

Trends, roles, and competencies in human resource management practice: A perspective from practitioners in Halifax, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Human resource management (HRM) practitioners from 13 government, healthcare, post-secondary education, and business organizations in the Halifax Regional Municipality and area were interviewed in person using a structured interview guide. Participants identified trends they faced in their profession, described the roles that they occupy in organizations, and described the required competencies for effective HRM practice. Results indicated that major trends affecting HRM practice include shifting demographics, an orientation to an increasingly strategic role for HRM, and changing technology. Key roles identified by participants were internal consultant and strategic partner. Important competencies were described as technical, strategic, organizational/management, interpersonal, and personal. Implications of these findings for HRM practitioners are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations of today continue to operate in fast-changing and often unpredictable environments. Globalization (Kleinsorge, 2010), changing demographics (Busine and Watt, 2005), and changing customer relationships (Busine and Watt, 2005; Losey, Meisinger, and Ulrich, 2005) are frequently cited as trends that require organizational changes. Frequently caught in the midst of these changes is the human resource management (HRM) function which has evolved from a narrow personnel view, to a broader HRM perspective, and then to one that emphasizes a strategic orientation (Strauss, 2001). This strategic human resource management (SHRM) orientation is evidenced in a variety of HRM areas, for example, recruitment and selection (Das, 2007), training and development (Saks and Haccoun, 2010), and compensation (Milkovich, Newman and Cole, 2010). Further, during these shifts many have been critical of the role of HRM and suggested among other things that it does not add value to the firm (Hammonds, 2005). However, others have shown that HRM does indeed add value (Liu, Combs, Ketchen, and Ireland, 2007). Clearly, the field of HRM is changing and growing, new knowledge is being created, and the standards of performance will increase in level and type (Losey, Meisinger, and Ulrich, 2005). The HRM field is under pressure from various quarters.

The following paper examines the HRM function and HRM practitioners in Nova Scotia in terms of trends that the HRM profession currently faces and might face in the future and the resulting changing roles and competencies required of HRM practitioners. It is important that the HRM profession in

Canada be examined because of the current changes (and possible future changes) it faces as well as the demands and constraints that those changes possess. Secondly, it is a relatively large group having more than 40,000 practitioners who make important contributions to organizational effectiveness (Schwind, Das, and Wagar 2007). Lastly, HRM has become increasingly professionalized with about 21,000 practicing professionals in Canada holding the Certified Human Resources Professional (CHRP) designation (Canadian Council of Human Resource Associations 2010).

Initially this paper reviews the literature relevant to trends facing the HRM profession and resulting changing roles and competencies. It then provides a description of the study's methodology, presents findings and discussion, and concludes with implications for the profession and directions for future research.

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT – TRENDS, ROLES AND COMPETENCIES

HRM has been affected by a number of trends including globalization, changes in technology, demographics of the workforce, ethical issues and pressures to show that its practitioners add value to the organization.

Globalization has resulted in specific challenges to HRM including how to enhance global business strategy, how to align HRM with business strategy, how to design and lead change, how to build global corporate culture (Mendenhall, Black, Jensen, and Gregersen, 2003) and how to develop leaders (Mendenhall, et al., 2003; Prince, 2008). Further, organizations must compete for talent globally (Losey, Meisinger, and Ulrich, 2005).

Changes in technology have affected how traditional HRM activities are managed. For example, payroll and information systems can be more effectively and efficiently handled through better technology (Adler, 2003). As well, the use of web recruiting and e-learning has grown tremendously (Frank and Taylor, 2004). This increased use of technology and speed is evidenced by the greater usage of technological learning opportunities such as online journaling (Cyboran, 2005), podcasts (Gronstedt, 2007), blogs (Gronstedt, 2007; Karrer, 2007), wikis (Laff, 2007) as well as web discussions (Hulkari and Mahlamäki-Kultan, 2008) and online simulations (Slotte and Herbert, 2008).

Changing demographic trends, for example, worker retirement and reduced population growth, are causing labour shortages for firms (Bohara, 2007), and they might well face difficulty in recruiting, retaining and engaging employees (Frank and Taylor, 2004; Jamrog, 2004; Jensen, 2005). Talent management is thus a very important process (Frank and Taylor, 2004). For example, various generational groups in the workforce have different preferences for benefits, and tailored benefit plans can be used to attract and retain talent (Clark, 2007). Further, succession management has become a crucial issue because proper succession management can help to develop and retain good people (Busine and Watt, 2005). This is particularly so for organizational leaders; however, only about 55% of organizations have a succession plan in place, and of these, about one-third have not been particularly effective in their succession management activities (Berntal and Wellins, 2006). Further, being able to deal with many diverse groups as employees and customers is required (Bohara, 2007). HRM managers must be able to source and recognize "diverse and nontraditional talent" especially in a global and increasingly diverse environment. Indeed, managing takeovers and acquisitions and the required integration of people and systems is a major challenge (Adler, 2003, p. 29).

