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Symbiotic Mutualism? A Process Perspective on the HRM and L&D Professions

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ABSTRACT

Professional HR associations are pivotal, yet under-researched, institutions that shape recognition, accreditation, legitimacy and professional boundary definition in the HR field. In this paper we argue that as HR work expands into domains such as talent management, HR analytics, coaching, and mentoring, professional boundaries are better understood as dynamic and contested than as fixed outcomes of 'closure'. This paper focuses on boundary adjustment at the interface of two enduring fields of HR practice: Human Resource Management (HRM) and Learning and Development (L&D). We report a 100-year historical process analysis of the UK Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), drawing on archival, oral and publicly available sources, to address the question: what are the processes by which different HR-related occupational or professional boundaries are established, developed, and changed? Our findings show concurrent processes of contestation, cooperation and boundary readjustment between HRM and L&D. We propose the concept of *symbiotic mutualism* to describe the process whereby these adjacent professional groups navigate and adjust their boundary claims. The concept of symbiosis has important implications for HR and other corporate professions where new areas of specialized practice continue to emerge.

1 | Introduction

Human Resources (HR) professional associations have increased in prominence since the mid-late 20th century alongside a corresponding growth in other corporate professional bodies (Farndale and Brewster 2005; Muzio et al. 2011). In this context, the term *profession* represents a domain of skilled practice or advisory work grounded in advanced intellectual study and specialised training (Noordegraaf and Schinkel 2011). Professional associations play an important role in establishing professional field boundaries through their engagement in collective and institutional formal and informal processes to establish, maintain, and negotiate distinctions, limitations and roles within and between different professional groups (Rétiová et al. 2021). Professional associations' codification of professional and ethical conduct, legitimization of expert knowledge claims, accreditation of professional education, and

regulation of entry to practice in employment contexts are important features of this boundary work, providing societal and cultural markers signifying expertise, occupational identity, access and belonging (Higgins et al. 2025; Nicklich et al. 2020). These boundary claims matter, as they are the means by which professional groups claim organizational and corporate significance and social capital value, and achieve successful institutional and strategic positioning (Langley et al. 2019; Reed 2018).

Institutional theory suggests that corporate professionalization, involving increasing process codification and regulation, in HR and in other corporate professional fields, is a feature of convergent adaptive practices that meet the requirements of macro-level systems, such as state employment regulation structures, and which also serve employers' substantive interests (Higgins et al. 2025). However, the interpretation of convergence is challenged by the emergence of new areas of professional

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Practitioner Notes

- What is currently known?
 - HR professional associations are important for legitimizing and accrediting specialist knowledge, practice and education.
 - The HR profession has had limited success regulating who is allowed to perform HR tasks, what education is mandatory and how HR tasks are executed
 - Uniquely in the UK the professional field boundaries established by the CIPD include both HRM and Learning and Development (L&D). In most other countries there are separate and adjacent professional bodies for HRM and L&D
- What this paper adds?
 - A new approach to assessing HR professional association development in different national jurisdictions through 'becoming', 'doing', and 'relating' lenses.
 - A new concept, symbiotic mutualism, to explain HR professional field development in different national contexts.
 - How sustained professional field development involves dynamic interaction, cooperation and boundary adjustment with other adjacent fields in the emerging corporate ecosystem of occupational and professional groups.
- The implications for practitioners
 - Leverage fluid corporate contexts to advance the status and contribution of HR professionals through interaction, collaboration, negotiation and co-creation.
 - Proactively seek cross-disciplinary collaboration and team working opportunities to advance HR professional impact.
 - Prioritize ethical and professional standards in HR education and practice.

practice specialization, for example, talent management, HR analytics, and coaching and mentoring, suggesting that professional field boundary claims are not fixed or static and that boundary adjustment between adjacent established and emerging occupational fields is likely (Slater 2019). In a context where emergent and adjacent fields develop and legitimize distinct professional certification processes (e.g., EMCC Global 2025), scholarly and practitioner networks (e.g., Institute of Training and Occupational Learning [ITOL] 2021) and professional identity claims (Reed 2018), field boundary closure may be elusive. Therefore, a process approach is needed to conceptualize how professional field boundaries are established and then change over time. This requires study of the historical trajectory of professional field relationships in their specific temporal context (Anteby et al. 2016; Collins and Butler 2020; Currie et al. 2020; Higgins et al. 2025; Scheibmayr and Reichel 2024).

This paper focuses on the UK Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and examines historic processes over a 100 year time-frame from 1914–2014, by which field boundaries between the adjacent occupational fields of Human

Resource Management (HRM) and Learning and Development (L&D) were established, developed and then changed over time. Theoretically, the historical examination is grounded in the analytical lens of professional field *becoming, doing and relating* proposed by Anteby et al. (2016). This provides a basis for an integrated analysis of historic processes of field boundary establishment and change. Our analysis leads us to propose a novel conceptualization of *symbiotic mutualism* that describes how field boundary claims change through simultaneous and continual processes of contestation and cooperation between different occupational fields within HR.

2 | Theoretical Grounding

The emergence of corporate professions in fields such as HR, management, and financial accounting is linked to organizational demand for professionally skilled knowledge workers (Hodgson et al. 2016) and positioned in contrast to an identified weakening of the capacity for self-governance and independence of traditional professions such as medicine and law (Freidson 1988; Reed 2018). Hodgson et al. (2016) and Reed (2018) highlight the rise of new corporate professions, including L&D and HRM as features within management fields, as an outcome of what Muzio et al. (2011, 443) refer to as “professionalization projects”, whereby occupational groups seek to reposition themselves from operational or administrative functions towards roles of strategic influence in organizational power structures (Higgins et al. 2016).

The pursuit of professionalization in any occupational area is complex, ambiguous, and highly contingent (Harrison et al. 2021; McCann et al. 2013). Professionalization processes have been explained through a variety of theoretical perspectives. Sociological functionalist accounts describe claims to professionalization made by occupational groups as a feature of increasing complexity in social, economic and corporate systems (e.g., Carter et al. 2015). Institutional theory considers emerging professions such as HRM to be a consequence of institutional isomorphism where structures and processes in different organizations increasingly resemble each other's, and standardization of work practices becomes ubiquitous (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Suddaby and Viale 2011). A third explanation of the professionalization trend centres on power relationships, conflict and competition that result from changing occupational and organizational positions in a global environment. From this perspective, the continued structure and functioning of the social and organizational world is explained as the outcome of continuous contests for competitive advantage (Evetts 2003; Noordegraaf 2015).

