

Breaking the Boardroom Barrier: Examining Strategic Competencies, Digital Savviness, Top Management Influence, and the Moderating Role of Gender on HR Representation at the Board Level in Sri Lankan Listed Public Companies

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ABSTRACT

Board-level representation of HR professionals is no longer optional in today's dynamic business landscape, but it is a strategic necessity. This research aims to investigate the strategic competencies, digital savviness, top management influence, and the moderating role of gender on HR professionals' representation at the board level in Sri Lankan listed public companies. The data was collected from the CEOs of Sri Lankan listed public companies and a dataset including 170 respondents was analysed using structural equation modelling with SmartPLS to get significant insights. The model has moderate explanatory power, explaining a significant amount of the variance in board-level HR representation ($R^2 = 0.445$). The findings show that HR representation at the board level is significantly improved by strategic competences ($\beta = 0.402$, $p < 0.001$), digital savviness ($\beta = 0.182$, $p = 0.007$), and top management influence ($\beta = 0.202$, $p = 0.002$). However, the moderating effect of gender did not have a significant impact on the correlations between these factors and HR representation on the board, suggesting that gender does not meaningfully modify the influence of these critical determinants on board inclusion.

KEYWORDS

HR on Board, Strategic Competencies, Digital Savviness, Top Management Influence, Human Resources Management

Introduction

If people are the most valuable asset of any organisation, the inclusion of Human Resource (HR) specialists in boardroom decision-making can be seen as a strategic need. Approximately one-third of the topics addressed in boardrooms pertain to human resources, which indirectly affect the financial statements (Ulrich, 2016). These subject matters include the selection, monitoring, evaluation, and management of the Top Management Team's (TMT) performance, compensation determination, succession planning, organisational culture, employee physical and cyber security, governance and compliance, mergers and acquisitions, as well as crisis management and business continuity which necessitate insights from HR professionals well-

versed in talent management, leadership, and organisational capabilities (Ulrich, 2020; Wolfe, 2020; Bruneau de la Salle & Thomas, 2021). In addition, organisations encounter increased pressure to align HR strategy with long-term corporate goals due to market competition. This synchronisation facilitates the attraction and retention of qualified workers, ensuring employee engagement and motivation to advance the company's mission by elevating the importance of the HR profession. However, despite this growing strategic relevance, HR professionals are significantly underrepresented in corporate boardrooms, even though they act as guardians of the workforce and the culture, which are considered two critical elements for the sustained success of the organisation.

Human Resources Management (HRM) has evolved from a mere support function to a strategic powerhouse, propelling organisational growth, influencing culture, and securing its position as a strategic contributor. However, the perception of organisations limits Human Resources professionals' visibility and opportunities for advancement to board roles. Many businesses neglect to recognise the strategic contributions of HR, viewing it primarily as an administrative function rather than as an essential participant in decision-making processes (McCarron, 2024). By reinforcing the same view, Longenecker et al. (2020) highlighted that HR professionals often underperform in their current positions due to the absence of value-added strategic roles, which include a lack of comprehension of fundamental business models, an inability to co-create an effective value-added HR strategy, strained relationships with senior leadership, a noticeable deficiency in emotional intelligence, and an incapacity to establish optimal HR practices and utilise technology effectively.

In recent decades, HR has been debated for a prominent place in organisations. This requires a strong strategic mindset to demonstrate HR's value and convince senior management that it is a vital business function (Mayo, 2020). This change suggests that participation at the board level is dependent on a set of skills that allow HR to perform as a board member rather than a functional specialist.

Simultaneously, they emphasised the necessity for HR professionals to synchronise their expertise with organisational strategy, performance indicators, and leadership expectations to be acknowledged as crucial contributors to company success. Accordingly, the ability to express the impact of human resources on business performance, including workforce efficiency, organisational culture, and employee engagement, has become a crucial element in the advancement of HR professionals towards achieving board membership. Accordingly, three interconnected potential areas provide a better comprehension of the journey to board representation.

First, the competencies that enable HR to contribute to strategic decision-making are one of the most essential steps HR professionals may take to reach the executive table (Longenecker & Fink, 2015; Nadiv et al., 2017). This includes financial knowledge, technical skills, data-driven decision-making, and organisational change facilitation. Second, globalisation trends require the

HRM department to adopt digitalisation to meet new organisational demands in the digital age, since digitalisation, workforce analytics, and global company integration have caused HR to become a business driver and can elevate HR from an administrative role to a board-level strategic contribution as a distinguished profession (Sripathi & Madhavaiah, 2018; Junita, 2020). Third, scholars also believe that HR professionals require the support and influence of top management to secure board positions. (Charan et al., 2015; Dwarakanath, 2019). Together, these elements offer a logical justification for how HR professionals could advance from operational to board-level responsibilities, supporting their inclusion as important components in this study.

Accordingly, this study delves into the strategic competencies, digital savviness of HR professionals and top management influence on their access to board positions and their potential to contribute to board-level decision-making. By understanding the value HR professionals bring to the table and addressing the barriers they face, organizations can unlock a powerful resource for improved governance and strategic leadership, fostering a more holistic and people-centric approach to corporate management. On the other hand, the underrepresentation of HR professionals on corporate boards represents a missed opportunity for organizations to leverage a critical skillset in strategic decision-making.

