

# Professional personas and capabilities of the future people practitioner: A thematic review



## Authors:

Dieter Veldsman<sup>1</sup>   
Melinde Coetzee<sup>2</sup> 

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

<sup>2</sup>Department of Industrial and Organisational Psychology, College of Economic and Management Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Melinde Coetzee,  
coetzm1@unisa.ac.za

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**Orientation:** The transformation of the technology-enabled workplace has a significant impact on the future professional roles, services and capabilities of both the human resource professional (HRP) and industrial/organisational psychologist (IOP).

**Research purpose:** The present study aimed to identify the intersecting professional personas and capabilities that speak to both the HRP and IOP as people practitioners of the digital era.

**Motivation for the study:** An integrated 2020s capabilities framework outlining IOP and HRP services-linked personas and capabilities in their conjoint roles as people practitioners seems to be lacking.

**Research approach/design and method:** The study utilised a configurative thematic review analysis methodology to identify convergences among contemporary scholarly and empirical views on the professional personas and capabilities of the 2020s multidisciplinary people practitioner.

**Main findings:** The thematic analysis revealed professional development in terms of four digitally-dexterous capabilities proficiency domains and six professional personas relevant to the technology-enabled working environment.

**Practical/managerial implications:** The proposed integrative conceptual personas and capabilities model may inform the context-relevant professional development of the digital-era people practitioner.

**Contributions/value-add:** The study adds to the research literature on the shifting roles and capabilities of IOPs and HRP as future people practitioners in technology-enabled hybrid and virtualised work environments.

**Keywords:** capabilities model; people practitioner; digital-era working world; future-fit people practitioner capabilities; people practitioner personas; professional development; human resource professional; industrial/organisational psychologist.

## Introduction

The pandemic-impacted fourth industrial revolution (4IR) fast-tracked technological augmentation and distributed technology-enabled business models that resulted in a redefinition and redesign of work along with challenges of people-technology integration across human resource (HR) management systems (CIPD, 2020; Howe, Chauhan, Soderberg, & Buckley, 2021; Rotatori, Lee, & Sleva, 2021). The multifarious nature of technology-enabled, virtualised work processes and arrangements has raised the need for more strategic, coordinating and innovative tasks with advanced responsibilities for people practitioners (Rotatori et al., 2021). Organisations need multidisciplinary digital expertise that help them develop standardised interfaces and open architectures that enable co-operative work on different digital platforms. Leaders and employees must further acquire the capabilities for optimal performance and productivity in competitive and virtualised work contexts (Ross & Maynard, 2021).

For business leaders, the complexities of a 4IR technology-driven business world have put the workforce at the centre of the business agenda with a dire need for multidisciplinary professional people practitioners to take on the personas of strategic business partners, change champions, and employee advocates who help shape a better future for leaders and employees (CIPD, 2020; Heathfield, 2021; Oosthuizen, 2022; Ulrich, Ulrich, Burns, & Wright, 2021; Van Vulpen, 2022). In the present study, the term 'people practitioners' encapsulates the integrative roles and services of human resource professionals (HRPs) and industrial/organisational psychologists (IOPs).

Human resource professionals generally are known to provide effective administrative, transactional, and process-driven HR management services that meet the strategic and operational business needs of the organisation. Such services generally include HR planning, recruitment and selection, employee development, employee rewards, employee relations, employee wellness, and health and safety management with a focus on compliance to policies and procedures (Msingi, 2021; Van Zyl, Nel, Stander, & Rothmann, 2016). Human resource professionals further act in strategic roles through processes that guide the alignment of organisational strategies with HR management practices for enhanced organisational and employee performance and wellbeing (Van Zyl et al., 2016).

Professionally qualified IOPs are known as strategic behavioural scientist-practitioners who bring psychological and research expertise that contributes to the understanding, modification and optimisation of individual, group and organisational behaviour, performance and well-being (Coetzee & Veldsman, 2022). Generally, IOPs are seen to focus on the design and facilitation of psychological-based strategies, systems, theories and methodologies for enhancing individual, team, leader and organisational performance and wellbeing (Van Zyl et al., 2016). The services of IOPs typically involve designing, facilitating and evaluating evidence-based behavioural interventions for effective individual, group and organisational functioning. Industrial/organisational psychologists also perform psychometric and other assessments in support of HR management practices relevant to selection, employment, career and wellness guidance and counselling, training and development, employee performance, organisational culture and climate, and leadership, team, organisational development and change (Coetzee & Veldsman, 2022; Van Zyl et al., 2016).

The roles and services of the HRP and IOP are distinctively unique in their focus and expertise. However, conjointly both professions function as people practitioners who, through their multidisciplinary synergetic expertise and services to management, line managers, team leaders and employees, help to optimise sustainable business performance and market competitiveness (Coetzee, Botha, & De Beer, 2021). The transformation of the technology-enabled 4IR workplace will have a significant impact on the future professional roles, services and capabilities of both the HRP and IOP. The 4IR complexities have ushered in a new paradoxical era: on the one hand, the opportunity for HRPs and IOPs as people practitioners to support the reshaping and drive toward people-led organisational transformation; on the other hand, the risk of becoming irrelevant and losing the strategic impetus that has been gained over the past three decades (Cheese, 2020; CIPD, 2020; Coetzee & Veldsman, 2022; Ulrich et al., 2021). Consequently, scholars highlight the imminent accelerated upskilling, reskilling and continual agile professional development of both HRPs and IOPs to meet the evolving needs of the modern, digital-era business (Bersin, 2021; Cheese, 2020; Coetzee & Veldsman, 2022;

Marion & Fixson, 2021; Mazurchenko & Maršíková, 2019; Van Vulpen, 2022; Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022; Veldsman, 2020).

