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Research Paper

Impacts of artificial intelligence on an HR generalist role

Ágnes Lamper *

Budapest University of Economics and Business, Doctoral School of Entrepreneurship and Business, Budapest, Hungary

* Correspondence: lamper.agnes@uni-bge.hu

Abstract: This study explores how artificial intelligence (AI) impacts competencies in the HR generalist role. It addresses a critical gap in understanding the evolving nature of HR work in AI-integrated environments. Adopting a qualitative design, 11 semi-structured interviews analyzed with GIOIA methodology revealed how AI influences HR competencies through emergent concepts and themes. AI automates routine tasks and enhances strategic HR functions through analytics and decision support. It introduces new technical and ethical skills, yet human-centric competencies like empathy and negotiation remain essential to HR's relational core. The study's reliance on a small, purposively selected sample and its qualitative design limit the generalizability of findings across all organizational contexts, industries, and geographic regions. Implications. The results advocate for clear AI governance frameworks, ethical guidelines, and the cultivation of internal AI champions. They underscore the urgency of targeted reskilling programs that balance technological fluency with strategic and interpersonal capabilities, ensuring the human essence of HR endures amid accelerating automation. This research contributes a novel five-dimension conceptual framework that captures AI's multifaceted impact on HR generalist competencies, advancing the discourse on hybrid HR professionalism that integrates emotional intelligence, strategic acumen, and technological fluency.

Keywords: HR competencies, artificial intelligence, HR generalists, strategic HR, organizational change

1. Introduction

Organizations have come to recognize that their success hinges on the effective management of human resources, and, in any business strategy, people are more crucial than the plan itself. Therefore, strategies can only be successfully implemented if organizations have a competent workforce (Ivanova et al., 2019; Sanghi, 2007). Over the past decades, Human Resources (HR) has evolved significantly taking on a more strategic role than ever before (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023). However, researchers report a significant gap between competencies taught in Human Resource Management (HRM) programs and those employers require (Novak et al., 2015; Ravi & Sumathi, 2023; Sartori et al., 2022). This gap affects graduates' employability (Abelha et al., 2020) and, consequently, their success in fulfilling their jobs. This situation generates significant pressure not just on educators but also on employers. Both parties need to update educational and employee development programs to better align them with employer needs and to reduce HR professionals' competency gap (Abelha et al., 2020; Chandler, 2024).

Additionally, the evolving HR landscape necessitates that professionals acquire new skills in Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven employee management (Bijja & Surendar, 2023). This study adopts a functional perspective: it conceptualizes AI as digital technologies and systems capable of executing intellectual tasks traditionally performed by human intelligence in HR professional contexts (Russell & Norvig, 2022; McCarthy, 2007). This encompasses automated decision-making tools, predictive analytics, pattern recognition systems, natural language processing applications (such as ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, and proprietary HR chatbots), and intelligent automation platforms that can augment, transform, or potentially replace human judgment and expertise in HR functions. To adapt to this technological shift, it is essential to re-evaluate HR competency development (Deepa et al., 2024). Because a gap exists between current and required HR competencies (Bogdány et al., 2021), and as AI is continuously shaping HR activities (Fachrunnisa & Hussain, 2020), there is a need to explore

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the effects of AI on HR competencies. This can help address concerns that AI will take people's jobs (Ban et al., 2024), including those of HR professionals (Aguinis et al., 2024). This study aims to contribute to the research field by examining the impact of AI on HR competencies. It also aims to provide empirical insights into which competencies AI can enhance or replace in HR generalists and wishes to generate empirically grounded propositions by identifying emerging patterns and themes.

This study addresses key research gaps. Many studies focus on AI's impact within specific HRM areas such as efficiency, organizational development (Alnsour et al., 2024), recruitment (Albassam, 2023; Black & Van Esch, 2021; Roppelt et al., 2025), and talent management (França et al., 2023). Research on AI's impact on human skills exists, but further exploration is needed regarding job replacement risks and upskilling needs (Giordano et al., 2024). There is a need for empirical studies on AI's challenges in HRM (Arslan et al., 2022) and AI implementation impacts (Deepa et al., 2024). Although studies like Piwowar-Sulej et al. (2024) examine the influence of AI on future competencies, the role of HR is often marginal. A significant gap exists in understanding the impact of AI on HR competencies. Raman et al. (2024) evaluate AI's performance in HR queries highlighting its complementary role in strategic and transactional functions. Aguinis et al. (2024) emphasize the need for diverse competencies in managing HR roles foregrounding the use of AI as an HRM assistant across various domains.

Based on Caldwell's (2003) identification of multifaceted HR roles as well as on Mcdonnell and Sikander's (2017) characterization, this research defines an HR generalist as a human resources professional who manages and executes comprehensive HR functions throughout the employee lifecycle, including recruitment and onboarding, employee relations, benefits administration, compliance management, performance management, training and development, and organizational development. Examining the role of HR generalists – rather than the roles of isolated HR specialists such as recruiters, compensation and benefits specialists, or training specialists – allows for a broader understanding of how competencies must evolve across the complete spectrum of HR responsibilities. The comprehensive nature of these multifaceted duties makes the job of HR generalists particularly relevant for the investigation of AI's impact, as their diverse portfolio of functions encompasses processes that are potentially subject to AI-driven transformation, enhancement, or replacement. To the authors' knowledge, empirical research examining the comprehensive impact of artificial intelligence on the full competency profile of HR generalists remains limited. This study addresses this gap by investigating how AI is reshaping HR generalist competencies and how it is transforming the boundaries between human expertise and machine-driven capabilities in HR practice.

