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## A Case Study: Changing Human Resource Management Education to Fit the Field

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# **A CASE STUDY: CHANGING HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT EDUCATION TO FIT THE FIELD**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The field of Human Resource Management has embarked upon a process of significant change. To keep up with changes to the field, Barksdale (1998) argued that so too must HR education change. This article presents an effort that changed the HR educational model from a functional silos focused model to an integrated outcome-based model. The logic for the change, what changes were made, and comments about the outcomes are presented.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

“The competitive landscape is changing, and new models of competitiveness are needed to deal with the challenges ahead. These responses reveal a new competitive reality demanding organizational capabilities that will enable firms to better serve their customers and to differentiate themselves from their competitors.” (Ulrich, 1997, p. 1)

The maintenance and development of human capital is necessary to sustain an organization’s competitive position. Quite simply, the organization needs to have a human capital mix (e.g., knowledge, skills, & abilities) that will facilitate goal achievement year after year. Organizations that fail to take a proactive approach to developing and maintaining human capital will be less competitive. As Pfeffer (1998) notes, “Companies that manage people right will outperform companies that don’t by 30% to 40%.” There are a variety of other authors that seem to concur with Pfeffer’s comments (e.g., Pfau & Kay, 2002).

The management and development of human capital is but one challenge presented by an increasingly complex marketplace. Other challenges to the organization may include global, capability awareness and development, change management, technology, and the employee life-cycle (Ulrich, 1997, p. 2-14). Ulrich (1997, p. 23) suggests that the Human Resource (HR) function is ideally positioned to help the organization manage these challenges. Becker & Huselid (1999) suggest that the HR function must reinvent itself as both a strategic partner and service provider within the organization. As a strategic partner, the HR function is responsible for ensuring that adequate numbers of employees exist, with the right skills, in the right positions, so that the organization can achieve the goals that are set by the senior management team (profitability, expansion into new markets). As a service provider the HR function’s role is to provide managers with information about people-related issues, provide employees with timely paychecks, benefit information, provide training and many other tasks. Fitz-enz (2001) suggests that HR has clearly evolved and to remain relevant, must change with the times and

learn to use data to make intelligent decisions. In other words, HR needs to measure and make sure that it is using its resources as well as possible.

The push to become a strategic partner and service provider of the organization has changed the skills mix that organizations seek when hiring HR graduates. The role of the HR faculty member is to make sure that the Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSA) mix provided by the HR curriculum “generally” matches the needs of HR – present and future – so that when students complete their degrees they are employable. This discussion does not intend to suggest that Business Schools are vocational schools. Instead, Business Schools should perceive themselves and be perceived as a development organization. And as a development organization the goal is to develop individuals that (1) have an appropriate/current mix of KSA’s to meet future human capital needs and (2) sufficient foundation to continue developing themselves.

Consistent with the arguments that the HR function in organizations needs to update itself, Barksdale (1998) in the *Journal of Management Education* argues that we also must update HR education. He identifies four reasons why we should update HR education: the HR image problem; an overemphasis on compliance; ignorance of the financial side of business; and that HR has forgotten what it does well. A discussion with most HR professionals demonstrates that these reasons are valid, and there are probably several others that could also be included (e.g., strategic HR & changing technology). When these reasons are coupled with the growing chorus of industry and academic leaders who are increasingly talking about the link between treating people well and enhanced profitability, the argument to update HR education is even more compelling.

The evidence presented by both academic thought leaders and HR professionals are consistent. New HR professionals require skills – beyond the traditional HR tools (i.e., recruiting, compensation, etc.) – such as technology skills (Gartner Group, 1999; Miller, 2000; Shrivastava & Shaw, 2003; Thompson, 2000), the ability to think strategically (Becker, Huselid, Pickus, & Spratt, 1997), and the ability to understand how to measure and benchmark HR processes (Fitz-enz, 2001). Becker, Huselid, & Ulrich (2001, p. 12) note that most HR managers are very competent with regard to HR tasks but less competent at meeting strategic HR needs.

