

# JUST THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF CARING: CONTRADICTIONARY DEMANDS OF HR WORK IN BELARUSIAN IT INDUSTRY

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*Abstract:* This article discusses the tensions of Human Resources (HR) work in Belarusian IT companies by examining it within the context of an ongoing crisis in the industry. HR workers in Belarusian IT are predominantly female, and various gendered expectations are assigned to them, both formally and informally. Based on the qualitative study conducted in 2021, I examine how care (Fisher & Tronto, 1990), emotional labor (Hochschild, 2012), and intimate labor (Zelizer, 2010) manifest in HR work, regulated by the idea of balancing the interests of different groups and employer branding rationale. HRs have to perform several kinds of emotional work that are not officially part of their job and even can be regarded as unprofessional, but that are nevertheless perceived as unavoidable. I discuss how performing impartiality involves what Hochschild calls deep and surface acting (2012) with several audiences in mind. I argue that the ambiguity of this role is strategic in the sense that it serves the businesses, by allowing them to benefit from emotional labor without acknowledging it.

*Keywords:* Belarus, emotional labor, intimate labor, Human Resources, labor, IT Industry

## Introduction

In Belarus, HR is stereotypically a female profession, in fact over 90% of HRs in Belarusian IT are women, according to the latest study (Dev.by, 29 May 2023). It is hard to directly compare these statistics to



other Western countries, where many Belarusian IT companies often have headquarters. For example, about 70% of HR workers across industries in the USA are female (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 25 January 2023), while in the tech industry statistics are more focused on vulnerabilities of female workers in jobs requiring tech competencies (Dean, 11 July 2023). The fact that HR would be often combined there with other leadership roles suggests some differences in the status of the profession. The most common and universal types of work in this role would be, for example, arranging and managing employee benefits, organizing corporate events or training, having day-to-day communication with employees and managers, resolving conflicts, monitoring employee satisfaction, advising managers, etc. Depending on the company, paperwork or recruitment can be included or assigned to separate roles. The legal and compliance aspects of employment were getting much less attention both from HRs and employers in Belarus, compared to the other countries. Key staff leaving the company would be a more pressing concern than potential lawsuits. Therefore, till recently employee happiness and retention became even more important for HR in Belarusian IT than elsewhere. For the last decades, the IT industry in Belarus has been in quite good shape both for companies and employees. Employers leveraged tax benefits (Ministry of Economy of the Republic of Belarus, n.d.) and cost of labor, while for the employees high salaries combined with a relatively low cost of living in Belarus and good mobility prospects made the industry attractive. The crisis started in 2020, first with COVID-19, followed by protests against rigged elections and state violence, where IT workers were quite active. When protests were suppressed, the migration of IT workers from Belarus intensified and grew further following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As more and more sanctions were imposed, some companies started closing their offices in Belarus, while others announced hiring freeze or downsizing. With lay-offs and pay cuts, both in Belarus and in the neighboring countries where people were relocating from Belarus (Dev.by, 20 June 2023), the industry inevitably changes.

The study is based on 22 interviews with HR professionals from 17 Belarusian IT companies. Interviews were conducted in 2021 and covered questions related to everyday job responsibilities and how they were affected by the crises. Additionally, I use autoethnography from my own experience working in an IT HR role before 2017, and other “production” roles in IT before 2022. My insider/outsider perspective on various aspects of everyday HR work informed the study design and interpretation. I have utilized the temporal distance between collecting the data and its interpretation, iteratively and repeatedly revisiting the interview transcripts while monitoring news from the IT industry and Belarus in general. Seeing how the crisis developed, influenced my understanding of vocabularies of care usage in a business organization towards a more critical perspective. This

article builds on how study participants described their understanding of work responsibilities, how the work was evaluated, and what it meant to be a good HR.