This study generates empirically grounded propositions regarding the impact of AI on HR generalist competencies. Employing a qualitative, exploratory approach with semi-structured interviews (n=11) with HR professionals and IT specialists, the study applies the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013) to identify which competencies are enhanced, replaced, or newly required upon AI's integration into HR functions. The research addresses the following question: What are the main competencies in the role of an HR generalist that are impacted by AI? This paper first reviews HR competency literature and AI's role in transforming professional practice, then presents qualitative findings from 11 semi-structured interviews with HR and IT professionals, and concludes by discussing theoretical contributions and practical implications for HR educators, practitioners, and organizational leaders.

2. Literature review

This article examines how HR has evolved into a strategic business function and highlights this shift in HR skills over time, particularly due to the impact of AI. It is also important to differentiate among various HR roles, as such roles perform different tasks and thus require distinct skills. Accordingly, this research categorizes the literature into three groups based on their focus: general HR positions, HR leaders and managers, and HR generalists.

The transformation of HR capability became the focus of research attention in the 1990s, as described in an article by Yeung et al. (1996). The study emphasizes the competence differences between various HR roles. This study of large US companies found that many HR competencies are common across sectors, but the required competencies differ

substantially by HR role. Interviews with senior HR executives resulted in a proposed four-domain HR competency model, which emphasizes both generic and role-specific competencies. Kohont and Brewster (2014) emphasize that HR managers in multinational companies need to develop a broad range of competencies and describes that "the level of HR managers' competencies increases with the increasing internationalization of business" (p.294).

Salleh and Sulaiman's (2017) Malaysian study, which does not specify an industry, supports the idea that competencies provide employees with skills and knowledge to meet industry needs and gain a competitive advantage. Payne's (2010) US study found that in smaller organizations HR managers need strategic management, business knowledge, and management of talent as core competencies. The study found that both HR and non-HR managers agree on the importance of core competencies but differ in how they rate HR managers' abilities in these areas. The study concludes that HR professionals' focus on transactional tasks hinders their shift to strategic roles, and expectations of HR remain consistent across companies with up to 20,000 employees. A study by Boselie and Paauwe (2005) collected data from both HRM managers and non-HRM manager respondents across 40 multinational companies operating in various industries in Europe. It was found that non-HRM respondents believe that strategic contribution is the key competency for achieving financial competitiveness, whereas HR managers emphasize the importance of business knowledge for enhancing the value of HR functions.

A study by Lo et al. (2015) does not focus on any specified HR position but applies differentiation between strategic and functional HR roles. The study examined organizations ranging in size from 5 to 120,000 employees in New Zealand and found that strategic HR practitioners need to excel in strategic contribution, business knowledge, and leadership, while functional HR practitioners must prioritize personal credibility, HR delivery, and proficiency in HR technology to succeed in their roles. This research emphasizes that business knowledge encompasses an understanding of both the company and the industry in which the business functions. In line with this, a study by Ramlall (2006) focused on identifying gaps between the current competencies of HR rather than being strictly based on different HR roles. The study examined HR competencies across various industries and positions in large and medium-sized companies.

The value of generalists is growing in modern organizations due to their adaptability, which is also highlighted by Ivanova et al. (2019). The study emphasizes the importance of generalists in helping organizations adapt to dynamic internal and external conditions described through the example of three case studies in Russian SMEs. The role of senior HR generalists, as highlighted by Yeung et al. (1996), requires aligning HR competencies with business needs. Although the study of Mcdonnell and Sikander (2017) does not focus exclusively on HR generalists, it highlights the relevance of identified competencies for all HR practitioners, including HR generalists. The study synthesizes perspectives from academic literature, industry-based literature and potential employers, and identifies key skills and competencies needed for contemporary HR practitioners. The article highlights that HR competencies are shaped by industry demands.

