



When the Political-Administrative Chain Looks Away: Exploring Swiss Cantonal Workforce Perceptions of AI-Driven HR Analytics Implementation

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The deployment of AI-driven HR analytics in public administration promises to enhance evidence-based decision-making and organizational effectiveness. Yet adoption in Swiss public sector organizations remains overwhelmingly descriptive, with predictive and prescriptive capabilities significantly underutilized. While a growing body of research examines technical and organizational barriers to HR analytics maturity, comparatively little attention has been paid to how public sector employees anticipate these tools and to how political-administrative chains shape whether workforce evidence becomes actionable. Drawing on twenty semi-structured interviews conducted in a French-speaking Swiss cantonal administration, this study documents the anticipatory perceptions of employees and managers, and reads them through HR attribution theory, HRM system strength theory, and the concept of strategic ignorance. Participants express a conditional openness to AI-driven analytics that differs sharply between recruitment and evaluation use cases, describe a pre-existing political-administrative pattern in which workforce evidence is produced, circulated, and ultimately absorbed without consequence, and anticipate that AI-driven tools would be incorporated into that pattern rather than disrupt it. The findings identify a barrier qualitatively distinct from technical and competency-based obstacles. Successful adoption in politically accountable public administrations requires not only technical readiness and data literacy but also politico-administrative courage.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The public release of ChatGPT in November 2022 marked a turning point in the visibility of artificial intelligence (AI) across organizational functions, and human resource management (HRM) has been no exception. HR analytics had been progressively shifting from descriptive reporting toward predictive and prescriptive applications well before that date, mobilizing machine learning techniques to anticipate attrition, identify burnout risk, model career trajectories, and support performance evaluation (Coron, 2022; Fallucchi et al., 2020; Strohmeier, 2022). What changed after 2022 was the speed at which large language models and conversational interfaces entered the everyday vocabulary of HR practitioners, transforming AI-driven HR analytics from a specialist concern into a mainstream organizational question. Cantonal public administrations in Switzerland have not remained outside this movement, with pilot projects, vendor proposals, and internal reflections on the deployment of AI-driven HR tools multiplying in recent years (Revillod, 2024a, 2026).

The diffusion of these tools is driven by a familiar set of promises. These include improved evidence-based decision-making, earlier detection of organizational risks such as turnover and burnout, more granular workforce planning, and the possibility of fairer evaluation processes (Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015; Strohmeier, 2022). Yet the same promises have generated substantial controversies. One strand of the literature has documented concerns about surveillance, dignity, and the perceived legitimacy of algorithmic decision-making in workforce settings (Bankins et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2020). A second strand has examined the discriminatory potential of algorithmic HR tools and the conditions under which they reproduce existing inequalities (Köchling & Wehner, 2020). A third strand has explored the emotional and attributional reactions of employees to workforce datafication, showing that fear of datafication is mediated by the perceived legitimacy of data collection processes and by the attributions employees form about organizational intent (Rigamonti et al., 2025). Together, these literatures point to a recurring observation: the consequences of AI-driven HR analytics depend less on the technology itself than on the institutional and interpretive context in which it is deployed.

Recent Swiss evidence sharpens the puzzle. Gerber et al. (2024) show that HR analytics adoption in Switzerland remains overwhelmingly descriptive, with predictive and prescriptive capabilities significantly underutilized despite considerable investment. This gap between technological capacity and actual use is not fully explained by data quality, analytical skills, or infrastructure limitations, all of which have received sustained attention in the strategic HRM literature (Angrave et al., 2016; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015; Revillod, 2024a). Comparatively little attention has been paid to how public sector employees perceive these tools and, more consequentially, to the role that political decision-makers play in enabling or obstructing their implementation.

Three interrelated gaps converge on this puzzle. The first concerns the *employee perspective* on AI-driven HR analytics in the public sector, which has received limited attention compared to private sector applications (Beijer et al., 2021; Belizón et al., 2024; Gerber et al., 2024). The second concerns *anticipation*: perceptions that form before any tool is deployed remain underexplored, even though attributional processes are known to begin well in advance of practice implementation (Hewett et al., 2019; Nishii et al., 2008; Vuorenmaa et al., 2023). The third gap concerns the conditions under which evidence-based HR tools take root or fail to do so in public administrations, which have so far been explained by two complementary but largely parallel literatures. The HRM literature traces such failures to weak signaling and unfavorable attributions (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Nishii et al., 2008), while the public administration literature points to the political management of what is allowed to become visible (Jalonen, 2024; McGoey, 2012, 2019). These two explanations have rarely been brought together, even though they jointly determine whether a new HR technology will be acted upon or quietly absorbed.

The present article takes up these three gaps by studying how a French-speaking Swiss cantonal workforce anticipates the implementation of AI-driven HR analytics in its administration. Each of its subsidiary questions addresses one of them. The first asks *to what extent employees and managers are open to AI-driven HR analytics*. The second asks *what attributions about organizational and political intent they form before any tool is deployed*. The third asks *to what extent the political management of what becomes officially visible shapes the signals HR practices*

send, and thus whether employees and managers expect the workforce evidence generated by AI-driven HR analytics to be acted upon or quietly absorbed. Taken together, the three questions shed light on the conditions under which these tools could deliver on their promises.

To answer these questions, this study combines the HRM and public administration explanations rather than treating them as alternatives. It mobilizes two complementary frameworks from strategic HRM, HR attribution theory (Nishii et al., 2008) and HRM system strength theory (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004), and reads their outputs through the concept of *strategic ignorance* (Jalonen, 2024; McGoey, 2012, 2019), which specifies how political-administrative actors manage what becomes officially visible in organizational life. Empirically, the study draws on twenty semi-structured interviews with HR and non-HR employees.