Within HR, the intellectual space between domains such as L&D and HRM is contested. In the UK, a single professional body, the CIPD has claimed to represent the fields of both HRM and L&D since a merger between the Institute of Personnel Management (IPM) and the Institute of Training and Development (ITD) in 1994. However, in scholarly and practitioner literature no consensus has been established as to whether L&D should be regarded as a subset of HRM (Garavan et al. 2024; Harney and Alkhalaf 2021). In the USA and in many parts of mainland Europe, separate professional boundary

claims between HRM and L&D are established and accepted. In contrast to the UK, for example in the USA, L&D professional education programmes are provided through Faculties of Education and are separate to programmes delivered in other faculties for HRM (Kuchinke 2003). In different parts of Europe studies suggest a separation in relation to professional education between L&D and HRM (e.g., Cho and Zachmeier 2015; Woodall et al. 2003). Furthermore, at an international level, distinctive research journals separately associated with L&D and with HRM, such as *International Journal of Training and Development* and *Human Resource Management* continue to flourish and indicate a lack of boundary convergence (see also Werner 2014).

Debates about whether one occupational area in any field should be regarded as a sub-set of another are also reflected in literature that examines the *associational positioning* of emergent professional groups (Higgins et al. 2025). Addressing these debates, institutional theory describes corporate professions as rooted within macro-level socio-economic systems where cross-national convergence of professional identity and practice inexorably occurs. This approach suggests that field boundaries, not just in HR but across different professional groups in areas such as health and social care, legal and criminal justice, and in people management, increasingly intersect and converge (Abbott and Meerabeau 2020; Givati et al. 2018; Kessler et al. 2015; van Bochove and Oldenhof 2020). Contrasting approaches to associational positioning direct attention to differential power relationships that support distinctive knowledge and professional boundary claims in occupational fields such as education, librarianship, information technology, financial services and para-legal professions resulting in success for some 'professionalization projects' and failure for others (Higgins et al. 2025; Steinmetz 2011).

However, new professional areas of expertise in HR, and in other corporate and organizational professional domains (e.g., the legal profession, and in health and social care), continue to emerge, suggesting that professional boundaries are more fluid and indistinct than might be inferred from binary explanations of the success or failure of professionalization projects. Yet there is a notable lack of research into how professional boundaries change over time. This is an important gap as professional boundary claims are the basis from which individuals navigate organizational challenges, influence their economic positioning, and achieve access to social capital and professional status (Comeau-Vallée and Langley 2020). Therefore, the principal research question we address is: what are the processes by which different HR-related occupational or professional boundaries are established, develop and change?

2.1 | Analytical Lens: Professional Field Becoming, Doing and Relating

To address this research question, we draw on the analytical lens of professional field becoming, doing and relating (Anteby et al. 2016) which provides a basis from which to consider different features of professional field boundaries and their change over time. The 'becoming' lens draws principally on conceptions of the emergence of occupational boundary claims

(Anteby et al. 2016). For example, while acknowledging that differences exist, Higgins et al. (2025) frame the 'becoming' of HR professional boundary claims, in the UK, China, and Hong Kong, as an outcome of macro-level institutional developments across different corporate and national policy contexts. Alternatively, conflict-based accounts of the way professional bodies are established focus attention on power struggles, competition and differential resources deployment. This suggests that the success of the professionalization projects of some groups occurs at the expense of groups in other adjacent fields (Anderson et al. 2021; Bennett and Silva 2011; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). From an historical perspective and focussing specifically on the HR field in the UK, for example, Slater (2019) describes processes enacted by professional organizations in the adjacent HRM and L&D fields directed towards claims for *boundary separation* from each other as well as from other emerging corporate fields through extended attempts to achieve social status and standing.

The 'doing' lens conceptualized by Anteby et al. (2016) refers to the ways in which specific frameworks of practice, ethical standards and expert-level knowledge form the basis for occupational or professional groups' societal or corporate positioning. 'Doing a profession' is not so much a style of behaviour or practice, rather the conceptual term refers to the services, ethical standards, and expertise that are provided and the contribution that is claimed through temporally located organizational or societal engagement, both individually and collectively (Kemmis 2010). In recent HR scholarly literature, critics have argued that engagement and agency by HR professionals in corporately situated contexts has been overlooked in research and theorizing (Harney and Collings 2021; Vincent et al. 2020). However, the 'doing' of HR is an important feature of the process by which professional boundaries are sustained and changed (P. Evans 2019; Lindberg and Rantatalo 2015; Raelin 2024). In a context of socio-economic and cultural change, including increased global wealth disparity, unprecedented technological disruption, and substantially changed patterns of migration and immigration, the 'doing' lens focuses attention on the ways in which the "palette of HR options" (Harney and Collings 2021, 3) changes and on the consequences for professional field boundary adjustment of the emergence of new frameworks of expertise, such as human capital analytics, talent management, and workforce planning (Sheppard et al. 2020).

The 'relating' lens focuses on how different occupational or professional groups advance, defend, or maintain social or corporate influence separately and in combination and the effect that this has on boundary claims. For example, substantial cross-disciplinary relational and co-operative work is evident in studies of medical and nursing professional groups in the UK as an emerging professional group, Advanced Nurse Practitioners, have achieved some regulatory responsibility for medical prescribing, a function previously limited in law to members of the medical profession (Timmons et al. 2023). In the HR field, innovations in smart technology, radical changes to forms of work and employment relationships, for example, remote working and gig-work, have challenged and blurred boundary distinctions between professional work traditionally within the HR

domain such as employee engagement and employee development, and other areas of professional practice focussed on workforce influence and organizational branding (Morris et al. 2019). Such a blurring of boundaries requires continual relational work by professional associations as a basis for collaboration and cooperation to achieve profession-specific or cross-professional shared objectives or interests (Ma 2023; Ulrich and Dulebohn 2015). This relationship work calls for attention to how networks of influence form or decay, and how collaboration and cooperation are consequential for negotiating fluid, rather than fixed, boundaries between professional groups (Comeau-Vallée and Langley 2020; Tyskbo 2023).