Ethical issues have increased for managers and organizations, and reputation can help or hurt a firm's recruitment and retention (Vickers, 2005). Changes in laws mean that HRM practitioners must work to keep up (Adler, 2003) and talent must be treated fairly (Frank and Taylor, 2004).

HRM practitioners are under pressure to show how they add value to the firm (Adler, 2003). Some suggest that this can occur through increased employee abilities and increased organizational capabilities

(Losey, Meisinger, and Ulrich, 2005). However, traditional HRM activities such as recruiting and career planning are devolving to line managers (Perry and Kulik, 2008), and the impact of HRM is increased for those HRM managers who collaborate with line managers (Losey, Meisinger, and Ulrich, 2005). Further, outsourcing of HRM activities has become a major trend in businesses (Adler, 2003; Cooke, Shen, and McBride, 2005), and it has also increased in the public sector (Davidson, 2005).

To assess trends faced by HRM practitioners, they were asked two sets of questions:

1. Have general business and/or organizational trends from the 1990s to the early 2000s affected your practice of HRM? What are these? How are they affecting your professional practice?
2. Are there any new trends that are emerging that affect your HRM practice? If so, what are these? How will they affect your HRM practice?

As trends have emerged, HRM professionals have been expected to occupy new roles, and some have suggested that the former functional HRM role has been supplanted by a more strategic role which requires new competencies (Lipiec, 2001; Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson, and Younger, 2007). Many new or enhanced roles for HRM practitioners have been described by numerous writers, and although many of these roles overlap, there are some that do stand out. For example, one key role for practitioners seems to be that of “change manager”, learning to better assist organizational managers to deal with change (Jensen, 2005; Rynes, 2004; Ulrich et al., 2007). Also, HRM practitioners must begin to act as a “business ally” (Ulrich et al., 2007) by taking roles as “strategist” and continuing to show how HRM adds value to the organization (Jensen, 2005; Losey, Meisinger, and Ulrich, 2005; May, Sherlock, and Mabry, 2003). Thus HRM practitioners must become competent in the use of ROI tools, develop skills in influencing others (especially key decisions makers), show how meeting the needs of diverse firm stakeholders adds value, and create an action plan that prioritizes those needs (May, Sherlock, and Mabry, 2003).

HRM has a role to play as “talent and succession managers” by providing professional and technical expertise (Busine and Watt, 2005; Jensen, 2005; Vickers, 2005), but they must also ensure that senior managers are active in managing this process (Busine and Watt, 2005). Again their roles and competencies as influencers are important.

HRM’s roles have shifted from “training suppliers” to “learning managers” (Nijof, 2004; Sambrook and Stewart, 2000). For example, some have discussed the demand for the increased speed of learning and the associated increased demand for just-in-time (JIT) learning and its associated implications for HRM (Brandenburg and Ellinger, 2003). These include using available technology while maintaining a social touch in learning, becoming more proactive and adopting roles that are facilitative and supportive, and using JIT learning to get knowledge to the right people at the right time.

HRM practitioners must also act as “ethics champions” (Losey, Meisinger, and Ulrich, 2005) by helping to develop the right ethical culture and showing employees through open-door policies or 1-800 support lines that they have options if ethical issues arise (Vickers, 2004). In addition, HRM practitioners must be “integrators”, bringing other people and processes together and “collaborators” working closely with others (Losey, Meisinger, and Ulrich, 2005). They must also act as “employee champions” (Losey, Meisinger, and Ulrich, 2005) in part by serving as managers of diversity as well as creating cultures that facilitate employee loyalty and engagement (Jensen, 2005).

Clearly, HRM practitioners have, or should have, come a long way from keeping records and managing payroll systems. Their jobs now require serving many new and different roles from the past, and these roles require development of current competencies or the acquisition of new ones. Many of these

competencies revolve around hard-core business competencies, but others also require a firm ground in areas such as communication, coaching, influencing, and understanding others among other competencies.

