

The Future Challenges for the HR Practitioner

By Amy Tan Bee Choo

Before considering what the key skills for HR practitioners in the future will be, it is essential to identify the future challenges for the HR service.

The role of HR is changing as a result of many influences. These include: globalisation resulting in increased competition; a change to service- and consultative-approach; demographic trends evidenced by falling birth rates and extended life expectancy. These trends affect the labour market and have resulted in skill shortages in specific areas. The HR practitioner needs to understand the impact of these factors on his/her organisation.

In considering key skills, much will depend on the functionality of HR in the particular organisation. The function may deliver a mainly transactional service or may have moved towards the strategic business partner role, but certain factors will remain the same regardless of model of delivery. In many organisations the administrative function of HR is increasingly being outsourced.

There can be confusion about the role of HR as it moves from one model to another, and HR practitioners can find that they are still heavily involved in the operational role, handling grievances and discipline while new demands are made of them. The expectations of the service and individuals need to be clearly articulated and managers need to be clear about their role in managing people.

The Challenges For The Future Include:

Talent Management & Succession Planning

There needs to be a clear human capital development plan, identifying areas which could be affected by turnover or changes to the business. By planning in advance, the organisation is not left trying to cover gaps in key areas. This can also inform the organisation in terms of identifying future managers and leaders. Career routes can be identified and linked to an individual's career aspirations. This development plan will also inform the learning and development function of HR.

Staff Motivation & Engagement

HR has to continuously drive the link between employee motivation and engagement.

Added Value

HR needs to be able to demonstrate clearly how it impacts on the business. However, increased monitoring and collection of data can be administratively cumbersome and tie up a lot of time for HR practitioners. This needs to be carefully implemented or it does not add value but becomes simply another administrative burden.

Recruitment and Retention

In view of the global and sector changes outlined above, there is a tightening labour market in certain areas. It is important that HR understands the labour market it is recruiting from and also the need to retain key talent in the organisation.

Work Environment: “Employer of Choice”

To engage the best talent and keep these people motivated and engaged, many organisations now invest in their image as an employer of choice. A person’s experience of their workplace is a result of their feelings and perceptions in the following areas: leadership (the leadership and senior management of the company); my manager (the local management on a day-to-day basis); personal growth (opportunities to learn, grow and be challenged); well-being (balancing work-life issues); my team (immediate colleagues); giving something back (giving back to society and to the local community); my company (the company and the way it treats staff); and fair deal (pay and benefits).”

Key Skills & Roles Needed to Meet the Challenges

In view of the areas identified above, the key skills and roles for HR practitioners for the future are:

Communication, Interpersonal and Influencing Skills

Clear, concise communication - both verbal and written - is essential. Without these skills, the practitioners cannot engage productively with individuals, nor with top management.

Global Business Mindset

The HR practitioner needs to be able to influence the organisation and effect change by using examples and information from other organisations in the sector of activity they support. This requires not only a sound understanding of their own organisation but also wider knowledge of how other organisations have approached similar problems.

Analytical Skills

The HR practitioner of the future needs to be data literate and be able to question the figures and reports which they read. The data needs to be interpreted and an understanding of the wider picture is necessary to identify underlying factors which may be influencing what they read.

“Employee Advocate”

As an employee advocate, the HR practitioner plays an integral role in organisational success through his/her knowledge about, and advocacy of, the employees. This advocacy includes expertise in how to create a work environment in which people are motivated and contributing. Fostering effective methods of goal-setting, communication and empowerment builds employee ownership. The HR practitioner in this helps to establish the organisational culture and climate in which people have the competency, concern and commitment to serve their users and customers well. Through all this, he/she provides employee development opportunities and other retention strategies, OD interventions, pro-active problem solving and regularly scheduled employee communication opportunities.

Strategic Partner

The HR practitioner needs to be a strategic partner to the business units or departments that he/she supports. In this role, he/she contributes to the development and accomplishment of organisation-wide business plans and objectives. HR business objectives are established to support the attainment of the overall strategic plan and objectives. The HR practitioner needs to be able to translate strategy into operational terms – this strategic partnership impacts HR services such as the design of work positions; hiring; reward; recognition; retention; performance development; appraisal systems; career & succession planning and employee development.

Credible, Professional Internal Consultant

He/she should be the subject matter expert in enabling and facilitating their staff's capabilities and drive towards a vision – he/she should be deeply knowledgeable about the design of work systems and methods in which people contribute and succeed; he/she should be the “internal consultant”, and his/her knowledge, capabilities and corporate credibility should reflect as much.

Change Champion

The constant need to evaluate the effectiveness of the organisation results in the HR practitioner having to be a change champion – he/she needs to be knowledgeable about and able to execute successful change and change preparation strategies. Knowing how to link change to the strategic needs of the organisation will minimise resistance to change and employee misunderstanding or dissatisfaction. The HR practitioner contributes in an ongoing manner to the organisation by constantly assessing the effectiveness of the HR function and developing timely change anticipation, change management and change alignment initiatives.

Coaching Skills

The more senior HR practitioner has a role in enabling managers to be confident in people management, and this should be supported by individual coaching. Interpersonal skills feature in most of the work of an HR practitioner but these skills are paramount in giving feedback to the people being coached. Some important factors an HR practitioner brings to this role is his/her knowledge of the organisation; giving the internal coachee the feeling his/her best interests are being looked after; and providing the coachee with the chance to be candid, and possibly show vulnerabilities to a highly professional confidant.

About the Author

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