



From HR specialist to generalist

In most professions, being a specialist is the pinnacle. However, in HR there is a trend where specialists look to move their focus towards HR generalist roles at some stage in their career. Why anyone would want to move from being an expert, to... well, a non-expert is the focus of this month's 'In step'.

Why transition to a role as an HR generalist?

Making the transition from an HR specialist to a generalist role may appear to be counter-intuitive after developing the in-depth knowledge of a chosen specialist area in HR. So why move? Why move from being an expert to a jack of all trades? Many specialists would say, "Why de-skill yourself?"

The answer to that question, as most people know, is that the HR generalist role is the 'closest' HR position to the business and its decision makers. More often than not, in most HR structures, the generalist brings in the experts – the specialists – when needed. The theory of most HR structures is that the generalist drives the HR effort in relation to the business needs, hence the often used title, HR Business Partner.

A more cynical view would be that HR generalists generally run the function, and as HR specialists say, "they get all the credit and the limelight". With over 50% of all HR jobs being of a generalist nature, they are also more prolific so there are some practical reasons for heading in this direction in terms of HR career management.

What are the issues of transition?

While transitioning from an HR specialist role to a wider remit could be potentially daunting, the reality is that many practitioners swap from a specialist focus to generalist and back again regularly and successfully. It is a very do-able deal.

Steve Reid, Head of HR & Organisation Capability at Hutchison Telecommunications (3 Mobile), is one of those HR professionals who has successfully moved his focus as an OD/L&D specialist to being responsible for the company's generalist HR delivery. Steve has worked for the Hutchison business for nine years and has been at the forefront of the organisation's cultural and development programs over this period.

When asked about the challenges he faced when making the transition, the **first learning** that Steve commented on was the difference of moving from a pro-active focus to working in a role that had a predominately reactive bent. He was surprised by the lack of control over time: "A major issue can suddenly blow up and there goes your whole day," he said. "The white noise that envelops

your day can be disconcerting; in the past I've had more control of my time."

A positive aspect for Steve was being able to bring his pro-active orientation from OD/L&D to the table and make headway with managers to "get ahead of the game and prevent things from happening in the first place rather than waiting for them to happen".

Steve's **second learning** was that while there is a degree of technical information that needs to be absorbed in the generalist role, his OD/L&D experience had given him plenty of exposure to a very wide range of business issues. Combined with some 'common sense' he has been able to effectively navigate his way through the HR generalist landscape. At the end of the day, "learning to back your judgment and trusting your intuition has probably been the biggest ah-ha moment for me", Steve said.

The **third learning** was that results in the generalist area were sometimes less defined than in the specialist area. Steve felt that this is mainly related to the project focus of a specialist role and the 'invisible' nature of a lot of the best generalist work.

Making a successful transition

On considering his experience, Steve agreed that advice for people making the move from a specialist role to a generalist role can potentially include the following:

- Firstly and most importantly, get really close to the business group you are supporting. While it is obviously important to be business-focused in any role in HR, as a generalist this is critical.
- Don't feel as though you need to know everything – advice and assistance is available. Steve said, "as a specialist professional, you have picked up a whole lot of valuable knowledge that, combined with good common sense, will pay dividends".
- If you are asked about something that you aren't sure about – don't bluff. Have the confidence to say, "let me check on that and come back to you".

All up, Steve said that he is enjoying the move. It does not mean he will not move back to a specialist role in the future but he has enjoyed the transition from being an expert to a 'jack of all trades' and dealing with the white noise of HR!

Craig Mason is the founder of The Next Step, a specialising consulting practice in the human resources market.

For more information call +61 2 8256 2500
or e-mail cmason@thenextstep.com.au
Or to let HC know about your new appointment
e-mail: instep@keymedia.com.au

the
next
Step