The contribution is, therefore, threefold. Empirically, the study documents anticipatory perceptions of AI-driven HR analytics in a Swiss cantonal setting. Theoretically, it bridges HR attribution theory and HRM system strength theory with *strategic ignorance* to explain why evidence-based management tools may fail to gain traction in public organizations. Practically, it identifies a barrier qualitatively distinct from the technical and competency-based obstacles typically documented in the HR analytics literature (Rigamonti et al., 2025). Indeed, successful adoption in politically accountable administrations may require not only technical readiness and data literacy but also *politico-administrative courage* (Kelman et al., 2016; Mert & Burlacu, 2026).

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 sets out the context and theoretical anchors. Section 3 details the method. Section 4 presents the results. Section 5 discusses their implications and condenses them into a set of propositions, and Section 6 concludes.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. SWISS CANTONAL CONTEXT

Swiss cantonal administrations operate within a federal architecture that grants substantial autonomy over public employment policy, from statutory frameworks to remuneration systems and evaluation practices (Emery et al., 2024). This autonomy translates into significant cross-cantonal variation in HRM regimes, which the strategic HRM literature has documented for domains as diverse as recruitment, performance evaluation, and workforce planning (ibid.). Cantonal executives, known as *Conseils d'État* in the French-speaking cantons, are elected for four- or five-year terms depending on the canton and combine collegial governance with departmental accountability, a configuration that determines which HR initiatives receive sustained political support and which are set aside after each electoral cycle (Emery et al., 2024; Soguel et al., 2025).

This federal architecture is intersected by direct-democratic instruments. Cantonal citizens exercise scrutiny through initiatives, referendums, and votes, which extend accountability well beyond the electoral moment and expose administrative practices, including workforce management, to recurrent public contestation (Ladner et al., 2019; Soguel et al., 2025). Workforce figures documenting absenteeism, burnout risk, or interpersonal conflict are consequently not neutral management information but potential material for public debate, opposition arguments during electoral campaigns, and parliamentary questioning. The politicization of workforce evidence is not exceptional in the Swiss cantonal setting; it is constitutive of the setting itself.

Two features matter particularly for the present study. First, French-speaking cantonal administrations have historically maintained relatively centralized personnel policies with cross-departmental HR competencies, which increases the visibility of workforce evidence at the executive level (Emery et al., 2024). Second, Swiss empirical work has shown that whether evaluative evidence leads to change within the federal administration depends not only on its quality but on contextual conditions such as the pressure for change and the level of conflict surrounding it (Ledermann, 2012), a pattern that the *strategic ignorance* literature reads as part of the active management of what becomes officially known (McGoey, 2012, 2019). These two features combine to make the French-speaking cantonal setting an informative site for observing how workforce evidence is produced, framed, and circulated in a politically accountable administration.

Against this institutional backdrop, the state of AI-driven HR analytics in the Swiss public sector remains modest. Gerber et al. (2024) show that adoption is overwhelmingly descriptive, with predictive and prescriptive uses significantly underdeveloped, and that the gap between technological capacity and effective use cannot be reduced to infrastructure or analytical skills alone. Recent comparative work on AI adoption in Swiss public organizations converges on a similar diagnosis: technological readiness precedes but does not determine effective deployment, which depends on organizational conditions, leadership commitment, and the interpretive framing that public sector actors bring to new tools (Neumann et al., 2024; Revillod, 2024a). Cantonal administrations therefore find themselves in a paradoxical position. Technological maturity is largely available, investment has been made, and internal reflections on deployment are widespread. Yet effective use of advanced analytics remains rare, and the reasons for this gap require an analytical framework capable of capturing both the organizational signaling around HR practices and the political-institutional dynamics that determine what evidence is allowed to become consequential. The framework set out below combines three components that are read in sequence. HR attribution theory explains how employees ascribe intent to HR practices, HRM system strength theory explains how the signaling architecture surrounding these practices shapes those attributions, and *strategic ignorance* connects both to the political-administrative chain in which public sector HR practices are embedded.

2.2. ANALYTICAL ANCHORS

2.2.1. HR Attribution Theory

Nishii and Wright (2007) distinguish between intended, implemented, and perceived HR practices, arguing that the effectiveness of an HR system depends less on the practices formally in place than on the interpretations employees form of those practices. Building on this insight, Nishii et al. (2008) distinguish two broad categories of attributions. *Commitment-focused attributions* interpret HR practices as expressing genuine organizational investment in employee development, well-being, and recognition. *Control-focused attributions* interpret the same practices as instruments of monitoring, cost-reduction, or coercive compliance. These attributions are not properties of the practices themselves but of the interpretive frame through which employees encounter them, which in turn depends on the broader signals the organization sends about its intent (Beijer et al., 2021).

A recent meta-analysis synthesizing forty-eight primary studies confirms the empirical robustness of this distinction. *Commitment-focused attributions* are consistently associated with positive employee outcomes such as engagement, organizational commitment, and performance, while *control-focused attributions* predict reduced satisfaction, increased turnover intentions, and resistance behaviors (Hu et al., 2025). These effects hold even when controlling for the objective content of the practices, which indicates that the attributional process operates as a genuine mediator between practice and outcome. Recent work on AI-driven HR analytics specifically has shown that the perceived legitimacy of data collection processes mediates the formation of benevolent versus malevolent attributions about workforce datafication, with downstream effects on emotional reactions such as fear of surveillance (Rigamonti et al., 2025). The implication for the present study is that AI-driven HR analytics, treated as a practice rather than a technology, will produce divergent organizational consequences depending on the attributional frames employees bring to them, well before any tool becomes operational.

2.2.2. HRM System Strength Theory

Whereas HR attribution theory explains how employees read HR practices, HRM system strength theory explains why these readings converge or diverge across an organization. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) propose that the strength of an HRM system can be characterized through three meta-features. *Distinctiveness* refers to the visibility, salience, and legitimacy of HR practices, that is, the extent to which a distinctive HRM system stands out clearly against the broader organizational noise. *Consistency* refers to the alignment of practices across instances, across time, and between announced intentions and observed implementations. *Consensus* refers to the agreement of organizational actors, particularly managers and HR functions, about what the practices mean.