The present study was interested in identifying the intersecting professional personas and capabilities that speak to both the HRP and IOP as future-fit people practitioners of the digital era. The aim was to conceptualise an integrative conceptual people practitioner personas and capabilities model for the professional development of the HRP and IOP of the future. Scholars in the people profession field have come up with people practitioner capabilities frameworks to inform higher education HR management and IOP curricula and training and development practice to ensure the sustainable employability and relevance of the 2020s people practitioner (Bersin, 2021; Coetzee & Veldsman, 2022; Ulrich et al., 2021; Van Vulpen, 2022; Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022; Veldsman, 2020). Taking a capabilities framework approach is corroborated by scholars interested in future-proofing the employability and lifelong learning of professional graduates (see e.g. Bates, Rixon, Carbone, & Pilgrim, 2019; Bowles, Bowles, & Wilson, 2019; Bowles, Ghosh, & Thomas, 2020; Oliver & De St Jorre, 2018). Modern people practitioner future-fit capabilities frameworks attempt to map professional capabilities as a multidisciplinary business-oriented set of skills, knowledge, expertise and attributes that can be tested, observed and proven in the 2020s workplace (Bersin, 2021; Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022; Veldsman, 2020).

It is evident from studying the various 2020s HRP and IOP people practitioner capabilities models that the pervasive changes in technology-driven business environments and models are leading towards a dire need for both HRPs and IOPs to go beyond the traditional professional personas of advisor, business partner or consultants, and to function conjointly in new context-relevant professional persona roles to remain employable in the digital era (Cheese, 2020; Chinyamurindi, Masha, & Tshabalala, 2021; Coetzee & Veldsman, 2022; Howe et al., 2021; Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022; Veldsman, 2020). However, digital skills and proficiency still seem to rank among the scarcest talent. Even though talent capability models related to hybrid, remote and flexible working models have allowed emerging markets to become significant players in the global talent marketplace, a lot of work still needs to be done to ensure the future-proofing capabilities of people practitioners, leaders and the workforce for sustainable business success (Ewers, Khattab, Babar, & Madeeha, 2022). Of concern is the findings of a global capabilities-assessment among 5648 people professionals that only 21% of the sample had the required level of competency and proficiency in the future-ready HRP capabilities outlined by Van Vulpen and Veldsman (2022). The survey findings signal the need for an integrated HRP and IOP future-ready people practitioner capabilities model that could inform the professional development and sustainable employability of the 2020s people practitioner.

A 2020s capabilities framework that integrates the services-linked skills and attributes of the future-fit HRP and IOP in their conjoint roles as people practitioners seems to be

lacking. The present study endeavours to address this gap in research. A key issue that needs resolution is the highlighting of convergences in the 2020s era's published literature on future-ready HRP and IOP personas and capabilities. The aim was to holistically understand the core integrative HRP and IOP personas and capabilities that the future-fit people practitioner requires for context-relevant professional development and employability.

The study makes the following key contributions. Utilising a configurative thematic review analysis methodology (Gough, Thomas, & Olivier, 2012), this study sheds light on convergences among contemporary scholarly and empirical views on the future-fit professional personas and capabilities of the HRP and IOP in their roles as people practitioners. The study further proposes an integrative conceptual HRP and IOP personas and capabilities model that may inform the professional development of the digital-era people practitioner.

## The evolving role of the people practitioner

Historically, the role of the people practitioner could be segmented into several eras in alignment with the nature of work and organisational requirements (Mommensen & Husung, 2017). The industrial revolutions played a big part in evolving the role of the people practitioner and organisational expectations. The 1910s and 1920s saw a rise in legislation, the strong emergence of trade unions, and more formalisation regarding workplace conditions and terms (Mommensen & Husung, 2017). In response, the people practitioner contribution evolved regarding the negotiation of labour conditions, and a strong focus on legislative compliance became the norm. As world wars started to disrupt the workplace, the role of the people practitioner again shifted because male workers were called to war, and local factories and businesses were run by the remaining workforce, which consisted predominantly of females and children (Greenwald, 1990).

During the world war era, the people practitioner role evolved in terms of searching and managing the supply of available talent while selecting the right talent for the appropriate roles. The people practitioner also aided the war efforts in developing psychological assessments geared towards better leveraging the available skills and attributes of soldiers being sent to the frontline (Sutker & Allain, 1995). This brought greater awareness regarding the contribution of better understanding human behaviour and its contribution towards fit, productivity, and performance. As the world was rebuilt following the end of the wars, the people practitioners were faced with a growing discontent within the workforce and especially in the developed world, the rise of civil unrest and rising inequality became a workplace reality (Edelman, 1990). During this time, the personnel, or as some refer to it, hire and fire mentality within human resources, also developed as organisations started to formalise the practices of hiring, training, compensation, and firing (Haslinda, 2009).