While scholars globally have thoroughly investigated various aspects of strategic competencies, digital savviness, top management influence and HR professionals' representation in board level (Milhem et al., 2024; Wash, 2023; Eliza, 2023; Lee, 2021; Nankervis et al., 2021; Mayo, 2020; Zhao, 2019; Wolfe, 2020; Al-Harazneh & Sila, 2021), prior studies have not addressed the correlations between all three factors and the representation of HR professionals on boards within a singular context. Consequently, the scarcity of significant studies on the aforementioned topic reinforces the research gap. Likewise, although scholars have debated the impact of gender on professional career advancement (Owunna et al., 2024; Fitong Ketchiwou & Dzansi, 2023; Brites et al., 2021), there are no studies on how gender moderates the relationships between strategic competencies, digital savviness, top management influence, and HR professionals' board representation. Further, the lack of studies on the subject in Sri Lanka, particularly in listed public companies, underpins the research gap based on this article.

The succeeding sections of the paper are structured as outlined below. The subsequent section of the literature review examines the key theories and empirical evidence about HR professionals at the board level, focusing on their strategic competencies, digital savviness, top management influence, and the role of gender. Following the elaboration of the method, the results will be reported. The research paper ultimately presents a discussion and conclusion.

Literature Review

Strategic Competencies (SC) and HR Professionals' Representation at Board

Level (HPRB)

Scholars contend that strategic Competencies are essential for securing a board seat (Yusoff & Armstrong, 2012) and will undoubtedly facilitate the integration of HR professionals at the board level (Ulrich et al., 2017; Shameem & Rengamani, 2018; Westover, 2024). Moreover, longitudinal studies have underscored that business acumen, financial acumen, leadership capabilities, and specialised technical skills constitute the essential strategic competencies for any professional seeking a board position (Adams et al., 2018; Jelil et al., 2019), including HR professionals (Ulrich et al., 2015; Lo et al., 2015; Geimer et al., 2017). Furthermore, Westover (2024) underscored the imperative for HR professionals to acquire an additional ability known as credibility to function as a reliable counsel to the company's management. Consequently, HR professionals must develop strategic competencies to secure the opportunity to represent the board. Thus, this study asserts that a correlation exists between strategic competencies and the representation of HR professionals at the board level, and the subsequent hypothesis arises:

H1: There is a relationship between the Strategic Competencies (SC) of Human Resources professionals and their representation at the board level (HPRB)

Digital Savviness (DS) and HR Professionals' Representation at Board Level (HPRB)

Empirical studies have established that digital proficiency is increasingly recognised as a vital criterion for HR professionals aspiring to board positions, as it enhances their credibility and visibility, allowing them to act as key contributors to overall organisational performance (Kamalakannan, 2024; Reddy, 2024; Khan & Jain, 2024). Researchers have emphasised that a technologically proficient board of directors can substantially influence a company's financial outcomes by converting IT resources into effective business results (Mathew et al., 2020; Moerel, 2021). Accordingly, digital savviness is becoming one of the most demanded skills by organizations seeking to appoint board members. (Van Peteghem et al., 2019; Valentine, 2014). As such, the second hypothesis is put forth by considering the above facts.

H2: There is a relationship between the Digital Savviness (DS) of Human Resources professionals and their representation at the board level (HPRB).

Top Management Influence (TMI) and HR Professionals' Representation at Board Level (HPRB)

Scholars have found that top management, especially CEOs, significantly influence board member selection, often acting as key decision-makers and serving as board members themselves (Abatecola & Cristofaro, 2019; Garcia-Sanchez et al, 2020). Additionally, researchers debate the extent to which new board appointments depend on demographic similarities with existing members, professional networking ties, and personal relationships with the CEO and the board members (Cai et al., 2022; Renneboog & Zhao, 2020). Similarly, top management's authority and influence greatly affect HRM

(Boada-Cuerva et al., 2019; Dwarakanath, 2019; Mirfakhar et al., 2022), and when it comes to shaping the growth of the HR profession as a strategic function, the CEO's attitude is even more influential (Kelly & Gennard, 2007; Brandl & Pohler, 2010). The Chief Human Resources Officer's (CHRO) function is predominantly determined by the CEO, and the significance of the HR department is highly contingent upon the CEO's perspective (Boada-Cuerva et al., 2019; Charan et al., 2015). Accordingly, the third hypothesis is constructed as mentioned below.

H3: There is a relationship between Top Management Influence (TMI) and Human Resources professionals' representation at the board level (HPRB).

