

The Role and Organization of the HR Function

The Role of the HR function

The role of the HR function is to take initiatives and provide guidance, support and services on all matters relating to the organization's employees. Essentially, the HR function is in the delivery business – providing the advice and services that enable organizations to get things done through people.

The activities carried out within an HR function can be divided into two broad categories:

- 1) Strategic, which is largely concerned with the alignment and implementation of HR and organization strategies
- 2) Transactional, which covers the main HR service delivery activities of resourcing, learning and development, reward and employee relations.

A survey of the work of the HR function (Crail, 2006) asked respondents to Irish state departments what were the most time consuming and most important issues facing their HR departments. The replies are summarized below.

Table – Issues facing HR departments

HR Issue	Most time consuming (%)	Most important (%)
Recruitment/resourcing	27.3	16.8
Administration	16.4	1.9
Absence	12.7	7.7
Pay and benefits	12.7	19.4
Employee relations	9.1	10.3
Training and development	4.2	10.3
Strategic activities	0.00	10.3

The role of front line managers

HR can initiate new policies and practices but it is the line that has the main responsibility for implementing them. In other words “HR proposes but the line disposes”.

If line managers are not inclined favourably towards what HR wants them to do they won't do it, or if compelled to, they will be half-hearted about it. Better HR depends not so much on better procedures but better implementation and ownership of implementation by line managers.

The way line managers implement and enact policies, show leadership in dealing with employees and in exercising control is a major issue. Dealing with people is perhaps the aspect of their work in which line managers can exercise the greatest amount of discretion and they can use that discretion by not putting HR's into practice. **It is the line managers who bring HR policies to life.** People-centred activities such as defining roles, interviewing, reviewing performance, providing feedback, coaching and identifying learning and development needs, all require special skills. Some managers have them – many don't.

The role of the HR practitioner

The role varies considerably but it is basically about providing advice, guidance and services on all matters affecting people.

The “business” partner role

As “business” partners HR specialists share responsibility with their line management colleagues for the success of the enterprise and get involved in implementing the organizations' strategy.

The strategic role

To formulate and implement forward looking HR strategies that are aligned to objectives and integrated with one another. To contribute to the development of strategies. To work alongside their line management colleagues to provide on an everyday basis continuous support to the implementation of the strategy of the organization, function or unit.

The change agent role

HR specialists act as change agents, facilitating change by providing advice and support on its introduction and management

The internal consultancy role

As internal consultants, HR practitioners work alongside their colleagues – their clients – in analyzing problems, diagnosing issues and proposing solutions.

The service delivery role

The basic role of HR specialists is that of providing services to internal customers. The services may be general, covering all aspects of HRM, or services may only be provided in one or two areas.

The guardian of values role

HR practitioners may act as the guardians of the organization's values and ethical standards concerning people. They point out when behavior conflicts with those values or where proposed actions will be inconsistent with them.

Ethical considerations

Professional ethics are the moral principles and values governing professional behavior. The ethical principles of the HR profession imply that HR specialists need to take account of the dignity and rights of employees when taking employment decisions.

These include having clear, fair terms and conditions of employment, healthy and safe working conditions, fair remuneration, promoting equal opportunities and employment diversity, encouraging employees to develop their skills, and not discriminating or harassing employees. The ethical frameworks for judging HR practices are basic rights, organizational justice, respecting individuals, and community of purpose.

Ambiguities in the role of HR practitioners

There is an ambiguity in the overlap between personnel management as a set of activities for all managers, and as specialist function. Ambiguity in the role of HR people can result in confusion between ideals and reality.

This may arise because the role of HR practitioners is ill-defined (they are unsure of where they stand), their status is not fully recognized, or top management and line managers have equivocal views about their value to the organization.

Second, ambiguity occurs because it is often difficult to define success in personnel management, to determine who or what was responsible for the success or failure and to identify the unique contributions of the personnel function.

Third, personnel managers sit in an uncomfortable "in between"- position, where they are seen as part of management but also have a special relationship to, and responsibility for the workers.