Table 1: Competencies in HR roles. *Source: Author's own*

Author	Role or HR domain	Competencies	Sample
Marja-Liisa (2010)	HR Manager	Strategic management, Business knowledge, Management of talent, Employee relations, Ability to foster quality of work-family life, Information technology	HR managers (n = 44) non-HR managers (n = 76)
Kohont & Brewster (2014)	HR manager	Strategic thinking, Cultural sensitivity, Change management, Communication skill, Teamwork and networking, Professionalism, Analytical skills, Conflict resolution, Use of foreign languages, Coping with uncertainty	25 Slovenian multinational companies
Boselie & Paauwe (2005)	HR manager	Strategic Contribution; Personal Credibility, HR Delivery, Business Knowledge, HR Technology	683 individual respondents across 40 multinational companies
Salleh & Sulaiman (2017)	Human Resource Development (HRD) Manager	Analytical thinking, Leadership, Problem-solving, Teamwork, Adaptability, Technical skills, Time management	144 Malaysian HR practitioners
Ivanova, Klimova & Thorngate (2019)	HR generalist	Broad knowledge base, Transferable skills, Career flexibility, Problem-solving abilities, Leadership and coordination, Adaptability, Interdisciplinary approach, Ethical and value-driven	Three case studies
Yeung, Woolcock & Sullivan (1996)	Senior HR generalist	Leadership Competencies: Leadership styles, Leadership skills and attributes, Change advocacy	10 (interviews with ten HR leaders)
		Core Competencies: Business knowledge, Customer orientation, Effective communication, Credibility and integrity, Systemic perspective, Negotiation and conflict resolution skills	
	HR leader	Leadership Competencies: Leadership styles, Leadership skills and attributes, Change advocacy	
		Core Competencies: Business knowledge, Customer orientation, Effective communication, Credibility and integrity, Systemic perspective, Negotiation and conflict resolution skills	
Lo, Macky & Pio (2015)	Strategic and functional HR practitioners in general	Strategic HR Competencies, Strategic contribution, Business knowledge, Leadership and relationship building, Business awareness	10 HR practitioners
		Functional HR Competencies, Personal credibility, HR delivery, HR technology, Self-belief and social factors, Input and support, HR acumen (specific HR functional knowledge, such as recruitment, training, and performance management), Systems and technology	
Ramlal (2006)	Various HR positions	Strategic contribution, Personal credibility, HR delivery, Business knowledge, HR technology, HR measurement	108
Mcdonnell & Sikander (2017)	HR practitioner	Building effective relationships, Influencing and negotiating, Leadership, Project management, Change steward, Global acumen, Broader business knowledge	Comprehensive literature review

Table 1 indicates that strategic management, business knowledge, and leadership are critical attributes for all HR professionals regardless of their role. The table compiles diverse insights into the competencies essential for effective HR practice across different contexts and organizational environments. However, a critical observation emerges from this analysis: the competency profiles for HR managers and HR generalists have substantially diverged. While the position of HR managers increasingly require strategic management, business acumen,

and leadership competencies (reflecting the strategic evolution of the HR function), HR generalists operating in transactional roles develop those competencies that are more closely aligned with specific business and industry needs. This divergence is significant: it suggests that generalist competencies are shaped by immediate operational demands rather than overarching strategic imperatives, which creates a distinct role profile. The size of an organization compounds this divergence: larger organizations typically institutionalize the strategic-transactional separation more clearly, while smaller organizations may conflate both roles. Notably, the literature examining HR competencies often privileges the strategic conversation dominated by HR leaders and executives. Yet, the empirical reality of generalist work remains underexplored, particularly regarding how external pressures (such as artificial intelligence) reshape their specific competency needs. The gap between strategic HR competency discourse and generalist practice justifies focused investigation into the HR generalist role and how emerging technologies challenge and transform their competency profile. Empirical investigation into how AI transforms HR generalist competencies remain absent. This study addresses this gap by examining five dimensions: (1) strategic value creation, (2) human-centred capabilities, (3) AI-augmented operations, (4) ethical awareness, and (5) change management, thus answering the following research question: What main competencies are impacted by AI?

The reviewed literature highlights five dimensions through which AI is likely to influence HR generalist competencies. The first one is strategic augmentation: Raman et al. (2024) and Aguinis et al. (2024) characterize AI as a complementary HRM assistant rather than a replacement. Given that foundational competency models emphasize human judgment in strategic decisions (Yeung et al., 1996; Lo et al., 2015), this suggests that AI will augment rather than displace strategic competencies. The second one is persistence of interpersonal competencies: The literature consistently identifies interpersonal competencies as essential across HR roles (Yeung et al., 1996; Lo et al., 2015; Mcdonnell & Sikander, 2017). Therefore, emotional competencies (empathy, negotiation, active listening) appear to remain non-substitutable despite the advancement of AI sophistication. The third one is automation with emergent technical skills: Research shows AI automates routine tasks (Palos-Sánchez et al., 2022; Roppelt et al., 2025), while contemporary models emphasize HR technology competencies (Lo et al., 2015; Ramlall, 2006). This indicates that routine transactional work will be automated while new technical competencies (AI system understanding, data literacy) emerge as essential. The fourth one is ethical and critical competencies: Literature increasingly addresses AI governance concerns (Panda et al., 2024; Jobin et al., 2019), suggesting that ethical and critical competencies (algorithmic literacy, bias awareness, data privacy) will become increasingly essential in HR generalist roles. The fifth one is change management. Given the scholarly emphasis on competency re-evaluation and AI integration challenges (Deepa et al., 2024; Umar Baki et al., 2023; Tarafdar et al., 2019), this underscores that change management competencies will become foundational for organizational adaptation to AI-augmented HR functions.