To assess roles and competencies HRM practitioners were asked three sets of questions:

1. What are the key roles that you as an HRM practitioner occupy in 2008?
2. What are the key competencies that are required by you to operate within these roles? Do you believe that you possess these competencies?
3. Are there any shifts in roles and competencies that you anticipate in the next one to five years?

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this study was qualitative and exploratory in nature and was intended to examine a number of case studies based in part on procedures outlined in Lofland and Lofland (1984). For example, these were direct, face-to-face encounters that provided rich detail. The case study approach was appropriate because 1) it answered questions such as “what,” “how,” and “why” regarding workplace learning, 2) the investigators had little or no control over events within the sites to be studied, and 3) events in a real-life context were under study (Yin, 1984).

The study’s findings are based on in-depth interviews with 13 HRM managers in a variety of organizational contexts in the Halifax Regional Municipality (a major government, retail, industrial, military, university and health-care center in the Atlantic provinces of Canada). Organizations were selected from several sources: the Halifax Chamber of Commerce Business Directory, the local telephone directory, various websites, and assorted media reports. The intent of the authors was to increase the variation of the sample, and thus participation was sought from HR managers in organizations from various sectors such as government, military, health care, and business, to name a few.

In total 20 letters were sent between July 2008 and September 2008 to human resource managers at these organizations explaining the study and inviting them to participate. Ultimately these managers were contacted by telephone by the researchers to determine their willingness to participate. At that point an interview was arranged for a mutually convenient time and place for those who agreed to participate in the study.

A pre-test of the interview guide resulted in minor revisions to improve clarity. Interviews were then completed using an interview guide consisting of open-ended and closed-ended questions to determine selected demographic and organization information as well as issues related to trends impacting the profession and shifts in professional roles and competencies. Interviews took approximately 60 minutes, were tape-recorded and were transcribed verbatim. The interviews were then coded and analyzed on a qualitative basis.

PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR ORGANIZATIONS

The managers who participated in this study represented a diverse group across quite different organizations. Participants are identified by number to protect their identities, and participants and their organizations are briefly described below:

Participant 1 is a female Director of Human Resources at a post-secondary educational institution with approximately 500 full-time employees. This director is a generalist with 20 years of full-time work experience in the field of HRM. She holds a BA, BEd, MBA, and CHRP.

Participant 2 is a female Human Resource Manager at a health-care facility with approximately 1,000 full-time and part-time employees. This manager is a combined generalist and specialist (recruitment and

labour issues) with six years of full-time work experience in the field of HRM. She holds a Certificate in Adult Education and several professional credentials including Professional Recruiter, IPM, and Psychometrics Professional Assessor.

Participant 3 is a female Human Resource Director in a federal government department with 44,000 full-time employees. This director is a combined generalist and specialist (advising senior managers on all HRM areas) with four years of full-time work experience in the field of HRM. She holds an undergraduate degree and a professional accounting designation.

Participant 4 is a female Senior Vice-President of Human Resources in a diversified group of companies with 3,500 employees. This vice-president has a BA and an MBA and has worked in management and HRM for 25 years.

Participant 5 is a female Director of Employee Services in a post-secondary educational institution with 1,700 employees. This director has a BA, a Certificate in Personnel Management and a Certificate in Human Resources Management and 20 years' experience in HRM.

Participant 6 is a female Senior Director, Human Resources in a high-tech consulting firm with 600 employees in Canada and 1,400 worldwide. This director is a generalist, has a CHRP and has 15 years' experience in HRM.

Participant 7 is a female Vice President, Human Resources in a firm in the energy business with approximately 2,600 employees. This director is a generalist/specialist (labour relations) who holds a BA, LLB, MBA and a CHRP designation. She has 16 years' experience in HRM.

Participant 8 is an HRM manager with a high-tech firm that has more than 500 employees in Atlantic Canada. She is a generalist/specialist with a college diploma and 12 years' experience in HRM.

Participant 9 is a male HRM generalist in a professional services firm with 1,500 employees. He holds a BBA and several professional certificates and has 25 years' experience in HRM.

Participant 10 is a male generalist/specialist (labour relations) in a communications/information technology firm with more than 9,000 employees. He holds a BBA and several professional credentials and diplomas and has more than 10 years' experience in HRM.

Participant 11 is a female generalist in a professional services firm with 7,000 employees. She holds a PCP designation and has 15 years' experience in HRM.

Participant 12 is a female generalist in a professional services firm with 120 employees. She has a BComm, a certificate in HRM and 20 years of experience in HRM.