3 | Methodology

To understand and explain how HR professional boundaries emerge, are sustained, and change over time, our study adopts a qualitative process research approach (Berends and Deken 2021). Our qualitative research design was a single, bounded field case study (Ragin 1992; Vold Hansen 2022) to allow focus on the contextually situated dynamics of the HRM and L&D professional groups within the HR field in the specific 100 year time period between 1914 and 2014. Our aim was to conceptualize HR related professional boundary claim processes through empirically connecting narratives, concepts and competing theories. The choice of the CIPD as a single, historically located case is appropriate for two reasons. First, the UK provides one of the earliest historical examples of an HR professionalization project (Higgins et al. 2025). Second, the UK is the first country where HR professional boundaries encompass both Human Resource Management (HRM) and Learning and Development (L&D) (Gillon et al. 2014; Stewart and Sambrook 2012). This is distinct from other national jurisdictions where professional bodies for Learning and Development, sometimes referred to as Human Resource Development (HRD) or Talent Development, operate separately from the HRM professional body. In the USA, for example, although Personnel Management as a field emerged earlier than in the UK (US Office of Personnel Management [OPM], n.d), the Association for Talent Development represents a distinct professional field for L&D that is separate from the USA HRM Professional Association, the Society for Human Resource Management (Obedgiu 2017).

3.1 | Data Sources

We used three main data sources, summarized in Table 1. First, publicly available sources in the form of website information, published papers and books to chart the emergence and development of HRM and L&D associations and occupational groups in the UK. We consulted the CIPD website and, for reference to the UK context in relation to international developments, we further consulted the websites of the US Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the USA based Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), the USA based Association for Talent Development (previously the American Society for Training and Development); the World Federation of People Management Associations (WFPMA), and the International Federation of Training and Development Organizations (IFTDO). These provided corporate historical descriptions of the foundation and subsequent institutional development of various L&D and HRM occupational groups and associations in the UK and elsewhere.

We consulted books published between 1960 and 2019 about HRM or L&D associations and practices, for example Niven (1967) and Twining (1999) which drew on Perry (1976), a book currently located in the Open University Archive, as well as DeSimone and Harris (1998) and Slater (2019). In addition, we consulted contemporaneous and historically focussed journal articles by Sharpe (1979a), (1979b), Hicks and Brown (1963), Howells (1980), Pitfield (1983), Iles (1994), Kaufman (2001), R. Evans (2009), Emmott (2015), Stewart et al. (2015), Ruona (2016), Obedgiu (2017) and Harrison et al. (2021).

The Warwick University Modern Records Centre archive collection provides sources that confirm the emergence of the CIPD from earlier predecessor organizations for example, the London Association of Welfare Workers/London branch of the Central Association of Welfare Workers (later the Welfare Workers' Institute), the Institute of Labour Management and the Institute of Personnel Management. However, it contains no archive records of the Institute of Training and Development or other Learning and Development associations.

Sources accessed through the CIPD Archive, both published and unpublished records spanning the period 1953–1998, comprised

TABLE 1 | Data sources.

Data sources	Analysis
Publicly available secondary sources in the form of website information, books and contemporaneous and historically focussed published papers, that provide evidence of the emergence and development of HRM and L&D professional associations	Charting of the chronological development of professional associations in the HR field. These included groups and associations focussed on HRM and L&D.
CIPD archive—following the merger of the IPM and the ITD and their predecessor organizations, some records from both organizations are deposited in this archive, although more are extant relating to the IPM.	Sources examined focused on 1976–2004 representing the years during which merger discussions were occurring and formal boundary claims in the 10 years following the merger.
Solicited discursive source material from three leading figures with first-hand knowledge of the HRM & L&D fields over more than 30 years and gathered in 2014	Narrative analysis of memories and reflections of experienced and long-standing HR field-based experts who had first-hand knowledge and experience of the many professional associations operating at the time of the merger and thereafter.

our second form of data. These sources provided information about relational interactions and institutional relationships between occupational and professional groups in the adjacent occupational fields of HRM and L&D from 1953 until the immediate years following the merger of the Institute of Training and Development (ITD) and the Institute of Personnel Management (IPM) in 1994. The principal sources accessed were 10 boxes of policy related documents and correspondence from the ITD collection (1961–1987) relating to Vocational Education and Training with the Scottish Education Department, Ministry of Labour, and Department of Employment and Productivity. In addition correspondence and documents from the IPM/ITD Merger archive collection (1971–1994) were scrutinized, including an IPD/ITO Report from a Joint Working Party on closer cooperation and a subsequent ITO/IPM Report on a proposed (but ultimately unsuccessful) amalgamation (1976–1977), and subsequent later IPM/ITD Joint Proposals to form a new Institute, and associated correspondence from 1993 to 4 leading up to the merger in 1994. Twelve boxes of correspondence and documents from the IPD collection (1995–2004) were also scrutinized focussing particularly on the years immediately following the merger process. Documents scrutinized included an IPD ‘Results Through Transition’ report (1995–96); documents relating to the development of IPD Professional Standards (1995–1998) and IPD Annual Reports 1996–1997 & 1997–1998. Sixty-six documents from these archive collections were analysed in detail ranging in date from 1953 to 1999.

Solicited oral source materials represent the third form of data. These data were gathered and transcribed in 2014, one hundred years since the emergence of the first HRM association and 20 years since the formal merger of the IPM and the ITD. These oral source transcripts comprised the memories and reflections of three leading HRM and L&D figures, each experienced and of long-standing in the HR field and with first-hand knowledge of HRM and L&D professional association relationships both before and after the merger. These data were obtained from a symposium in 2014 that focussed on the relationship between the adjacent fields of HR and L&D. Each expert had been involved in different ways and in different parts of the emergent HR field ‘at the time’ and ‘over time’ (Suddaby 2016). Two of the three figures (N1 and N2) were academic professors with first-hand experience of the professional association’s merger in 1994. The third figure (N3) was a senior employee of the merged organization (by then the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development). At this event, each expert, from their own perspective, was invited to narrate their unique ‘kind of knowledge’ of the relationship between HRM and L&D, reflecting their distinctive positioning, memories and experiences. These solicited reflections represent 58 minutes of oral content and 26 pages (8012 words) of transcript content. Each of the narrators consented to their reflections being recorded, transcribed and analysed for scholarly purposes. ‘In the moment’ the identities of the speakers were known to those who attended the symposium, however speaker anonymity was a feature of the ethical consent granted in relation to any subsequent wider research publication. A noteworthy feature is that all three accounts were gathered at the same event, where each expert heard the others speak. This resulted in each subsequent narration being in part a response to, and at times finessing, the

content or sequential structuring of previous narrations. It is important to acknowledge that accounts gathered independently of each other might have differed. However, the opportunity for these experts to introduce nuances to highlight differences in their own view from that of others provided valuable insights into variations that would not otherwise be evident.