Unfortunately, during the world war era, many reputational issues about HRP and IOP as people practitioners emerged, and for several HR management professionals, this still forms the perception of their role and contribution to workplaces. The 1970s and 1980s gave rise to the idea of human capital development and an increasing interest in the psychology of human motivation and behaviour (Mahutga, 2019). This was in response to organisations moving towards the knowledge economy workplace and becoming increasingly interested in human beings as a source of competitive advantage. The now-famous 'strategic business partner' concept was articulated in the late 1990s and early 2000s as businesses realised that human capital has a strategic role in organisational performance (Conner & Ulrich, 1996). Recent studies conducted by Van Vulpen and Veldsman (2022) and Veldsman (2020) also highlighted the changing value-added role of both the HRP and the IOP as people practitioners in the broader social and humanitarian context. This is evident with the rise of a multidisciplinary humanitarian work psychology (Veldsman, 2020) with the question being posed as to how the people practitioner can contribute towards solving societal challenges such as climate change, inequality and poverty (Coetzee & Veldsman, 2022).

The 4IR, technology-enabled business world further impacted the people practitioner role by replacing some responsibilities through automation or enhancing the ability of the people practitioner to operate in more digital-driven, virtualised and hybrid work contexts (Meduri & Yadav, 2021). Hybrid and remote workplaces exacerbated the need for the people practitioner to adapt or face the risk of extinction as artificial intelligence became increasingly more pervasive (Veldsman, 2020). Van Vulpen and Veldsman (2022) studied 55 traditional HR practitioner roles and the risk and value that automation could bring to the future workplace. In this study, almost 49% of roles fall within categories where automation will bring additional value. The study further highlighted that the expectation that all people practitioner roles will be impacted by technology leads towards the conclusion that the people practitioner of the future needs to learn to adapt, evolve and reframe how services and solutions are delivered to remain relevant (Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022). These findings align with studies by Charlwood and Guenole (2022), Chinyamurindi et al. (2021), Coetzee and Veldsman (2022), and Veldsman (2020) that state that both HRPs and IOPs as people practitioners of the future need to reshape and rearticulate their role contributions (professional personas) and capabilities requirements in the digital-era workplace.

## The professional personas and capabilities of the people practitioner of the future

The present study focused on published studies on the professional personas and capabilities of the 2020s people practitioner. Earlier models of the capabilities of HRPs allude to competency and proficiency in professional domain

behaviours of excellence in HR management. Such behaviours include inter alia the role of the HRP as strategic change champion and business partner, manager of human relations, and HR innovator and integrator (SHRM, 2012; Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson, & Younger, 2007; Ulrich Younger, Brockbank, & Ulrich, 2012). Table 1 shows that the 2021–2022 HRP personas and capabilities models propose multifaceted skills alluding to the granular areas of expertise in specific HR functional domain tasks, systems, or practices, including experiences in designing, implementing, measuring and optimising various people and talent-related solutions. In addition, expertise in building collaborative connections and relations to deepen expertise, and exhibiting context-awareness are also deemed as important for professional and business success in the digital-era organisation (Bersin, 2021; Ulrich et al., 2021; Van Vulpen, 2022).

Van Vulpen and Veldsman (2022) developed a novel HRP capabilities model (coined as the AIHR [Academy to Innovate HR] T-shaped HR professional competency model). The AIHR T-shaped model maps the required future-fit HRP personas, technology, process, skills and resources that future-fit people practitioners require to deliver on the people strategy and drive sustainable business results. As shown in Table 1, the AIHR T-shaped model was used as an overall modern framework to review the most prominent 2021–2022 professional personas and capabilities that emerged for the HRP with the full swing onset of the 4IR.

In the framework (Table 1), professional personas denote employer requirements of the expected roles of people practitioners. Business acumen refers to the ability to apply insights to business strategy and align people practices in an impactful, customer-focused manner. Data literacy denotes the ability to apply, translate and communicate data to influence business decision-making and action. Digital dexterity comprises creating the mindset for adopting digital people solutions and memorable employee experiences, and

the ability to leverage technology to drive value at scale. The ability of people advocacy helps build organisational cultures and workplaces where people feel they belong. Such cultures drive open communication, navigate change, and ensure the business acts in an ethical and sustainable manner. The functional competency domain refers to expertise across the spectrum of HR management services which are supported and enabled by credible and ethical professional behaviours (Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022).

In Table 2, we again utilised the AIHR T-shaped model of capabilities (Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022) as a framework for organising the 2020s future-fit professional personas and capabilities of the digital-era IOP. This allowed for a reliable comparison of the future-ready HRP and IOP capabilities and professional personas.

Titus, Starke and Sibiza (2020) highlight future-fit domains pertaining to the personal attributes and abilities, knowledge abilities and expertise, and personal, interpersonal and organisational abilities of the successful IOP as future-fit people practitioner. Oosthuizen (2022) proposes a STARA-intelligent (smart technology, artificial intelligence, robotics and algorithms) capabilities framework for the future-fit IOP. Empirical research by Coetzee and Veldsman (2022) among employers who adopted technology-enabled business models points to digital dexterity along with IOP practice-related capabilities that are more suitable for the 2020s technology-enabled workplace. Their research further emphasises the professional roles of IOPs as future-ready people practitioners and the concomitant future-fit distinct elements of talent (coined as DELTAs: Dondi, Klier, Panier, & Schubert, 2021) they need for sustainable employability and professional success in the digital era.