Participant 13 is a female HR generalist in a firm in the tourism and hospitality industry with approximately 1,200 employees. She holds a BComm and an HR certificate and has three years' experience in HRM.

FINDINGS

The first questions asked, "Have general business and/or organizational trends from the 1990s to the early 2000s affected your practice of HRM? What are these? How are they affecting your professional practice?" Demographics, strategic roles, and changes in technology have been important trends, and these have created changes in how HRM practitioners deal with aging populations and different

demographic groups. They have also had to adopt more strategic roles in their organizations and make use of changing technology, for example, with recruiting and training strategies.

Demographics were mentioned by eight of 13 participants (62%) as a trend that has influenced HRM practice in several ways. For example, Participant 3 suggested that the aging population has resulted in increased benefits costs as well as the development of various programs such as those related to disability management, mental health and wellness issues in the workplace, and succession planning. The aging workforce (and associated early and normal retirements) has also resulted in managers moving through the ranks more quickly than in years previous. Consequently, HRM must help provide more coaching and mentoring for these managers. For others, such as Participant 12, “accommodating retirement issues” must be addressed.

Changing demographics have also resulted in labour shortages for some firms and for some practitioners has led to different ways of recruiting and retaining the workforce. Participant 6 believed that fewer graduates were available for her firm to recruit and “groom” and that demographics had changed, which affected recruitment. “How do we stay on top of what’s driving the people who want to work for us?” Participant 9 indicated that, “We’ve put a large number of programs and policies in place to focus on retention.” Others such as Participant 10 said, “Now we’re measuring engagement because engagement’s a higher level of requirement that just satisfaction.”

The changes in demographics have also resulted in changing expectations, and according to Participant 3, younger hires are more demanding than their predecessors—they want more money when they start and they are not afraid to ask for time off. However, responses to different demands from different groups are limited because of a high rate of unionization and associated collective agreements, which clearly delineate pay rates and other benefits. Others, for example, Participant 7, felt that new generations had different expectations of their supervisors.

A second trend was that of the increasing strategic role that HRM has begun to play in organizations, a factor identified by seven of 13 (54%) of respondents. Participant 1 indicated that the biggest trend has been the positioning of HRM as a strategic partner: “...others have realized HR is not just paper clearing, record-keeping ...” Participant 2 held a similar view, suggesting “at one time Human Resources was probably more of a processing department, it wasn’t part of the whole business of the organization. I think it’s becoming much more part of the business of the organization ... we’re part of that whole senior management group and making decisions for the organization.” HRM is now much more strategic in orientation, and this strategic shift is encapsulated by Participant 5 who said that, “Everything we do is built on, dependent on, and linked to our strategy... I can remember when HR used to be the personnel police and ... it is now being a strategic partner ... we need to enable employees to be more independent and self sufficient ...running reports that enable decision making.” This strategic view was echoed by Participant 8 who stated that, “You’d never have a strategy meeting without your director of finance present, but it was OK not to have the director of HR there. Now what I see is that if there’s a strategy meeting, HR is there as well.” Further, Participant 11 said, “A few years ago, HR was very much a support; now HR is expected ‘to be at the table.’ We’ve had to force it a bit. They’re realizing that without good talent and the people to get them the right talent and keep it, they’re not going to succeed.”

Technology changes have also had an impact on HRM practice according to five of the 13 participants (38%). For Participant 1 technology has changed what is required of people in their jobs and then creates a need for more and more training as technology continues to develop. Participant 10 saw training changing as a result of technology: “Webinars, online learning and combination conference calls are all available. These change the makeup of training. It’s a lot more self-paced training. It used to be a perk, but it isn’t when you don’t go away for a course, but do it at your desk.” On the other hand, Participant 3 suggested that HRM had driven changes in technology because these changes helped HRM achieve its

goals of providing consulting and coaching to managers through having technology handle more of the transactions processing. For Participant 8 changes in technology permitted the streamlining of a lot of transactional work which “elevates the profile of HR practitioners.” Further, Participant 4 and Participant 5 indicated that enhanced technology had been brought in to make the organization more competitive with its recruiting.

Other participants indicated trends such as increased outsourcing, greater focus on productivity and performance management as well as employment equity issues such as experiencing challenges getting various groups represented at senior levels.

