How HR Spends Its Time: It is Time for a Change

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Abstract

Over the last 15 years, the Center for Effective Organizations has surveyed HR leaders every three years regarding the HR profession, the role of HR professionals, the nature of the HR function, and the effectiveness of the HR function. In this article we report the findings from this research project, focusing on the way HR leaders report spending their time, and what this tells us about the pace of change and its future direction in HR.

Is HR making progress toward becoming a strategic partner? Certainly, the underpinnings of having a strategic position are in place. Indeed, many would argue that they have been in place for some time. Yet, the field continues to lament the limited progress that the HR profession has made in being recognized as a major strategic partner in many organizations. HR professionals consistently tell us that while they agree with the pronouncements of HR thought leaders regarding the need to devote more time and energy to strategic pursuits, their work demands leave little time for it.

Despite advancements in technology, information systems, shared services, outsourcing and constituent recognition of the strategic value of human capital, HR leaders continue to say that their actual work remains focused on administration and the delivery of HR services. Is this true? Has the way HR leaders spend their time really remained static? Can we detect significant changes?

Perhaps more important than how HR spends its time is whether the way HR spends its time is significantly related to HR's strategic role, the effectiveness of the HR function, and organizational performance. If so, the key question is what distinguishes HR organizations that spend more time on strategic activities that make a difference in organizational performance?

In this article, we report the results of a unique global study of HR functions. This study focuses on how HR functions in large corporations and spend their time, as well as structure, technology, decision processes, roles and skills. It is not a competency study, but rather a broad examination of the HR function in a sample of large organizations. While advancing and developing HR competencies is important, and rightfully gets a good deal of attention from scholars and thinkers in the field, it is the organizational context of the HR function that determines whether it performs in ways that lead to effective performance.

In this article we focus on the following questions posed:

- Has the way HR functions spend their time evolved over the last 15 years?
- Is the way HR functions spend their time related to HR's strategic role?
- Is the way HR functions spend their time related to HR's effectiveness?
- Is the way HR functions spend their time related to the effectiveness of the organization?
- What features of the HR function are related to how it spends its time?

HR's Strategic Opportunity

The importance of human capital and talent is more apparent with each passing year (Lawler, 2008). Recently, much attention has been paid to technological advancements that are rapidly making HR metrics and analytics more available. More and more organizations are creatively connecting human capital data to organizational performance information in order to develop deep insights about how decisions about talent affect performance (Boudreau & Jesuthasan, 2011). The movement of HR data to the "cloud," the impact of social media on talent sourcing and leadership, and the evolution of game-based approaches to talent management all suggest an opportunity for the HR profession to reduce its focus on transactions, and increase its focus on being a strategic partner and change agent.

Even before the recent attention to information technology, much was been written about the trends that have made human capital ever more vital, including globalization, accelerated organizational change, collective leadership, the individualization of the employment brand, and talent segmentation (Boudreau & Ziskin, 2011; Lawler and Worley, 2011). There is no doubt that in the future work will look very different (Gratton, 2011; Mohrman and Lawler, in press). It will be best managed by a professional and evidence-based approach to HR (Rousseau & Boudreau, 2011), and leaders will need to be more informed and professional in the way that

they approach decisions about talent and human capital (Lawler 2008). The HR profession will need to develop and offer strategically relevant advice and leadership, through an array of information systems, flexible HR department structures, leading-edge skill-sets, logically sound decision frameworks, and engaging metrics and analytics (Lawler & Boudreau, 2012).

There is a growing recognition that the *potential* of HR is not necessarily a guarantee that the HR profession will rise to meet these challenges. The HR profession may need to recognize the need for a more permeable functional boundary that welcomes expertise from other professions such as strategy, marketing, operations and finance (Boudreau & Ziskin, 2011). At one extreme, this may mean that the future of the HR profession is one of increasingly technical work in areas such as labor relations and benefits, a focus on making HR processes as efficient as possible, and the delivery of HR programs and practices in response to the requests of others. Such a future may mean that the HR profession will be less involved in organization strategy and change, and instead makes its contribution largely outside of those processes, in more transactional, service and process-focused areas.