It is evident from the published literature (Table 1 and Table 2) that since 2020, both the HRP and IOP professional personas and capabilities models demonstrate a substantial

**TABLE 1:** Overview of professional personas and capabilities of the human resource professionals: 2021–2022.

Professional personas (HR professional): 2021–2022	Professional capabilities (HR professional): 2021–2022					
	Business acumen	Data literacy	Digital dexterity	People advocacy	Functional competency	Professional behaviours
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Business partner, strategist, innovation and change agent, internal consultant, monitoring role, guardian of values (Msingi, 2021)</li> <li>Strategic business partner (Heathfield, 2021; Van Vulpen, 2022)</li> <li>Digital culture architect, technology steward, culture and workplace champion, change and communication navigator, ethics and risk custodian (Van Vulpen &amp; Veldsman, 2022)</li> <li>Employee advocate; change champion (Heathfield, 2021; Ulrich et al., 2021)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Context interpretation, strategy co-creation, customer-focused, HR mastery (Van Vulpen, 2022)</li> <li>Generates competitive insights, influences the business, drives agility (Ulrich et al., 2021)</li> <li>Business acumen (Bersin, 2021)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data-driven, analytics translation (Van Vulpen, 2022)</li> <li>People analytics, digital employee experience (Bersin, 2021)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Technological awareness, technology embedding, digital culture building (Van Vulpen, 2022)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Culture building, efficient people practices (Van Vulpen, 2022)</li> <li>Advances human capability (elevates talent, delivers HR solutions, champion diversity, equity and inclusion (Ulrich et al., 2021)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Functional competency in HRM domain areas (Van Vulpen &amp; Veldsman, 2022)</li> <li>Benefits &amp; wellbeing programmes, diversity strategy and measurement, labour relations practices, leadership and succession management, performance and career management design, coaching, tools, change and transformation, health and safety, flexible workplace policies, HR operating models and policies, reward and recognition systems, employee communications, HR solution design, learning and development tools and technology, talent acquisition, compensation models, HR tech/service delivery, organisational design and culture, leader development (Bersin, 2021)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Credible, trusted and ethical figurehead, effective communicator (Van Vulpen, 2022)</li> <li>Thinks critically, harnesses uncertainty, fosters collaboration, builds relationships, manages self (Ulrich et al., 2021)</li> </ul>

Note: HR, human resource.

**TABLE 2:** Overview of professional personas and capabilities of the industrial/organisational psychologists: 2020–2022.

Professional personas (IOP): 2020–2022	Professional capabilities (IOP): 2020–2022					
	Business acumen	Data literacy	Digital dexterity	People advocacy	Functional competency	Professional behaviours
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategic business value creator/communicator, behavioural specialist, digitally dexterous scientist-practitioner and knowledge broker, seamless multi-disciplinary scientist-practitioner, humanitarian work psychologist (Coetzee &amp; Veldsman, 2022; Veldsman, 2020)</li> <li>Physical and mental health champion (Chinyamurundi et al., 2021)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strategic business acumen (Coetzee &amp; Veldsman, 2022; Oosthuizen, 2022)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Technological acumen (Chinyamurindi et al., 2021; Titus et al., 2020)</li> <li>Understanding information technology security (Oosthuizen, 2022)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>STARA proficiency and intelligence (Coetzee &amp; Veldsman, 2022; Oosthuizen, 2022)</li> <li>Digital dexterity, acumen in digital IOP tools development, technology, leveraging; people-technology integration, (Coetzee &amp; Veldsman, 2022)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advancing human capability and well-being (Oosthuizen, 2022)</li> <li>Developing support networks and structures for physical and mental health (Chinyamurundi et al., 2021)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multidisciplinary and cross-functional; action intelligence; change navigation, communication, networking, teamwork and collaboration, stakeholder management, and communication (Titus et al., 2020)</li> <li>People behaviour/motivation skills, virtual change management skills, virtual consulting/coaching/counselling skills, virtual people/behavioural/team/organisational measurement/assessment skills, virtual leader and team development, virtual performance management and workplace motivation, virtual employee well-being programmes and counselling, leader and employee virtual skills development, organisational climate, culture, development and change assessment and interventions (Coetzee &amp; Veldsman, 2022)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deep insight and self-awareness, self-directed, risk-taking; flexible, resilient, systemic thinking, complex problem-solving, empathy, deep subject mastery; multidisciplinary and cross-functional; action intelligence; change navigation, communication, networking, teamwork and collaboration, stakeholder management, communication, persuasiveness (Titus et al., 2020)</li> <li>Adaptability, resilience, compassion, persuasiveness, communication skills (Coetzee &amp; Veldsman, 2022)</li> </ul>

Note: IOP, industrial/organisational psychologists.

shift towards digitally-oriented competencies such as data literacy, digital communication, analytics, and dealing with data. The shifting capability requirements have not been restricted to the domain of technology but also extended to include elements such as the ability to deal with strategic business decisions and solutions, complexity and change, employee physical and mental health, and being able to deal with increasing ethical ambiguity involving technology-human interaction (Chinyamurindi et al., 2021; Coetzee & Veldsman, 2022; Oosthuizen, 2022; Ulrich et al., 2021; Van Vulpen, 2022; Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022).

We were interested in identifying the core future-fit professional personas and capabilities of the digital-era people practitioner. The 2020s professional persona and capabilities of the HRP and IOP outlined in Table 1 and Table 2 show some commonalities that signal the need to find the convergences among these personas and capabilities that could allow for a more holistic and integrative view of the people practitioner of the future. The following research questions guided our thematic review of the 2020–2022 HRP and IOP personas and capabilities models:

- What are the convergences among the future-ready HRPs' and IOPs' professional personas and capabilities?
- Which core, converged, HRP and IOP professional personas and capabilities emerged for the future-fit people practitioner?