The second question asked, “Are there any new trends that are emerging that affect your HRM practice? If so, what are these? How will they affect your HRM practice?” Changing technology was mentioned by 7 of 13 participants (54%), demographics by 6 (46%), and the economy by 3 (23%). Other trends identified were changing legal requirements, performance management, focus on personal development, a shrinking labour force, flexible scheduling, and succession planning. These changes will require HRM practitioners to better integrate technology into their practice, to continue to develop strategies to respond to the differing wants and needs of a variety of demographic groups in the workplace, and to work under increasingly tighter economic conditions.

Technology continues to be a trend that affects HRM practice, although not all practitioners are experiencing the same effects. For example, Participant 9 said that “technology has affected the payroll function, which is partly outsourced” and Participant 10 felt that “everything is online – management processes, succession planning, skill tracking, interim reviews.” Participant 11 indicated that the “Internet is changing our environment ... you may not have an office with 200 people; they may be all over the globe working out of our office so you have to be able to stay connected.” Participant 12 said that “work has changed ... all positions have an IT component to them.” The challenge is to integrate technology into the workplace. Participant 13 said that her firm no longer puts job ads in the newspaper; her firm uses the Internet for recruiting.

Demographics also continue to be a trend of some importance to HRM practitioners because the different generational groups appear to be seeking different things through their work. Participant 1 identified generational differences as a current trend because the different groups—Boomers, Xs, Ys—all want different things. “People don’t stay forever,” and her organization is experiencing more turnover recently. Exit interviews suggest that some people, many younger people, leave their jobs for no particular reason (e.g., not going elsewhere for higher salary). Many younger people are leaving simply because they don’t see themselves committing for 20 years. How do we keep them satisfied?

Participant 2 felt that changing demographics would require her organization to adapt to recruit people from new demographic groups. HRM and others must change their attitudes toward the workforce coming in. She felt that “incentives for young people and much more flexibility” were required because “they’re not like the Boomers who work weekends and night.” Participant 3 also felt the impact of changing demographics. She indicated that preparing younger workers, who lack the experience of their predecessors, to deal with difficult situations was an issue: “They haven’t been through the school of hard knocks kind of thing where you sort of learn things just by doing over time, so it’s how we prepare those people so that, you know, when they are dealing with their difficult circumstance ... those kinds of skills in the organization.” Participant 4 identified three broad groups of people in her firm: older senior managers, middle-aged managers, and young, new entrants. She has seen an extreme difference in attitude across the groups, largely in terms of work ethic. For example, “I mean if they decide (younger workers) that they want to stay at home for whatever reason that should be acceptable and then if you convey that reason the person stated on to the senior management, they can’t comprehend it at all.” Participant 5 felt that the emergence of many different types of generations in the workplace at one time

was forcing her organization to change its definition of diversity and how that impacts on recruitment, retention, and engagement. These views are emphasized by Participant 8 who felt that “we are in a time when we have four to five generations working in the same workplace ... there are some challenges around what makes a baby-boomer tick does not make a Gen-Xer tick.” Participant 11 said, “The mix of generations ... we need to find out what they want and give the options instead of saying ‘this is the only way it will be’.” Changing demographics are causing HRM practitioners to be responsive and creative in dealing with people from different generational groups.

The economy was a trend that was problematic for some HRM practitioners, and Participant 9 exemplified this view: “Well, the only trend really at the moment that we’re concerned about is a recession ...” The impacts of the economy were made clear by Participant 7 who said, “The economy was an upcoming trend as it affects recruitment. It’s easier to get people if the economy isn’t doing as well.” Further, Participant 13 felt that in a tough economy there is more retrenching and redesigning of jobs, but the firm is “not putting money into training.”

Other trends that were affecting HRM practice were the acquisition of broader knowledge (Participant 2) and the need to develop disability, mental health and wellness programs; and succession plans (Participant 3 and Participant 6). Participant 6 also identified work-life balance and wellness initiatives. Participant 7 identified immigration, executive compensation, transparency and pension plan management as key trends. A shrinking labour force was problematic for Participant 8, and flexibility of schedules, employee surveys, performance management, and a focus on learning rather than training were important trends for Participant 10. However, for Participant 12 a duty to accommodate is a trend given the aging workforce and increased numbers of mental-health issues in the workforce. There was also a trend toward increased demand for HRM reports in her firm. These emerging trends are now requiring HRM people to focus on a broad variety of issues as well as the key ones faced by most practitioners.

The third question asked, “What are the key roles that you as an HRM practitioner occupy in 2008?” The key roles identified were internal consultant and strategic partner.

