ILR CAHRS

The Evolving Role of the HRBP
Working Group
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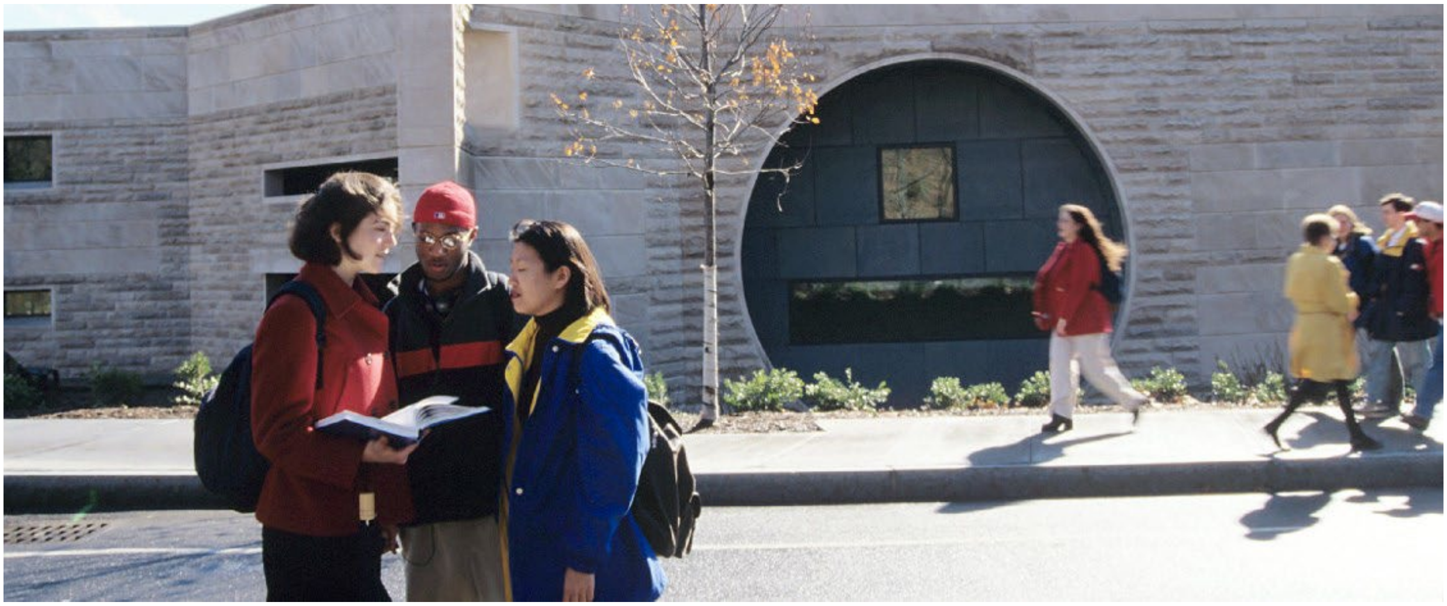

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HR Business Partners (HRBPs), who represent a very large and relatively underserved segment of the HR population, are on the frontlines in terms of dealing with real questions relative to the future of work. They must help the businesses and functions they support navigate changes to work and the workplace being brought about by a host of technological, economic, and geopolitical disruptions while simultaneously adapting to changes in the nature of their own role and responsibilities being brought about by many of the same disruptions.

This CAHRS working group explored the evolving role of the HRBP, with a focus on sharing challenges, opportunities, and best practices while also considering what may lie ahead for the role.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Overview of the CAHRS HRBP Initiative and Framework

Brad Bell and Chris Collins from Cornell's Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies (CAHRS) introduced the center's mission to bridge HR research and practice. The session is part of a two-year workstream on the evolving HRBP role, aiming to define future capabilities and build a community. The workstream was initiated because HRBPs are a large population in HR, often neglect their own development, and face a rapidly changing role due to disruptions like AI.

They presented a framework developed from interviews with CHROs, senior HRBPs, and business leaders. The framework's ultimate goal is driving business results by understanding and shaping business strategy. It acknowledges the tension between HRBPs and Centers of Excellence (COEs), suggesting HRBPs should inform COEs about frontline trends. It also highlights the need for HRBPs to prioritize their time across three key areas:

1. **Talent & Leadership:** Focuses on individual leader effectiveness, team dynamics, and succession planning.
2. **Org Effectiveness:** Focuses on workforce planning (roles and volume).
3. **Employee Value Proposition:** Focuses on culture and the employee experience.

The framework and an associated pilot assessment tool are designed to build HRBP capabilities and facilitate contracting with business leaders.

Leveraging AI in HR and Business Operations

The discussion centered on HR's dual role in adopting AI for its own functions and supporting its implementation across the organization. There is strong interest in using AI to automate non-strategic tasks to free up HR for more strategic work. While some are using AI for meeting summaries and document creation, concerns remain about security, data privacy, and reliability.