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) presents a knowledge model as a recommendation for every HR professional (SHRM, 2005). The SHRM model recommends that every HR professional should have: (a) knowledge of his/her business; (b) an understanding of HR technology; (c) ethical behavior and the demonstration of personal credibility; and (d) knowledge of traditional HR needs and delivery. The linkage between these components and the strategic contribution of HR also needs to be understood.

## **PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER**

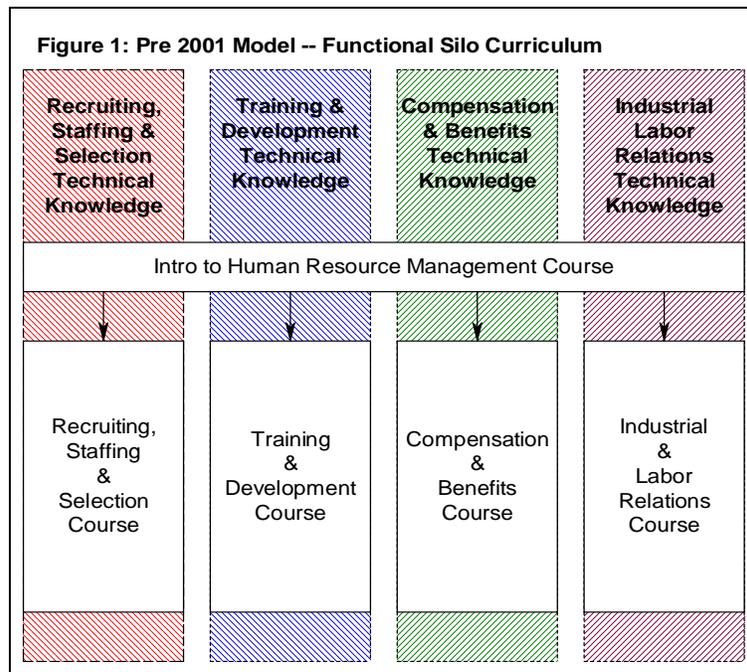
The purpose of this article is to go beyond the call for discussion presented by Barksdale (1998) to update HR education and provide a case example as to how one management department updated its HR concentration. Ideally, this article will start discussion and perhaps fan the flames of change.

The curriculum changes presented within were developed with input from a variety of stakeholders. The list of stakeholders includes HR professionals, current students, and students who graduated and started working in HR or management positions within the last several years. In addition, the authors relied upon: (1) one author's work experience as an Organizational Development specialist with a global retailer; (2) routine contacts with HR and management professionals in the business communities; (3) service with the local Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) Board of Directors; and (4) service with a global provider of Human Resource Information Systems, (HRIS), and Supply Chain information systems – both of which are subsets of Enterprise Resource Planning, (ERP), software systems which are used to run entire organizations.

### **THE STARTING POINT**

An examination of various Human Resource curricula finds a heavy emphasis on the traditional HR tools with some focus on strategic HR and HRIS – and ours was no different. When we began this process, our curriculum was composed of the traditional list of courses with each one focusing on a subset of the traditional HR toolbox: (a) Introduction to Human Resources; (b) Compensation & Benefits; (c) Staffing, Recruiting, & Selection; (d) Training & Development; and (e) a Special Topics course. Students took four of the courses (See **Figure 1**) of which one was a required prerequisite. Although our curriculum did not, some curricula also include an HR Information Systems component to demonstrate how data can be used to make hiring decisions, to track training courses taken, and to help manage placement of people based on their skills. Feedback from our constituents strongly suggested that our HR students were well-versed in the traditional HR tools.

Courses were heavily focused on the “how to” of the traditional HR tools, and they provided great detail on these tools. There was little discussion that focused on the linkages that could be developed between traditional HR tools or as to how they could be implemented to facilitate the achievement of desired outcomes. Any discussion of linkages between the functional HR areas (compensation, recruiting) and strategic organizational goals (such as profitability or physical capacity growth) existed in a hypothetical and sometimes case study fashion, but these discussions would have been much more powerful if they had occurred consistently in every class and if the focus had been at the level of the HR department and not on the functional silo (recruiting). For the purpose of this paper, functional silos are defined as a focused subset of activities within the HR function. For example, compensation and all the activities related to compensation decisions would occur within the functional silo responsible for compensation.



