Strategic Human Resources Management:
Challenges and Opportunities

An Interview with Dr. David S. Weiss

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What external pressures are having the greatest impact on human resources management?

Organizations are facing quite a few pressures at the present time. I will refer to three key challenges.

1. *Alternative competitive forces.* New competitive forces are creating new pressures for companies to respond to service and product delivery in very different ways. These competitive forces place tremendous demands on companies to embrace technology and alternative relationships, sometimes with competitors.

2. *Customer expectations and values.* Customers have become very demanding; they expect responsiveness, quality, and bundling of services, so that the services they receive are total solutions rather than just parts of the solution. This is creating significant challenges for companies that see themselves as the delivery agents of only one service.

3. *Access to capital.* Companies often have great difficulty responding effectively to these pressures because of the lack of available capital. As a result, we are seeing very significant mergers and acquisitions. These are driven by the need for both new competencies and additional capital to meet these external challenges.

How are these pressures driving both business strategy as well as human resource (HR) strategy?

These external pressures are creating a tremendous challenge for HR professionals to enhance their business acumen, their understanding of the business issues and the needs of the external customer. For some HR professionals, their understanding of this goes beyond what they would typically be expected to know and do. HR is also being challenged to develop strategies to create an organizational culture that allows people to be more flexible during dramatic changes. As the changes are introduced, HR professionals have developed excellence in implementing change and ensuring that transitions are effective. Finally HR strategy is being driven by the need to create an overall business alignment of HR practices with the many initiatives in the company.

Can you briefly describe what the current role of HR should be in today's organization?

The HR role should focus on three major areas.
1. *People processes.* People processes refer to the employment life cycle that

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employees engage ongoing assistance and support, to when they eventually leave. HR's role is to ensure that there is excellence throughout this cycle. Many of the people processes, especially in from when they are brought into the company, developed, paid and receive the more administrative ones, are now being done by external suppliers. However, HR is expected to ensure excellence will continue even if HR is playing a vendor management role.

2. *Organizational processes.* The second area covers value-added organizational processes. For example, HR is expected to contribute to the organization by creating a learning process where people can share their experiences of what works and what does not work. HR is also expected to enable employees and managers to be more resilient through the application of technology and self-management processes. Finally, there is a strong expectation for HR, through coaching and consulting, to enable organizational capability and effectiveness. These roles may not be strategic, but they are value-added.

3. *Business transformation.* In this area HR works at the strategic level. They help the company deal with issues and gain its competitive position within the marketplace. There are a number of strategic alternatives that HR may focus on, such as, organizational culture, change management, alignment between business and HR, the cost of the human capital, etc. Typically, most Human Resources organizations have the bandwidth to tackle only one or two of the strategic issues that are most pertinent to the organization. The challenge for today's HR then will be to determine which of the organization's strategic initiatives it will address.

What does strategic HR mean?

It is important to have a common understanding of the word `strategic.' Something is strategic if it allows the organization to gain competitive or relative advantage against the competition. In private sector companies, relative advantage may be evident because they are in a competitive mode. But even non-profit and government agencies need a competitive mindset. They deliver a service or a product that could be delivered in alternative ways. If they are going to capture the hearts and minds of those people who are receiving the service or product they also must identify how they can develop the strategic capabilities to give them that relative advantage over the `competition.' Strategic HR managers, then, are able to deploy the people and organizational processes that enable competitive advantage to occur. They are very focused on what provides that strategic advantage, and at the same time, they are excellent at creating the systems to deliver that.

Recently, I introduced the concept of strategy as competitive advantage to an HR leadership team. When I asked, 'Who is your competition?', they explained that the competition is the people external to the company who could replace them.

I then asked the line executives the same question: 'Who is the competition for HR?' They gave an entirely different answer. They said that the competition for HR in their company is the HR professional in their competitors' companies.

Apparently, the executives are not concerned about whether the HR professional is an employee in the company or external. Rather, they want to deploy HR services that surpass the value their business competitors receive. In their terms, the external HR professionals are not the competitors of their internal HR professionals, rather they are their partners. The internal HR professionals and the chosen external professionals work together to deliver strategic value and provide the company with relative advantage against the competition.

