

Higher Performance

Here are tips on how to become—and be recognized as—a high-potential HR employee.

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Most HR professionals do a good job directing the career development of employees throughout their organization. But they sometimes become so involved in the business of helping others that they fall short in pursuing their own professional excellence.

“We each need to become our own professional entity—accomplished, confident, competent—and then offer ourselves to the workplace,” says Karen M. Hopkins, SPHR, principal in The Hopkins Group LLC, an HR consultancy based in Dallas. She says HR professionals should see themselves as “a sort of ‘Me Inc.,’ ” ready to offer their skills and abilities to their organizations.

But acquiring the skills and attributes that are instrumental in helping HR professionals learn and grow in their careers takes focus and dedication, and it is easy to get sidetracked along the way. Experts say it helps to have a plan.

Plotting a Path

Every journey—including the journey to an HR career—has a starting point and a destination. And it is the responsibility of the individual to oversee his or her own career development.

“HR professionals must be responsible for their own learning and development,” Hopkins says. And effective development begins by establishing a foundation of basic HR knowledge.

“First and foremost, HR professionals need to be grounded with HR functional expertise,” says Ken Meyers, a partner with the Mercer Delta Executive Learning Center in Chicago. “That includes the

basics: compensation, benefits, employee development, staffing and recruitment, employee advocacy/ employee relations.”

But because core competencies vary from one organization to another, and from one position to another, HR professionals need to find out which competencies are expected and actively pursue them.

“During regular review periods, an employee and his or her manager should discuss core competencies and evaluate the individual’s skills related to these,” says Deleise Lindsay, district managing consultant for transition management firm Drake Beam Morin Inc., in Philadelphia, “and then set in place an action plan for further development in these and other areas.”

Some companies actively aid HR professionals in the development process.

Global energy and chemical firm Royal Dutch Shell has 3,000 core HR staff to service 112,000 employees in more than 140 countries. To assist its HR employees in increasing their skill sets, the company conducts an annual global HR talent review process that includes renewing individual development plans, identifying future leaders and implementing succession plans.

Shell also has a series of online HR Functional Excellence (HRFE) tools available to assist HR staff in managing their short-, medium- and long-term goals. The skills required at different job levels are laid out in a Leadership Competence Framework and a Personal and Business Skills Competence Framework. The HRFE tools also include strategic and technical curricula as well as internal and external educational opportunities to assist staff in attaining the required competencies.

Jan Davis, Shell’s global manager for HR functional excellence and a chartered fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in London, says the impact of these initiatives is felt throughout the organization.

“As HR business professionals, we contribute to Shell’s bottom-line performance and long-term sustainability,” says Davis.

Whether or not your company is as strategic toward its HR staff as Shell is, you can still be responsible for your own development.

Specialist or Generalist?

Whatever path they take initially, professionals in the HR field usually have to decide whether to delve deeper into a narrow specialty or take a broader interest in the business as a whole.

“People can get into HR from all sorts of different routes,” says Dr. Marc Sokol, vice president, development solutions, at Personnel Decisions International, a global human capital management consulting company in Minneapolis. “A person can choose to be a generalist and work across the organization in a number of business lines,” or can be a functional expert who specializes in a particular area.

A specialist would probably pursue a master’s or advanced degree in the HR arena, whereas a generalist would be better served by more-general business management training.

But all HR professionals—whether specialists or generalists—can benefit from enhancing their general business knowledge, say experts.

“HR leaders need the same knowledge that all businesspeople need—and that starts with a good grounding in the fundamentals of business management,” says Meyers. “The more business experience HR professionals gain during the course of their career, the more sensitive they become to the value HR can bring to the organization.”

Lindsay also recommends adding business skills. “HR professionals should naturally remain in tune with their career field, but also should be considering a broader business background.” To achieve that end, consider pursuing an MBA, obtaining project management certification or training in data analysis, to name just a few approaches to building business strengths.

Besides formal study, HR professionals would be wise to seek mentors outside of the HR department who can help them develop more-general business skills.

“Look outside of the usual venues for new learning opportunities,” says Hopkins. “Develop relationships with leaders in different areas of expertise and learn from them.”