## Method

### Research approach

The study utilised a configurative thematic review analysis methodology (Gough et al., 2012) to enable a critical-evaluative and qualitative exploration of convergences among the 2020–2022 HRP and IOP personas and capabilities

models outlined in Table 1 and Table 2. The Google search engine was deemed adequate as the chosen tool for the rapid review process and interpretive exploration of intersecting 2020–2022 themes. The search process yielded six ( $n = 6$ ) publications relevant to the future-ready HRP personas and capabilities (2021–2022) and five ( $n = 5$ ) publications relevant to the digital-era IOP (2020–2022). The inclusion criteria pertained to only 2020–2022 publications to ensure that only publications relevant to the digital era were reviewed.

### Synthesis and interpretative analysis

The configurative thematic review allowed the synthesis or organisation of the conceptual themes from the included studies (Table 1 and Table 2) to answer the two research questions. Based on guidelines by Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann (2006) and Gough et al. (2012), the researchers independently reviewed the publications in depth and proposed a summary table aligned to the literature themes outlined in Table 1 and Table 2. Areas of agreement and disagreement were highlighted and tabled for discussion. Consensus was achieved over time through an iterative process of open-coding and analysis. The findings of the reviews showed that thematic saturation was adequately achieved.

To answer research question 1, three labels were utilised to categorise the extent of theme convergences across the ( $n = 11$ ) publications: high levels of congruence, some similarities, and limited similarities. The findings are shown in Figure 1. Using the initially identified themes, the researchers were able to identify emerging theoretical categories and incorporate the existing literature into the findings. To answer research question 2, the authors integrated the reviewed and categorised themes into a conceptual model (Figure 2) in

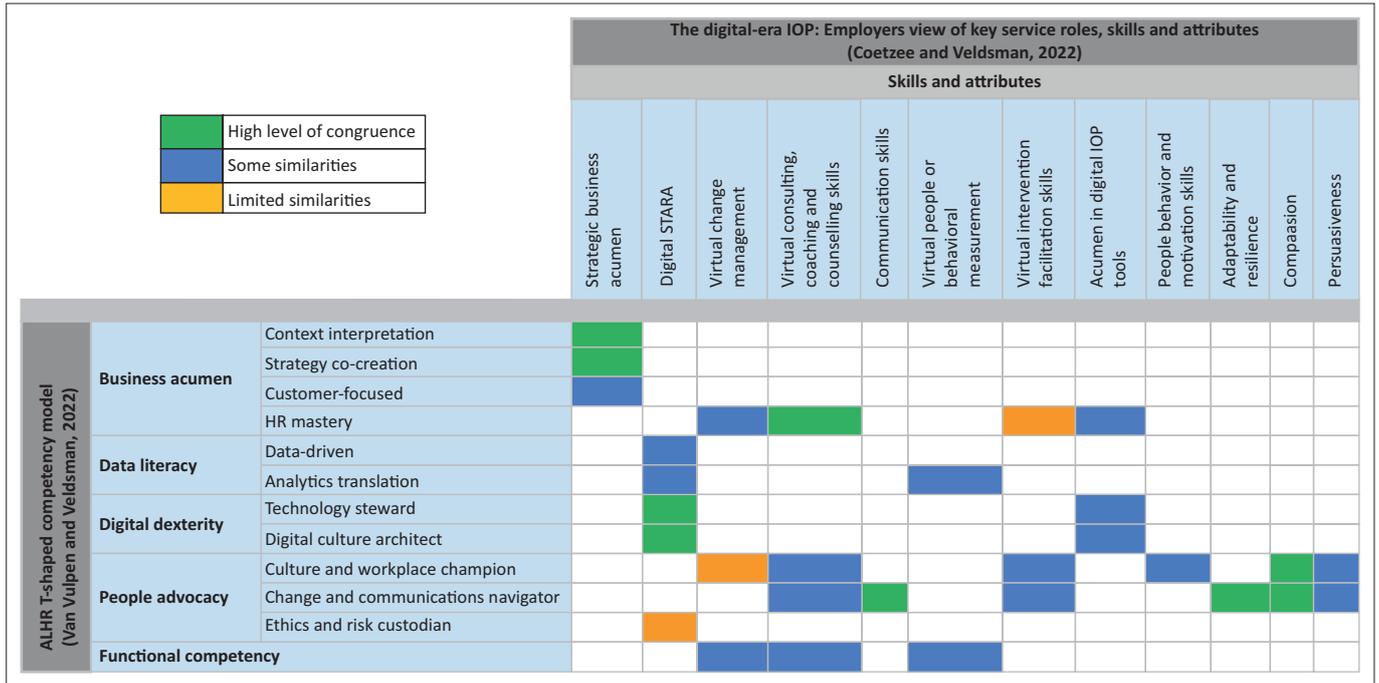


FIGURE 1: Convergences between the future-fit human resource professionals’ and industrial/organisational psychologists’ capabilities.