The tensions of imported global management concepts and practices in post-soviet space got some scholarly attention (Hetrick, 2002; Adamson, 2006; Weigl et al., 2008; Ardichvili & Kuchinke, 2010). I propose to examine HR workers in IT as a distinct group within this broader process with attention to the gender aspect of it within the critical discussion of the political implications of human resources management practices (Deetz, 2003; Valentin, 2014). My analysis relies on the feminist scholarship on notions of care (Fischer & Tronto, 1990), emotional labor (Hochschild, 2012), and intimate labor (Zelizer, 2010) to illustrate how all three are intertwined in everyday HR work. In the analysis of the interview transcripts and media content, I apply a critical discourse analysis perspective by linking discursive constructions to social context and practices of domination (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

## Ideas of HR

It is necessary to discuss several ideas of what HR is, that serve as interpretative repertoires (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) for HR professionals dealing with everyday situations. First is built around the subjectivity of a “strategic partner” or “business partner”, which suggests that the HR person has a stake in the business and serves the organization’s interest by delivering “business results” based on solving “people problems” (Ulrich, Schiemann & Sartain, 2015, pp. 2–3). It is noticeable that since the concept of HR partner was offered in the late 90s (Ulrich, 1997) till today, the discourse around it keeps suggesting that HRs are not business partners yet and should become ones. Yet, Rose connects the initial birth of HR as a function to the development of what he calls Psy expertise or understanding of human behavior. In Rose’s version it appears that from its inception, Personnel was organized to serve business goals using their expertise in the human soul (Rose, 1999, pp. 78, 91). Despite that, ongoing demands to transform and become such business-oriented human experts suggest that HRs have not achieved it. Additionally, the framing of HRs as business partners contributes to constructing their position within an organization as ambiguous. HR employees can take different places in the formal organizational hierarchy, but the idea of “partnership” in practice often suggests working with managers who have higher ranks and more real power. However, HR needs to pretend that they communicate as *almost* equals. The second idea contributing to the ambiguity is the “caring HR” trend, which is concerned with employee engagement, satisfaction, and fulfillment. One of its key guiding principles is that “care towards employees ultimately influences client’s satisfaction and business outcomes” (Saks,

2022). Accepting this principle makes it imperative for HR to know when employees are unhappy and why. One of the visible manifestations of both trends is change in the job titles. From Human Resources Managers it gravitates towards Human Resources Business Partners or Happiness/Employee Experience specialists respectively. If the notion of strategic partnership is about building relationships with management, then caring HR is about having relationships with regular employees. One of the recurrent themes that was prominent in the majority of interviews was the idea of looking for balance. Those ideas of HR suggest constructing different subjectivities and the requirement to balance them creates noticeable challenges that I will discuss below.

Finally, it is important to consider how the employer branding perspective was influencing labor relations in the Belarusian IT industry before the crisis. The importance of having a reputation that makes the company attractive to both current and potential employees (Kucherov & Zamulin, 2016) was rooted in the high demand for IT workers in Belarus. In the so-called “employee’s market”, companies were competing over the limited number of highly skilled workers. Any news of a company not treating employees fairly would spread fast and would be expected to influence the ability of the company to hire and retain employees. This system of relationships motivated companies to act within the law and compete by offering more than the labor regulations require. For example, it could be more vacation days or benefits for the families. Resolving any issues amicably, as well as parting with employees on a friendly note was considered very important. Employer branding vocabulary was even used in relation to the 2020 protests when employees were voicing expectations that companies take sides and express their position.

### Care, emotional, and intimate labor

“But how do you even work in HR without a degree in psychology?!” my male colleague asked me in 2011 when I worked as an HR in one of the Belarusian IT companies. Particular configurations of job responsibilities varied significantly among my study participants, depending on company size, business model, the size of the HR team, as well as job title and place in the company hierarchy. Some HRs would be perceived by employees as more bureaucratic, while others would be seen as supportive employees’ advocates. However, similar expectations of care, emotional, and intimate labor were present in their work, and crisis circumstances in 2020 made it even more apparent. For some, regular everyday job responsibilities could be related to training or event organizing, but they would be mobilized for care responsibilities during the crisis under the assumption that relevant care competencies are universal for all HRs. Fischer and Tronto define care as

everything “we do to maintain, contain, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 40). The reproductive labor aspect in HR work is sometimes highlighted even by terminological division, where care is directed toward so-called “production” employees who should have favorable and comfortable conditions to produce software. In some companies, certain care practices can be not available to HR employees or considered unnecessary. For example, regular employees would be asked how they are doing and whether they are satisfied with the job, while HRs are often, although not always, expected to deal with their dissatisfaction themselves.