Barksdale (1998) notes that the traditional focus has three weaknesses. First, this approach reflects the historical development of HR and is heavily compliance-oriented. Second, this approach tends to teach the traditional HR tools in a vacuum. That is, it teaches HR tools without accounting for the necessity of being able to: (a) connect HR practices to the achievement of strategic organizational goals; (b) benchmark HR processes; (c) measure HR financial effectiveness; (d) manage change; and (e) completely understand modern HR information systems. Third, the traditional HR tools were developed by examining the desired capabilities of personnel professionals of an earlier time.

## RE-ENGINEERING

Based on these arguments and other trends in the field, we began re-engineering our HR concentration during the 2001/2002 academic year. The change process started with a simple re-engineering question -- "What outcomes are desired?" We began the process of determining desired outcomes by starting with the stakeholders that planted the seed of change initially -- those organizations who hire our students and recent alumni. There was a recurring theme that we needed to develop HR generalists with skills beyond the traditional focus. The HR generalist is tasked with recruiting employees, managing compensation related problems, disciplinary issues, training, and union-management relations, just to name a few activities.

Discussions with our external stakeholders demonstrated that the HR concentration should be developing HR generalists who had knowledge about the traditional HR skills (compensation, training, staffing) as well as (a) strategic HR, (b) HR information systems, and (c) organizational change. Assessment data confirmed that the students understood the traditional HR tools, but

were less capable at connecting the use of HR tools to achieving desired strategic outcomes or managing organizational change.

Strategic HR is a process by which the organization's collective human capital, or the collective knowledge, skills, and abilities are managed to facilitate the achievement of organizational goals. One typical organizational goal might be to increase profitability through physical expansion, which would mean the HR function should identify, train, decide on compensation, and physically move the individuals that would be likely to be successful in a new location. Another organizational goal might be to reduce reliance on outside contractors in the information technology sector, which means the HR function needs to manage an aggressive hiring campaign and then make sure that the compensation plan is in place so that adequate numbers of employees with the right skills can be hired to replace the outside contractors. Strategic HR is the process of identifying the organization's goals, translating those goals into strategic HR goals, and then coordinating the various areas within HR in their movement towards goal achievement. The new HR professional needs to understand the linkages present in order to be part of these processes.

Human Resource Information Systems are database software products that manage all of the data that organizations maintain about their employees. Much like the introduction of spreadsheets and accounting information systems to accounting students, new HR graduates are expected to understand how an HRIS works and ideally have some familiarity. For example, when making a recommendation about which employee to interview for an open position, the HRIS can be used to match the specific tasks required of the job with all applicants and their skills. This results in a much faster decision about who is qualified so that valuable interview time and resources are not wasted on an unqualified applicant. The HRIS can also help by automating some processes, such as payroll, so that the HR professional can be left to work on strategic decisions.

Many of the traditional HR tools can be easily adapted to help manage change. For example, training is often used to manage change. The difference between training for jobs and training for change is the focus of the training. Recruiting might also be used to facilitate change by changing the kind of individual knowledge, skills, or abilities that are desired in the next hire.

When we began this process the goal was simple – determine the best way to add or augment courses to meet the identified knowledge goals. As the re-engineering process began, it was discovered that simply adding material would not necessarily develop the additional knowledge in a way that was useful to the student and more importantly transferable by the student into the workplace. The number of hours available in the HR concentration also served as a constraint. Six months and many conversations with stakeholders later -- a new HR concentration was developed.

