural, and emotional processes, setting the stage for Chapter 7, which examines how tighter coupling was subsequently achieved.

6.2 Defensive Translation

The HR Data Governance and Standardisation project (P1) exemplified how defensive translation emerged when actors perceived HRA as peripheral to their core responsibilities. This interpretive distancing meant that, although the project appeared cooperative on the surface, underlying meanings attached to the work undermined substantive engagement. The HRA team launched this project to standardise data definitions and create a shared infrastructure for analytics across HR at D-company. For the HRA team, data governance represented the foundational work required for credible analytics. For other HR units, however, it was perceived as unimportant compliance work - tedious, peripheral, and only loosely related to their daily responsibilities. During my fieldwork I observed and confirmed this perception. These divergent interpretations led actors to display superficial cooperation while effectively preventing meaningful implementation.

This recurring pattern of superficial offers of cooperation followed by limited practical engagement provides the empirical starting point for what I conceptualise as Defensive Translation. Whereas classical translation work enables new ideas to edit and adapti them for local use (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008), the early HRA decision episodes at D-company revealed a different dynamic to the preceding patterns of translation work. Actors interpreted HRA projects as potential threats to their competence, credibility and professional jurisdiction, and these interpretations generated partial, symbolic or minimal forms of translation. In practice, analytical concepts and artefacts were selectively reframed in ways that legitimised hesitation or resistance rather than facilitating integration. This pattern shows that defensive translation is not simply incomplete translation but a mechanism through which existing arrangements are protected: actors reshape the meaning of HRA to maintain continuity, preserve established evaluative criteria, and limit the implications that analytics might have for their roles and responsibilities. Thus, defensive translation is the interpretive mechanism through which loose coupling is actively reproduced, as actors mobilise translation work to stabilise the institutional status quo.

This section analyses how defensive translation unfolded across four decision episodes - HR Data Governance and Standardisation (P1), Employee Communication Pattern (P5), Office Capacity Optimisation (P6), and Organisational Diagnosis Survey (P11). It also demonstrates how a combination of divergent interpretations and relational vulnerability sustained or sometimes reproduced loose coupling between analytics and HR practice.

6.2.1 Translation amid Divergent Interpretations

The HR Data Governance and Standardisation project (P1) exemplified the fragile interpretive foundation of early HRA work. The HRA team launched this project to standardise data definitions and create a shared infrastructure for analytics across HR at D-company. For the HRA team, data governance meant establishing the basis for credible analytics. For other HR units, however, it was perceived as unimportant compliance work, tedious, peripheral, and only loosely related to their daily responsibilities. During my fieldwork I observed and confirmed this perception. Such differences in understanding led participants to appear cooperative on the surface while, in practice, preventing any meaningful implementation.

To initiate the project, Emily in the HRA team circulated an invitation to the relevant stakeholders, including the HR Admin team, the HR Recruitment team, and the infrastructure team. Those who were invited initially accepted the meeting request. I, as the researcher, was also planning to attend for participant observation, but the meeting was abruptly cancelled just before its scheduled time. During the conversation with me, Emily mentioned, looking embarrassed:

> Emily (HRA team member): *"Teams that were supposed to attend the initial meeting of the HR Data Governance project suddenly said they couldn't make it, so I had to cancel. (…) But they actually were all agreed and accepted my invitation."*

To understand the reason behind the sudden withdrawal, I later interviewed several of the invited participants. I could realise that they had accepted Emily's invitation but held different understandings of the project's purpose. For instance, a member of the HR Admin team interpreted the project differently:

> "*I read Emily's summary of the project and meeting agenda. But…it sounded like more compliance work for over-controlling or over-managing other teams' work, not something that would help us solve immediate problems (of my team).*"

A senior engineer from the infrastructure team expressed similar scepticism:

> "*There are already too many ongoing system projects across the company. I really don't understand why HR is suddenly talking/suggesting about a HR data governance project. There hasn't been any problem so far.*"

Subsequent observations of that day's unexpected cancellation, along with my reflections, were written in my fieldnotes as follows:

[Fieldnotes] *Emily seemed frustrated and embarrassed. She said that this project is an important groundwork for enabling other HRA projects to be set up and executed smoothly, requiring a long-term perspective, but other teams do not recognise its importance. It seems that even the term 'data governance' means different things to different teams. For example, the HR Admin team perceived the data governance project as an exercise of control, supervision, or monitoring over their own work. The HR Recruitment team saw it as largely unrelated to their immediate tasks, while the infrastructure team viewed it as part of peripheral and technical policy of the HRA team but not an emergent issue.*

Each group engaged in a form of Defensive Translation, assigning its own meaning to data governance in ways that aligned with its existing priorities and insulated its daily routines. These divergent interpretations meant that actors were not working from a shared problem definition, which kept agreement at a superficial level and produced symbolic rather than substantive cooperation. This episode consequently illustrates the interpretive mechanism at the core of defensive translation: when actors perceive analytic collaboration as misaligned with their immediate responsibilities or as a threat to their established competence, translation work is enacted to legitimise limited engagement. In doing so, this case advances the chapter's argument that loose coupling is reproduced through patterned configurations of meaning-making and selective uptake that stabilise separation between analytic and relational logics.

6.2.2 Defensive Translation under Relational Vulnerability

In the Employee Communication Pattern project (P5), the HRA team's request for reward and performance data initially appeared unproblematic. When Emily (a HR analyst) first outlined the project to Christopher, the HR Admin team leader, he responded positively and asked what was required. However, once she specified the detailed data request, his tone shifted. He emphasised that the data was "sensitive even within HR", asked for time to "check with the team", and then avoided further communication. Informal conversations with HR Admin members later revealed concerns about exposing messy data, being blamed for inconsistencies, and losing control over domain expertise. What looked like a routine data-sharing request was thus reframed as a risk-laden compliance issue, allowing Christopher to appear cooperative while avoiding substantive engagement.

This pattern revealed in P5 illustrates what I conceptualise as defensive translation under conditions of relational vulnerability. Relational vulnerability describes a condition of relational

imbalance in which actors operated within an ambiguous hierarchy, where data ownership and professional accountability were unclearly distributed across teams. In such settings, collaboration entailed potential exposure to criticism and uncertainty over control. What makes this example analytically important is that relational vulnerability activated defensive translation: actors reframed analytic requests not on their technical merits but in ways that minimised perceived exposure and protected their professional standing. In doing so, they engaged in forms of translation that preserved existing boundaries. This mechanism helps explain why apparently cooperative interactions repeatedly resulted in symbolic, thereby reproducing loose coupling even when formal support for analytics existed.

The P5 project aimed to analyse communication patterns among employees to assess collaboration effectiveness under hybrid work conditions during Covid-19 pandemic period. To implement the analysis, the HRA team requested access to reward and performance data of employees traditionally managed by the HR Admin team. This request exposed underlying tensions around data ownership and professional accountability between the two teams. During fieldwork, I observed a direct conversation between Emily from the HRA team and Christopher, the leader of the HR Admin team, which revealed how these tensions materialised in practice.

> "*(After listening to Emily's explanation of the P5 project) That sounds interesting. So, what do you need?*"

When Emily explained the detailed data request, Christopher's tone changed noticeably.

> "*Well, (...) this kind of data is sensitive, even within the HR department. Let me discuss it with my team first and get back to you.*"

However, no further contact followed. Later my informal conversations with members of the HR Admin team clarified the reason for this silence and lack of cooperation.

> HR Admin team member: "*He (Christopher) was quite sceptical, questioning why they (the HRA team) suddenly needed access to our data. He mentioned concerns about potential misuse or misinterpretation, especially since it's sensitive data.*"

A subsequent interview with Christopher, who spoke in a noticeably cautious tone, provided a more detailed explanation.

> "*Sharing data within HR isn't that difficult, but as you might know that our data is messy. Most variables aren't standardised, so we used to spend a lot of time cleaning it. If the HRA*

team analyses it and the results differ from ours, it might look like we've made mistakes or faults. That's something we'd rather avoid."

Christopher's response demonstrated how relational vulnerability triggered defensive translation. By redefining the analytic request as a matter of data sensitivity and procedural review, he reframed a request for collaboration into an issue of data management. Although the HRA team followed up with several reminders, Christopher did not re-engage, and no further discussion occurred. Rather than declining directly, he postponed action and avoided further communication, creating the appearance of procedural engagement without taking substantive steps. This indirect form of refusal enabled him to maintain professional courtesy and avoid potential criticism of his team's data quality or reporting practices.

6.2.3. Defensive Translation under Fear of Accountability

A similar pattern of vulnerability emerged at the executive level, but here the emphasis was less on cross-team relationships and more on personal accountability and comparative expertise. As CHRO, James occupied a central role in sponsoring early HRA initiatives, yet he expressed ambivalence towards data-driven projects that could expose HR to criticism from more technically skilled executives. That is, he experienced a form of professional vulnerability, fear of accountability, arising from comparisons with more analytically skilled executives. This vulnerability shaped his interpretive stance toward analytics: projects such as the Remote Work Effectiveness initiative (P7) were acknowledged as important, yet he hesitated to endorse them fully because deeper engagement risked exposing HR to scrutiny from quantitatively oriented functions such as Finance, Strategy, and Engineering.

James (CHRO): "*I understood the importance of setting up early HRA projects, but it was honestly difficult to fully support them. I felt constrained, worrying that HRA activities might draw negative reactions from other leaders or teams.*"

In meetings, he repeatedly voiced concern about how other departments, particularly those with strong quantitative and advanced data-analytic capabilities, might react to the results.

"*What if other departments, like Technology or Engineering, push back on the analysis or results?*"

In an informal conversation with me later, when I asked his thoughts why the early HRA projects at D-company had struggled to progress, he responded candidly and reflected on the personal burden of responsibility:

> *"When communicating with other leaders like the CTO (a tech expert with over 20 years' experience) or CEO (who holds a PhD degree in engineering), who excel in technical skills, my relatively weaker analytical expertise makes it challenging to discuss technical terms or analytics-related topics. So, I feel burdened when it comes to having our analytical results evaluated or judged by them.*"

These comments show how fear of accountability and vulnerable professional expertise were intertwined at senior level. James was not only concerned about whether the analyses were technically robust; he also anticipated being held personally responsible if other executives challenged the methods or results. In this context, defensive translation took the form of cautious support and limited sponsorship. Projects such as P7 were formally approved and framed as aligning with the organisation's commitment to data-driven HR, but they received little active championing, resourcing or follow-through during critical early stages.

James defensively translated HRA into low-risk, low-visibility commitments, endorsing the idea in principle while constraining its practical exposure. This defensive translation allowed him to preserve his legitimacy as a supportive CHRO while managing the perceived risks of scrutiny from more technically dominant peers. In doing so, he reproduced a familiar pattern already visible at lower levels: support for HRA was articulated to maintain symbolic legitimacy, yet participation remained selective and constrained, contributing to the loose coupling between analytics and HR practice.

6.2.4 Summary

Across these episodes, defensive translation operated as a key mechanism through which actors managed the organisational introduction of analytics while maintaining continuity with existing practices. Actors at D-company reinterpreted it in ways that reduced perceived disruption to established boundaries and responsibilities rather than rejecting analytics outright. Therefore, defensive translation functioned as a means of accommodating the new logic of analytics under conditions of divergent interpretations and multiple forms of vulnerability.

This process showed several features. First, translation was shaped by divergent priorities and relational dependencies. Projects such as P1 and P5 showed that actors adjusted the meaning of analytic initiatives to fit within their own local agendas, defining analytics as either compliance work or procedural data management. This allowed them to acknowledge the legitimacy of analytics without changing how they worked. Secondly, translation produced symbolic rather than substantive coupling. Related teams, such as the HR Admin team, HR Recruitment team, etc seemed to superficially endorse HRA projects, but their actual actions rarely led to changes in decision-making or data-sharing practices. In addition to this, thirdly, defensive translation was not only rooted in lateral relational vulnerability but also in leadership-level fear of accountability. Actors such as the CHRO translated analytic initiatives into low-risk, low-visibility forms of endorsement because they anticipated scrutiny from more technically dominant peers and feared being held personally responsible for adverse outcomes. This executive-level vulnerability amplified cautious, selective participation and limited sponsorship for early HRA projects.

From this perspective, translation at D-company became a means of managing dependency and avoiding potential embarrassment or loss of credibility. Through defensive translation mechanism, analytics became and remained loosely coupled from everyday HR routines by interpretive negotiation.

6.3 Jurisdictional Distancing

When I attended and observed a meeting for the Introduction of Workday project (P2), HR managers at D-company stared at the organisational chart in silence as they realised that the company's several existing job titles did not appear anywhere in Workday's global taxonomy. One manager muttered, "*So… what are we supposed to map these to?*" Another added, in a curt tone, "*HQ must think their categories work everywhere*." Workday was not just a simple tool or system; it was a contested object over whose logic, and whose authority, would define HR practice. A similar reaction occurred in the AI Interview Pilot project (P4), where a Data Engineering manager introduced an AI-based screening model by saying, "*This removes delays from traditional HR interviews.*" Several HR managers exchanged discomfort glances because they felt that the human-centred evaluative logic underpinning HR practice was being underestimated in favour of an efficiency-driven technological approach.

These moments revealed a recurring pattern across the early HRA projects. Actors did not openly reject analytic initiatives; instead, they appealed to data ownership or professional jurisdiction to legitimise delay and redirect responsibility. From this perspective, jurisdictional distancing refers to a structural mechanism through which actors sustained or reproduced loose coupling by formally preserving the existing distribution of analytic authority across organisational or departmental boundaries. Through these mechanisms, authority and responsibility for analytics were maintained procedural legitimacy while impeded substantive integration. In these ways, analytic authority became the object of cross-level contestation between headquarters and subsidiaries (e.g. P2), between Technology and HR (e.g. P4), and between Facilities and HR (e.g. P6). In this section, I examine three related sub-themes: the recentralisation of analytic authority, competing logics of expertise, and procedural resistance through data ownership.

6.3.1 Recentralisation of Analytic Authority

During an early meeting for the Introduction of Workday project (P2), several participants from D-company, exchanged confused looks as they realised that their existing job titles, grading structures and employment categories simply did not exist within Workday's global taxonomy. One manager mumbled that "*almost half of our existing roles do not match the English-expressed roles required by headquarters…*", capturing a moment in which the local HR system appeared fundamentally incompatible with the global platform being imposed. This reaction signalled more than operational difficulty; it foreshadowed a broader realignment of analytic authority away from D-company's HR function.

The Workday adoption project demonstrated how analytic authority was relocated through hierarchical realignment between D-company and its corporate headquarters. Following the firm's acquisition by a global conglomerate, headquarters mandated the introduction of Workday, a cloud-based HR information and enterprise resource planning system. The system was promoted and introduced as a means to integrate employees' data and standardise HR processes across subsidiaries including D-company. For D-company's managers, however, it symbolised control and loss of discretion. The CHRO, James, expressed his frustration during the conversation with me:

> "*Workday doesn't really account for regional features. The headquarters expects us to follow a one-size-fits-all approach, but our workforce requirements, situation, and business environments are different.*"

In our conversation, he further elaborated on the linguistic and cultural barriers that accompanied centralisation as well as local contextual factors. By local features, he referred to the elements of HR practice that were specific to D-company's national context but not recognised within Workday's global framework, such as job titles and grading structures that existed in the local organisation but not in the system's standard taxonomy, employment policies embedded in national labour law that could not be represented in the Workday platform, and HR terminology expressed in the local languages that had no direct equivalents in English. In particular, he emphasised terminological inconsistencies between the HR language used in the country where D-company is located and the system's global taxonomy, stating:

> James (CHRO): "*HR terminology is a key issue. There are roles and terms in our local language that don't exist in English. This isn't an isolated problem; it happens frequently and adjusting for these differences takes time. Moreover, we want to invest more aggressively in workforce hiring to align with the realities of our local business market, but headquarters seems more focused on projects like Workday to exert greater control over subsidiaries. They don't fully understand the business dynamics of this region.*"

Without a deep and comprehensive understanding of national context where D-company is located and business realities, the Workday initiative (P2) was perceived by D-company's HR staff as an imposed mandate rather than a genuinely data-driven HR strategy. This top-down implementation generated resistance and practical difficulties, reproducing the loose coupling between analytics and HR practice.

As detailed in the Methodology chapter, my fieldwork data included a substantial volume of internal documents collected from D-company. Among these, a related document concerning the Workday project described the implementation policy as "*an integrated, data-driven HR system ensuring consistency across subsidiaries.*" However, the document did not provide any detailed implementation guidelines that took into account the specific contexts and operational realities of individual subsidiaries, including D-company. In practice, this meant that analytic control was relocated from local HR to the global HRIS division without any clear jurisdictional negotiation or boundary definition. Consequently, the adoption of Workday, the corporate HRIS system, was framed as a necessary step for efficiency and standardisation but deprived local actors of the discretion to adapt analytic processes to their business conditions. This recentralisation of authority under the new corporate structure constituted a case of jurisdictional distancing as a structural mechanism, leaving analytics and HR practice loosely coupled between global HRIS systems and local HR operations.

During one meeting observed in late 2022, Lena, the Workday project manager, reflected her uncertainty about the Workday project's purpose:

> "*I have been assigned to this project, but I am uncertain how Workday aligns with our existing systems. It sometimes feels like an unnecessary disruption. While integrating data management is beneficial, I also wonder whether this is an attempt by headquarters to exert control over our HR system.*"

Her comment reveals the double-edged aspects of the initiative. She added that, "*although I continued to attend headquarters-led Workday meetings and discussions in compliance with corporate directives, we (Lena's team) have made almost no progress within D-company itself*".

These organisational tensions, however, cannot be understood solely as a case of hierarchical control. At a broader level, Workday acted as a carrier of the institutional infrastructure of the HRA subfield. Global HR tech vendors such as Workday, SAP SuccessFactors, and Oracle have become powerful field-level actors that shape what counts as legitimate analytic practice by embedding standardisation, codification, and data-integration logics into their platforms. Their products represent and reinforce a dominant 'global platform logic' within the HRA subfield, which prioritises cross-organisational uniformity over local professional judgement. Viewed through this background, loose coupling in P2 was not only the result of local resistance but also the consequence of a field-level reordering that relocated analytic authority upward to global systems and external vendors. As a result, Workday's introduction produced symbolic adoption and local disengagement: while compliance with headquarters directives was maintained, meaningful integration of analytics into HR routines remained weak.

From this perspective, the introduction of Workday, while formally presented and introduced as an improvement in analytics integration, functioned as a political reallocation of analytic authority between headquarters and D-company. The global standardisation of HR data systems, implemented through a top-down redistribution of control and reinforced by external platform vendors, reproduced loose coupling by limiting local actors' capacity to shape analytic practices in ways that aligned with their context. This form of distancing sustained and reproduced loose coupling.

6.3.2 Competing Logics of Expertise

During a meeting for the AI Interview Pilot project (P4), a Data Engineering manager introduced the AI interview product by stating, "*The vendor says their model reduces interview-candidate screening time by approximately 70%. If we adopt this process, we can reduce the delays and significant time spent using the traditional interview methods handled by the HR team.*" Several members of the HR department, however, showed visible discomfort and dissatisfaction. One member of the recruitment team responded by asking, "*If technology can really solve this, why don't all other companies already use AI-based HR tech solutions for interviews?*" This line of argument, and the conflicting perspectives behind it, also appeared among C-level leaders, particularly between the CTO and the CHRO. Before any procedures were even discussed, the project had already surfaced a clash over who held the legitimate expertise to evaluate candidates in the interview process.

P4 revealed jurisdictional distancing enacted laterally across functional boundaries between HR and Technology. Especially in this case, jurisdictional distancing resulted from the reallocation of hiring authority for engineers from the HR department to the technology department. The HR Tech Recruitment team, under the Technology department, embarked on this project to automate part of the recruitment process through artificial intelligence. Historically, recruitment at D-company had been a core domain of HR, but the growing need for technical talent created pressure for collaboration with the Technology division. As explained in the Context chapter, D-company maintained two separate teams responsible for recruitment: the HR Recruitment team within the HR department, which oversaw company-wide hiring, and the HR Tech Recruitment team under the Technology division, which was specifically dedicated to recruiting engineers. Emphasising the need for faster and more efficient acquisition of technical talent, the CTO, Megan, argued in a meeting:

> "*Engineers are the backbone of this company. We need to secure the best talent quickly and efficiently and using AI-based systems allows us to do this without being constrained or delayed by traditional HR processes.*"

The division of recruitment authority between the HR Recruitment team and the HR Tech Recruitment team created growing tension between their institutional logics. The CTO's statement positioned AI recruitment as an efficiency-driven tool aligned with the technological logic of optimisation and detached from HR's relational and human-centred approach. Moreover, by describing traditional HR procedures as "*constrained or delayed*," she implicitly devalued HR's

long-established emphasis on assessing candidates' character, attitude, and value alignment. For HR professionals, automation therefore challenged not only their process ownership but also the fundamental meaning of recruitment itself.

