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by Dhvani Patel

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DELHI SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT
DELHI TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

MAJOR RESEARCH PROJECT
ON
THE INVISIBLE CURRICULUM IN HUMAN RESOURCES
How Industry Context Shapes Unwritten Competencies



UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF
DR. VEENU SHANKAR
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

SUBMITTED BY
DHVANI PATEL
(2024 – 2026)

CERTIFICATE

It is hereby certified that the Major Research Project entitled “**THE INVISIBLE CURRICULUM IN HUMAN RESOURCES: How Industry Context Shapes Unwritten Competencies**”, is a work of originality done by **Ms. Dhvani Patel**, Roll Number: **24/DMBA/074**, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Business Administration at **Delhi School of Management, Delhi Technological University, Delhi**.

The project has been performed under my supervision and guidance and to the best of my knowledge is a genuine and original project.

DR. VEENU SHANKAR
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Date - 26 May, 2026

Place - Delhi Technological University, Bawana Road Delhi 110042

DECLARATION

I, Dhvani Patel, student of Master of Business Administration (Human Resources), Roll No. 24/DMBA/074, at Delhi School of Management, Delhi Technological University, certify that the Major Research Project under the title “THE INVISIBLE CURRICULUM IN HUMAN RESOURCES: How Industry Context Shapes Unwritten Competencies” is an original work.

The work has been done under the guidance of Dr. Veenu Shankar (Assistant Professor, Delhi School of Management). All the content of this project is original and has not been copied or reproduced from any other source without giving due credit to the source. All sources of information and references have been cited and acknowledged in this project.

The information and data contained in this report is accurate as far as I know. Not presented (partially or in full) to another University or Institute for any degree or diploma.

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ABSTRACT

Every HR professional learns two sets of curricula. The first is formal which is taught in classrooms and certified through degrees. The second is invisible, it is gained through experience, absorbed through immersion and it is not written down anywhere.

This study examines that second curriculum. It explores the knowledge, instincts and unwritten rules that are not explicitly taught but are held to be possessed by HR professionals across the six industries, namely: Manufacturing, Information Technology, BFSI, Healthcare, E-commerce & Retail, and Consultancy.

HR practitioner research has, over the past 50 years, been guided by an HR scholarship that has been centered on the individual and their work and did not include the context of the work. Building upon the five decades preceding this, HR practitioner research was guided by an HR scholarship centered on the individual and their work and not including the work context. This silence is what this research will fill.

This study is designed using mixed methods approach in which 10 academic and practitioner sources are reviewed and primary data are gathered through the use of a structured questionnaire that was administered to 6 experienced HR professionals from the selected industry, systematically maps what has never been mapped.

Results suggest that formal learning is seen as less effective in equipping HR professionals with the skills needed for the work, most decisions made day-to-day are carried out instinctively rather than based on HR theory, and the skills that are needed are only learned through mentorship, observation and years of immersion and practice, but not formal learning.

The outcome of this is the first practitioner-driven map of the Invisible Curriculum in Indian HR, which reveals six invisible knowledge areas, six unspoken rules for survival and six daily skills that every experienced practitioner knows, but has never recorded. This research is not intended to supplant formal HR education curriculum. It aims to finish it.

²¹ 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The field of Human Resource Management has been studied for more than 50 years. Functional specialization like Talent Acquisition, Learning & Development, Business Partnering, and hierarchical analysis from administrative, managerial to leadership levels demonstrate that the HR profession has been formally examined in many ways.

However, the impact of industry context on how HR professionals perform their work is largely neglected. In his article "The Hidden Curriculum of Work" (Strategy+Business), Jesse Sostrin writes that on the day they join an employer, each employee takes on two roles: the one explicitly written in the job description, and another implicit "job-within-the-job" that has to do with politics, relationship management, staying relevant, and dealing with ambiguous demands that no training can prepare them for.

This is more evident than ever in the Human Resources field. The same designation makes a profoundly different professional in different industries not because the job title changes, but because the "unspoken" expectations of each industry alter the job.

1.2 CONCEPT OF THE "INVISIBLE CURRICULUM" IN HUMAN RESOURCES

This research brings forward and extends the concept of "The Invisible Curriculum in HR" – the knowledge, instincts and skills that HR professionals are not explicitly taught but are expected to have by industry.

This is very similar to the concept of tacit knowledge that was researched. In the paper, ¹¹
The Role of Tacit and Explicit Knowledge in Workplace, Smith (2001) in Journal of Knowledge Management, Vol. 5, No. 4, states that the knowledge that is acquired through tacit knowledge is "common sense" and "know-how" gained by experience rather than formal education and that it is "a hallmark of managerial success" that is often neglected.

Beaudry (2021), in *"When It Comes to HR Jobs, Does Industry Matter?"* (Lattice), practitioner voices, further, confirm that this invisible, industry-specific layer of HR knowledge exists, is experientially learned, and is consequential but has not been systematically mapped.

Dave Ulrich et al. (2017), in *"Competencies for HR Professionals Who Deliver Outcomes"* (Employment Relations Today), identified nine universal HR competency domains in the globally renowned HR Competency Study conducted by the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business. Notably, all these nine competencies are not industry differentiated. It is a clearly universal framework and its lack of noise is the space that this research aims to cover.

1.3 INDUSTRIES SELECTED FOR THE STUDY

For structural diversity and contrast, this research centres on six industries that were purposefully chosen to represent diverse contexts in the formal employment market in India:

1. **Manufacturing:** Union relations, shop floor politics and the intricacies of dealing with a largely blue-collar workforce.
2. **Information Technology:** Culture (rapid), ESOP (management), and white collar, knowledge driven expectations of the fast-paced workforce.
3. **BFSI:** Demands HR to work in structured hierarchy and to work under strict compliance and regulatory environment.
4. **Healthcare:** Briefs the specific issues of credentialing, over-worked staff, and sector-specific regulations.
5. **E-commerce & Retail:** Offers HR professionals a continued challenge in terms of high turnover, blurred job lines, and an ever-changing operating environment.
6. **Consultancy:** Is a unique position that places HR both as a user of HR services within the organisation and as a provider of HR services to client organisations.

These six sectors together represent both white-collar and blue-collar jobs, highly regulated as well as highly dynamic industries, and product- as well as knowledge-driven economies. This structural diversity is not a by-product, but a key element of the study. The contrast between

industry sectors has to be strong enough to make the same HR designation, placed in these six different environments, into six very different HR professionals.

1.4 INDUSTRY CONTEXT AND ITS ROLE IN HRM PRACTICES

Existing research supports the argument that industry context meaningfully shapes HR practice. Laldingliani et al. (2023), in *"An Overview of HRM Practices Across Different Sectors in India"* (Journal of the Asiatic Society of Mumbai), and Abdulhussein et al. (2025), in *"A Comparative Analysis of Human Resource Practices in Selected Industrial Sectors of Gujarat"*, both demonstrate how different industries shape an HR professional for effective practice in the Indian market.

Most impressively, Datta et al. (2005), in *"Human Resource Management and Labor Productivity: Does Industry Matter?"* (Academy of Management Journal, Vol. 48, No. 1), quantitatively shows that there are three out of four industry characteristics that significantly moderate the relationship between HR practices and productivity outcomes.

Similarly, Cayrat & Boxall (2023), in *"The Roles of the HR Function: A Systematic Review of Tensions, Continuity and Change"* (Human Resource Management Review, Vol. 33), conducted a systematic review analysing decades of studies on the shifting identity of the HR function, further reinforcing that HR cannot be studied in isolation from its organizational and industrial environment.

1.5 PROBLEM STATEMENT

HR as the professional role has been well researched from the functional and hierarchical perspectives, while it has not been studied from the tacit perspective of industry environment. The current frameworks such as the universally applied competency model which was developed by Ulrich do not consider the extent to which the role of the HR professional varies by sector.

The formal curriculum of HR education provides frameworks, models, and functional know-how; however, it is not preparing HR professionals with industry-specific instincts like the unspoken rules, unspoken expectations, and context-dependent judgements that determine

whether HR professionals are just doing the job, or they are “on top of it.

The lack of a systematically mapped, industry differentiated understanding of HR competencies is the focal point of this research.

