

Whither the future of HR?

Let's prevent it from withering away!!

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Winston Churchill was once reported as saying "The future will be kind to me, as I intend to write it ". Some people might accuse Churchill of being pretentious. For them it would be difficult if not impossible to imagine that one person could shape destiny. For others, Churchill's ambition could be an inspiration: for them the challenge of creating or shaping the future is more certain than predicting it. Underlying these positions is the reality that, individually and collectively, we all have a view about our ability to shape outcomes and the future.

At the risk of being contentious, there seems to me that there is little evidence that the HR occupational group has exercised much influence over its own destiny. Whether it is legislation, government policy, professional standards, occupational image and reputation, or impact on management education and practice, we would be hard pressed to present tangible evidence of our direct and lasting impact.

There are at least several reasons for this, reasons that must be acknowledged and overcome if we are to change the status quo. *First*, HR people have weak occupational socialisation; we lack strong identity and aspirations. In comparison to lawyers, doctors, dentists, engineers and accountants, we have few recognised standards of entry educational preparation and practice, few rites of passage and a professional body weakened by a chequered history of achievement and influence. *Second*, there are multiple entry points into our occupational group. While this brings the benefits of diversity, it also makes it difficult to build a strong occupational identity that encompasses who we are, what we do and how we add value. *Third*, it may be that our origins as service providers and administrators rather than direct bottom line contributors (compared with our counterparts in sales and production) has attracted people or has conditioned us to be more passive in our role and influence or indeed less ambitious.

Whatever the origins and current status, if we are to consider the future of how people are led and managed in our organisations, a Churchillian approach is more likely to be successful. We have to *think and act* as though our views are both worthy and important; we have to *think and act* as though we can impact the objectives, dynamics and performance of our organisations.

So in the future, what is possible and desirable? Let me present four options for your consideration.

First, the financial performance of our organisations is necessary but not sufficient. Despite the best efforts of their advocates, triple bottom lines and balanced scorecards are still the exception rather than the rule. The magnitude of our influence in this world is largely determined by our credibility among the prevailing power brokers. And our credibility will be enhanced among these individuals and groups by demonstrating that we not only understand our organisation's business model and how it adds value to our customers and shareholders, but also how the management and leadership of people contribute to the success of that business model. On one hand we have never had better and more compelling evidence that people practices impact financial performance and longer term success; on the other hand and in my experience many HR people, when asked to articulate their organisation's business model and strategy, struggle to provide an accurate and comprehensive understanding of these issues. Until we are able to present and gain unqualified acceptance for the business case for HR, our ability to influence other agendas will always be limited. So our future must include a dimension that acknowledges that the occupational group must become more corporate and commercially savvy.

A **second** feature of the future will be that our relative numbers will decrease as managers and members take more responsibility for people management and leadership. The pathway to this future is for HR professionals to work less on themselves and more on their partners. The history of the women's' movement provides an analogy. In the 60s and 70s women focused primarily on their own rising aspirations, on their own identity, roles and contributions. In hindsight one major barrier to progress was the other 50% of the population : males who were unable or unwilling to change their roles, attitudes and expectations of women. Similarly, there are limited returns to be gained from developing ourselves if this is in isolation from working on our relationships with managers, members and external service providers. So the future will see us working more on collective learning and development than on competency development within the occupational group; on developing organisation wide HR capability rather than functional competence.

Third, if in our future we are to be more significant and influential, if we are to unlock value, we will have to understand some of the fundamental changes that are taking place in our organisations. For example, the traditional functional silos are being de-emphasised to enhance integration for customers/ clients. Implicit in these developments is the need to integrate the thinking, discussions, roles and contributions of marketing, sales, finance, IT and HR. Such integration opens up opportunities, for example, for us to add value by integrating our corporate product and employment brands as sources of higher performance and competitive advantage. So our future may well lie in creating new hybrid occupational categories rather than strengthening our existing functional thinking and practice. HR plus Marketing could focus on reputation and brand creation and migration; HR plus Finance could open up opportunities to produce more robust cost benefit analyses and causal linkages between practices and processes, and performance; and the integration of HR and IT could enhance decision support and the development of artificial intelligence. So

a significant future may require that we weaken our traditional occupational identity and professional zeal in order to enhance our impact. To achieve such outcomes who will plan and be prepared to be part of inter-disciplinary and cross functional conferences and education?

Fourth, given the increasing investment that we are required to make in career preparation and continuing education, and given the pervasive nature of work, the boundaries between learning, work and our personal lives will become more even more diffuse. If these trends are to be positive rather than counterproductive, then the world of work will have to undergo fundamental change. Our organisations will have to become communities; our use of the term employee will have to give way to the concept of member; and our organisations will have to encompass wider definitions of success. Such definitions of success will more adequately recognise that organisations are embedded in and dependent on the communities that they seek to serve. Just as environmentalism has gained momentum over the past two decades, this very term will have to be expanded to encompass the psychological and sociological impact of work and organisational life on the quality of our lives and society. Such developments open up opportunities to shape the role and contributions of our organisations in the years ahead.

So how can we meet the challenge of writing the future? In every occupational group there is a prochange constituency that is concerned about the future; what we lack are the forums to debate and resolve some of these issues. But these issues are too important to leave to others. We each carry responsibility for writing our future: our own and that of our organisation. This calls for reflection, discussion, debate, resolution and action. When will you take up this challenge?