All 13 participants occupied a variety of roles and were engaged in dealing with standard types of issues such as performance management issues, discipline, HRM planning, recruiting and training and development. However, the one role that emerged very clearly was that of internal consultant. These HRM practitioners provided advice and guidance on a range of issues to managers for decision making. Twelve (92%) of the 13 saw their role as strategic, and as Participant 1 indicated, her job is to “feed into the executive management group ... being a business partner.” Participant 5 echoed this sentiment and said, “serving on different committees, working with executives and senior leaders around their strategies and what we can do to help support them.” Participant 12 indicated that her “primary role is advisor to manager.”

The fourth question asked, “What are the key competencies that are required by you to operate within these roles?” Competencies that were identified by all 13 participants were numerous but can be categorized as technical, strategic, organizational management, interpersonal, and personal.

Technical HR skills—being technically competent and well rounded, that is, knowledgeable about many issues such as labour relations, wrongful dismissal, succession planning, competency assessment, reward and recognition programs, benefits and pension issues—were seen as being important by nine (69%) of the 13 participants. Indeed, Participant 2 summed up the need for technical skills quite well by saying, “being able to interpret collective agreements, always being prepared to go to court ... How’s that going to be perceived in court?” This view was also reflected by Participant 8 who felt that “understanding HR practices and law” were key competencies. Participant 12 believed that HR practitioners “must be up to date in the HR field ... as well as the client’s work environment.”

Strategic skills—knowing the business and industry in which they operated and having analytical skills—were mentioned by nine (69%) of the participants. For example, Participant 3 said being able to “translate the vision into operational activity” was important, and in a related vein was the notion of managing change. As Participant 6 said, a key competency is the ability to “move through the changing landscape quickly.” Participant 8 said, “You need to understand the business you’re working in,” and Participant 9 added, “You also have to really understand the business ... what are the drivers and how you can actually add value to the managers.”

Organizational/management skills—being able to work under pressure, having strong leadership skills, establishing priorities, having project management skills, and possessing strong investigation skills—were noted. Participant 7 suggested that leadership skills such as being “an advocate for HR” were required.

Interpersonal skills—being able to deal with diverse individuals and teams, facilitating, negotiating, influencing, knowing who to ask, coaching, and communicating—were identified. Participant 7 suggested that “building partnerships” was important. Participants 9, 10, and 11 all felt that communication skills were key, and in particular, “listening skills” were required.

Personal skills—having good judgment, common sense, self awareness, for example, knowing your limitations—were exemplified by Participant 11 who said that practitioners need to “know how to use the resources within the organization ... use everyone’s expertise.” Further, Participant 13 indicated that “multi-tasking and being organized” were required to operate successfully in her role in her firm.

The fifth question asked, “Are there any shifts in roles and competencies that you anticipate in the next one to five years?” Eleven (85%) of the participants felt that there would be some shifts in roles and competencies. However, Participant 9 did not see major shifts coming: “I don’t think so ...” “change is always there ... I don’t think the fundamentals for me will change too much”, and for now HR will deal with more of the same. Alternatively, eight participants seemed to agree that the need for HRM practitioners to understand the business of their organizations would continue or increase. For example, Participant 8 said, “What I said about understanding the business or ‘of business’ I see as lacking in some of our HR practitioners and managers. It’s not just HR specific but business in general.” Participant 10 added that, “Yes, I think that you are going to find business acumen is going to come even further to the forefront.” Further, Participant 3 also raised the issue of understanding the financial impact of HRM work: “when we are proposing HR strategies, we have to really add some value.”

Participant 4 indicated that workforce demographics would tend to remain an issue, and other factors such as mental-health issues and employee assistance programs would increase in importance. Participant 6 also mentioned demographics and being able to meet the changing needs of employees as well as focusing on work-life balance issues. These issues have translated into a need to develop specific skills. For example, Participant 12 felt that HRM practitioners had to get better at predicting: “Moving from reactionary to more strategic. Will always have ‘fires to put out’ ... can’t plan every mat or sick leave, but we’ve got to get better at predicting.”

Participant 3 spoke of the benefits of operational experience and how her organization has moved from a generalist to a specialist approach, which develops a depth of expertise. This is counter to what Participant 1 suggested, but Participant 3 is in a very large, well-resourced organization and these specialists cannot only be afforded, but they are also needed. Participant 5 indicated that HRM’s roles such as recruitment/retention, stewardship, building leadership capacity, building employee self-sufficiency, assisting people with their learning and growth, and developing a “top-notch services model” have increased and are aligned with the broader strategy of her organization.

