

The HR Practitioner

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Abstract: How does the practice of HR differ from what you read about in the textbooks? The role that HR practitioners play in organizations is changing because of the trends in the organizational context related to technology, social demographics, skills shortages, and the speed of change. All HR practitioners should have a keen interest in the latest thinking in their profession. However, what sets the best practitioners apart is the ability to apply their HR knowledge pragmatically and sympathetically to the context within which their organization is operating in order to contribute to adding value to the organization.

This article provides a guide to becoming a commercially aware HR practitioner, supporting the HR practitioner to apply his or her HR knowledge pragmatically and sympathetically to the context within which his or her organization is operating.

Keywords: HR Business Partner, Human Capital Theory, Human Resources, Human Resource Management

INTRODUCTION

Many human resource (HR) practitioners have studied human resource management (HRM) at college or university, as part of a business degree, a diploma in HRM, or in working toward a professional membership with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM), or the Human Resource Certification Institute (HRCI), and achieving a qualification is to be celebrated. However, once leaving the hallowed halls of learning and securing a job in HR, many HR practitioners discover that HR in practice is nothing like what they read about in textbooks. It comes as no surprise that many HR practitioners forget the four-box models, theories, and definitions you diligently repeated in the exams as they have no day-to-day practical application to the day job. However, while many will be nodding their heads in agreement, it would be foolish to believe that theory has no place in the workplace. In fact, it's quite the opposite; all HR practitioners should have a keen interest in the latest thinking in their profession, and theory-led practice is essential to being a good practitioner. What sets

the best practitioners apart is the ability to apply their HR knowledge pragmatically and sympathetically to the context within which their organization is operating.

The HR Business Partner

Ulrich (1997) introduced the concept of business partnering as a way of supporting HR to focus on what it delivered rather than what it did. His Multiple Role Model for HRM introduced four outcomes that he perceived to be important, which were translated in practice into different job roles, resulting in 95 percent of HR function restructuring and transformation (Orion, 2016):

- **Strategy execution:** Becoming more strategic appears on the surface both trite and obvious. In essence it is about aligning the HR activity and the HR function to the business strategy, hence the rush to develop the role of the HR Business Partner. But, this may be limiting, because in many ways HR can, and should, contribute to the development of business strategy as well.
- **Administrative efficiency:** A huge proportion of day-to-day HR activity is essential administration of transactional services. These can be delivered via a shared service center, or via a self-serve intranet system.
- **Employee contribution:** Using best practice HR in specialist areas such as organizational development, people resourcing, reward, employee relations, and learning and development. Developing centers of excellence, which provides first-class HR advice and services to the organization.
- **Capacity to change:** Often parceled out to consultants or project roles, developing the capacity to change within organizations is often confined to change management rather than, as Ulrich intended, developing the people resource to be agile, resilient, and flexible.

The Three-Legged Stool

Ulrich's model led to the development of the three-legged model approach, which separated HR into three components: shared service centers, business partner, and centers of expertise. Orion (2014)

researched the impact of 18 years of Ulrich on the HR function. The report found that "HR staff ratios, levels of HR expertise and commercial awareness" (Orion, 2014, p. 28) had all improved significantly. However, the financial resource dedicated to transforming HR and improving administration efficiency was made at the cost of investing in talent processes reducing the opportunity to add commercial value to the business strategy. The issue is that the implementation of Ulrich's model was focused on what HR did, the job roles, rather than what outcomes HR should be aiming to deliver to the organization. A second issue is that many business partners do not have the opportunity to be more strategic, or at least lack the wherewithal to create the opportunity to be more strategic.

So What?

The key contribution that Ulrich made was not a lovely four-box model, nor the tremendous influence that the model had on the organizational redesign of numerous HR departments, rather it was what was forgotten about in the hurry to relabel HR officers as business partners in the hope of getting HR being taken seriously by the business. No, the real contribution that Ulrich made was what he proposed in his model—the focus on the outcomes. HR practitioners, regardless of whether they are entry-level professionals, HR Directors fighting for their seat at the boardroom table, or somewhere in between; whether generalists or specialists, have a responsibility to execute strategy, be efficient in playing their role, create an environment where employees can contribute value to the organization, and ensure that the organization remains agile by building a capacity to change through the people resource.

Theory in Practice

The starting point for the HR practitioners therefore is to Begin with the End in Mind (Covey, 1989). Quite simply, HR practitioners must determine what outcomes they, and their practice, are going to deliver for the

organization. Covey (1989) states that this requires first a mental creation followed by a physical creation. HR practitioners need to use their imagination to create a vision for their practice. Each day, interaction, meeting, job task, project, program, and strategy will have its own envisioned outcome too, but the HR practitioners must be clear on their core purpose in order to ensure that their practice is centered on purposeful endeavor. To help clarify purposeful practice, explore the following questions:

1. What parts of HR practice make you most happy and leave you feeling fulfilled? (Consider activities, people, events, projects, etc.)
2. What parts of your practice make you lose track of time?
3. What activities make you feel great about your ability and yourself personally?
4. What skills, abilities do you possess that you are naturally good at?
5. What would you regret not doing?
6. What knowledge, experience, or skills do people come to you for?
7. What legacy would you like your HR practice to have?
8. What are you most passionate about when it comes to HR's contribution to the organization?
9. What values and beliefs are important to you?
10. What causes do you connect with most?
11. What challenges and difficulties in your HR practice are you facing or have you faced in the past? How have you overcome problems before?
12. How could you use your whole self (talent, passion, belief) to enhance your HR practice?
13. What can you contribute?
14. What do you want to do?
15. What is the result that you want to create?

Summary

- Having secured a job in HR many HR practitioners discover that HR in practice is nothing like what they read about in textbooks.
- All HR practitioners should have a keen interest in the latest thinking in their

profession, and theory-led practice is essential to being a good practitioner.