3. Methodology

This study focuses on the specific HR competencies influenced by artificial intelligence and therefore employs semi-structured interviews as its primary qualitative method. Semi-structured interviews are well suited to investigate attitudes, beliefs, and social interactions in their natural workplace contexts (Oranga & Matere, 2023) thus preserving HR professionals' lived experiences and allowing themes to emerge inductively from the data. This flexibility enables the researcher to probe how and why AI reshapes particular competencies, uncover underlying motivations and interpretations, and generate a nuanced, practice-oriented understanding of the changes observed (Saunders et al., 2019). To answer the research question, this study employs the Gioia methodology to analyse semi-structured interviews with HR professionals and IT specialists, thereby revealing five aggregate dimensions of AI-driven competency transformation. It provides theoretical and practical implications for HR educators, practitioners, and organizational leaders navigating the AI-augmented professional environment.

3.1. Participant selection and sampling

To address the research objectives, purposive sampling was employed, as defined by Saunders et al. (2019), to ensure the selection of participants with relevant knowledge and experience. The sampling process aimed to recruit a minimum of three individuals from each target group who met the predefined selection criteria: HR generalists, HR leaders, and IT professionals, each possessing at least three years of professional experience. Prior experience or familiarity with AI was not included in the inclusion criteria for HR professionals. In contrast, for IT professionals, demonstrable knowledge of AI and a minimum of three years of practical experience in AI-related roles were required, based on their informed understanding of AI technologies and their application within HR contexts. During the interview process, however, additional participants emerged as key references based on their expertise in the field of AI. Following their consent to participate, the total number of interviewees increased to 11. All participants were recruited through professional networks, ensuring access to a diverse pool of insights across organizational boundaries. Participants voluntarily agreed to contribute to the research. Within the HR group, participants were purposefully selected from various hierarchical levels of the organization with the aim of exploring whether HR leaders and HR generalists adopt distinct approaches in their professional practice, as HR generalists typically handle a wider range of HR activities (Mcdonnell & Sikander, 2017). This sampling strategy was consistent with the principles of heterogeneous purposive sampling, designed to capture diverse perspectives within a defined subgroup. While company size, industry, and geographic region were not used as selection criteria, such contextual information was collected during the interviews.

3.2 Interview procedures and data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between February and June 2025. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, depending on the depth of participant responses and their willingness to elaborate on specific topics. Five interviews were conducted via secure video conferencing platforms (Microsoft Teams) due to participants' geographic distribution across Hungary, Norway, Spain, and Poland. In contrast, six were conducted in person at the participants' workplaces. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' explicit consent and transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher. Interviews were conducted in English (n=2) and Hungarian (n=9). Hungarian interviews were transcribed in the original language and subsequently translated into English by the lead researcher. To ensure translation accuracy and conceptual equivalence, a bilingual colleague conducted back-translation verification, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion. The interview guide was developed based on a comprehensive literature review of HR competencies and AI integration. The interview guide was pilot-tested with one HR professional (not included in the final sample) to ensure clarity, neutrality, and the appropriateness of the questions. Minor revisions were made following the pilot interview to improve question flow and to reduce the potential of leading language.

3.3. Data analysis

The Gioia methodology enables the systematic analysis of qualitative data through three hierarchical coding levels: first-order concepts retain participants' language (e.g., "AI for drafting and summarizing"), second-order themes group related concepts (e.g., "AI usage and workflow augmentation"), and aggregate dimensions synthesize themes into five broader categories representing core theoretical constructs. This inductive approach grounds findings in empirical data while building towards theoretical abstraction and rigor.

The analysis was conducted from April to July 2025 using systematic manual coding in Microsoft Word. Data saturation was continuously monitored following each interview through systematic manual coding in Microsoft Word. Following the iterative logic of the Gioia methodology, saturation was established through three complementary observations. First, declining novelty in first-order concepts: in the early interviews (I-1 through I-5), each new interview introduced multiple new codes and concepts. However, by interview I-8, new substantive first-order concepts ceased to emerge, with later interviews (I-9, I-10, I-11) confirming existing codes through participant narratives that echoed previously identified

themes rather than introducing novel content. Second, stabilization of second-order themes: the key patterns and analytical categories identified through I-7 remained stable across final interviews, with I-9 through I-11 providing contextual elaboration and reinforcement of existing conceptual structures rather than requiring categorical expansion. Third, consistency of aggregate dimensions and mechanistic explanations: the five core dimensions and their underlying mechanisms (cognitive load reduction enabling strategic augmentation, dual-competency paradigm, relational demand persistence) were fully articulated by interview I-8, and final interviews contributed only refinements to these established explanatory frameworks. This pattern, where later interviews primarily served to reinforce and contextualize rather than expand analytical categories, indicates that theoretical saturation was achieved. The verification phase (interviews I-9 through I-11) confirmed that the analytical framework had become so sufficiently comprehensive that subsequent data collection would likely yield confirmatory rather than transformative insights, which demonstrates data sufficiency consistent with Gioia methodology principles for exploratory qualitative research.