When all three meta-features are present, employees converge on shared and accurate attributions, even if these attributions diverge from those the organization would prefer (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). When one or more are absent, the HRM system sends weak signals and employees develop heterogeneous, idiosyncratic, and often cynical attributions. Recent empirical work refines this proposition. Meier-Barthold et al. (2023) demonstrate that the configuration of system strength, that is, the relative weight of the three meta-features and their interactions, explains a substantial portion of the cross-organizational variability in HR attributions, beyond what is predicted by the content of HR practices alone. Line manager beliefs about HR information further condition the process, and their alignment with the HR function is a key determinant of employee attributions (Vuorenmaa et al., 2023). The two frameworks are therefore complementary: HR attribution theory establishes that the meaning employees ascribe to HR practices matters, and HRM system strength theory establishes that this meaning is the product of the signaling architecture in which the practices are embedded.

2.2.3. Strategic Ignorance as a Bridging Concept

HR attribution theory and HRM system strength theory were largely developed in private-sector settings and treat the organization as the outer boundary of analysis. This boundary is analytically insufficient for public administrations, in which HR practices are embedded in a political-administrative chain where elected officials, senior administrators, and operational HR services each filter which forms of evidence become officially recognized and consequential (Angrave et al., 2016; Van der Voet & Lerusse, 2024). Whether workforce evidence generated by AI-driven HR analytics translates into managerial action does not depend solely on the tools deployed or the signals they emit, but also on the political willingness of decision-makers to receive that evidence and to act upon it. Strategic ignorance theory provides the missing conceptual link by theorizing the political and institutional management of what is officially known and unknown (Jalonen, 2024; McGoe, 2012, 2019).

McGoe (2012, 2019) defines *strategic ignorance* as the productive mobilization of unknowns to command resources, deny liability, and assert authority in situations where the visibility of certain facts would generate political or organizational costs. Ignorance is here understood not as a deficit of information but as an accomplishment: a socially organized non-knowledge that requires institutional work to sustain, precisely because the information that is not officially known is often widely available in operational practice. This active dimension distinguishes *strategic ignorance* from passive bureaucratic inertia, which describes a residual resistance to change rooted in structural features (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). Recent literature has extended the analysis by documenting how ignorance can be mobilized willfully by managers to preserve existing routines and to shield organizational structures from disruptive evidence (Alvesson et al., 2022; Schaefer, 2019). Jalonen's (2024) systematic review of ignorance in organizations identifies the political-administrative setting as a particularly fertile site for such dynamics, given the layered accountability relations it involves and the electoral costs associated with the public recognition of underperformance.

In public administrations, this fertility takes a specific institutional form. As a managerial accomplishment, *strategic ignorance* is shaped by the political context in which it operates: in administrations subject to electoral accountability, the production of HR evidence is conditioned by what political principals are willing to see acted upon, and the managerial routines of evidence production and circulation adapt over time to the implicit political costs and benefits of visibility. The point is not that politicians actively engineer ignorance about HR practices in a directly instrumental way, but that the managerial systems through which HR data are produced and circulated are responsive to the political signals their administrative leadership receives. This managerial-political equilibrium is sharpened in the Swiss cantonal setting, in which cantons combine substantial autonomy over public employment policy with high exposure to electoral and direct-democratic scrutiny (Emery et al., 2024; Soguel et al., 2025).

How this managerial-political equilibrium reshapes the interpretation of HR practices does not emerge from strategic ignorance theory taken in isolation. It becomes visible when *strategic ignorance* is read jointly with HR attribution theory and HRM system strength theory, along two axes.

On the attribution axis, *strategic ignorance* reshapes the causal inferences employees make about the intent behind HR practices. Nishii et al. (2008) show that employees arbitrate between *commitment-focused attributions*, in which the practice is understood to aim at developing employees, and *control-focused attributions*, in which it is understood to monitor, economize, or coerce compliance. In a *strategic-ignorance equilibrium*, the *control-focused* register becomes the more available inference, because employees repeatedly observe that HR evidence is produced without *commitment-focused* follow-through. Attributions about organizational intent then extend into attributions about political intent, and the two become analytically inseparable in the public sector.

On the system-strength axis, *strategic ignorance* operating at the political-institutional level produces the three configurational weaknesses Bowen and Ostroff (2004) identify. *Distinctiveness* weakens because HR practices whose downstream consequences are politically absorbed lose the visibility, salience, and legitimacy required to signal organizational intent: employees infer that the practice exists but that its outputs do not travel. *Consistency* weakens because the systematic divergence between announced HR priorities and observable political attention becomes a stable pattern of decoupling that employees learn to anticipate and reproduce in their interpretations. *Consensus* weakens because HR functions, line managers, and political principals hold structurally different beliefs about whether the evidence generated will be acted upon, leaving the interpretive frame within which employees encounter HR practices fragmented across the hierarchy.

Two empirical expectations follow. First, in attributional terms, employee openness to AI-driven HR analytics will be conditional not on the technology itself but on the anticipated institutional follow-through of its outputs, and will be differentiated across use cases according to the perceived political stakes of their visibility. Second, in terms of HRM system strength, the deployment of AI-driven tools into an unchanged politico-administrative configuration is likely to be absorbed into the pre-existing pattern rather than to disrupt it, generating symbolic modernization without *commitment-focused* consequence.

Table 1 summarizes the resulting framework, the key concepts drawn from each theory, the role *strategic ignorance* plays in connecting them, and the parts of the analysis each component informs.

Table 1 Integrated theoretical framework and its use in the analysis.