3.2 | Data Analysis

We first carried out a descriptive chronological charting of the emergence of HRM and L&D related professional groups and associations during the 20th century. This showed the emergence and proliferation of distinctive professional associations and scholarly bodies all claiming to represent these adjacent occupational groups in what was to become known as the HR field from the early 20th century onwards. The events in our chronological charting were then grouped in relation to societal, structural and political contexts of the time (Dawson 2014; Langley 1999) to assess when and how actions, decisions and processes enacted in one period influenced processes affecting professional boundary claims in subsequent periods. This periodization process (Figure 1a,b,c,d) showed the *emergence* of occupational groups during the first half of the 20th century followed by *proliferation*, then boundary *skirmishing* followed by formal *consolidation* of the HRM and L&D fields in the second half of the 1990s. This consolidation of HRM and L&D occurred through a merger in 1994 between the Institute of Training and Development (ITD) and the Institute of Personnel Management (IPM).

CIPD archive sources were then analysed to probe more deeply into the processes, events, activities and choices that informed the formal boundary combination of the newly formed Institute of Personnel and Development (IPD) and the redefinition of HR field boundary claims in the UK in which L&D was presented as a sub-set of HRM rather than as an adjacent and independent field. Analysis of qualitative oral source data collected at the symposium in 2014 provided further description of processes that followed the merging of the professional fields. A narrative analysis process (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2015) was used for the oral source data, involving data review by all authors independently before comparing their analyses. Themes on which there was broad agreement or substantial overlap were retained. Divergent and exceptional themes were discussed to ensure that important insights were not excluded.

4 | Findings

In this section we summarize the four main findings from the analysis of our sources. These relate to professional association emergence and proliferation, associational boundary skirmishing, formal boundary consolidation and also field boundary change and development. With regard to professional association emergence, the descriptive, chronological charting process, summarized in Figure 1 indicates the variety of distinctive associations and organizations that emerged in the UK from the early 20th century onwards. Taken as a whole, Figure 1 illustrates reciprocal contextual influence across the events in both columns. For clarity, this figure also presents titles of the

(a)

Period 1: The Emergence of HR Occupational Groups

Emerging political acceptance of the importance of workers' welfare (Booth and Rowntree Reports into poverty, working conditions and unemployment)	Welfare Workers Association (WWA) formed (1913)
Reforms to improve Social Security support to workers: Pensions, Labour Exchanges, National Insurance (1906-14)	
1 st World War and focus on post-war reconstruction School leaving age raised to fourteen (1918) Growth of trades unions (1900-1918)	WWA becomes Institute of Welfare Workers (IWW) (1919) Association for the Advancement of Commercial Education (AACE) formed (1919)
Rise in influence of the Labour Party (1930s) 2 nd World War Coalition Government (1940-45)	Institute of Labour Management (ILM) replaces Institute of Welfare Workers (1931)
Percy Report into Higher Technological Education (1945) Barlow Report into Scientific Manpower (1946) to address over-concentration of industry and population in the UK	ILM reformed as Institute of Personnel Management (IPM) (1946)

(b)

Period 2: Professional Association Proliferation

White Paper on Technical Education (1956) proposed a restructuring of technical and occupational education	AACE reformed as British Association for Commercial and Industrial Education (BACIE) (1953)
McMeeking Report on Further Education and Commerce (1959) into Further Education and the needs of business and industry	Sundridge Park Management Centre opened (1956) Ashridge College opened (1959)
Robbins Report / Higher Education White Paper (1963) expansion of Higher Education and Colleges of Advanced Technology	Failure of merger discussions between IPM and BACIE (1963)
Industrial Training Act (1964) shifted government policy from voluntarist to mandatory occupational, vocational training and established Industrial Training Boards to set standards for vocational training	British Institute of Training Officers established (1964)
Crosland Review/ White Paper on Technical Education (1966) recommended expanding technical education and the establishment of polytechnics	Henley Management Centre opened (1968) IPM strategy to achieve Royal Chartered Institution status commences (1968)

FIGURE 1 | (a) UK HR associations—emergence, development, and change (1913–2013): Period 1. (b) UK HR associations—emergence, development, and change (1913–2013): Period 2. (c) UK HR associations—emergence, development, and change (1913–2013): Period 3. (d) UK HR associations—emergence, development, and change (1913–2013): Period 4.

different associations in bold (plus an acronym where relevant) for their first mention. Subsequent appearances use acronyms only. This figure shows how the four discrete socio-economic periods within the 100 year time-frame of our study, provided the context in which two distinctive occupational groups (HRM and L&D) emerged. The occupational field that would eventually be labelled as HRM began in 1913 as the Welfare Worker's

Association, subsequently becoming the Central Association of Welfare Workers in 1917, the Institute of Industrial Welfare Workers in 1924 (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development [CIPD] 2023). Its renaming as the Institute of Labour Management in 1931 (A. Williams 2010; A. P. Williams 2012; Warwick Modern Records Centre, n.d.) indicates the increasing shift of emphasis towards labour and industrial relations

Temporal context

Groups, Associations, Organizations and related events

(c)

Period 3: Boundary Skirmishes

Business and Technology Council (BTEC) established as an awarding body for work-related vocational qualifications (1973-4)
Manpower Services Commission established to coordinate employment and training services, vocational training and retraining programmes (1973)

Trade Union and Labour Relations Act (1974) replaced Industrial Relations Act (1971) reflecting the "Social Contract" between the government and trade unions

Merger discussions between IPM and British Institute of Training Officers (unsuccessful) (1972-1979).

British Institute of Training Officers renamed as **Institution of Training Officers (ITO)** (to reflect its International membership)

Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) to encourage integration of vocational and technical education into mainstream school curricula (1982)

ITO becomes **Institute of Training and Development (ITD)** (1980)

Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE) introduced to offer college-based vocational training and work experience (1983)
National Council of Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) introduced a national framework for vocational qualifications (1986)
Employment Acts 1980, 1982, 1988, 1990 introduced restrictions on forms of trade union and industrial relations activities

Training and Enterprise Councils launched to manage publicly funded training programmes and promote SME development (1990)

University Forum for HRD (UFHRD), initially the Euston Road Group formed (1991)

Colleges of Technology and Polytechnics granted permission to apply for University status (1992)

Temporal context

Groups, Associations, Organizations and related events

(d)

Period 4: Mergers and Institutional Consolidation

Higher Education policy focus on employability.
Further and Higher Education Act (1992) widens access to professional and vocational education provision in Universities

IPM/ITD merger proposals published (1992)

Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Act (1993) tightened regulations on trades union activities and administration

Institute of Personnel and Development (IPD) formed (1994). IPD absorbs BACIE's commercial operations.