- The implementation of Ulrich's model was focused on what HR did rather than what outcomes HR should be aiming to deliver to the organization.
- HR practitioners have a responsibility to execute strategy, be efficient in the administration of their role, create an environment where employees can contribute value to the organization, and ensure that the organization remains agile by building a capacity to change through the people resource.
- HR practitioners must be clear on their core purpose in order to ensure that their practice is centered on purposeful endeavor.

GET CURIOUS A Metaphor

Driving a car and learning to drive are two separate things. Students will learn the mechanics of driving a car; mirror, signal, maneuver; three-point turns and reverse parking, but they won't learn to drive until they have passed the test and begin to apply the things they have learned. Effective driving happens when the physical skill of driving is coupled with the mental skills linked to intuitive understanding, good decision-making, control, and technique.

Reading about HR in textbooks informs HR practitioners about the procedures required to do HR in the business; applying this knowledge will begin the process of learning. However, mental skill development requires that HR practitioners continue developing their knowledge base. They must be curious about what, why, when, who, where, and how in order to contribute to releasing the human resource potential to deliver sustainable organizational performance.

Why Curiosity?

Curiosity provides the input from which the HR practitioner can deliver actionable insights and solutions, prioritize and tailor HR best practice to the organization, comprehend why people behave the way

they do, and understand the organization and the organizational context. Curiosity doesn't require access to the university library, nor necessarily access to professional member resources, although these are terrific assets. Fry (2011) said, "Information is all around us, now more than ever before in human history. You barely have to stir or incommode yourself to find things out. The only reason people don't know much is because they do not care to know. They are incurious. Incuriosity is the oddest and most foolish failing there is."

A curious HR practitioner will actively seek out answers, because they are constantly asking questions, their mind is continually being exercised, seeking out new ideas, creating new opportunities, and evolving possibilities. If anyone thinks that HR practice was boring, transactional, and routine, they have never met an HR practitioner who is curious. Curious HR practitioners are constantly embarking on another adventure.

Strategic Dialogue Model

Van den Berg and Pietersma (2014) introduced an integrated eight-step model for developing and implementing a strategy focused on content and process. At its core is the Strategic Dialogue Model (SDM), an iterative process of exploration, discussion, and choice, which results in a good understanding of the organizational context, strategic insight based on an analysis of opportunities and barriers to create options, and implementing the correct methods of engagement. Strategic success using the SDM is based on the following formula:

Formulation × Mobilization × Realization

The iterative process comprises eight steps:

1. **Searchlight:** Consider what the strategic aspiration is, the goal of the process, program, or task at hand, searchlight sets the scope of the action being explored.

2. **Outside-in—the scenarios:** Examine anticipated futures, strategic position, or business environment.
3. **Inside-out—the analysis:** Analyze the capability to deliver possible strategic options: Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities. This includes a process of examining different perspectives and assumptions of key stakeholders.
4. **Options:** Recognize the certainties and uncertainties of each option, identifying the realistic options to take forward. Question comfortable or familiar ideas and strategic responses.
5. **Choice:** Develop a business case, including examining feasibility, cost/benefit analysis, and risk analysis, to decide on the best strategic option. Consider unintended consequences of decisions made.
6. **Operationalization:** Generate an implementation process with a detailed plan of execution, which identified short-term wins, medium-term goals, and long-term objectives. Construct a commitment for the implementation plan.
7. **Execution:** Implement the plan and take action.
8. **Monitoring:** Evaluate the performance of implementing the plan, determining the outcomes, and assess the delivery against strategy.

The strength of the SDM is that it specifically identifies the need to expand the examination of possible strategic options, and employees' dialogue with key stakeholders to incorporate different viewpoints into the process and develop a strong sense of ownership of the choice made.

So What?

Chamorro-Premuzic (2014) states that having a hungry mind or high curiosity quotient (CQ) is important to tolerating ambiguous organizational environments. Being inquisitive results in thinking, which can deal with complexity. He goes on to argue that CQ supports the production of "simple solutions to complex solutions"

and “leads to higher levels of intellectual investment and knowledge acquisition over time.” Curiosity is not simply having an open mind or being observant, although these are attributes that help with curiosity. Curiosity is about being purposeful in finding things out in order to be innovative. SDM offers a simple, iterative eight-step process that HR practitioners can follow in order to develop their thinking and be purposefully curious.

Theory in Practice

Whether the organization is facing a challenge right now or not, the HR practitioner must engage in a continuous learning process, developing their ability to systematically innovate their HR practice, produce options that will be owned by key stakeholders, and implement the chosen solutions quickly. CQ can be developed to

- Determine an issue as a focus for your curiosity.
- Develop a reliable and credible collection of sources and resources to access and converse with to collect data and information as part of SDM.
- Continuously review data and information relating to changes that are taking place, trends, and new thinking.
- Be prepared to interview senior leaders to gain insight into the changes and strategic challenges that the organization is facing. Use these conversations to inform subsequent opportunities for dialogue with other information sources.
- Spend time developing facilitative questions that will create a rich dialogue with key stakeholders.
- Do something with the data gathered. Use information to develop and assess different scenarios, building business cases and developing options for actions.
- Work through the consequences of each scenario, conversing with different people to ensure different perspectives are considered and possible consequences of various actions are considered fully. Co-opt other people to help identify blind spots.

- Execute the plan, but stay curious. Examine what is working, and what is not working, assess the planning, process, and outcomes.
- Evaluate the results and ask questions as to whether those results are aligned to expectations, and regardless of success or failure what can be learned from the process.

Summary

- Mental skill development requires that the HR practitioner continues developing their knowledge base.
- Curiosity provides the input from which the HR practitioner can deliver actionable insights and solutions.
- A curious HR practitioner will actively seek out answers, because they are constantly asking questions, their mind is continually being exercised, seeking out new ideas, creating new opportunities, and evolving possibilities.
- The SDM is an iterative process of exploration, discussion, and choice that results in a good understanding, strategic insight, creating options, and implementation.
- Being inquisitive results in thinking, which can deal with complexity.