COMPONENT	KEY CONCEPTS	ROLE IN THE FRAMEWORK	USE IN THE ANALYSIS
HR attribution theory (Nishii & Wright, 2007; Nishii et al., 2008)	Intended, implemented and perceived HR practices; commitment-focused and control-focused attributions.	Explains how employees ascribe intent to HR practices, and why the same practice can be read as investment or as control.	Reading of participants' differentiated openness as anticipatory attributions.
HRM system strength theory (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004)	Distinctiveness, consistency, consensus.	Explains how the signaling architecture surrounding HR practices produces shared or fragmented attributions.	Reading of workforce evidence produced but not acted upon as weak system strength.
Strategic ignorance (Jalonen, 2024; McGoey, 2012, 2019)	Socially organized non-knowledge; active and relational management of what becomes officially visible.	Bridging concept: the political management of visibility weakens the three meta-features and makes control-focused attributions the more available inference.	Reading of the anticipated absorption of AI-driven HR analytics and of its institutional scope condition.

3. METHOD

3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN AND POSITIONALITY

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist design and draws on thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The aim is not to test pre-specified hypotheses but to make sense of how public sector employees and managers construct meaning around an HR technology that they had not yet encountered in their daily work. Because AI-driven HR analytics were not deployed in the cantonal administration at the time of fieldwork, the analytical object is the *anticipatory perception* of these tools rather than their lived experience. This distinction matters because anticipatory perceptions reveal the institutional and political assumptions through which actors filter new HR practices before any technology is deployed, which is precisely the moment at which HR attribution processes begin to form (Hewett et al., 2019; Nishii et al., 2008).

The analysis was conducted by a single author trained in strategic HRM and public administration, with no employment or contractual relationship to the cantonal administration under study, and the interpretations presented here are offered as one plausible reading grounded in the participants' accounts rather than as an exhaustive institutional description.

3.2. SETTING, SAMPLING AND PARTICIPANTS

Fieldwork took place between December 2023 and February 2024 in a French-speaking Swiss cantonal administration. The cantonal level was selected because Swiss cantons combine substantial workforce size, direct exposure to political accountability through periodic executive elections, and operational autonomy in HR policy (Emery et al., 2024; Ladner et al., 2019). A purposive sampling strategy (Palinkas et al., 2015) targeted three strata expected to hold complementary perspectives on the anticipated implementation of AI-driven HR analytics. The first stratum comprised strategic HR leaders responsible for the HR policy of an entire departmental unit or across departments, including HR Directors (P6, P7) and HR Business Partners with cross-organizational responsibility (P14, P20). The second stratum comprised operational HR practitioners embedded in day-to-day workforce management, including HR Sector Heads (P3, P4, P11, P18, P19) and one HR Assistant working at the intake stage of HR services (P10). The third stratum comprised public employees and middle managers outside HR functions whose work would be directly subject to AI-driven HR tools if deployed, including Program Managers (P1, P15), Scientific Adjuncts (P2, P5), Service Heads (P12, P13), Engineers (P8, P16), a Director (P9), and a Legal Officer (P17). Snowball recruitment supplemented purposive sampling through professional networks. Twenty participants ultimately took part. Table 2 summarizes their anonymized characteristics.

ID	FUNCTIONAL ROLE	AGE GROUP	TENURE ¹
P1	Program Manager	35–40	3
P2	Scientific Adjunct	40–45	7
P3	HR Sector Head	30–35	1
P4	HR Sector Head	40–45	9
P5	Scientific Adjunct	55–60	11
P6	HR Director	50–55	4
P7	HR Director	45–50	8
P8	Engineer	60–65	17
P9	Director	55–60	5
P10	HR Assistant	20–25	1
P11	HR Sector Head	50–55	7
P12	Service Head	50–55	6
P13	HR Service Head	55–60	8
P14	HR Business Partner	55–60	12
P15	Program Manager	45–50	10
P16	Engineer	40–45	9
P17	Legal Officer	40–45	7
P18	HR Sector Head	55–60	12
P19	HR Sector Head	50–55	4
P20	HR Business Partner	60–65	24

Table 2 Participants' characteristics (N = 20).

The sample intentionally overrepresents HR functions (eleven of twenty participants), which reflects the study's analytical focus on the interpretive practices through which workforce evidence is produced, framed, and circulated in a cantonal administration. This composition sharpens the study's grip on the internal HR signaling architecture, but limits the extent to

¹ In their current position, in years.

which the anticipations documented can be generalized to public employees outside HR functions. This trade-off is discussed further in Section 6. The question of sample size in qualitative research remains the object of methodological debate (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021; Saunders et al., 2018). In their systematic review of empirical tests, Hennink and Kaiser (2022) report that thematic saturation is typically reached between nine and seventeen interviews for studies with relatively homogeneous populations and focused research questions, with code saturation often achieved earlier than meaning saturation (Hennink et al., 2017). Recurrence of core thematic patterns was observed from approximately the twelfth interview onward, with subsequent interviews refining rather than transforming the analytical narrative.

3.3. INTERVIEW PROCEDURE

Semi-structured interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes (mean approximately 60 minutes). All interviews were conducted in French, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide opened with biographical questions and then explored four areas: general perceptions of AI-driven HR practices, anticipated organizational uses in a cantonal setting, perceived risks and benefits for the workforce, and expected reactions from political and managerial actors. The guide was kept flexible to allow participants to develop their own framings and to raise issues the guide had not anticipated. The full interview guide, translated into English, is provided in the Appendix.

3.4. ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six phases set out by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, search for themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and production of the report. Coding was inductive in the first instance, capturing the terms and framings used by participants, and was then progressively organized around the analytical anchors set out in Section 2.2. Analysis was iterative rather than linear: emerging themes were repeatedly tested against the full corpus, refined through memo-writing, and adjusted where verbatims resisted the initial coding. In the discussion, each of the first three subsections closes by condensing the corresponding findings into one or two propositions. These propositions are neither hypotheses tested in this study nor claims about the prevalence of the patterns observed, but theoretically informed statements of the mechanisms the analysis brings to light, which aim at analytical rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 2018) and are formulated to be tested in other administrations and with quantitative designs.