Moderating Effect of Gender on Strategic Competencies (SC) and HR Professionals' Representation at Board Level (HPRB)

Longitudinal research indicates that men predominantly occupy corporate directorships, whereas women are markedly underrepresented (Lewellyn & Muller-Kahle, 2020; Wahid, 2019; Smith & Parrotta, 2018). Researchers ascribe this to the perceived deficiency of women in financial literacy, business expertise, and managerial competencies (Walt & Ingley, 2003; Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014). Furthermore, studies indicate that women frequently obtain board positions through networking rather than professional qualifications (Burgess & Tharenou, 2002; Rose, 2007). The prevailing belief suggests that a candidate's gender may influence their likelihood of being nominated to a board of directors, regardless of their requisite strategic competencies. Considering these facts, the fourth hypothesis is established:

H4: Gender moderates the relationship between Strategic Competencies (SC) and Human Resources Professionals' Representation at the board level (HPRB)

Moderating Effect of Gender on Digital Savviness (DS) and HR Professionals' Representation at Board Level (HPRB)

Researchers contend that gender does not correlate with digital proficiency (Suri & Sharma, 2013; Qazi et al., 2021), yet a notable gender discrepancy in the utilisation and accessibility of information technology persists, especially in developing nations (Acilar & Saebø, 2023). Shahbaz (2020) determined that males exhibit greater interest in aspects of digitalisation, such as data analytics, which enhance job efficiency, whilst females are less persuaded of its efficacy. On the same note, Oggero et al. (2020) highlighted that, historically, men have derived greater advantages than women from technical progress in the workplace, including enhanced prestige and remuneration, whereas women's engagement with technology has often been characterised by more routine and unskilled tasks. Consequently, it may be inferred that gender may influence the selection of persons for board positions based on their degree of digital savviness. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis was formulated.

H5: Gender moderates the relationship between Digital Savviness (DS) and Human Resources Professionals' Representation at the board level (HPRB)

Moderating Effect of Gender on Top Management Influence (TMI) and HR Professionals' Representation at Board Level (HPRB)

Longitudinal studies have established that the selection of women for director boards is generally dependent on their enduring relationships with other directors and the influence of the CEO (Selvadurai et al., 2020; Allemand et al., 2022). Likewise, women persist in facing prejudice in their pursuit of board positions due to the prevailing views of senior management towards them (Knippen et al., 2019; Srinidhi et al., 2020). Srinidhi et al. (2020) indicated that independent female directors are more proficient in altering board norms and improving governance compared to their male counterparts. Therefore, the inclusion of female directors considerably influences board processes and governance results, potentially posing issues for CEOs who often hold a dominating position in board dynamics. The dearth of formal research to ascertain the moderating influence of gender on top management influence and the representation of HR professionals on the board results in the following hypothesis.

H6: Gender moderates the relationship between Top Management Influence (TMI) and Human Resources Professionals' Representation at the board level (HPRB)

Conceptual Framework

The hypotheses used for this study are developed in accordance with the conceptual framework established by a comprehensive examination of existing literature (See Figure 1).

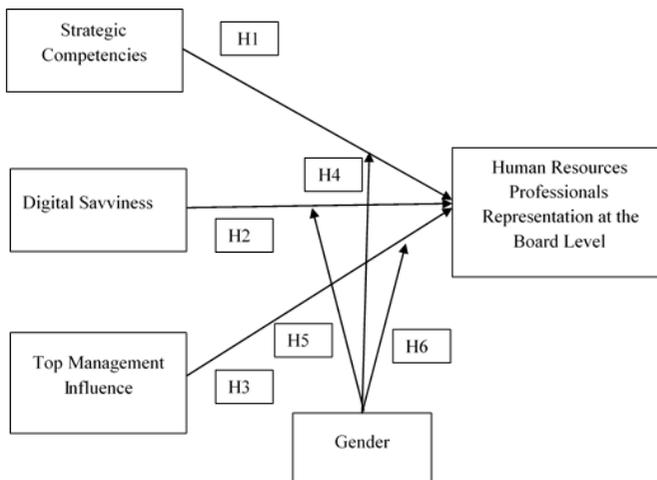


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Theoretical Foundation

This subsection will delineate all the theoretical models underpinning the current investigation. Numerous theoretical frameworks elucidate certain variables, including Agency Theory, the Dave Ulrich and Associates Competency

Framework (2016), Resource Dependence Theory, and Upper Echelon Theory.

Agency Theory

Jensen and Meckling (1976) introduced agency theory to elucidate the mechanisms by which managers and shareholders manage investments to maximise corporate value (McColgan, 2001). The theory characterises the agency relationship as a contractual agreement in which one party (the principal) engages another (the agent) to provide a service on their behalf, but the principal delegates certain decision-making authority to the agent during this process (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). The agent (Manager) must consistently operate in the principal's (Shareholder) best interest, which is presumed to be morally acceptable, or the agent must often engage in immoral behaviour to achieve its obligations within the agency relationship (Zogning, 2017). Typically, the interests of agents and principals can be harmonised by incentivising agents to assume ownership of their responsibilities and act as if they were the organization's proprietors (Jensen & Meckling, 1976), offering an appropriate compensation package accompanied by regular performance evaluations (Core et al., 1999), and granting agents adequate autonomy to enhance organisational value while advancing their careers as high achievers (Panda & Leepsa, 2017).

Dave Ulrich and Associates Competency Framework (2016)

Dave Ulrich and his associates performed seven rounds of surveys on competency studies, and the evolution of competencies was investigated in each survey cycle. The HR competency model – round 7, introduced in 2016, is the most comprehensive and durable among the seven iterations due to its balanced approach. Ulrich et al. (2017) investigated the competences necessary for HR practitioners to have access to high-level business discussions that significantly influence organisational performance while also ensuring personal effectiveness. Accordingly, nine prevalent domains of competences have been established that Human Resources professionals can adopt to qualify for participation in board discussions, i.e. Strategic Positioner, Credible Activist, Paradox Navigator, Culture and Change Champion, Human Capital Curator, Total Reward Steward, Technology and Media Integrator, Analytics Designer and Interpreter, Compliance Manager.