1.6 OBJECTIVE ² OF THE STUDY

The primary objectives of this research are:

- To identify and map the *unwritten, industry-specific competencies* expected of HR professionals across six industries in India.
- To gain insight into how these intangible expectations are learned, embraced and embedded in the different sectors of employment.
- To investigate the essential change in meaning of the same HR specialization in different industrial contexts.
- To offer a scholarly grounding and organized body of knowledge, “The Invisible Curriculum” brings together industry-specific HR knowledge that seasoned practitioners recognize but that has not been formally documented.

1.7 OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

¹³ For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined as used within the context of this research:

1. **Invisible Curriculum:** These are the industry-specific knowledge, instincts, behavioural norms and unofficial skills that HR professionals never learn, but are expected to know and exhibit in their industry.
2. **Unwritten Competencies:** Skills, judgements, and behavioural capabilities that are not 'scoped' in job descriptions or formal HR education but are 'implied' in the industry context in which an HR specialist works.
3. **Industry Context/Environment:** The set of tacit knowledge and the structural, cultural, regulatory and workforce features of a specific industry that influence how HR functions are enacted and what further skills and knowledge HR workers need to master in that specific industrial context.

4. **Tacit Knowledge:** Tacit Knowledge, as described by Smith (2001) is the "common sense" and "know-how" that can be gained through professional experience and which is not easily codifiable, transferable via formal training, or in the standard educational curriculum.
5. **HR Professional:** Any individual who is currently employed in any of the six industries studied in a role that involves HR functions, including those of a Talent Acquisition, Learning & Development, HR Business Partnering, Payroll, or Generalist role.
6. **Industry-Specific Instinct:** The ability of an HR professional to make decisions based on their experience in a particular context and industry without having to learn it in school.
7. **Formal HR Curriculum:** The common body of knowledge delivered in academic programs, certification programs and HR training programs like Ulrich's HR Competency Model, which is the explicit and documented foundation for HR Professional Education.
8. **Invisible Demands:** The unspoken demands made on the HR professional by the nature of the industry such as working with power, dealing with industry specific HR issues and adjusting HR processes to the industry which are not explicitly communicated at the time of hiring or when the HR professional joins the company.

1.8 ¹SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study is scoped to:

- **Geography:** India's formal employment market
- **Focus Group:** HR professionals actively working within these industries
- **Level of Analysis:** A category of HR positions and skills that are differentiated at the industry level.
- **Nature of Knowledge Explored:** Tacit, experiential, and unwritten competencies
- **Industries Covered:** Manufacturing, Information Technology, BFSI, Healthcare, E-commerce & Retail, and Consultancy

The study does not seek to reinvent the understanding of HR but to *complete it* by adding the industry dimension that formal education and existing research have left un-addressed.

1.9 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research holds significance on multiple levels:

- **For Academic Research:** It addresses an existing gap in the HR competency literature and systematically represents the concept of The Invisible Curriculum in industries.
- **For Organizations:** It emphasizes the value of industry-specific onboarding and context-specific HR training, going beyond generic approaches.
- **For HR Practitioners:** It provides a name, structure and validation for the unspoken demands in which they operate daily, which can facilitate more purposeful and intentional career growth and industry transitions.
- **For HR Education:** It highlights the importance of integrating the industry context into HR education programs as an integral part.
- **For HR Students & Aspiring Professionals:** For students currently pursuing HR as a field of study, this research equips them with the understanding that the industry they choose to work in is just as important as to make more informed career choices.

When they go to start their jobs, they will either be looking to be able to go into an internship or actually start working full-time, ask the questions they should ask in the recruitment process and come to their first job with a realistic and contextually appropriate professional mindset.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM OF PROFESSIONAL LIFE

The conceptual basis of this research is not only from the literature of HR, but from the general observation of the professional life. Jesse Sostrin (2016), in his article *"The Hidden Curriculum of Work"* published in *Strategy+Business*, expresses that every employee accepts two simultaneous jobs on the day he/she is hired: one is a formal job defined by a written description in the form of job description and the second being an invisible 'job-within-the-job', involving navigating politics, managing informal relationships, staying relevant, and handling demands that no training prepares them for. Sostrin defines this concept of hidden curriculum as "whenever there are two simultaneous challenges where one is visible, clear, and understood and the other is concealed, ambiguous, and undefined." Further, he suggests that one of the more important competitive edges that a company has is also its employees' ability to recognize and intentionally address this hidden curriculum, but there is no formal training system in place for this.

This article provides the most direct conceptual mirror for the research. Sostrin sees the hidden curriculum as a universal aspect of the professional condition, while this study focuses on the field of Human Resources. It suggests that the hidden curriculum is not only individual, but also is structurally produced by the industry context and thus systematically affects professionals across the sectors.

2.2 TACIT KNOWLEDGE AS THE THEORETICAL BACKBONE

In order to learn about the theory of tacit knowledge, one must be familiar with this Invisible Curriculum and its opposition to the formal education and documentation.

Nonaka (1991), in his ⁵⁵ *Harvard Business Review* article *"The Knowledge-Creating Company,"* made the distinction between explicit knowledge, which is the formal, codified, and is written ¹⁵ in manuals and procedures, and tacit knowledge, which is learned only through experience, and is communicated only indirectly, through apprenticeship, or when the situation demands. Most of the western management systems are oriented towards explicit knowledge, regarding the organisation as a machine for processing information, and neglecting the tacit knowledge

that is embedded in the personal engagement, honesty and intuition of an individual in the organisation, which is the most competitive and valuable knowledge. He also introduces the well-known "SECI model" (Socialization, Externalization, Combination and Internalization), which is a model for the flow of tacit knowledge in an organization. In this research, the SECI framework is highly explanatory. The Invisible Curriculum in HR is largely present at Socialization, as these are the instincts the experienced HR professionals pass on informally from their own experience, through observations and explorations, without reaching the Externalisation and Combination stage in any formal HR curriculum. This study has a collateral objective of the beginning of the Externalization process in formal learning.

Nonaka's model has been expanded by Smith (2001), in 'The role of tacit and explicit knowledge in the workplace', where he gives the most specific description of tacit knowledge within the workplace context relevant to this research. Smith characterizes tacit knowledge as "practical, action-oriented knowledge or know-how that is obtained through practice and from personal experience and is not generally shared in public; often has a feeling of intuition about it. The ten categories of tacit vs. explicit knowledge (work practice, learning, teaching and relationships) translate directly to the nature of this study. In tacit knowledge environments, work practice is defined as "spontaneous, improvised, and responsive to a changing, unpredictable environment", and this is exactly what the HR practitioner in Manufacturing, Healthcare, and e-commerce should do! The informal and practical ways industry-specific HR knowledge is gained, such as mentoring, internships, and on-the-job learning, are also different than the structured classroom material, Smith says. Her observation that 'vital tacit knowledge' can disappear when companies reorganise, merge and/or downsize presents a critical need and value of this research.

Together, Nonaka (1991) and Smith (2001) are the two theories that justify the existence of the Invisible Curriculum and why it is necessary to study it in a qualitative, experiential way.

2.3 THE UNIVERSAL HR COMPETENCY FRAMEWORKS & THEIR SILENCES

It is also important to look at the theoretical contributions of the formal HR competency literature, and how it is lacking in the theoretical treatment of tacit or invisible knowledge. In "*Competencies for HR Professionals Who Deliver Outcomes*," published in the *Employment Relations Today*, Ulrich, a highly respected authority on HR professional competencies,

provides the most authoritative and globally validated framework of HR competencies. HR professional competencies, as defined by Ulrich, also known as "*The Father of Modern HR*," are detailed in the most authoritative and globally validated framework, in the publication "*Competencies for HR Professionals Who Deliver Outcomes*," published in the *Employment Relations Today*. The authors present the results from the seventh iteration of the prestigious worldwide ¹⁶ University of Michigan's Ross School of Business *HR Competency Study* that evaluated over ³⁸ 4,000 HR professionals at 1,500+ organizational units globally, representing more than 30,000 surveys, to reveal nine universal competency domains: ⁶ Strategic Positioner, Credible Activist, Paradox Navigator, Culture and Change Champion, Human Capital Curator, Total Reward Steward, Technology and Media Integrator, Analytics Designer and Interpreter, and Compliance Manager. Importantly, there's no specialization for these nine domains by industry. The framework is clearly and generally applicable across all sectors, contexts and environments.