In terms of competencies, Participant 11 said, “You’ll still need to use the same competencies as today,” and as Participant 13 said, “Staying up to date with labour standards and legal issues ... staying in touch with what people want ... pension, vacation time, time with family ...” will be important. However, Participant 11 stated that “communication will probably become more of a major role,” and Participant 12 stated that “IT skills will be more important to be comfortable with various programs such as electronic databases.” Others felt that “the ability to coach and mentor junior management or people in situations that they haven’t found themselves in before, e.g., giving feedback ...” was important as was becoming “more readily aware of ... some of the softer skills.”

Participant 1 and Participant 6 felt that HRM practitioners, at least in their organizations and industries, must be better generalists, and they must have well-rounded HRM and business knowledge because their organizations are relying on them. This is in part a function of the size of their organizations and the economic and other resource constraints faced. Participant 2 believed there would be greater emphasis on succession planning, which is “something that we have not done a lot here.” Other areas that were on the upswing included promoting organizational development, adult learning, conducting more professional assessments for leadership competencies, and focusing on organizational health and work/life balance issues.

One issue that emerged was that of the overall HRM role, which is to some extent dependent on organizational size and resource availability. Two participants in smaller, publicly funded organizations seemed to be “in the trenches” and seemed to be involved in the day-to-day HRM operations to a greater extent than some participants who were in larger, more fully resourced organizations. Consequently, those in smaller organizations felt that they had to develop strategically, but they also had to know about a broad range of technical issues because they had to deal with the day-to-day issues to a greater extent than did those in larger organizations.

However, those in the larger, better resourced organizations felt that their role was more one of team and strategic leadership and the technical issues were left to specialists. For example, Participant 4 said that she had oversight of the HRM area; however, she had professionals in place to handle the technical aspects. Her role is to provide leadership for the HRM strategic plan. Further, Participant 5 said, “Do I have all the strengths necessary to be successful? Probably not. But it’s more about the outcomes by using the strengths that exist throughout teams of people ... What I care more about is that collectively we have what it takes to achieve those outcomes ...” Thus participants in the larger organizations focused on being strategic, but also on developing their own leadership and team-building capabilities.

DISCUSSION

The interviews reinforce the trends noted in the literature, and three major trends were noted by the participants. While changing demographics appear to be the driving force behind the trends in the changing role of the human resources practitioner, an increasing strategic role and technology changes were also important trends.

The most often mentioned trend affecting HRM practitioners, changing demographics, was mentioned by 62% of the participants. This trend is documented in the literature by numerous researchers (Bernthal and Wellins, 2006; Bohara, 2007; Busine and Watt, 2005; Clark, 2007; Frank and Taylor, 2004; Jamrog, 2004; Jensen, 2005). The implications of this trend are far-ranging. The participants mentioned mental health, wellness, benefits, succession planning, recruitment, retention, disability management, different needs and work values of various age groups as well as managers moving up in the ranks more quickly. The last implication results in what some refer to as talent management (Frank and Taylor, 2004). Changing demographics, according to some of the participants, lead to increased benefit costs and programs which as Clarke (2007) found indicates that different generational groups have different benefit

preferences. Our study found that changing demographics is resulting in labour shortages that result in more emphasis on recruitment and retention which was noted in the literature (Bohara, 2007; Frank and Taylor, 2004; Jamrog, 2004; Jensen, 2005). The literature indicated a trend to more succession planning as a way to develop and retain good people (Busine and Watt, 2005), and this finding was expressed in a slightly different way by our participants who found that managers were promoted quicker and needed more coaching and mentoring. Participants noted that another impact of changing demographics was the changing expectations of employees. This will continue to affect HRM practitioners as Bohara (2007) found that they must be able to deal with many diverse groups. In other words, HRM managers must act as change managers (Jensen, 2005; Rynes, 2004; Ulrich et al., 2007).

The second trend noted by 54% of the participants was that of their increasing strategic role. Participants reported that HRM is moving to more of a strategic role, and this trend has also been reported by other researchers (Das, 2007; Liu, et al., 2007; Mendenhall, 2003; Saks and Haccoun, 2007). How is this trend evidenced in the day-to-day activities of a human resource manager? The HRM manager may be sitting on top-level management teams and be expected to contribute to the strategic decision-making of the organization. Some suggest that this means that the HRM manager has to be familiar with tools used to make strategic decisions, for example, ROI and the skills to influence others (May, Sherlock, and Mabry, 2003). HRM managers are also taking a strategic approach to HRM decision making and planning as well as participating in organization-wide teams.