3.5. ETHICS, DATA PROTECTION AND LANGUAGE

All participants signed an informed consent form specifying the research aims, the voluntary nature of participation, the possibility of withdrawal at any point, the audio-recording and transcription procedure, and the anonymization protocol applied to publications. Personal data were handled in accordance with the revised Swiss Federal Act on Data Protection. Anonymization removed direct identifiers, aggregated age into five-year brackets, rounded tenure to the nearest year, and suppressed departmental affiliations. Verbatim quotations presented in this article were translated from French into English by the author, and back-translation of key passages was performed to verify semantic fidelity. Original French verbatims are retained in the study documentation and can be made available on reasonable request, subject to the anonymization constraints described above.

4. RESULTS

4.1. A CONDITIONAL, DIFFERENTIATED OPENNESS

Across roles and hierarchical positions, participants did not oppose AI-driven HR analytics in principle. Their openness was conditional and framed by a fine-grained distinction between recruitment uses, which most participants accepted as broadly beneficial, and evaluation uses, where the objection was directed not at the technology itself but at what political and managerial actors would do with its outputs (Strohmeier, 2022; Tambe et al., 2019).

4.1.1. Recruitment: A Broadly Endorsed Use

Recruitment was the first use participants turned to when asked which HR activities AI could serve in their administration, and the area in which they most readily endorsed AI-driven tools. An HR Director described its operational logic in precise terms: *“When we open a secretarial position, we receive more than 250 applications on average, and these tools help us go from 250 down to 30, so we can focus our analytical effort on the best 30 candidates”* (P7). The same participant recounted a blind comparative test between AI-assisted shortlisting and experienced human recruiters: *“There was a certain concordance between the two, except that the tool had taken ten seconds, and they had taken three days”* (P7). Another HR Director grounded the endorsement in the matching task: *“It’s very binary for me. For recruitment, it seems fine, because it can say: he has the diploma, he doesn’t have the diploma, he has five years of experience, he doesn’t”* (P6). Algorithmic bias was located upstream in human parameter-setting rather than in the technology: *“It’s the human who reproduces his own biases in the machine”* (P3). This endorsement, echoed across roles (P1, P2, P5, P10, P18, P19), was framed as a quality-of-process issue rather than an intrusion, and was conditional on the preservation of human discretion downstream: *“As long as I can fish out the files. If I have 400 applications, and the AI eliminates 350 of them, I would not be happy”* (P6). A more cautious voice raised risks of organizational dehumanization (Caesens et al., 2017) tied to applicant stress and to the exclusion of atypical profiles (P11), but the principled openness held.

4.1.2. Evaluation: A Different Attributional Register

Evaluation use cases, from AI-based performance evaluation to the real-time tracking of employee mood, triggered a different attributional register. The same HR Director who had endorsed AI for recruitment drew the line at AI-based performance evaluation: *“If we think that afterwards we will manage people with a number, a score, some coefficient or other, if we think it can do away with the entire work of proximity management, I believe we are mistaken”* (P7). A Business Partner with twenty years of HR experience expressed skepticism about real-time mood tracking, finding such tools invasive because they presuppose a managerial maturity that public sector hierarchies in the canton have not yet acquired (P14). Comparable concerns surfaced across the corpus (P1, P4, P5, P15) around the irreplaceability of a manager physically present to a team and around the relational dimension of appreciation. Other voices positioned themselves differently. A Scientific Adjunct framed AI-based evaluation as potentially protective, arguing that it could reduce the subjectivity of periodic evaluations conducted repeatedly by the same manager (P2). A Program Manager articulated a similar conditional openness (P15). What these divergent positions share is the same principle: whether the technology is read in a *commitment-focused* or a *control-focused* register depends on where the participant stands in the managerial configuration and on what they anticipate the tool will be used for. From above the tool, the fear is of losing proximity management; from below, the hope is of gaining protection from the arbitrariness of a single evaluator.

A recurring concern about the behavioral gaming of textual data reinforced the same structure. An HR Director observed: *“If it’s linked to verbatim, that is, to textual data that people enter in and that they know about, then they’re going to pervert the thing by putting in any old nonsense”* (P7). An HR Business Partner described the same anticipatory strategy from the employee’s perspective: *“I would be capable of putting up post-its with all the words I shouldn’t use, I would have template emails ready where I would change just one or two words”* (P20). Far from being a refusal of the tool, these statements articulate the behavioral consequence of a *control-focused attribution*: when individuals expect that data will be used to monitor rather than to develop, they pre-emptively protect themselves through gaming, a mechanism documented in the broader literature on gaming under perceived monitoring (Bankins et al., 2022; Giermendl et al., 2022; Newman et al., 2020). The temporal sequence matters: the attribution forms first, the behavior follows. Here again, the objection was directed not at the technology itself but at what political and managerial actors would do with its outputs, a concern participants grounded in how their administration already handles the workforce evidence it produces.

4.2. WORKFORCE EVIDENCE PRODUCED BUT NOT ACTED UPON

Across the corpus, participants trace a consistent pattern in which HR services collect data, prepare presentations, and then watch the resulting evidence dissolve in the institutional chain. The pattern extends to precisely the categories of workforce evidence that the strategic HRM literature identifies as central to psychosocial risk management in public administrations: sickness absenteeism ([Mastekaasa, 2020](#); [Pihl-Thingvad et al., 2024](#)), burnout risk ([Maslach & Leiter, 2016](#)), and interpersonal conflict within teams ([De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008](#); [De Wit et al., 2012](#)). Participants describe an administration that is aware of these categories, produces evidence about them, and does not use that evidence to sustain change.

