

Next generation HR professionals: HR Insights plots the future

A brave few may feel that they are setting the pace for next generation HR. But other HR leaders may simply not be ready for fresh challenges, or maybe regard the prospect with some trepidation. If, that is, they know what next-generation HR looks like.

The CIPD has been wrestling with the question over the past year and is about to publish its views on the shape of HR to come. The UK's leading professional association is keen to manage expectations and is promising not so much a definitive report as a useful map and compass. This CIPD trailer hints at what will be unveiled:

- “HR’s purpose needs to shift to being about sustainable organisational performance. Second, that in order to do this it needs to focus on building a culture of authenticity, demonstrating a balanced approach to risk management and developing organisational agility. Last, that both of these hypotheses will, in turn, affect the type of HR leadership we will need in future.”

All of which probably leaves HR directors wondering what the CIPD has in store.

In the spirit of contributing to the debate of what next-generation HR might involve, “HR Insights” puts forward its own ambitious list, sifted from recent thinking, conversations with HR directors and the odd straw in the wind. Some of these represent a tough stretch, but could transform the position of HR in the organization.

- Value measurement. As performance and competitive pressures mount, it becomes more essential to make the case for boards to invest in HR as a value-adding resource. Superficially, the justification for everything from succession planning and leadership development to competency building and talent management appears self-evident. But proving the link between exactly which competencies hold the key to improved performance in a given role can be notoriously difficult, but not impossible. A significant prize awaits the HR function that can explain these and other cause-and-effect links between interventions and results in business value terms.
- A people model for business performance. Most businesses know they are critically dependent on brainpower and human capabilities for their success. Yet for most boards there is a gaping blank in the performance model that should make the people dimension of enterprise visible and manageable. If companies had a model that enabled them to manage the drivers of performance – that is people – it would provide a whole new rationale for the chief human resource officer and put that position on a par with the CFO.
- Performance enabling technology. While the US has powered ahead, relatively speaking, with the use of systems and applications that support improved performance across the organization – everything

from real time performance management systems to smarter knowledge sharing, internal networking and staff development – the UK lags somewhat behind. HR is in a position to play a leading role in supporting the use of technology. The bonus is that these systems continue to become both more intuitive to use and less technically demanding to install thanks to the evolution of web-based, on-demand applications.

- Making HR an indispensable business partner. It is no secret that despite calls for HR to up its game and contribute strategically to the enterprise, results have at best been mixed. Nor is it any secret that unless HR wins the trust of business managers, the essential foundation for this partnership will be missing. There are two aspects to this: helping line managers to take on their proper share of responsibility for people management is one. Another is showing that HR provides consistently valuable support for business and commercial decisions based on its specialist understanding of people issues.
- Growing the HR talent pool. There is inevitably a chicken and egg challenge for HR in raising the level and range of its contribution to the business. To do this, the function needs to grow business-awareness as well as sharp HR know-how within the HR team. The function also needs high-calibre performers of its own. But until it has achieved this strategic involvement in the business, it will be difficult to demonstrate the opportunities for the right kind of high-fliers.
- The evolving HR agenda. Service delivery excellence should be a given. Increasingly this is likely to be hived off as a specialist shared service centre or outsourced activity. Which leaves the field open for HR to concentrate on areas where it can add value. Some of these will already be on the list: talent management, leadership development, succession planning, performance management, engagement, organizational effectiveness and corporate culture are obvious candidates. But increasingly HR is identifying opportunities in other business areas with a strong people dimension, such as brand development and innovation.

Several of these development opportunities are closely related, or another side of the same coin. Achieving a breakthrough will invariably involve solving a parallel problem in one of these other areas. The guiding principle is that success breeds success. Identifying a particular project or business initiative requiring HR's input should enable the function to prove its worth and find a foothold to climb to greater things. Certainly, unless there is evidence that HR can offer stimulating opportunities, then the CIPD's goal of attracting "the brightest and the best" into the profession looks like a remote prospect. One thing is clear: unless the head of HR has the appetite for this brave new world then next generation HR will pass them by.