This tension was articulated by Sena, a member of the HR Recruitment team:

> "*Our culture has always valued people. AI might speed up recruitment, but it can't evaluate a candidate's moral perspectives or cultural alignment with D-company's. People are people. They interact best when they can read each other's non-verbal signals and body language.*"

Emily, who had previously served as acting leader of the HR Recruitment team before joining the HRA team, echoed a similar sentiment:

> "*There are a lot of issues with the recruitment process being handled separately by the HR Tech Recruitment team. Our company values employee experience and a human touch, but AI interviews don't align with that. The Technology team sees this differently, though.*"

Internal meeting notes reviewed during fieldwork captured similar tensions. According to the meeting summary, several executives insisted that "*critical decisions about people should continue to be made by us (humans)"* and that *"the recruitment experience shapes candidates' perceptions of D-company's brand, making human involvement non-negotiable.*" These statements illustrate how the AI project (P4) became a site of tension between technological and humanistic logics, with existing jurisdictional distancing enabling each side to maintain its preferred evaluative logic and thereby sustaining their separation.

Beyond the organisational level, these dynamics also demonstrates a broader shift in the HRA subfield itself. Like the previous case related to the Introduction of Workday in 6.3.1, AI-based hiring tools, often developed by global HR tech vendors, carry an efficiency-oriented platform logic that privileges automation and quantifiable assessment. This macro-level logic is embedded in the design of AI screening systems and is actively promoted as best practice in vendor literature and industry discourse. When D-company's Technology division advocated this software, the platform logic was introduced into the organisational context, where it directly confronted the HR profession's relational and humanistic evaluative criteria. The P4 case shows that the loose coupling of analytics and HR practice also emerged from field-level pressures and vendor-driven platform logics that allowed competing logics of expertise to persist without resolution.

The project was later suspended without formal termination. This episode illustrates how competing professional logics materialised in organisational structures. Jurisdictional distancing, as a structural mechanism, produced an ambiguous settlement that preserved symbolic legitimacy by separating authority from accountability and, in doing so, sustained and reproduced the loose coupling between analytics and HR practice.

6.3.3 Data-Based Distancing: Procedural Resistance through Data Ownership

When the HRA embarked on the Office Capacity Optimisation project (P6), Emily (a HR analyst) sent an email requesting access to spatial utilisation data from the Facilities division. Later, a Facilities team manager responded: "*We understand the purpose, but why is this your team's project? Office usage related work is under the CAO, not HR.*" Because Emily had included me in the CC line of the email thread, I was able to follow the exchange as it unfolded, and it became clear that the two teams' differing perspectives and interpretations generated ongoing resistance to data-sharing and raised concerns about jurisdiction and authority.

From this perspective, P6 demonstrates how jurisdictional distancing also emerged through the procedural control of data ownership, which functioned as another form of authority reallocation sustaining loose coupling between analytics and HR practice. The project aimed to analyse office space utilisation after the pandemic by integrating attendance records managed by HR with office spatial data owned by the Facilities division under the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO). While the project was designed as a collaborative analysis, ownership boundaries over data quickly transformed cooperation into symbolic compliance.

According to my observation of an early project email exchange between Emily and a facilities management team manager, a question was raised concerning the project's departmental jurisdiction. From one email, Emily explained the background and objectives of the P6 project and formally requested access to D-company's office management data.

The Facilities Management team responded as follows:

> "*Thank you. We understand the background of the project well. But isn't this our own work? Why are you (the HRA team) doing this?*"

This raised question from the Facilities Management team reflected an implicit understanding that control over data defined professional territory. When the HRA team

subsequently submitted a formal request for data access, the Facilities division replied in a manner that preserved procedural propriety while withholding actual cooperation:

> "*The data requested by the HRA team pertains to organisational facility operations and is therefore considered an asset of the CAO division. Even with CHRO approval, sharing this data would require additional authorisation from the CAO."*

The exchange exemplified jurisdictional distancing through data-based control. Formal rules and ownership claims were invoked to impede cross-departmental integration. In practice, the Facilities division exercised procedural authority to reassert its control over data, formally acknowledging the request but withholding actual cooperation. Interestingly, although no further analytical work was carried out, the project was subsequently recorded on the company's internal documentation platform (Wiki) as "Office optimisation pilot conducted - findings under review." This internal record gave the impression that the project had been conducted, despite the absence of any substantive analysis or output.

Emily, an HRA team member involved in the project, later reflected:

> "*At that time, we didn't even know exactly how to explain what kind of data we actually needed for the project. We described it vaguely as something like 'efficient use of employees' workspace,' which sounded reasonable, but in reality, we weren't sure what kind of data the Facilities team had, or what kind of data would actually allow us to conduct a meaningful analysis. (...) We tried to request cooperation from the CAO through the CHRO, but as other urgent tasks took priority, the whole thing just fizzled out.*"

Her remarks illustrate how, even though the execution of P6 had not appropriately progressed, the project appeared to be moving forward nominally, thereby creating the impression that the HRA team's work was advancing. Although the content recorded on the Wiki may not have been a deliberate or active act of deception, such ostensible documentation, which gave the appearance of progress without substantive action, exemplifies the loose coupling observed in the early stage of HRA introduction at D-company.

Therefore, jurisdictional distancing operated as an active form of resistance that defended the institutional status quo. By invoking procedural authority and ownership claims, the HRA team and the Facilities division shaped and reproduced a loosely coupled state. This allowed them to maintain legitimacy while remaining short of any substantive integration.

6.3.4 Summary

Jurisdictional distancing operated as a structural mechanism that preserved loose coupling between analytics and HR practice by formally preserving the existing distribution of analytic authority across organisational or departmental boundaries. Actors legitimised delay or non-participation by appealing to hierarchy, data ownership, or professional jurisdiction. In this way, authority and responsibility for analytics were not straightforwardly transferred but instead became sites of cross-level contestation, as different actors invoked competing logics to shape how analytic work should proceed. This allowed symbolic endorsement without substantive integration.

This mechanism manifested in three interrelated forms. In the Workday Implementation (P2), headquarters imposed a standardisation-oriented platform logic that clashed with locally embedded HR evaluative criteria. This prioritisation of a global logic, through the mandated adoption of Workday across all subsidiary companies, including D-company, encountered resistance at the local level, producing compliance in form but disengagement in practice. Local actors adhered to the global mandate but lost discretion to adapt the system to their specific business conditions. In the AI Interview Pilot (P4), jurisdictional distancing unfolded across functional boundaries between HR and Technology. Contested logic prioritisation, between a technological efficiency logic and HR's relational, humanistic logic, structured how recruitment authority was reallocated and how analytic innovation remained loosely coupled with HR practice. The Office Capacity Optimisation project (P6) further illustrated how jurisdictional distancing emerged through data-ownership-based resistance. The Facilities division maintained formal legitimacy while withholding substantive collaboration, creating an appearance of progress through symbolic documentation.

Across these cases, jurisdictional distancing transformed potential collaboration into formal compliance and symbolic completion, operating as a form of resistance in defence of the institutional status quo. Analytic authority became structurally separated from practical ownership of HR work, resulting in organisational arrangements that sustained rather than resolved loose coupling. Through data-based forms of logic contestation and jurisdictional preservation, D-company's early analytic initiatives remained acknowledged yet operationally detached, demonstrating how structural mechanisms preserve legitimacy while inhibiting integration.

6.4 Identity Ambiguity

In the early phase of establishing HRA at D-company, whenever the team was introduced during project meetings, attendees from other departments often showed weird expressions. For example, in meetings for the Office Optimisation project (P6) and the Workforce Planning Prediction project (P12), John introduced the *Change Management Team* as the unit leading the analytical work using employee-related data. Participants responded with questions such as, "*Why is change management doing this analysis?*" and "*Are they consultants? Analysts? Or an HR support team?*", expressing doubt about the identity of the HRA team. Even within the HRA team, confusion surfaced: Michael, a HRA team member, once said, "*I still don't know what my job is supposed to be. Am I doing analysis? Or strategy change management?*" These reactions revealed that the team's identity was contested and unclear. Colleagues struggled to understand whether analytics was a technical service, a change management tool, or a strategic advisory function. This ambiguity of the HRA team's identity weakened the foundations needed for collaboration and engagement.

Identity ambiguity refers to a cognitive mechanism that sustained and reproduced loose coupling between analytics and HR practice through persistent uncertainty about the role, mandate, and value of the HRA team. It did not emerge from a single decision but from a series of compromises during the team's formation. As elaborated in the Context chapter, the HRA team at D-company was deliberately named the *Change Management Team* to mitigate anticipated resistance from HR practitioners who might be sceptical of the unfamiliar term analytics, and to frame analytics as part of organisational transformation rather than a purely technical function. The omission of the term analytics was intended to avoid conflict with other HR units that might perceive data-driven work as intrusive. Yet this strategic choice produced unintended cognitive confusion. Stakeholders repeatedly questioned what the team was supposed to do, and even its members were uncertain about their roles. The following episodes illustrate how this ambiguity developed and how it reproduced loose coupling through reduced legitimacy and disengagement.

6.4.1 The Formation of the Change Management Team

The decision to label the analytics unit as the Change Management Team was made in early-2022 when D-company sought to formalise its HRA capability. The CHRO and John, the HRA team leader thought that the softer label would make the function appear less threatening to existing other HR teams. However, this strategic naming blurred the boundary between analytic

and other teams' work as well as its identity. Although John introduced the team as supporting the data-analytics aspect of employee-related work whenever he explained its role, stakeholders across D-company frequently questioned what the team was actually responsible for:

> "*Why is the Change Management Team conducting this analysis?*" (HR Admin team member)
>
> "*What does the Change Management Team actually do?*" (Amanda, employee voice project manager)
>
> "*How is this project related to the responsibilities of the Change Management Team?*" (Technology team member)
>
> "*Does the Change Management Team handle HR data analysis as well?*" (Employee wellbeing team member)

These repeated questions show that other teams did not recognise analytics as part of the Change Management Team's legitimate work. The absence of a clear mandate made it difficult for the HRA team to request data or participation. The ambiguity functioned as a cognitive barrier: when the team attempted to engage others, colleagues often struggled to see how the proposed analysis related to their own objectives.

Internally, this uncertainty affected motivation and role clarity. Rapid team expansion, from two members to seven within six months, occurred without a clear division of roles. Michael, an early recruit, described his frustration before resigning:

> Michael (former HRA member): "*I joined the team, but I'm not even sure what my role is supposed to be or what data or materials I'm supposed to work with. Everyone else seems busy with their own tasks, so I can't exactly ask them to clarify my responsibilities*."

He later reflected that remaining would have endangered his professional development:

> "*Rather than endure that uncertainty, I decided it would be better to return to my previous company, where I could continue building my career and professional network*."

Michael's resignation highlighted the link between identity ambiguity and attrition. Without a shared understanding of what the team represented, members found it difficult to derive meaning from their work, while other departments questioned the legitimacy of their activities. The ambiguous label Change Management Team not only created confusion about purpose but also generated anxiety among some HR colleagues, who associated 'change management' with

restructuring or organisational intervention. This heightened sensitivity caused their reluctance to share data or collaborate.

The ambiguous label Change Management Team also created a symbolic approach: it made the analytics function appear organisationally aligned while leaving its actual purpose and authority undefined. This ambiguity reduced the credibility of the team's analytic requests, discouraged cooperation, and fragmented the team's internal identity. These dynamics collectively prevented analytic work from becoming embedded, thereby reproducing loose coupling between analytics and HR practice. What was initially intended as a strategy to facilitate acceptance of analytics instead reinforced ambiguity, reproducing the separation between symbolic endorsement and substantive engagement that characterised the early stage of HRA at D-company.

6.4.2 Ambiguity in Daily Practice

Identity ambiguity also appeared in everyday interactions and project execution. Emily, who co-led several HRA projects, described her frustration during the Office Capacity Optimisation project (P6).

> "*These days, I don't even know what I'm doing in the Change Management Team. I'm supposed to work on the Office Capacity Optimisation project to optimise employees' physical office usage, but it's hard to secure the data, and I don't have the time to process the data we already have. Then there are all these ad-hoc tasks assigned to me as part of the team, and I keep wondering if they're really that important. I joined this team because I wanted to focus on data analysis, but now I feel like I'm doing something completely different. It's really disheartening, and the stress is overwhelming.*"

Her words "*there are all these ad-hoc tasks assigned to me as part of the team*" reveal the disconnection between professional identity, as a HR analyst, and assigned ad-hoc work. During this period, my fieldwork notes document several instances in which Emily was abruptly diverted from HRA-related analysis to provide urgent support for recruitment or HR administrative tasks. My fieldnotes include the following entry:

> [Fieldnotes] *Emily cancelled today's mid-point analysis meeting with me for the Office Optimisation project (P6) at short notice and left to work on something else. She later explained that she had been urgently reassigned by John to support HR administrative tasks*

for senior leaders. She mentioned that the HR Admin team was overloaded and unable to cover all the work, which meant she was frequently pulled in to help. Emily told me that these repeated interruptions made it extremely difficult to make progress on the analysis, and she looked visibly exhausted. (...) In a later informal conversation, Emily said she felt she was "burning out" and was considering taking long-term leave or even leaving the company if the situation continued.

She expected to contribute through analytic methods, but the team's undefined role pushed her into reactive administrative tasks. The mismatch between expectation and reality generated emotional fatigue and confusion about purpose.

A similar experience occurred for David, who joined the HRA team with HR consulting expertise but encountered the same lack of direction. His main responsibility was to utilise his consulting experience to define and address key HRA-related problems. However, his actual work resembled that of Emily and Michael, who had previously expressed exhaustion and frustration due to the team's unclear identity. My fieldnotes at the time indicate that although David's formal role was listed as "job analysis consulting," in practice he was assigned to various ad-hoc tasks without explicit guidance from the Change Management Team's leadership.

Unlike Michael, however, David did not make an extreme decision to leave the company. In an informal conversation, he explained why:

David (HRA team member): "*When a new organisation or team is first set up, it's always a bit unstable. Things often change from one day to the next. I've had similar experiences before when I worked with John on HR consulting projects in another company.*"

Although David seemed to accept this ambiguity on a personal level, the uncertainty still led to inconsistent collaboration with other departments. When the HRA team approached the HR Admin or Technology department for data access, those groups questioned whether the requests were legitimate. As one HR Admin colleague commented in an informal conversation with me: "*They say they need data for change management, but I'm not sure what that means in practice*." This ambiguity produced two outcomes. First, it reduced the credibility of analytic requests. Other teams were less likely to share data with the HRA team whose purpose they could not define. Second, it weakened the internal coherence of the HRA team itself. Without a clear identity, members oscillated between enthusiasm and frustration, caused and reproduced the loose coupling between analytics and HR practice at D-company.

6.4.3 Leadership Ambivalence and Competing Expectations

The ambiguity surrounding the HRA team's purpose and identity was reinforced by inconsistent signals from leadership. Typical illustrative case was the conflict between John, the leader of the HRA team, and James, the CHRO who oversaw the entire HR function. The contrast between James's and John's perspectives on the HRA (at that time, Change Management Team) team's identity became particularly visible during the initial meeting for the Workforce Planning Prediction project (P12):

> John (HRA team leader): "*This (D-company) isn't a start-up. In a company of this size, it doesn't make sense for departments to make ad-hoc requests to HR for new hires every time they need additional resources. To manage talent effectively, we need predictive workforce management aligned with strategy.*"

James, however, held a different view.

> James (CHRO): "*The role of the Change Management Team is to respond quickly and provide support as needed based on changing business circumstances. It should be data-driven, but I don't understand why they are spending so much time and energy on workforce prediction.*"

The CHRO, James, who had initiated the creation of the HRA team, saw its role as providing rapid support for changing business needs. On the other hand, John, the HRA team leader, envisioned analytics as a long-term strategic capability that could predict workforce requirements. These two different perspectives illustrate how senior leaders inhabited different institutional logics. They were inhabited by contrasting and conflicting institutional logics, which reflected the sedimented valuations they had developed about business and HR practices through their own career experiences. One in strategic consulting, the other in traditional HR. This reflects HR's professional status as an embedded profession: Individual professionals become inhabited by the institutionalised practices of the organisations they have practiced in rather than a cohesive logic of professional practice. These divisions over practice logic make it harder to cohere around a unified vision of how to couple analytics to HR.

Over time, this leadership ambivalence deepened the team's identity ambiguity. The point at which these logics collided created ambiguity around the team's identity, generating cognitive confusion among its members. Specifically, due to the tension between the two leaders, HRA team members received conflicting messages about whether their work should anticipate future

needs or respond to immediate demands. Meetings alternated between discussions of predictive modelling and requests for short-term HR reporting even within the same HRA team.

Emily, for instance, explained this complex situation in a markedly embarrassed tone:

> "*In the morning, I was working with Jessica on the predictive modelling analysis, but then suddenly John asked me to prepare an urgent report for the executives. And of course, I had to work the report because he's the team leader. (…) But later, James (the CHRO) asks why the predictive modelling work keeps getting delayed and why I'm doing this ad-hoc reporting. I honestly don't know what I'm supposed to prioritise…*"

As mentioned previously, HR analysts like Emily struggled to prioritise tasks and justify their methods. In this context, projects such as the Workforce Planning Prediction (P12) advanced slowly, as participating departments or teams questioned whether the HRA team possessed the authority to influence strategic decision-making. In turn, this ambiguity as a cognitive mechanism hindered the tighter coupling of HRA projects with the everyday operations of HR.

6.4.4 Summary

Across these episodes, identity ambiguity sustained loose coupling by weakening the cognitive foundations of collaboration. The mechanism operated through a recursive process: ambiguity over purpose reduced legitimacy; diminished legitimacy discouraged cooperation; limited cooperation reinforced uncertainty about purpose. In particular, at the formation stage, the strategic decision to name the function the Change Management Team blurred its analytic mandate, allowing symbolic acceptance of analytics while concealing uncertainty over its actual authority and purpose. During everyday work, this lack of clarity led inconsistent practices. Team members such as Emily and David experienced confusion over priorities, performing ad-hoc administrative work rather than analytic tasks, while other departments hesitated to collaborate with the HRA team whose purpose they could not clearly define. Leadership ambivalence further compounded this problem. The CHRO emphasised short-term responsiveness, whereas the team leader advocated a strategic, predictive role. These competing expectations caused conflicting cognitive cues to members and perpetuated confusion about the team's mission.

As a result, identity ambiguity operated as a cognitive mechanism that reproduced loose coupling between analytics and HR practice. Cognitively, ambiguity prevented the formation of a shared understanding of what analytics was meant to achieve, in turn, it constrained trust and

collaboration across teams. The outcome was a pattern of symbolic alignment, where analytics appeared endorsed but remained not tightly coupled from day-to-day HR decision-making. In this sense, identity ambiguity was a persistent organisational condition that maintained and reproduced separation between HRA and practical engagement.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how analytics evolved within D-company and why, despite formal endorsement, it remained loosely coupled with day-to-day HR practice. The analysis identified three mechanisms that sustained and reproduced loose coupling. Defensive translation, an interpretive mechanism, redefined analytic requests in ways that aligned with existing routines, producing symbolic rather than substantive adoption (e.g., P1, P5, P11). Jurisdictional distancing, a structural mechanism, relocated authority for analytics through vertical recentralisation to headquarters (P2), lateral redistribution across functions such as HR and Technology (P4), and data-based control via ownership and procedural rights (P6). Identity ambiguity, a cognitive mechanism, persisted around the role, mandate, and value of the HRA team, weakening legitimacy and discouraging cooperation (P6, P12). These mechanisms explain how and why analytics was accommodated in discourse and artefacts while remaining detached from operational decision-making.

The mechanisms did not operate in isolation. Defensive translation and identity ambiguity mutually reinforced each other: ambiguity over purpose enabled narrow translations that limited scope and repeated defensive translation perpetuated uncertainty about mandate. Jurisdictional distancing amplified both by structurally separating analytic authority from the practical ownership of HR work, either upward to headquarters, sideways to Technology, or through control of datasets, which restricted opportunities for shared work. Over time, these interpretive, structural and cognitive dynamics accumulated, and actors minimised potential conflicts and tensions by cancelling or postponing meetings, withholding or rerouting data, deferring approvals, recording completion without analysis, and suspending contested projects. The cumulative outcome was symbolic alignment with an analytics agenda, procedural legitimacy in documents and meetings, and continuing separation from everyday HR routines.

The episodes also clarified conditions under which loose coupling was most likely. It persisted when meanings diverged across teams, when authority or ownership claims could be used to restrict access, and when the HRA team’s identity remained unclear to collaborators.

From this perspective, we can assume that loose coupling will become tighter when authority, purpose and benefits were specified in ways that reduced perceived risk and when collaboration was supported by clear procedural pathways and accessible artefacts. These boundary conditions point to the types of interventions required to move from symbolic endorsement to practical use.