The gap between data collection and consequence surfaced across multiple types of evidence. A Program Manager observed that *“position revaluations happen when people leave”* (P1), describing a Senior Specialist reclassified upward only after his departure despite an obvious salary gap sustained for years. An HR Director illustrated the same pattern through a university course rated poor across satisfaction surveys for a decade with no change in content or outcomes; the data existed, the verdict was clear, no action followed (P7). Exit interview forms *“which we do absolutely nothing with”* (P20), and a competence evaluation system unchanged in substance for several decades despite recurrent diagnoses of its limits (P14), converged on the same diagnosis. Absenteeism monitoring and psychosocial risk indicators were described in similar terms: quantified, tabulated, presented in dashboards, and then absorbed without organizational response (P4, P13). The information exists; what is missing is the institutional follow-through.

Interpersonal conflict within teams surfaced as an especially telling site of this dynamic. An HR Director recounted that, in an internal survey of ten team members in a department experiencing acknowledged interpersonal difficulties, *“out of the ten, I learned that there were four who didn’t want to tell the truth, so they coordinated, all four of them, to answer that everything was fine”* (P6). She framed this not as individual cowardice but as an organizational adaptation to a context in which voicing concerns is perceived as futile or risky despite formal job security: *“Yet it’s the most secure place in terms of dismissal. And it’s where people are the most afraid”* (P6). Convergent observations reinforced this diagnosis across the corpus (P3, P5, P13, P20). The classic literature on organizational silence identifies the mechanism as a self-reinforcing cycle in which perceived voicelessness produces collective silence, which in turn reduces problem visibility ([Knoll et al., 2021](#); [Milliken et al., 2003](#); [Morrison, 2014](#)).

Structural mechanisms producing the gap are simultaneously managerial and political, and participants describe them as inseparable. An HR Sector Head described the cantonal administration as *“a mammoth, so it moves slowly”* and pointed to the electoral cycle, observing that after each election *“there’s a transfer market”* of executive councilors and their cabinets, with the result that *“it’s sometimes difficult to maintain continuity”* (P11). The Department of Finance was identified as a chokepoint through which any meaningful HR initiative must pass regardless of departmental affiliation (P1, P13). A particularly telling comparison came from an HR Director describing the long-delayed implementation of a cantonal HR reform: *“Twelve years, after twelve years, if it has not been implemented, that’s not for nothing”* (P6). A further layer operates through the strategic framing of HR data themselves. An HR Director recounted an academic study in which workplace satisfaction surveys had been mobilized by senior managers not to identify problems but to justify the status quo: *“There is a study in which the person used satisfaction surveys for political purposes, to plead in favour of the argument that everything was fine”* (P4). Another HR Director articulated the dialectical nature of this instrumentalization: *“politicians need figures. We are forced to have figures to answer the questions. We are obliged to produce data to defend ourselves, protect ourselves, justify ourselves”* (P13), adding: *“It comes from the fact that politicians want to understand and to supervise, and not to give budget”* (P13). What participants describe is therefore not an absence of HR evidence but a pattern in which its production and framing are already subject to political curation, a form of *strategic ignorance* ([McGoey, 2012](#); [Van der Voet & Lerusse, 2024](#)).

4.3. THE ANTICIPATED FATE OF AI-DRIVEN HR ANALYTICS

The third theme draws the first two together. If participants are open in principle to AI-driven HR analytics, and if they observe that their administration already absorbs conventional sources

of HR evidence without acting on them, the relevant question becomes what they anticipate would happen to AI-driven HR analytics specifically once introduced into this configuration. The participants' answer is precise and convergent: they anticipate that evaluative AI tools would be absorbed in the same way.

The most articulate diagnosis came from a Business Partner with twenty years of HR experience. Drawing a deliberately provocative parallel, she warned against the kind of HR modernization that adds visible artefacts without changing the underlying managerial reality: *"It's just like putting in a foosball table, and then behind it, we are mistreated or exploited"* (P14). She was explicit about the mechanism: *"It's when there is an incoherence between the measures, or precisely, this type of tool, and then afterwards, their everyday, where perhaps there is no trust, where there is mistreatment"* (P14). And she predicted the temporal trajectory: even where managers are nominally trained to use a new HR tool well, *"if the manager is rather in a form of control or authoritarianism, their natural tendency comes back at a gallop. We will talk about it for a few months, but for me, that is not enough"* (P14).

The same anticipated trajectory was articulated through the vocabulary of organizational fashion (Abrahamson, 1991; Sturdy, 2004). A long-tenured HR Director framed AI-driven HR analytics as the latest in a sequence of management trends that fail to take root: *"Or it's just a fashion effect. It will never take hold if there isn't a need, a culture, something that matched. After three months, it's gone, yes, that's what they call management fashion"* (P6). Announced HR practices, absent follow-through, become themselves a signal that employees learn to read (Peeters et al., 2020).

A more hopeful anticipation surfaced in parallel. One HR Director expressed the possibility that bringing to light *"elements that would really be recurrent, and then where people could no longer say no"* would constitute a substantive change, precisely because *"there are things that are, scientifically, irrefutable. It remains data that has been collected"* (P13). The attributional shift described here is theoretically consequential, but it is conditional, and the condition is institutional rather than technological.