BECOME THE BRIDGE

Many business leaders criticize HR for being out of touch with business, a siloed function that is so focused on HR that it doesn't contribute to the organization, rather it gathers a reputation for being a corporate policeman in regard to employee regulation, failing to get the basics right, not being responsive enough, lacking an understanding of business basics; the list goes on.

The first module in any HRM study is focused on the business context. Understanding the business environment, Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal and Environmental (PESTLE), Porters Five Forces, The General and Task Environments, Stakeholder Analysis. HR practitioners need a grasp of the organizational environment and business trends as much as they need to understand human resources. The issue is

very often that HR practitioners learn about business in a theoretical sense and return to the workplace to do HR, not business. By failing to apply the knowledge, it gets stored somewhere in the recesses of the brain, long forgotten by the time the opportunity and need arise to develop a strategy aligned to business. The issue is that there is a separation between the idea of business and management theory and HR practice, when in fact both are, and should be, intimately intertwined.

The term HR business partner names an outcome that is important for all HR practitioners regardless of rank, if their practice is going to be powerful. Effective practitioners bridge the gap between HR and the Business, but the most important word to focus on is partner.

[pahrt-ner]

noun

1. A person who shares or is associated with another in some action or endeavor; sharer; associate.

(*Dictionary.com*)

HR business partnering, therefore, isn't simply about a role; it is HR working with business in a shared endeavor to achieve business performance. Regardless of rank, every HR practitioner partners with the business; the HR administrator partners with business to carry out the administration of the business. The HR officer makes business decisions. The HR manager supports the management of business resources and the HR Director is in charge of a business function. HR therefore takes business actions, but just as finance is focused on financial resources, HR is focused on human resources. The bridge comprises of the human processes, resources, and practices so that the HR practitioner can offer advice and expertise in order to support the business.

Know Your Business

The reason why context is taught so early in an HRM qualification is because Human Resource Management is about business.

Organizations aren't buildings, production lines, or organizational charts, although they provide the physical manifestation of the organization. Organizations *are* people. They are the sum total of the human resource: the knowledge, skills, intellect, abilities, innovation, inventiveness, sociability, relationships, motivation, and action of every single individual within the business. Understanding how to utilize that resource is the key to unlocking the competitive advantage of the organization. Understanding the forces, both internal and external, that impact the people within the organization helps the HR practitioner to understand what support is required to protect, release, and manage the people resource to deliver sustainable organizational performance.

Conducting a PESTLE is useful, but the real need is for the HR practitioner to have a deep knowledge about the organization and its context. This means keeping a finger on the pulse of what is happening. When someone says that they don't know about business or they don't know about commerciality, what they are really saying is that they haven't been bothered to find out. Whether it is reading a quality newspaper or business journal, the industry-specific journals relating to the organization, or even reading regular updates coming out from the organization, including the annual report; information on what is happening is readily available. Being in touch means having the knowledge about what is happening in the context and speaking to key stakeholders on a regular basis about what this means to the organization. Commerciality requires the HR practitioner to get to grips with how the organization makes money, how it spends money, and the threats to the organization in regard to how it could potentially lose money. Becoming business savvy doesn't require financial wizardry—after all that is what Business Analysts are there for—but it does require a desire to inquire.

The output of the inquiry is the development of knowledge in regard to what the contextual demands on the organization

are, and as a result what response is required from the organization in order to survive, and thrive. It is at this point that HR becomes the bridge. The HR practitioner can link the business with the know-how regarding HR practice to provide answers in response to the business context.

Core Competencies Model

Prahalad and Hamel (1994) argued that understanding the core competencies unique to the organization was a key component of developing organizational strategy. In addition to considering the golden thread (CIPD, 2010), developing an insight into the strengths of the organization provides clarity of areas of focus to cultivate competitive advantage. The core competencies model furnishes management with a process to build core competencies, deliver customer benefits, negate imitation from competitors, and leverage competitive advantage. Prahalad and Hamel (1994) identified three core competencies:

- **Resources:** What inputs are available to the organization, which can be drawn on to add value to the organization's strategy.
- **Competence:** What internal developments does the organization possess that can be adapted or transferred to deliver competitive advantage.
- **Capability:** What qualities, systems, routines, capacity exist or have the potential for development that can be communicated as part of the organizational strategy. By focusing on the core competencies, the organization can pursue four strategic choices based on whether the core competence and market is new or existing.
 - **Premier plus 10:** The organization can develop a strategy to deploy a new core competence in an existing market 10 years in the future.
 - **Mega opportunities:** The organization moves into new territory, developing competencies and expanding the market reach.
 - **Fill in the blanks:** Organizations can choose to deploy their core competencies in particular existing markets to

strengthen the competitive advantage of the organization.

- **White spaces:** The organization can deploy core competencies in new markets, or identify core competencies that will be required in the future and create a strategy for the development of these competencies.

However, criticism of the core competencies model is focused on how core competencies can be defined, and whether they can in fact be identified, especially in regard to providing clarity in an unknown future.

So What?

Identifying core competencies provides management with process by which they can identify the strengths and capabilities, which exist within the organization, which will provide competitive advantage. Clarity of core competencies enables the organization to respond to the complex, dynamic, and fast-moving environment with agility and flexibility.

Theory in Practice

The core competencies model can be used by the HR practitioner to contribute to the development of the organizational strategy by supplying specific information as the human core competencies, which reside within the organization. This includes the knowledge, skills, and capability that can create competitive advantage.

- Asking how can human resources contribute to competitive advantage begins a journey of analysis, discovery, and diagnosis that leads to shared endeavor with the business.
- Recognize the core competencies of the human resource within the organization that can contribute to the development of the learning organization, by using the data relating to the knowledge skills and abilities to recognize, and facilitate the sharing of strengths to collectively develop new knowledge.
- People cannot be imitated by competitors and therefore are an essential element of core competencies within the organization.

