

Overcoming HR Myths and Stereotypes

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What makes the best in HR the best? Human resources is a complex field. Practitioners have to juggle priorities and excel at tasks, ranging from strategic to tedious. They have to know what to hone in on and what to delegate, stay on top of the latest trends, and keep a finger on the pulse of employee relations. And, often, with so many misconceptions about HR, practitioners need to stay ahead of the curve to drive home what HR's role should entail for the company. Being in HR requires a number of talents and is not for the faint of heart. HR can make a big impact on the lives of individuals working for the company—its most important assets. But the role can also leave managers feeling less than appreciated, when their contributions to the bottom line are questioned, or not recognized at all. Here are just a few of the stereotypes and myths HR must overcome to be most effective.

HR as a cost center

This perception of HR may be one of the hardest to overcome. How executives view HR and its role often plays a huge part in the organization's perception of the role's function. This includes whether the job is managed in-house to begin with. HR should take every opportunity to be its own proponent in educating the company on the value of its offerings.

Others realize that HR managers contribute more directly to taking care of their most valuable assets--employees. HR's responsibilities include: recruiting; interviewing; providing, presenting, and delivering medical, dental, vision, life, and other ancillary benefits; job training; instituting programs for wellness, retention, and growth, and more. Each of these activities does, in fact, contribute greatly to the bottom line, considering all of the hard and soft costs involved.

Group benefits, for instance, are a major part of the compensation employers offer to entice and retain productive and reliable employees. They help to keep the organization competitive. In retaining good employees, companies can save thousands, if not more, on rehiring and training costs. HR must be prepared to justify its case and to come to the table with a strong knowledge of its employee base and the company's needs and options.

HR's role: strategic, tactical, or both?

HR's role in the organization is all too often tactical over strategic. This is frequently because of assumptions by the practitioner or because the HR professional executes a function of "fighting fires" on a daily basis. This point is illustrated by University of Southern California professor Edward E. Lawler III, who noted that HR professionals reported in 2005 spending only 23 percent of their time "being a strategic business partner" – no more than they reported in 1995. And line managers, he found, said HR is far less involved in strategy than HR thinks it is.

Whether dealing with a down economy or one in recovery, HR needs to help guide the company's response to market changes. With increasing benefits premiums and changes likely to result from health care reform, for instance, HR needs to help companies respond quickly and appropriately. HR practitioners can leverage access to employee demographic and benefits requirement information to make recommendations and support company strategies and decisions.

While company culture often sets the stage, HR practitioners must actively seek key areas for improvement themselves. They have to take action to defend their roles where possible.

Employee capabilities and technology's prevalence

While employees and executives are often guilty of downplaying HR's role, HR is often guilty of underestimating employees' ability to manage information. Computers first appeared in schools over 13 years ago and today are used by 75 percent of Americans. Still, many in HR are reluctant to move to technologies that would allow them to relinquish basic benefits management tasks to employees and save themselves a tremendous amount of time that could be better devoted to more strategic objectives.

HR can increase employee satisfaction by giving individuals greater access to manage their benefits information online. In fact, many employees will expect online access, especially today's younger generation for whom iPods and instant messaging are part of everyday life. As generations X and Y begin to dominate the workforce, the demand for technology in the workplace will only increase.

Self-service has become so invaluable that a September 2006 Forrester Research report termed it "an essential core application" for businesses. The report pointed to the ability of Human Resource Management Systems (HRMS) to help manage personnel costs, operate efficient business processes, comply with regulations, manage legal exposure, and optimize the value of human capital.

Not all tools are created equal

Another way that HR can heighten its role and increase strategic input is by using technology to better access, manage, and report on information. Current trends indicate that HR practitioners do realize the importance of a true enterprise solution to cover employee management from hire to retire. But, as with any industry, it is hard to cut through the clutter and hype surrounding proposed solutions to select the best technology to meet organizational needs. As the benefits technology industry responds to HR's broad solution request, providers may describe offerings that are not yet able to deliver on their promises. Though one provider may declare it offers full self-service capabilities, for instance, it may not be the same level needed or offered by others.

Many excellent solutions do exist. HR practitioners must be careful to uncover all of the details regarding the proposed offerings and the user's required involvement to achieve

the promised success. Many in the HR industry are already very busy, and may not have the time to fully assess alternatives or be as knowledgeable about technology, making it all the more important to do the homework on proposed solutions.

HR systems should grow and scale with the organization; let HR/the company maintain full ownership of the data; provide full security for backups; include servers, added protective layers, etc.; and link with carriers in the format that they prefer, to name a few.

Managing human resources is certainly not without its challenges. But perhaps individuals are drawn to this role because of the challenge and the opportunity to make a difference. HR managers can accomplish more and further prove their worth to the company by being their own best advocates and relying more heavily on employees and technology to focus on the most important issues.

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