3.4. Ethical considerations

Explicit informed consent was obtained from all 11 participants prior to participation. All interviews were conducted with volunteers recruited through professional networks. Data protection followed European data protection standards: interview recordings were securely encrypted and password-protected. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher, reviewed for accuracy, and then permanently deleted. Participant identities were replaced with codes (I-1 to I-11) in all transcripts, analysis, and reporting. Participants were informed of their rights to access, rectify, or request deletion of personal data. Anonymized transcripts will be retained for five years, then securely deleted. The researcher's 20+ years of HR experience was acknowledged as both an asset and a potential source of bias: this was managed through ongoing reflexivity with research supervisors and doctoral colleagues to uphold ethical transparency and analytical rigor (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

3.5. Limitations of methodology and reflexivity

Semi-structured interviews offered flexibility, but this also introduced the risk of leading questions or interviewer influence. To mitigate this, an interview guide was designed with neutral, clear, and non-leading questions to ensure consistency and reduce bias.

4. Findings

Using the Gioia methodology, this study analysed 11 semi-structured interviews conducted with HR generalists, HR leaders, and AI-specialist IT professionals. Table 2 highlights the diverse, cross-functional, and multi-industry group of professionals involved in the study. These experienced individuals offer rich insights into HR and IT practices across various organizational scales and cultural contexts.

Table 2. Diversity of study participants. *Source: Author's own*

Code	Age	Position	Education level	Experience (in years)	Country	No. of employees	Industry
I-1	45	Senior HR consultant	Bachelor's	15	Hungary	450/ 3 000	Industrial pumps, technology, materials and energy
I-2	38	IT developer, automatic tester	Master's	12	Hungary	3 000 / 20-30 000	IT
I-3	48	HR generalist	Bachelor's	>10	Hungary	500	Packaging material production
I-4	37	HR Manager	Bachelor's	10	Norway	166 / 17 000 / 5-600 (172)	Maritime, shipping
I-5	48	Process and OD Manager	Bachelor's	3	Hungary	500	Packaging material production
I-6	30	HR business partner	Bachelor's	7	Hungary	250-300	Glass industry
I-7	49	OT Team Leader -	Secondary	15 IT / 8 OT	Hungary	20-30 / >1 000	Glass industry
I-8	45	HR partner	College	>20	Hungary	>8 000	Finance
I-9	39	IT manager	College	7	Hungary	505	Printing industry
I-10	48	HR Business Analyst	Master's	24	Spain	+100 000	Several
I-11	48	Senior HR Business Partner	PhD	25	Poland	170	Modern business services; SSC, BPO

The analysis revealed a multi-layered data structure consisting of 1st-order concepts, 2nd-order themes, and five aggregate dimensions. Table 3 visualizes how HR activities such as recruitment and strategic partnering are increasingly aligned with broader strategic shifts, which emphasizes value creation through data-driven and personalized approaches. These evolving activities reflect deeper themes of transformation in HR competencies, including the need for human-centred skills and ethical AI integration. Together, they form part of a conceptual framework that highlights five aggregate dimensions, guiding organizations in adapting to AI-enhanced HR practices.

Table 3. Concepts, themes, and aggregate dimensions of the sample. Source: Authors' own work.

First-Order Concepts	Second-Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
Strategic partner role	HR role and activities	Strategic HR value creation
Recruitment and onboarding		
Performance management		
More strategic, less admin	Future HR – strategic shifts	
Predictive analytics and employee experience personalization		
Empathy and active listening	Core people and decision competencies	Human-centred capability portfolio
Influencing and negotiation		
Strategic thinking and decision-making		
Listening gap; influencing practice	Competency gaps and development needs	
Decisions with incomplete info		
Time for quality vs. pace		
AI for drafting and summarizing	AI usage and workflow augmentation	AI-augmented HR operations
Workflow automation (Excel, scheduling)		
CV screening and chatbots		
Prompting as a core skill	Tech/Operational shifts with AI	
Data interpretation and insights		
Human-centred tasks remain		
Curious but critical attitude	AI mindset and ethics	AI mindset, ethics and risk
Limited trust → verification		
Data privacy and ethics	AI risks and limitations	
Over-automation risk		
Prompt training and AI champions	Organizational enablement	Organizational readiness and change
Clear guidelines and governance		
Education on AI use		
Change resistance and buy-in	Change and buy-in barriers	

Strategic HR value creation: This dimension includes competencies related to strategic contribution, such as workforce planning, performance management, and predictive analytics. AI was seen as a supportive tool enhancing strategic decision-making through data-driven insights but not replacing the required human judgment. The complexity of strategic HR work becomes evident when examining how professionals navigate decision-making under uncertainty. One HR consultant reflected: "I often have to make decisions with little information… tomorrow a page of information will come out that puts it in a completely different light." (I-1) Complementing this perspective, an experienced HR professional emphasized the essential competencies required: "An HR professional must understand the business they support… strategic thinking, analytical and adaptive skills become key." (I-11). These insights highlight that AI enhances strategic decision-making through data-driven insights, but human judgment remains indispensable when information is incomplete or ambiguous, as illustrated by participants' emphasis on contextual understanding and adaptive strategic thinking.