Resource Dependence Theory

The foundations of the Resources Dependence Framework (RDF) originate from a concept developed by Jeffrey Pfeffer and Gerald Salancik in 1978, positing that organisational decisions and actions can be elucidated by their reliance on "critical" and "important" resources (Nienhüser, 2008). The theory posits that organisational behaviour is influenced by external influences, suggesting that managers can mitigate environmental unpredictability and reliance. Additionally, Zahra and Pearce (1989) asserted that the Resource Dependence Theory regards boards as essential boundary spanners that furnish CEOs with timely information while also facilitating the extraction of resources for effective corporate operations. Similarly, "resource-rich" directors should be

the principal focus of board composition. It signifies that both the quantity and the diversity of directors' skills are crucial (Boyd, 1990).

Upper Echelon Theory

The upper echelons theory, introduced by Hambrick and Mason in 1984, elucidates the influence of managerial characteristics such as those of the CEO and top management team on organisational outcomes. Hambrick and Mason (1984) assert that the Upper Echelon Theory presents three primary advantages for scholars: it potentially enhances the capacity to predict organisational outcomes beyond that of existing theories, aids those tasked with selecting and developing senior executives, and benefits strategists seeking to anticipate the actions and reactions of competitors. Furthermore, the Upper Echelon theory provides a first explanation by asserting that the experiences, values, and personalities of upper management significantly affect their perception of events and decision-making (Boada-Cuerva et al, 2018).

Methodology

This study deploys a deductive research methodology within the positivist paradigm, relying on systematic data gathering that is quantifiable and amenable to statistical analysis. A quantitative research method was adapted to investigate the relationship of the hypothesis. This cross-sectional study was supported by a self-administered questionnaire to collect primary data. A sample of 170 listed public companies in Sri Lanka was selected from 283 through simple random sampling, using the CEOs of listed public companies in Sri Lanka as the sample frame. A pilot study was conducted with 30 respondents before data gathering, confirming the reliability and validity of the questionnaire. Prior to engaging in the final analysis data screening process has been taken place to eliminate missing entries and outliers to improve the quality of the dataset (Hair et al., 2021). Data screening and descriptive statistics were analysed using SPSS, while Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) and hypothesis testing were conducted with SmartPLS. To avert missing data, the researcher set a constraint in the online questionnaire that prohibited respondents from advancing between questions without providing a response. No extreme outliers were detected through visual inspection, Stem and Leaf plot, and a Boxplot. Subsequent to the screening, the dataset was examined for skewness and kurtosis through statistical methods, as well as graphical methods, specifically Normal Q-Q Plots, to understand the formation of a normal curve.

Following data cleaning, descriptive statistics were conducted to systematically characterise the data, clarifying the relationships among variables within a sample or population. All factors under each variable showed moderate deviation from the mean. Furthermore, as illustrated in Table 1.1, the Cronbach's alpha values validated the internal consistency, offering insight into the reliability and validity of the construct being examined, which should ideally surpass 0.7 (Hair et al., 2021). To enhance reliability, two elements were

eliminated from both Construct HPRB and TMI.

Table 1: Reliability Values for Variables

Construct	Initial		Modification	
	No of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	No of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
HPRB	7	0.267	6	0.773
SC	8	0.767	8	0.767
DS	7	0.825	7	0.825
TMI	7	0.675	6	0.735
Total		0.728		0.713

Structural Equation Modelling

Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) is a robust statistical technique used to analyze complex relationships between observed and latent variables, as well as to test hypotheses concerning model fit through absolute and comparative fit indices to determine the model's adequacy in representing the data (Dong et al., 2023). This study utilized Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) to conduct Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), structural modelling, moderator analysis, and hypothesis testing.

In SmartPLS, measurement models are referred to as outer models, and there is no recognized global goodness-of-fit metric. Nonetheless, the outer loadings of all indicators must exhibit statistical significance at a minimum threshold. Given the potential for significant outer loadings to demonstrate relative weakness, it is frequently recommended that standardised outer loadings should attain or exceed a threshold of 0.70. and outer loadings below 0.40 must consistently be removed from the construct (Hair et al., 2021). Therefore, the measurement model was modified by removing TMI5 and TMI7 due to extremely low factor loadings (TMI5 = 0.130 and TMI7 = 0.180), which have an impact on content validity. While TMI5 evaluated the degree to which senior management supports board candidates based on their standing in the business community, TMI7 demonstrated support based on previous personal contacts with candidates. The weak loadings of these items may be attributed to the business environment in Sri Lanka, where informal networks and relationship-based factors that are not publicly acknowledged frequently impact board selection procedures. Because of this, it's possible that respondents were unwilling to openly support assertions that showed personal prejudice or preferred influence, which resulted in replies that were inconsistent or socially acceptable. This probably decreased the dependability of the items, which is the reason they were removed.

Accordingly, Figure 2 illustrates the improved measurement model,

while Table 2 presents its outer loading.