Hochschild discusses emotional labor as labor requiring a person to either express certain emotions at work or invoke some feelings in others (2012, p. 7). It is particularly prominent during the crisis when HR would be focused on keeping people calm, reducing stress, and invoking a feeling of being “cared for” and “taken care of”:

“All meetings [YS: in 2020] became such mini-psychological meetings, where everyone just poured their anxiety into others. And I had to stop it (Russian: купировать) sometimes, and sometimes the opposite, to allow them to let off steam. So I took notes when I saw someone who did not speak out. And then I met each of them individually.”<sup>1</sup>

In this quote, a person uses the medical term “купировать” (Russian: to provide relief from symptoms that cannot be fully treated). As neither COVID-19, nor state violence could be fixed, being a good listener, and allowing people to vent with the promise of confidentiality was the only available ‘solution’. According to study participants, it was in high demand. Some HRs used parenting metaphors and compared dealing with stressed employees with calming a child’s tantrum. One of the informants quoted the manager, who said “Call HR, we have a person crying”, which implied that there is a special person responsible for dealing with employees’ emotions. It seems that showing emotions in the workplace was considered more acceptable in 2020 than in some other cases, and HR in this story only was able to go and cry together with this employee. Hochschild uses ideas of deep and surface acting to distinguish between the work where certain emotions should be manifested superficially as opposed to the ones deeply felt by the person performing it (2012, pp. 36–41). It is important to take into account how HR’s professional identity is closely intertwined with the employer brand: they had to embody the ideal company, which is humane, compassionate, and caring. As with deep acting in Hochschild’s terms, if you need to convince others that a company is good you need to believe it too. And in this example, you literally embody compassion by crying together.

1 All translations are done by me.

But this work did not only rely on managing or expressing certain emotions. An important feature of intimate labor, according to Zelizer, is that it relies on trust a lot. It creates value from knowing or paying attention to some aspects of a person's life that are not widely available to others (2010, p. 268).

“I am responsible for everything that happens to people in the company. I mean, any processes of course, but also their health, their physical state, emotional, moral, etc. It means I am paid to communicate with people and know how they are doing [...] My responsibility is people, how they feel.”

Here, the person describes how she sees her role in a company. She assumes responsibility for managing emotions, but she also highlights that she is paid for an intimate connection with employees and knowing their personal stories and issues. Zelizer highlights a major distinction between care that aims to improve the welfare of its recipient and intimacy that can actually hurt a person (2010, p. 269). Sometimes there are no barriers to using such intimate knowledge to advance the company's interests, except HR's own ethical boundaries. My colleague's confidence that a degree in psychology is necessary for HR is directly related to this aspect of the job. The job is not only to be able to care for someone under stress but also to be able to produce useful information that will help manage people.

HR work seems to be an intricate combination of care, and emotional and intimate labor. Moreover, some types of such labor are not part of the official job description, and they are sometimes regarded as unprofessional and of lower status by other HRs. Caring too much or being too close to employees is often seen as undesirable. The status of such closeness can be inferred from such articulations as “cry pillow”, describing an HR person who allows employees to unload negative emotions too much, or “to wipe their noses” relating to the activity of tending to all emotions of employees in a motherly way. One other interlocutor shared that she sometimes wonders whether “...the fact that they call me to chat about the divorce or share a screenshot of their chats with their girlfriend... because I am a woman. Because if I was a man, I do not think it would be this way” (Interview, 2021). She suspects that some gendered expectations are projected onto her and wonders about the fairness of it.

An important question is whether HRs could refuse to engage in such labor, and the answer is ambiguous. The crying together with the employee described above definitely was not part of the job officially and it was not mandatory. I would argue, however, that sometimes this work could be perceived as inescapable for several reasons. First, phrases like “care”, and “understanding people” in HR's job descriptions are very vague and they require constant interpretation work to decide what kind of care should or should not be provided. Second, the

evaluation criteria of their work are also often very vague, and even when HRs are asked to provide better proof of their work value, the attempts to delineate responsibilities more clearly rarely seem to be successful due to constructing HR work as a form of art that cannot be measured. One of the participants shared that her supervisor asks employees informally whether she is caring and helpful enough, and her performance evaluation is based on that feedback. In this case, the refusal to deal with someone's emotions can be perceived as unsafe, not without a reason. If you do not listen to a male colleague's story of divorce and suggest contacting a therapist to discuss it, this could affect the result of informal appraisal later. Finally, employees' trust can also be used as a resource for HR's career advancement. Understanding and knowing what is going on with people can serve as a counter to some of the employee's feedback when management judges how useful you are. One person shared that when they have gained higher status within the organization and more confidence, they redraw boundaries and can engage less in such work.

