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Evidence-Based Human Resources in Action

by Christopher Woock and John Gibbons

Contents

Harvard University: Using Evidence To Align HR with Strategy

Harvard University presents a set of challenges for its human resources function that differ from most profit-driven private sector companies. The main challenge facing the human resources function is to sustain Harvard University's position as a market leader by continuing to attract and retain the best people to support its mission. "[Our] mission focuses on excellence in teaching and research," says Melissa Brown, director of the Center for Workplace Development at Harvard, "human resources practices can help drive that mission." By the same token, typical drivers such as talent management and employee retention, along with outcome measures such as share-holder value or the return on investments of human resources practices, have traditionally not received nearly as much consideration as would be the case in the for-profit sector.

Further complicating the issue is the fact that Harvard University is composed of many relatively independent schools—such as the Harvard Business School, John F. Kennedy School of Government—each of which have their own human resources function. Across the different schools exists a wide range of human resources professionals representing a broad spectrum of roles, responsibilities, and experience levels. In addition to the school-based human resources functions, central HR is responsible for workforce development, rewards, benefits administration, HRIS, employee communications, and employee and labor relations policies and procedures across the university. These unique characteristics are some of the challenges Marilyn Hausammann, vice president of human resources, faced when she arrived at Harvard in October 2004.

To gain a deeper understanding of these issues, Ms. Hausammann met with over 100 academic and adminis-trative leaders to understand the challenges and opportu-nities facing the university and to inform the development of human resources' priorities. One recurring theme of her "listening tour" was that deans and other leaders thought that clarifying the role of human resources and professionalizing the function should be top HR priorities. In addition, many of them identified key human resources functions, such as staffing and development, as either a problem area that was not delivering value to their departments or units or an opportunity area to deliver more consistent service or support. Based on the lessons learned from her inquiries, Hausammann set out to acquire more concrete information about the strengths and weaknesses of the human resources function at Harvard.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

THE GOAL
Transitioning human resources from its existing support function to taking on a more strategic role in supporting Harvard University's commitment to excellence in teaching and research.

THE CHALLENGES
Human resources practices are not driven by metrics like shareholder value in a non-for-profit environment. The human resources function is highly decentralized across schools.

THE STRATEGY
A gap analysis based on surveys and focus groups identi-fied staffing, employee development, and performance management as key human resources issues. In response Harvard redesigned its employment/recruitment process and implemented a development guide for HR employees based on external research findings.

"We knew that the most pressing human resources issues were staffing and employee development," recalls Brown. However, conventional human resources metrics alone did not make a compelling case for change within Harvard's central human resources function; as a result, Hausammann and Brown decided to gather more evi-dence to support their initial discoveries.

Implementing Strategic Alignment
Shortly after her arrival at Harvard, Hausammann, who had come from the consulting and financial services industries, had established a three-year rolling goal setting plan, introducing a review process so common in the for-profit environment, but less prevalent in academic settings. Her aim was to establish a benchmarking process against which to measure the performance of the human resources function.

Together with Brown and other human resources leaders, Hausammann set out to educate human resources line leaders about what it meant to align the human resources agenda with Harvard's overall agenda.

This process provided a blueprint for how the human resources function was to deliver against the university's agenda (Exhibit 8). Says Brown, "The cyclical nature of this design allows human resources to improve upon … the areas that have been challenges in the past."

Hausammann and her team identified three key components of the human resources strategy:

- aligning workforce strategies with the university mission and strategies
- identifying the employee value proposition (i.e., what should existing and prospective employees be able to expect in "their employment deal" with the University)
- demonstrating measurable results and increasing collaboration and integration between the central and local HR functions.

As it turned out, one critical factor for ensuring the success of this strategic framework was the development of human resources talent at Harvard. As a result, Hausammann placed her initial focus on the employee value proposition and on identifying and developing key human resources talent though recruitment and development.

