

# Where are the men of HR?

**D**ramatic shifts with regard to female employment figures have been seen in a wide range of professions over the past 20 years, which is great. This has resulted in some very positive changes in workplace gender balance, but has it tipped too far given that HR is now a field clearly dominated by women?

A recent internal audit conducted by the CIPD, a leading HR body in the UK, indicated that 72% of their 124,500 strong membership list were women. Analysis of the Australian market from a sample of HR candidates presents similar patterns with anecdotal industry evidence reinforcing these findings.

So where are all the 'Men of HR'?

In this month's article, we take a look at some of the factors that have driven the rise of women in HR and ask where to from here?

## The 'human' attraction of HR

The first point often raised in the HR gender debate is certainly a contentious one. It draws a line between the 'human' in HR and the commonly held belief that women fare better in this space. Advocates claim that women are naturally attracted to a profession that holds people at its core. Indeed, many younger females nominate the people aspect of HR as a primary motivator for choosing an HR career.

As Gerard Hussey, Director of Policy, Employee Relations and Diversity at GlaxoSmithKline in the UK said in a recent roundtable discussion on the topic, "When people think of HR, they think it is about the relationships, and women are more drawn to that than men".

## The role of HR has changed

Men have clearly held sway at certain times in the past but business needs of HR have changed. In previous years, businesses tended to be highly unionised with centralised industrial wage fixing. Intensely regulated, HR was a male 'left brain' environment characterised by hard nosed negotiations and all the associated politics that go with hammering out workplace terms and conditions. From this perspective, the environment may have held limited appeal to women due to its combative nature.

In recent times, with the breakdown of the centralised wage fixing system and the move away from awards, businesses are now

focused on engagement and cultural strategies.

From this modern perspective, if opinions are valid in terms of a woman's ability to create relationships, then women, it would seem, are again in the HR pole position.

## Net growth in HR roles – small companies

Over the past ten years the balance has shifted dramatically in terms of who employs HR professionals. In the past, the majority of HR professionals tended to be employed by larger companies with extensive HR departments and clearly defined hierarchical career paths. Small companies did without a HR function.

Most recently, larger companies have stripped back numbers in HR and the net growth of roles has been in companies of less than 500. Quite often these smaller companies draw their entry level HR professionals from within their own administration ranks – generally female dominated.

## Graduate programs have disappeared

A critical piece in this gender puzzle can be linked to the decline of HR graduate programs and quality pathways for people to enter the HR profession.

In the past, lead organisations such as BHP and many of the banks, actively pursued top shelf graduates, educating them on the merits of a career in HR. This has all but stopped. HR opportunities for new starters are now predominantly administrative in nature and not terribly appealing to qualified graduates. Other professions are quick to offer alternate careers thereby poaching great talent before HR has a chance to present. Only those that are prepared to enter HR through the back door of administration are being drawn into the field. As many of the fewer young male graduates aren't prepared to go down this track, large numbers of females are left behind to battle it out.

## Well is there really a problem?

Potentially not, it depends on your point of view. It could be argued that if HR remains feminised as a profession, wage parity with other support functions, such as the finance function, may always remain an unachievable goal. Having said that, as the importance of the HR function increases for most businesses, wage parities may look after themselves.

Some commentators believe that there is a problem and it needs addressing. As Gerard Hussey expressed: "There is something problematic about having too many of one gender ... I think 75% female entry into HR is too high and you do get the sense there is something wrong here."

And perhaps that's it ... if there is a problem, are the custodians of HR doing enough to ensure top talent is drawn into the profession in a fair and equitable way? At the very least, discussion will bring awareness.

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