Empirically, the chapter showed that early analytic initiatives frequently produced symbolic compliance without engagement. In P2, global standardisation recentralised control and limited local discretion. In P4, competing professional logics shifted recruitment ownership across functions and slowed integration. In P6, claims over data ownership produced procedural acknowledgement without cooperation and yielded symbolic documentation of progress. In the identity domain, the initial naming and positioning of the HRA team created uncertainty that translated into inconsistent practices and slow progress in projects such as P12. These patterns demonstrate that limited integration and loose coupling was not a technical failure but the predictable result of interpretive negotiation, authority realignment and unclear mandate.

Conceptually, the chapter advances a mechanism-based explanation of loose coupling by showing that the three identified mechanisms are recurring configurations of morphogenetic cycles through which actors' concerns, interactions and outcomes jointly reproduce separation between analytics and HR practice. Findings demonstrate that this process is repeatedly accomplished through institutional work that unfolds within decision episodes - the situated arenas where multiple morphogenetic cycles intersect across actors - and, over time, stabilises and reproduces patterns of symbolic meaning. The chapter thereby clarifies how loose coupling is generated through cross-level dynamics: macro-level platform logics embedded in HR technology systems, meso-level jurisdictional arrangements between HR, IT and Finance, and micro-level interpretive and affective practices mutually shaped one another during decision episodes. In contested episodes such as P2 and P4, global standardisation logics, efficiency-driven technological logics and human-centred evaluative logics competed for primacy, aligning with local boundaries and day-to-day practices in ways that repeatedly reproduced morphostasis rather than enabling morphogenesis. Loose coupling persisted not because any single mechanism failed, but because these multi-level logics and organisational arrangements converged to reinforce defensive interpretations, ambiguous identities and displaced ownership.

This mechanism-based and temporally sequenced account explains why early HRA adoption at D-company remained loosely coupled even under visible executive support, and articulates how loose coupling emerges from the reflexive, relational and institutional processes

that shape analytic work. The next chapter builds on these findings by analysing the conditions and countervailing mechanisms through which actors mitigated defensive translation, reordered symbolic hierarchies, reconfigured artefacts and bridged jurisdictional boundaries, thereby enabling tighter coupling over time.

Chapter 7. Mechanisms of Tighter Coupling Formation

7.1 Introduction

The previous chapter addressed the first part of the research question by examining why HRA, despite being symbolically legitimised, remained loosely coupled with everyday HR practice at D-company. It identified three mechanisms, *Defensive Translation, Jurisdictional Distancing,* and *Identity Ambiguity*, through which loose coupling was reproduced and sustained. Each represented an interpretive, structural, or cognitive process that maintained separation between analytics and HR practice. These mechanisms showed that the limited embedding of HRA was not a technical failure but a relational and institutional change outcome. They also revealed how analytic work was defensively inhabited by organisational actors who sought to protect existing routines, boundaries, and identities from perceived threats.

Building directly on these findings, this chapter turns to the second RQ: *What are the mechanisms though which tighter coupling between analytics and everyday HR practices develop?*

It examines how, within the same organisation and over time, the relationship between analytics and HR practice evolved from symbolic endorsement towards more substantive integration. Rather than treating tighter coupling as a final or ideal state, I draw on my data to argue that it is a gradual, recursive, and situated mechanism produced through multiple forms of institutional work. The analysis identifies the specific mechanisms that allowed analytics to become intelligible, credible, and usable in daily decision-making. As explained in Chapter 3, coupling is conceptualised in this thesis as a process that evolves through recursive interactions between structure, agency, and practice. In the early phase, actors' defensive responses facilitated separation by translating analytic requests symbolically, reallocating authority, and maintaining ambiguous roles. In the later phase, however, these same actors, with some newcomers to D-company began to alter how they translated, negotiated, and applied analytics in practice. Through iterative adjustments in interpretation, coordination, and artefact design, the conditions and status of coupling shifted.

To analyse how tighter coupling occurred, I again examine the twelve HRA projects introduced in Chapter 5 as decision episodes. Observed longitudinally, these projects show distinct shifts in how collaboration was organised and how analytic artefacts became more tightly coupled with decision routines. Some projects that had stalled in earlier phases, such as the Remote Work Effectiveness (P7), the HR Dashboard (P3), and the Workforce Planning Prediction

(P12), later moved beyond pilot implementation and became regular organisational practices. Their continuation over quarterly or annual cycles demonstrates how analytics became more tightly coupled with HR practice.

By tracing these developments, I identified three interrelated mechanisms through which tighter coupling occurred: ***Bridging Translation, Reconfiguring Artefacts,*** and ***Symbolic Reordering***. These three mechanisms show that tighter coupling was accomplished by overlapping forms of institutional work. *Bridging Translation* reconfigured how actors related to one another and interpreted analytic outputs; *Reconfiguring Artefacts* adjusted the technical and procedural forms through which analytics entered everyday work; and *Symbolic Reordering* reshaped how analytics was defined, valued, and positioned within the organisation. As can be seen in Table 5 below, these mechanisms represent the relational, material, and cognitive dimensions of institutional work that transformed analytics from a formally endorsed yet loosely practised initiative into an integrated organisational routine. These mechanisms are understood as recurring configurations of morphogenetic cycles - patterns of conditioning, interaction, and elaboration - that unfolded within decision episodes. They reflect how actors overcame interpretive disconnection, aligned artefacts and tools with organisational workflows, and reshaped the symbolic and positional meaning of analytics within the company. Each mechanism therefore captures a distinctive way in which actors enacted institutional work within decision episodes, producing cumulative adjustments that gradually shifted the organisation from loose coupling toward tighter coupling. In addition, each mechanism through recurring configurations of triggers, interactional moves, and outcomes, illustrates how analytics became more tightly coupled with HR practice over time.

The remainder of this chapter examines in more detail these mechanisms. Section 7.2 analyses Bridging Translation, showing how personalised dialogue, HRBP-mediated encounters, and repeated and ongoing translational work created shared interpretive routines between the HRA team and senior leaders. Section 7.3 explores Reconfiguring Artefacts, demonstrating how data-access pathways and dashboards were redesigned to fit HR workflows and to allow non-specialists to use analytic tools directly. Section 7.4 examines Symbolic Reordering, explaining how organisational repositioning, rebranding to People Data Analytics (PDA), and leadership-driven shifts in evaluative logic collectively reshaped the meaning and legitimacy of analytics within D-company. The concluding summary shows how these relational, material, and cognitive mechanisms, viewed over time and through abductive analysis, together produced and sustained tighter coupling between analytics and HR practice.

Table 5. Overview of Mechanisms of Tighter Coupling

Theme	Mechanism Type	Core Feature / Process	Illustrative Description	Example Quote / Vignette
Bridging Translation	Relational / Interpretive mechanism	One-to-one translation of concerns; HRBP-mediated two-way feedback; iterative reframing of issues in shared language	Analytics moved from one-way reporting to mutual interpretation as Amanda's one-to-one executive meetings and the HRBP system translated between leadership concerns and analytic work, enabling projects such as P11 and P7 to shift from ad-hoc consultation to sustained engagement.	*"When Amanda explained the model in the way the COO thinks about cost, everything clicked. After that meeting he started calling us directly about how to use the findings." (HRBP)* *"Once we reframed it in their language - 'What does this mean for headcount next quarter?'- leadership finally understood why the analysis mattered." (HR Analyst)*
Reconfiguring Artefacts	Socio-material mechanism	Codified data-access pathways; repurposing existing tools; redesigning dashboards into usable, modular forms	Data-access templates and Jira tickets replaced informal negotiations, and the HR Dashboard was rebuilt from Python into Excel Power Query and modularised to match HR and executive meetings. These artefact changes allowed HR practitioners to request data, update dashboards, and use analytics in routine reviews without relying on continual technical support from the HRA team.	*"Once it moved to Power Query, I could update the dashboard myself in five minutes. I don't need to wait for the data team anymore." (HR Manager)* *"The Jira request template made everything clear - what data, why, and for which decision. People finally started using it properly." (HRA Team Member)* *"Now the dashboard fits our monthly meetings exactly. We don't have to redesign slides every time." (HRBP)*
Symbolic Reordering	Cognitive mechanism	Reframing identity and status; leadership-driven shifts in evaluative logic; stabilising expectations about the role of analytics	Repositioning the team under the CHRO's direct oversight, rebranding it as People Data Analytics (PDA), and leadership changes (from Robert to Laura, from John to Jessica) redefined analytics from an ambiguous support activity into a recognised strategic capability, aligning projects such as P12 with core organisational priorities and clarifying where and why analytics should be used.	*"Once the team became PDA under the CHRO, everyone suddenly paid attention. It signalled that analytics wasn't optional anymore." (Senior HR Manager)* *"Jessica made it clear: analytics is part of how we make decisions now, not an add-on." (Line Leader)* *"Laura kept asking, 'What does the data say?' That changed the whole atmosphere." (HR Analyst)*

7.2 Bridging Translation

At D-company, bridging translation mechanism took shape through repeated one-to-one executive meetings and the introduction of the HR Business Partner (HRBP) policy, both of which enabled the HRA team to act as translations between the professional languages of HR, data analysis, and senior management. Through these encounters, data discussions shifted from unilateral explanations to joint interpretation, creating a shared basis of understanding across professional boundaries.

During the early phase of HRA adoption, relationships between analysts, HR practitioners, and senior leaders were often characterised by defensiveness and mutual misunderstanding (as elaborated in Chapter 6.2). Employees at D-company initially perceived HRA as a simple reporting exercise, a jurisdictional invasion, or even a surveillance mechanism rather than a collaborative process. Over time, however, these boundaries softened. Through deliberate and recurring interactions actors transformed analytics into a shared collaborative resource. In contrast to *defensive translation*, which limited engagement to symbolic alignment, *bridging translation* captures how actors reconfigured their engagement from hierarchical or transactional exchanges into reciprocal interpretive work. The HRA team translated data into issues that resonated with executives' concerns, and in doing so, HR professionals cultivated trust, clarified expectations, and established enduring communicative channels. The process combined formal organisational structuring with the accumulation of interactional experiences that gradually reconfigured how analytics was socially inhabited within D-company.

7.2.1 Translating Concerns Through Personalised Dialogue

Bridging Translation was most clearly observed in the Organisational Diagnosis Survey (P11) project. When the project was initiated, employees widely questioned whether an internally run survey could truly protect their anonymity. Although survey responses were collected anonymously, many employees thought that senior managers or HR personnel, who were familiar with each team's circumstances, might infer who had provided critical or sensitive feedback[6]. Due to these concerns, employees were reluctant to provide candid or honest responses, which

[6] In the national context where D-company operates, employees commonly believe that providing negative or risk-related comments about their organisation may adversely affect future promotion, compensation, or managerial assessment. This cultural perception heightened reluctance to respond candidly to internal surveys.

significantly affected the qualitative integrity of the project, including not only the data collected but also the credibility of the analytical results derived from it.

Senior leaders were aware of employees' concerns and anxiety, and to avoid perceptions of direct HR interference they had previously outsourced the survey to third-party consultancies. While outsourcing increased participation rates, it generated substantial cost burdens and limited D-company's capacity to analyse and utilise the data internally . As a result, a project was launched within the HR department to internalise the organisational diagnosis survey, and Amanda was appointed to lead this initiative. After a town-hall meeting in the first year of my fieldwork, during which the results of D-company's internally conducted survey were shared with employees, Amanda reflected on her experience in an interview with me:

> Amanda (Employee Voice Project Manager): "*During the town-hall meeting, people interpreted the information in ways that suited their own interests. Some questioned whether an internally conducted survey was reliable, while certain leaders felt uncomfortable, perceiving the analysis as evaluation.*"

To address this scepticism, Amanda and the CHRO, James shifted from generic reporting to a more interpretive, personalised mode of engagement. In particular, they began by focusing on the leaders who were most immediately affected by the survey results. They arranged one-to-one debrief meetings with each C-level executive after every survey cycle. In these meetings, Amanda translated high-level findings into the specific operational concerns of each division, reframing the results within the leader's own strategic and managerial priorities. She explained:

> "*To build trust and to increase their acceptance level, we (Amanda & CHRO) met each executive one-on-one at the end of every survey cycle. We didn't simply show numbers; we interpreted the data in relation to each leader's specific challenges.*"

James, the CHRO, also added:

> "*Most importantly, we made it clear that this was not about evaluating leaders, exposing shortcomings, or triggering competition by comparing departments. The intention was to help each department understand its situation more clearly and to offer constructive directions for improvement.*"

The point Amanda emphasised - *the fact that she did not report numbers or figures but translated them through the lens of each leader's concrete challenges and concerns* - is important. As I observed in the organisational diagnosis reports and presentation materials collected during

my fieldwork, the documents typically contained numerical results accompanied by general interpretations. However, because these interpretations were framed from an HR perspective, they offered only superficial insight for senior leaders. Amanda sought to bridge this interpretive gap through relational mechanisms, using personalised translation to connect generalised survey findings to the specific contexts in which leaders were operating.

Amanda's approach was also reflected in the departmental reports that were submitted to senior leaders at D-company. The internal documents I collected through the company's Wiki, D-company's online document-editing and internal document-sharing system, included not only a general consolidated report but also customised versions tailored to each department. These customised reports incorporated the specific characteristics and sensitive circumstances of individual departments, and for this reason were not accessible to other employees. However, because the NDA placed no restrictions on my participant observation or the collection of related documents, I was able to examine sample versions of these materials. Showing me a sample of these restricted reports, Amanda explained: "*I applied a similar technique in the Organisational Diagnosis Survey by customising the reports for different departmental leaders. For instance, the report I presented to the CTO was different from the one I shared with the CAO. Each was tailored to its audience. It took extra time, but aligning the content with each leader's interests increased engagement.*"

A senior executive captured the value of this shift in his interview with me:

> "*At first, I wasn't particularly keen on the diagnostic report. To be honest, my first reaction was 'So what am I supposed to do with this?' It even seemed likely to intensify comparisons and competition between departments. (...) But one-on-one meetings with Amanda helped me make sense of the data for my department. It wasn't just abstract analysis. It gave concrete, actionable steps.*"

Through these personalised interpretive exchanges, analytics moved from numerical outputs that different actors interpreted in divergent ways to analyses that leaders could use directly to understand their department's issues and decide how to respond. This shift constituted an important early step towards tighter coupling, as analytics became a practically usable and contextually grounded element of managerial decisions.

7.2.2 Translating Leadership Priorities through the HRBP Policy

Amanda's case highlighted the importance of bridging translation within D-company and provided an early indication of why the HRA team's initial practices tended to remain loosely coupled. Based on this experience, the CHRO, James, came to think that in order for HRA practices to take root and diffuse more effectively, the organisation needed a more precise and continuous understanding of leaders' concerns. This recognition prompted him to introduce the HRBP policy. The HRBP policy was rolled out across D-company during the middle of the second year of my fieldwork.

While Amanda's personalised engagement created several tighter coupling practices, the HRBP policy extended and formalised this translational work across the organisation. Introduced by the CHRO in 2023, the HRBP structure paired senior executives, such as the CTO, CAO, and CMO, with mid-level HR managers who acted as embedded partners within each leadership domain. For instance, after the CHRO decided to introduce the HRBP policy, the heads of the HR Admin team, Recruitment team, and Organisational Culture team were required to take on HRBP responsibilities alongside their existing roles. In doing so, they became key actors in identifying the kinds of analytic work the HRA team would need to undertake. Importantly, their role was not limited to collecting comments or passing along informal feedback; rather, these HRBPs engaged in a translational mechanism through which business issues were reframed into HR or HRA-relevant analytical terms. In other words, rather than serving as administrative liaisons, these HRBPs operated as translational intermediaries: they interpreted leadership concerns, reframed them into analytically tractable problems, and subsequently translated analytical outputs back into the language, priorities, and time horizons of each executive.

The CHRO, James, articulated the rationale for introducing the HRBP policy:

> "*To promote HRA practice as a more coherent and meaningful activity, we needed to understand leadership priorities quickly and accurately. During the Flex Work Policy rollout, leaders were uncertain about managing remote employees. This concern emerged through HRBP discussions. Jessica and her team responded immediately with the Organisational Health Check analysis (P8).*"

As elaborated in the Context chapter, although Covid-related restrictions were eased at the start of my second fieldwork year, D-company implemented the Flex Work Policy across the organisation to retain key talent and maintain work flexibility. During this period, the HRA team attempted to develop analyses that could track and compare employee productivity in remote

settings (related to Flex Work Policy Analysis project, P9). But, as demonstrated in Chapter 6, persistent challenges in securing relevant data and limited cooperation from other departments kept the project in a loosely coupled state.

The introduction of the HRBP policy, however, established a stable two-way feedback loop of translation. Because HRBPs were the heads of each HR sub-unit, much of this exchange took place through the weekly team-leader meeting convened by the CHRO. At these meetings, HRBPs shared the issues they had gathered from ongoing conversations with business leaders, and the HRA team leader, who attended the meeting as the CHRO's direct report, could immediately interpret, prioritise, and follow up on these concerns.

On one side, HRBPs captured emerging issues, such as workload pressures, productivity anxieties under remote work, or specific staffing challenges, and articulated them to the HRA team in a structured and prioritised manner. On the other side, HRBPs translated the HRA team's findings back to executives, reframing analytic insights not as technical outputs but as actionable interpretations aligned with each leader's managerial context. The weekly CHRO-led meeting functioned as an institutionalised channel through which translation could occur bidirectionally, enabling analytic work to become embedded in organisational dialogue.

Emily vividly recalled how the HRBP policy revitalised a previously stalled project:

> "*Since the HRBP policy was implemented, HR professionals have been listening closely to executives' concerns. One issue that kept surfacing was that leaders felt they were losing control in remote work settings. That's why we decided to restart the Remote Work Effectiveness project (P7), which had previously stalled.*"

This example reveals a crucial dynamic: the HRBP policy transformed it into a far more responsive and situationally attuned practice - one that enabled the HRA team to identify pressing issues quickly or even propose relevant projects directly to senior leaders in advance, and, through their sponsorship, mobilise collaboration from other departments with far greater ease. As I could observe in my fieldwork, in effect, the HRBP policy stabilised and scaled bridging translation, turning it from an ad-hoc interpersonal practice into a repeatable organisational routine that strengthened the tighter coupling between analytics and leadership work. In this process, translation actively re-shaped how they interpreted problems, aligned expectations, and coordinated action, thereby embedding a relational/interpretive mechanism at the core of strengthening the coupling between analytics and organisational decision-making.

7.2.3 Summary – Temporal Sequencing and the Emergence of Relational Learning

What distinguished Bridging Translation from temporary or interpersonal collaboration was its temporal emergence. Throughout the two years of fieldwork, I observed a sequence of episodes in which isolated acts of translation gradually accumulated into recurring routines. This temporal layering was notable: translation became not only an interactional technique but a patterned practice that reconfigured how executives and analysts understood and used analytics. The mechanism therefore became visible not in a single moment, but through an extended trajectory of relational shifts.

The earliest encounters, such as Amanda's personalised debrief meetings, began as one-off attempts to resolve uncertainty or scepticism. At that stage, translation functioned primarily as persuasion: analysts interpreted data to make results intelligible to leaders who remained cautious, defensive, or unsure how to engage with analytics. These episodes were important, but they did not yet constitute a mechanism. Their significance only became clear retrospectively, as later interactions revealed similar patterns emerging across different projects and actors.

A turning point occurred when executives who had initially been sceptical began referring back to previous analytic conversations. In my later field observations and several interviews, I noted and realised senior leaders asking for updates, comparisons, or extended interpretations of earlier outputs rather than treating each engagement as an isolated event. This marked a shift from episodic explanation to temporal continuity in meaning-making. Leaders expected analytics to accumulate across time, and analysts responded by anticipating the clarifications or contextual details that executives were likely to request. Such mutually adjusted expectations signalled the emergence of relational learning.

Over time, through abductive analysis, I came to understand that these recurrent exchanges produced bridging translation as a relational mechanism. They operated within a shared interpretive frame: analysts understood the specific concerns and priorities of leaders and tailored their translations accordingly, while executives learned how to question, interpret, and act upon analytic insights. This development, however, was not linear or uniformly smooth. At several points, personnel changes or shifting organisational priorities, such as CEO's replacement or the introduction of the Flex Work Policy, disrupted the emerging pattern. The reason why these attempts at translational bridging, undertaken by Amanda, the CHRO, and later the HRBPs, could move from loose to progressively tighter forms of coupling was that the relational routines

persisted despite these disruptions. Even when HRBPs or senior leaders changed roles, newly assigned actors stepped into an existing communicative structure shaped by prior translation work.

The endurance of these routines suggested that bridging translation had become a stabilised organisational practice - one capable of supporting analytics independent of specific personalities or interpersonal histories. Crucially, what emerged here was not translation work in the conventional sense of individual actors adjusting language or framing. It, rather, had evolved into a relational mechanism: a patterned, interactionally sustained way of linking analytic artefacts to organisational concerns through recurrent cycles of mutual adjustment. This clarifies that bridging translation operated at a different analytical level from individual translational activity and stabilised relational infrastructure produced by repeated morphogenetic cycles within decision episodes. In this sense, the mechanism elaborates and extends inhabited institutionalism by showing that tighter coupling becomes possible because interactional routines themselves crystallise into an organisational resource that endures beyond any single actor. It is upon this relational and interpretive foundation that the subsequent material and cognitive mechanisms of tighter coupling were able to build.