Human-centred capability portfolio: This dimension encompasses interpersonal and emotional competencies such as empathy, active listening, influencing, and negotiation. These were consistently described as irreplaceable by AI, forming the core of human-centred HR practice. The irreplaceability of emotional competencies emerged clearly across the interviews. One HR professional captured this perspective succinctly: "As long as there is no empathy in a machine, I don't think it will [replace us] … conflict management still needs people." (I-2) This sentiment was reinforced by another participant who noted: "People want warmth, human contact… they expect a person in HR." (I-3). These accounts reveal a

consistent message: empathy, active listening, and conflict management are definitely irreplaceable: participants consistently affirmed that the human dimension of HR remains central, as people seek authentic relational connection rather than machine-mediated interactions.

AI-augmented HR operations: This dimension includes competencies related to administrative and operational tasks. Participants described how AI can fully or partially replace routine tasks such as CV screening, scheduling, and drafting communications. At the same time, new technical competencies emerged, such as prompt engineering and data interpretation. The transformative potential of AI in routine work is evident in participant accounts: "AI can already arrange appointments, write letters, organize… it does that perfectly." (I-2). Yet this operational efficiency creates new skill demands. The same respondent elaborated: "Prompting is key. If HR people learn to prompt well, they can advance in their careers." (I-2). These observations demonstrate that AI reliably eliminates routine administrative work, while simultaneously creating demand for new technical competencies – notably prompt engineering and data interpretation – that HR professionals must develop to leverage AI's potential.

AI mindset, ethics and risk: This dimension reflects the attitudes, ethical awareness, and critical thinking required for responsible AI use. Participants emphasized the need for limited trust, verification, and ethical sensitivity, especially in relation to data privacy and over-automation. The necessity of critical thinking in AI deployment was consistently highlighted by participants. One senior HR professional stressed: "AI is a great tool, but it has limitations… critical thinking is key." (I-11). Another respondent articulated concerns about the potential pitfalls of unreflective adoption: "I have concerns about uncritical, thoughtless, and unethical use of AI." (I-1). Critical thinking, ethical awareness, and limited trust in AI outputs have emerged as essential competencies: participants emphasized the need for verification, reflexivity, and careful governance to prevent uncritical or harmful deployment of AI in the HR context.

Organizational readiness and change: This dimension includes competencies related to change management, training, and organizational enablement. Successful AI integration depends on HR professionals' ability to lead change, educate others, and build trust in AI systems. Evidence of proactive organizational approaches emerged in participant accounts. One HR leader described their institution's strategic initiative: "We created an internal AI squad to explore its capabilities and prepare the organization." (I-5). This proactive stance was complemented by recognition of ongoing educational needs. Another professional highlighted: "There is still a need to educate, train, spread knowledge… and its methods of use." (I-3). These examples illustrate that successful AI adoption depends on HR professionals' ability to champion change, educate colleagues, and build organizational trust through internal knowledge-sharing structures, thereby transforming AI from a technical tool into a culturally embedded capability. The findings reveal that AI complements strategic and interpersonal competencies, replaces routine operational tasks, and introduces new technical and ethical skill requirements. HR generalists must evolve to integrate AI into their workflows while preserving the human-centred essence of their role. Future HR professionals will need to balance strategic insight, emotional intelligence, and technological fluency to remain effective in an AI-enhanced environment.

The analysis of 11 semi-structured interviews revealed five aggregate dimensions of AI's impact on HR generalist competencies. AI augments strategic decision-making through data-driven insights but does not replace human judgment in ambiguous contexts. Interpersonal competencies – empathy, active listening, negotiation – remain irreplaceable, as participants consistently emphasized employees' demand for authentic human contact. AI fully or partially automates routine operational tasks (CV screening, scheduling, document drafting), while simultaneously introducing new technical requirements such as prompt engineering and data interpretation. Critical thinking, ethical awareness, and organizational change management have emerged as essential competencies for responsible AI integration.

5. Discussion

This study advances the discourse on the intersection of AI and HR by examining how AI complements, replaces, and reshapes competencies in the HR generalist role – a domain