Exhibit 8
Linking Human Resources to Harvard's Mission and Strategy
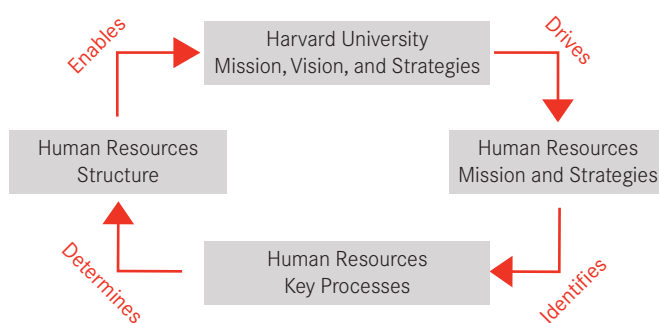
Source: Harvard University Human Resources

Increasing HR's Impact and Effectiveness

In the fall of 2005, Harvard's human resources department launched The Human Resources Development Initiative to transition its function from a support or transactional role to a more strategic role. The initiative was developed with three objectives in mind:

- identifying core competencies for human resources within the institution
- using core competencies to identify and prioritize development needs
- creating a curriculum for developing human resources talent and supporting ongoing development of these competencies

Hausammann also decided to bring on board Edith Onderick-Harvey from Change Dynamics Consulting to assist her and her team during this transition. Together with Hausammann and Brown, Onderick-Harvey formed a steering committee that also included the human resources deans and directors from the schools and key central administration units. Its role was to provide oversight for the initiative, and the committee's input and perspective significantly shaped the human resources competencies framework and approach to information gathering.

Gap Analysis

Using Dave Ulrich and Wayne Brockbank's "human resources competency framework" as their starting point, Brown and Onderick-Harvey developed a set of assessment tools to address the first two objectives of the initiative: identifying core competencies for human resources and identifying and prioritizing development needs.[7] This model was met with some resistance, with many human resources leaders expressing concern that it was "too corporate" and would not be a good fit with Harvard's organizational culture. In response to these concerns, Ulrich and Brockbank's competency model was customized to reflect Harvard's culture and the wide range of roles for the decentralized human resources function within the university.

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[7] Dave Ulrich and Wayne Brockbank, *The HR Value Proposition,* (Boston, Harvard Business School Press, 2005).

The rationale behind the use of the competency model was to try to create a set of common capabilities and expectations for all HR roles across Harvard in order to support the transition to more strategic partnerships with their client groups. Rather than creating uniform job descriptions, the focus was placed on leveling skill sets. This approach allowed the schools and units to meet their local needs, while providing human resources professionals across the university with opportunities to stay current with developments within their profession.

The process of identifying core competencies was based on establishing focus groups as well as online surveys of the schools' administrative deans and central administration vice presidents and their leadership teams. Each respondent was asked to force-rank eight core human resources functional areas or disciplines needed to support their school/unit goals—both "today" and "three years from now." Respondents were also asked to force rank five best practices human resources capabilities. In addition to the forced ranking, respondents were asked how well human resources was performing along each dimension (Exhibit 9).

Exhibit 9
Harvard's HR Competencies Framework

Capabilities	Current importance ranking	Future importance ranking	Current effectiveness*
FUNCTIONAL CAPABILITIES:			
Staffing			
Employment development			
Designing organization structures			
Legal compliance			
HR measurement			
Performance management			
Business knowledge			
HR technology			
BEST PRACTICE CAPABILITIES:			
Achieving results			
Personal communication			
Culture management			
Leading change			
Strategic decision making			

* 1=low, 2=moderate, 3=high

Source: Harvard University Human Resources

The Information Gathering Process

Surveys

Electronic surveys and focus groups were conducted to obtain input about the importance of key human resources competencies and their effectiveness in meeting the strategic goals of the various schools and units.

The use of two different information gathering approaches allowed for flexibility as well as efficient data collection.

Participants were asked to rank the importance of 13 human resources capabilities within their current environment, then project ranking for the same capabilities three years into the future. Participants were also asked to rate the existing human resources function's demonstrated effectiveness in these areas.

Surveys were delivered electronically to the administrative leadership and distributed to five school-based human resource teams between April and June 2006.