HR leaders in organizations, professional societies, scholars, consultants and thought leaders have long touted the dream of HR as a truly strategic partner. Much has been written about the potential for advanced technology, information systems, functional designs and leadership enlightenment to clear the way for an HR profession that will take its place among disciplines like finance, operations and marketing as a truly strategic and respected contributor to organizations. Writers envision a day in which HR leaders are more sought after as members of boards of directors, ascend to the ranks of Chief Executive Officers, and where leadership careers are as likely to include movement into the HR function as they are to include movement from HR to other organizational functions (Lawler, 2011).

Has HR made progress toward this new vision? There are many ways to measure such progress. One arguably important index of change is how HR functions spend their time. If change is occurring, we would expect to see a trend toward greater time spent on strategic partnership activities and less time on administration. We should also expect to see that it matters how HR spends its time. If HR strategic partnership is actually important to improved talent decisions and organizational performance more time should be spent on these issues.

In other words, one can say that "it's about time" that we take a careful and objective look at whether the HR profession, for all the rhetoric, is actually showing signs of a change toward a more strategic role. Many (including many HR professionals) would say that "it's about time" that the profession should get on with this evolution, after literally decades of admonishments. Finally, we will suggest that "it's about time" in the sense that how HR leaders spend their time may be a potent way to track the progress of HR's evolution and the factors that seem to encourage and discourage it.

Study Sample and Approach

The Center for Effective Organizations first surveyed U.S. HR leaders in large corporations in 1995. The survey asked about a wide variety of attributes of the HR profession and function. It has surveyed them every three years since then (for detail of the samples and data collection, see Lawler and Boudreau, 2012). The 2010 survey was the sixth study. For the first time in 2010, data were collected from multiple countries. In addition to the U.S., data were collected from HR executives in Australia, Canada, Europe, U.K. and China.

Is HR Spending Its Time Differently?

One common element in all of the surveys is a question asking HR leaders about the proportion of HR's time that is spent on various categories of activities. Table 1 shows the

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average responses to this question by U.S. HR executives beginning in 1995. It provides a 15-year series of snapshots, covering periods of both very strong and very weak economic activity, and several eras of HR evolution.

The results are clear with respect to change. There has been very little change in the how HR leaders report HR spending its time. Indeed, considering that our sample taps mostly different HR leaders each time, the consistency in the results is quite striking. This is not the same panel of individuals that are simply locked into a response pattern, but rather samples of mostly different individuals in each survey. Undoubtedly, HR's activities and contributions have changed some during this 15 year period. Yet, for all the rhetoric, it appears that HR consistently spends about 25 percent of its time on strategic business partnership activities, about 50 percent of it on providing and developing HR services and programs, and about 25 percent of it on recordkeeping and auditing employment practices.

Does HR Believe It has Changed?

Is the lack of change in how time is spent in line with what HR leaders believe has been the evolution of the profession and their own professional roles? To answer this question, the survey asked HR leaders to estimate how their HR function spent its time five to seven years before the present survey. Table 2 shows the results for the six surveys.

Again, the results are strikingly similar for all the surveys. Comparison between tables 1 and 2 shows that in every survey, HR leaders recall spending significantly less time on strategic partnership five years ago (between 10 and 13 percent), and significantly more time on auditing and HR administration (about 38 percent). Thus, the impression of HR leaders is that their HR function has evolved from administration to strategic partnership. Yet, the data on how they are

currently spending their time suggest that they have not changed how they are spending their time.

What Is The Pattern In Other Countries?

Tables 3 and 4 show data from 2010, from samples of HR leaders in other countries. The results are quite similar in all countries with the exception of China. In China, the actual time spent on strategic partnership is less than North America, Australia, Europe and the UK, as is the recollection of how time was spent five years ago.

