



FEATURE



## HR as a Strategic Business Partner: Cliché or Absolute?

[By Monique Dearth]

As a practicing HR professional for the past 17 years, I believe I have experienced the value (and contribution) of HR in many different ways. I hear many companies and HR leaders talking about the “value of HR as a strategic business partner,” and it is interesting to observe how this plays out in the real world of day-to-day HR work. Is HR valued as a business partner? A few observations follow.

**Phase 1:** I began my HR career working for a large automotive company based in none other than the Motor City, Detroit. The title I was given, personnel generalist, should have been some indication of whether or not HR was viewed as a “strategic business partner.” The plant manager and his staff sat in executive offices near the front of the plant. The HR manager and the rest of us on his team were placed in offices upstairs. The role of HR was obvious. It was relegated to being a “support” function, clearly not a part of the leadership team, and planning the company picnic was one of the expected responsibilities. I learned through observation and through assignment that HR was an administrative function and nothing more. Note: I was working at this company while attending school to receive my master’s degree in labor and industrial relations/human resources. Here I was learning all about the role of strategic HR, and yet I was experiencing something entirely different.

**Phase 2:** I interviewed with a new company that had a reputation for valuing the role of HR, but was it able and willing to put its money where its mouth was? Absolutely. Talk about HR being viewed as an integral part of the team! At this company, HR was expected to be “at the table” participating in making the big decisions, strategizing, and understanding the impact to the business. There were no company picnics being planned in upstairs offices. This was real.

The golden triangle in this company was comprised of the business operating leader, the finance manager, and the HR manager. This triad worked very closely together to ensure that the business was heading in the right direction. HR was expected to understand how the business ran, how to read the company financials, and, most importantly, how the role of HR could impact both of these things.

**Phase 3:** I left corporate America for an opportunity to start my own gig providing HR consulting services focused on my passion for leadership assessment and development. This opened up a tremendous opportunity to witness what HR looks like in many other companies. We work with companies across the U.S. ranging from the very small to the very large and across product and service lines. What did I find? Not a whole lot has changed. It’s amazing to see the differences that still exist in what businesses expect from their HR teams. Some of our clients continue to see HR as a necessary evil to pay people and keep them happy but would no more expect to see HR playing a role in the big decisions. Other companies rely on their HR teams as integral partners and won’t move forward on making major decisions until HR has participated. Clearly, we engage quickly and directly with those companies who already view HR as integral. Our greatest challenge lies in helping to educate our clients who don’t know how to use their HR teams to their fullest potential. This often

requires upgrading the HR talent or at least providing them with a new direction in terms of what is expected.

So, returning to the original question, can you, as an HR professional, execute on your role as a strategic business partner with your organization? Yes, this depends in part on the company, but don’t let that be your excuse. And don’t interview for an HR job using the hip buzzwords “I want to be a strategic business partner” if you aren’t ready and able to execute on this.

Here is my advice for truly delivering as a strategic business partner:

1. **Interview them.** When interviewing with a company for an HR role, observe how HR is treated. Are they sitting near the rest of the executive team? Did you interview with only other HR people, or do others in the business (e.g., the business leader and finance manager) also want a say in who gets hired into the position? Ask what major business initiatives HR has been involved with recently and, more importantly, what role HR played. What is your assessment of the strategic capabilities of the HR people with whom you are interviewing? Are they able to articulate what is going on in the business?



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2. **Educate yourself.** This means educating yourself on new trends in HR so that you stay current. It means educating yourself on a broader functional skill level so that you are comfortable reading a P&L statement or a balance sheet or understanding the latest technology. It means educating yourself on your business, your industry, and your competitors so that you are able to add meaningful dialogue.
3. **Be pushy.** If you find yourself in a company that doesn't value the role of HR, seek ways to add value outside of those typically expected from your role. Align yourself as a value-added partner by virtue of your contribution to the bigger picture. Ask insightful questions, make comments, and contribute on a broader level. While some people may initially brush this off as being "none of your business," this chimney-thinking will soon crumble if the result is greater contributions from someone considered "just the HR person."
4. **Stay positive.** There was a video produced recently that showed a series of young children stating things like "When I grow up, I want to be buried in bureaucracy." The entire video focused on what could be considered "typical" HR responsibilities in very non-strategic HR roles. I was in an audience of about 300 HR professionals when this was shown to the group, and the response was negative. You could just hear the buzz when the video clip ended that this did nothing to elevate the role of HR but, rather, served to further cement the "personnel generalist" view of the function. Too often, HR still receives a bad rap in organizations as simply being overhead or being the necessary evil. Staying positive, recognizing the value of your contributions, and, more importantly, being a role model for how HR should contribute are integral if the function is to truly make the shift to being accepted as a strategic business partner role-no clichés.

**About the Author:**

Monique A. Dearth is the founder and CEO of Incite Strategies, focusing on global executive assessment and leadership development, and HR OptIn, providing flexible HR project-management solutions. She and her team appreciate the variety and challenge that each client provides along with firsthand experience and insight into the role and value of HR. Clients include GE, The Home Depot, Accenture, Ventana Medical Systems, Textron Financial, and Ace Cash Express.

Monique holds a B.A. from the University of Michigan, a Master of Labor and Industrial Relations from Michigan State University, and a Juris Doctor degree, cum laude, from Albany Law School. In 2004, Monique was profiled by the *Atlanta Business Chronicle* as one of "40 of Atlanta's Most Promising Young Stars under Age 40." In 2007, she was named one of the "2007 Enterprising Women of the Year" by *Enterprising Women* magazine. Monique lives in Atlanta with her husband and two children.

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