Strategic HR managers are able to deploy the people and organizational processes that enable competitive advantage to occur.

What is HR's role in achieving alignment between business strategy and HR strategy and ensuring that the HR activities themselves are mutually reinforcing and integrated?

There are two parts to your question. The first part is the relationship between business strategy and HR strategy, and the second part is HR strategy within itself. There are two other alignment issues for HR, as well. HR should also be considering its relationship and alignment with other internal service providers and how that ultimately contributes value. Finally, HR must consider how it can contribute value in areas that are not HR-related but are business-to-business alignment issues within the organization or company.

1. *Alignment between business and HR.* HR needs to partner with business in order to identify what the customer needs and to design people and organizational solutions that help the business satisfy those customer needs.

2. *Internal HR activities.* There is a strong demand that HR develop an overall approach that is internally coherent when they deploy their HR strategies. When they do an organizational intervention, it should align with their people processes. Each process should be mutually reinforcing to allow them to achieve the overall objective of the strategy

3. *Alignment of HR and other internal service providers.* Many line managers are looking for solutions that are more than HR solutions. They are looking for the internal services to bundle their capabilities to give them a complete solution. The alignment of HR with information technology, finance, communications, real estate, and other functional areas is becoming more important. For example, if a company decides to move an office from one place to another, there will be HR issues, technology issues, financial issues, communication issues, and real estate issues. Alignment will be needed to give a complete solution to the internal client. They will bundle solutions to deliver value to customers.

4. *Business-to-business alignment within the company.* Since HR is one of the areas that has people deployed throughout the entire company, they have knowledge across the entire organization, and can contribute value to the overall alignment of all the strategic initiatives. For example, in a private sector company, the marketing, manufacturing, and development areas may all have individual initiatives. There is an assumption that the executives are accountable for ensuring that the individual initiatives align. That does not always occur, because the executives are often driven by their objectives. HR has people deployed within each area. In a number of companies, HR has the mandate to ensure the alignment of all of the initiatives to achieve the overall company direction. The same could be said for a non-profit or a public sector organization. They would need similar kinds of alignment among the multiple services that they offer.

When we talk about HR becoming a strategic business partner, what does that mean?

There are two areas to consider. First, human resources professionals who work as strategic business partners, work with, not for, their clients within the company to deliver value

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to the customer. (When I refer to 'customer,' I mean the external customer, not the internal customer. I use the term 'client' to refer to the internal customer.) This means that human resources professionals, as strategic business partners, will have the capability to redirect solutions or initiatives that are not in the best interests of the customer. HR professionals are the experts on the people and organizational solutions, while the line manager has the best data on the nature of the problem. Together they have the capability to discover the right answer that delivers the best service and that will enhance customer value.

Second, on most occasions, HR gets involved with a client at the point when the problem is identified. As a strategic business partner, HR is part of the development of the strategy and is able to anticipate problems before the need arises. They help develop the strategy rather than simply respond to needs. They also are able to contribute to the business-and customer-related issues by providing the special expertise on people and organizational processes.

In most organizations, business strategy drives HR strategy. Are there cases where an HR strategy can become a business strategy?

Yes. For example, one HR leader was successful in guiding the company to include a core strategy to create a strong positive culture. The strategic initiative focused on the development of core values and the associated behaviour for employees. HR also designed the rewards and recognition to enable the strategic culture initiative to occur.

How can HR contribute to bringing about needed changes in organizations?

HR needs to have an active role in bringing about change in the organization. Let's consider three ways they can do this. First, HR must have the ability to understand what is driving the business and its customers, so that they grasp the company challenges in a meaningful way. With that understanding, HR can create organizational change in alignment with the customer drivers and the business challenges.

Second, HR professionals need to have a broad knowledge base to provide them with the information to be idea merchants. They need to continuously develop their unique database of solutions and willingly share it. When they enter into conversations with clients, they can then play an expert and facilitative role in bringing about change in the organization.