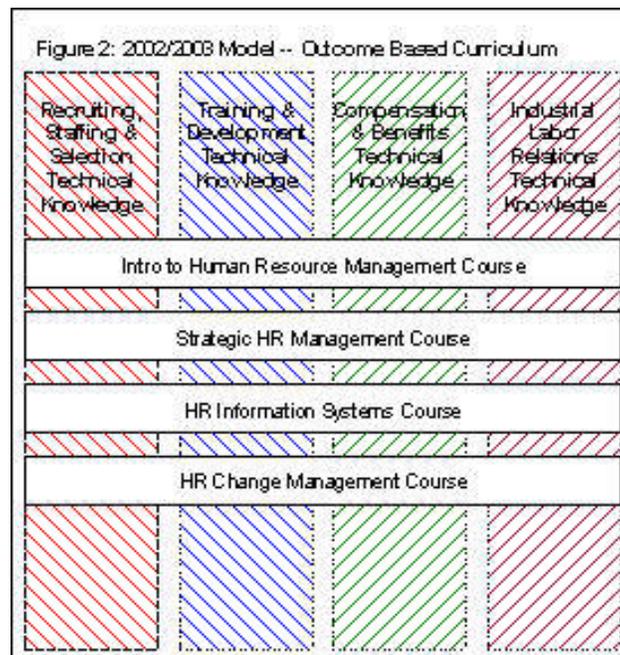
## **A NEW CURRICULUM**

The 2002/2003 academic year began with a streamlined and focused HR concentration with fewer course choices. The new concentration was designed by first deciding how to put the

goals listed previously into practice in the classroom. Once the desired outcomes were defined, courses could be developed that would teach the desired HR skills with the linkages to those desired outcomes. The new concentration continued to be four courses – now consisting of three required courses and one elective (See Figure 2). The new course list is:

- Introduction to Human Resource Management (required prerequisite)
- Human Resource Information Systems (required)
- Strategic Human Resource Management (required)
- Change Management or Negotiation Skills or Organizational Theory

The logic behind this was that the traditional HR tools could continue to be taught, but now they would be taught as part of the process towards achieving specific outcomes. In other words, the focus would start with outcomes and work “backwards” to the traditional HR tools instead of simply teaching the tools. This would develop linkages, an understanding of the HR system and processes, and knowledge of how each HR capability could contribute to a specific desired outcome. For example, instead of a specific focus on an HR tool or practice in an entire class (e.g., staffing and selection), each student would receive some aspect of staffing and selection in any course where it was relevant to the desired outcomes. This approach requires the student to use all of the traditional tools in the HR toolbox while the old approach focused on one HR process at a time.



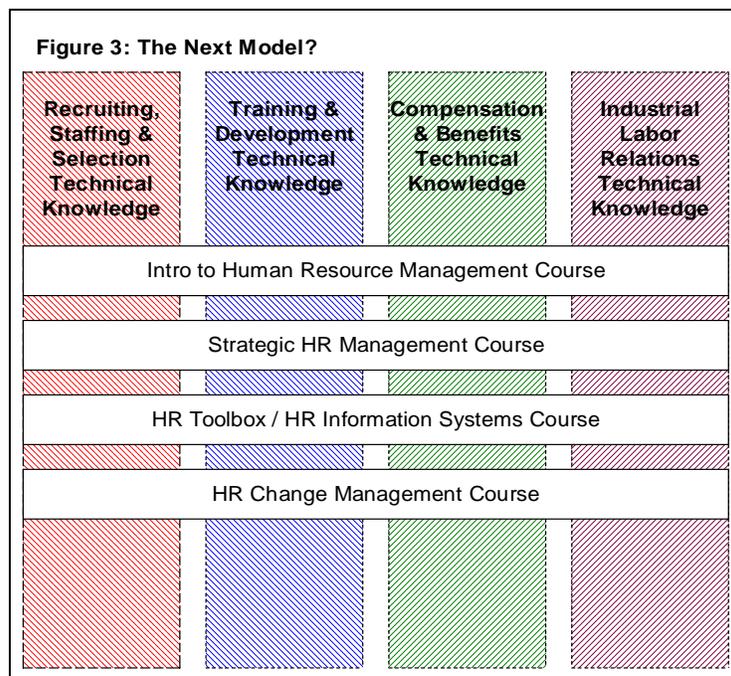
As an alternative, the simple addition of a capstone course to the original course sequence was considered. There are two reasons that we elected this other option. First, there were not enough free credit hours to require an HR capstone. The students would have developed depth in only two areas; and for a capstone course to work well, the students should be competent in all of the HR functional areas. Second, the integrated model would provide multiple opportunities to work with the traditional HR tools and the relationship that each HR tool has to the defined

outcomes. As most training methodologies have demonstrated, when more opportunities are provided to develop new skills, greater learning is more likely.