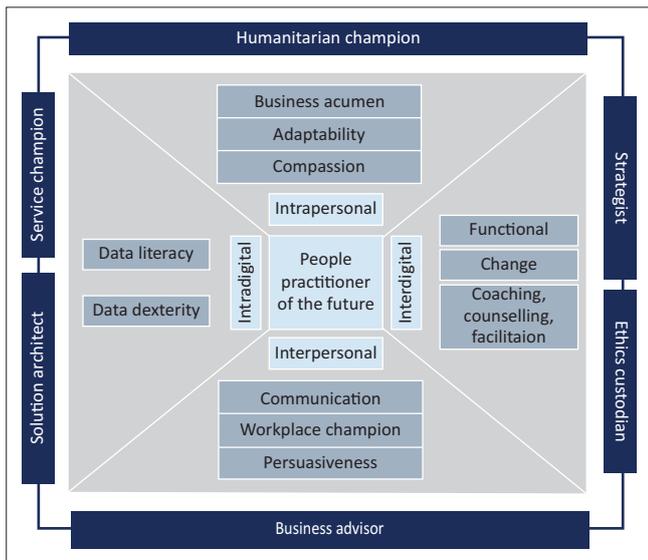


FIGURE 2: Integrative conceptual model of the future-fit people practitioner professional personas and capabilities.

line with the original publication themes to ensure relevance to the findings.

**Ethical considerations**

The study formed part of a larger research project (ERC Ref#: 2020\_CEMS/IOP\_014) for which ethical clearance was granted. To ensure the integrity of the data, a thorough record was kept of the research process, the codes assigned to the themes, the data coding, and the identified theme categories. This contributed to the trustworthiness (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability) of the study (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017). The data were stored in a secure, password-protected cloud-based format, which limited access to the data by the researchers.

**Findings**

The thematic review highlighted the publications of Van Vulpen and Veldsman (2022) and Coetzee and Veldsman (2022) as incorporating the most prominent overlapping themes. It appears from the two publications that the dominant 2020–2022 themes of the other HRP and IOP publications in Table 1 and Table 2 were already integrated in their research findings. Thematic saturation was therefore evident and adequate. This finding enabled us to focus on the convergences among the studies of Van Vulpen and Veldsman (2022) and Coetzee and Veldsman (2022). The two studies provided a framework for comparing a dominant contemporary well-researched HRP personas and capabilities model with an evidence-based, empirical IOP professional personas and capabilities model.

**Convergences between the future-ready HRP and IOP practitioners’ professional personas and capabilities**

The review findings are summarised in Figure 1.

High levels of convergence among the themes of the two studies were evident regarding the need for business acumen. The converged themes point to the ability to integrate technology into business and link workspaces to productivity as part of the business acumen capability. Strategic business acumen further alludes to the ability to apply systemic thinking, translate business needs and strategy, understand macro-environmental and industry context, and apply these to drive competitive advantage in the business.

High levels of convergence emerged among the digital STARA skills and the description of data literacy and digital

dexterity as described in the AIHR T-shaped capabilities model (Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022). Data-driven behaviour and the ability to work with data to inform evidence practice, utilise analytical skills to make decisions, and gather insights and apply evidence-based practice (as described in the AIHR T-shaped model) is more specific than the skills described in the model proposed by Coetzee and Veldsman (2022). However, the Coetzee and Veldsman (2022) model proposes a stronger focus on digital-savvy practitioner skills and the ability to incorporate these skills into a hybrid work environment through application and facilitation. Digital dexterity, described as the ability to adopt a digital mindset and incorporate technology into people practices, shows high levels of congruence with the digital STARA skills and attributes.

Coetzee and Veldsman (2022) proposed several IOP practice-orientated skills such as virtual change management, consulting, coaching, counselling, communication, and interviewing skills. The AIHR T-shaped capabilities model (Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022) does not explicitly describe these skills; however, it does propose a number of personas that the people practitioner of the future needs to play in the shape of workplace-and-culture-champion and communications-and-change-navigator. These personas show some similarities with the skills and attributes proposed by Coetzee and Veldsman (2022). This is further highlighted by high levels of convergence with the need for behavioural skills such as persuasion, adaptability, resilience, and compassion that are also encapsulated in the AIHR T-shaped capability model (Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022) as part of the people advocacy capability.

Coetzee and Veldsman (2022) also indicated the ability to utilise people practitioner tools in the virtual and digital environment as a critical attribute. This finding alluded to some similarities with Van Vulpen and Veldsman's (2022) suggestion regarding the digital dexterity competency and the ability to master HR practice in this ever-changing world of work. Interestingly, though, is that Van Vulpen and Veldsman (2022) view these capabilities as a key contributor towards business acumen or, more specifically, the ability to apply people practices within the context of business, while Coetzee and Veldsman (2022) views this as a key attribute of the work of a people practitioner in a virtual and hybrid world of work.

The AIHR T-shaped model of Van Vulpen and Veldsman (2022) also proposes in-depth domain-specific expertise to complement the core behavioural capabilities of business acumen, data literacy, digital dexterity, and people advocacy. This shows similarities with the more technical and domain-specific expertise Coetzee and Veldsman (2022) proposed in terms of change management, counselling, coaching, consulting skills, and people-behavioural measurement tools. However, Van Vulpen and Veldsman (2022) do not differentiate the application of these skills in an exclusively virtual sense, while this is evident in the model proposed by Coetzee and Veldsman (2022).

Van Vulpen and Veldsman (2022) also propose the persona of the people practitioner as ethics and risk custodian, which positions the role of the practitioner as a conduit to create communities and ecosystems of value, holding each other to designated moral codes and promoting the greater good in terms of sustainability and societal impact. Even though this is not evident in the skills and attributes (capabilities) proposed by Coetzee and Veldsman (2022), there are visibly evident overlaps with the personas proposed as the people practitioner's contribution toward a multidisciplinary humanitarian work psychology.