This finding of the paper is of special significance for this study, as it states that Paradox Navigator is the most important competency in driving business results. According to Ulrich et al. the definition of a paradox is a tension that is not easily resolved but is instead negotiated. The HR professionals are required to do just this, and that is the point of the Invisible Curriculum, but not once in the Ulrich framework is the HR industry-specific content of these paradoxes articulated. In the manufacturing industry, the HR professional is responsible for managing a balancing act between the rights of workers and operational efficiency; in the healthcare sector, for balancing the needs of employees with regulatory standards; and in the BFSI industry, between performance-oriented culture and a hierarchical structure. In the Ulrich model, the skill is named but not the industry specific form, therefore this research is a direct and necessary extension of the Ulrich model to map the actual form of the paradoxes that exist in industries.

This argument is further supported by Ramlall (2006) in the article, "*Identifying and Understanding HR Competencies and their Relationship to Organizational Practices*" published in ⁵³ *Applied H.R.M. Research*. In line with the Michigan HR Competency tradition, Ramlall discovers that in practice, HR professionals demonstrate a consistent lack of skill in strategic contribution and business knowledge and that years of experience has a significant relationship to competency ratings, while education level does not. The quantitative support of this research is: the most important skills of HR are not learnt in the classroom but by experience. Interestingly, his respondents pronounced "knowledge of the business" as the one

most essential HR ability with 64.9%. But again, it's a "business literacy" competency rather than a "business literacy at the factory floor" or a "business literacy at the hospital" or a "business literacy at the fintech company. The industries that he studied were retail, banking, manufacturing, agriculture, education and transportation, but industry was never a variable that was valued highly in his research.

This topic of industry-specific competencies is not spoken but needs to be filled and that is what this research will do.

2.4 INDUSTRY AS AN INDISPENSABLE VARIABLE IN HR EFFECTIVENESS

The notion that the context of the industry and its customers deeply change HR practice is not just an abstract one, but is backed by some of the most rigorous studies. The most quantitative support for this claim comes from Datta, Guthrie and Wright (2005) in "Human Resource Management and Labor Productivity: Does Industry Matter?" published in the *Academy of Management Journal*. They draw on the contingency theory and the resource-based view of the firm to explore the moderating effect of the key industry characteristics, including capital intensity, market growth, product differentiation and dynamism, on the link between high-performance work systems and labour productivity. Their results are clear across the three industry characteristics that they study and their relationship to productive outcomes of HR practices. The conclusion is obvious: When used in the same way, the same HR system can generate very different results depending on the industrial context.

Datta et al. reject the "universal approach" in HRM which suggests that best practice in HR is the same across all geographical locations and, like industries, national cultures are the contexts in which meanings are constructed, effectiveness is defined and behaviours are evaluated. This is a near-to-word-for-word restatement of the organizational-level present research problem. This study builds on the work of Datta et al. by applying their argument to the individual practitioner level: industry influences invisible competency demands placed on a practitioner in the role of HR professional.

Cayrat and Boxall (2023) also echo this from another perspective in their article: *The Roles of the HR Function: Tensions, Continuity and Change*, in *Human Resource Management Review*. They conducted a review of more than 201 articles published in peer-reviewed literature in more than 40 leading journals from more than 50 years of HR role research, finding that the

field recognizes industry sector as a variable that affects an HR's role and behaviour, but none of the studies has used industry as the primary lens through which to analyse HR roles and behaviours. Research by country, by organizational size and by hierarchical level is plentiful, but there is no proven research that includes industry context as a core. This study is significantly supported by the call for further research by Cayrat and Boxall that calls for "larger samples from various industries, countries and organisational settings," and that examines "the influence of contingent factors on HR roles". They also triangulated their findings using qualitative approach stating that since 2011, semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis have emerged as a dominant method in HR role research and the study is geographically significant as India is one of the non-Western countries found in the literature, and methodologically sound as it follows the contemporary trend.

2.5 PRACTITIONER EVIDENCE FOR INDUSTRY SPECIFIC HR KNOWLEDGE

This phenomenon has also been recognized in practitioner literature in addition to academic. In "*When It Comes to HR Jobs, Does Industry Matter?*" (2021) published in Lattice, Beaudry speaks with several HR professionals, such as HR consultants, staffing experts, and diversity strategists, who all say that industry-specific knowledge in HR is a reality, a reality that is critical and hard to learn outside of a practical setting. One HR consultant explicitly makes the statement that "there is industry-specific knowledge that is virtually impossible to obtain without first-hand experience" thereby giving a practitioner level confirmation to the Invisible Curriculum, in the form of an experienced professional reality.

The invisible curriculum also enters the spotlight when an HR professional switches between industry sectors, as the professional realizes that what they thought was generally known is actually only industry-specific, the article continues. In spite of the clear naming of this problem and the inclusion of expert voices that confirm it, the article fails to come up with a systematic mapping of what invisible knowledge is, how it is gained, or how it changes depending on sector. This is research that brings up a very important question and doesn't give any answer to it, rather it is the structured academic answer to this question in the context of India's employment.

2.6 HRM PRACTICES WITHIN INDIA'S EMPLOYMENT SECTORS

In the Indian context, specifically, two empirical studies of research have been instrumental. In the article titled "An Overview of HRM Practices in Different Sectors in India", published in ¹⁹ *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Mumbai*, 2023, Laldingliani et al. gave a detailed secondary data analysis of HRM practices in manufacturing, industrial and service sectors in India based on the studies carried out on organisations such as Tata Motors, Maruti Udyog, SBI, Infosys and textile mills in Tamil Nadu, steel plants in Odisha, and garment factories in Bangalore. From their research, they systematically report that compensation systems, training emphasis, appraisal systems and performance management systems vary significantly by industry. There are also institutionalized and time-bound promotions for government-owned manufacturing plants, and a system of performance and recommendations for private firms. Private sector banks, such as ICICI are performance-oriented banks and public sector banks have seniority-weighted operating systems. The formal evidence for the invisible, practitioner-level variation that this research aims to investigate are these variations. The study does not, however, inquire into who navigates HR practices, nor does it explore what is tacit knowledge of what is needed to navigate them well, across sectors.

This argument is further substantiated by the recent quantitative analysis published by Abdulhussein and Pandya (2025) in the ⁴ *Journal of Asian Multicultural Research for Economy and Management Study* in a comparative study of HRP in selected industrial sectors of Gujarat. Their study uses the ANOVA technique across nine HR practice areas, comprising of training, appraisal, compensation, feedback, career progression, employee morale, and confirms the differences across the Finance ⁴ and Banking, IT, Manufacturing, FMCG, Retail and Healthcare sectors with each and every hypothesis. Their finding reveals that Finance and Banking consistently have the lowest scores in every HR dimension, only 25.6% of the employees say HR practice has a positive impact on their morale, and only 34.9% believe that ⁴ there is a clear career progression path for them. This serves as quantitative proof of the structurally demanding and often disengaging nature of HR within BFSI, where on HR's demands are especially salient to the invisible nature.

Both, Laldingliani et al. (2023) and Abdulhussein and Pandya (2025), build on each other's work to show that the hypothesis of HR variation on the level of the whole industry is not just a theory in the west, but a fact in the formal labour market in India, where this study is conducted.

2.7 THE RESEARCH GAP

The literature reviewed in this chapter highlights that the industry context over and over again is identified as a variable that has an impact on HR practices and outcomes, but it has never been the focus of the study at the individual HR practitioner level. Although Sostrin (2016) identifies the hidden curriculum, there is no industry differentiation in HR, Nonaka (1991) and Smith (2001) explain tacit knowledge but do not apply it to HR professionals across industries, Ulrich et al. (2017) present the most authoritative HR competency framework, but treat it as universally applicable without industry differentiation, Ramlall (2006) collects data across the industry but never disaggregates by the sector, Datta et al. (2005) prove that the HR system outcomes vary by industry, they operate at the organizational level rather than the practitioner level and the HR role literature is cited as the field's most pressing gap by Cayrat and Boxall (2023) and Abdulhussein and Pandya (2025) document the existence of formal HR practice variation across the Indian industry sectors but do not ask the HR practitioner to intuitively know what to do to navigate those variations, nor provide any systematic map of the content of that HR knowledge.