Dearing Review of Higher Education (1997) recommends widening HR participation, restructuring the funding system and expanding degree level and sub-degree level courses

IPD Professional Qualifications Framework (1995)

Chartered Professional Association Status achieved (2000), IPD becomes **Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)**

Higher Education tuition fees introduced (1998)

CIPD Professional Standards published (2009)

Policies of marketization of Further and Higher Education and Vocational Training (from 2008)

FIGURE 1 | (Continued)

thereafter (Kaufman 2001). In parallel, following the First World War, distinctive professional associations for vocational training also emerged, such as the Association for the Advancement of Commercial Education, formed in 1919, later renamed the British Association for Commercial and Industrial Education (BACIE) in 1953.

Figure 1 also illustrates how the proliferation of vocational training bodies was further prompted by the policy consensus in the UK in the 1950s and 1960s about the importance of vocational education and training in addition to 'standalone' commercial management training colleges that offered advanced vocational and management training, for example, Sundridge

Park, Henley Management College and Ashridge (Ashridge House 2022; Henley Business School, n.d.; Smallwood 1977). This proliferation continued through the 1980s and 1990s despite the creation of the National Council of Vocational Qualifications (Twining 1999), to better coordinate and manage services offered by L&D occupational groups (Howells 1980). In the 1990s, as a further consequence of UK government prioritization of encouraging professional and vocational education, specialized Masters courses in HRD were developed and offered through Colleges of Technology and Polytechnics increasingly encouraged by UK government policy (Sambrook and Stewart 1998; Zachmeier and Cho 2014) alongside the emergence of a further L&D focussed grouping, the University Forum for Human Resource Development (UFHRD). In parallel, industrial policies to promote more efficient management of industrial or labour relations (Eilbert 1959; Gospel 2009; Kochan and Capelli 1984; Thornthwaite 2012; Tyson 2006) provided a context from which, distinctively from the L&D field, industrial relations and the management of collective bargaining became the 'central core' of HRM work (Kaufman 2001, 344).

Our second finding is of sustained boundary skirmishing and 'occupational upgrading' manoeuvres carried out by groups in both separate HRM and L&D fields between 1963 and 1994 (Slater 2019, 19). In 1963, negotiations between the Institute of Personnel Management and the British Association for Commercial and Industrial Education to establish an occupational group for Training Officers were unsuccessful, providing the context for the formation of yet another separate group, the British Institution of Training Officers (ITO) (Hicks and Brown 1963). Sources also show that L&D professional bodies resisted what were regarded as field boundary incursions by the HRM field (Slater 2019) for 30 years. For example, unpublished CIPD archival sources provide evidence of a failed merger attempt by the IPM and ITO in 1977. Subsequently postgraduate level L&D professional education programmes were developed involving collaboration between the renamed ITO, the Institute of Training and Development (ITD), the National Council for Vocational Qualifications and the newly formed University Forum for HRD (see also Reid et al. 2004; Stewart and Sambrook 2012). Alongside this, oral source evidence from two symposium sources, N1 and N2 make reference to initiatives in the L&D field to "develop journals with HRD in the title and ... developing [links] to the United States and elsewhere" (N1 transcript, 2014). During this period, the first UK Professors of Human Resource Development were appointed and scholarly and professional conferences in L&D were organized (Iles 1994; Stewart and Sambrook 2012).

Sources indicate, however, that these L&D field initiatives did not deter the HRM association, the IPM from seeking to incorporate the L&D field within its professional boundary scope. For example, IPM Annual Reports from 1970, 1972, 1974, 1975, 1979, held in the CIPD archive, refer to the development of collaborative relationships between the IPM and organizations such as the UK Training Service Agency, the International Federation of Training and Development Organizations (IFTDO) and the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD). IPM sponsorship of a new UK academic journal, *Human Resource Management Journal*, with a remit to publish

research into training and development and management development alongside issues of "recruitment and selection, discipline, participation and involvement and management-trade union relations" (Sisson 1990, 1) further illustrates the boundary expansion strategy of the HRM professional body.

The third finding from our analysis relates with the outcome of this associational boundary skirmishing. Formal boundary enclosure of the L&D field by the HRM professional body occurred in 1994, when the numerically larger Institute of Personnel Management (55,000 members) enacted a formal merger with the numerically smaller Institute of Training and Development (20,000 members). The merged and renamed association, the Institute of Personnel and Development (IPD), then sought to consolidate and legitimize these expanded boundary claims in the UK by seeking professional recognition through the award by the UK government of Chartered Institute status. Chartered Institute status was achieved in 2000 (UK Register of Charities 2025), meaning that the merged Professional association was granted (professional) regulatory power to establish standards of competence and professional conduct for its members and to provide accredited professional education (Slater 2019). Following the achievement of Chartered Institute status, the renamed Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), further sought to legitimize its formal boundary claims by publishing HR professional standards in which L&D was included as a sub-set within the HRM professional field in the UK (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development [CIPD] 2025; Wang and Stewart 2018). This third finding of formal boundary consolidation, therefore, suggests success for the HRM field at the expense of the L&D field. Sources further show how HRM Postgraduate level professional education provision expanded in the years following the formal consolidation whereas L&D focussed Postgraduate professional education programme provision substantially declined (Harrison et al. 2021).

Figure 2 illustrates and summarizes these first three findings. For clarity abbreviated organizational titles are included in Figure 2 but the full names are given in Figure 1. This flowchart illustrates the emergence of two distinctive occupational boundary claims (HRM and L&D), indicating the macro-level societal and policy contexts within which these processes occurred. This process flowchart illustrates features of boundary skirmishing between various L&D professional groups in the second half of the 20th century and associational positioning processes enacted by the IPM to incorporate L&D as a sub-set of HRM. It further illustrates the formal merger of the two adjacent professional bodies in 1994 followed by the achievement of a UK Royal Charter and the publication of Professional Standards in which L&D was positioned as a sub-set of the HRM field.