Support the organization in understanding how utilizing the people resource can contribute considerably to the organizational strategic development.

- Provide an answer to the question, what competencies have to be developed in order to achieve competitive advantage, by understanding the organizational environment and providing a response based on the human resources capability within the organization.
- Compare the human resource capability within the organization with competitors and determine how to develop unique people capabilities.
- Create a human resource roadmap to set milestones for internal competence building.
- Analyze the possible competitive positioning of the organization to capitalize on human resource strengths.

Summary

- There is separation between the idea of business and management theory and HR practice, when in fact both are, and should be intimately intertwined.
- HR business partnering involves HR working with business in a shared endeavor to achieve business performance.
- Organizations *are* people. They are the sum total of the human resource: the knowledge, skills, intellect, abilities, innovation, inventiveness, sociability, relationships, motivation, and action of every single individual within the business.
- Becoming business savvy requires a desire to inquire.
- The HR practitioner can link the business with know-how regarding HR practice to provide answers in response to the business context.
- Developing an insight into the strengths of the organization provides clarity of areas of focus to cultivate competitive advantage.
- The core competencies model furnishes management with a process to build core competencies, deliver customer benefits, negate imitation from competitors, and leverage competitive advantage.

- Clarity of core competencies enables the organization to respond to the complex, dynamic, and fast-moving environment with agility and flexibility.

BUILD A NETWORK

For most HR practitioners, the word “networking” generates images of dimly lit hotel conference rooms, with soggy sandwiches and a cohort of overly friendly consultants who are there to sell their services. An HR practitioner’s network isn’t about excruciating faux socializing with creepy people on a Thursday night. A well-built network offers the HR practitioner a powerful information system that gives access to private sources of information, access to people with sought-after knowledge, skills, and abilities, a source of influence and authority, and the opportunity to acquire competence.

Internal Network

Knowing who in the organization is as important as what you know about the organization, because it can support creative problem solving, ensuring access to key information and can smooth the path for creative problem solving, and program implementation. Informal connections can very quickly form into formal project groups. Developing an internal web increases agency for HR activity and improves collaborative relationships between departments. Consider the following, for example.

Finance department: The finance department should become the HR practitioner’s key contact within the organization, since they can provide information in regard to the commercial data needed to develop a business case, return on investment calculations, and HR financial data. The Finance Director is a key stakeholder, certainly in terms of budget determination, but also in providing insight into the areas that have the largest impact on the profit performance of the organization.

Sales or business development: A key information source relating to the marketplace, competitors, and customer demands.

This department is also a good source of industry-related information, trends, and external forces, which are impacting the organization, positively or negatively.

Service or production: Depending on the type of organization, the service or production department will be able to highlight key trends in quality, product, and service problems and issues that are occurring including any barriers or restraints in being able to resolve the issues that are happening. This information provides key information into areas of the organization that are under stress or suffering skills shortages.

Logistics or distribution: With connections to both suppliers and customers, the logistics department has a clear picture of what is happening to other parts of the industry both in terms of challenges and opportunities that suppliers are experiencing and the end customer perspective on the marketplace. This extends knowledge of the market beyond the immediate organization perspective and extends the network out by another level.

Administration: The back-office functions can be the hub of the organization and gossip center in regard to performance issues across the organization. The department itself is usually at the center of the web connecting different departments to one another. This department is also a good source of information in regard to decisions being made elsewhere in the organization.

Management: Key decision-makers in the management teams have information about strategies, plans, and objectives, where the organization is going, and what the organization needs to achieve in regard to the future goals of the organization.

External Network

The external network is a personal network owned and built by the HR practitioner. It is within the external network that the HR practitioner will develop their personal power and authority. It widens access to

both information and resources. How the HR practitioners decide to develop their external network, and how much effort the HR practitioners dedicate to building a network will determine how powerful the HR practitioners' networks are. Developing an external network provides access to information, knowledge, and influence. Consider the following, for example.

Regulators: Regardless of the industry or sector that the organization operates in, there will be a regulator who creates rules that the organization needs to abide by. As a guardian of employee safety working alongside a body whose goal is safety and soundness is a no-brainer. Working together with the regulator enables HR to collaborate and find solutions to industrywide issues, allowing the organization to be at the forefront of addressing safety concerns and robust procedures.

Suppliers: HR will have a number of suppliers they work with, possibly part of outsourcing HR administration. Working in partnership with suppliers creates a greater understanding of the needs of the organization and a shared perspective in regard to success factors. Knowing how your suppliers operate and what their goals are will ensure a clarity about alignment and possible barriers to smooth working.

Professional bodies: Being a member of a professional body not only provides the HR practitioner with a professional recognition and the associated credibility but also access to information, the latest developments in the profession, career developments, and networking opportunities.

Trade bodies: Just as the HR professional body provides information, updates on developments and networking, so too do the trade bodies associated with the organizational sector. Networking within this industry provides access to individuals who could be potential candidates for recruitment opportunities.

Personal network: A personal network is a self-sustaining asset. This might include people you have worked with previously,

been introduced to, met at a seminar, conference or hobby, or through a friend of a friend, but expanding and maintaining a personal network of diverse professionals is more than just about developing valuable friendships and relationships; it expands a web of connections.

Social Network Theory

Katz et al (2004: 308) described a social network as “a set of actors (‘nodes’) and the relations (‘ties’ or ‘edges’) between these actors. The nodes may be individuals, groups, organizations or societies.” In simple terms a network is a set of relationships that are linked together. Social Network Theory (SNT) seeks to explain how and why people create, preserve, or discontinue ties, as well as explain the impact that networks have on an individual’s behavior, attitude, opportunities, and constraints. The focus is on whether people form networks based on self-interest, collective need, reliance on others, or a mutual bond with like-minded individuals. There are three types of networks identified in theory:

- **Ego-centric networks:** These are connected with a single node or relationship, such as good friends in firms that only do business with the organization and no one else.
- **Socio-centric networks:** These networks are networks within a closed boundary, for example, connections between colleagues in an office or participants in a workshop.
- **Open-system networks:** These networks have blurred boundaries and consist of connections that are not necessarily clear or obvious, they consist of chains of people or organizations.