This study addresses this gap. It addresses the question of a role of an industrial sector in an HR professional life by focusing the lens of our inquiry on industry context and by acknowledging what HR professionals are expected to know, but never taught in a formal classroom setting, in each of the six industry categories representing the structurally contrasting industries in Manufacturing, Information Technology, BFSI, Healthcare, E-commerce & Retail, and Consultancy. This study provides scholarly expression to what every savvy HR professional knows but has rarely been written down.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

18 3.1 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

This study is a Mixed Methods Research Design (MMRD) which combines 36 secondary data analysis of previous studies with primary data collection using a structured and self-administered questionnaire. The research methodology adopted is a 'Sequential Exploratory Design' which involves first developing the theoretical and conceptual basis after a review of the literature and then testing and extending the theory and concepts with the primary data obtained from HR professionals in the six industries which are the focus of the research. This type of design is certainly appropriate for this study because this phenomenon is Invisible Curriculum in HR that needs a theoretical frame and needs the voice of practitioners in the concrete and industry aspects.

This Mixed Methods approach aligns with methodological suggestions provided by Cayrat and Boxall (2023), who conducted a systematic 9 review of 50 years of research into HR roles and recommend a semi-structured and structured method of qualitative inquiry and secondary analysis as most suitable for studying HR role variation across contexts. It also conforms to the nature of tacit knowledge which as Smith (2001) suggests is "seldom expressed openly" and calls for a different type of inquiry that is interpretive and based upon experience rather than experimental or observational designs.

3.2 NATURE OF RESEARCH

This study is exploratory and descriptive. It is exploratory in that sense as the Invisible Curriculum in HR has not been previously mapped, even as an industry differentiated and practitioner level phenomenon, in the existing literature, and this is one of the first studies to provide a systematic and scholarly basis. It is descriptive as it does not attempt to manipulate any variables and test any predetermined causal hypotheses, but rather to document, analyse and compare the invisible competency demands across the six structurally contrasting industries in the formal employment market in India.

Both of these natures constitute the dual aim of this study, first to name what has not yet been named, and then to describe what has not yet been described with regard to industries.

3.3 SOURCES OF DATA

This research relies upon two sources of data:

- **Primary Data** - Collected from a structured and self-administered questionnaire sent to HR professionals who are working in any of the six industries targeted – Manufacturing, Information Technology, BFSI, Healthcare, E-commerce & Retail, Consultancy. The questionnaire was created and distributed online using Google Forms platform to facilitate and geographically broaden data gathering whilst maintaining both the convenience of respondents and the restricted time period available.
- **Secondary Data** - from peer reviewed academic articles, management publications, practitioner articles. Some of the secondary sources reviewed are studies by Ulrich et al. (2017), Datta et al. (2005), Cayrat and Boxall (2023), Smith (2001), Nonaka (1991), Ramlall (2006), Laldingliani et al. (2023), Abdulhussein and Pandya (2025), and practitioner articles by Sostrin (2016) and Beaudry (2021) and others. These sources furnished the theoretical framework, the empirical background and the research gap which the primary data collection was aimed at.

3.4 RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

Data collection tool used was a structured and self-administered questionnaire which had 20 questions arranged in four thematic sections with the demographic profiling block of the respondents at the beginning of the instrument. The questionnaire was named as 'The Invisible Curriculum in HR' and presented to the respondents as a research study conducted by the Department of Management, Delhi Technological University. The participants were told that there were no right or wrong answers, no records kept of their participation, and no records kept of their answers (except for academic research).

The questionnaire was structured as follows:

- **Demographic Block** (Questions 1–5) included the name, industry, current HR role or HR specialization, number of years in HR and size of the organization. This block was added to ensure industry-wise disaggregation of the responses and give a professional touch to the sample.
- **Section A: The Weight of Industry** (Questions 6–8) included five-point Likert scale items to assess respondents' perception of their industry influencing their HR role, of their formal education being adequate to meet the needs of their industry, and how often they use industry intuition more than HR theory and policy when making decisions. The section directly addresses the basic research question at the individual practitioner level.
- **Section B: Crossing the Line** (Questions 9–14) focused on the perceived differences between and within HR functions across industries. Questions included whether HR jobs are unique among industries, how unique these jobs are in comparison to what people think, and how frequently HR professionals have to change their approach and personality to fit the industry they are in.

Questions 12-14 were specifically designed for those who had worked in more than one industry and asked respondents to describe their most challenging industry change and rate the differences in “unwritten HR requirements” between the industries.
- **Section C: The School Nobody Talks About** (Questions 15–16) emphasized the learning of tacit knowledge in a particular industry. They were also asked how long it had taken them to grasp the unwritten HR requirements in their current industry; and which of the following learning approaches between trial and error, mentoring, observing others, long-term experience, or continuous learning proved to be the best way to learn the unwritten rules? It is directly related to the Nonaka's (1991) SECI model at the Socialization phase and the Smith's framework (2001) of tacit knowledge transmission.
- **Section D: Name the Invisible** (Questions 17–20) comprised open-ended questions to which respondents were asked to explain the invisible curriculum. Questions asked included: What is the least understood area of HR work related to their industry; what is the trait they would look for in an HR person over education when hiring their replacement; what the one unspoken rule is that is essential to survive as an HR professional in their industry; and what is the one invisible skill they perform every day that never made an appearance in a textbook? These questions were the most important and intended to spark the original and sincere thinking of practitioner from which the Invisible Curriculum in six industries would be named, compared and mapped.

3.5 SAMPLING DESIGN

- **Target Population:** The present study focuses on the HR professionals currently working in any of the following HR functions in the six selected industries for this research in the formal employment market of India; Talent Acquisition, HR Business Partnering, Learning and Development, Payroll and Compensation, HR Generalist and HR Leadership.
- **Sampling Technique:** A non-probabilistic purposive sampling technique was used where the sampling was based on the respondents' active employment in one of the six target industries in a HR role. This method is suitable for exploratory mixed methods research when there is a focus on depth of insight within specific, pre-determined categories and not on representativeness of a broader population.

Sample Size: A total of 06 responses were collected across the six industries. The distribution of responses by industry was as follows:

S. No.	Industry	Number of Responses
1.	Manufacturing	01
2.	Information Technology	01
3.	BFSI	01
4.	Healthcare	01
5	E-commerce & Retail	01
6.	Consultancy	01
TOTAL		06

Table 3.1 - Sample Size Distribution by Industry

3.6 DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The questionnaire was made available digitally using Google Forms and then sent directly to the targeted respondents through LinkedIn's professional network, and peer referral within the six targeted industries. A short description of the research purpose was provided in the survey invitation to maximise informed participation. Data collection took place for 15 days from 15/04/26 to 30/04/26. The respondents responded to the survey independently at their convenience, so that the responses were not influenced by the researcher.

3.7 DATA ANALYSIS PLAN

The data obtained from the questionnaire employed for the study was analysed quantitatively for the structured questionnaire and quantitatively and qualitatively for the open-ended questionnaire.

Results were analysed for the Likert scale and multiple-choice items in Sections A, B and C by descriptive statistics (frequency distributions, percentage analysis, and mean scores) to detect patterns and to make comparisons between responses across the industries. This quantitative analysis allowed for the measurement and comparison of the perceptions of the invisible curriculum from the six sectors.

³¹ Responses to the open-ended questions in Section D were analysed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method in which the common words, phrases and patterns in the responses were identified, coded and categorised into themes. This method gave the raw practitioner language a shape and structure by mapping the Invisible Curriculum within each of the selected industries in a specific and concrete manner, thus allowing for the quantitative sections to become specific and concrete.

3.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

In contrast to the above, the present invention addresses the following problems.