Conflict in the HR contribution

HR professionals may have to walk a fine line between serving the organization that pays their salary and looking after the interests of employees. They may be involved in counseling employees over work problems. This can only be carried out successfully if the employee trusts the HR practitioner to maintain confidentiality. But something might be revealed that is of interest to management and this places the counsellor in a dilemma; to betray or not to betray the trust? There is no easy answer to

this question, but the existence of a code of professional conduct, a set of values and an organizational ethical code can provide guidance.

Conflict in the HR contribution can arise in the following ways:

- a clash of values – line managers may simply regard their workers as factors of production to be used, exploited and dispensed with in accordance with organizational imperatives
- different priorities – management’s priority may be to add value –make more out of less-and if this involves getting rid of people that’s too bad. HR people may recognize the need to add value not at the expense of employees
- freedom versus control – line managers may want the freedom to get on with things their own way, interpreting organizational policies to meet their needs.

The qualities required by HR professionals - what effective HR practitioners do

- Have the ability to see the big picture and take, and implement, a strategic and coherent view of the whole range of HR policies, processes and practices in relation to the business as a whole;
- Plan and **act proactive** and not reactive
- They ensure that their innovations and services are aligned to business needs and priorities while taking account of the needs of employees and other stakeholders.
- Have the capability to facilitate change, initiating it when necessary and acting as a stabilizing force in situations where change would be damaging
- Demonstrate that they can make value-added contributions
- Appreciate organizational and individual needs; against a background of their knowledge of organizational behavior, they understand how organizations function and the factors affecting individual motivation and commitment, they are capable of analyzing and diagnosing the people requirements of the organization and proposing and implementing appropriate action.
- Are persuasive – they present the proposals and recommendations emerging from their interventions persuasively, making out a compelling business case; innovations and ideas are sold to management on the basis of the practical and, wherever possible, measurable benefits that will result from their implementation.

Strengthening the HR function

Getting support from **top** management:

Managers can block or erect barriers to what the HR function believes to be progress if they are not persuaded that it will benefit both the organization and themselves at an acceptable cost (money, time and trouble). To be successful HR practitioner must

- Demonstrate that the proposal will meet both the needs of the organization and their own personal needs.
- Base the proposal on a compelling and realistic business case that spells out the benefits and the costs and, as far as possible, is justified either in added value terms, and/or on the basis of a return on investment, say in training, is justified by the financial return (increased productivity)-
- Prove that the innovation has already worked well within the organization or represents “good practice” (it has worked well elsewhere) which is likely to be transferable to the organization.
- Specify how the proposal can be implemented without too much trouble, for example not taking up a lot of managers’ time, or not meeting with strong opposition from line managers, employees or trade unions (it is well to check the reaction before launching a proposal).
- Emphasize that the innovation will enhance the “employer brand” of the company by making it a “best place to work”.
- Ensure the proposal is brief, to the point and well argued

Gaining support and commitment of line management

Line managers can be cynical or realistic about innovations – they have seen it all before and/or they believe it won’t work (sometimes with good reasons).

Innovations pushed down from the top can easily fail.

Managers need to **get convinced** that the innovation will help them to achieve better results without imposing unacceptable additional burdens on them. New or revised employment practices that take up precious time and involve paperwork will be treated with particular suspicion.

Many line managers, often from bitter experience, resent the bureaucracy that can surround and, indeed, absorb the over-engineered system favoured by some HR people, such as traditional performance appraisal schemes.

Obtaining support requires **networking** – getting around to talk to managers about their needs and testing new ideas to obtain reactions. The aim is to build up a body of information that will indicate approaches that are likely to be most acceptable, and therefore will most probably

work, or at least to suggest areas where particular efforts will need to be made to persuade and educate line management.

It is also useful to form “**strategic alliances**” with influential managers who are enthusiastic about the innovation and will not only lend it vocal support but will also cooperate in pilot-testing it.

Gaining the support and commitment of employees

When it comes to new employment practices, employees often react in the same way as the managers. They will tend to resist change, wanting to know “What’s in it for us?” They also want to know the hidden agenda:

- Why does the organization really want to introduce a performance management process?
- Will it simply be used as a means of gaining evidence for disciplinary proceeding?
- Or is it even going to provide the information required to select people redundancy?

As far as possible this kind of question needs to be answered in advance.