Our fourth finding, which draws on sources relating to the period after the formal merger is that, in spite of the formal field boundary consolidation between the L&D and HRM fields, concurrent processes of contestation, cooperation and boundary adjustment continued between HRM and L&D. The symposium contribution by N2, for example, whilst accepting that the merger was pivotal, also recounted negotiation and co-creation

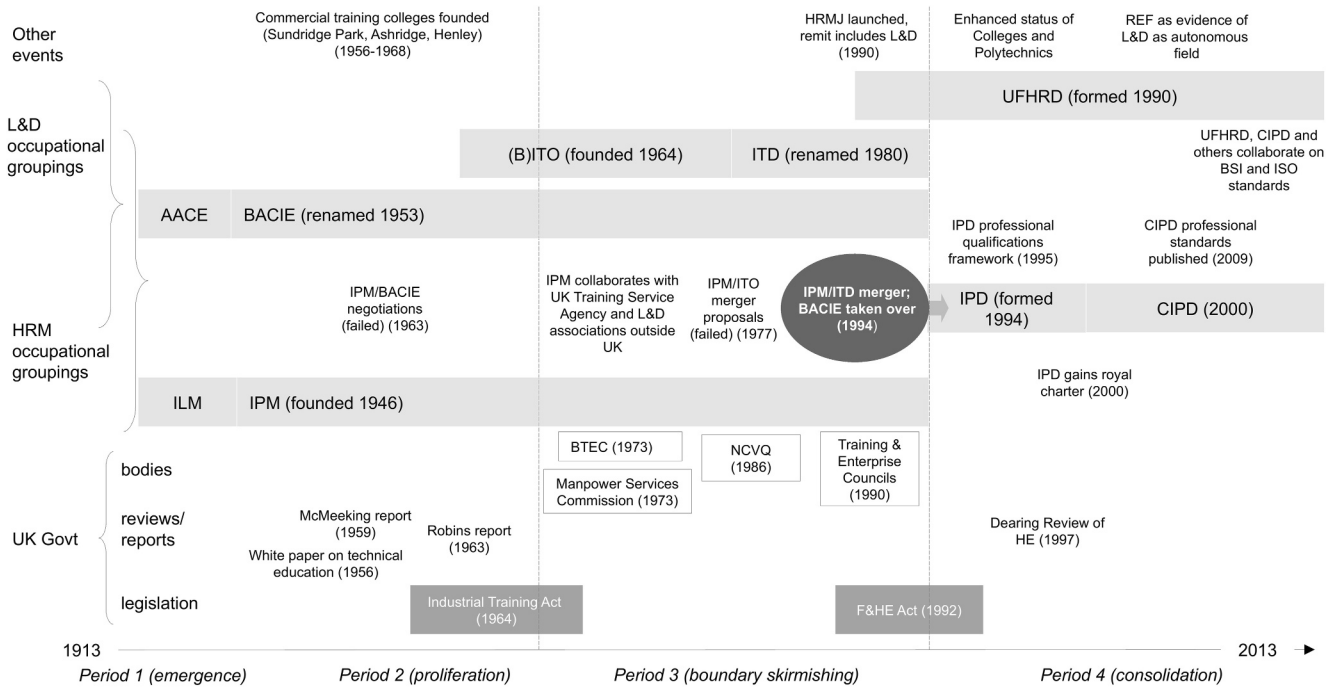


FIGURE 2 | Process flowchart: UK associations emergence, development and change 1913–2013.

processes by members of L&D groups within the newly merged Professional Association that embedded specialized L&D expertise and distinctiveness within the HR field. For example, N2 reflected that L&D specialists, through collaborative and networking processes were successful in influencing the formulation of the post-merger IPD professional education curriculum and professional standards such that specialized L&D professional education become obligatory for all HR Professional Association members: “nobody can get a [Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development] approved qualification without learning and development. So if you take that measure or indicator, provision of [L&D] education at masters level has increased [since 1994]” (N2 transcript, 2014). The third expert, N3, also reflected that interdependence and cooperation between the L&D and HRM fields after the merger led to the L&D field becoming more, rather than less, influential in HR professional work. They suggested that “the direction we’re going in is that L&D becomes the much bigger part...if there is an irreducible transformational core of HR it’s the L&D space...if you look at engagement, if you look at employee relations, reward, if you even look at service delivery there’s an [L&D] transformational way in which you can do things, it’s very much about creating change, agility, adaptability, building trust, integrity, all that kind of stuff” (N3 transcript, 2014).

Secondary sources further indicate distinctive professional field advances by both HRM and L&D fields following the merger. For example, jointly authored and edited books and journal articles within both the distinctive L&D field (e.g., McCracken and Wallace 2000; Garavan et al. 1999; Torraco and Swanson 1995) and the HRM field (e.g., Becker et al. 2001; Boxall and Purcell 2000; Lepak and Snell 1999; Ulrich 1996) indicate the persistence of distinctive field boundaries in spite of formal professional association consolidation in the UK. In addition, towards the end of our historical period of analysis (from 2011), distinctive HRM and L&D professional expertise featured

prominently in British Standards Institute (BSI) and international level (International Organization for Standardization [ISO]) processes to develop national and international standards for both HRM and L&D practice (Anderson 2017; Short and Anderson 2021).

Analysis of UK data concerning research impact drawn from the 2014 UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) assessment (Ross et al. 2020), at the end of the one-hundred year period of our analysis provides further evidence of continuing autonomous and distinctive field identities. The REF assessment is a UK specific system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions across all disciplinary specialisms. One component of this process is an assessment of the extent to which research has delivered impact through economic and social benefits. In relation to the L&D field, analysis of the 6637 qualitative case study summaries in the 2014 UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) assessment indicated that L&D professional knowledge and practice was prominent in documented applied impact across specialisms ranging from Education, Social Work and Policy through to Architecture, the Built Environment and Planning (Ross, et al., 2020; Stewart and Sambrook 2017). Therefore, in contrast with the interpretation that the L&D field ceded its distinctive expertise to the dominance of the HRM field in 1994, our fourth finding is of persistent field boundary distinctiveness in spite of formal consolidation.

5 | Discussion

The process analysis we present in this study challenges traditional binary ‘success or failure’ assumptions about professionalization projects and professional field boundary closure claims (Higgins et al. 2025; Steinmetz 2011). Both institutional theory and conflict approaches imply that, whether through convergence or through struggle and contestation, professional field

boundaries, once established, are fixed and static. Our analysis of these two adjacent fields over a 100 years period shows continual adjustment of professional field boundaries outside of formal consolidation of professional frameworks, ethical standards, and formal accreditation of professional education programmes, something so far unrecognized in the research literature.

Drawing on the analytical lens offered by Anteby et al. (2016) we argue that traditional assessments of professional field boundary claims that focus solely on associational 'becoming' take insufficient account of relational processes that continuously advance, defend, or maintain expert-level knowledge and professional practice in corporate, institutional and societal settings (Higgins et al. 2025; Kirkpatrick and Hoque 2022). Our analysis indicates that, alongside professional practice in organizational settings, sustained relational processes of network building and organization, individually and collectively, by professionals in adjacent fields (in this instance L&D and HRM) are important features of professional boundary changes over time. Our analysis shows the importance of alliance-building, co-operation and collaboration, that can benefit both distinctive professional field objectives and cross-field interests and which are important features of field boundary adjustment and change over time. We argue that such processes are especially consequential in emergent corporate professional field contexts such as HR where there is insufficient boundary closure to control entry into, and the practice of, HRM in organizational HR functional roles (Gilmore and Williams 2007; Lengnick-Hall and Aguinis 2012; Scheibmayr and Reichel 2024).