Even in China, the pattern of HR leaders recalling spending less time on strategy and more time on administration five years ago than they do today holds true. While we do not have data from prior years for these countries, the similarity in the pattern for 2010 suggests it is likely that if we had measured time spent in the past, it would be similar to what we see in our U.S. samples in Tables 1 and 2. Thus, it appears that the general pattern of how time is spent and the evolution of how time is spent that we found in the U.S. are likely to be true on a global basis.

There seems to be a desire on the part of HR professionals to believe that they are increasing the proportion of their time spent on strategic partnership, compared to the past. However, our data suggest that the perceived evolution toward spending more time on strategy by reducing the time spent on administration has not occurred. HR leaders seem to believe HR is spending more time on strategy and less on administration, but it is not if you believe the most accurate data are those reporting on current conditions. It clearly shows no change. In most cases, reports about conditions years ago are unreliable because people forget and alter their memories in ways that fit their current needs and self-image.

Does How HR Spends Its Time Matter?

Does increasing time on strategic partnership and reducing time on administration make any difference in key organizational outcomes? One reason why HR has not increased the time spent on strategy may be that it is not needed and is unlikely to lead to greater organizational effectiveness. It may be that for some organizations, spending more time on strategic partnership activities may be ineffective because the organization is not prepared to utilize the strategic contributions of HR. Some organizations may be better served an with HR function that gets the basics right through an emphasis on administration and compliance, or that focuses on providing stellar HR services in response to the requests of constituents, rather than trying to engage those constituents in strategic discussions about what services they really need. Certainly, compliance, administrative services and decision support are all necessary and important elements of the HR paradigm (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007).

Is How HR Spends Its Time Associated With A Strategic Role For HR

Table 5 shows the correlations between each of the time spent percentages and a question regarding the role of HR in strategy. The question about HR's role in strategy asked the HR leader to describe the relationship between the HR function and the business strategy of the organization by choosing one of the following (the number preceding each choice is the score, and the percentages after each choice show the proportion of U.S. respondents in 2012 selecting that choice): (1) HR plays no role in business strategy (4.3%); (2) HR is involved in implementing the business strategy (17.4%); (3) HR provides input to the business strategy and helps implement it once it has been developed (47.3%); (4) HR is a full partner in developing and implementing the business strategy (31.0%).

The table shows that HR's role in strategy is significantly and positively correlated with the proportion of time spent on strategic business partner activities. Moreover, the time spent on the first three choices is actually significantly *negatively* related to HR's role in strategy. Thus, the more time that is spent on recordkeeping, auditing and providing HR services, the more likely the HR leader is to report a less significant role in business strategy when describing their HR function. Thus, it appears that how time is spent does matter.

One reason for the correlations in Table 5 might be that when HR is permitted to play a greater role in strategy, this naturally leads to a reframing of the structure and roles of HR leaders to allow them to spend more time on strategic partnership activities, and less time on administration and service delivery. In other words, the causation may go both ways: When HR spends more time on strategy and less time on administration and services, it may enhance HR's strategic role, but also when HR achieves a stronger strategic role, the activities of HR shift away from administration and services and toward strategic partnership.

Does How HR Spends Its Time Relate To The Effectiveness Of The HR Function?

The next important question is whether how time is spent by HR affects outcomes beyond HR's role in strategy. Are HR functions judged to be more effective, and do organizational performance outcomes relate to how HR spends its time?

To examine the effectiveness of the HR function, we asked our survey respondents to evaluate how well their HR organization is meeting needs in 11 areas: (1) Providing HR services; (2) providing change-consulting services; (3) being a business partner; (4) improving decisions about human capital; (5) managing outsourcing; (6) operating HR centers of

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excellence; (7) operating HR shared service units; (8) helping to develop business strategies; (9) being an employee advocate; (10) Analyzing HR and business metrics; (11) and Working with the corporate board. We created an index of HR effectiveness by summing the responses to these items. Table 6 shows the correlations between the time-spent ratings and the HR effectiveness scale for the years 2004, 2007 and 2010 (these are the only years for which we measured these HR effectiveness areas).