that remains underexplored despite growing scholarly attention (Charlwood & Guenole, 2022; Deepa et al., 2024). Building on the five empirically derived dimensions presented in the Findings, this discussion theorizes three core mechanisms governing AI's impact on HR competencies. The first core mechanism is the cognitive load reduction enabling strategic augmentation: AI automates transactional tasks (CV screening, scheduling, document drafting) freeing up cognitive resources for strategic decision-making. However, this augmentation operates effectively only when organizations establish clear governance frameworks. This mechanism aligns with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) framework (Kim & Lee, 2024), where AI functions as a resource that mitigates cognitive load while simultaneously introducing new demands for digital literacy and ethical oversight. As the findings demonstrate, human judgment remains indispensable, particularly in contexts of ambiguity and incomplete information, where pattern-based AI reasoning proves insufficient. The second core mechanism is the emergent technical-ethical competency requirements reflecting a dual-competency paradigm: The rise of technical competencies such as prompt engineering and data interpretation marks a paradigm shift from purely administrative proficiency towards hybrid roles that integrate technological fluency with human-centred expertise. This resonates with the concept of "augmented professionalism" (Piwowar-Sulej et al., 2024), where technology amplifies rather than supplants human capabilities. However, technical skills alone are insufficient: they must be integrated with critical thinking, ethical judgment, and AI governance to ensure responsible deployment (Panda et al., 2024; Jobin et al., 2019). The dual-competency paradigm reflects an organizational reality where HR professionals must simultaneously master technological tools and navigate ethical complexities, which is a competency configuration fundamentally distinct from pre-AI HR professionalism. And the third core mechanism is the relational demand persistence explaining the irreplaceability of emotional intelligence: Despite AI's growing sophistication in mimicking human interaction, interpersonal skills (empathy, negotiation, and active listening) remain non-substitutable. Employees actively seek authentic human connection in HR interactions, particularly during ambiguous, conflictual, or vulnerable situations. This persistence of relational demand reflects a deeper organizational principle: employees reject machine-mediated emotional engagement regardless of AI sophistication, as they seek relational authenticity that validates their human dignity (Piwowar-Sulej et al., 2024; Aguinis et al., 2024). This persistence challenges deterministic narratives of technological substitution and underscores the enduring value of emotional intelligence in fostering trust and organizational cohesion.

These three mechanisms – cognitive load reduction, dual-competency requirements, and relational demand persistence – explain the patterns observed across the five dimensions and provide a theoretical foundation for understanding AI's dual role as both resource and demand in HR work. Rather than rendering HR professionals obsolete, AI reshapes their professional identity toward roles requiring greater strategic acumen, ethical judgment, and relational authenticity. This reconfiguration aligns with broader trends in augmented work (Autor, 2022), where technological augmentation shifts occupational focus from routine execution towards judgment, ethics, and human connection.

6. Implications

6.1. Theoretical implications

Beyond offering a descriptive framework, the five aggregate dimensions reveal three core mechanisms governing AI's impact on HR competencies. First, concerning cognitive load reduction enables strategic augmentation, AI automates routine work, thus freeing professionals to focus on ambiguous contexts requiring human judgment. However, this mechanism operates effectively only when organizations establish clear governance frameworks. Without such structures, automation risks displacing rather than augmenting strategic capability. Second, emergent technical-ethical competency requirements reflect a dual-competency paradigm: prompt engineering and data interpretation alone are insufficient. These technical skills must integrate with critical thinking and ethical judgment to ensure responsible AI deployment. Third, relational demand persistence explains why emotional intelligence remains irreplaceable: employees actively seek authentic human connection in

HR interactions, particularly during ambiguous, conflictual, or vulnerable situations, rejecting machine-mediated emotional engagement regardless of AI sophistication. The *Strategic HR value creation* dimension shows that AI enhances decision-making through predictive analytics and workforce planning, yet human judgment remains essential in ambiguous contexts, especially when ethical, cultural, or contextual nuances challenge AI (Fenwick et al., 2024). From a technological standpoint, preliminary evidence from a preprint study suggests that AI can replicate the appearance of empathy (Sorin et al., 2023, preprint), but not its authentic emotional depth. As such, the *Human-centred capability portfolio* attribute remains essential in HR practice, not because AI lacks the technical means to mimic empathy, but because employees continue to reject machine-mediated emotional engagement. This expectation reinforces the necessity of authentic human interaction in HR roles, as supported by research highlighting persistent demand for warmth and personal connection in organizational settings (Piwowar-Sulej et al., 2024). The *AI-Augmented HR Operations* dimension supports the concept of task reallocation and hybrid professionalism. Research shows that AI automates routine tasks like CV screening and scheduling, while prompting the emergence of new technical skills such as prompt engineering and data interpretation (Palos-Sánchez et al., 2022). The *AI mindset, ethics and risk* dimension aligns with ethical governance models, and emphasizes the need for critical thinking and responsible AI use. Concerns about data privacy and algorithmic bias are well-documented, which highlights the importance of ethical sensitivity in AI deployment (Panda et al., 2024). Studies show that successful AI integration depends on HR's ability to lead change, educate stakeholders, and build trust in AI systems (Umar Baki et al., 2023). The Organizational readiness and change dimensions reflect change management theory, and positions HR as a strategic enabler of digital transformation.

6.2. Practical implications

The five dimensions provide important insights for HR leaders, educators, and organizations seeking to integrate AI into HR. While the results are not intended to be universally generalizable, they highlight key areas where practical action can support a successful transition towards AI-augmented HR roles.