5.1 | The Concept of Symbiotic Mutualism

The analysis of our findings indicates the importance of, and interaction between, 'becoming', 'doing', and 'relating' processes (Anteby et al., 2016) and we propose a more integrated conceptualization, symbiotic mutualism, to describe how professional boundary claims change over time. Our conceptualization borrows the concept of symbiotic mutualism from the field of biology (Boucher et al. 1982). While there are precedents for applying this biological concept to other fields, such as economics (Watkins 1998) and Transactional Analysis (White 1997), and management (Obermann et al. 2020), we acknowledge a need for care when importing concepts from other fields. Our rationale for doing so here is as follows. First, as noted earlier, metaphors of contestation and struggle dominate the literature about professional field 'becoming' and assume boundary closure as fixed and static. However, analysis of our data set, spanning 10 decades, indicates that the concept of competition, whilst relevant and evident in our sources, is not sufficient to account for field boundary changes and adjustments over time. Our findings show the importance of individual and collective processes of cooperation and alliance as important features of professional field interdependence or 'relating'. These relational interactions are important for understanding how field boundary claims change over time but they are under-theorized in the research literature. Second, the metaphor of professional association 'boundary campaigns', struggle, resistance, and convergence focus on professional fields as individual entities. Our analysis indicates the importance of conceptualizing processes involving new forms of

'doing' professional practice within and between adjacent professional fields in the context of, and as features of, the wider *professional ecosystem* in order to understand and explain professional boundary change and adjustment.

The concept of symbiosis, originating in biology, describes how some species are dependent on other species to sustain their activities while assisting their ability to adapt to changes in external conditions. In this case HRM and L&D are analogous to species. There are three forms of the biological conception of symbiosis (Leung and Poulin 2008), illustrated in Figure 3, in which the unit of analysis, the eco-system, is indicated by the dotted rectangle. In the case of parasitism, a dependent species benefits from a host species ('+' in Figure 3) but the host is harmed or depleted ('-' in Figure 3) as a result. In commensalism, the dependent species benefits but the host is unaffected ('=' in Figure 3). In mutualism, which we suggest is the applicable form in the context discussed here, neither species is necessarily a host, and both species benefit from their collaboration. We can find no evidence in our data that L&D has benefited to the detriment of HRM, so reject 'parasitism'; and we contend that HRM has benefited from L&D—as indicated, for example, by N3 regarding L&D as an essential component of its professional standards—hence our designation of 'mutualism' rather than 'commensalism'.

This concept recognises that processes of both divergence, through contestation, and convergence through adaption explain how distinctive areas of expertise remain important and viable in increasingly intersecting professional field boundaries. For example, our data indicate that L&D associations resisted the ambitions of boundary consolidation by the HRM field for at least 30 years. However, after the merger occurred, sustained relational processes of network building, collaboration and cooperation provided the basis for adaptation, interaction and distinctiveness with benefits for both adjacent fields and across the HR field more widely.

The concept of symbiotic mutualism we propose recognises that distinctive professional boundaries, once established, can remain in spite of intersections and consolidations, providing the basis for mutual sustainability within the corporate professionalization ecosystem. The concept does not negate or ignore instances of competition between adjacent fields. Nor does it overlook the importance of cooperation and collaboration within adjacent or linked professional and occupational groups, whose expertise is distinct and yet interdependent. It indicates that the metaphor of professional association 'boundary campaigns' is not sufficient to explain professional field development. Instead, it indicates the utility of the metaphors of adaption and mutuality for sustainability. This symbiotic mutualism conceptualization further aligns with contemporary assessments of increasing requirements for innovation in the 'doing' of HR practices as contemporary corporate and economic imperatives increasingly blur boundary distinctions between professional work traditionally within the HR domain and in other corporate professional fields (Bucher et al. 2016; DiBenigno and Kellogg 2014; Farchi et al. 2023). In such contexts excessive competition and contestation is perceived negatively and associated with dysfunctional outcomes whereas collaboration and cooperation are regarded as necessary to

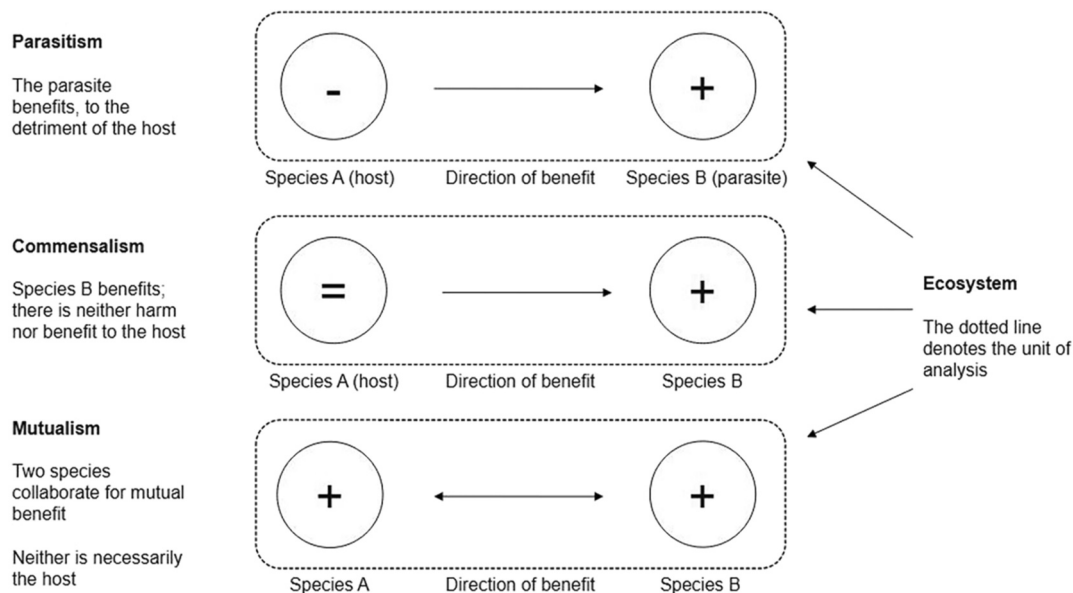


FIGURE 3 | The concept of symbiosis.

achieve profession-specific or cross-professional shared objectives or interests (Anteby et al. 2016; Heusinkveld et al. 2018).