The pattern of correlations is remarkably similar to the earlier pattern with regard to HR's strategic role. Time spent on maintaining records, auditing compliance, and administering HR practices is negatively associated with HR effectiveness, while time spent being a strategic business partner is strongly and positively associated with HR effectiveness. The pattern is the same for all three years of data, though it becomes even more pronounced over time.

So, it appears that when it comes to HR effectiveness, time spent matters. The more time HR organizations spend on strategy activities, the more effectively HR leaders rate the HR function. Causation may go in both directions. It is certainly possible that as HR organizations increase their effectiveness; this elevates their stature, which provides greater demand and permission for HR to play a strategic role, and perhaps to cut back on more traditional activities. Thus, more time spent on strategic activities (and less time on administration and compliance) may be a result of enhanced HR functional effectiveness. However, it certainly seems likely that the causal direction goes the other way as well. As HR organizations spend less time on administration and compliance, and more time on strategic business partnership, the effectiveness of the function is enhanced due to the greater attention and integration of HR with organizational strategy.

Overall, these results significantly bolster the earlier findings, by confirming the association between the way HR spends its time and the effectiveness of the HR function. Our evidence suggests that not only does the proportion of time spent matter to the strategic role played by HR, but it also matters to the perceived effectiveness of the HR function.

Does How HR Spends Its Time Relate To Organizational Effectiveness?

Organizational effectiveness can mean many things, and can be measured in many ways. Because organizations differ in their competitive environments, stakeholders and strategic goals, we chose to measure organizational effectiveness through the responses of the surveyed HR leaders to the following question: "How would you gauge your organization's performance relative to its competitors?" with a scale from 1="Much below average" to 5=Much above average. The average of the ratings was 3.87, with "Much below average" chosen by 2.4 percent, "somewhat below average" chosen by 9.4 percent, "about average" chosen by 15 percent, "somewhat above average" chosen by 44.9 percent and "much above average" chosen by 28.3 percent. Because we did not conduct a random sample of organizations, it is possible that our sample is indeed comprised of organizations among which 88 percent are at or above average. However, we suspect that there is also some inflation in the ratings, but that does mean the relative ratings are invalid and the range of ratings was sufficient to produce significant relationships with the time-spent questions.

Table 7 reports the results of our analysis of how the rating of organizational performance relate to the way HR spends its time? The table reports the correlations between the rating on the performance scale described above, and the percentage of time in each category.

The results are similar to the pattern we saw for HR effectiveness. Time spent on

maintenance, compliance and administration is negatively related to ratings of organizational performance, while time spent on strategic partnership is positively related to rated organizational performance. The correlations are smaller than those reported for HR effectiveness. This is likely due to the fact that many factors affect organizational performance, while HR effectiveness and HR strategic role are both more proximal to the way HR spends its time. Overall, the consistent pattern of results between time spent and these three variables – including organizational performance – suggests that the way HR spends its time is very important.

Conclusion

It is time for leaders within and beyond the HR profession to take a serious look at their true progress toward acting as a strategic partner. Many writers, including ourselves, have suggested that increased time spent on building a strategic partnership is a good thing, and very possible given advances in HR technology, information systems, data, organizational design and talent management. Our long-term results suggest that HR leaders from a variety of corporations and countries believe that the time they spend has shifted from a focus on record-keeping, compliance and service administration toward strategic partnership. Yet, our data suggest that this impression is mistaken. The proportion of time spent in these areas has been remarkably constant since 1995. This pattern holds up not only in the U.S. and North America but also in other Western global regions. It also holds up in our recent sample of Chinese HR leaders, though the magnitude is somewhat different.

So what? Does it really matter if HR leaders have a mistaken impression about the evolution of their time expenditures? Does it matter that the time spent on a mix of HR activities has stayed constant since 1995, with little reduction in areas such as administration and little increase in strategic partnership? Our data suggest that it does. Our results show that important outcomes including HR's strategic role, HR functional effectiveness, and organizational effectiveness all relate to the pattern of HR time expenditure in the same way: The more time spent on maintenance, compliance and administration, the lower the outcomes. The more time spent on strategic partnership, the higher the outcomes. In organizations where HR activity is focused on a strategic partnership there is a consistent pattern of greater strategic HR contribution, HR effectiveness and organizational effectiveness.