Participants converged on a structural diagnosis of the conditions under which AI-driven HR analytics could escape the absorption pattern. The production and circulation of HR data would need to be institutionally decoupled from the standard hierarchical chain. An HR Business Partner articulated this proposal in terms drawn from the tradition of independent public audit bodies, arguing that *"what I find interesting is that this should be centralized in an instance with a very neutral and distant gaze"* (P20), leaving open whether such an instance should be internal or external to the administration provided its independence from the operational hierarchy is preserved. Further participants insisted that HR data must be organized so that they cannot be diverted or personally appropriated by any single actor (P8, P13, P16, P17), an institutional design capable of producing *distinctive, consistent, and consensual* HRM signals (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Krafft et al., 2022). Absent such an arrangement, participants anticipate that AI-driven tools will not, on their own, break the pattern documented in the previous section. They anticipate the opposite: absorbed into the existing configuration, they would add a visible layer of modernization to a managerial reality that has not changed.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. ATTRIBUTIONAL DIFFERENTIATION FORMED IN ANTICIPATION

The differentiated openness documented in Section 4.1 is the empirical signature of attributional processes at work before any deployment, as the first expectation derived from the framework anticipated. HR attribution theory holds that employees do not receive HR practices as neutral facts but ascribe intent to them, and that this ascription determines their downstream effects on engagement, performance, and resistance (Hu et al., 2025; Nishii & Wright, 2007; Nishii et al., 2008). The recruitment/evaluation distinction observed in this study tracks the classic *commitment-focused/control-focused* split, with recruitment interpreted as an investment in fair and efficient hiring and evaluation interpreted as an instrument of managerial control. The theoretically consequential point is that participants formed these attributions in anticipation, from the broader signals their administration has already sent, and not in response to any observed practice. This confirms recent empirical work suggesting that attributional processes

are activated well before implementation and are shaped by the signaling architecture within which the practice is announced (Beijer et al., 2021; Hewett et al., 2019; Vuorenmaa et al., 2023). The pre-emptive behavioral gaming documented at the end of Section 4.1 illustrates the same anticipatory dynamic in its behavioral form, consistent with recent evidence that fear of datafication is mediated by the perceived legitimacy of data collection processes and by the attributions employees form about organizational intent (Rigamonti et al., 2025). A first proposition summarizes this pattern.

Proposition 1. In public administrations characterized by visible patterns of unused workforce evidence, employee openness to AI-driven HR analytics is conditional on the anticipated institutional follow-through rather than on attitudes toward the technology itself. Reservations expressed at the prospect of implementation are best read as anticipatory attributions in the sense of Nishii et al. (2008) about organizational and political intent, formed in advance of practice deployment from the broader signals the organization has already sent.

5.2. A RELATIONAL EQUILIBRIUM OF STRATEGIC IGNORANCE

The pattern documented in Section 4.2, in which HR evidence about absenteeism, burnout, and interpersonal conflict is produced but not acted upon, meets each of the criteria that distinguish *strategic ignorance* from passive inertia (Alvesson et al., 2022; Jalonen, 2024; McGoe, 2012, 2019; Schaefer, 2019). The phenomenon is sustained across multiple levels of the administration, from cabinet-level political decisions through HR services down to team-level employee silence. It is relational rather than individual: no single actor produces it, and removing any one actor would not dismantle it. And it operates as a stable equilibrium that has absorbed every conventional source of HR evidence the administration produces, from exit interviews to satisfaction surveys to multi-year reform diagnoses. This pattern is not reducible to bureaucratic inertia (Hannan & Freeman, 1984), which describes a residual sluggishness rather than an active management of visibility, nor to resource constraints, since the consistent direction of budgetary choices, away from problems that would document policy failures, is itself what calls for explanation. Read against the framework set out earlier, this configuration instantiates the three system-strength weaknesses at the empirical level: the *distinctiveness* of HR practices collapses in the participants' account of workforce evidence produced without downstream consequence (P1, P4, P14, P20), *consistency* collapses in their descriptions of announced HR priorities diverging systematically from observable political attention (P6, P11, P13), and *consensus* collapses in the structurally different beliefs HR functions, line managers, and political principals hold about what workforce data are for (P4, P6, P13). Two complementary propositions capture this pattern. The first characterizes the equilibrium itself. The second specifies its consequences for HRM system strength.

Proposition 2a. In public administrations, the absorption of conventional HR evidence into stable patterns of politico-administrative avoidance constitutes a relational equilibrium of strategic ignorance, sustained jointly by political risk aversion at the executive level, administrative caution at the HR-service level, and employee silence at the operational level, that no single actor produces and that removing any one actor would not dismantle.

Proposition 2b. This equilibrium translates into weak HRM system strength across the three meta-features of distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus simultaneously, such that any new HR practice, AI-driven or otherwise, is received through the interpretive frame the equilibrium has already established.

5.3. INSTITUTIONAL DECOUPLING AS SCOPE CONDITION

The two preceding readings combine into the analytical claim that participants themselves articulated most clearly, which corresponds to the second expectation derived from the framework. Because attributions form in anticipation and because the pre-existing configuration is a *strategic-ignorance equilibrium* capable of absorbing HR evidence regardless of its technical sophistication, AI-driven HR analytics introduced without a change to the surrounding architecture will not, on their own, break the pattern; they will extend it. This claim is consistent with the broader public administration literature on AI adoption, which converges on the diagnosis that technological readiness precedes but does not determine effective deployment (Angrave et al., 2016; Neumann et al., 2024; Van der Voet & Lerusse, 2024; Wirtz et al., 2020). The

scope condition under which AI-driven HR analytics could function as a *commitment-focused* practice in cantonal administrations is institutional rather than technological: the production and circulation of HR data would need to be organized in ways that insulate them from the standard hierarchical chain, along the lines participants themselves outlined by analogy with independent public audit bodies (P8, P20). Absent such an arrangement, more sophisticated tools would be received through the same attributional register that participants already apply to conventional workforce evidence and would further weaken HRM system strength by visibly modernizing the production of evidence while leaving unchanged the routines that determine what is done with it. This scope condition concerns primarily the evaluation-oriented uses of AI-driven HR analytics, whose outputs document the state of the workforce, whereas participants endorsed recruitment uses without comparable reservations. A third proposition summarizes this scope condition.

Proposition 3. Absent an institutional arrangement that decouples the production and circulation of HR data from the standard politico-administrative chain, AI-driven HR analytics in public administrations subject to electoral accountability are anticipated to weaken HRM system strength further across all three meta-features, by visibly modernizing the production of workforce evidence while leaving unchanged the managerial-political routines that determine what is subsequently done with it.