5.2 | Theoretical Contributions

In addition to the novel conceptualization of symbiotic mutualism developed here, an important contribution to theory of this paper is the identification that corporate professional boundary development is a continuously dynamic and fluid process, meaning that professional boundaries are themselves continuously subject to adjustment. This challenges notions of fixed and static professional boundary closure, explained as an outcome of contests for competitive advantage that pervade current theories (e.g., Evetts 2003; Hodgson et al. 2016; Noordeggraaf 2015; Scheibmayr and Reichel 2024). Instead, this study connects professional boundary legitimacy with processes of continual negotiation and adjustment whereby professional boundaries are maintained and adjusted in corporate and macro-level settings as new areas of expertise and specialization emerge in institutional and policy contexts. Grounded in the analytical lens of Anteby et al. (2016) an important contribution to theory is our identification of the importance of networks of influence, collaboration and cooperation operating alongside instances of competition and contestation as the basis for understanding and explaining professional boundary change and development.

Our study also contributes specifically to theories of HR professionalization. Nadiv and Kuna (2025), in this journal, identify important navigation processes by HR practitioners seeking to reconcile the expectations of HR professionalization with organizational and corporate priorities. They further highlight the importance for HR professionalism of the navigation of work relations in collaborative settings across organizational boundaries (see also Kinnie and Swart 2020). Our study goes further and identifies relational processes between professionals in adjacent and newly emergent specialist fields as an important component of professional boundary adjustment and adaptation.

This contribution to theorization of HR professionalization is particularly relevant in a macro-level context where new imperatives such as global migration, sustainability, and digital transformation increasingly impact on HR professional practice and introduce new stakeholders and fields of influence including what Nicklich et al. (2020, 376) refer to as “neighbouring occupational groups”. Trullen et al. (2020) identify the importance of cross-disciplinary relational practices as a feature of effective HRM implementation processes and Budhwar et al. (2026), in this journal, identify the importance of interdisciplinary rather than multidisciplinary theorization for HRM scholarship. Our paper extends this further, indicating that relational processes across and between adjacent and newer professional fields of practice are consequential for research and theorization of HR professional boundary development. This, we argue, makes research into the barriers and opportunities presented by cross-field or cross-disciplinary working a priority for further theorization of HR professional boundary development.

5.3 | Limitations and Further Research

We acknowledge that the single field case we analyse in this paper is a limitation. However, the concept we propose adds weight to the call of Adams (2015) for more research attention to international and comparative research into professional field emergence and field boundary claims in different geopolitical settings. It further suggests research inquiry into professional field boundaries as novel practices emerge in response to new imperatives such as sustainability, social responsibility, digital transformation and labour supply chain transformation. For example, research into cross-field processes of collaboration and competition could identify and examine how new areas of expertise (e.g., talent management and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) management) have emerged and the consequences of this for professional field boundary development within broader processes of ecological-institutional change (Heusinkveld et al. 2018). In addition, research to examine how macro-level disruptors such as digital technology and algorithmic decision-

making affect professional boundary development and the emergence of new occupations and fields of expertise (Sako et al. 2022). The implications of these issues for HR professionalism are well represented in practitioner and consultancy literature (e.g., Capelli and Rogovsky 2023; Oxford Management Centre, n.d.) but scant research into the consequences for professional field boundaries has so far emerged in the scholarly literature base.

5.4 | Practical Implications

This analysis indicates the practical imperative of openness to flex and renegotiation in relation to professional field boundary claims. We propose that adjacent professional fields can remain complete and viable, and even flourish, in spite of intersections, innovations and consolidations that may be required in a context where new areas of practice and professional specialism are developed. Professional associations in the HR field, therefore, require the confidence to collaborate and adapt as the means by which they can sustain professional contributions in functional, organizational and societal contexts.

We identify three implications of the concept of symbiotic mutualism for HR professional associations. First, the concept of symbiotic mutualism provides a useful way from which adjacent professional fields can develop relational practices to enhance and sustain the social capital and status of their members within fluid corporate, functional and societal contexts. This concept indicates the practical importance of interaction, collaboration, negotiation and co-creation with adjacent or newer professional fields of practice. Second, linked with this point, HR associations should encourage members in corporate settings to proactively engage in cross-field or cross-disciplinary teamworking as a basis from which their distinctive knowledge and practice can inform or lead organizational or sector-wide change and development processes. This implication, however, requires professional and occupational organizations and associations to be open to adjustment of their boundary claims, and continual review of their professional formation and development processes. Third, processes of interaction and co-creation can challenge professional values and norms. Therefore, in fields such as HR where boundary closure is not fully supported by regulation or educational and professional accreditation, there is a need to prioritize ethical standards of practice within professional education processes so that HR practitioners, whatever their specialist field, are equipped to advocate for, and defend important professional and ethical values and standards.

6 | Conclusion

In the UK, after a period of 80 years during which time the separate and distinctive occupational fields of L&D and HRM had come into being, the merger of the ITD and IPM professional associations in 1994 led to assumptions that one field (L&D) should be considered a subset of the other (HRM). However, distinctive professional boundary claims between these fields are established and accepted in other jurisdictions. Our analysis of the 20-year period following the formal merger, from 1994–2014 casts doubt on the assumption that formal

boundary consolidation represents professional field boundary closure.

The primary contribution of our examination of the HR professional field over this time frame is the concept of symbiotic mutualism. Our second contribution, relevant to professionalization more generally, is to challenge the notion that professionalization projects result in fixed and static field boundary outcomes. Although competition and struggle are features of professional field boundary claims, our analysis indicates that simultaneous and continual processes of interdependence, cooperation and alliance-building underpin active co-construction and adjustment of field boundaries with benefit for each field. The third contribution challenges the assumption that professional associations, both established and emergent, are competing individual entities. By applying the concept of symbiosis, the unit of analysis becomes the professional field ecosystem. In identifying the importance of relational processes across and between adjacent fields of practice (in this case the HRM and L&D professional fields) our analysis indicates the importance of ‘neighbouring occupational groups’ as well as new and emergent specialist fields of practice for theorizing HR professional boundary development within the corporate ecosystem.

Research is needed to identify how the concept of symbiotic mutualism can be applied to professional boundary claims in other national contexts and in relation to other corporate fields of expertise, noting that in some jurisdictions processes may occur at different speeds and over different time frames from the temporal context we have identified in this study. However, in a context where HR professional associations and the various professional fields that they comprise must navigate challenges such as technological transformation, geopolitical reconfiguration, and new priorities relating with sustainability and socially responsible business, we contend that the concept of symbiotic mutualism provides the opportunity to theorize professional boundary adjustment over time and in specific temporal and historical contexts.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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