In many organizations we find HR leaders who tolerate the fact that the "job" of most HR professionals is so full of administration and service delivery that there is really no time for a strategic partnership. The work of administration and service delivery is important, and it is often the most familiar and what many business leaders ask for. Often there is a co-dependency between HR and the rest of the organization that creates a pull toward traditional HR roles, and traditional definitions of HR value added (Lawler & Boudreau, 2012).

HR leaders, who believe that their investments in technology, structure, data and competencies are leading to an inexorable evolution of HR toward greater strategic partnership, may well be wrong. If their organization is like our sample of organizations, the proportion of time HR spends on strategic partnership activities may have barely moved for decades and that as a result of their HR function and their organization may not be as effective as it should be.

We often encounter young HR professionals who say, "I got into this profession because I was inspired by the vision of a strategically relevant HR profession in which I would be able to play a vital role in shaping strategy through the lens of human capital and employment. Yet, my actual job leaves little room for strategic work, because I spend so much time on administration

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and service delivery." Our data suggest this is a systemic condition that needs to change in order for organizations to be effective and increase their effectiveness.

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TABLE 1. CURRENT PERCENTAGE OF TIME SPENT ON VARIOUS HUMAN RESOURCES ROLES

	MEANS					
CURRENT	1995	1998	2001	2004	2007	2010
Maintaining Records Collect, track, and maintain data on employees	15.4	16.1	14.9	13.2	15.8	13.6
Auditing/Controlling Ensure compliance to internal operations, regulations, and legal and union requirements	12.2	11.2	11.4	13.3	11.6	12.5
Human Resources Service Provider Assist with implementation and administration of HR practices	31.3	35.0	31.3	32.0	27.8	30.4
Development of Human Resources Systems and Practices Develop new HR systems and practices	18.6	19.2	19.3	18.1	19.2	16.7
Strategic Business Partner Member of the management team. Involved with strategic HR planning, organizational design, and strategic change	22.0	20.3	23.2	23.5	25.6	26.8

TABLE 2. RECALLED PERCENTAGE OF TIME SPENT ON VARIOUS HUMAN RESOURCES ROLES

	MEANS					
5-7 YEARS AGO	1995	1998	2001	2004	2007	2010
Maintaining Records Collect, track, and maintain data on employees	23.0	25.6	26.7	25.9	26.3	23.2
Auditing/Controlling Ensure compliance to internal operations, regulations, and legal and union requirements	19.5	16.4	17.1	14.8	15.2	15.7
Human Resources Service Provider Assist with implementation and administration of HR practices	34.3	36.4	33.1	36.4	33.0	32.8
Development of Human Resources Systems and Practices Develop new HR systems and practices	14.3	14.2	13.9	12.6	13.5	14.4
Strategic Business Partner Member of the management team. Involved with strategic HR planning, organizational design, and strategic change	10.3	9.4	9.1	9.6	12.1	13.9

TABLE 3. CURRENT PERCENTAGE OF TIME SPENT ON VARIOUS HUMAN RESOURCES ROLES

	MEANS						
CURRENT	USA	CANADA	AUSTRALI A	EUROPE	UK	CHINA	
Maintaining Records Collect, track, and maintain data on employees	13.6	17.4	16.1	22.3	20.2	19.4	
Auditing/Controlling Ensure compliance to internal operations, regulations, and legal and union requirements	12.5	12.4	14.2	12.4	13.5	20.1	
Human Resources Service Provider Assist with implementation and administration of HR practices	30.4	30.4	27.3	28.4	26.2	29.5	
Development of Human Resources Systems and Practices Develop new HR systems and practices	16.7	17.2	15.6	16.9	16.5	16.0	
Strategic Business Partner Member of the management team. Involved with strategic HR planning, organizational design, and strategic change	26.8	22.7	26.8	20.0	23.6	15.0	