The types of network will usually overlap with one another, and there will be relationships, which extend along components of different systems within the web of the network.

So What?

The study of networks is concerned with why networks exist, why individuals choose

to be connected and interact with other members of their network, how members interact, and how connected those members are. The researchers try to understand how a network works and offer an explanation as to why seemingly random people end up being connected. From the perspective of the HR practitioner, SNT provides the basis for the examination of the quality of the network that is in place. An individual might have thousands of followers on Twitter, friends on Facebook, and links on LinkedIn, but this doesn’t mean any interaction is taking place, nor that the network has any value in regard to delivering a powerful information system, access, or influence.

Theory in Practice

The SNT can be used by the HR practitioner to understand everything from how useful their connected relationships are to developing talent management and succession planning strategies and access to information, which can be a game changer in relation to HR practices or programs.

- Focus on building a network as a regular activity; don’t just leave it to when you are looking for a new job. Make a habit of reaching out to people that are interesting by sharing your interest in what they do.
- Avoid the tendency of contacting your network only when you want something. The panhandler approach to networking is transactional and superficial and dries up the flow of a network very quickly. Be a likeable presence instead of a manipulative pain in the backside.
- Do your homework when connecting with someone. Remember, networking isn’t about collecting followers, rather it’s about developing relationships and that requires a genuineness in making a connection, which requires mutual interest.
- Recognize those people who are your power contacts; these are individuals that have access, either to other useful contacts for you to be referred to, or to information. Place an emphasis on keeping in contact with power contacts and

make sure there is mutual support and exchange. This goes to the heart of the quality over quantity argument. Having the right people in your network is more important than having numerous meaningless contacts.

- Cut out the networking parasites. Just as you don't want to be the one only connecting to demand something, so too, the HR practitioner must cut out those individuals who are only interested in a directional relationships that draws from you and gives nothing in return.
- Build on what you already have. Review your current network and consider how you can potentially increase your web of influence. What opportunity do your existing connections currently offer you, and how can you develop your existing network?
- Follow up and keep in touch, make sure that you respond professionally and politely to messages from your network. Be reliable and professional in all your network relationships.

Summary

- A well-built network offers the HR practitioner a powerful information system that gives access to private sources of information, access to people, a source of influence and authority, and the opportunity to acquire competence.
- Informal connections can very quickly form into formal project groups.
- Developing an internal web increases agency for HR activity and improves collaborative relationships between departments.
- In simple terms, a network is a set of relationships that are linked together.
- From the perspective of the HR practitioner, SNT provides the basis for the examination of the quality of the network that is in place.

KNOW YOUR NUMBERS

In the section entitled "Become the Bridge," it was stated that "Becoming business savvy doesn't require financial wizardry,

after all that is what Business Analysts are there for. . ." but this doesn't excuse the HR practitioners from knowing their numbers. However, there is a difference between financial wizardry and understanding the impact on the organizational finances of decisions made regarding HR practice, and having knowledge of the organization's financial health, including the implication that this will have on HR practice. There is not a requirement for HR practitioners to become qualified accountants but there is a requirement to be able to read financial information and understand what that financial data mean.

Human Resources must represent the employee perspective; hold up the mirror to business leaders of the human cost of decisions being made; ensure that the organization focuses on employee relations to release human potential. But people are also a resource within the organization and HR has a key part to play in helping the organization realize the full value of the people asset, and that requires financial understanding.

The biggest source of conflict between HR and finance departments is the requirement to make key financial decisions to deliver strong quarterly earnings reports in the short term, while the incorporation of practices, which utilize the human element, requires long-term investment and strategic planning. For HR practitioners uncomfortable with finances, quantifying the outcomes of HR practices appears to be difficult, especially when determining how a program might impact profitability in the long run.

Perhaps the biggest opportunity for practitioners who get to know their numbers is to change the perception that HR is a cost center to viewing HR as a function that is directly adding value to the goals and success of the organization. A solid financial understanding will enable HR practitioners to quantify the impact that HR has on business performance and to provide important lesson on how the human side of the organization delivers a good return on investment.

Human Capital Theory

Becker (1964) proposed that human capital offers labor economics a form of capital, which is focused upon the skills of employees that have a market value. This may include knowledge, skills, or abilities, which have a direct impact on productivity for the organization. Viewing human resources as a capital asset means that any investment, whether in recruitment, engagement, or learning and development, can deliver a return in regard to organizational earnings. The focus of Becker's study was on how education and training were similar to other capital investments such as machinery or land. The output of such investment is improvements in productivity. OECD research (Dae-Bong, 2009) demonstrates that there is a clear link between investment in education and training and national economic growth. There are three methods to measure human capital:

- **Output-based approach:** This calculates the stock of human capital based upon the amount of training and education needed in order to be fully productive. The issue with this approach is that the connection between productivity and qualification is a tenuous one.
- **Cost-based approach:** This measures the investment in human capital, as a depreciated cost against human capital stock. The issue with this approach means that it is difficult to place a value on the knowledge, skills, and capabilities of human beings, many of which are intangible.
- **Income-based approach:** This is the return generated by the individual as a sum of the income against investment in education and training. Again this measure is difficult to quantify, which influence income generated by individuals that are directly related to investment in development.

Although there are difficulties in measuring the worth of human capital, return on investment, and specifically educational attainment and productivity, human development and well-being can be

measured against organizational performance metrics.

So What?