This study adds important insights into the HR competencies required for a particular industry but certain limitations are noted:

- **Time Constraint:** The sample size and geographical scope of the data collected was restricted due to the time constraint, and this may have impacted the depth and detail of the industry-wise comparisons.
- **Sample Size:** Due to purposeful sampling and time constraint, the sample may not be representative of the diversity across the six industries and may not be representative across organizational size, hierarchical level and geographic region within India.
- **Self-Reporting Bias:** The respondents fill in the questionnaire themselves, and their answers are based on their personal perception and interpretation of the Invisible Curriculum and not based on the behaviours that have been observed, which may lead to the possibility of social desirability bias.

- **Absence of Interviews:** This study does not incorporate the semi-structured interviews, reducing the depth of qualitative exploration available for each industry. In the future, it could be helpful to ⁴³triangulate the findings from the questionnaires with in-depth interviews to gain deeper practitioner accounts.
- **Generalizability:** The results of this research are limited to the formal employment market in India and cannot necessarily be directly applied to the HR practice in other countries and cultures.

3.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The principles of academic honesty and respecting participants and responsible use of data guided the conduct of this research. The following ethical issues were taken into account during the research process:

- **Informed Consent:** ³³The participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the study before they filled out the questionnaire. The introduction of the survey made it clear that the responses would only be utilized for academic purposes under the Department of Management of Delhi Technological University and that only after the participants were fully aware of the research context.
- **Voluntary Participation:** ²³In this study, participation was totally voluntary. No individual was forced, coerced or compelled to take part in the survey. There was no time limit for participant withdrawal, or for not answering questions.
- **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** The names of all the respondents were requested in the questionnaire for the purpose of demographic profiling and all the individual responses were treated as confidential. The analysis and findings of this research have not been attributed to a named person. All data were kept safely and only available to the researcher.
- **No Harm to Participants:** The questions were professional and non-invasive. Naturally, no questions asked of respondents included personally sensitive information, disparaging comments about identifiable persons or organizations, or material that might cause any psychological or professional discomfort. The survey was intended to provoke reflective discussion by professionals, not criticism or disclosure.
- **Honest Representation of Data:** All the data gathered from the questionnaire have been reported and analyzed as received, without manipulation, selective omission or

misrepresentation. All secondary sources quoted in this research work are properly referenced and attributed according to the academic writing guidelines.

→ **Academic Purpose Only:** This research is conducted only for the fulfilment of Major Research Project requirement of the MBA programme at Delhi School of Management, Delhi Technological University. Data will not be used for any purpose other than academic research.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 INTRODUCTION OF ANALYSIS

This chapter provides the analysis and interpretation of primary data gathered from HR professionals of six industries namely Manufacturing, Information Technology, BFSI, Healthcare, E-commerce & Retail and Consultancy using a structured self-administered questionnaire. Six responses were returned – one from each of the six industries. In this exploratory study with limited time and access, the sample is considered to be a purposive qualitative-primary dataset in which it is the depth of insight that matters more than a large number of statistics. Respondents are analysed section-wise, followed by thematic analysis of open-ended responses, integrated discussion of findings in relation to existing literature and recommendations based on data.

Throughout the chapter, respondents are identified by their industry to maintain confidentiality, but in order to facilitate meaningful comparisons by industry.

4.2 DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

The six respondents interviewed together provide a broad cross section of experience, seniority and functional specialization in HR across the formal employment sector of India.

S. No.	INDUSTRY	ROLE	EXPERIENCE
1.	Manufacturing	HR Manager	14 Years
2.	Information Technology	HR Business Partner	7 Years
3.	BFSI	HR Generalist	9 Years
4.	Healthcare	HR Business Partner	11 Years
5.	E-commerce & Retail	Talent Acquisition	5 Years
6.	Consultancy	HR Leadership	17 Years

TABLE 4.1 - Demographic Profile of Respondents

The sample range is 5 to 17 years, and encompasses early career through to senior leadership roles, along with functional roles in Talent Acquisition, HR Generalist, HR Business Partnering

and HR Leadership. This diversity guarantees that the invisible competencies discovered show a variety of functional perspectives and of a hierarchy of levels within each sector.

4.3 SECTION A: THE WEIGHT OF INDUSTRY

Q6: How significantly does your industry shape the way you perform your HR role?

5 out of 6 rated this at the highest level of 5 which is "Completely shapes it". The only exception to this was the IT respondent who rated it on a 4. This if not unanimous, is a solid endorsement of the core thesis of this research: Industry is an antecedent, not a background factor of HR. HR professionals feel their industry has the greatest influence on how they do their job, regardless of the difference in structure between industries, ranging from manufacturing to consultancy.

Q7: How well did your formal education or HR training prepare you for the specific demands of your current industry?

Of the six respondents, all found that they had received 2 or less out of 5 formal preparations. The lowest rating of 1, "Not at all prepared" was given by the Healthcare respondent. That's a remarkable uniformity of results. In each of six structurally different industries and across people with five to 17 years of experience, formal education in HR is consistently ranked as very poor preparation for the actual practice of HR in a particular profession. This reinforces the notion of Ramlall (2006) that there is a lack of a direct correlation between education level and practical HR skills, ³⁴as well as with the tacit nature of knowledge and learning in the real world, as suggested by Smith (2001).

Q8: How often do you make decisions based on industry instinct rather than HR theory or policy?

²⁰Four respondents gave this a rating of 4 out of 5, and two - Healthcare and Consultancy: gave it a rating of 5, "Almost always. None of the respondents gave this a score of less than 4. In all six industries, HR professionals with experience say they use industry instinct as their most important decision-making factor in most of their business scenarios. This is one of the most obvious empirical indicators that this research could have generated of the Invisible Curriculum: the knowledge that informs daily human resource decision-making is not the knowledge that human resource education provides.

4.4 SECTION B: CROSSING THE LINE

Q9: Do you believe HR roles differ significantly across industries?

A complete 100% of the respondents responded in the affirmative leading to a finding which does not need to be statistically explained. All HR professionals in this sample, across all industries, experience levels and functional roles, confirm that the HR role is very different from one industry to another.

Q10: How different do you think the HR role is across industries compared to how it is commonly perceived?

A majority of the respondents (4 respondents) rated this at the maximum of 5, "Completely different." The IT and E-commerce respondents gave the score of 4. The trend is striking, particularly for the industries that have more distinguishable and inconspicuous needs, like manufacturing, healthcare, BFSI, and consultancy, which all ranked the divergence at the top.

Q11: How often do you mold your personality or approach to fit your industry environment?

Three respondents in Manufacturing, Healthcare and Consultancy indicated they were "Always - I am a different HR person in this industry than I would be elsewhere. The top two responses across all industries were 'Frequently, the industry culture dictates 70% of the way that I behave' (BFSI respondents) and 'Frequently, I follow my own instincts' (IT respondents). The E-commerce respondent answered "Moderately - I stay the same, but my priorities change". This is a significant gradation. Designing the fundamental identity adaptation that HR professionals need demands is most challenged by the industries that have the sharpest structural peculiarities, the one that has the sharpest double mirror, the shop floor, the clinical setting. While challenging, e-commerce seems to be changing priorities, but not the essence of the profession.

Q12-14: Cross-Industry Transition Experience

67% of all respondents had worked in more than one industry. 100% of all four rated the gap in demands for unwritten HR between industries at 4 or 5 out of 5. They have particularly important transition stories to tell:

The Manufacturing respondent said it was the 'hardest' thing he had done professionally in his career, and he was "reset" on his professional framework in the first week by the union representative saying, 'we don't do KPIs here, we do safety and seniority'. The BFSI respondent said that the transition from the business of insurance to banking was akin to finding out that "in BFSI, the regulator is an invisible stakeholder in every people-decision". For the respondent from the Healthcare sector, the move from pharma to a tertiary care hospital was referred to as "changing planets" because there was no parallel to credentialing where the professional qualifications of a staff member are verified before they can treat patients. The Consultancy's respondent said that the transition from corporate HR to Consulting was "the most identity-disrupting transition ever", because they are now both on the inside and the outside working on HR and people strategies for different clients.

These stories are good qualitative evidence to support Beaudry's (2021) argument that the invisible curriculum can only be fully seen at the point of industry transition, when the knowledge one thought was universal is found to be industry specific.

4.5 SECTION C: THE SCHOOL NOBODY TALKS ABOUT

Q15: How long did it take you to understand your industry's unwritten HR demands?