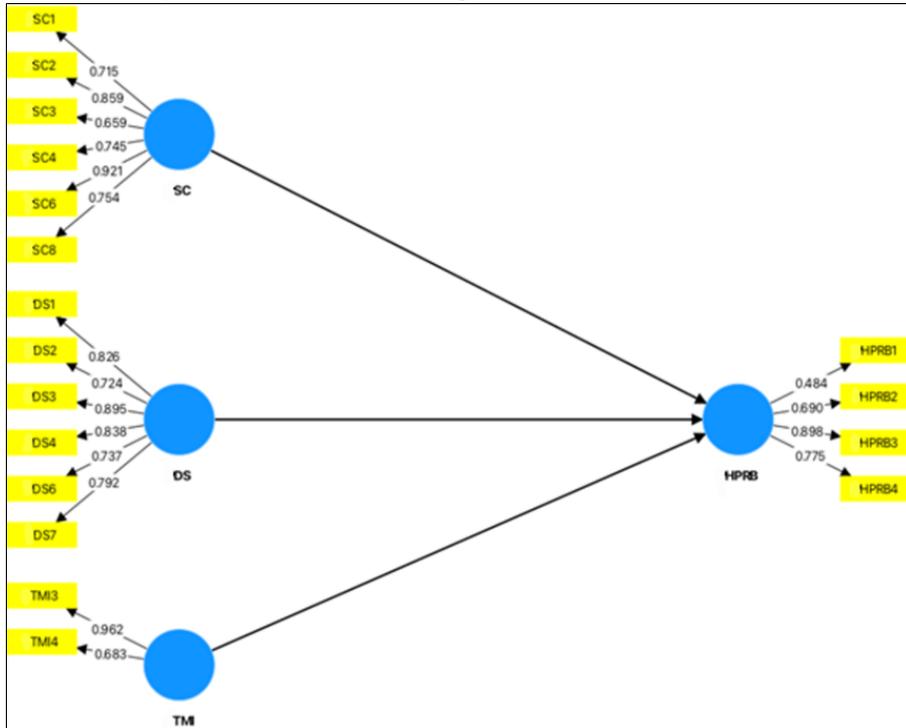


Figure 2: Measurement Model

Table 2: Outer Loading (Modified Measurement Model)

	DS	HPRB	SC	TMI
DS1	0.826			
DS2	0.724			
DS3	0.895			
DS4	0.838			
DS6	0.737			
DS7	0.792			
HPRB1		0.484		
HPRB2		0.690		
HPRB3		0.898		
HPRB4		0.775		
SC1			0.715	
SC2			0.859	
SC3			0.659	

SC4			0.745	
SC6			0.921	
SC8			0.754	
TMI3				0.962
TMI4				0.683

During the measurement model phase, reliability and validity are assessed to ensure accuracy as well as consistency of the measurement instrument. The examination of indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity was conducted to achieve the objective.

Indicator reliability refers to the consistency and dependability of the measurement model used to assess latent constructs within a model. It is evaluated through factor loadings, with values exceeding 0.7 generally indicating sufficient reliability (Haji-Othman & Yusuff, 2022). Additionally, outer loadings above 0.4 (> 0.4) (Hair et al., 2013) or 0.5 (> 0.5) (Memon et al., 2021) are regarded as indicative of strong reliability. Consequently, as shown in Table 2, adjustments were implemented by removing low factor loadings and enhancing content validity. Moreover, internal consistency examines the degree to which all indicators of the construct collectively measure it effectively. Cronbach's alpha provides a reliability estimate based on the intercorrelations of observed indicator variables, while composite reliability addresses the constraints of Cronbach's alpha related to sample sensitivity. According to Hair et al. (2013), a Cronbach's alpha of more than 0.6 and a Composite Reliability (CR) of over 0.7 are considered satisfactory. Cronbach's Alpha for all constructs exceeded 0.6, indicating an adequate level of dependability, with values of 0.892, 0.713, 0.870, and 0.627 for DS, HPRB, SC, and TMI, respectively. In addition, composite dependability demonstrated an acceptable level of reliability, with findings indicating DS = 0.928, HPRB = 0.808, SC = 0.881, and TMI = 1.073. Nonetheless, TMI exhibits a composite reliability score of 1.073, given that the construct comprises only two indicators. Besides, convergent validity denotes the extent to which a measurement exhibits a positive correlation with other measures evaluating the same concept, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of outer loadings must exceed 0.5 (Hair et al., 2013). The study demonstrates satisfactory convergent validity, with values of DS = 0.647, HPRP = 0.529, SC = 0.609, and TMI = 0.696. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for all four constructs surpasses the 0.5 threshold, indicating that each construct explains over 50% of the variance in its indicators (Hair et al., 2021). Furthermore, discriminant validity denotes the extent to which a concept is empirically established as independent and distinct from other constructs, which can be evaluated using Cross-loadings, the Fornell-Larcker criterion, and the HeteroTrait-MonoTrait ratio (HTMT). Consequently, each item

possessed a superior value relative to other values in the cross-loadings output (Hair et al., 2017), and every latent variable surpassed the maximum correlation noted with any other latent variable according to the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The HTMT values for each construct pair consistently remain below the set threshold of 0.90 (Henseler et al., 2015).

