

HR specialists

“We have increased the capacity and capability of every team and every individual to take action.”

United Biscuits' 'vision' for its HR specialists

Executive Summary

This is the first publication to focus specifically on the collective role of HR specialists, and follows on from earlier CRF reports on *Configuring HR for tomorrow's challenges* and *The Effective HR Business Partner*. Note that we do not go into detail about the particularities of individual areas – such as reward, L&D, organisational effectiveness – which would require a far longer report.

- 1 HR specialists – increasingly grouped in so-called ‘centres of expertise’ or ‘excellence’ – represent one leg of the ‘three-legged model’ widely adopted in an effort to make HR functions more cost-effective. But organisations have not found it easy to bed in the new structures, and many HR transformations have struggled to reap the hoped-for benefits. One of the challenges has been determining the most appropriate purpose, role and capabilities of specialists, as well as how they should be organised and how they should manage relationships with other parts of HR and the organisation as a whole.
 - 2 Part of the problem is that success depends on all the elements of the model – specialists, HR business partners (HR BPs), shared service centres – being in place and working well, with line managers taking full responsibility for managing their people. Transformation also has to be – and be seen to be – a business initiative, not an HR initiative. However, in practice, the model has often been introduced piecemeal, and the changes conceived and/or implemented by HR without fully engaging business managers.
 - 3 However, the idea of a structural formula that every business can apply is unrealistic.
 - Organisations vary in terms of both complexity and need, and the model needs to be adapted to specific needs and circumstances. There has been much trial and error.
 - Firms also need to allow time for the new structures to bed in and reach the desired levels of quality – yet expectations have been poorly managed.
 - Structures have been implemented without really addressing interrelationships and establishing behavioural groundrules – the result has been to create a new set of silos.
- It is advisable to approach transformation as a learning exercise and culture change from the start, and for HR to involve its customers from concept to implementation.
- 4 Given cynicism about ‘HR-speak’ and ‘jargon’, HR specialists should be careful not to confuse their colleagues in describing their roles and activities. For instance, we found the term ‘CoE’ being applied to single individuals and yet also to groups of several hundred ‘specialists’. Some organisations avoid using ‘excellence’ since it can seem vainglorious.
 - 5 Organisations have learnt to group areas together in order to provide a more integrated and streamlined service to the business. This potentially also improves communications between CoEs, allowing them to share knowledge and avoiding becoming silos. It can facilitate movement of specialists between CoEs, helping to broaden them.
 - 6 Central HR functions should be clear about how they approach three distinct types of work – propagating policy and common practices; consultancy; and ‘doing’ services. Colleagues in the business need to know what’s on offer – are they being told what to do or being treated as ‘clients’? Are specialists offering resources, or just advice? Note that co-creation of policies and practices with ‘customers’ is usually more effective than top-down imposition.
 - 7 The quality of relationships between specialists, HR BPs, HR service functions and line managers is critical to the success of the three-legged model. In particular, HR business partners have a pivotal role, akin to a medical ‘general practitioner’. HR specialists need to work closely with them in order to
 - be informed about important business challenges, and thus design appropriate solutions

HR 'experts' should avoid devising solutions in search of a problem, and remember that successful change relies heavily on implementation skills.

- work as a team, rather than competing for business managers' attention
- predict workloads, and thus the need for resources in terms of quantity and quality
- manage the inputs of any external experts effectively.

Collaborative orientation is thus an important attribute in hiring and developing specialists.

- 8 A danger when bringing together a group of subject experts is that they become over-productive in thinking up new 'products' and services. The more removed they are from front-line realities and pressures, the less 'customer-driven' they may become. HR specialists should avoid the temptation to devise solutions in search of a problem.
- 9 There should be careful consideration given to the types and level of expertise the organisation really requires to meet its needs, facilitated by a thorough needs review.
- Distinguish between 'thought leadership' – insofar as that can be defined – deep technical skills, and expertise in orchestrating and buying in specialist capacity.
 - Distinguish also between 'thinkers', facilitators, project managers and doers.
 - Bear in mind that 90% of change management rests on the skills of making it happen.
 - How 'expert' do you need your specialists to be? What can you afford?
 - Organisation development, measurement and analysis skills are core for all specialisms.

- 10 We identified that expertise is in short supply. Organisations need to 'make' if they can't buy.
- This takes time and investment. Any 'cobblers children' approach by HR to investment in its own talent needs to be overcome – the business cannot afford low expertise.
 - A carefully constructed development framework should be used to generate quality. However, attention must be paid to recruiting the right orientation in the first place.
 - Identify a range of critical experiences that specialists should acquire through movement within HR and the organisation, and also building deep external perspectives.
- 11 Assessment of the effectiveness of creating and providing HR specialist services is at present often informal and subjective in many organisations. The starting point is to establish business needs, and use that to prioritise resources and activity, and identify what success will look like. Evaluation must address both service performance and what specialists achieve in partnership with leaders and managers, recognising joint responsibility for outcomes.
- 12 In future, the number of people employed in specialist areas should decline proportionately. If they are successful, specialists will embed greater skills in HR colleagues – in both business partner and service roles – and also within line management. They should also be working towards using technology ever more effectively in creating self-help tools. While some governance, co-ordination and higher level expertise will always be needed, the aim should be to educate and develop an organisation's capacity to manage itself effectively.

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