5.4. FROM TECHNICAL READINESS TO POLITICO-ADMINISTRATIVE COURAGE

The joint reading of the three findings supports a substantive contribution to the literature on HR analytics in public administration. The strategic HRM literature has documented technical and competency-based barriers to HR analytics maturity in considerable detail (Angrave et al., 2016; Rasmussen & Ulrich, 2015; Revillod, 2024a; Sharma et al., 2025). The findings presented here identify a barrier that is qualitatively distinct from these: the political willingness of decision-makers to receive and to act upon workforce evidence, which employees read in advance of any deployment through the attributions they form about political intent. Bridging HR attribution theory and HRM system strength theory with *strategic ignorance* provides a lens through which this barrier becomes observable, both in the anticipations employees articulate and in the institutional signals that shape those anticipations. The practical corollary is direct. Successful adoption of AI-driven HR analytics in politically accountable public administrations requires not only technical readiness and data literacy (Neumann et al., 2024; Revillod, 2024a) but also *politico-administrative courage* (Kelman et al., 2016; Mert & Burlacu, 2026): the willingness of elected officials and senior administrators to receive workforce evidence they might prefer not to see and to be held accountable for acting upon it. Without this component, technological modernization risks being read by employees as the latest instance of the pattern they already observe, in which the visible production of workforce evidence coexists with its systematic absorption. This lens has implications for the Swiss cantonal setting specifically, but it extends to any politically accountable administration in which HR practices are embedded in a layered chain of political and administrative filtering.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings carry implications at two operational levels. At the level of cantonal HR governance, the practical corollary of the courage argument is that the production and circulation of HR evidence need to be organized in ways that make political non-response visible and consequential rather than costless. Drawing on the tradition of independent public audit bodies, participants themselves outlined the principle of such an arrangement, namely a centralized HR oversight instance with standing access to workforce data and an explicit mandate to publish findings regardless of their political reception. Whether such an instance is internal or external to the administration is a secondary question, provided its independence from the operational hierarchy is preserved (Wirtz et al., 2020). This requirement bears primarily on evaluation-oriented uses, whereas recruitment uses, which participants already endorse, offer a less politically exposed entry point for AI-driven HR analytics. At the level of HR services themselves, the implications are equally substantive. Data literacy among HR practitioners and line managers is a precondition for AI-driven analytics to be discussed in evidence-based rather

than impressionistic terms (Gerber et al., 2024). Communication of analytical findings within the administration matters as much as the findings themselves, since the same evidence can be received as a control instrument or as a developmental tool depending on the interpretive framing employees and managers bring to it. And the articulation between HR analytics outputs and the everyday managerial conversation, particularly around evaluation and feedback, is the practical site where *commitment-focused* attributions are built or undermined. None of these operational implications substitutes for institutional decoupling; they specify what HR services can do within the conditions the institutional architecture creates.

6.2. LIMITATIONS

Four limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study draws on anticipatory perceptions rather than on lived experience of AI-driven HR tools. While this design is appropriate for the research question and consistent with the attribution literature, which holds that interpretive frames are formed in advance of practice implementation (Hewett et al., 2019; Vuorenmaa et al., 2023), the findings do not allow inference about how perceptions evolve once tools are operational. Second, the empirical material is drawn from a single cantonal administration, which limits cross-cantonal and cross-national inference, even if the mobilization of complementary lenses at multiple levels of analysis offers some analytical leverage against this constraint (Cunningham, 2021). Third, the qualitative design, while suited to the interpretive depth required by the research question, does not permit causal claims about the relationship between political-administrative configurations and employee attributions. Fourth, the sample composition, which intentionally overrepresents HR functions, sharpens the study's grip on the internal HR signaling architecture but limits the extent to which the anticipations documented can be generalized to public employees outside HR functions. The size of the sample also precludes a meaningful comparison of anticipations across age groups, a relationship that larger samples, notably in quantitative designs, could examine.

6.3. FUTURE RESEARCH

Three avenues follow. Longitudinal studies that follow the actual deployment of AI-driven HR tools in cantonal public administrations would allow systematic comparison between anticipated and lived attributions, in line with the staged adoption frameworks now established for AI in Swiss public organizations (Neumann et al., 2024) and HRM (Revillod, 2024b). Comparative studies across cantons and across national contexts would permit the testing of the political-institutional mechanisms identified here under varying accountability configurations and would extend work on the cross-national determinants of AI adoption in the public sector (Mikalef et al., 2019). Such studies could also examine whether political willingness to introduce AI is greater in recruitment than in evaluation, as the differentiated openness documented here suggests. And quantitative work measuring HRM system strength and HR attributions before and after the deployment of AI-driven HR analytics, drawing on the validated instruments available for both constructs (Hu et al., 2025; Meier-Barthold et al., 2023), would provide a complementary empirical test of the integrative framework and of the propositions articulated in this article and would specify the conditions under which anticipatory perceptions translate into post-implementation attributions. Beyond its analytical reach, this last line of inquiry would help determine whether the *strategic-ignorance equilibrium* documented here is structurally specific to politically accountable administrations or whether comparable dynamics operate in other large bureaucratic settings. One participant captured the entire argument in a single line: *"For now, my very modest experience shows that we are rarely capable of doing much with this data. And so, we end up with pretty presentations where we say we put this in place, we have modernized, we are at the cutting edge of technology. And then, so what?"* (P7).

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The interview data cannot be made publicly available because participants were guaranteed anonymity and the full transcripts could allow the identification of participants and the administration under study. Original French excerpts are available from the author upon reasonable request, subject to the anonymization constraints described above.

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix.** Interview Guide. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ssas.244.s1>

ETHICS AND CONSENT

All participants signed an informed consent form prior to their interview. Personal data were handled in accordance with the revised Swiss Federal Act on Data Protection.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author designed the study, conducted the interviews, analyzed the data, and wrote the manuscript.

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