

Strategic HR

Building the Capability to Deliver

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GOWER

Foreword

There are surprisingly few books which are about the HR function itself, rather than its policies, and which are set in a UK rather than North American context. There are very few good ones. This book is definitely one of them, primarily I think because of the depth, the breadth and particularly the balance of the observation and analysis it contains.

The obituary of the HR function has been written many times since Peter Drucker famously questioned the role and contribution, the future existence, of the then personnel departments 50 years ago. Academic articles continue to split definitional hairs and lament the conflicting identities of the function's roles, while the authors wryly observe that sometimes practitioners can justly be accused of being better at analysis and fault-finding than action and implementation.

For the last decade we have been inundated with superficial and normative admonishments to avoid the modern-day version of Drucker's fate, an administrative and outsourced purgatory in which we are progressively replaced by line managers and MBAs. We must 'get strategic', reinvent ourselves, lose our administrative and employee-friendly baggage and all follow Dave Ulrich's supposed miracle recipe of partnering with the business to achieve boardroom presence and success.

Ulrich himself, of course, in reality describes a 'cacophony' of value-adding roles for HR to apply and crucially adapt in their own setting. The authors rightly caution us to avoid being 'obsessed with a narrow and outdated concept of the strategic', as well as with the 'me too' supposed best practice contained in much of the literature. 'The aim [of the book] is to get one and all to think through why they are taking a particular approach and the consequences.' Context is king.

But Peter and Tony do much more in this book to help us pursue the appropriate pathways to success. Displaying their own multiple roles as leading thinkers, consultants, practitioners and writers they delve beneath the superficial and above the narrowly over-analytical to observe and infer from what is actually happening to HR in many different UK organizations and settings. They generally see not a required or actual 'radical transformation' but 'an evolutionary process' of building on traditional strengths and melding on new and enhanced responsibilities and contributions. And, overall, their findings give them 'much reason to be optimistic'.

HR outsourcing? Exaggerated in extent and tough to deliver in practice. Replacement by the line managers? They generally have not the time, the skills nor the inclination. Business partners? An essential role for HR functions but one in which there has been too much focus on job titles and aspirations and not enough on delivery. The obsession with strategy? HR has to find a balance between its still valuable day-to-day operational role and the 'big-picture' transformational initiatives, and the two in reality can't be neatly segmented. Employment legislation? A powerful reinforcement to an influential regulatory role for HR. Understanding and identifying with employees? Also a continuing and key aspect of HR's USP.

A function in terminal decline? Look at the Institute for Employment Studies' (IES) research for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) showing significant growth in the numbers of HR staff since 2001. Are talent and human capital management the latest in a long line of faddish straws we clutch at? No, they are both crucial and indicative of a fundamental shift in the global economy towards service and knowledge-based work which means people really are an organization's most important asset. And, for HR, the function that should know more about the people aspects of the organization and how to deliver performance through them than anyone else, they are a fantastic opportunity.

But optimism is combined with realism, and this book is far from being an HR whitewash or love-in. It combines a full description of the evolving role and purpose of HR in the first part, and of this visionary potential contribution in the second, with a powerful and challenging critique of current practice and the very real obstacles to delivering on this potential in the third. Lack of vision and optimism; a bias towards inaction and progressive retreat from an essential front-line presence and impact ('for many employees HR has become remote and irrelevant'); and, perhaps most critically, an over-focus on HR structures, roles and processes rather than on developing and what the authors call 're-contextualizing' our skills and capabilities. 'Lack of the right skills', the authors write, 'will continue to be the principal reason for HR not meeting its own aspirations.'

The CIPD continues to adapt and expand the professional development it provides to tens of thousands of HR practitioners each year to help to address this challenge. We are currently working with IES to examine the shifting career and development pathways in HR, and the broader evolution of the function. But at its heart it's down to the personal commitment each of us makes to continually question, learn and re-learn so as to be ever better at linking the people and performance agendas in the specific settings each of us works in.

A recent CIPD survey found that HR professionals are only devoting half the time they feel they need to their own personal development. Only if we make this commitment will more of us realize the magnificent vision of the function's future the authors hold out, where 'far from being Human Remains, HR is the part of the organization that orchestrates employee performance, conducting ... playing the employee engagement notes'.

Everyone at whatever level and role in HR, or with studies or interests in people management more generally, should find plenty in this book to help them develop and improve significantly on this score.

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