The Industry 4.0 talent capabilities framework suggested by Kohl and Swartz (2019) and Coetzee and Veldsman (2022) in their model further organises these capabilities into four categories:

- Intrapersonal – Business acumen, adaptability, resilience.
- Interpersonal – Persuasiveness, communication, people, behaviour, motivation skills.
- Interdigital – Virtual change management, virtual consulting, coaching and counselling, virtual behavioural, measurement, assessment.
- Intradigital – Intelligence and acumen in digital IOP tools and development.

This categorisation provides further clarification of the nature of the attributes and skills (capabilities) in terms of intrapersonal (me), interpersonal (me and the world), interdigital (how) and intradigital (what). Coetzee and Veldsman (2022) go further and describe the roles of the future people practitioner in terms of their contribution towards a multidisciplinary humanitarian work psychology, strategic technological (STARA) intelligence, people technology integration, well-being and multidisciplinary scientist-practitioner. Although this categorisation is not evident in the models proposed by Van Vulpen and Veldsman (2022) and Coetzee and Veldsman (2022), their research findings seem to allude to four (HR professional) people practitioner personas that, based upon the work context, apply these capabilities differently as outlined in Table 3. The professional personas outlined in Table 3 describe a shared set of professional capabilities distinctively relevant to a specific persona. The persona capabilities speak to the contribution made to the workplace context within which the practitioner delivers services. The professional personas of the future-ready 2020s people practitioner were labelled as: strategist, solution architect, service champion, and business advisor.

As is evident from the thematic review, high levels of overlap exist between the two proposed capabilities models regarding the need to be digitally savvy, the application of people practitioner skills in a hybrid and virtual world of work, and the inherent knowledge of macro-environmental factors and business acumen. As can be expected, the HRP and IOP models differ slightly in terms of role and scope focus, yet even in this domain, there seems to be noteworthy convergences regarding the role of the people practitioner

**TABLE 3:** The future-fit people practitioner professional personas and distinctive professional capabilities.

Professional persona	Description	Distinctive professional capabilities
Strategist	The strategist is expected to be a pivotal contributor to business strategy and to be a partner in shaping the future of the business. The persona crafts the people strategy and ensures that the business has the people capacity to deliver now and into the future.	The strategist uses data to tell impactful stories and shapes the people strategy through evidence-based insights. This persona co-creates the organisation's strategy and initiates and drives the required change to achieve goals. They are a role model of the vision and mission of the business and are often seen as the protector of organisational values, ethics, and sustainable practices.
Solution architect	The persona is expected to provide sound, well-considered, and practical approaches to designing value-adding people practices. This persona can translate how people solutions solve the business needs and enable others to drive solutions across the business at scale.	The solution architect is knowledgeable regarding the latest people trends and can translate their relevance to the business context. They play a crucial role in optimising technology design and building a digital culture. They are curious by nature—always exploring how new knowledge can be applied to people practices in a meaningful way to drive business impact.
Service champion	Fast, responsive, and quality service that sees things through and gets things done. The persona must be committed to the client while ensuring a consistent, repeatable, and scalable experience of people processes and practices.	The service champion is focused on the internal customer and uses their knowledge of people processes to deliver a memorable employee experience. They can create and leverage data to demonstrate value and monitor performance. They have extensive insight into the people technology platforms and tools available to them and apply these in an impactful manner.
Business advisor	Solid, sound and well-considered advice are relevant to contextual realities and needs. The persona needs to be perceived as a trusted and credible expert when it comes to people matters.	The advisor shows commercial awareness and understands the business and commercial realities. They are seen as credible partners who use data to drive evidence-based practices based on a robust knowledge of end to end people practice. They align the needs of external and internal stakeholders and can engage seamlessly with complexity while balancing multiple priorities.

as strategist, provider of people solutions and services, and the role of business advisor. Both models acknowledge the extension of scope beyond traditional organisational borders and the impact that people practitioners need to play in the broader societal context. Given the nature of the changing world of work, it is evident that the application of traditional people practices needs to be adapted to be relevant in the digital world of work, while there is also an expectation that new responsibilities and roles will come to the fore.

### Integrated conceptual model of core professional personas and capabilities for the people practitioner of the future

Based on the observed convergent themes among the professional personas and capabilities of the future-ready HRP and IOP, the thematic review culminated into an integrative conceptual model relevant to the 2020s people practitioner is shown in Figure 2.

The model (Figure 2) postulates that the people practitioner of the future requires four proficiency domains. The first, intrapersonal, refers to business acumen and the ability to apply systemic thinking to the world of work, adaptability to deal with the changing ambiguity and the ability to demonstrate compassion for people within that context. This

is in line with the study conducted by Coetzee and Veldsman (2022) and the model proposed by Titus et al. (2020).

The second, the interpersonal domain refers to the ability to communicate with impact, champion workplaces for individuals to thrive, and have the persuasiveness to influence others. This domain aligns with the models proposed by Ulrich et al. (2021) as well as the study by Van Vulpen and Veldsman (2022). The third, the interdigital domain refers to applying functional expertise in this digital world, such as organisational development or talent management, underpinned by the ability to lead change and play the roles of coach, counsellor, and facilitator in a digital environment. This aligns with capability models that discussed mastery as a key differentiator for the people practitioner, yet this model promulgates applying these skills in a digital and virtual world of work.