HRBPs are now expected to be thought leaders on AI, scaling operations, and talent. This requires re-evaluating how top talent is identified, how to measure HRBP success, and determining the right questions to ask business leaders about AI's workforce implications.

Proliferation and Centralization of AI Tools

A widespread challenge is managing the proliferation of various third-party and internal AI tools. While this allows for rapid innovation, it creates security risks and inefficiency. The consensus is that a centralized approach is necessary for governance, security, and cost-effectiveness. Many companies are moving to this model, appointing a central authority (like the CHRO) to standardize tools (e.g., using only Copilot) and consolidate the most effective bots into official systems. Companies with their own integrated HR systems find it easier to integrate AI features compared to those using multiple third-party systems.

AI Application in Performance Management

AI is being successfully used to improve performance management. Many companies have built internal tools to help employees and managers write performance reviews by pulling data from various sources (Workday, goals, feedback, documents, Slack). This saves managers time, improves the quality and fairness of reviews by including forgotten accomplishments, and helps deliver difficult feedback constructively. The process requires human oversight due to potential AI “hallucinations” and the need to manage legal hurdles like General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and data access permissions. Some companies have incorporated their values and principles to assess cultural alignment alongside accomplishments.

The Strategic Role of HR in Leveraging AI

The discussion highlighted a strategic shift for HRBPs to move beyond administrative tasks and drive business value by leveraging AI. HRBPs are uniquely positioned to identify employee pain points and should focus on using AI to make leaders more effective and improve the employee experience. This involves collaborating across the organization to develop powerful, centralized AI tools rather than just automating small, individual tasks. Having “AI forward” HR professionals who are fearless in experimenting and partnering with Information Technology (IT) is critical for success.

Immigration-Related Challenges

The impact of current immigration policies, specifically concerning H-1B visas, remains a significant and top-of-mind issue for HR professionals, particularly those supporting engineering and technology-focused business units.

Performance Management, Retention, and Organizational Structure

Performance Review and High Performer Identification

To improve performance reviews, it’s effective to analyze past data of high performers to create a data-driven model of what “high performance” looks like. This shifts the focus from subjective traits to objective contributions. Integrating company-specific career ladders and competency definitions for different performance ratings ensures evaluations are consistent and tailored to specific roles, acknowledging that a high performer in sales differs from one in engineering. For innovative roles, assessment should focus on progress and fast failure rather than predefined outcomes, as traditional goal-setting is often not applicable.

Retention Strategies for Top Talent

Retention of top talent, especially those with AI knowledge, is addressed through a multi-faceted approach combining financial incentives, career development, and engaging work.

- **Financial Methods:** Performance-based Restricted Stock Unit (RSU) grants with graded vesting and discretionary retention awards for high-risk individuals.
- **Career Development:** Annual career discussions with leaders about career paths and skill growth.
- **Engaging Work:** For top engineers, retention often boils down to being paid appropriately and being given meaningful work on cool projects with smart peers, free from bureaucracy.

HR must balance corporate consistency with flexible, localized approaches, acting as data-fluent strategic partners who question management requests and offer data-driven alternatives.

Organizational Structure and AI-Native Pods

To combat bureaucracy and retain fast-moving talent, companies are experimenting with "AI-native pods." These are small, agile teams (3-5 people) designed to move quickly, cut through red tape, and experiment with a "fail fast" mentality. Leadership sets clear goals for these pods, which often have rotating members and are led by "agent captains." Some companies are implementing similar "ring-fenced" teams for high-priority projects, which have accelerated delivery timelines from years to months.

Challenges of Integrating Experimental Teams

While effective for innovation, these experimental teams create significant challenges when integrated into the larger corporate structure. A primary issue is the conflict with standardized systems for compensation, performance evaluation, and career progression. If a pod is considered entirely high-performing, or a research team operates without traditional levels, it creates friction when interacting with the rest of the company. Finding the right interface between these experimental units and the main organization remains the biggest challenge, though milestone-based bonuses were suggested as one alternative compensation approach.

Talent and Hiring Strategy

Intern and Early Career Talent Strategy

Companies are adopting varied strategies for entry-level and AI-centric hiring. Interns are a valuable talent source, often outperforming senior staff in areas like AI. Some companies are doubling down on hiring early-career professionals (undergrad, Master's, PhD) and interns as a critical investment to prevent future talent pipeline gaps, viewing AI as an enabler, not a replacement. There is a debate between hiring interns year-round to meet immediate needs versus hiring only during peak seasons to get the "cream of the crop." Some are creating separate, less structured programs for year-round "students" to accommodate leader requests.