First, organizations should clearly communicate the strategic purpose of AI adoption. Transparency about how AI aligns with business objectives and human-centric HR values is essential to reduce uncertainty and build trust among employees. This communication should emphasize that AI is a tool to enhance, rather than replace, the strategic and relational aspects of HR work (Kotter, 1996). Second, the study underscores the importance of establishing robust ethical and governance frameworks. Concerns about data privacy, fairness, and over-automation were evident among respondents, which suggests that organizations must implement clear guidelines to ensure responsible AI use. These frameworks should address accountability and transparency, fostering confidence in AI-driven processes (Jobin et al., 2019). Third, the emergence of new competencies such as AI literacy, prompt engineering, and data interpretation calls for targeted reskilling and upskilling initiatives. HR professionals need structured training programmes that not only develop technical skills but also reinforce interpersonal and strategic capabilities that remain irreplaceable, such as empathy, negotiation, and active listening (Kim & Lee, 2024). Moreover, while AI can automate routine tasks like CV screening and scheduling, organizations must balance efficiency gains with the preservation of human interaction. Employees continue to expect warmth and relational authenticity from HR, making it critical to maintain the human-centred nature of the profession (Aguinis et al., 2024). Organizations must intentionally preserve the human-centred qualities that define effective HR practice including empathy, ethical judgment, and inclusive decision-making. As one participant observed, "People want warmth, human contact... they expect a person in HR" (I-3), which reflects the enduring need for genuine interpersonal engagement (Aguinis et al., 2024). This balance requires reserving emotionally complex and ethically sensitive HR interactions for human professionals, while AI handles administrative functions such as scheduling and initial candidate assessment. Ensuring inclusivity within AI-supported HR systems requires proactive attention to bias prevention and fairness assessment. In fact, AI trained on historical data may inadvertently replicate existing inequities in recruitment and performance evaluation (European Commission, 2025). Organizations must implement regular audits on AI and establish transparent evaluation criteria to mitigate discriminatory

outcomes. Also, ethical governance frameworks must be established before AI deployment. One participant expressed prevailing concerns: "I have concerns about uncritical, thoughtless, and unethical use of AI" (I-1). The frameworks to be created should address AI transparency, clarify accountability structures, and protect employee data privacy. Additionally, transparent communication about evolving role expectations and career development pathways helps HR professionals navigate technological change without compromising professional dignity. Ultimately, AI integration represents an opportunity to elevate the profession by freeing HR professionals from routine tasks thus enabling a deeper focus on strategic partnership and employee development. However, realizing this potential requires deliberate organizational commitment to maintaining the human essence of HR.

Finally, successful AI integration requires organizational readiness and cultural adaptation. Resistance to change can be mitigated through initiatives such as creating AI champions, offering continuous education, and fostering open dialogue. These efforts can normalize mixed emotions towards AI and can encourage collaborative meaning-making (Tarafdar et al., 2019). Additionally, as automation reshapes certain roles, proactive workforce transition plans, including redeployment and career development strategies, are essential to minimize job insecurity and to support long-term employability (Ban et al., 2024).

7. Conclusions and future research directions

This study set out to identify such competencies in the HR generalist role that are supplemented by AI and are likely to be impacted by automation. The findings reveal that AI excels at handling repetitive operational tasks – such as CV screening, scheduling, and routine correspondence – thereby freeing HR professionals to focus on higher-value activities. At the same time, AI enhances strategic HR functions by providing predictive analytics, data-driven workforce planning, and streamlined decision support. Yet the inherently human dimensions of empathy, active listening, negotiation and conflict resolution remain irreplaceable in meeting employee demand, which underscores the enduring importance of emotional intelligence in HR practice.

The five-dimension framework advances the established models of HR competence by demonstrating AI's dual role as both resource and demand. While automation alleviates cognitive load in transactional areas, it simultaneously introduces new requirements for digital fluency, prompt engineering, and ethical oversight. This hybrid professionalism, where technological proficiency coexists with human-centred expertise, extends the Job Demands-Resources perspective and refines the concept of augmented professionalism illustrating how technology amplifies rather than supplants human judgment.

From a practical standpoint, organizations embarking on AI integration must strike a careful balance between efficiency and humanity. Clear governance structures, robust ethical guidelines, and the appointment of internal AI champions will foster responsible use and will build trust among employees. Moreover, targeted reskilling programmes should develop not only technical skills such as data interpretation and prompt writing but should also reinforce strategic thinking and interpersonal capabilities, which cannot be automated.

This study is limited by its small sample size (n=11), geographic concentration in Hungary, and temporal snapshot, which constrain generalizability across sectors and regions. The sample underrepresents certain industries, like healthcare, education, public administration, and organizations that have resisted AI adoption. Potential biases – including researcher insider perspective, self-selection of volunteers, social desirability effects, and retrospective recall – may influence findings. Additionally, the single-point-in-time design lacks longitudinal validation, external quantitative triangulation, or performance data to substantiate reported competency shifts. Despite these constraints, the exploratory, inductive approach provides rich, contextually grounded insights into emerging AI-driven competency changes in HR practice, which justifies the methodological choices for addressing the research question at this preliminary stage of inquiry.

Future research should validate and refine the proposed framework across diverse industries, organizational sizes, and cultural contexts. Comparative studies between HR generalists, HR leaders and specialized roles can clarify the boundaries of AI's impact on different competency profiles. Experimental evaluations of AI training interventions can reveal which pedagogical and educational approaches most effectively cultivate prompt-engineering

prowess, ethical sensitivity, and those human skills that are essential for trust and employee well-being in AI-augmented environments. By mapping these paths, scholars and practitioners can better anticipate how HR competence will evolve in an era of intelligent automation which ensures that the profession remains both strategically relevant and deeply human.

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