Human Capital Theory blends the human with the financial concerns of the organization, and emphasizes the human impact on the economic activities of the organization. This goes beyond people being part of the production cycle and driving improved efficiencies and utilization of human resources in regard to return on capital employed (ROCE). The key differentiator in developing human capital is the idea that investing in human resources creates value through growth in knowledge, skills, capability, creativity, and innovation, a value that cannot be imitated and creates undeniable competitive advantage.

Theory in Practice

HR practitioners must develop collaborative relationships with the finance department in order to understand how to create added value for the organization, calculate return on investment, and develop financial know-how to deliver competitive advantage.

- Learn to measure the impact of HR programs using return on investment measures. Include organizational performance metrics in the design of the HR evaluation tool kit.
- Cooperate and strengthen relationships with the finance department to develop strategies to improve employee productivity and engagement and deliver better organizational financial performance.
- Develop evaluation practices to ensure that any learning and development offered delivers a return on investment calculation (Foster, 2016).
- Develop the business case for HR interventions, explaining the investment risks and assumptions in regard to payback periods and opportunity cost.
- Review qualifications and education of the employee population and take stock as to what value training and education really add in regard to improved productivity.

Summary

- There is a requirement to be able to read financial information and understand what that financial data mean.
- People are a resource within the organization and HR has a key part to play in helping the organization realize the full value of the people asset.
- A solid financial understanding will enable HR practitioners to quantify the impact that HR has on business performance.
- Human Capital Theory proposes that education and training deliver improvements in productivity.

BRING THE FEELS

It is bemusing that many employees and managers accuse HR practitioners of being ineffective in their people skills. In many respects HR practitioners are no different from other managers in the organization in that the delayering of the 1990s have left individuals to both manage people and manage task. Unsurprising task usually gets in the way of good people management. For HR the burden of HR administration means that very often there is only capacity to deliver the HR policy and process with little room to be considerate or explore the emotional aspects of work.

HR practitioners have a dual responsibility when it comes to feelings and emotions within the organization. On the one hand they need to be masters at managing their own emotions, being calm and composed decision-makers and expertly managing stressful situations without being stressed or angry. On the other hand, HR practitioners have a responsibility to create a workplace environment that allows human emotions to be part of the fabric of organizational life.

Often individuals would be told that there is no room for emotion in professional life; in fact, a lot of effort is put into hiding emotions, ignoring them, or overriding conversations, which become emotion focused. The logical rational approach so feted by proponents of scientific management ignores a key aspect of human

behavior: emotions. But it is emotions that drive action and are at the center of releasing human potential. Attempting to quash negative emotions leads to negative challenge, resistance, and fear rather than resolution. Ignoring the importance of positive emotional well-being in driving innovation, commitment, creativity, and energy for change leads to a failure to move the organization forward.

The HR practitioner needs to educate organizational leaders on the benefits of allowing emotions to be part of the language of the organization, work to develop a work space that appeals to people's emotions, and role model a balanced approach to understanding the human element of human resources by modeling emotional intelligence.

Most pertinently, given that stress and anxiety problems are driving up absence levels within organizations, the HR practitioner must also ensure that the organization is prepared to proactively manage mental health issues and create a healthy and motivated workforce. Creating a culture when employees feel able to be open about their mental health, signaling that mental health matters, and leading in areas of mental health and support, including tackling discrimination, is part of the answer. HR practitioners must ensure that managers are trained and equipped with the tools they need to be proactive in intervening early for employees that are unwell, supporting employees who are absent due to mental health and their return to work through a people-centered approach focused on being sensitive to the needs of the individual. HR practitioners must also be available to manage the process of sickness absence, providing professional and practical advice to both the manager and employee.

Emotional Intelligence

Goleman (1996) popularized and expanded research by Salovey and Mayer (1990), who coined the term Emotional Intelligence (EI or EQ), which is the ability of an individual

to recognize, understand, and manage their own emotions and recognize, understand, and influence the emotions of others. EI is focused on developing an awareness of how an individual's emotions drive their behavior and their personal impact on others, and crucially learning about managing their emotions to ensure they are used positively.

Mayer and Salovey (1997) researched emotional intelligence further to create a four-branch model of EI:

- **Perceiving emotion:** Linked to the ability to recognize and receive information from nonverbal and verbal expressions of emotion as a form of social communication.
- **Using emotions to facilitate thought:** Individuals develop a capacity to use emotions to guide and promote thinking. Good emotional input helps individuals to prioritize thinking on matters that are really important.
- **Understanding emotions:** Understanding the information that emotions convey and take action as a result of that understanding. The skill of understanding emotional messages results in individuals being able to manage their reaction and act appropriately.
- **Managing emotions:** Emotions can be managed in order to convey information. Emotions must be under control, regulated, and used to promote personal and social goals.

Emotional Intelligence is therefore an ability that can be developed. Improving EI benefits the development of healthy relationships, bringing reason, quality, and understanding to social interaction.

So What?

Developing EI has proven to deliver organizational effectiveness (Langley and Francis, 2012), helping develop confidence, connectedness, communication, decision-making, stress management, conflict management, and engagement. Bringing the feels to the organization isn't some new-age nonsense but instead drives positive outcomes and sustainable organizational performance. If

the HR practitioners develop their own EI then they will improve their own thinking, behavior, and decision-making to become a more effective employee.

Theory in Practice

Developing EI is simply about the HR practitioner being open to collecting data about personal emotions, and the emotions of others around them and choosing to navigate those emotions by thinking more intelligently about actions they can take as a result.

- Ensure that clear policies on sickness absence and return to work are available, and implemented correctly when required. Trustworthiness and action are equally important in demonstrating the value that the organization places on employee well-being.
- Provide opportunities for employees to learn and practice EI Techniques to support change management, increase engagement, improve personal accountability, drive personal performance, and build teams.
- Embrace emotions, both your own and other people's. Learn to understand and communicate your own emotions to other people, as well as taking time to develop your sensitivity to how other people are feeling.
- Use your feelings and emotions to develop constructive paths of action; in conversations where feelings are causing discomfort, choose to stay in the moment and stay on topic, allow time to explore the emotions uninterrupted and unedited.