Serving as an outlet for employees' emotions, sometimes can also take the form of bullying. For example, it is not rare for female HR professionals to deal with aggression or being called useless, as well as bullying on social media, where they sometimes are called "piggies" (Russian: хрюши).

"This thing, especially in post-soviet space, that girls-psychologists go into HR...And in the end, they face brutality. And it is your job to be 'beaten', to deliver the results, because you are the frontline person."

This quote illustrates how the informant is leaning toward strategic partner subjectivity as they gained a reputation and can be more confident in their role. It conveys an attempt to distance themselves from those more caring HR "psychologists" and position themselves as a result-oriented, frontline person. In the process, the vulnerability of those caring HRs is exposed in a very vivid way.

## Performing Impartiality

The idea of the mediator role, where HR is constructed as an intermediary between the company and employees is closely related to the requirements to be a strategic partner to business and a trusted person for employees at the same time. This makes an impartiality requirement an important aspect of professional identity and dictates balancing the interests of two groups, the company versus employees. The task is truly challenging, as the balance often seems to be elusive and unattainable. This positioning and the expectation of mediation can be seen by employees as a service when the issue is sensitive and they do not want to raise it themselves, but also as an obstacle when

they prefer to solve it directly. When asked about the content of their job role, and how it is evaluated, study participants often talked in similar words, that caring about people and being empathetic is equally important to being “business-oriented” and focused on using relationships with people to advance the company interests. Many study participants shared that they face those contradictions, as, for example, in the quote below:

“And this is a common story that happens to all HRs [...] Either it’s a director’s girl, and the whole office is at war with her [...] Or she can be the employee’s person, a so-called cry pillow, and everyone is running to her, but she cannot help in making management decisions [...] Essentially, you are always alone [...] But if you are alone, you have this neutral position, when everyone can trust you.”

Several ideas are prominent in this quote. First, it suggests that to be effective, HRs have to practice impartiality by always acting with several audiences in mind. Second, impartiality is understood as a condition for intimacy, or trust, from both sides. And being trusted by everyone is positioned as something desirable. Finally, the quote also implies that failure to achieve this balance of interests is more than common, and HRs end up leaning towards one or the other side.

Another informant shared about her interactions with company management she is “partnering” with:

“And they say you are all about people, it’s great but how about business KPIs.. we are interested in how happy people are good for business performance. And you are like f\*ck you! You are not interested in happy people [laughing]. And as an HR you are like: yes, yes, we need to balance business interests. But as a person, I am more and more unhappy about this in the profession...”

In this quote, the person is expressing frustration with senior leaders who care only about business outcomes. To get approval for her work intended to improve people’s satisfaction she needs to use particular vocabulary, such as “balance business interests” and show that she is interested in business outcomes to an acceptable degree. Although her work is to be focused on employee satisfaction, it is also her work to show that she is not too invested in it. In her case, caring about employees is a deep act, while impartiality is a surface act. But the contradiction is visible and frustrating for her. Other study participants shared similar stories, where the surface act of impartiality was aimed at showing company management that formal rules are followed while letting employees know that HR is on their side. This could manifest, for example, in overlooking a joke that breaks company policy or buffering the messages from the top management and modifying them into what HRs see as more acceptable for employees. The opposite can

be true as well. Caring about employees can be a surface act as well, especially when HR thinks that their issues are not legitimate. In leaning towards one of the sides, HRs either position care as something important and business as something to tolerate, or construct themselves as business-oriented while using care to legitimize their usefulness for employees. In either case, there is clear tension rooted in the necessity not only to perform emotions with several audiences in mind but to show moderation in it as well.