7.3 Reconfiguring Artefacts

Reconfiguring artefacts refers to a socio-material mechanism through which analytic tools and operational workflows were redesigned to support tighter coupling between analytics and routine HR practice. Whereas bridging translation reduced interpretive distance between actors, reconfiguring artefacts narrowed the technical and procedural distance that had previously limited the use of analytics in everyday work. This mechanism was expressed through a series of concrete adjustments: codified data-access pathways that replaced informal negotiations; the shift from Python-based dashboards to Excel Power Query, which allowed HR practitioners to update and adjust analytic outputs themselves; and the modularisation of dashboard views so that analytic artefacts corresponded directly with the structure of HR and executive meetings. These changes made analytics more accessible to non-specialists and enabled analytic outputs to be used more consistently within established HR processes.

This mechanism did not emerge through major system changes but through incremental reconfigurations of artefacts already in use at D-company. Initial bottlenecks in data access, identified and described in the previous chapter, prompted the redesign of the approval process and the repurposing of Jira as a request-tracking platform. Subsequent difficulties with Python-

based dashboards led to the redesign of the dashboard using Excel Power Query, which operated within the familiar Excel environment relied upon across HR. As these artefacts became easier to use, they were further adapted to organisational routines through modular views and clear mapping to meeting agendas. Through these adjustments, analytic artefacts, such as HR Dashboard, that HR practitioners had previously struggled to use became tools they could operate and update themselves, and they were incorporated into regular HR tasks such as monthly reviews and workforce discussions. In this regard, reconfiguring artefacts functioned as a material mechanism of tighter coupling, enabling analytics to be used reliably in routine decision-making without requiring continuous technical support from the HRA team.

7.3.1 Reconfiguring Data Access Pathways

As demonstrated in Chapter 6, especially section 6.2 and 6.3, repeated delays and difficulties in obtaining data arose from structural and interpretive differences across departments, for example. In response, one of the most significant artefactual changes attempted by the HRA team concerned the redesign of data-access and approval pathways. During the initial stage of HRA adoption, analysts had to negotiate data access with other HR teams on an ad-hoc basis, which produced bottlenecks and generated the perception that analytics was an intrusive or discretionary request. Following several stalled projects, the CHRO recognised the need to introduce a new, codified data-access template. The template required analysts to specify the dataset, time frame, and intended analytic use; requests were automatically copied to the CHRO; and once approval was granted by the CHRO or another C-level leader, the data-owning unit was required to share the requested data to the HRA team.

Emily, a HR Analyst, described the shift:

> "*Previously, when we requested data from other HR teams or from different departments, we had to contact each person individually, check who was responsible for the dataset, and confirm which managers needed to approve it. This process took a long time. Once we started using the template, communication became much faster.*"

As part of this effort, the HRA team reconfigured an existing organisational artefact: Jira, a software tool primarily used by engineers at D-company to manage bugs, tasks, and improvement requests in software development. Although Jira had been used only sporadically by non-engineering teams, it was already well established within D-company's technical functions.

The HRA team reconfigured Jira's original purpose and adopted it as a platform for managing data-access requests. In Jira, initiating a project is referred to as *issuing a ticket*. By issuing a ticket for each data-access request, the HRA team enabled all relevant stakeholders, such as department heads, HRA team members, CHRO, etc to view the request, its purpose, and its approval status in one place.

This repurposing marked a material shift: instead of relying on informal email chains, individual negotiations, or personal relationships, data-access workflows were visible and trackable. The adaptation of Jira for the HRA team created a common request-tracking tool that allowed analysts, data owners, and the CHRO to view the same information and monitor the progress of each data-access request.

Jessica, a Senior Analyst who proposed extending Jira for HRA use, explained in an informal conversation with me:

> "*We needed a tool that everyone could see and trust. Jira was already familiar to many employees at D-company, especially in technical teams. By using tickets for data access, we reduced ambiguity and unclarity about who was responsible, and which stage the request was at. It also reduced (data access) delays and made the process more transparent.*"

By reconfiguring Jira and redesigning the associated templates, the HRA team converted data access from an interpersonal negotiation into a standardised artefact-based workflow. This shift allowed requests to move through predictable and auditable stages, reduced the personal effort required from analysts, and provided clarity to data-owning teams. The reconfigured pathways also reduced organisational friction: because the process was formalised and visible, data owners were less likely to challenge the legitimacy of requests. These changes supported tighter coupling by ensuring that analytics work could begin without prolonged negotiation. Reconfiguring data-access pathways consequently represented a foundational material mechanism through which analytics became more reliably embedded in organisational practice.

7.3.2 Reconfiguring Dashboards as Usable Artefacts

A second aspect of artefact reconfiguration involved redesigning the analytic tools themselves, particularly the HR Dashboard project (P3). While the redesign of data-access pathways (as described in 7.3.1) reduced delays and clarified responsibility, it did not fully resolve a deeper

material barrier: for example, most HR practitioners could not meaningfully engage with dashboards built in Python by the HRA team. When the HRA team presented the initial dashboard model to HR professionals, they responded positively at first:

> *"Oh, this is useful. I can now see, alongside the items I normally calculate in Excel, some of the preliminary analyses as well."* (HR admin team member)

> *"Thanks to this, for the monthly workforce reports, I can just refer to this dashboard and save my work time!"* (HR recruitment team member)

However, as I observed while spending time in the D-company office, employees' actual behaviour did not match these initial expressions of enthusiasm and affirmation. In practice, they rarely used the dashboard. My follow-up interviews revealed that their underlying views were different from what they had expressed to the HRA team:

> HR Recruitment team member: "*Well, it's good that I can see related information on the dashboard, but the problem is that I can't explore the things I'm actually curious about. To do that, I would need to modify the backend code, and I don't know how to code. (…) In our team of fifteen, only one person has a very basic coding skill.*"

As a result, even when the HRA team successfully acquired data, its analytic outputs often remained technically sophisticated but practically inaccessible. This challenge repeatedly surfaced in the early months of my fieldwork. During P3 project-related meetings, HR staff frequently questioned how numbers were calculated or expressed concern that they could not update or validate the dashboard without analyst support. This dependency, contrary to the HRA team's intentions, reinforced the perception that analytics belonged to a specialised domain separate from everyday HR work. These recurring patterns prompted the HRA team to reconsider not only the content of analytics but the form through which it was presented and used.

The material shift from Python to Excel Power Query occurred within this context and background. Recognising the limitations of the existing artefact, the coding script-based software, Python used to build the initial dashboard, Jessica, a senior HR analyst, and other HR analysts, Emily and Jennifer, initiated a redesign using Excel Power Query. While Power Query itself was not widely used within HR, it operated within the familiar Excel environment that most HR practitioners relied on, making the redesigned dashboard far easier for non-specialists to understand, modify, and update. This shift represented a material reconfiguration: the goal was

not to downgrade technical sophistication but to create an artefact that could be understood, manipulated, and reused by other HR professionals.

Emily described this shift in an interview with me:

> "*For us, Python or R were efficient. But for most HR members, they looked unfamiliar and even intimidating. When we rebuilt the dashboard in Excel Power Query, we no longer had to explain the tool. People already knew Excel. (...) The conversation gradually shifted to the insights rather than how the system worked.*"

Similarly, Jessica emphasised the importance of fit-for-purpose artefacts:

> "*A dashboard only works if people actually use it. By rebuilding it in Excel Power Query, anyone in HR could refresh the data, filter views, or trace definitions. It meant the dashboard part of normal work, not a technical report.*"

These comments from Emily and Jessica illustrate how reconfiguring artefacts, as a material mechanism, enabled HR practitioners to engage with analytics more directly and more frequently, thereby supporting a transition toward tighter coupling between analytic outputs and everyday HR practice.

Once the dashboard became technically accessible, the team introduced a second form of artefact reconfiguration: modularisation. Each dashboard view was mapped to the structure of existing HR and executive meetings, such as headcount for monthly HR reviews, attrition for quarterly business reviews, overtime for weekly team check-ins. These changes were not unilateral adjustments made by the HRA team but were incorporated and updated jointly with other HR teams. This indicates that the reconfigured tool facilitated everyday use of analytics within HR practice.

This dynamic was documented in my fieldnotes from the later phase of fieldwork, during which I conducted remote observations of several meetings. One of my reflective notes described it as follows:

> [Fieldnotes] *Interestingly, modularisation was being initiated not by the HRA team but by individual HR practitioners and other teams who used the dashboard. During remote meetings where teams shared their screens, HR staff actively and voluntarily adjusted modules - renaming labels, separating contract-type categories, and rearranging indicator sequences to fit their reporting templates, even without direct prompting from the HRA team. (…) In one meeting today, a recruitment manager shared her screen and explained that*

their monthly hiring review always begins with pipeline status before moving to time-to-fill. She then showed a customised version of the dashboard that she had reorganised to display the relevant modules in that exact sequence.

These interactions and practices demonstrated that modularisation was a joint design process, shaped through repeated cycles of use and revision rather than a top-down redesign. It evolved into an artefact that was routinely updated and referenced across teams. In this sense, reconfiguring artefacts functioned as the socio-material mechanism that reinforced the relational mechanism of bridging translation described earlier in the section of 7.2. These technical and representational adjustments enabled analytics to be used more consistently across both the technical and routine operational dimensions of HR work, contributing directly to tighter coupling between analytics and HR practice.

7.3.3 Summary – Temporal Sequencing and the Emergence of Material Integration

The significance of these artefactual changes became apparent when traced across time. In the early stage of implementation, Python-based dashboards, informal data-access negotiations, and inconsistent definitions meant that analytic artefacts could not circulate reliably within the organisation. Each update required analyst intervention, and most HR practitioners lacked the technical familiarity to validate, adjust, or reuse analytic outputs independently. As a result, even when data was successfully acquired, analytics remained a specialised activity rather than a routine component of HR work.

The material reconfigurations introduced across the second year of fieldwork, such as codified data-access pathways, the adoption of Excel Power Query, and modularised dashboard views, gradually altered this pattern. Through these sequential adjustments, analytic artefacts became easier to interpret, update, and reuse. I observed a clear behavioural shift: HR practitioners began opening the dashboard during meetings without analyst assistance, refreshing data themselves, and comparing new figures with previous versions. These actions indicated that analytics was no longer dependent on the technical competence of individual analysts but had become incorporated into everyday HR routines.

A further turning point occurred when executives requested additions or revisions to dashboard modules. This shift indicated that managers no longer viewed analytic artefacts as static outputs created by the HRA team but as tools that required ongoing adjustment to align with

changing organisational priorities. Instead, HR professionals treated dashboards as shared tools that required ongoing adaptation. This development was neither planned nor immediate; it emerged through successive adjustments to artefacts that made analytics practically usable and consistently available. These observations did not initially present themselves as evidence of a material mechanism. But reconfiguring artefacts became visible as a material mechanism through repeated movement between field observations and theoretical reflection, as I compared stalled early projects with later episodes in which analytic artefacts were used more routinely. It explained why analytics, once inaccessible and rarely used, was able to circulate reliably: artefacts had been redesigned so that HR practitioners could work with them directly, without relying on the HRA team to interpret results or operate the technical tools on their behalf.

Reconfiguring artefacts therefore represented a material mechanism of tighter coupling. Codified access templates reduced delays and ambiguity; Power Query-based dashboards enabled non-specialists to handle data; modularisation aligned analytic artefacts with existing organisational workflows. Through these changes, analytics became a durable and reproducible part of HR practice. Importantly, this socio-material mechanism stabilised and reinforced the relational alignment that bridging translation had already created. The trust and shared interpretive frame established through bridging translation created the conditions under which artefact redesign was accepted. Once enacted, the reconfigured artefacts provided material stability that preserved those relational gains by allowing analytic engagement to occur without continuous negotiation or explanation. In this way, bridging translation and reconfiguring artefacts operated sequentially and in a mutually reinforcing manner, each working through different institutional domains yet contributing cumulatively to tighter coupling.

These developments also prepared the ground for the third mechanism examined in the next section. While bridging translation aligned meanings and reconfiguring artefacts aligned material processes, D-company's ability to move from partial use to sustained integration required changes in how analytics was understood and positioned within the organisation. The next section examines symbolic reordering, a cognitive mechanism through which the identity, status, and organisational placement of analytics were redefined.

7.4 Symbolic Reordering

Symbolic reordering refers to a cognitive mechanism through which the meaning, status, and organisational role of analytics were redefined. While *Bridging Translation* (7.2) reduced

interpretive distance between actors and *Reconfiguring Artefacts* (7.3) enabled analytics to circulate more reliably in day-to-day work, these improvements did not automatically generate a shared understanding of what analytics represented within D-company. Early in my fieldwork, analytics was still interpreted inconsistently: some viewed it as administrative reporting, others as technical experimentation, and others as an evaluation or surveillance. Symbolic reordering captures the process through which this ambiguity was replaced by a recognisable identity and a coherent cognitive frame.

At D-company, symbolic reordering emerged through a sequence of organisational developments, marked by several clear turning points that altered how analytics was categorised and understood. As explained earlier in this chapter, these developments included the repositioning of the HRA team under the CHRO's direct oversight, the formal renaming of the function as People Data Analytics (PDA), and leadership-driven changes in what counted as valuable managerial knowledge. As these changes accumulated, analytics came to be recognised not as an auxiliary activity but as a strategic capability. Through this mechanism, actors developed shared expectations about what analytics was for, who owned it, and why it mattered, enabling tighter coupling between analytic work and organisational decision-making.

7.4.1 Reframing Identity Through Repositioning

The first dimension of symbolic reordering involved reframing the identity and organisational placement of the analytics function. As demonstrated in Section 6.4 *Identity Ambiguity* of Chapter 6, the label "Change Management Team" generated confusion about its remit and purpose. The title did not communicate an analytical role for the HRA team, and many other actors interpreted the team as an administrative function focused on managerial risk rather than analytics, which created further ambiguity. This ambiguity weakened collaboration, created hesitation around data sharing, and either maintained or reinforced loose coupling between analytics and HR practice.

Recognising these limitations, CHRO James introduced a series of deliberate repositioning initiatives during my fieldwork. The first occurred in September 2022, when the analytics unit was formally repositioned from one of several HR sub-teams to operate under the direct authority of the CHRO. Prior to this change, the team occupied the same hierarchical level as HR Admin, Recruitment, and Compensation. The HRA team's requests for data access were therefore interpreted as peer-to-peer requests, which allowed other teams to question their authority, legitimacy or deprioritise collaboration. Moving the team operating under the CHRO's

direct oversight signalled an elevating shift in organisational status and communicated that analytics was being treated as a strategic activity rather than an auxiliary task.

James, the CHRO, reflected on the motivation for this decision in an interview:

> "*A few months after introducing the HRA function at D-company, I realised through conversations with colleagues and with you (the researcher - myself) that difficulties in securing data access were a critical reason why HRA projects were failing to progress. I had not understood how much time the HRA team was losing negotiating access. Had I known earlier, I would have made the change sooner.*"

The relocation produced immediate cognitive effects. The team's requests were now viewed as carrying executive authority, which reduced resistance and shortened delays, particularly among other HR teams. Emily described the change:

> "*When we requested data before, we had to justify every detail. Even when we explained the background of the project and why the data was needed, we often received no response or faced a lack of cooperation. After we moved under the CHRO, the process became much faster and easier. Our requests were effectively seen as instructions from the CHRO. If someone questioned why we needed the data, we could say it was a direct request from the CHRO.*"

This shift was not only structural but also symbolic, and it generated cognitive changes among actors. It repositioned analytics as a core element of HR strategy and signalled to other teams that analytic work carried organisational priority. The adjustment also increased the visibility of the function among senior leaders, further reinforcing its legitimacy. Emily added "*After the repositioning, the CHRO began referring to our work and activities in executive meetings. That changed how the leadership viewed our team and raised our standing within the organisation.*"

Following these developments, a second repositioning occurred one year later, when the team was formally rebranded as People Data Analytics (PDA). Jessica, who had effectively led the team since early 2023 and was later appointed as the formal team leader, explained the rationale:

> Jessica (PDA Team Lead): "*Analytics could no longer be framed as passive reporting. We needed an identity that made our purpose explicit and aligned with how the organisation was changing.*"

The renaming eliminated the earlier ambiguity associated with the “Change Management Team” label. In particular, once the new name appeared clearly in D-company’s organisational chart, it became cognitively evident across the organisation that the HR department had a dedicated team responsible for data analysis. When asked what changes the rebranding triggered, Emily responded:

> “*After we rebranded as PDA, we started receiving analysis requests not only from HR but also from other departments such as Engineering, Sales, Finance, and Customer Services. Teams that were interested in workforce-related data and analysis began asking questions and exploring potential collaboration. (…) People understood what we did.*”

These repositioning initiatives, elevation under the CHRO’s direct oversight and the symbolic renaming to PDA, redefined the identity, status, and recognised purpose of analytics within the organisation. They replaced earlier uncertainty with a coherent and widely shared understanding of what the team represented and why it mattered. In this respect, symbolic reordering shaped a stable interpretive frame that enabled analytics to be viewed as a legitimate and strategic function, thereby supporting tighter coupling between analytic work and organisational decision-making.

7.4.2 Reordering Value Through Leadership-Driven Logic Shifts

A second dimension of symbolic reordering concerned shifts in what counted as legitimate and valuable managerial knowledge. At D-company, this process was closely connected to changes in executive leadership. As described in the Context Chapter 5.5 , the replacement of CEO Robert with Laura in early 2023 altered the dominant institutional logic through which activities were evaluated and prioritised at the organisational level. Robert, with a background in engineering, emphasised technological innovation and product development. Under his leadership, HR including HRA practices was largely seen as a support function.

With Laura’s appointment, who held an academic background in economics and had previously worked at a top-tier global strategy consulting firm, the dominant organisational logic shifted towards cost efficiency and strategic control. James, the CHRO, described this transition:

> “*With Laura as the new CEO, the focus has changed from driving revenue through technological advancement to increasing profitability by cutting unnecessary internal costs.*”

This change in orientation had direct implications for how analytics was perceived. Under Robert, there were several sceptical questions why HR needed data analytics across D-company, as demonstrated in the Chapter 6.4.

John, the original HRA team leader, recalled:

> "*When Robert was here, HR was seen as a peripheral function supporting recruitment and administration rather than a strategic capability. (...) With Laura, the expectation became that workforce planning should be integrated into financial risk management.*"

The shift from a technology-focused to a financial control-focused logic reorganised the symbolic order of organisational activities. For example, the Workforce Planning Prediction project (P12), which had previously remained stagnant and loosely coupled to HR practice, became aligned with the priorities of the new CEO. P12 came to be cognitively reframed as directly linked to D-company's central objective of managing labour costs and workforce efficiency.

Emily, who had initiated the early stages of P12 before it stalled, described the shift:

> "*The previous executive, Robert, was less proactive about the Workforce Planning Prediction project. It was not clear whether they (executives including CEO) saw it as useful. Under Laura, however, P12 was revisited and given renewed attention, because of its aim.*"

The renewed attention to P12 was not driven by technical revision, but by a cognitive shift in how the project was categorised and evaluated. Under the previous leadership, workforce prediction had been interpreted as a speculative analytical exercise situated at the margins of HR work. With Laura's appointment, the project was cognitively reclassified as a tool for governing labour expenditure and planning future workforce risks. This reframing altered the evaluative criteria applied to analytic work. What had previously been viewed as optional or exploratory analysis was now treated as essential evidence for financial decision-making. Analytics gained credibility not because its methods changed, but because its purpose now aligned with the dominant organisational logic of efficiency and accountability. In this sense, the mechanism was symbolic and cognitive.

A similar mechanism occurred within the HRA team itself. Whereas the leadership-driven cognitive shift mechanism described above triggered movement from loose to tighter coupling at the executive level, a parallel cognitive reordering was evident at the team level following a change in internal leadership. After a restructuring of the HRA team in late 2022, CHRO James reassigned John to oversee compensation and evaluation, and Jessica, who had already led key

projects such as the HR Dashboard (P3), Organisational Health Check (P8), and the early development of Workforce Planning Prediction project (P12), was formally appointed as the new team leader in late 2023. This leadership transition altered how employees understood the purpose and direction of analytic work, contributing to a clearer and more consistent framing of analytics within the team's daily practice.