After completing the measurement model and evaluating reliability and validity, the structural model was analysed to determine its predictive capability and the relationships among the constructs. Multicollinearity was evaluated using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), with a threshold value of less than 5 (<5) being acceptable (Hair et al., 2013). Consequently, VIF values consistently remain beneath the threshold of 5 (DS → HPRB = 1.653, SC → HPRB = 1.444, and TMI → HPRB = 1.189). Thus, collinearity does not reach critical levels in any of the formative components and does not pose an issue for the estimation of the PLS path model. Additionally, in this model, the R² value (coefficient of determination) is 0.445, signifying a minor effect of the independent variables on the dependent construct. The adjustment of 0.421 reveals that independent factors account for a variation of 0.024 in the dependent variable. The negligible difference suggests that most components in the model are relevant and contribute to elucidating the variation. Similarly, the predictive relevance (Q²) of 0.406 is obtained by the Stone-Geisser test (Q² > 0) (Hair et al., 2017), employing the blindfolding resampling approach with D set to 7 for this analysis, as it is not a divisible number for the sample size of 170.

Furthermore, the effect size (f^2) is used to assess the proportional influence of an external (independent) variable on an endogenous (dependent) variable inside the model. Table 3 indicates that the f^2 values of PSC exert a moderate influence on the HPRB (dependent variable), while DS and TMI have a minor impact. Nonetheless, the moderator's impact is not apparent in any of the three relationships: TMI → HPRB, SC → HPRB, and DS → HPRB.

Table 3: Effect Size (f^2) with Moderator

	HPRB
DS	0.035
SC	0.192
TMI	0.058
Gender x TMI	0.006
Gender x SC	0.003
Gender x DS	0.001

Accordingly, the comprehensive structural model with moderators is illustrated in Figure 3, encompassing all variables represented in the conceptual

framework presented in Figure 1.

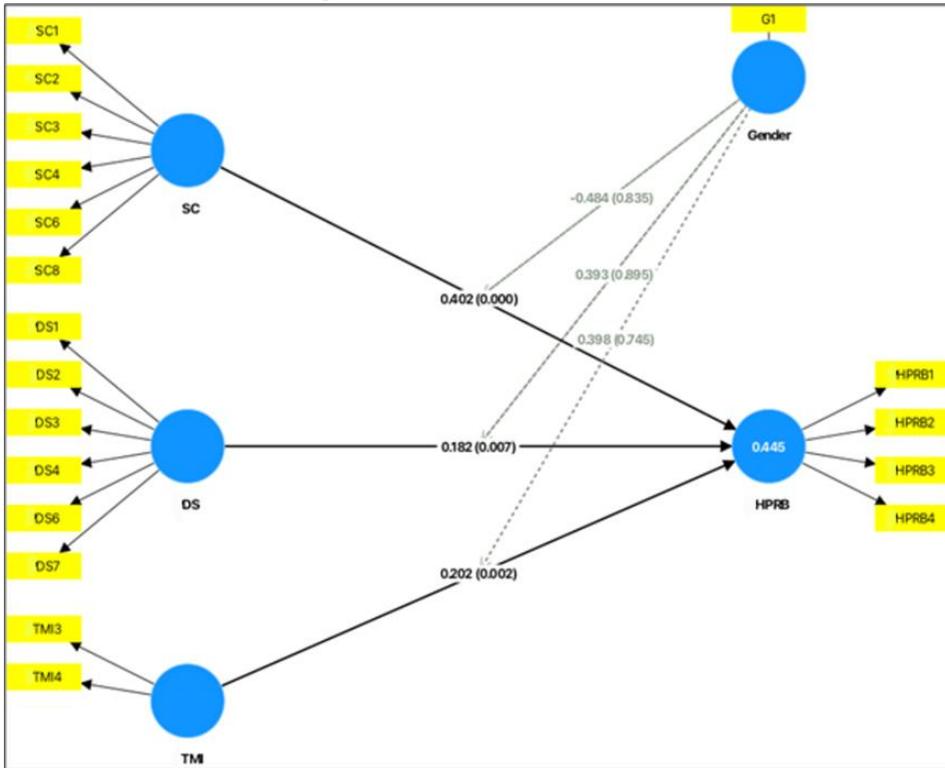


Figure 3: Structural Model with the Moderator

Table Error! No text of specified style in document.: Mean, Standard Deviation, T values, P values

	Original sample (O) β	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
DS → HPRB	0.182	0.182	0.067	2.693	0.007
SC → HPRB	0.402	0.407	0.077	5.249	0.000
TMI → HPRB	0.202	0.209	0.066	3.054	0.002
Gender x TMI → HPRB	0.398	0.392	1.225	0.325	0.745
Gender x SC → HPRB	-0.484	-0.518	2.327	0.208	0.835
Gender x DS → HPRB	0.393	0.428	2.980	0.132	0.895

To analyze the outcomes of the path model, it is crucial to evaluate the

significance of all structural model relationships using t-values, p-values, and bootstrap confidence intervals. If the t value surpasses the crucial threshold of 1.96 ($t > 1.96$), it can be inferred that the coefficient is statistically significant at a certain error probability, and the p-value must be below 0.05 when employing a significance level of 5%. is utilized (Hair et al., 2021). Accordingly, Table 4 illustrates that the t values for DS → HPRB, SC → HPRB and TMI → HPRB surpass 1.96, specifically 2.693, 5.249, and 3.054, respectively, with corresponding p-values below 0.05, namely 0.007, 0.000, and 0.002, at the 0.05 significant level. In the moderator statistics, Gender x TMI → HPRB, Gender x SC → HPRB and Gender x DS → HPRB, the t values (0.325, 0.208, and 0.132, respectively) and p values (0.745, 0.835, and 0.895, respectively) suggest a negative correlation.

