

From HR Generalist to HR Business Partner

When recruiting HR talent in the current market, many businesses are not just looking for HR professionals who will purely deliver a suite of requested “people services”. The focus in acquiring HR talent is now on people that can “partner” with the management team and work with them to achieve business objectives. The move from delivering reactionary HR customer services to providing business solutions is not always straight forward. In this months Instep, we look at some of the required transitional shifts to move from being a HR generalist to a true business partner.

Internal business understanding

Every successful HR Director will say that the most important starting point to truly partner with a business is knowing the metrics by which the organisation is measured. Whilst this is an old message in 2007, the number of HR people that continue to ignore the key metrics of their particular business such as EBIT, gross margins, stock turns, sales forecasts, expense & debt management and share price is still surprising.

Regardless of the industry sector, HR practitioners need to build a comprehensive knowledge of how the business ticks and is measured.

Environment and the external market

Hand in hand with understanding the internal business drivers, is having the head above the “HR turrets” and being across how the business is performing in the open market.

As we know, most organisations operate in a competitive environment. The essence of business strategy formulation is coping with competition. If HR is to be relevant to the business strategy, then at the most basic level, practitioners need to understand the drivers of an industry structure such as supplier and buyer power, industry entry barriers and rival and substitute threats as well as the overall economy that the industry is operating.

Internal consulting capability

Often HR generalists focus on providing high levels of customer service to their internal clients. Whilst this is a positive trait, to

truly partner, practitioners need to shift from purely advising managers to consulting. This is about being involved in developing the solution, offering alternatives, highlighting the risk, pushing back where need be, troubleshooting and holding up the mirror and making people accountable for their leadership style.

Change and strategic initiatives

In the evolving Business Partner role, business leaders are expecting HR practitioners to be able to work at the conceptual as well as implementation levels. For HR practitioners, gaining exposure to leading projects or interventions that are complex, change oriented and require conceptual thinking is a key personal growth strategy.

Coaching

As a HR Business Partner, part of any HR professionals remit is to shape and enhance the people leadership capability of managers. To do this, HR practitioners must learn the skills of coaching so that they can be effective in transferring skills and knowledge to truly empower others. Participating in an accredited coaching program to develop coaching skills is a worthwhile investment.

Personal leadership skills

Although many HR roles in today’s HR structures rarely involve leading a large direct team, experience in managing virtual or project teams can be important. Developing personal skills around performance management and the development and motivation of others can significantly increase a practitioners credibility to coach and support other managers in these areas.

Centre of knowledge

Being at the top of your own profession and having a strong “technical backbone” is essential. Researching and benchmarking good HR practice in the external market can cut time and effort in reaching business solutions.

The right company

One of the most important factors that supports the journey from HR Generalist to HR Business Partner, is working for the right organisation. Organisations that expect their managers to lead and be accountable for their people. These companies will typically resource HR transactional services in a way that allows their HR Business Partners to spend more time with clients working on value adding activities that can improve business performance.

Clearly the conclusion is, by enriching commercial as well as HR skills, HR practitioners have a significant contribution to make to the business, and in the process, developing for themselves, fascinating career opportunities.

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