Emily and Jennifer reflected on the difference from an informal chat with me:

> Emily (HR Analyst): "*Under John, we were still figuring out how HR analytics fit within the organisation. There was no clear direction. (…) But with Jessica leading, we have a structured approach. Because Jessica has both technical and analytical experience, she could clearly articulate not only how to access data but also which analytical methods to use and which insights deserved priority.*"

Jennifer, a junior analyst who joined the team later, provided a similar perspective:

> Jennifer (Junior HR Analyst): "*When I joined the team, I found it difficult to understand what counted as 'good' analytical work. Previously, our tasks felt scattered, and it was unclear what the analysis was supposed to achieve. But once Jessica took over, the expectations became much clearer. She articulated which insights mattered for decision-making, how we should frame findings for leaders, and what data or evidence would be considered credible. It helped me understand the purpose of our work, not just the tasks. (...) It changed how I understood the purpose of our work."*

Their reflections illustrate how the leadership transition triggered a cognitive reordering within the HRA team. Under Jessica's leadership, everyday work shifted from debating whether a project should be pursued to focusing on how analytic work should be structured to support strategic concerns. This altered cognitive environment enabled analytic projects such as P12 to gain traction and be sustained. In this perspective, leadership-driven logic shifts reshaped how analytics was understood, valued, and situated within the organisation's symbolic order. This symbolic reordering strengthened the link between analytic work and managerial practice and provided the cognitive conditions under which the relational and material mechanisms described in Sections 7.2 and 7.3 could have enduring impact.

7.4.3 Summary – Temporal Sequencing and the Consolidation of Symbolic Order

The symbolic reordering of analytics at D-company became visible over time as competing logics surrounding analytic work, between traditional HR practice and emerging data-driven approaches, began to converge. Rather than remaining a weak and contested sub-field lacking agreement on logic prioritisation (Zietsma et al., 2017), HRA gradually acquired a clearer and more widely shared meaning, status, and organisational role.

The first step involved reframing the identity and organisational placement of the analytics function. The transition from the ambiguous label “Change Management Team” to People Data Analytics (PDA), combined with the team’s repositioning under the CHRO’s direct oversight, clarified what the team represented and why it existed. These shifts provided the symbolic reordering that enabled actors to recognise analytics within D-company’s broader strategic functions. This clarified identity provided the initial symbolic foundation for tighter coupling.

The second change involved a status reordering following shifts in leadership and logic prioritisation. The transition from a technology-oriented CEO to one who emphasised financial discipline and labour-cost management reshaped the evaluative criteria through which analytic work was judged. Earlier periods, in which projects such as Workforce Planning Prediction (P12) stalled under a technology-focused logic, contrasted sharply with later periods when the same project gained both legitimacy and executive support as it aligned with the new CEO’s priorities. At the team level, the appointment of a new PDA team leader reinforced these shifts by introducing more structured analytical expectations and clearer standards of evidence. Through this process, analytic work became cognitively associated with issues that required tighter coupling between analytics and managerial practice.

These developments reveal symbolic reordering as a cognitive and structural mechanism enacted through temporally distributed processes rather than discrete interventions. Identity clarification redefined what the analytics function was; leadership-driven logic shifts altered what analytics was for. By moving back and forth between empirical observations and theoretical reflection, I identified this mechanism as the process through which analytics acquired a stable meaning, status, and organisational role. Symbolic reordering provided the cognitive and structural conditions necessary for tighter coupling, ensuring that relational and material gains described earlier did not dissipate but were instead reproduced in practice as shared expectations and interpretive alignment became part of everyday reasoning.

In this sense, symbolic reordering operated as the cognitive mechanism that enabled relational and material mechanisms described in Sections 7.2 and 7.3 to endure. Once the meaning and purpose of analytics were stabilised, the communicative routines built through bridging translation and the operational processes established through artefact reconfiguration could be maintained. Thus, symbolic reordering represents the consolidation of tighter coupling: the point at which analytic practice and organisational understanding became aligned in a coherent, shared symbolic frame.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the second part of the research question by examining how, within the same organisational setting, HRA at D-company moved from loose to tighter forms of coupling with HR practice. Previous chapter showed that *Defensive Translation, Jurisdictional Distancing,* and *Identity Ambiguity* operated as mechanisms that maintained and reproduced loose coupling between analytics and everyday HR work. The analysis in this chapter also demonstrates that tighter coupling did not emerge spontaneously or through a single structural reform. Instead, it developed through a set of interrelated mechanisms that altered how actors interacted, which tools they used, and how they understood and positioned analytics over time.

The first mechanism, *Bridging Translation*, showed that tighter coupling required more than the production of analytic outputs. It depended on how those outputs were communicated, interpreted, and turned into shared problems. Through Amanda's one-to-one meetings in the Organisational Diagnosis Survey (P11) and the subsequent introduction of the HRBP policy, translation work shifted from episodic persuasion to an ongoing practice of mutual interpretation. Actors learned to translate between leadership concerns and analytic categories, and back again. Over time, repeated encounters of this kind created stable communicative routines in which executives did not simply receive reports but engaged in interpretive dialogue. In this regard, bridging translation operated as a relational mechanism that gradually replaced defensive and hierarchical exchanges with reciprocal interpretive work, making analytics usable in managerial deliberation.

The second mechanism, *Reconfiguring Artefacts*, showed that these relational gains required material support if they were to be maintained in everyday practice. Early analytic artefacts, such as Python-based dashboards and informal data-access arrangements, remained dependent on specialist intervention and were not easily incorporated into HR routines. By

redesigning data-access pathways through templates and Jira tickets, rebuilding the HR Dashboard (P3) in Excel Power Query, and modularising views to match the structure of HR and executive meetings, the HRA team altered the technical and procedural conditions under which analytics was used. These adjustments enabled HR practitioners to request data, update dashboards, and refer to analytic outputs in regular reviews without continuous support from the HRA team. Reconfiguring artefacts thus functioned as a material mechanism of tighter coupling, ensuring that analytics could be used reliably in routine decision-making rather than remaining a specialist activity.

The third mechanism, *Symbolic Reordering*, explained how tighter coupling was stabilised at the cognitive level. Even as relationships and artefacts changed, analytics continued to be interpreted in different and sometimes conflicting ways. Symbolic reordering captured how the identity, value, and organisational role of analytics were clarified and reshaped. Repositioning the team under the CHRO's direct oversight and rebranding it as People Data Analytics (PDA) addressed earlier ambiguity about what the team did and why it existed. Leadership changes, from Robert to Laura at the executive level, and from John to Jessica within the analytics team, shifted the evaluative logic through which analytic work was judged. Projects such as Workforce Planning Prediction (P12), once peripheral, were reframed as central to financial discipline and workforce-cost management. Across these developments, analytics came to be understood as a strategic capability. Therefore, symbolic reordering provided the cognitive conditions in which relational and material changes could endure.

These three mechanisms show that tighter coupling occurred through layered and overlapping interactional, structural, and cognitive processes. Bridging Translation reconfigured how actors related to one another and worked with analytic outputs; Reconfiguring Artefacts adjusted the technical and procedural arrangements that had previously limited use; and Symbolic Reordering altered how analytics was defined, evaluated, and positioned within D-company. Their interaction reduced interpretive ambiguity, removed practical barriers to use, and stabilised shared expectations about when and how analytics should inform decisions. In this regard, tighter coupling can be understood not as a single outcome but as the product of relational, material, and cognitive changes that reinforced one another over time.

The analysis also demonstrates the importance of temporality and abductive theorising in identifying mechanisms of coupling. The mechanisms did not appear as predefined categories at the start of fieldwork. Instead, they became visible as I compared early episodes of stalled projects and defensive reactions with later episodes in which analytics was routinely used and taken

seriously. By moving back and forth between these observations and the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 3, I came to understand Bridging Translation, Reconfiguring Artefacts, and Symbolic Reordering as distinct yet interdependent processes. Each mechanism emerged through recurrent patterns of interaction, tool redesign, and meaning-making that accumulated over two years of practice. This temporal and iterative perspective is essential for explaining how a loosely coupled, contested innovation such as HRA can move towards more stable and tighter integration.

At the same time, the chapter has shown that tighter coupling remains conditional and partial, rather than fully settled or permanently established. The relational mechanism relies on continued trust and open communication between HR, analysts, and senior leaders; the material mechanism depends on the ongoing maintenance of artefacts and processes; and the cognitive mechanism remains sensitive to shifts in leadership priorities and organisational narratives. Accordingly, tighter coupling is not a fixed end-state but a configuration that can be strengthened or weakened as conditions change, and much like loose coupling, it should be understood as a mechanism and process through which coupling extent between analytics and HR practice evolves over time.

In sum, the findings in this chapter extend the analysis of Chapter 6 by showing that the same setting that sustained loose coupling can, under different relational, material, and cognitive conditions, support tighter integration. They also prepare the ground for the Discussion chapter that follows, where I draw on these mechanisms to develop the thesis's contribution to theories of coupling, institutional work, and the microfoundations of how organisations adopt, adapt, and sometimes embed HRA in organisations.

Chapter 8. Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter draws together the empirical and theoretical threads of the thesis to answer the two research questions that motivated this study: why HRA remains loosely coupled with HR practice and how tighter coupling can emerge. Theoretically, the study develops a microfoundational and interactional explanation of coupling by integrating Archer's (1995; 2003) morphogenetic approach with institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012), inhabited institutionalism (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006), and practice-based institutionalism (Smets et al., 2012; 2015). The study shows how structural conditioning, reflexive agency and situated social interaction jointly shape the coupling of analytic artefacts in organisations. The theoretical integration is operationalised through the concept of decision episodes, which makes it possible to analyse how analytic artefacts are interpreted, contested and incorporated in practice. This concept also helped identify three mechanisms that sustain loose coupling - *Defensive Translation, Jurisdictional Distancing and Identity Ambiguity* - and three mechanisms that support tighter coupling - *Bridging Translation, Reconfiguring Artefacts and Symbolic Reordering*. Empirically, the thesis contributes to HRA scholarship by specifying how meaning-making, credibility judgements, boundary negotiations and identity work shape whether analytic practices become enacted or remain symbolic. Practically, it offers insight into the organisational and relational conditions under which HRA can be more consistently and substantively embedded in HR decision-making.

The chapter synthesises the findings into a mechanism-based theoretical account of coupling, demonstrates the implications of this account for institutional theory and inhabited institutionalism, and develops the practical contributions that follow from these insights. This allows the chapter to situate the thesis's contributions within broader scholarly debates while clarifying their significance for organisational practice.

8.1 Reconnecting the Findings to the Research Questions

The This thesis set out to address two intertwined research questions:

> *RQ1: Why does Human Resource Analytics (HRA), despite securing symbolic legitimacy within the HR field, remain loosely coupled with everyday HR practices?*

and

RQ2: What are the mechanisms though which tighter coupling between analytics and everyday HR practices develop?

Re-engaging with these questions through the conceptual and theoretical lenses developed in Chapters 2 and 3 enables the findings to be understood as contributions to wider debates in institutional theory, inhabited institutionalism, and the microfoundations of organisational practice. More specifically, the thesis contributes a theoretically integrated and microfoundational account of how analytic artefacts become loosely or tightly coupled with organisational practices by linking structural conditioning, reflexive agency, situated social interaction and temporal sequencing, operationalised through the concept of decision episodes.

The first RQ concerns a long-standing unresolved question in institutional theory: why organisational practices remain loosely coupled even when they are formally endorsed and symbolically legitimised (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Westphal & Zajac, 2001). Existing HRA scholarship has typically attributed this pattern to capability gaps, limited leadership sponsorship, or technical immaturity (Cayrat & Boxall, 2022; Fernández & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2021; Vargas et al., 2018; Minbaeva, 2017), While these accounts illuminate important organisational conditions shaping HRA uptake, they leave open the question of how loose coupling is organised and patterned as an ongoing practice — a question to which this study turns its analytical attention. In this respect, the findings of this study point instead to institutional and interactional mechanisms that actively reproduce loose coupling. Specifically, the mechanisms of Defensive Translation, Jurisdictional Distancing, and Identity Ambiguity demonstrate that loose coupling is produced through situated practices that protect existing identities, boundaries, and evaluative logics from the encroachment of novel practices that are perceived as conflicting with existing logics and the institutionalised practices that embody them. This reframes loose coupling not as an implementation failure but as a form of institutional work through which actors actively reinforce prevailing arrangements such as established role boundaries and limit exposure to professional, relational, or jurisdictional risks.

This reorientation carries broader implications for institutional theory. Much prior scholarship has tended to characterise decoupling as symbolic compliance or structural inconsistency (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Westphal & Zajac, 1994; 2001; Bromley & Powell, 2012), providing the conceptual foundation on which subsequent research has begun to investigate how these patterns are enacted in practice. Although a small but growing body of work has begun to study coupling and decoupling empirically - for example, analyses of meaning-making during institutional reform (Zilber, 2002), practice breakdown and repair (Lok & de Rond, 2013), or

jurisdictional negotiation in cross-occupational work (Bechky, 2011). Building on these empirical foundations, there remains scope to develop a mechanism-based account of how loose coupling is sustained across sequences of interaction — a contribution that this thesis seeks to develop. Hallett and Hawbaker (2021) argue that loose coupling should be understood as an interactional accomplishment, a meso-level process produced through recurring social interactions in which actors negotiate meanings, identities and evaluative criteria. They emphasise the need to empirically examine the interactional configurations - the recurring combinations of actors' reflexive concerns, interpretive moves, boundary claims and outcome patterns that unfold across a chain of social interactions - through which coupling is enacted in practice. This thesis directly responds to that agenda by identifying and theorising the interactional configurations through which loose coupling persisted at D-company. The thesis also provides a more granular account of how actors actively sustain and reproduce existing institutional arrangements, what institutional scholars refer to as institutional maintenance work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Dacin et al., 2002), by identifying the mechanisms through which separation is maintained. Findings show that (de)coupling is actively produced through interpretive reframing, boundary negotiation, and identity-related evaluations within decision episodes. This contributes to institutional theory by clarifying and examining the micro-level processes through which organisational actors remain or reproduce loose coupling as an organisational form.

These insights also deepen the analytical leverage of the morphogenetic framework developed in Chapter 3, by showing how the maintenance of loose coupling unfolds across the phases of structural conditioning, reflexive interpretation, situated interaction, and structural elaboration. Interpreted and analysed through the morphogenetic perspective (Archer, 1995; 2003), the mechanisms identified in this study illustrate how actors draw on prior structural conditioning (T1) to interpret analytic initiatives reflexively, enact responses within the interactional sequences that constitute decision episodes (T2–T3), and ultimately reproduce institutional arrangements (T4). This recursive sequencing clarifies why loose coupling persists even in organisational settings where structural and technological conditions appear conducive to behavioural change: actors selectively prioritise elements of the situational context to stabilise existing evaluative logics and jurisdictional boundaries, thereby generating morphostatic rather than morphogenetic outcomes. In Archer's (1995; 2003) terms, such outcomes are morphostatic, in that they reproduce the prevailing structural–cultural configuration, whereas morphogenetic outcomes involve the re-elaboration of those arrangements through iterative cycles of interaction and change.

While the morphogenetic approach clarifies how loose coupling is reproduced across temporal phases, the findings also indicate that its persistence is driven by micro-level interpretive and affective dynamics that operate within those phases. For instance, Identity Ambiguity, which reflects uncertainty about the role boundaries and mandate of the analytics function, and Defensive Translation, which involves narrowing or reframing analytic requests to avoid accountability or evaluative scrutiny, further demonstrate that these interpretive responses are shaped by concerns about vulnerability and professional displacement. This finding extends Creed et al.'s (2014) account of identity-protective institutional maintenance by showing how such reasoning is enacted within the concrete interactional sequences of decision episodes rather than only at the level of discursive justification. It also develops Zietsma and Toubiana's (2018) argument regarding the constitutive role of affect in institutional processes, by specifying the particular affective–interpretive configurations through which organisational members stabilise loose coupling in practice. These insights extend existing accounts by providing a mechanism-level explanation of how identity judgements, affective reactions, and evaluative logics intersect to reproduce loose coupling.

The second RQ shifts attention from loose coupling to the processes through which tighter coupling between analytics and HR practice occasionally develops. This focus is comparatively rare in institutional studies. Much of the foundational literature is oriented towards explaining decoupling, whether as ceremonial conformity (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), strategic impression management (Westphal & Zajac, 1994; 2001), or structural inconsistency under institutional complexity (Bromley & Powell, 2012). These seminal contributions have shaped our understanding of why symbolic adoption occurs, and invite a complementary line of inquiry into how organisations move from symbolic adoption towards more substantive enactment. Even studies attentive to practice variation under conditions of institutional complexity (Smets et al., 2012; Jarzabkowski et al., 2016) have opened productive avenues for understanding how previously marginal or contested practices may stabilise as consequential organisational routines. Smets et al. (2012; 2015), in particular, provide compelling accounts of how practice variation emerges and may diffuse beyond the organisation. The present study extends this line of inquiry by examining, in fine-grained detail, the mechanisms through which initially marginal or contested practices become tightly coupled with organisational routines.

One of the central implications of the findings is that tighter coupling emerges not simply through increased interaction frequency, but through specific forms of relational work that render disparate logics mutually intelligible. Inhabited institutionalism has established that

institutions are enacted through situated encounters (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett & Meanwell, 2016; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021) and that local interactions mediate the translation of broader logics into practice (Binder, 2007). Building directly on this foundation, the present study seeks to specify the concrete interactional processes through which such encounters reshape shared meaning structures, evaluative logics, and role expectations. Recent extensions of the inhabited institutionalist perspective, such as Bitektine et al. (2020), further argue that institutions are internalised through communicative processes and actorhood models, rather than simply imposed through structural pressures. The findings presented in this thesis extends these insights by identifying patterned forms of relational work through which actors reinterpret analytic initiatives, negotiate boundaries of relevance, and recalibrate expectations about legitimate action. In doing so, analytic and relational HR logics become jointly recognisable and actionable. Additionally, the findings provide a more granular account of interactional institutional work, showing how relational processes furnish the interpretive conditions for subsequent material and symbolic consolidation.

A further implication of the findings concerns the role of materiality in institutional processes. Whereas interpretive and structural dimensions have been extensively theorised within institutional scholarship (Scott, 2014; Greenwood et al., 2011), materiality has more recently received growing analytical attention. Orlikowski (2000) and Leonardi (2013) have demonstrated that artefacts actively participate in shaping organisational action , and practice-based studies have shown how tools and templates influence the enactment of routines (Nicolini, 2012; Jarzabkowski et al., 2016). Building on these important contributions, the present study offers a mechanism-level account of how artefacts contribute to the embedding, maintenance, or contestation of organisational routines, particularly under conditions in which contested practices such as HRA are being embedded. The present study, however, contributes to this work by offering a mechanism-level account of how artefacts mediate the consolidation of HRA within organisational routines. The findings show that material artefacts such as dashboards, templates (e.g. Jira), analytic software (e.g. Excel Power Query), and workflow systems altered who could undertake analytic tasks, enabling HR practitioners to perform analyses that had previously required specialist expertise. In this sense, this study extends materiality-oriented approaches (Leonardi & Barley, 2008; Leonardi, 2013) in institutional theory by clarifying how artefacts operate as active mediators of institutional work, making tighter coupling materially feasible and sustainable.

The symbolic dimension of institutional work is also central for understanding how tighter coupling becomes possible. Institutional logics scholars argue that organisational action is guided

by meaning systems and evaluative criteria that indicate what is legitimate, valuable, or strategically appropriate (Thornton et al., 2012; Greenwood et al., 2011), providing the conceptual grounding for examining how such symbolic structures operate across levels of analysis. More recent work has extended these foundations by examining how multiple logics are interpreted and prioritised on the ground (Currie & Spyridonidis, 2016). Building on these contributions, the present study seeks to develop a mechanism-level account of how specific practices are reclassified symbolically in ways that alter their organisational standing. The findings in Chapter 7 contribute to this gap by demonstrating that tighter coupling depends on situated forms of symbolic work through which actors revise the cognitive mechanisms used to interpret and value analytic practices. Leadership transitions, the renaming of the analytics function, and changes in organisational narratives served as occasions in which actors reinterpreted analytics as aligned with emerging organisational priorities. These shifts redefined analytics from an ambiguous support activity into a credible strategic capability, thereby altering expectations about who should engage with analytic work, under what conditions, and to what organisational ends. Therefore, the study extends institutional logics theory by showing that symbolic change is an interactional mechanism that consolidates relational and material developments already underway.

Also, these insights advance institutional theory by explaining tighter coupling as the emergent outcome of temporally layered institutional work. The findings show that relational alignment creates the interpretive conditions for material stabilisation; material usability expands the opportunities for symbolic reordering; and symbolic reordering strengthens the legitimacy of the practice, thereby sustaining its integration. This sequencing contributes to institutional scholarship by providing a process-based explanation for why some organisations transition from symbolic adoption to substantive enactment while others remain decoupled. It also clarifies why tighter coupling remains conditional and reversible: each layer depends on the durability of the others, and subsequent episodes may reopen contestation or reinstate ambiguity.

The findings, furthermore, illuminate the meso-level processes through which micro-interactions scale into organisational patterns. By showing how relational, material, and symbolic mechanisms accumulate within decision episodes, the thesis responds directly to calls for research that explains how microfoundational processes link to institutional outcomes (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Zilber, 2020). This provides a theoretically grounded account of coupling processes at micro- and meso- level. Next, Section 8.2 develops this argument more fully by outlining the thesis's theoretical contributions, specifying how the mechanisms identified here refine and

extend existing scholarship, and in some respects invite reconsideration of how established concepts operate within situated interactional settings.