### Strategic ambiguity

The employer branding and retention perspective dominating the IT labor market in Belarus before 2020 was driven by the desire to save on employee hiring and onboarding costs within the highly competitive local labor market. This made the company's reputation an important consideration and often encouraged both employees and employers to negotiate work conditions informally, as "human to human". In 2021, a media outlet focused on IT in Belarus reported on VironIT company requiring financial penalty from interns if they want to leave the company after introductory training. The conditions were in the contracts, and they were untypically harsh, but it seems that people understood it as a formality, not the real intention of the employer. Later, VironIT enforced those contracts via court (Dev.by, 29 July 2021). The news led to a quite heated discussion in the professional community, where other companies' leaders condemned such formal treatment of employees. Its detrimental effect on the employer's reputation was one of the key arguments against such practice. It is fair to assume that the modus of labor relations built on the assumption that the reputation of caring and humane is important for employers has contributed to the lack of people's attention to the contracts.

Emotional and intimate labor performed by HRs in IT companies was part of this frame. Before the crisis HRs were representing caring faces of the companies. To be effective, the care and trust had to feel genuine and personal. If HR's professional identity is entrapped in employees' perceptions of the company, a bad company would mean bad HR. When during the crisis HRs were providing sincere care, grief, and compassion, it was done on behalf of the companies and still was part of the job even when done half-secretly. As discussed by Fisher and Tronto, women are often tasked with care within bureaucracies and expected to break rules, so organizations can look more caring (1990, p. 49). I argue that HR job requirements are strategically vague and inconsistent, so emphasis on balance and impartiality serves as a source of constant tension and self-doubt. This allows companies to have *plausible deniability*. If a certain practice is questioned or criticized, it can always be presented as HR's private initiative, while if it is

successful, the company would benefit from it without acknowledging the scope, cost, or even its existence.

Discursive representations of practices are ideological, as they reinforce existing power relations and tend to “iron out” the differences in the interest of domination (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). The contradictory discursive constructions of care, emotional, and intimate labor in HR work served to naturalize the understanding that companies are interested in taking care of employees, and that company and employee interests can be balanced. Moreover, ambiguity plays an important role within this discourse: when the idea is naturalized that a business enterprise must pursue financial interests and does not have to care about employees by default, it establishes the baseline advantageous for the companies. The fact that an employer does something for its employees that is above this baseline, serves for reputational gain. Promoting a sense of closeness and trust was a tool for keeping the relationships between employees and employers outside of legal realms or labor regulations.

The fact that employees and company management have very different interests, is becoming more and more obvious. With closing offices in Belarus, layoffs, and putting salary reviews and promotions on hold in 2022 (Dev.by, 20 June 2023), maintaining a caring face becomes less of a priority for the companies. These measures would often affect the most vulnerable among IT workers: less experienced or with less valued specializations. The VironIT story points out the ultimate vulnerability of labor conditions contingent upon the situation on the labor market temporarily favorable for employees. Such practices are not seen as bizarre exceptions anymore. More IT companies are trying to leverage the situation by forcing entry-level workers to contractually commit to long-term work. For example, in the interview given to Dev.by, one company owner uses the vocabularies of business interests and acting within the law, but at the same time tries to refer to human-to-human relations and convey the message that contracts would not be enforced automatically, and each case will be treated individually (Dev.by, 25 October 2021). As I am learning from the more recent conversations with people in the industry<sup>2</sup>, new practices can be, for example, having no salary when you are not actively assigned to a billable project with a customer, no possibility of negotiations on salary increases during the contract term, and the financial penalty for quitting. Moreover, there are even some attempts to import similar employment practices to EU countries where the company would have an office (Dev.by, 25 October 2021).

HRs would find themselves in this more precarious category too. One article about job security among local HRs and recruiters claims:

2 My status as a researcher was disclosed and I have obtained permission to use the anonymized content of those conversations.

“Now is definitely not the time for the “girls with the balloons”, as HRs were often called before” (Dev.by, 28 September 2022). The expression “girls with the balloons” obfuscates any actual work HR workers were doing and highlights their purely decorative function that can be removed. In 2023 unemployment in the IT industry reached 5%, while 25% of HRs shared that they were unsure about their job prospects (Dev.by, 20 June 2023). At the same time, the article mentioned above suggests that HRs can be even more in demand, since the dismissals “will take a lot of work” (Dev.by, 28 September 2022). Future will show how these new types of work will change the role attuned to different kinds of emotional and intimate labor. As the crises continue to influence management practices within IT companies, and government control spreads in the industry (Dev.by, 7 March 2023), it invites a further critical discussion on business organizations constructing themselves as the source of support and care within an authoritarian context.

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