Managing Workforce Transition and Skill Gaps

A significant challenge is managing a multi-generational workforce where tenured employees possess legacy knowledge and a new generation requires different skills. AI is creating a skill gap where senior employees are sometimes outperformed by interns. The core issue is whether to build skills in the current team or hire new talent. It was strongly argued that senior employees must learn AI to remain relevant, and leaders should challenge requests for more staff by first ensuring the current team is investing in upskilling.

Contractor and Contingent Worker Strategy

The use of contingent workers (CWs) is evolving. Some companies treat them as a talent pipeline, integrating them into systems with a fixed term before a potential conversion. Others use them to bridge temporary gaps until an AI or automation solution is deployed. A key question is how the increasing reliance on internal AI systems impacts the role of contractors, who traditionally shouldn't have deep access to proprietary systems.

Recruiting Based on Skills vs. Tenure

The trend is moving towards skill-based hiring and internal mobility. Companies are using internal platforms to facilitate cross-functional moves and short-term "gigs." This helps retain talent when promotions are limited by allowing employees to learn new skills and transfer experience to different parts of the organization.

Evolving Job Roles and Organizational Models

Blurring of Job Roles and the Rise of the "Generalist"

Job roles are increasingly blurring, particularly in tech. Some companies are experimenting with unified titles like "builder" to reflect a mix of skills and responsibilities, driven by AI's ability to handle specialized tasks. This suggests a move away from traditional job titles towards a focus on skills, tasks, and project-based pods. Several companies have redesigned their performance management to be grounded in skill-based "performance expectations" for all roles, which includes AI fluency as a core component.

Evolving Organizational Structures and Management Ratios

Companies are experimenting with flatter organizations and very large manager-to-employee ratios (e.g., 1:50) to increase speed. In this model, the manager's role shifts from people management to being a hands-on technical lead and barrier-remover. This change necessitates new, high-touch HR-like roles to maintain employee engagement, resembling a consulting model where leaders manage projects and assemble teams with specific skills.

Culture, HR's Role, and Future Outlook

Fostering an AI-Ready and "Fail-Fast" Culture

A major challenge is creating a culture of transparency around AI use, as employees may fear that disclosing productivity gains could lead to job cuts. Leaders, in turn, report their teams lack time to experiment. The consensus is that using AI is becoming a cultural expectation for development, enabling employees to become more efficient and redeploy into more value-added roles.

Establishing a "fail-fast" culture requires psychological safety, achieved through leadership modeling, celebrating learnings from failures, and archiving "failed" projects for future use. The interpretation of "fail-fast" varies by department (e.g., finance vs. IT), so leaders must translate the concept into specific, safe behaviors for their teams.

Leadership and HR's Role in Shaping Culture

Leaders, not HR, are the primary drivers of culture. An effective leader integrates business results with cultural principles. HR's role is to embed these principles into all people systems (hiring, promotions, etc.) and coach leaders to translate them into daily behaviors. This human coaching remains an irreplaceable core skill for HRBPs. The discussion distinguished between "culture" (how we do things) and "employee experience" (how people feel), emphasizing the need to use the right tools to measure and influence each.

AI's Impact on Performance Management and Trust

Using AI in performance management could make evaluations more objective by analyzing vast amounts of data and combating recency bias. However, its use is heavily dependent on employee trust. Without it, monitoring will be perceived as "Big Brother" surveillance, eroding psychological safety.

Measuring HRBP Success and Key Capabilities

HRBP success is difficult to measure with traditional metrics. Their value is demonstrated by coaching leaders, managing performance, and asking critical questions that reveal the downstream impacts of decisions. Goals should be tied to the specific business unit's strategy. As AI automates information access, HR's value will shift from transactional support to strategic contributions. The most critical future capability for HRBPs is organizational effectiveness, with a strong emphasis emphasis on goal-driven org design and leading through perpetual change.

The Future of Compensation Frameworks

For niche roles like AI researchers where external data is scarce, companies must make high-judgment calls, using limited external data and internal insights rather than standard frameworks. AI may enable highly individualized compensation structures based on specific value and impact, potentially making traditional leveling systems obsolete. There is an awareness of rising AI costs (e.g., token usage), but the current focus is on adoption over strict cost control, with a shift towards measuring "impact over token usage."

Future Discussion Topics and Collaboration

Proposed future topics include the evolution of HR roles, how smaller companies operate, and the trend of "repurposing" talent to lower-cost locations. There was a desire for more frequent, informal communication channels, though in-person networking was noted as more effective for building relationships. The host confirmed these working groups will occur regularly, in addition to an annual "HRBP exchange" conference.

CAHRS
(The Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies) is an international center serving corporate human resources leaders and their companies by tools for building and leading high performing HR organizations.

The Center is part of Cornell's **Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) School.** As the preeminent educational institution in the world focused on work, employment and labor, the ILR School generates and shares knowledge that improves the lives of workers and transforms the future of work.