Two respondents from Manufacturing and Healthcare reported it took more than one year. Six months to one year was reported by two of them from BFSI and IT. One was from E-commerce and three to six months was reported. The Consultancy respondent also reported over a year. In particular, the Healthcare respondent also ticked "I still don't feel fully prepared," suggesting that the invisible curriculum may not be fully learned in the most complex industry environment found in this sample. The average adaptation period on the sample, and for the most structurally demanding industries, is more than six months. This directly aligns with Nonaka's (1991) view that tacit knowledge is gained through deep contextual immersion over time, and cannot be shortcut by formal teaching.

Q16: How did you primarily learn the unwritten rules of your industry?

There are three acquisition paths that emerge from the responses. The Manufacturing respondent acquired the knowledge by observing the workplace dynamic. The IT and Consultancy respondents were found to have learnt through a mentor or senior colleague. Trial

and error was one of the modes of education for the BFSI and e-commerce respondents. The Healthcare respondent said that it "took years of mistakes. No respondent reported that formal training or a formal induction process was a relevant way to learn invisible knowledge in their respective field. This aligns very well with Nonaka's SECI model at the Socialization stage, where tacit knowledge is shared between people, learned from others, and experienced through observations and mentoring. It also confirms that Externalization, Combination and Internalization stages of Nonaka's model are significantly less present in the transfer of industry-specific HR knowledge.

4.6 SECTION D: NAME THE INVISIBLE

In this section, four open-ended questions were provided to generate the raw practitioner language of the Invisible Curriculum. Themes are extracted from the responses and are analysed below.

Q17: Which area of HR work was most poorly covered by your formal education?

The answers show six specific invisible areas of knowledge, one for each industry, that are not taught in typical business HR courses or included in the Ulrich competency model:

1. **Manufacturing:** Collective bargaining and union negotiation, not theory of labour law: the face-to-face encounter between an experienced union representative and the collective bargaining system.
2. **IT:** ESOP discussions and equity culture - handling the emotional and technical aspects of equity comp, cliff vesting and post-IPO nerves.
3. **BFSI:** Regulatory Compliance – Law and HR Norms - specifically understanding how these norms from the Posh Act, Know Your Employee and SEBI fit and fit not criteria are practically being applied in daily HR decisions.
4. **Healthcare:** Burnout management and compassion fatigue - the unique psychological needs of helping clinical professionals in life-and-death situations.
5. **E-commerce & Retail:** High volume hiring in operational times - the ability to process large volumes of recruitment in under tight time constraints whilst ensuring compliance and candidate experience.

6. **Consultancy:** HR of a team of experts who know the theory and practice of HR, and the difficulty of exhibiting judgement and nuance, rather than procedural expertise, to internal clients that are critical of HR practice in their professions.

Q18: What would you tell a fresh HR graduate entering your industry?

All the respondents identified one disposition or capability more important to them in their specific industry than formal HR qualifications:

1. **Manufacturing:** Strategic patience - to be able to read into silence as a warning, not an agreement.
2. **IT:** Intellectual humility - ask quality questions and not pose as an authority because employees in tech will know.
3. **BFSI:** Discretion - the ability to be discrete in sharing sensitive information; "more valuable than the ability to solve a problem."
4. **Healthcare:** Emotional containment - absorbing pain without carrying it, and recognising the difference between fixing people's pain and making the system inattentive to it.
5. **E-commerce & Retail:** Adaptability without ego - freeing ourselves from structures and processes that can change in an instant.
6. **Consultancy:** Intellectual integrity – consistency of what they do internally and what they sell externally, because others are professional evaluators of HR practice.

Q19: What is the unspoken rule of survival in your sector?

These survival rules as expressed by each respondent are the most focused statement of the Invisible Curriculum within industries:

1. **Manufacturing:** Do not allow embarrassing a worker in front of others in the manufacturing process. Authority is not institutional, it must be earned, and one embarrassment can end it forever.
2. **IT:** Be not the voice of leaders. As information moves as fast as Slack, credibility is everything in a culture like this and, as the trusted neutral voice, not the polished mouthpiece of management.

3. **BFSI:** Hierarchy isn't a hierarchy or a hierarchy. Don't attempt to flatten it for a modern HR; know what to decide at what level and operate in that structure.
4. **Healthcare:** Understand the clinicians' language first to influence them. Senior doctors will reject instantly process language and data-driven arguments that present to the finance managers.
5. **E-commerce & Retail:** Attrition is not a bad thing, it's a part of the model. If you view every exit as a systemic issue, you'll cause HR burnout rather than alleviate it.
6. **Consultancy:** Internal HR practices are never purely internal! Everytime HR treats its own people, it is a case study in the HR firm that advises clients on people strategy and HR consultants tell clients of its firm.

Q20: What is the one invisible skill you use daily that was never mentioned in your textbooks?

The skills listed by respondents are invisible, and are a series of emotional and perceptual skills, many of which are very industry-specific:

1. **Manufacturing:** Reading the shop floor mood before any data or reports evaluating the risk of shop floor disruption due to informal leaders' physical movement and eye contact.
2. **IT:** Pre- resignation disengagement - measuring subtle behavioural signals, including shorter emails, fewer optional meeting appearances and less social responsiveness, as much as three weeks prior to an employee resigning.
3. **BFSI:** When to document and when not to - the wisdom to differentiate situations that need formal paper and paperless trails to solve.
4. **Healthcare:** Knowing what it means when someone who's supposed to be strong says "I'm fine," and taking action before it's too late.
5. **E-commerce & Retail:** Emotional speed ability to go from a challenging parting with a colleague to a joyful welcoming into a new job in the same hour – and ensure that everyone is fully present.

6. **Consultancy:** The invisible hierarchy of billability - how to navigate conversations with non-billable employees about their value in the organization without making them feel small, by using an informal system that assigns value to revenue generators.

4.7 DISCUSSION

The information gathered from the four sections coalesces to a clear and unambiguous answer: the Invisible Curriculum in HR is a real one, it is industry specific and it exists without being formally addressed in HR education.

All respondents, regardless of industry, experience or functional role - agreed that their industry has a full or significant impact on HR practices, that formal education is not sufficient to prepare them for industry-specific needs and that their majority of day to day decisions are based on instinct rather than theory. This isn't isolated; it's a trend observed in six different structurally varied industries with a total of 63 years of HR experience.

The results directly corroborate and expand the current literature in significant respects. The universal inadequacy of formal preparation in all six industries reinforces Ramlall's (2006) conclusion that experience is a better predictor of competency in HR than education is and Smith's (2001) research that the most important knowledge in a profession is tacit and cannot be coded into formal knowledge. The narratives from respondents transitioning between industries are the best evidence of Beaudry's (2021) insight that invisible knowledge is knowledge by industry. The three pathways of acquiring mentorship, observation, trial and error all correspond to the Socialization stage⁴⁸ of the SECI model developed by Nonaka (1991), which means that the Externalization of this knowledge has never taken place systematically. Most importantly, the six invisible knowledge domains in Q17, the six survival rules in Q19 and the six invisible daily skills in Q20 form the first practitioner generated map of the Invisible Curriculum across industries in the Indian HR context, according to this research. In each industry, there is a distinctly different invisible professional in terms of the tacit knowledge, perceptual skills and unstated rules that make effective HR practice effective.

However, the lack of mention of these areas of union negotiation instinct, equity culture management, regulatory discretion, and compassion fatigue literacy, emotional speed, and billability hierarchy navigation is not just theoretical. It's a void that has names, industries, and consequences for those HR pros who have to travel through it without any formal preparation.

5. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 SUMMARY OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research was to fill a void identified by five decades of HR scholarship – namely, the lack of a systematic, practitioner-level mapping of the invisible – unwritten competencies expected of HR professionals but never formally taught. This study was designed to put in writing the unwritten competencies that all seasoned HR professionals know, but have not yet encountered in scholarly research: *The Invisible Curriculum in HR: How Industry Context Shapes Unwritten Competencies*.

The study was done across six purposively selected industries: Manufacturing, Information Technology, BFSI, Healthcare, E-commerce & Retail, and Consultancy, which is spread across the sharpest possible structural contrasts in the formal employment market in India. The study, which relied on a mixed-methods design of ten academic and practitioner sources combined with primary data obtained using a structured, self-administered questionnaire, explored the ways by which HR professionals from these industries locate, adjust to, and internalize the "soft" requirements within their industry.