Summary

- HR practitioners have a dual responsibility when it comes to feelings and emotions within the organization: to be masters at managing their own emotions and having a responsibility to create a workplace environment, which allows human emotions to be part of the fabric of organizational life.
- It is emotions that drive action and are at the center of releasing human potential.

- The HR practitioner needs to educate organizational leaders on the benefits of allowing emotions to be part of the language of the organization.
- The HR practitioner must also ensure that the organization is prepared to proactively manage mental health issues and create a healthy and motivated workforce.
- EI is the ability of an individual to recognize, understand, and manage their own emotions and recognize, understand, and influence the emotions of others.

START A CAMPAIGN

Passion and belief are key drivers of action within an organization, and HR cannot be immune to the requirement for acting upon their beliefs and values to drive change within the organization. Belief and shared values possess a unique power to inspire, motivate, and energize a course of action that has a positive effect and speaks loudly about the importance of HR to an organization wanting to achieve great results.

The problem for most HR practitioners is that they simply don't understand how to create and execute a highly effective campaign, or indeed know where to begin in regard to what subject to campaign for. HR campaigns that do well begin a meaningful relationship with employees and managers within the organization and help keep them engaged. By keeping within the confines of business as usual, HR practitioners are playing small and they are working in the realm of the way things have always been done.

HR practitioners need to engage with the issues that they are really passionate about, to realize that even within their HR practice there are challenges and opportunities that need someone to take a stand on, engage with, and pursue the cause. Organizational issues require someone to take ownership and campaign for a change. This requires energy and using personal resource and a resolve to drive the issue forward.

Very often change is introduced as a process that people need to follow to get from A to B, but what is missing is an engagement

that goes beyond the business case and engages with a deep sense of the need for an issue to be addressed. Very often this is discussed as engaging hearts and mind, but it is more than that, it is a zealous pursuit on behalf of the campaigner to see change happen.

The Case for Change

Kotter's (1995) eight-step change model begins with developing a sense of urgency, which refers to the development of a feeling that there is a need for change in the audience. Establishing a sense of urgency for an initiative to happen is to develop a narrative that explains why the issue needs to be addressed. This isn't simply developing a 15-slide PowerPoint presentation to use in meetings but a sharing of the passion and heart for the issue to be addressed. It is a sharing of belief and value that goes beyond simply facts and figures, although these too are an important part of developing the case for change.

Hirschhorn (2001) developed a diagnostic map for organizational change based on the application of campaign concepts, developing three campaign fronts simultaneously:

- **The marketing campaign:** The creation of strategic themes, onboarding change agents to communicate the benefits of change.
- **The political campaign:** Creating a coalition of support to disseminate the campaign message and support the change effort.
- **The military campaign:** Developing a strategy to implement the change program from developing support, gaining credibility, supporting learning, leveraging support, and implementation.

The purpose of developing an HR campaign is to articulate a strategic change pivot, which launches a change in practice, begins with passion to tackle an issue, building a coalition of like-minded individuals and then a campaign to change practice.

Theory in Practice

The best change campaigns achieve success because they are based upon the

passionate commitment that an individual has to pursue the change and create a narrative that engages others to cooperate in pushing the change initiative forward.

- Gather a core group of committed people together to help to organize the campaign. The network of core campaigners will have a wealth of skills and resources to move the campaign forward.
- Be realistic about what resources are available to develop the change initiative and prioritize actions to maximize the impact.
- Develop your campaign message, to give absolute clarity about the issue that you wish to address and what success looks like.
- Become an expert in your campaign issue. Research background information, expert opinion, and relevant legislation including government policy. By becoming well informed, it is possible to influence others, and respond to any questions organizational leaders might have regarding the issue you are campaigning to address.
- Examine the issue within the environmental context in which you operate and how it relates to the change campaign.
- Target key influencers and develop a map of stakeholders, allies, and supporters who have the power to make the change you are campaigning for.
- Develop, design, and implement strategic interventions to raise awareness and create a sense of urgency.

Summary

- Belief and shared values possess a unique power to inspire, motivate, and energize a course of action that would have a positive effect.
- HR campaigns begin a meaningful relationship with employees and managers within the organization and help keep them engaged.
- Organizational issues require someone to take ownership and campaign for change.
- Developing a sense of urgency refers to the development of a feeling that there is a need for change in the audience.

- Establishing a sense of urgency for an initiative to happen is to develop a narrative that explains why the issue needs to be addressed.

BE ACTIVE, TAKE ACTION

Just because an individual goes into work every day, has a full diary and a to-do list as long as their arms, does not mean that they are active or taking action that achieves anything. Have you ever wondered why some individuals seem to get lots done, why others always appear to be busy, being busy? They seem to constantly be in meetings, on phone calls, and writing reports; however, they have no discernable output. Every employee has the same amount of time: 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. When individuals complain about a lack of time to do something, what they are actually saying is that they do not consider it to be a priority.

The HR practitioner needs to be effective and that means they need to be productive. This means they must keep on task and apply their best effort to perform at high levels. Being active and taking action isn't just being busy. Being active is being busy on the right things. Taking action is prioritizing activity, which contributes positively to organizational endeavor and personal purposefulness.

Focus–Energy Matrix

Bruch and Ghoshal (2002) developed the Focus–Energy matrix to help managers to understand how to become effective by developing two important traits: Focus, which is targeted concentrated effort; and Energy, which is an internal vitality that is driven by personal commitment to action. They identified four types of managerial behavior:

- **Procrastination:** Managers who procrastinate apply neither energy nor focus into their work, although they may perform routine tasks, they rarely show initiative or perform beyond what is expected of them.