8.2 Discussion of the Theoretical Contributions

The findings presented in Chapters 6 and 7 extend a series of theoretical considerations beyond the empirical insights of HRA adoption at D-company. Although the study was motivated by a theoretical concern with the persistent difficulty of achieving either loose or tight coupling between analytics and HR practice, the mechanisms identified across the decision episodes contribute to ongoing theoretical conversations about how coupling and decoupling are conceptualised within institutional theory. The study demonstrates that coupling should be understood as a situated, recursive institutional process produced through interaction, materiality, and reflexive interpretation. This conceptualisation builds directly on Hallett and Hawbaker's (2021) call to study coupling empirically rather than assume it, and to examine the variable configurations through which institutions, organisations, and interactions become connected. The thesis extends their account by specifying the relational, material, and cognitive mechanisms through which such configurations are enacted, and by introducing decision episodes as the meso-level analytic unit through which their formation becomes empirically tractable. This section revisits key debates developed in Chapters 2 and 3, showing how the study's mechanism-based analysis advances theoretical understanding. It does so in two steps. Section 8.2.1 re-theorises coupling as a form of institutional work under conditions of institutional complexity, drawing primarily on institutional logics and institutional work. Section 8.2.2 then builds on inhabited institutionalism and microfoundational perspectives to explain how interactional configurations within decision episodes scale up into patterned coupling trajectories.

More specifically, the findings suggest the need to reframe coupling not as a static configuration between social structures and enacted practices, but as an ongoing process of institutional work. The interaction among these forms of institutional work - translation, boundary work, identity work, and legitimacy work - operates as more than a mediating mechanism between coexisting logics: these practices themselves constitute the interconnected processes through which coupling is maintained, weakened, or occasionally strengthened. In this sense, the findings provide conceptual grounds for rethinking how institutional complexity is enacted in practice. Institutional complexity, as I elaborated in Chapter 2.3, refers to the coexistence of multiple, and often competing, institutional logics that offer different evaluative criteria, identity expectations,

and standards of appropriate action (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton et al., 2012; Raynard, 2016). The findings also clarify how micro-level mechanisms scale into meso-level patterns, and how temporally sequenced interactions generate either morphogenetic elaboration or morphostatic reproduction. The subsections that follow articulate and discuss these contributions in turn: Section 8.2.1 concentrates on coupling as institutional work in the face of competing logics, while Section 8.2.2 develops the inhabited-institutionalist and microfoundational implications of treating decision episodes as the meso-level locus through which institutions are inhabited and coupling is produced.

8.2.1 Re-theorising Coupling as Institutional Work

The thesis shows that coupling in HRA can be conceptualised as a set of institutional work practices through which actors negotiate, stabilise, and occasionally revise the relationship between coexisting institutional logics. Classic accounts conceptualise loose coupling as symbolic adoption maintained for legitimacy while substantive practices continue largely unchanged (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Westphal & Zajac, 2001). More recently, Hallett and Hawbaker (2021) have called for a reconsideration of coupling itself, arguing that coupling configurations between institutions, organisations, and interactions should be studied empirically as they are enacted in practice, rather than assumed as static structural conditions. The present thesis builds directly on this reorientation while extending it in a specific direction: it specifies the forms of institutional work — *translation, boundary, identity,* and *legitimacy work* — through which coupling configurations are enacted and clarifies how their patterned arrangements either reproduce loose coupling or facilitate tighter coupling. The fuller implications of this extension for inhabited institutionalism are developed in Section 8.2.2. This conceptual grounding continues to inform institutional analysis, and recent scholarship has begun to build on it to examine how and why data analytics is introduced and used within organisations — a line of inquiry that this thesis carries forward in the specific context of HRA, where coupling dynamics present particularly complex challenges. Much of preceding research has approached HRA either through the successful best practice implementation (Ferrar & Green, 2021; Green, 2017; Guenole et al., 2017; Napper, 2025), or through interview- and literature-based analyses that identify structural and factor-based explanations for its limited uptake (Rigamonti et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). Scholars examining the barriers to HRA implementation typically highlight analysis capability gaps, poor data quality, governance constraints, or inadequate leadership sponsorship (Angrave et al., 2016; Cayrat & Boxall, 2022; Minbaeva, 2017; Fernández & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2021; McCartney

& Fu, 2022). These accounts provide important insights into organisational conditions that shape HRA adoption and implementation. Building on these foundations, the present study directs attention to a complementary set of questions: how analytics is defined, negotiated, and enacted within everyday organisational practice, and how these situated processes shape whether HRA adoption — including analytic artefacts and the establishment of HRA functions — becomes loosely or tightly coupled with existing HR routines. This shift in analytical focus complements existing treatments of coupling as an organisational consequence of external legitimacy pressures by examining coupling also as a process of situated work.

The thesis turned to institutional logics as a theoretical lens in order to build on these foundations and to understand which and how coupling can be reconceptualised. According to Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2012), Institutional logics structure the symbolic and material organising principles that define what is considered legitimate, authoritative, or appropriate. They shape identity and interpretive frames influencing actors' judgements. In the field of HR, a relational logic persists that is rooted in contextual judgement, experiential knowledge, trust and discretion. This logic coexists in adoption of HRA uneasily with the more recently introduced logic of quantification (Sandholtz et al., 2019; Greasley & Thomas, 2020). The coexistence of these two logics generates institutional complexity: a condition in which organisational actors navigate competing logics and prioritisation rather than follow a single dominant logic. Under such complexity, organisational responses reflect how actors interpret and prioritise multiple logics.

A crucial implication of institutional complexity is that actors are rarely in a position to enact all relevant logics simultaneously. Instead, they continually establish logic prioritisation - that is, decide which logic is treated as authoritative, credible, or actionable in a given situation (Greenwood et al., 2011; Besharov & Smith, 2014; Currie & Spyridonidis, 2016; Stevenson et al., 2024). According to Smets et al. (2015), the relative salience of competing logics is not predetermined by the logics themselves but is continually accomplished through situated interpretation, sensitivity to the presence and expectations of referent audiences, and the authority relations that structure local interactions. Likewise, Ocasio, Thornton, and Lounsbury (2017) argue that logic salience emerges from situational cues and actor constellations rather than from the inherent features of institutional logics. In contexts such as HRA, where a relational logic and a quantification logic offer competing grounds, the absence of stable prioritisation results in a weak sub-field characterised by fluctuating evaluative criteria and unsettled meaning structures (Zietsma et al., 2017). From this point, coupling outcomes do not simply reflect whether

analytics fits existing practices; rather, they reflect how organisational actors rank and negotiate the salience of competing logics in concrete episodes.

This ordering of logics provides the immediate backdrop against which institutional work unfolds. However, this thesis demonstrates that the prioritisation of competing logics is itself accomplished through situated practices, rather than treating this ordering as a fixed background condition. Prioritisation is enacted through concrete forms of institutional work, as actors determine which logic is accorded authority, how tensions between logics are resolved or postponed, and when analytic practices gain or lose standing (Greenwood et al., 2011; Pache & Santos, 2013; Besharov & Smith, 2014). The findings of the empirical analysis demonstrates that this ordering of logics is mediated by four forms of institutional work - translation, boundary, identity and legitimacy work - whose configuration varies across decision episodes. For instance, as I conceptualised in Chapter 3, translation is one of the central mechanisms through which actors render analytic artefacts intelligible across professional communities (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). The findings refine this understanding by distinguishing between defensive translation, which narrows or reframes analytic requests to minimise exposure and thereby reinforces the relational logic, and bridging translation, which interprets analytic outputs in ways that make the quantification logic meaningful and actionable to HR practitioners.

8.2.1.1 Differentiating Defensive and Bridging Translation

These forms of institutional work interact as mechanistic configurations that either reproduce loose coupling or enable tighter coupling. Loose coupling reflects a maintenance-oriented configuration. In this configuration, translation becomes defensive as actors narrow or soften analytic claims to avoid exposing misalignments with the relational logic. Preceding works by Czarniawska and Sevón (1996) and Sahlin and Wedlin (2008) show that organisational actors rarely adopt practices in their original form but actively edit, narrate, and recontextualise them to fit local evaluative frames. Similarly, Carlile's (2002; 2004) theory of boundary objects and Levina and Vaast's (2005) work on boundary spanning demonstrate that translation requires bridging heterogeneous knowledge domains and reconciling divergent epistemic assumptions. More recent HRA-focused studies, such as Jörden et al. (2022) and McCartney and Fu (2024), reinforce this point by showing that analytics influences decisions when practitioners translate statistical outputs into strategically resonant narratives. Building on these valuable contributions, the present study seeks to further articulate how translation contributes to the reproduction of loose coupling

or facilitates the emergence of tighter coupling, particularly under conditions of institutional complexity where competing logics coexist.

The findings of this thesis further develop this line of inquiry by specifying the mechanistic variation within translation work under such complexity. What prior studies describe primarily as a cognitive–discursive act, making a practice intelligible or appealing, appears in this context as two qualitatively distinct mechanisms: *defensive translation* and *bridging translation*. Defensive translation occurs when actors attenuate or soften analytic claims to avoid exposing tensions with the relational logic that governs HR practice. This pattern extends Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) notion of maintenance work by showing how translation itself can function as a mechanism for preserving incumbent logics, alongside its more widely recognised role in adapting new ones.. Conversely, bridging translation involves interpretive work that renders analytic categories meaningful to HR audiences while preserving their analytic integrity. This practice clarifies, in more concrete terms, how institutional translation can facilitate logics reconciliation rather than logics protection - a dimension that this thesis seeks to further specify within translation scholarship. In these ways, the thesis extends translation work in institutional theory by demonstrating that translation is a consequential mechanism that can either reproduce loose coupling or enable tighter coupling depending on how it is enacted within decision episodes.

Moreover, by specifying defensive and bridging translation as analytically distinct, the findings extend recent practice-oriented studies that highlight the socio-material and affective dimensions of translation work. Research on cross-boundary coordination (Carlile, 2002; 2004) and epistemic brokerage (Levina & Vaast, 2005) demonstrates that translation is mediated by frames, artefacts, and status hierarchies. Building on this foundation, the present study foregrounds a complementary possibility: that translation can sometimes produce effects contrary to its bridging intent, inadvertently reinforcing and solidifying the very boundaries it seeks to cross. Defensive translation in this thesis shows how actors strategically limit the scope of analytic claims to avoid accountability, thereby reinforcing the relational logic and preserving existing jurisdictional boundaries. Conversely, bridging translation illustrates how translation can serve as a form of logics reconciliation, enabling analytic artefacts to circulate without being stripped of their epistemic authority. In doing so, the thesis advances institutional translation theory by demonstrating that translation is not simply a conduit for ideas but a mechanism through which institutional arrangements are either maintained or reconfigured.

8.2.1.2 Boundary Work as Logic Prioritisation

Boundary work has been recognised as central to how professional groups defend, extend, or redefine their jurisdictions (Abbott, 1988; Gieryn, 1983). Ethnographic studies provide particularly valuable insight into how such boundaries are enacted in practice. Bechky's (2003) and Kellogg's (2009) works, are worth scrutinising from this perspective. Both studies highlight that boundary work is not a formal delineation of roles but a continuous, contested practice through which actors stabilise their position vis-à-vis others. These analytically rich accounts are grounded primarily in established professions such as surgery or engineering. The present study extends their insights to a different analytical setting, examining how boundary dynamics shape the coupling of organisational innovations such as HRA, whose legitimacy is partially unsettled and whose jurisdictional placement is ambiguous.

In more detail, Bechky's (2003) seminal study of cross-functional collaboration in a manufacturing setting demonstrates that boundaries are reproduced through situated disputes over expertise, interpretive authority, and control over problem definitions; she shows that even mundane interactions constitute arenas in which actors reassert what counts as legitimate knowledge within their occupational domain. The findings of this thesis extend this work by demonstrating that boundary work is another core mechanism through which actors concretise logic prioritisation within decision episodes, particularly when faced with the competing demands of relational and quantitative logics. As shown in the mechanism of Jurisdictional Distancing in Chapter 6, HR teams contest requests for data access, redirect responsibility to other departments (e.g., Technology or Corporate HQ), or reframe analytic work as misaligned with HR's remit. These practices echo Bechky's (2003) insights into occupational boundary defence but extend them by showing how boundary work also protects epistemic jurisdictions (i.e., relational ways of knowing) from the perceived encroachment of quantification.

In contrast, tighter coupling emerges when boundary work shifts from a protective stance to a boundary-opening mode. As illustrated in the Symbolic Reordering in the Chapter 7, actors open jurisdictional space by co-owning analytic artefacts, granting shared interpretive authority, or repositioning the HRA team (e.g., through the PDA rebranding) within the organisational hierarchy. This elaborates Kellogg's (2009) concept of relational spaces by specifying how jurisdictional openness enables logic reconciliation. Kellogg's (2009) analysis of hospital change efforts illustrates that professional boundaries are negotiated through relational micro-practices that can alter who speaks when, who can challenge whom, how tasks are sequenced and whether the uptake of innovations is enabled or obstructed. Therefore, the findings advance boundary

work scholarship by showing that boundaries actively determine whether analytics becomes institutionally consequential, shaping whether coupling trajectories stabilise as loose, become tighter, or remain contested.

A further implication is that boundary work functions not only as a jurisdictional practice but also as an affective and epistemic ordering process. Existing scholarship increasingly recognises that boundaries are sustained through emotions such as anxiety, vulnerability, and the desire to preserve identity coherence (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). In the context of HRA, the findings show that actors' emotional responses to analytic work, particularly discomfort with quantification, fear of accountability, or concern about reputational risk, shape how boundaries are either tightened or eased. These affective cues become integral to logic prioritisation, as they signal which logic is safe to foreground and which must be contained. Moreover, boundary practices also organise epistemic authority by determining what counts as credible evidence and whose interpretive frames prevail in decision episodes. This supports recent work on epistemic contestation in professional settings (Anteby et al., 2016) but extends it by showing that such contestation is about how affective dispositions and epistemic preferences intertwine to produce particular coupling outcomes. In this way, boundary work becomes a multi-layered mechanism through which actors negotiate not only jurisdictional reach but also emotional security and epistemic legitimacy, making it central to understanding how logic prioritisation unfolds under institutional complexity.

8.2.1.3 Identity Work as an Interactional and Cross-Occupational Process

As a cognitive mechanism, identity work constitutes a process through which actors negotiate the relative standing of competing institutional logics, and this thesis draws on identity work — in its institutional-theoretic formulation (Creed, DeJordy & Lok, 2010; Lok, 2010) — as an analytic lens for examining how such negotiations unfold within the situated micro-processes that shape coupling. I introduced identity work as an inherently reflexive, emotionally charged practice in Chapter 3 that occurs when new logics challenge settled understandings of professional purpose and competence. The empirical analysis in this thesis shows not only that such tensions are pervasive in the context of HRA, but also that identity work directly shapes whether analytic practices become loosely or tightly coupled with HR decision-making.

Existing research provides important foundations for understanding these dynamics. Studies of professions emphasise that professional identity is closely tied to occupational

jurisdiction and epistemic authority (Abbott, 1988; Bechky, 2011). For this reason, the introduction of data-driven tools often provokes identity tensions when it is perceived as displacing core occupational values. Evidence from journalism (Usher, 2022), finance (Anthony, 2021) and education (Dunn & Jones, 2010; Williamson, 2017) shows that actors experience algorithmic and data-driven methods as threats to experiential authority and autonomy. Similar patterns are evident in medicine, where clinicians resist algorithmic decision support systems because these tools challenge the epistemic foundation of clinical judgement (Greenhalgh et al., 2017). These studies show that identity tensions arise when new technological or evaluative logics unsettle existing professional norms. This thesis builds on these foundations by examining how such identity tensions are enacted within the situated encounters where HRA adoption decisions are actually made.

The empirical analysis illustrates how identity work operates not only as a cognitive attitude toward analytics, but also as a situated practice enacted moment-by-moment within decision episodes. Under loose coupling, identity work intensified vulnerability and ambiguity, particularly in episodes associated with Identity Ambiguity and Defensive Translation in Chapter 6. HR practitioners expressed concern that data-driven approaches would devalue experiential knowledge, or even further, signalled discomfort about performing analytic tasks in front of more numerically confident colleagues such as engineers or finance specialists. These micro-level signs of perceived identity threat resonate with Creed et al.'s (2014) argument that identity violations provoke defensive institutional work, rooted in the anticipation and avoidance of evaluative exposure. The analysis illustrates how such reasoning is enacted interactionally through the naming of the HRA team at D-company. In loosely coupled episodes, particularly those surrounding Identity Ambiguity in Chapter 6, the decision to label the HRA team as the "Change Management Team" was intended to shield it from direct challenge or criticism about analytics but produced an outcome in which the team's role and identity became highly ambiguous.

The findings also illustrates how identity work in HRA adoption is not limited to self-definition but is fundamentally relational and emerges through comparison across occupational boundaries. While existing institutional research has examined identity contestation within occupational or organisational groups (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Lok, 2010), the present study highlights how identity threats are also produced through inter-occupational comparison in the specific context of HRA. Studies of occupational dynamics (Abbott, 1988; Barley & Kunda, 2001; Bechky, 2011) show that professions construct status and legitimacy relationally and this thesis

draws on this insight to examine how relational comparison shapes the adoption of analytics in HR.

From this perspective, the findings show that HR practitioners' identity concerns were shaped by their sensitivity to how technically dominant groups, such as data scientists, engineers, the CTO, and HQ managers, might judge or question their analytic competence. This sensitivity manifested in everyday interactions, generating an internal and affective sense of vulnerability that was not outwardly visible but had concrete effects on practice. In episodes (e.g. P2, P4, P6) related to Jurisdictional Distancing, HR practitioners enacted a pattern of surface-level cooperation while quietly maintaining distance from the HRA team. When the HRA team requested data or collaboration, actors such as other HR teams or other departments often invoked procedural checks, ownership reviews, or other administratively plausible reasons to delay or avoid substantive data sharing. These responses were neither openly hostile nor explicitly refusing; rather, they allowed HR practitioners to preserve superficially formal collegiality while limiting analytic exposure and protecting their jurisdictional boundaries. In this respect, the analysis complements existing research on identity–logic alignment (Lok, 2010; Reay & Hinings, 2009), which has typically conceptualised identity work as inward-facing cognitive reconciliation, by illustrating how identity tensions in HRA also arise through everyday comparison with proximate occupational groups perceived as epistemically superior. This relational, cross-occupational dimension of identity dynamics provides additional analytic resources for understanding how identity work mediates the loose or tighter coupling of analytics in HR..

At the same time, the findings show that identity work can not only hinder, but also strengthen the coupling of HRA, depending on how actors negotiate and stabilise the meaning of analytics in relation to their professional role. For instance, tighter coupling emerged in episodes characterised by Symbolic Reordering and the re-labelling of the analytics team as People Data Analytics (PDA), where HR practitioners clarified their professional identity and aligned epistemic expectations about HRA with their evolving role. The analysis here resonates with Lok's (2010) account of identity–logic alignment, which conceptualises alignment as a process through which individuals adjust their self-understanding to accommodate competing institutional logics. The empirical material illustrates how, in the HRA context, such alignment also unfolds interactionally, through situated practices such as redefining team labels or repositioning analytics within the hierarchy. These practices produce identity configurations that incorporate both relational and analytic expectations, thereby stabilising emerging meanings of analytics within HR. In this way,

identity work serves as one of several analytic resources for understanding the conditions under which loose coupling gives way to tighter coupling in HRA.

8.2.1.4 Legitimacy Withholding and Reclassification as Coupling Mechanisms

This thesis also contributes to the literature on legitimacy work by specifying how legitimacy work is performed within decision episodes and how these micro-level practices shape the extent to which analytics becomes loosely or tightly coupled with HR routines. As discussed previously in Chapter 3.2, legitimacy work is foundational in institutional work theory, shaping whether emerging practices become accepted, marginalised, or transformed (Suchman, 1995; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Suddaby et al., 2017). While prior research on organisational legitimacy has distinguished pragmatic, moral and cognitive forms (Suchman, 1995; Deephouse & Suchman, 2008), and more recent scholarship has explored its micro- and multi-level dynamics (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). Building on these contributions, the present study extends the analytical focus to how legitimacy judgements are enacted as ongoing, situated processes within everyday decision episodes.