Furthermore, the bootstrap confidence interval evaluates the reliability of the calculated coefficient by identifying if a path coefficient significantly differs from zero and offers a range of possible population values for the parameter, contingent upon data variability and sample size. If a confidence interval for an estimated route coefficient does not include zero, the hypothesis that the path equals zero is rejected, signifying a strong influence (Hair et al., 2017). Consequently, a robust association between DS → HPRB, SC → HPRB, and TMI → HPRB is evidenced by the confidence intervals indicating positive outcomes at both the 2.5% and 97.5% levels. Conversely, moderator associations demonstrate a detrimental effect, evidenced by negative (-) outcomes at 2.5% and positive (+) outcomes at 97.5%. Bias correction (significance level = 0.05) confirmed the outcome as there is a substantial association between the independent factors and the dependent variable, whereas the moderator variable demonstrates a negative relationship.

Discussion

The association between the strategic competencies of Human Resources professionals and their representation on the boards of Sri Lankan Listed public companies (SC → HPRB) was found to be significant. Westover (2024) and Reddy et al. (2022) underscore that strategic competencies enable HR to transition from a traditional administrative role to a strategic partner inside the organisation by aligning HR initiatives with corporate objectives and influencing strategic decision-making. Simultaneously, scholars assert that strategic skills will certainly enhance the incorporation of HR specialists at the board level. (Ulrich et al., 2017; Shameem & Rengamani, 2018; Westover, 2024). Likewise, business acumen, financial expertise, leadership skills, specialised technical skills, and the credibility to function as a trusted advisor are the essential strategic characteristics for HR professionals seeking a board post (Ulrich et al., 2015; Geimer et al., 2017; Westover, 2024). Nevertheless, there is an absence of research within the Sri Lankan context on the same context, whereas previous studies have identified the strategic competencies that HR professionals must acquire to function as strategic partners or to participate in strategic HRM (Sajeewanie & Opatha, 2007; Dharmasiri, 2008; Muthusamy et al., 2009; Payne, 2010). Thus, the findings of this study demonstrate that the

strategic competencies of Human Resources (HR) professionals substantially affect their representation on the boards of Sri Lankan Listed Public Companies.

The correlation between the digital savviness of Human Resources professionals and their representation on the board of Sri Lankan Listed companies ($DS \rightarrow HPRB$) demonstrates a strong and positive association. To increase their value in organisations, HR professionals can adopt a digital mindset and use technology for strategic decision-making, data-driven workforce planning, skill development, and aligning HR strategies with organisational objectives (Lokhande, 2024; Reddy, 2024). Accordingly, prior research suggested that HR professionals seeking board positions should be digitally savvy to enhance their credibility and visibility, contributing to organisational performance (Kamalakaran, 2024; Reddy, 2024). Similarly, De Alwis (2010) has stressed the importance of digital tools and data analysis for HR professionals in today's business environment to aid decision-making, despite the lack of research on how digital savviness assists HR professionals in achieving board positions in Sri Lanka. Thus, this study highlights the increasing significance of digital savviness as a strategic resource that bolsters HR professionals' capacity to engage meaningfully in high-level decision-making processes.

In addition, the correlation between top management influence and the representation of Human Resources specialists at the board level in Sri Lankan listed public corporations ($TMI \rightarrow HPRB$). The results demonstrate a positive correlation. Researchers have established an argument that the appointment of board members is profoundly affected by top management, especially CEOs, who act as the ultimate decision-makers and board members (Abatecola & Cristofaro, 2019; Garcia-Sanchez, 2020). As such, management's power and influence affect HRM (Boada-Cuerva et al., 2019; Dwarakanath, 2019; Mirfakhar, 2022), and the CEO's attitude is more important in shaping the HR profession's strategic growth (Kelly & Gennard, 2007; Brandl & Pohler, 2010). However, the influence of top management on the board representation of HR professionals in Sri Lanka remains inadequately researched. Therefore, this research identifies a gap in the literature by demonstrating that top management influence substantially aids HR professionals in securing a board seat in listed public companies in Sri Lanka.

The findings regarding the moderating effect of gender on the relationships among strategic competencies, digital savviness, top management influence, and the representation of Human Resources professionals at the board level in Sri Lankan listed public companies indicated that gender did not significantly affect any relationship, leading to the acceptance of the null hypothesis. Longitudinal research demonstrates that men hold most corporate directorships and women are under-represented (Lewellyn & Muller-Kahle, 2020; Smith & Parrotta, 2018) due to the deficiency in financial literacy, business acumen, and general management skills among

female directors (Walt & Ingley, 2003; Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014). In contrast, according to Suri and Sharma (2013) and Qazi et al. (2021), gender does not correlate with digital proficiency, yet a notable gender inequality in the utilisation and access to information technology persists, especially in poorer nations (Acilar & Saebø, 2023). Moreover, scholars contend that the selection of women for director positions is often dependent on their established connections with existing directors and the influence of the CEO (Knippen et al., 2019; Allemand et al., 2022), and women persistently face discrimination in their quest for board appointments due to the prevailing attitudes of senior management towards them (Knippen et al., 2019; Srinidhi et al., 2020).