Lindsay agrees: “If you do not know how to read the company’s balance sheet, find someone on the finance team to explain it to you. Build a relationship with that individual that is mutually beneficial ... and ultimately benefits the organization. Then, become a resource to your HR team by sharing that new knowledge.”

While the decision to become a specialist or to follow a generalist path will guide the actions taken to further any HR professional’s career, such a decision doesn’t need to be permanent.

“I have changed careers and industries several times—not from necessity, but due to personal interest and challenge,” says Hopkins, adding that her career development was self-directed. “Gaining the education and credentials necessary to move into and succeed in another arena were accomplished independently, not sponsored by a company or organization.”

Aligning With Business Goals

Whether HR professionals take a broad or narrow approach to their areas of expertise, the closer their career development activities match the needs of their business as a whole, the more successful they will be.

“HR professionals need to make sure the work they do is aligned with the organization’s business goals, not just its overarching vision,” says Lindsay. “A mistake that many HR departments make is to pursue departmental goals and objectives that are not in sync with the operational and financial goals of the company.”

HR needs to establish itself as a strategic resource, not a cost center. The entire HR department and the individuals within it will be considered more valuable to the extent that they understand their organization’s business needs and proactively provide solutions to business problems.

“Today, the HR professional needs to be more strategic and business-focused, more visionary,” Lindsay continues. “This shift is critical in order for organizations to value HR as a strategic business partner, rather than a tactical component that could easily be outsourced.”

This requires meeting with leaders of business units and finding out their goals and barriers. Armed with that information, HR professionals can more easily come up with creative solutions to help achieve those goals and break down those barriers.

“An HR professional should be thinking, ‘What is keeping my CEO or CFO up at night?’ and ‘Where are the “pain points” on which the C-suite focuses?’ ” says Lindsay. “At all levels within the HR organization, HR professionals should be asking how their work can help the CEO be successful based upon the business plan of the organization.”

Getting Noticed

No matter how well trained you are or how well you support the company’s business goals, however, you won’t advance your career unless your efforts are being noticed.

Hopkins advises HR professionals to maximize the annual review process, employee development initiatives, compensation conversations and other opportunities to garner recognition.

But there still is the need to get out in the organization where people can see you in action.

HR professionals should “ask to be assigned to business units for special projects, so that their HR skills can be ‘seen’ and appreciated in the line business,” she says.

Recognition from outside the office could benefit HR professionals as well. “Offering these talents to charitable agencies can create great experience as well as recognition.”

Sokol advises HR staff to look at key company initiatives and to take a leadership role in getting them implemented. For example, if the

top executives decide to implement Six Sigma, work out ways to align HR tasks to these activities.

But the best way to get recognition is by building a solid track record of measurable accomplishments and making them known.

“You should be constantly tracking data to quantify your contributions to business goals—then share this information with your manager,” Lindsay says. “You must be able to effectively communicate your contributions using phrases like ‘Helped to reduce overhead costs 25 percent by maintaining and utilizing a new system for screening job candidates.’ ”

And look beyond your own individual accomplishments. Despite any pronouncements about this being a dog-eat-dog world, people who support the success of those around them share in that success themselves.

“Most important, align yourself with your manager,” Lindsay says. “Ask yourself, ‘What do I need to do to make my manager successful?’ ” and then do it.

Staying Put

One thing HR professionals must decide is how important it is for them to move up in the HR hierarchy. Making an ascent is not for everyone.

“Not all professionals are driven by upward mobility,” says Hopkins. “Many get great satisfaction from doing a good job and being recognized for it.”

However, not wanting to move up the ladder doesn’t mean that an HR professional must stay in a job that is stale or “going nowhere.”

Lindsay advises high-performing individuals who have little likelihood of—or little interest in—advancement to conduct a baseline assessment of their skills, interests and cultural fit, and to look ahead at career goals for the next three to five years and identify any gaps.

“Develop an action plan with your manager that will help you get where you need to be and develop new capacity,” she says. “Make sure to have a development plan that leads to growth.”

In doing the assessment, make sure to take an honest view of the way that the company views HR.

“If the company culture does not view HR as a strategic partner, then there are two choices,” says Lindsay. “Take steps to change that view, or move to an organization that embraces a different view.”

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