Findings show that legitimacy work frequently took the form of legitimacy withholding in relation to loose coupling. Across episodes such as HR Data Governance (P1), Employee Communication Pattern (P5) and Office Capacity Optimisation (P6), actors questioned the technical robustness and necessity of models or framed analytics as strategically peripheral. These were interactional behaviours, such as hesitations, requests for repeated validation, or prolonged silence (e.g. no response to the data access request). This aligns with Suchman's (1995) account of pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy that provides a basis for understanding how organisational audiences judge whether a practice is desirable and appropriate. He emphasises that legitimacy can be withdrawn as well as gained or maintained, and that withdrawal prompts organisations to adjust or repair their practices. The findings build on this perspective by showing how legitimacy withdrawal and repair were enacted within everyday decision episodes. Under loose coupling, actors withheld legitimacy by questioning data quality, raising fairness concerns, or framing analytics as low priority. These actions limited the organisational reach of analytic outputs and reproduced loose coupling. In this way, legitimacy work operated as a micro-level mechanism that shaped whether analytics remained marginal or became more integrated into HR decision-making.

Tighter coupling, on the other hand, was supported through legitimacy reclassification, in which actors began to treat analytics as an appropriate and strategically relevant basis for decision-making. At D-company this was most visible in the mechanism of Symbolic Reordering: repositioning the analytics function under the CHRO's direct oversight, formally renaming it People Data Analytics (PDA), and the leadership change from Robert to Laura collectively recategorised projects such as Workforce Planning Prediction (P12) from peripheral experimentation to core evidence for workforce-cost control. Following these developments, other departments increasingly approached the PDA team with analysis requests, indicating that analytics was now recognised as a legitimate and necessary capability. These shifts show how legitimacy judgements changed over time, and how legitimacy work contributed to tighter coupling by reclassifying analytics from an ambiguous add-on into a cognitively clear and pragmatically valued organisational function.

These developments show that legitimacy in HRA is a recursive and interactional process that is produced differently for distinct evaluative audiences. In addition, the findings further specify aspects of legitimacy work that earlier scholarship has helpfully foregrounded. Suchman (1995) argued that pragmatic legitimacy concerns audience evaluations of usefulness and self-interest, whereas cognitive legitimacy concerns whether an activity is regarded as understandable, expected, and requiring no further justification. Later work by other scholars such as Deephouse and Suchman (2008) and Suddaby (2010) has highlighted how organisations actively manage legitimacy judgements through symbolic actions, rhetorical framing, and narrative strategies, often accompanied by targeted procedural or structural adjustments. These studies establish that legitimacy rests on audience-specific judgements and is accomplished through narrative and symbolic work. The present study builds on these foundations by showing how such judgements are also produced through the interaction of relational, material, and cognitive mechanisms that operated across multiple audiences, each with competing logics. Repositioning the team, renaming it, and aligning projects like Workforce Planning Prediction (P12) with the new CEO's cost-discipline logic reclassified analytics as strategically useful and appropriate. These moves did not simply add legitimacy to an already defined practice; they altered what analytics was understood to be, who it served, and which organisational problems it was authorised to address.

In this sense, the findings complement and deepen Bitektine and Haack's (2015) argument that legitimacy judgements are formed in micro-level evaluations and subsequently aggregated into macro-level legitimacy states. The thesis identifies the mechanism through which legitimacy judgements facilitated institutional elaboration in this setting: analytic projects were

reclassified from tentative, low-priority experiments into credible resources that could legitimately underpin decisions across hierarchical levels. This reclassification was achieved through symbolic reordering - changes in labels, reporting lines and evaluative logics - combined with the relational and material work traced in bridging translation and reconfiguring artefacts. Therefore, these forms of legitimacy work expanded the organisational reach of analytics and helped stabilise tighter coupling between HRA and everyday HR practice.

8.2.2 Advancing Inhabited Institutionalism through a Microfoundational Account of Coupling

Building on the empirical orientation toward coupling configurations outlined in Section 8.2.1, Inhabited Institutionalism (II) positions interaction as the site where institutional meanings, organisational routines and broader logics are enacted, contested, and occasionally transformed. Yet, as Hallett and Hawbaker (2021) argue, II still lacks a sufficiently specified account of how interactional processes scale up into organisational patterns, and how configurations of interactions generate changes in coupling between institutions, organisations and practices. Similarly, Hallett and Meanwell (2016) richly demonstrate how institutional reform unfolds through contested meaning-making in interaction, and open the question of how such micro-sequences accumulate into meso-level institutional outcomes. Importantly, Hallett's (2010) analysis of recoupling in an elementary school demonstrates that turbulence in the interaction order - shifting expectations, reallocations of authority, and renegotiated performances - constitutes a micro-level mechanism with organisation-level effects. Together, these studies establish II's rich analytical purchase on interactional dynamics and open important questions about how such dynamics consolidate into patterned organisational change. The findings of this thesis contribute to this ongoing line of inquiry by specifying decision episodes as an analytically tractable meso-level unit that captures how the interaction order produces loose or tighter coupling over time.

Decision episodes, as identified across the twelve analytic projects, functioned as bounded yet recurring arenas in which actors negotiated the meaning, relevance and legitimacy of analytics. These episodes operationalise Hallett and Ventresca's (2006) assertion that institutions are "*inhabited*" through situated exchanges but extend their insight by showing that it is not isolated interactions but the patterned configuration of four types of institutional work - translation, boundary, identity and legitimacy work - that generates coupling trajectories. In this way, the thesis provides a mechanism-level explanation for II's central claim that institutions live

in the interaction order: it demonstrates the specific combinations of micro-practices through which actors recouple or decouple organisational arrangements. In addition to this, the findings also complement Hallett's (2010) argument that recoupling is not a single shift from myth to practice, but an ongoing, recursive, emotionally charged set of interactional adjustments. At D-company, these shifts in coupling, examined through Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach, unfolded through a recursive and affectively mediated interaction order. Episodes of defensive translation and identity ambiguity - visible in actors' anxiety about analytic scrutiny, concerns about reputational exposure, and discomfort with unfamiliar metrics - alternated with moments of bridging translation and symbolic reordering. In this dynamic interplay, recoupling emerged as a sequence of emotionally charged adjustments in which practitioners grappled with doubt, negotiated accountability pressures, and gradually stabilised a new logic data-driven analytical practice.

The findings also advance Zilber's (2020) call for microfoundational research that explicates how actors' everyday actions, interpretive processes and artefact-mediated interactions constitute the "black boxes" linking micro-level conduct with macro-level institutional outcomes. The analysis shows how decision episodes operate as micro-sequences in which identity, translation, boundary, and legitimacy work combine into stabilising or destabilising feedback loops. The thesis also shows how recurring configurations of micro-practices generate identifiable patterns of coupling over time, offering a complementary perspective on interactional events by tracing how they accumulate into patterned institutional outcomes. Defensive translation and jurisdictional distancing generate morphostatic reproduction of loose coupling, whereas bridging translation, artefact reconfiguration and symbolic reordering produce recursive reinforcement that gradually embeds analytics into organisational routines. In this way, the thesis provides a concrete, mechanism-level explanation of how micro-level interactional configurations accumulate into meso-level institutional outcomes. It thereby opens the black boxes identified by Zilber (2020: 2) and addresses the questions she poses about "*how social structure emerges from human interactions (Soderstrom & Weber, 2020), how strategy is constructed through everyday routines (Felin & Foss, 2009), and how organisational fields are shaped by mundane practices (Smets, Morris, & Greenwood, 2012)*".

Prior research in II has illuminated how interaction, meaning, emotion and power shape the lived experience of institutional life (Creed et al., 2014; Voronov & Weber, 2016; Zietsma et al., 2019). Yet, as Hallett and Hawbaker (2021) observe, II still lacks a sufficiently specified account of how interactional processes consolidate into patterned organisational consequences.

This body of work has richly documented interactional dynamics, and this thesis builds on those foundations by examining how particular sequences of micro-events scale into meso-level institutional outcomes. The present study advances II by identifying relational (Bridging Translation), material (Reconfiguring Artefacts), and cognitive (Symbolic Reordering) mechanisms as distinct but interdependent pathways through which the interaction order shapes coupling trajectories. These pathways clarify how actors' situated negotiations produce recurrent patterns - loose decoupling or gradual incorporation - that accumulate into institutional effects. In doing so, the thesis provides II with a tractable meso-level unit of analysis that links micro-level negotiations to patterned organisational change, thereby addressing a foundational limitation identified in recent II scholarship.

These findings also extend Bitektine, Haack, Bothello, and Mair's (2020) argument that institutionalisation depends on how actors internalise institutional expectations through communication and actorhood models. In the case of D-company, decision episodes served as communicative spaces in which actors actively constructed who counts as a legitimate analytic actor, how responsibility is distributed, and which evaluative models are appropriate. Through translation, identity positioning, and symbolic reordering, actors in the HRA team redefined the role of analytics. What had previously been seen as a technical data-processing function or a set of analytic tools became recognised as a role that legitimately contributes to organisational judgement and decision-making. More broadly, this demonstrates that actorhood is not a pre-given cultural template but a situated accomplishment emerging through patterned interaction. This finding advances interactional accounts of actor formation, such as Hallett's (2010) and Hallett and Meanwell's (2016) analyses of how professional standing is negotiated in the interaction order, by showing how actorhood is reconstructed in contexts characterised by epistemic tension between relational and analytic logics. It also extends Binder's (2007) and Powell et al.'s (2012) arguments about the local reinterpretation of institutional templates by identifying the specific interactional configurations through which new evaluative models of analytics gain legitimacy. Furthermore, the results elaborate socio-material perspectives (Barley & Tolbert, 1997) by demonstrating how analytic artefacts serve as resources for redefining the boundaries of HR expertise. These insights show that actorhood formation is an ongoing, interactionally produced process through which new institutional roles acquire legitimacy.

In sum, these relational–material–symbolic mechanisms provide a more granular account of how micro-level processes become consequential for institutional outcomes, as demonstrated in Section 7.5. As a relational mechanism, Bridging Translation explains how interpretive

alignment is built through iterative sense-making. Reconfiguring Artefacts shows how material reconfiguration alters who can participate in analytic work. Symbolic Reordering illustrates how shifts in evaluative logics and organisational identities consolidate meaning structures. These findings extend the II perspective advanced by Hallett and Ventresca (2006), who argue that agency is not an individual property but emerges through situated social interaction. The insights in this thesis show how different forms of institutional work converge through recursive social interactions within decision episodes to generate morphogenetic outcomes - that is, to incrementally reconfigure existing arrangements rather than simply reproduce the status quo. They also elaborate Bitektine et al.'s (2020) multi-level communication model by demonstrating how meso-level communicative episodes are the locus through which actors internalise and reproduce institutional scripts. Additionally, the study responds to concerns raised by Zilber (2020), Powell & Rerup (2017), and Barley (2019) that microfoundational research often fails to link local practice to wider institutional structures. It demonstrates how micro-practices ratchet upwards into meso-level organisational routines and institutional positions by showing how repeated decision episodes - each composed of situated configurations of interactional, material and symbolic work - accumulate into stable coupling patterns. Therefore, this specification enriches II by articulating the mechanisms through which local negotiations actively reshape the coupling between relational and quantitative logics in a contested subfield such as HRA.

8.3 Practical Implications

The theoretical account developed in this thesis carries several implications for organisations seeking to introduce and implement HRA and, more broadly, for practitioners attempting to introduce data-driven and -informed practices into established organisational fields. A central message is that the adoption of analytics is neither a technical nor a linear implementation process; it constitutes institutional processes that depend on how actors translate competing logics, negotiate boundaries, manage identity commitments, and engage with material artefacts over time. This perspective reframes many assumptions in practitioner-oriented HRA guidance and helps to explain why, despite extensive best practice prescriptions and significant investment, analytics continues to struggle to achieve tighter coupling with organisational practice.

First, the findings invite practitioners to move beyond factor-based explanations of failure. Much of the practitioner, scholars, and consultancy discourse frames the barriers to HRA adoption in terms of discrete deficits: insufficient data quality, a shortage of analytical capability, or

inadequate leadership sponsorship (Angrave et al., 2016; Ferrar & Green, 2021; Minbaeva, 2017; Fernández & Gallardo-Gallardo, 2021; Cayrat & Boxall, 2022; McCartney & Fu, 2022). Such factors matter, but the mechanism-based analysis developed in this thesis shows that they partially explain the persistence of loose coupling. Organisations may have enterprise data lakes, skilled analysts, and visible executive support, yet analytics can still remain peripheral if the institutional work required to integrate it is misaligned, contested, or left incomplete. The evidence reviewed in Chapter 2 shows that many HRA projects stall at pilot stage or remain confined to HRA teams because logics, identities and jurisdictions remain unsettled (Greasley & Thomas, 2020; Jörden et al., 2022; Sandholtz et al., 2019), not simply because the models or dashboards are technically weak. For practitioners, this implies that corrective actions focused on isolated inputs, such as hiring more data scientists, purchasing advanced analytics tools, or mandating dashboards, are unlikely, on their own, to shift entrenched patterns of weak analytic use. Embedding HRA requires organisations to diagnose and address the institutional conditions that shape how analytic practices are interpreted and enacted: the degree of identity compatibility with the HR profession; the vulnerabilities created by jurisdictional boundaries between HR, finance, IT and legal; and the symbolic positioning of analytics within organisational hierarchies.

Second, the thesis underscores the practical importance of translation and relational work. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 repeatedly shows that HRA gains traction not by virtue of sophisticated methods alone but when analytics is rendered intelligible, credible and actionable for diverse audiences (Ellmer & Reichel, 2021; McCartney & Fu, 2024). In inhabited institutional terms, analytics becomes consequential when it is worked into the interaction order through situated dialogue, rather than simply being broadcast as technical output (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). This suggests that organisations should invest as much in translation capability as in technical capability. In practice, this involves identifying and supporting actors who can frame analytic questions in terms that resonate with business priorities, negotiate evaluative standards across HR, finance and legal, and narrate results in ways that preserve methodological integrity while aligning with decision-makers' concerns. Such implications further reinforce the importance of earlier scholarship. Carlile (2004) demonstrates that such cross-boundary translation requires addressing not only differences in knowledge but also differences in interests and evaluative criteria, making translation an organisational capability rather than a simple communication task. Likewise, Jörden and her colleagues (2022) show that HRA practitioners' translation work is shaped by identity performance scripts, such as 'customerization' and 'action-orientation', which pressure analysts to prioritise speed, visibility and audience appeal over deeper analytical rigour. This insight highlights that translation is not a neutral transfer of information but a form of identity

and legitimacy work in which practitioners should navigate competing expectations about professionalism and value. The thesis' account of bridging translation, for example, indicates that structures such as HR Business Partner (HRBP) roles, one-to-one executive debriefs, and regular cross-functional forums can serve as infrastructures for reciprocal interpretation, where leaders and analysts jointly define problems, interpret evidence and agree follow-up actions. Treating such translation as a strategic competence, designed into roles, rewarded, and deliberately cultivated, is likely to be a precondition for tighter coupling.

Third, the analysis suggests that organisations should approach analytic artefacts as socio-material enablers. Preceding literature show that dashboards, data-access templates, and KPI glossaries function as boundary objects that coordinate across occupational communities while also redistributing authority and shaping what counts as legitimate evidence (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Bowker & Star, 1999; Carlile, 2002; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009; Sandholtz et al., 2019). The field evidence indicates that artefacts designed exclusively around technical elegance or developer convenience are prone to remaining loosely coupled: they require constant mediation by specialists and are difficult to adapt to evolving HRA-related questions (Greasley & Thomas, 2020; Ferrar & Green, 2021). By contrast, artefacts that are modular, recognisable to HR practitioners, aligned with the temporal meetings (e.g., monthly HR reviews, quarterly business reviews) and are configurable by non-specialists create opportunities for repeated engagement, local adaptation and ultimately tighter coupling. Practically, this implies that organisations should design artefacts iteratively with end-users, pay attention to classification schemes (e.g., turnover definitions, FTE counts, pay-equity thresholds), and treat disputes over categories as clues to underlying jurisdictional tensions rather than mere data cleaning problems (Bowker & Star, 1999; Carlile, 2002). In this study, the shift from Python-based dashboards, which were difficult for HR practitioners to access or modify, to Excel Power Query artefacts expanded the usability of HR data dashboards, enabling tighter coupling of analytics into everyday HR work and, in doing so, extended and consolidated HRA's jurisdiction within the organisation.

Fourth, the thesis points to identity and vulnerability as core adoption dynamics that require explicit managerial attention. HRA is often experienced by HR practitioners, line managers, and senior leadership not only as a new data-driven strategy but as a challenge to their jurisdiction and status (Bechky, 2011; Sandholtz et al., 2019). Practitioner-oriented discourse frequently assumes that resistance to analytics is a matter of mindset or a data literacy deficit that can be addressed through training or improved communication (Marler & Boudreau, 2017; Peeters et al., 2020; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015). However, the empirical literature and the findings of this study

suggest a more complex dynamic: actors may experience analytics as a threat to experiential authority, or as exposing them to evaluation by numerically dominant groups such as data scientists, finance specialists, or engineers (Anthony, 2021; Williamson, 2017), or as creating new forms of accountability they cannot fully control (Creed et al., 2014). For organisations, this implies that attempts to adopt HRA should anticipate identity concerns and emotional responses rather than treating them as irrational obstacles. Practical steps include involving HR practitioners and line managers early in HRA-related problem-framing, inviting them to co-design metrics and dashboards, and creating low-stakes settings in which analytic outputs can be explored, questioned and re-interpreted without immediate performance consequences.

From a practical standpoint, this is particularly important because my fieldwork at D-company demonstrated the tangible consequences of failing to address identity and vulnerability issues early. As discussed in Chapter 5 (Context), Michael, one of the earliest members of the HRA team left the organisation due to identity strain, role misalignment and ambiguity in the early stages of adoption. John, the team's first leader, also left D-company in the second year of fieldwork following repeated experiences of relational vulnerability arising from the division and repositioning of the HRA function. Although not documented in detail because their departures occurred after the end of the fieldwork period, HR analyst Emily, who had long struggled with recurring intra-team tensions, and CHRO James, who exhibited signs of professional vulnerability despite his outward support for HRA, also left the organisation shortly afterwards. These background developments indicate that although HRA adoption eventually gained stability and contributed to tighter coupling over time, the process also involved significant turnover among key stakeholders and exposed the relational complexity and fragility inherent in embedding analytics. This underscores that addressing identity and vulnerability is not an abstract concern but a practical requirement for sustaining the continuity and retention of core HRA members, and thus for enabling tighter coupling in the long term.

Fifth, the findings nuance the familiar injunction that leadership support is critical for successful analytics. The strategic HRA literature emphasises the importance of executive sponsorship and alignment with business priorities (Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015; Lawler & Boudreau, 2015; Levenson, 2018). The findings suggest that leadership matters not only for resources but for symbolic ordering: leaders define what analytics stands for and where it sits in the organisation's hierarchy of value (Suchman, 1995; Greenwood et al., 2011). This was evident in D-company's leadership transitions. Under Robert, a technology-oriented CEO, HRA was frequently interpreted as peripheral experimentation, generating limited traction for projects such

as Workforce Planning Prediction (P12). With Laura's appointment, a shift toward financial discipline reframed the same project as central to labour-cost governance, immediately elevating its organisational relevance. A similar dynamic occurred within the HRA team: John's leadership reinforced ambiguity about the team's purpose, reflected in the "Change Management Team" label. Whereas Jessica's leadership clarified analytic standards, reset expectations, and stabilised the team's identity under the new "People Data Analytics (PDA)" designation. Structural placement and naming choices were therefore mechanisms through which leaders reclassified analytics. Whether the team remained at the same hierarchical level as other HR sub-units or was repositioned directly under the CHRO, and whether the function was framed as "Change Management" or "People Data Analytics," materially influenced how actors across the organisation interpreted its mandate. These leadership-driven shifts communicated whether analytics should be treated as a marginal support function or a strategic capability. This, in turn, shaped whether analytical practices remained loosely coupled or became more tightly integrated with HR decision-making. For practitioners, this entails that leaders should attend to framing and placement as seriously as to funding and supporting.

Finally, the thesis reinforces the need to view HRA adoption as a long-term recursive process rather than a fragmentary project. Most preceding empirical studies offer cross-sectional snapshots of adoption and implementation, with relatively few tracings how analytic artefacts interact with organisational practice in the long run (Ellmer & Reichel, 2021; Jörden et al., 2022). The mechanism-based account developed in this study conceptualises coupling as an emergent property of decision episodes that recur over time, echoing practice-focused institutional process work in other domains (Smets et al., 2012; 2015; Hallett & Hawbaker, 2021). For practice, this suggests that organisations should shift focus from rolling out analytics as a one-off initiative toward building structured, repeated opportunities for interpretive engagement with analytic artefacts. It also means accepting that coupling is reversible: turnover in key roles, changes in leadership priorities, or high-profile governance controversies can re-open contestation and return analytics to a loosely coupled state. A clear illustration of this dynamic was the Workday implementation project at D-company, which progressed throughout my fieldwork due largely to headquarter-driven mandates and institutional pressures, yet repeatedly oscillated between loose and tight coupling as priorities shifted and coordination faltered. Therefore, for effective HRA adoption and execution, organisations should not assume that once teams, analytic capabilities, and artefacts are established, a successful process will unfold automatically. Sustained attention to the relational, material, and symbolic mechanisms that underpin coupling is essential. In particular, it requires interpretive and relational infrastructures that enable translation across logics;

socio-material artefacts that stabilise new practices while redistributing authority in considered ways; recognition of identity and vulnerability as core adoption dynamics; leadership capable of symbolic as well as resource-based support; and a longitudinal, trajectory-oriented approach to change.