The third trend that 38% of the participants discussed was changing technology. Technology has allowed HRM to free up resources to deal with the new roles that result from changing demographics. Clearly the participants found that HRM was changing from a transactional approach to a coaching/advising role as transaction activities such as hiring, performance appraisal and payroll activities were transferred to line managers. This is consistent with the findings of a number of researchers (Losey, Meisinger, and Ulrich, 2005; Perry and Kulik, 2008). The change in role of HRM from transactions to coaching/advising has been facilitated by technology. Whether technology has driven the change or HRM managers whose role is changing have driven technology to develop the necessary tools can be debated. However, without the technology improvements, the delegating of payroll and other “traditional” HRM functions would not have been possible. Participants noted that with the increased role of technology in HRM, there was more need for training and coaching as many HRM functions are being performed by line managers. The new role of coaching and advising requires different skills and competencies.

Clearly, the trends experienced by the HRM practitioners in this study mirrored those found in other studies. Demographic changes, a more strategic role for HRM practitioners and technology usage are viewed as significant trends for HRM. How are future trends going to affect the role of HRM professionals?

While demographics and technology were once again discussed as anticipated future trends, the emphasis changed somewhat with technology being mentioned by 54%, demographics by 46% and the economy mentioned by 23%. The change to a strategic role wasn't noted as a future trend perhaps because it has already affected the HRM practitioners. The economy was a factor for the future as the interviews took place at the beginning of an economic downturn. The constantly changing technology is a tool that HRM practitioners will have to rely on in many areas from payroll to recruiting to training activities. The downturn in the economy had HRM implications in areas such as recruiting, training budgets and redesigning of positions. The trends are interrelated. It may be that the technology changes will be able to assist HRM practitioners to deal with the problems that arise from the economic downturn. On the other hand, a downturn in the economy may result in people working longer and more generational issues arising.

In light of the trends identified, participants were asked what their key roles were as an HRM practitioner in 2008. Three types of roles emerged. One role was the traditional HR role and encompassed

performance management issues, discipline, recruiting, training and development and planning. The second and third roles flow from the trends affecting HRM. As technology allows many HR functions to be transferred to line managers, the role of HRM practitioners is now including that of an internal consultant who provides advice and guidance to managers. The third role mentioned by 12 of the 13 participants is the strategic role that flows from the current trend identified earlier of HRM becoming more strategic in its focus.

Given that the key roles are the traditional HRM roles which are increasing in complexity and the relatively new roles of internal consultant and member of the management team, what are the key competencies needed by HR practitioners? As indicated earlier, the competencies fall into five categories: technical, strategic, organizational management, interpersonal and personal. The skills that the HRM practitioners felt they needed are expanding and cover a broad range. They are also unique to each individual. It may well be that an HRM practitioner needs to take the time to identify his/her individual learning needs and prepare a plan to meet these needs.

Participants were also asked if they thought that their roles and required competencies would change in the next 1 to 5 years. The 85% of the participants who felt that changes would come in this timeframe identified their strategic role in management, demographics and the changing needs of employees as areas of future change. What competencies will they need to further develop? Answers varied from HR topics to communications to technology to coaching.

As this was a qualitative study based on a sample of 13 HRM practitioners, more research needs to be conducted on the changing roles and required competencies for HRM practitioners. There appears to be a much more strategic role for human resource directors or vice-presidents, and the practitioners in this study felt that this role would continue to grow in importance. The competency needs for this role centre on breadth of knowledge of how the business or organization works. Yet, more complexities are being added to human resources, which increases the need for specialists. In large organizations, specialists support the generalist at the head of the human resource area. These generalists at times are brought in from other functional areas and have MBAs or professional accounting designations as they have to bring value to the senior management team and need that broad perspective. Future research is needed in this area to answer questions such as: How do smaller organizations with a limited staff handle the two roles, that is, a generalist with broad business knowledge and a specialist who can handle labour relations, conflict management, coaching, benefit plans, disability issues, etc.? In larger organizations, what types of succession plans exist for human resource directors? If human resource practitioners are becoming more specialized, where will future heads of the human resource area come from as they need broad general skills?

Another area of future research could be how companies are dealing with a new version of diversity, that is, one based on different ages and, as a result, different values in the workplace as opposed to different genders, language, culture or religion. Yet another area of future research could look at the ways the human resources departments are measuring the value that they add to organizations which would include how the human resource area is contributing to strategic decision-making.

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