TABLE 4. RECALLED PERCENTAGE OF TIME SPENT ON VARIOUS HUMAN RESOURCES ROLES

	MEANS						
5-7 YEARS AGO	USA	CANADA	AUSTRALI A	EUROPE	UK	CHINA	
Maintaining Records Collect, track, and maintain data on employees	23.2	26.2	26.0	35.6	31.1	31.5	
Auditing/Controlling Ensure compliance to internal operations, regulations, and legal and union requirements	15.7	16.4	18.0	14.1	16.5	21.2	
Human Resources Service Provider Assist with implementation and administration of HR practices	32.8	31.4	29.3	27.2	31.4	27.1	
Development of Human Resources Systems and Practices Develop new HR systems and practices	14.4	15.0	11.7	12.2	10.5	11.0	
Strategic Business Partner Member of the management team. Involved with strategic HR planning, organizational design, and strategic change	13.9	11.0	14.9	10.9	10.6	9.2	

TABLE 5. RELATIONSHIP OF HR ROLES (TIME SPENT) AND HR ROLE IN STRATEGY

HR ROLES ¹	Current
Maintaining Records Collect, track, and maintain data on employees	18*
Auditing/Controlling Ensure compliance to internal operations, regulations, and legal and union requirements	17*
Human Resources Service Provider Assist with implementation and administration of HR practices	18*
Development of Human Resources Systems and Practices Develop new HR systems and practices	.05
Strategic Business Partner Member of the management team. Involved with strategic HR planning, organizational design, and strategic change	.31***

Significance Level: $^{t}p \leq .10$

* $p \le .05$

** $p \le .01$

*** $p \le .001$

 $^{^{\}rm 1}{\rm Based}$ on percentage of time spent on HR roles as rated by HR Executives.

TABLE 6. RELATIONSHIP OF HR ROLES (TIME SPENT) AND HR EFFECTIVENESS

	HR Executives Rating of HR Effectiveness 1		
HR ROLES ²	2004	2007	2010
Maintaining Records Collect, track, and maintain data on employees	47***	33**	42***
Auditing/Controlling Ensure compliance to internal operations, regulations, and legal and union requirements	04	18	30***
Human Resources Service Provider Assist with implementation and administration of HR practices	05	.05	24**
Development of Human Resources Systems and Practices Develop new HR systems and practices	.24 ^t	.02	.12
Strategic Business Partner Member of the management team. Involved with strategic HR planning, organizational design, and strategic change	.30*	.27*	.54***

Significance Level:

 $^{\mathrm{t}}p\leq.10$

* $p \le .05$

** $p \le .01$

 $***p \leq .001$

 $^{^{\}rm 1}\,{\rm Based}$ on total score for all eleven effectiveness items as rated by HR Executives.

 $^{^{\}rm 2}\,{\rm Based}$ on percentage of time spent on HR roles as rated by HR Executives.

TABLE 7. RELATIONSHIP OF CURRENT HR ROLES (TIME SPENT) AND ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

HR ROLES ¹	Organizational Performance ²
Maintaining Records Collect, track, and maintain data on employees	12
Auditing/Controlling Ensure compliance to internal operations, regulations, and legal and union requirements	13
Human Resources Service Provider Assist with implementation and administration of HR practices	23*
Development of Human Resources Systems and Practices Develop new HR systems and practices	.16 ^t
Strategic Business Partner Member of the management team. Involved with strategic HR planning, organizational design, and strategic change	.27**

Significance Level: $^{t}p \le .10$

* *p* ≤ .05

** $p \leq .01$

*** $p \le .001$

 $^{^{\}rm 1}$ Based on percentage of time spent on HR roles as rated by HR Executives.

² Based on Response: 1 = Much below average; 2 = Somewhat below average; 3 = About average; 4 = Somewhat above average; 5 = Much above average.