8.4 Limitations and Future Research

Although this thesis makes a substantive theoretical and empirical contribution to understanding the institutional dynamics of HRA, the study's limitations shape the scope of its claims and open avenues for further research. These limitations do not undermine the contribution; rather, they reveal important conceptual and empirical questions that remain unresolved in the study of organisational coupling and the institutionalisation of analytic practices.

A first limitation concerns the temporal period of the research. The study captured approximately two years of organisational life, enabling fine-grained analysis of how loose and tighter coupling emerged within and across decision episodes. However, institutional change is inherently a long-term, recursive process, and institutional theory consistently cautions against assuming that change stabilises within short timeframes (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Beckert, 1999; Perkmann & Spicer, 2008; Pettigrew, 1990). The morphogenetic perspective adopted in this thesis conceptualises institutional change as a series of conditioning - social interaction - elaboration cycles (Archer, 1995; 2003), but the longitudinal window available inevitably limits observation of later cycles of reproduction or transformation. Future research should therefore track HRA trajectories over longer periods to examine whether the mechanism configurations identified here - maintenance-oriented loose coupling and elaborative tighter coupling - persist, convert, or diminish under evolving structural and organisational conditions. Such research would deepen understanding of how morphogenetic sequences unfold beyond the initial adoption of an innovation and how early episodes shape, but do not determine, subsequent institutional trajectories.

The single-case ethnographic approach enabled an unusually detailed examination of how institutional work, identity negotiation, and socio-material interaction unfolded in situ. identity negotiation, and socio-material interaction unfolded in situ. This depth was very important for theorising decision episodes as microfoundational mechanisms and for specifying the affective and relational microfoundations of (de)coupling. Yet, as with all single-case studies, the contextual particularities of the research site limit direct transferability. This does not weaken the theoretical

contribution as many foundational institutional studies have relied on theoretically informative cases (e.g., Greenwood et al., 2011; Hallett, 2010). The purpose of this thesis was analytical rather than statistical generalisation. Nevertheless, future research should investigate whether the mechanism configurations observed here appear across organisational forms, occupational fields, or national contexts. Comparative case studies would be particularly valuable for examining how decision episodes differ when institutional logics, professional jurisdictions, regulatory constraints, or data governance cultures vary. Likewise, multi-site ethnographies or organisational panel studies could illuminate how coupling mechanisms interact with sector-specific pressures or differences in power asymmetry between HR and other functions.

In terms of the theoretical scope of the study, the thesis integrates institutional theory, inhabited institutionalism, and microfoundations with Archer's morphogenetic approach. This integration proved analytically productive, particularly for theorising how mechanisms accumulate within episodes and shape coupling trajectories. Nonetheless, other theoretical lenses could offer additional or different perspectives. For example, sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) could enrich future work by examining how actors retrospectively reconstruct analytic practices and how interruptions or surprises trigger reframing of analytic artefacts. Actor–Network Theory (Latour, 2005) would facilitate stronger theorisation of material actants, enabling exploration of how dashboards, data pipelines, and algorithms mobilise or resist particular institutional settlements. Practice theory (Nicolini, 2012; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011) could deepen analysis of how routines stabilise or erode as analytic artefacts circulate across organisational sites. These frameworks would not replace the institutional lens advanced in this thesis but would enable broader examination of the socio-technical entanglements that shape (de)coupling processes. Therefore, future research could adopt multi-theoretical designs to explore intersections between institutional work, technological mediation, and meaning-making, particularly as generative AI systems increasingly influence organisational analysis and decision-making in this era.

The thesis foregrounds affect, identity, and relational vulnerability as integral microfoundations of institutional work - dimensions that warrant further development in institutional scholarship (Voronov & Vince, 2012; Zietsma & Toubiana, 2018). While the study illuminates their significance within decision episodes, future research should investigate these dynamics more systematically. In particular, further studies could examine how emotional intensities vary across professional groups, how identity threats are negotiated at the collective rather than individual level, and how organisations manage the affective toll of prolonged institutional work. Research could also explore how hybrid identities develop and stabilise over

time as new practices become institutionalised (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Besharov & Smith, 2014). A longitudinal analysis of identity consolidation, drawing more directly on identity work scholarship (Brown, 2015; Caza et al., 2018; Creed et al., 2010), would complement the microfoundational dimension of institutional theory and respond to calls to integrate emotion and embodiment into institutional analysis (Lok, 2010; Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Creed et al., 2014; Voronov & Vince, 2012)

Last but not least, the thesis's hybrid ethnographic approach, combining in-person and digital observation, was important for capturing how analytic practices unfolded within hybrid organisational settings (e.g. in the office and sometimes remote). Nonetheless, this approach also presents methodological limitations. Remote observation restricts access to certain tacit cues and may influence the spontaneity of interaction, even when participants appear accustomed to digital communication. Future ethnographies of analytics should therefore experiment with methodological triangulation, including shadowing, digital trace analysis, and participatory design workshops, to capture socio-material interactions more comprehensively. Furthermore, while decision episodes proved analytically powerful in this study, future research could refine the concept by delineating sub-types of episodes (e.g., consultative, conflictual, boundary-setting) or by examining how episodes vary across hierarchical levels. This would enrich our understanding of the meso-level mechanics of institutional change.

8.5 Overall Conclusion

This thesis set out to explain timely empirical and theoretical questions. First, why HRA, despite widespread endorsement, growing professionalisation, and substantial organisational investment, so often remains loosely coupled with everyday HR practice. Second, how tighter coupling between HRA and HR practice can emerge. Existing debates in the HRA field tend to attribute this problem to deficits in data quality, analytical capability, business environment, or leadership support. Institutional scholarship, for its part, highlights the symbolic adoption of fashionable practices, yet offers limited insight into how coupling or decoupling unfolds in practice. Across these conversations, the underlying mechanisms through which analytic practices become enacted, resisted, or transformed have remained insufficiently theorised. This thesis has contributed towards addressing that gap by providing a theoretically integrated and microfoundational explanation of how analytic artefacts become loosely or tightly coupled with organisational practices by linking structural conditioning, reflexive agency, situated social

interaction, and temporal sequencing. This integration is operationalised through the concept of decision episodes and made visible through the six mechanisms identified across the study - three that sustain loose coupling (Defensive Translation, Jurisdictional Distancing and Identity Ambiguity) and three that support tighter coupling (Bridging Translation, Reconfiguring Artefacts and Symbolic Reordering).

Drawing on a two-year hybrid ethnography of a multinational technology firm, the thesis advances a mechanism-based explanation of how coupling emerges, persists, or shifts over time. It reconceptualises coupling not as a static organisational state or an outcome of implementation success, but as a recursive institutional work process enacted within decision episodes. These episodes constitute the meso-level sites where competing logics are translated, situated identities are negotiated, professional boundaries are worked on, and socio-material artefacts are mobilised. Through repeated interaction, they accumulate into patterned trajectories of loose or tighter coupling. This addresses a core limitation in institutional theory: the absence of a tractable analytic unit connecting micro-interaction with structural reproduction and elaboration.

This thesis makes four interrelated theoretical contributions. First, it re-theorises coupling as a form of institutional work rather than a static alignment between social structures and practice. The findings show that loose and tight coupling emerge through situated, recursive configurations of translation, boundary work, identity work and legitimacy work. Loose coupling is not a passive implementation failure but an actively changing process shaped by interpretive, structural and identity-protective processes; tighter coupling, in turn, represents a recursive morphogenetic elaboration that depends on relational, material and symbolic alignment. This reconceptualisation reframes coupling as an interactionally accomplished, artefact-mediated institutional process shaped by reflexivity, meaning-making and socio-material dynamics.

Second, the thesis develops a dual-mechanism model of (de)coupling. It identifies three mechanisms - Defensive Translation, Jurisdictional Distancing and Identity Ambiguity - that reproduce loose coupling by reinforcing relational HR logics and limiting the organisational reach of analytic artefacts. It also identifies three countervailing mechanisms - Bridging Translation, Reconfiguring Artefacts and Symbolic Reordering - that allow tighter coupling to emerge by creating shared interpretive ground, redesigning artefacts to fit workflow routines and reshaping the symbolic and organisational positioning of analytics. By specifying how these mechanisms assemble into patterned sequences across decision episodes, the thesis extends institutional theory's understanding of how organisational practices become stabilised or unsettled through temporally layered interaction.

Third, the thesis introduces decision episodes as an analytically tractable meso-level construct that links microfoundational processes with organisational outcomes. Episodes are the practical arenas in which competing institutional logics collide, are prioritised and reconfigured. They show how reflexivity, affect, identity negotiation and interpretive work accumulate into meso-level coupling patterns, thereby advancing inhabited institutionalism, which has often lacked a temporal analytic lens. Through this, the thesis also operationalises Archer's morphogenetic approach in a way that renders temporal sequencing empirically observable and analytically productive.

Fourth, the thesis extends the microfoundations of institutional theory by demonstrating that coupling is shaped not only by cognitive sensemaking but by affective, relational, identity-related and socio-material dynamics. Anxiety, vulnerability and identity threats influence which mechanisms are activated; professional identities condition receptivity to analytic practices; relational vulnerability shapes perceived risks of engagement; and artefacts mediate the very possibilities for action. This expanded microfoundational account contributes to institutional scholarship and connects it more closely to socio-material perspectives by showing how interactional, material and symbolic mechanisms converge within episodes to produce either morphostatic reproduction or morphogenetic change.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, the thesis offers practical insights for organisations seeking to adopt and successfully implement HRA. It shows that technical investment is necessary but insufficient; what matters is how analytic work is translated across professional boundaries, how artefacts are configured to support everyday practice, and how identity concerns and relational vulnerabilities are addressed. It also highlights the symbolic dimension of analytic adoption, emphasising the importance of organisational framing and leadership in shaping the perceived meaning and legitimacy of analytics.

Methodologically, the thesis demonstrates the value of hybrid ethnography for capturing contemporary organisational life. It provides, by combining in-person and digital forms of participant observation, a model for researching organisations operating through hybrid infrastructures while maintaining the depth necessary for institutional and microfoundational analysis.

The limitations identified in Section 8.4 suggest opportunities for future research. Longer-term studies are required to trace how mechanism configurations evolve across multiple morphogenetic cycles. Comparative research across industries and national contexts could help

assess the transferability of the mechanism model. Further theoretical work could also engage alternative frameworks, such as sensemaking or Actor–Network theory, to extend understanding of meaning, materiality, and human–technology interaction in analytic adoption.

In conclusion, this thesis offers a theoretically integrated, empirically grounded and conceptually coherent explanation for why analytics expertise is often loosely coupled with organisational practices and how tighter coupling can occur. By placing institutional work, decision episodes, and microfoundational dynamics at the centre of analysis, the thesis reorients debates in HRA and organisational change toward a more situated, relational and temporally informed understanding of how analytic practices are interpreted, negotiated and transformed within organisations. In doing so, it provides a novel conceptual and analytical framework capable of supporting future research and guiding practitioners seeking to advance evidence-based and data-driven HR.

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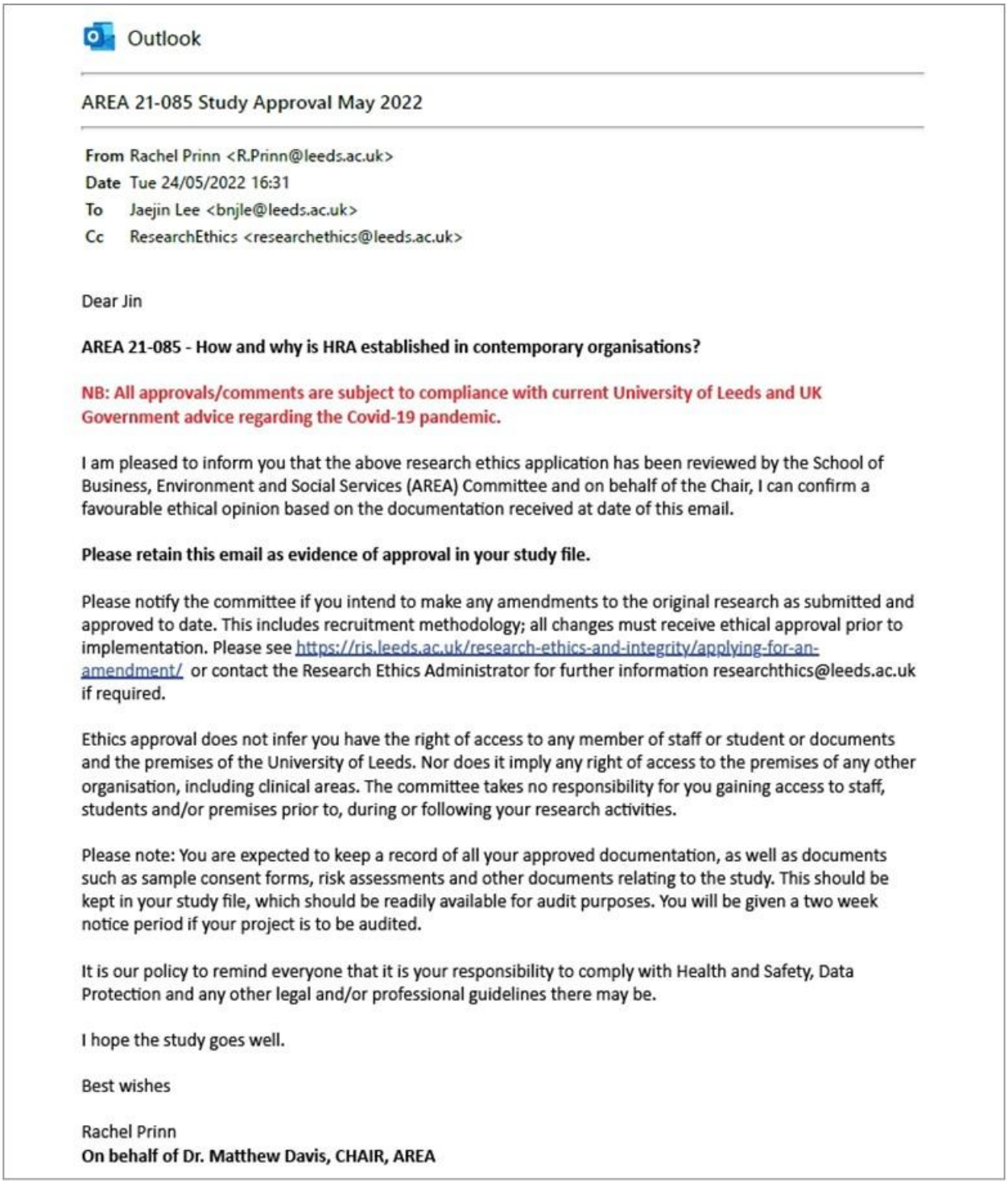
Appendix 1. A copy of the ethics approval evidence for the fieldwork

In accordance with the Thesis Guidelines, I have attached a copy of the ethics approval evidence for the fieldwork granted by the Leeds University Business School Ethics Committee.



Outlook

AREA 21-085 Study Approval May 2022

From Rachel Prinn <R.Prinn@leeds.ac.uk>
Date Tue 24/05/2022 16:31
To Jaejin Lee <bnjle@leeds.ac.uk>
Cc ResearchEthics <researchethics@leeds.ac.uk>

Dear Jin

AREA 21-085 - How and why is HRA established in contemporary organisations?

NB: All approvals/comments are subject to compliance with current University of Leeds and UK Government advice regarding the Covid-19 pandemic.

I am pleased to inform you that the above research ethics application has been reviewed by the School of Business, Environment and Social Services (AREA) Committee and on behalf of the Chair, I can confirm a favourable ethical opinion based on the documentation received at date of this email.

Please retain this email as evidence of approval in your study file.

Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the original research as submitted and approved to date. This includes recruitment methodology; all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. Please see https://ris.leeds.ac.uk/research-ethics-and-integrity/applying-for-an-amendment/ or contact the Research Ethics Administrator for further information researchthics@leeds.ac.uk if required.

Ethics approval does not infer you have the right of access to any member of staff or student or documents and the premises of the University of Leeds. Nor does it imply any right of access to the premises of any other organisation, including clinical areas. The committee takes no responsibility for you gaining access to staff, students and/or premises prior to, during or following your research activities.

Please note: You are expected to keep a record of all your approved documentation, as well as documents such as sample consent forms, risk assessments and other documents relating to the study. This should be kept in your study file, which should be readily available for audit purposes. You will be given a two week notice period if your project is to be audited.

It is our policy to remind everyone that it is your responsibility to comply with Health and Safety, Data Protection and any other legal and/or professional guidelines there may be.

I hope the study goes well.

Best wishes

Rachel Prinn
On behalf of Dr. Matthew Davis, CHAIR, AREA

Appendix 2. Created website for recruiting companies

In late 2021, I created a website to promote my doctoral research to recruit potential companies for the research fieldwork.

3. Expected Benefits for Participants

- **Companies and individuals who participate in the study will have an opportunity to reflect on their own experiences of adopting HR Analytics.**
- **I will summarise key findings, allowing participants to better understand their own HRA trials.**
- **This study will provide companies with best practice guidance on establishing HR Analytics.** Questions considered include: *Is it enough to hire an analyst for your HR team? Is it enough to introduce an external HR solution? How can companies get the most out of analytics tools and systems?*

4. Research Method

- **I want to interview people involved in commissioning, deploying, and using HR Analytics tools and systems in a broad variety of organisations.**
- Ideally, I would then like to narrow down to one or two companies for greater depth. This includes spending time in the organisation to look at how HR Analytics tools and systems are used in practice.

5. Ethical Issues

- **The company and I will sign a confidentiality agreement in advance.** This contract will include the roles of the company and myself, the subject and scope of data collection, liability for damages, personal information protection, intellectual property rights, and standards for information storage and disposal.
- **Any identifiable contents, such as company name, department name, and employee name shall be kept anonymous** when research contents are used in the Ph.D. thesis, and any future reports, presentations, academic conferences, etc.
- **I will have the relevant permission procedures and contents confirmed by the Ethics Committee of the University of Leeds** to ensure ethical best practice.
- **The informants (company/individual) can request withdrawal or destruction of the data provided at any point** for any sensitive matters in the collected data (e.g. interview scripts, recorded meeting contents, etc.).

Any inquiries to the following email: bnjle@leeds.ac.uk

Appendix 3. A sample of the semi-structured interview questions

How and why is HR Analytics (HRA) established in contemporary organisations?

Interview questions

Intro

- HR Analytics, a study on how data-driven HR is utilised in organisations. In particular, this study seeks an integrated understanding of HRA through various aspects, such as organisational strategy, communication method, HRA-related solution, organisational culture, technical level, and employee competency and perspective.

- Interviews may be recorded with the consent of the participant. All personal information (organisation name, title, role, position, gender, etc.) will be made anonymous, and all data will be stored up to 3 years after completion this research.

Questions

1. Please briefly describe your position and role in the company.

2. How do you understand HR Analytics (HRA)?

3. How is your organisation using HR Analytics (or data-driven HR)?

    3-1. Does your department have a staff or team that specialises in analytics?

    3-2. If so, what is the size of the team and what kind of people does it consist of?

4. Specific questions about the impact of data-driven HR (HRA) on the organisation.

    4-1. When do you use data analytics in your HR/employee-related work?

    4-2. What are the internal/external factors that influence your work using data analytics?

    4-3. What do employees think of HR departments leveraging data analytics?

*(If trying to introduce any HRA solutions, go to Q5; If it is already used, go to Q6)

5. Questions related to the process of introducing HRA Solution

5-1. What HRA Solution is your organisation mainly using?

5-2. How was the HRA Solution introduced?

5-3. How was decision-making and communication made during the introduction process?

5-4. What factors positively/negatively influenced the decision to adopt an HRA solution?

5-5. What is the reason for positive/negative?

6. Questions related to the process of using HRA Solution

6-1. How long have you been using HRA Solution?

6-2. What are the characteristics of this solution?

6-3. If you are using your own system, why? Why not use an external solution?

6-4. If you are using an external system, why? Why not use the internal solution?

6-5. What is the general feedback from employees about the HRA solution? (pros and cons)

6-6. What factors are behind the positive feedback?

6-7. If there are problems, why do you think they occur?

6-8. How do you think the use of HRA solution will affect your work in the future?

7. In the interview, if there is anything that I did not ask, but you would like to say additionally on the topic, please feel free to say so.

8. Would you recommend another suitable person to talk to on this research topic within the organisation?

Close

Thank you for participating in the interview. Participants can request the withdrawal of information at any time if they feel that the given information is sensitive. Interview data will be used only for this study, and personal information will be made anonymous. Thank you once again.

Researcher Contact: JAEJIN LEE (bnjle@leeds.ac.uk)