The fourth domain refers to intradigital, the ability to work with data, read data, and interpret data to drive evidence-based practice. This is complemented by digital dexterity, or the mindset to survive and thrive in a digital world and working with technology to drive impact. This domain builds upon the research conducted by Coetzee and Veldsman (2022) in terms of the attributes required for the future people practitioner to remain relevant in the virtual world of work.

The model further sees the multidisciplinary people practitioner in the role of six professional personas, which apply to these four domains within a different context, whether that be working in or with organisations, in service of the community or society as a whole. These personas are described in terms of the terminology assigned by Van Vulpen and Veldsman (2022) as the strategist, the business advisor, the solutions architect, and the service champion. Based on the thematic review, two additional personas are proposed. The additional first persona is the multidisciplinary humanitarian champion, as proposed by Coetzee and Veldsman (2022), focusing on driving the balance between societal, organisational and individual requirements. The second additional persona refers to the ethics custodian and positions the people practitioner as the voice for good, to act as the compass of moral principles and values. This aligns with the movement towards a higher awareness of people risk and moral and societal values, as proposed by Van Vulpen and Veldsman (2022).

In summary, the integrative conceptual model positions the future people professional as a multidisciplinary scientist-practitioner who is able to apply people expertise in a digital and virtual world while demonstrating a strong sense of strategic business acumen and macro-environmental awareness. They demonstrate digital dexterity, can work with technology and utilise virtual platforms to reach more people, more of the time for the good of individuals, organisations and societies. They play various roles and balance in-depth expertise in specific functional domains with a core transferable set of competencies that enables them to navigate the ambiguity of the changing world of

work and guide individuals, leaders, organisations and society into the future.

## Discussion

This study builds upon the current understanding of the 2020s people practitioner capabilities requirements and employers' HRP and IOP personas expectations through the lens of the changing, virtual and digital world of work. As our literature review indicated, the digital-era professional personas and capabilities of the people practitioner as a guide into the 2020s uncertain future will be critical for employees, leaders, organisations and society to transition and adapt. Based upon the findings in this study, we proposed an integrative conceptual model that incorporated the prominent intersecting insights from the AIHR T-shaped HRP model (Van Vulpen & Veldsman, 2022) and the digital-era IOP model proposed by Coetzee and Veldsman (2022) to inform the professional development of the future-ready people practitioner.

The proposed conceptual model (Figure 2) highlights professional development in terms of the four digital dexterous capabilities proficiency domains (intrapersonal, intra digital, interdigital, interpersonal), and professional capabilities (business acumen, adaptability, compassion, functional mastery, change, coaching and counselling, communication, workplace champion, persuasiveness, digital dexterity, data literacy). The model also elucidates six professional personas (humanitarian champion, strategist, ethics custodian, business advisor, solution architect, service champion) in relation to the technology-enabled working environment. The findings corroborate research pointing to general essential digitally dexterous capabilities that are needed to operate in the technology-enabled hybrid and virtualised work environment (Dondi et al., 2021; Kohl & Swartz, 2019). In addition, the findings are supported by research among professional practitioners and employers of technology-enabled businesses that highlights a dire need for multidisciplinary professional personas and capabilities of the people practitioner that can guide digital-era organisational transformation and workforce capability building (Coetzee & Veldsman, 2022; Veldsman, 2020).

## Limitations and future work

The study is limited to only evaluating people practitioners within traditional HRP and IOP roles. This excludes some roles related to individuals working within the people technology and learning and development domains. The study was also limited to publications within the 2020–2022 timeline and culminated into dominant themes derived from two key publications. Further work is required to conduct a more inclusive study that extends beyond the boundary of the present study. Checking the findings and interpretations with a broader range of scholars in the HRP and IOP field will shed new light to the present study. The future-readiness of HRPs and IOPs are a critical requirement for their sustained

employability in a rapidly changing digital-era work context and deserves further interrogation and debate.

## Conclusion: Way forward for the professional development of the people practitioner of the future

The study contributes to the current knowledge regarding the future-fit capabilities and professional personas requirements of HRPs and IOPs as future multidisciplinary people practitioners. Through this study, we also contribute towards the discussion regarding the reskilling of the future-ready people practitioner and the changing requirement to build multidisciplinary scientist-practitioners that can operate beyond traditional organisational borders (Veldsman, 2020). The study also proposed a shift in the scope of the people practitioner to move beyond the traditional organisational level focus and to become a key contributor towards societal level goals as facets of their professional personas. It is assumed that the converged personas and capabilities encapsulated in the proposed conceptual model will find distinctively unique expression in the focus and scope of practice relevant to the expertise and professional training of the HRP and IOP. However, the integrative conceptual model may be useful in guiding professional development initiatives that ensure the context-relevant employability of the HRP and IOP professions. Although the conceptual model integrated themes shared by both HRPs and IOPs, the extent to which each people practitioner needs to develop, and the importance of each of the capabilities and personas within their unique HRP and IOP roles will differ in accordance with the scope of practice of either profession. Hyper-personalised professional development initiatives will provide the proficiency, agility and mindset needed to become the future-fit multidisciplinary people practitioner needed in the digital-era work world.

The study was explorative in nature and paves the way for future debate about the core professional personas and capabilities that HRPs and IOPs as multidisciplinary people practitioners require in the digital-era work context. The continued context-relevant employability of people practitioners remains a topic of high priority in higher education and practice alike. It is hoped that the study stimulates further debate and research on the development of key professional capabilities for people practitioners in today's technologically-driven society and business environment.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors, and the publisher

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