The theoretical underpinning was developed from the knowledge creation model proposed by Nonaka (1991), the classification of tacit knowledge put forward by Smith (2001) and the notion of hidden curriculum of professional life by Sostrin (2016). These were aligned to the most authoritative formal HR competency framework developed by Ulrich et al. (2017), which aims to include the nine universal competency domains, to illustrate that the formal curriculum in HR education offers some universal frameworks, but systematically lacks the instincts, unwritten rules and situation-specific judgements that ultimately determine whether HR professionals simply perform their role or whether they truly master it.

5.2 ACHIEVEMENT OF RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study had four main objectives. These all have been addressed as follows:

Objective 1: To identify and map the unwritten, industry-specific competencies expected of HR professionals across six industries in India.

This objective has been attained by analysing the responses to section D of the primary questionnaire which consisted of the following questions: 17, 18, 19 and 20. An unspoken set of 6 knowledge domains (hidden in the practice) were identified and mapped across industries (one set per industry) along with 6 invisible survival rules and 6 invisible daily skills – which together constituted the first practitioner generated map of the Invisible Curriculum across the industries in the Indian HR context.

Objective 2: To understand how HR professionals discover, adapt to, and internalize these invisible demands within their respective industries.

This objective has been tackled in the section C of the questionnaire. More data shows that the invisible curriculum is learned only by reflective means of mentorship, observation, trial and error, and years of error, and that the average adaptation time is greater than six months, and more than a year in the most complex industries. There was no respondent who saw formal training as a significant way of gaining industry-specific invisible knowledge.

Objective 3: To examine how the same HR designation is fundamentally reshaped by different industrial environments.

This objective has been met in section A and B of the questionnaire. The high level of consensus across the industries about HR as a complete or significant shaper of HR practice, and the respondents' narratives about transition between industries indicate that it is not a title or a formal function that makes a person an HR professional in one industry and not another, rather it's tacit knowledge, perceptual skills and unwritten rules that define what an effective HR in each industry is.

Objective 4: To provide a scholarly foundation and structured framework for industry-specific HR knowledge.

The goal of this has been accomplished by the incorporation of primary findings and theoretical framework developed in Chapters 1 and 2. The Invisible Curriculum has been named, defined, and traced in the six industries, its existence validated on the practitioner level, and anchored theoretically in the tacit knowledge literature, the HR competency literature and the literature of the context of the industry at the same time.

5.3 THE FINAL MAP

This is the practitioner-generated map of the Invisible Curriculum that is the centrepiece of this research work, which comprises six industries: This map is a compilation of what has been shared by experienced HR professionals of various domains including Manufacturing, IT, BFSI, Healthcare, E-commerce & Retail, Consultancy, etc., but not documented in any textbook, certificate or competency framework.

Manufacturing

- *Invisible Knowledge Domain*: Invisible Knowledge Domain: Collective bargaining instinct and union navigation: Union navigation and negotiating with experienced union representatives, reading informal power hierarchies on the shop floor, knowing when policy enforcement will cost more than it gains.
- *Unspoken Survival Rule*: Do not embarrass worker in front of peers. There is no institutional authority; it is earned through a record of respect; and it can never be lost if it is once publicly humiliated.
- *Invisible Daily Skill*: Informal leaders' physical behaviour and visual cues on the shop floor before any data or reporting is analysed and interpreted. Informal leadership physical behaviour and visual cues before data or reporting is analysed and interpreted.

Information Technology

- *Invisible Knowledge Domain*: Equity culture and ESOP management is the emotional and psychological challenge of running an ESOP with partially deferred compensation, with people figuring out vesting cliffs, and whose anxiety levels spike during funding rounds and IPOs.
- *Unspoken Survival Rule*: Avoid being the voice of leadership. With information flowing at lightning speed, HR's credibility is all about being seen as a neutral, trusted soundboard for management rather than a slick talking point.
- *Invisible Daily Skill*: Identifying pre-resignation disengagement – noticing soft signs usually about three weeks before a resignation letter is received, before the employee even realises it's a decision they need to make.

BFSI

- *Invisible Knowledge Domain*: Regulatory compliance at the nexus of HR and law - how the concepts of “POSH”, “Know Your Employee”, “SEBI fit and proper” and “RBI audit implications” are practically integrated into everyday HR decisions, which no MBA syllabus covers in a usable format.

- *Unspoken Survival Rule*: Hierarchy in BFSI is load bearing, not bureaucratic. It will be difficult to 'modernise' it, and will be ineffective and uncredible if you try. Modify the architecture and make changes in a subtle manner.

- *Invisible Daily Skill*: When to document, when to not document: the judgment to know when to have a formal paper trail vs when to deliver ally have an undocumented conversation and what the consequences are of getting either one wrong.

Healthcare

- *Invisible Knowledge Domain*: IKN is a literacy that deals with Burnout Management and Compassion Fatigue, the unique psychological needs of employees who work with clinical patients in the context of life and death situations in which traditional employee wellness programs are completely unsuitable.

- *Unspoken Survival Rule*: Get familiar with the language of the clinicians before trying to talk them into it. Senior doctors reject data, process language, and hierarchical arguments that don't work in other industries. It is essential to know the things that clinicians are looking to guard before beginning any HR intervention

- *Invisible Daily Skill*: Reading the texture of exhaustion in professionals trained to appear as if they are coping – knowing when the people saying they are fine are not really fine – acting before it becomes a clinical and organizational problem.

E-commerce & Retail

- *Invisible Knowledge Domain*: High-volume hiring under operational pressure - the ability to deliver large-scale hiring in a compressed timeframe which is driven by the need to sell, while upholding compliance, safety and candidate experience.

- *Unspoken Survival Rule*: Attrition is not a failure - There's no such thing as failing to survive - it's a built-in part of the industry model. If you treat each exit as a systemic failure, you will burn out your HRs quicker than they are being burned out. The objective of the professional is to get people to leave on a positive note, and in fact, sometimes to return.
- *Invisible Daily Skill*: Emotional speed-up - the ability to leave a bad exit interview and go to a good onboarding interview in a single hour, and to be fully present and in an appropriate emotional state in both.

Consultancy

- *Invisible Knowledge Domain*: Managing HR for a team of experts who know HR theory, but who can't always be convinced of procedural authority - the challenge of showing judgment, nuance and self-awareness rather than procedural authority to internal clients who are professional critics of exactly what HR does.
- *Unspoken Survival Rule*: Consultancy is a business that operates on the inside with the outside always present. The firm's people strategy is a living case study for people strategy consultants who supply people strategies to clients. The firm implicitly endorses those HR practices that it practices on the inside.
- *Invisible Daily Skill*: *How to converse with non-billable employees about their worth and career without making them feel bad for not having a formal ranking on the chart, but for having a more informal priority ranking that everyone knows, and which no one acknowledges.*

5.4 CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research lead to the following overarching conclusions:

1. The industry is the least acknowledged parameter for HR professional development. In all six industries, HR professionals with experience in the field found their formal education to be a significant lack of preparation in their industry. Industry expertise was found to be the main agent of everyday choices rather than HR theory and policy. It does not reflect the fault of any individual practitioners; it's a failure in the system of HR education.

2. There is an Invisible Curriculum, and it's industry-specific and it is consequential. The knowledge areas, survival rules and day to day skills that were identified in this research are not abstract or theoretical, they are lived, day to day realities that directly affect the effectiveness of an HR professional within their sector. They have real world working costs when it comes to formal education, especially if they are new to an industry.

3. The invisible curriculum is gained only by experience and not by instruction. Formal education was not seen as a significant source of industry specific knowledge by any of the respondents in this study. The acquisition processes of mentorship, observation, trial and error, and extended immersion, suggest that the invisible curriculum is found within the Socialization stage of Nonaka's SECI model and has never been systematically Externalized into teachable form. This study is a first effort in that direction, Externalization.