Focus Groups

Focus group participants were asked to rank:

- the importance of functional capabilities in the current environment
- the importance of best practices capabilities in the current environment
- the importance of functional capabilities in the future environment
- the importance of best practices capabilities in the future environment

Participants were then asked to rate the demonstrated effectiveness of human resources in these capabilities, and their responses were recorded on a flip chart by a facilitator. Additional comments about these ratings were captured by a second facilitator during the sessions.

Focus groups were conducted with six groups representing the senior leadership of five schools/units [one school conducted two separate focus groups].

A gap analysis of the focus group and electronic surveys identified the following key human resources issues: staffing, employee development, and performance management. In addition, focus group and survey results revealed a lack of knowledge about the full capacity of Human Resources' capabilities. With the goal of focusing and maximizing the success rate of their action plan, and based on their knowledge of the organization's key weaknesses, Brown and Onderick-Harvey began asking why these deficiencies existed.

Additionally, Harvard had simultaneously administered an employee engagement survey to a broad university audience, designed to understand a variety of institutional issues. Key areas identified by the report included those related to leadership, career mobility, and performance pay. Together with the results yielded by the focus groups and the administrative dean/vice president surveys, it provided the necessary data to determine key areas of improvement.

Plan

As the gap analysis had shown, a complexity at Harvard was the decentralized nature of its hiring process. "Decentralized hiring meant that it was possible for the Law School to have two very good applicants for one job, and choose to hire one," explains Brown. "Meanwhile, the Medical School was looking to fill a similar position, and the second-best Law School applicant would have been a better fit than any of the Medical School's applicants. However, the Medical School did not know about this applicant."

In response, the research team began a review of the employment function. They formed a small steering committee to develop strategies for streamlining some of the hiring practices and investigate whether or not a consistent approach could be established. The committee also set out to devise a process for sharing applicants for common jobs.

Based on the results of the gap analysis, the steering committee proposed an employment redesign process that encompassed three strategies:

- placing at least one employment specialist in each school, along with restructuring the central employment services team
- establishing university-wide common standards for the employment process
- introducing a new applicant tracking system

In addition, Hausammann and her team, working with Onderick-Harvey, prepared a development guide modeled after the competency models formulated by Ulrich and Brockbank. They developed skill sets for each position with targeted learning resources. Using a computer–based assessment tool, Human Resource employees are now able to assess what skills and capabilities they need to acquire to advance in their careers or change jobs within the organization.

Recent Developments

An on-line human resources development tool linking the competency models and development resources went live in November 2007. Central human resources is further integrating the competencies and learning resources into their 2008 performance management and development planning processes.

In the fall of 2007, the central employment function at Harvard University proposed a new organizational structure that includes newly defined roles related to workforce planning, establishing best practices and standards, identifying talent pools for key roles, community outreach, and recruiting support. Standards for the employment process within the schools have been developed and are currently under review. Harvard is piloting a Recruitment Process Outsourcing model designed to free up human resources professionals to source for more senior level and "hard to fill" roles. Harvard Law School, the President & Provost's Office, Alumni Affairs and Development, the Office of Human Resources as well as Financial Administration turned over their requisition screening process for staff assistant roles to the vendor last December. Finally, implementation of a new applicant tracking system (ATS) is scheduled for fiscal year 2009. In the interim, a number of enhancements to the existing ATS are set to be implemented by the end of June 2008.

About the Authors

John Gibbons is a senior research advisor in the Management Excellence Program at The Conference Board. In addition to leading The Conference Board's research in Evidence-Based Human Resources, he is also responsible for the organization's employee engagement research practice. Gibbons joined The Conference Board with more than 15 years as a human resources practitioner, serving in HR management roles as well as in specialist capacities in organizational development, compensation design, and sourcing and staffing.

Christopher Woock, Ph.D., is a research associate in the Management Excellence Program of The Conference Board. His current research projects explore the empirical links between human capital and business performance to develop an evidence-based approach to human capital analytics, including assessing the link between innovation and competitiveness; evaluating business' investment in the skills of its current and potential workforce; and issues surrounding a multigenerational workforce.

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