- **Disengagement:** A disengaged manager may have high levels of focus, but would lack energy to deliver results. This maybe because they are focused on negative aspects of their role or are suffering from anxiety or stress.
- **Distraction:** Distracted managers have high energy levels but lack focus to complete tasks they are supposed to be delivering. They may be busy doing things, but they are unrelated to the task at hand.
- **Purposefulness:** Purposeful managers have high levels of both energy and focus to deliver what they set out to achieve.

Purposeful managers have a clear idea about what it is they are trying to achieve, they have clarity regarding the goal, they work around the resource constraints and external context to manage their energy and focus to keep active and take action.

Theory in Practice

Behavior can be changed and the HR practitioner can choose to be purposeful by being active and taking action, directing energy, and improving focus to deliver high levels of performance.

- Examine your workplace behavior patterns. What tasks do you have that require high levels of energy and focus, and what tasks drive less productive behaviors. Review your personal attitude and approach to work, be honest with areas you are struggling in, to better understand your behavior.
- Identify projects and activity where you are most effective and do more in those areas.
- Be clear that working more hours doesn't increase productivity levels, the key is to target challenges and choose activity that increases personal levels of energy or focus, or both.
- Develop a productive workspace. Environment is a very important in supporting the development of focus and energy.
- Prioritize tasks. Everybody has different times of the day when their energy and

focus levels peak. Manage the order that tasks are tackled by undertaking difficult and challenging tasks when energy and focus levels are high.

- Manage personal well-being by switching off from work. High energy and focus in work can only be maintained if you are taking care of yourself physically and mentally. This means maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

Summary

- When individuals complain about lack of time to do something, what they are actually saying is that they do not consider it to be a priority.
- The HR practitioner needs to be effective and that means they need to be productive.
- Being active is being busy on the right things. Taking action is prioritizing activity.
- Becoming effective requires focus and energy.

SPECIALIZE

HR is a huge field of practice, and as such HR Generalists are limited in the amount of expertise they can develop in any one of the specialist fields of practice. But this isn't just advice from the perspective of human resource practice; this is advice that is pertinent to all workers. As more and more work is automated, technology is replacing tasks that don't need specialist knowledge or understanding. Since 2009 there has been a recognition that there is a shift in the employment market; this change has been encapsulated in the term Gig Economy, which refers to a single project work for which a worker is hired for short-term work on demand. These trends are going to continue to develop and dissolve the employability of nonspecialists. Being a jack of all trades and a master of none is going to limit the career prospects of the HR practitioner.

At the beginning of a career, being a generalist is useful in allowing individuals to test their options, experience a range of different opportunities, and develop a broad

skill set before identifying an area that they would like to specialize in. HR practitioners need to consider specific areas where they feel they would like to engage in concentrating their efforts and developing their expertise. The HR practitioner may choose to specialize in a specific HR field such as people resourcing, learning, and development or reward. Alternatively, the specialism may be in developing people and management skills to progress a HR management career. Finally, the interest of the HR practitioner may be in the development of human resource strategy, and therefore they may specialize in strategic thinking.

There is no right or wrong in developing a specialism, rather there is a requirement to have clarity as to which career path interests the HR practitioner and to develop skills, knowledge, and expertise in the chosen area.

Theory in Practice

The key to becoming a specialist is to become familiar with everything about your specialism. Passion is a key component if time is going to be spent on the same topic, so it needs to be one that you are genuinely interested in and enjoy working on.

- Spend time working out what areas of HR are of real interest.
- Focus on developing your subject expertise, create opportunities to get qualified or train in your chosen area.
- Learn the theory and practices that are at the center of your chosen areas of specialism.
- Be deliberate in your practice, continuously challenge yourself to develop, progress in your specialism.
- Develop a council of professionals who will provide feedback on your progress and give you a frank assessment of your progress and level of expertise.
- Identify a learning route, with clear goals to progress and key milestones to move toward longer-term goals. Never stop learning or educating yourself about developments in your field.

- Become a teacher and an advocate for your specialism. Develop your authority by sharing your expertise through coaching, mentoring, delivering seminars, or writing articles.

Summary

- Technology is replacing tasks that don't need specialist knowledge or understanding.
- The term Gig Economy refers to single project work for which a worker is hired for short-term work on demand.
- HR practitioners need to consider specific areas where they feel they would like to engage in concentrating their efforts and developing their expertise.
- Passion is a key component to developing a specialism.

CONCLUSION

The role that HR practitioners play in organizations is changing because of the trends in the organizational context related to technology, social demographics, skills shortages, and the speed of change. In addition to providing knowledge and expertise in a number of HR practice areas such as recruitment and retention, learning and development, talent management and succession planning, and employee relations and reward and recognition, HR must contribute to adding value to the organization. The developments in HR from personnel to HRM in the last 30 years has demanded that HR practitioners apply their HR knowledge pragmatically and sympathetically to the context within which their organization is operating. This requires that they develop key skills and capability. HR practitioners must:

- **Begin with the end in mind:** Determine what outcomes they, and their practice, are going to deliver for the organization.
- **Get curious:** Engage in a continuous learning process, developing their ability to systematically innovate their HR practice, produce options that will be owned by key stakeholders and implement the chosen solutions quickly.

- **Become the bridge:** Contribute to the development of the organizational strategy by supplying specific information on the human core competencies that reside within the organization.
- **Network:** Understand everything from how useful their connected relationships are to developing talent management and succession planning strategies and access to information that can be a game changer in relation to HR practices or programs.
- **Know your numbers:** Develop collaborative relationships with the finance department in order to understand how to create added value for the organization.
- **Bring the feels:** Be open to collecting data about personal emotions, and the emotions of others around them and choose to navigate those emotions by thinking more intelligently about actions that can be taken as a result.
- **Start a campaign:** Achieve success because they are based upon the passion or commitment that an individual has to pursue the change and create a narrative.
- **Be active, take action:** Choose to be purposeful, by being active and taking action, directing energy, and improving focus to deliver high levels of performance.
- **Specialize:** Become familiar with everything about your specialism.

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