4. Industry transition is the moment the invisible curriculum becomes visible. The strongest evidence in this study was from HR professionals who had changed industries. Their stories verify that the invisible curriculum is only fully appreciated when the knowledge that one thought was common knowledge is then discovered to be knowledge ²specific to the industry. This has a profound impact on the way organizations manage industry transitions and on the planning of career transitions between the industry sectors.

5. The formal HR competency framework is incomplete without an industry dimension. The framework, which was formulated by Ulrich et al. and is still considered the most authoritative and widely used in the field, consists of nine universal competency domains. This research does not question their validity; it is just finding their boundary. The nine domains are a description of what all HR professionals are, and this research aims to look at the added expectations of HR professionals in specific industries. The Invisible Curriculum is not an alternative to the formal curriculum; it is its completion.

5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **For HR Professionals:** Understand that industry knowledge is not an add-on to the HR competency as it is a fundamental to practice. Those looking to transfer into a new industry need to proactively look for mentors in that industry that can support them in transition and

can expect a transition period of 6 months to 1 year. However, the invisible curriculum of each industry is learnable and needs deliberate, humble and sustained immersion.

2. **For HR Students and aspiring HR Professionals:** The most paramount career decision an HR student can make is not which HR specialization to opt for but which industry to go into, as the career path of that industry will impact on the aspiring HR professional more fundamentally than any HR Certification or Degree. It is important for students to proactively explore career internship experiences and industry exposure to their target area, to ask experienced HR practitioners directly about the hidden expectations of the industry, and to view the mismatch between the formal learning environment and industry as a professional learning opportunity they must take up from day one.
3. **For Organizations:** Industry-specific HR onboarding is currently not available in most organizations. Organizations need to create a formal induction programme which goes beyond the policy and process, and covers unwritten policies, regulatory expectations for the sector, the dynamics of the workforce, and the invisible hierarchy that determines how decisions are actually made. Senior HR professionals should be formally acknowledged as knowledge carriers of the "invisible curriculum" and their tacit knowledge should be deliberately captured and shared prior to organizational changes, reorganisation or exit otherwise it will disappear as Smith (2001) cautions.
4. **For HR Education and Curriculum Designers:** An MBA and HR certification course should go beyond a universal competency framework and include industry-specific modules with domains that cover tacit areas of knowledge identified in this research. Manufacturing HR union navigation is as teachable as labour law, say the invisible curriculum of reading the shop floor. The equity culture calls for IT HR to be as learnable as compensation theory. Compassion fatigue literacy is an HR skill in healthcare that is no more difficult to learn than the wellness plans for workers. It's just that no one has yet decided that these should be part of the curriculum. These studies suggest they do.
5. **For Future Research:** This study, with its small purposive sample of 6 respondents, is considered an exploratory foundation and is not meant to be a map. Further work is required that includes larger quantitative studies involving statistically representative samples from various industries to gauge the invisible curriculum across the industries. Longitudinal

studies and tracking of HR professionals as they change jobs across industries would be specifically helpful in understanding how these competencies that are not overt would be acquired, lost and transferred over time. A comparative cross-national study of the invisible curriculum of the same industry across countries especially between manufacturing, or BFSI sectors of India and other economies would greatly enhance the contribution of this work.

5.6 SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In addition to the suggestions outlined above, the findings of this study suggest a number of discrete paths for future research:

- The SECI framework provides a useful theoretical framework for research in organisations that investigate the externalisation, combination and institutionalisation of invisible HR knowledge from the Socialization stage to documented, transferable organisational knowledge.
- An industry-level map such as this one could be enriched by studies looking into whether there is a difference in the invisible curriculum within industries, e.g. between public sector and private sector banking within BFSI, between large hospital networks and smaller clinical setups within healthcare.
- A vertical dimension to this study's horizontal industry mapping could be added by researching the invisible curriculum at various levels within the same industry between what a junior HR executive must invisibly know in manufacturing, for example, and what a CHRO must know.

5.7 CLOSING REFLECTION

This research has attempted to give a name to what every HR practitioner knows. They understand it as the manufacturing HR manager does before opening one report on the shop floor. They know it in the way the BFSI generalist considers whether an interaction is recorded or not. They know it as the healthcare HR business partner knows “I’m fine,” which means “I’m not.”

This knowledge has never been recorded, not because it's not important, but because there isn't been a formal system that has determined that it should be. This research is a first and small one that will hopefully help change that.

For any HR profession, the formal education system has long provided the frameworks, models and the vocabulary of HR. What it has lacked is the industry, and this research has aimed to start to fill that void. And in HR, as this study has shown that the industry is everything.

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7. ANNEXURES

4/13/26, 8:07 AM

The Invisible Curriculum in HR

The Invisible Curriculum in HR

A Research Initiative under the Department of Management, Delhi Technological University.

Post-Undergraduate Research Study | 2025-26 - 2nd Year MBA Student

This survey is part of an academic research study titled "The Invisible Curriculum in HR" which explores how industry context shapes the unwritten knowledge, instincts, and skills that HR professionals develop through experience, competencies that are never formally taught but are absolutely expected.

This survey carries 20 questions with no right or wrong answers, only honest ones. Your responses are strictly confidential and will be used solely for academic purposes.

* Indicates required question

1. 1. Name *

2. 2. What industry are you representing? *

Mark only one oval.

Manufacturing

IT / Tech

BFSI

Healthcare

E-commerce / Retail

Consultancy

Other

3. **3. What is your current HR role/specialization? ***

Mark only one oval.

- Talent Acquisition
- HR Business Partner
- Learning & Development
- Payroll & Compensation
- HR Generalist
- HR Manager / Senior HR
- HR Leadership (CHRO / VP HR / Director)
- Other

4. **4. How many years of experience do you have in HR? ***

Mark only one oval.

- Less than 1 Year
- Between 1 - 5 Years
- More than 5 Years

5. **5. What is the size of your current organization? ***

Mark only one oval.

- Less than 50 employees
- 50-200 employees
- 200-500 employees
- More than 500 employees

SECTION A

The Weight of Industry - *How much does your sector actually shape your HR role?*

6. **6. How significantly does your industry shape the way you perform your HR role?** *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Not Completely shapes it

7. **7. How well did your formal education or HR training prepare you for the specific demands of your current industry?** *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Not Completely prepared

8. **8. How often do you find yourself making decisions based on industry instinct rather than HR theory or policy?** *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Never Almost always

9. **9. Do you believe HR roles differ significantly across industries? ***

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

10. **10. If yes, how different do you think the HR role is across industries compared to how it is commonly perceived? ***

Mark only one oval.

- 1 2 3 4 5
- No Completely different

11. **11. In your experience, how often do you have to 'mold' your personality or approach to fit your specific industry environment? ***

Mark only one oval.

- Always, I am a different HR person in this industry than I would be elsewhere
- Frequently, The industry culture dictates 70% of how I behave
- Moderately, I stay the same, but my priorities shift
- Rarely, HR is the same everywhere

SECTION B

Crossing the Line - *What happens when HR professionals move between industries?*

12. **12. Have you worked across more than one industry in your HR career? ***

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

13. **13. If yes, which industry transition was the most demanding and why? ***

14. **14. If yes, how different did you find the unwritten HR demands between the two industries? ***

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

No Completely different

SECTION C

The School Nobody Talks About - *How did you actually learn what no one taught you?*

15. **15. When you first entered your current industry, how long did it take you to understand its unwritten HR demands? ***

Mark only one oval.

- Less than 3 months
- 3 - 6 months
- 6 months to 1 year
- More than 1 year
- I still don't feel fully prepared

16. **16. How did you primarily learn the unwritten rules of your industry? ***

Mark only one oval.

- Trial and error
- A mentor or senior colleague
- Observing workplace dynamics
- It took years of mistakes
- I am still learning

SECTION D

Name the Invisible - *Put words to what was never written down*

17. 17. Which area of your industry-specific HR work was most poorly covered by your formal HR education? *

18. 18. If you were hiring your successor, what personality trait would be more important than their HR degree for this specific industry? / If you had to train a fresh HR graduate specifically for your industry, what is the ONE thing you would tell them that no textbook will? *

19. 19. What is the 'unspoken rule' of survival for an HR professional in your sector? *

20. 20. What is the one 'Invisible Skill' you use daily that was never mentioned in your textbooks? *

MRP

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