### CONCLUSION: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

As with any new curriculum it is vital that assessment be completed to determine if the modifications have been successful. Much to the delight of the people that hire our students, the new curriculum seems to be helping us to develop new HR employees with desired competencies. The most often mentioned positive feedback indicates that our students understand the big picture and how to strategically partner with top management to develop, implement, and interpret HR metrics.

The most significant opportunity for improvement – as mentioned by our HR advisory board – is that the traditional HR skills (e.g., compensation, training, recruiting) are not as strong as they used to be in some of the students. In hindsight, perhaps we went too far. When we combine this feedback with the feedback we receive from our recent alumni, we find another opportunity for fine-tuning. Several recent alumni (and new entrants into the workforce) suggested that the HRIS course could be tailored to better fit the role of the HR generalist instead of the HRIS specialist. HR generalists work throughout the entire field of HR making daily decisions about hiring, compensation, training, and terminations, and they use an HR information system to support these activities. HRIS specialists focus on the decision support role of the HRIS as a delivered product while their daily activities focus on system implementation. A solid suggestion is to replace the time spent developing HRIS specialist knowledge with additional time on working with the HR tools such as compensation, training, or recruiting (See **Figure 3**).



While it is possible to focus too closely on the traditional HR tools, it is also possible to go too far the other direction and develop strategic thinkers that are not as familiar as they should be with the HR functional tools. Most of the thought leaders in HR strongly suggest that HR professionals need to add the strategic capability, metrics, and technology to their toolkits (Barksdale, 1998; Fitz-enz, 2001; Pfeffer, 1998; Ulrich, 1997). However, these same thought leaders say nothing about abandoning the traditional HR tools.

Another approach might be to examine HR from the perspective of the supply chain. In the supply chain model the focus is on processes that are used to deliver products or services to the final customer. The supply chain is broadly conceptualized in that it examines the entire manufacturing/service process from final customer back to initial suppliers of raw materials. However, to the sides of this supply chain there must be financial capital and human capital. This suggests that the role of HR is to ensure that adequate levels of human capital, as defined by desired knowledge, skills, and abilities, are provided such that the supply chain can continue functioning. This is not such a stretch as the role of accounting/finance is to ensure that adequate financial capital exists such that the supply chain can continue functioning. This approach would certainly focus on meeting the human capital needs of the supply chain, although there is potential for a short-term human capital focus to develop.

As many have suggested, the HR function must change to embrace the business that they are within; so must those who develop the HR professional. We must go beyond the simple addition of new topics by continuously monitoring our key constituent groups- the employing organization and the soon-to-graduate student who will want to be employable. In the spirit of continuous improvement we should also consider improving our assessments of what the students are learning. We must also go beyond simple assessment to systematically request feedback from our HR professional graduates. We might also consider working more closely with the professional organizations as their content more rapidly reflects workplace realities and changes.

Another way that the effectiveness of this change may be assessed is in actions taken by the outside stakeholder group. The general level of interest in our students has increased, and placement rates have increased for interns and new full-time positions. Several members of the local Society for Human Resource Management chapter – including the Vice-President of HR of a large local hospital; the Director of HR for the County Courts; and the College Recruiters for two global oil companies with a presence – have commented that the new curriculum has had a noticeable effect in that interns and new HR professionals have a better understanding of how HR activities fit into the big picture of the organization. This is not a task to be taken lightly. Much like designing a new product, the right stakeholders need to be involved, and the right questions must be asked. The end result, though, appears to be promising and worth the time and effort spent.

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