One possible cause for the above results might be that competence-based factors, which prioritize organizational value and strategic skill over gender differences, are increasingly influencing board-level selections in Sri Lankan listed businesses. This is consistent with corporate governance policies' increasing emphasis on meritocracy. Alternatively, the result could be a reflection of the structural reality of boardrooms, where a small number of senior directors control a large portion of the decision-making authority, which lessens the apparent influence of gender as a moderating factor. In these kinds of settings, networks, strategic alignment, and leadership support may be more important in gaining access to board positions than demographics. On the other hand, from a methodological standpoint, sample characteristics, such as possible gender representation imbalances or low sample variability, may also have an impact on the non-significant moderation effect and restrict the capacity to identify moderation effects. Additionally, owing to their comparatively modest effect sizes, moderation effects are sometimes more challenging to identify in PLS-SEM.

Besides, the available literature reveals a lack of studies pertaining to the Sri Lankan context and the HR profession. Thus, the present study has addressed the literature gap and provided statistical evidence that the relationship among strategic competencies, digital savviness, top management influence, and the representation of Human Resources professionals at the board level in Sri Lankan listed public companies is not moderated by gender.

Thus, strategic competencies, digital savviness, and top management influence are equally important for HR professionals, regardless of gender, seeking board-level involvement. This suggests that Sri Lankan Listed Public Companies evaluate HR experts for board posts based on competencies and leadership influence rather than gender.

Implications of the Study

This study provides significant insights for HR practitioners, business leaders, and policymakers by pinpointing the primary facilitators of HR professionals' presence on the boards of Sri Lanka's listed public companies.

The results indicate that strategic competencies, digital savviness, and top management influence considerably enhance the involvement of HR professionals at the board level. Gender, however, examined as a moderating variable, did not significantly influence these relationships, underscoring a transition based on merit board nominations.

For HR professionals, the study underscores the significance of establishing credibility with top management and enhancing strategic capabilities, particularly in the business, financial, and technical domains. Cross-functional collaboration, active engagement in strategic initiatives, and participation in high-impact projects, including mergers, restructuring, and digital transformation, are all recommended. Committee membership and industry engagement can serve as essential steppingstones for board readiness, providing exposure to board-level activities.

In addition, the findings necessitate a re-evaluation of the role of HR in organizations, from an administrative support function to a strategic partner in decision-making. This can be accomplished by incorporating HR into strategic committees, engaging them in early-stage decision-making discussions, and supporting their development through mentoring, executive training, and continuous learning programs, particularly in the sectors of AI-enabled HR analytics and digital technologies. Visibility and influence can be further improved by encouraging HR involvement in strategic forums and board-level committees.

Furthermore, the study establishes a foundation for the improvement of corporate governance frameworks in Sri Lanka at the policy level. In addition to reevaluating gender diversity initiatives to ensure that they address structural and cultural barriers rather than presumed skill deficits, policymakers and regulators are encouraged to implement measures that promote HR representation on boards. The necessity of structured, inclusive succession planning and leadership development programs is emphasized by the increasing number of women on corporate boards worldwide and in Sri Lanka, despite the fact that their representation is not matched by leadership positions.

In conclusion, this research emphasizes the changing strategic role of HR in governance and board participation. In order to enhance the strategic positioning of HR professionals and encourage equitable, competency-based board inclusion, it promotes an integrated approach that integrates individual capability development, organizational support, and policy reform.

Future Research Directions

Future research should expand the scope by incorporating a variety of organizational contexts, including private sector firms, SMEs, and public institutions, to evaluate the generalizability of the insights. By incorporating board members and functional leaders into the respondent base in addition to

HR professionals, it is possible to obtain data that is more impartial. In order to monitor the development of relationships over time, longitudinal research is advised. Mixed-method approaches, such as interviews or case studies, can provide a more comprehensive comprehension of the obstacles that HR professionals encounter when attempting to secure board representation. Besides, since gender does not seem to modify these associations in the current study, it suggests more research in more contextually varied and diverse groups. Additionally, further research could investigate additional moderators such as corporate governance, leadership styles, organizational culture and mediators such as HR's role in strategic planning to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the influencing mechanisms. Given the growing influence of technology, future research should also examine the influence of sophisticated tools such as AI and HR analytics on HR's strategic influence at the board level, too.

Conclusion

This study has successfully accomplished its objectives by examining the strategic competencies, digital savviness, influence of top management, and role of gender on the representation of HR professionals on the board of listed public companies in Sri Lanka. The research has made a significant contribution to literature by bridging the existing gap. The study concurrently addressed the results of previous longitudinal research on gender influences, ultimately determining that gender does not play a substantial role in the successful acquisition of board seats for HR professionals. Very importantly, the study provides significant insights from several viewpoints. It offers a novel perspective for researchers, especially in the Sri Lankan setting, filling a significant vacuum in the literature. It underscores avenues for deliberate career progression for HR professionals, while urging businesses and senior management to facilitate their growth. The findings compel politicians and regulators to re-evaluate current frameworks to enhance HR's role as a pivotal contributor to corporate decision-making.

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