Third, HR professionals need to find ways to have their 'other' required work done. If HR is inundated with administrative work or with employee relations problems on a regular basis, they will not have the time to invest in introducing changes to the organization. Human Resources professionals need to be outstanding in the process of disciplined abandonment; they will have to redeploy certain roles and determine which things do not need to be done anymore. A rigorous exercise of disciplined abandonment is essential to create the time to focus on bringing about organizational changes.

Traditionally HR was viewed as the conscience of the organization and the employee advocate. Now HR is expected to be a strategic business partner to the CEO and partner to line management. Are these conflicting or competing roles?

Let's consider the conscience of the organization and employee advocate role. When HR individually takes on that role, it segregates itself from the other leaders, creating some limitations on the willingness of the others to involve them in strategic issues. The preferred approach is that line managers, who work directly with the employees, should have the role of

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employee advocate. Human Resources professionals would operate as the enablers, ensuring that line managers work effectively with their employees to address their needs, enhance their potential, and deliver value to the company and the customer.

What kinds of HR responsibilities or activities are being outsourced and/or delegated to line management?

Human Resources professionals need to determine what activities are strategic, (i.e. activities that provide competitive advantage), and what activities are not strategic but need to be done. They should consider whether to outsource or delegate the non-strategic activities so that they are not burdened with delivery. They are often still held accountable for vendor management for those activities and will need to develop excellence in that area. Many of the non-strategic activities are often done better by specialized external service providers in support of HR professionals.

Some examples of work that HR can outsource include:

- payroll, benefits, and pension responsibilities, with the third party managing the entire infrastructure;
- the employee call/response centre, which is a centralized method of direct access to HR for information and advice;
- technology deployment and delivery, which can be either outsourced or delegated through an alliance with the IT professionals within the company.

HR should also be delegating many of the day-to-day employee relations issues to line managers. The old model where line managers are responsible for the work and HR is responsible for the workforce is very problematic; it forces HR professionals to spend almost all their time working on employee relations. Instead, the managers within the company function as the local 'FIR' professionals, and the Human Resources professionals operate as the centre of excellence to deliver value to the line managers. In many cases, HR professionals need to be the last, not the first, point of contact on employee relations issues.

Being an enabler to line management?

HR professionals function as both partners to and enablers of line management. For example, if there are 1,000 people in the company and 180 are managers, the Human Resources professionals partner with and enable the 180 managers to help them manage the other 820 people. This is how HR has increased its ratio from what used to be a low number to in some cases 1:200. The HR professionals are not really dealing with 200 people. It's not a correct assumption. What they are doing is working with the 30 or 40 managers that are servicing those 200 people. That becomes a manageable number. The ratios are also higher because there are many people who are doing HR services from outside the company. In reality there are many more people who are doing HR services than those low numbers would suggest because line managers are doing some of it and external vendors are doing some of it.

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What are some of the paths or directions human resource management might follow in terms of HR's roles and priorities?

HR management practices often reflect what the company executives envision for HR. The HR priorities will likely result from not only customer demands but also the extent of the openness of the executives to allow initiatives to occur. For example:

- Some companies are open to alternative HR strategies and are *early adopters* of new initiatives. In these companies, you will find very experimental HR management roles and priorities. You will often see culture as part of their strategy. You will see efforts to create systems of change management and determine alternative ways of working. The direction will often be reflected in the competencies of the person hired as, for example, VP of HR.
- Other companies are *late adopters* of innovative practices with people and organizations. When they are late adopters they often hire people who are more responsive and less driven to introduce new changes.
- Some companies see Human Resources as an *administrative* function and have little time for HR to enter into business issues.

In other words, although the human resources roles and priorities should be determined by competitive challenges and customers, they will be directly affected by what the leadership of the company wants to see within Human Resources. They will likely select people within HR accordingly.

There will also be some financial roles that HR will be expected to deliver. For example, HR will be expected to ensure that the company is making the best investment possible in people and organizational processes, i.e. the human capital investment made to allow the business to do what it needs to do. The challenge for Human Resources is to introduce the financial component, which determines the value received from the activities and interventions that are being promoted by the company and within Human Resources. It's happening already in a number of different industries and sectors and it will continue to increase. The Human Resources capability to use economic models to determine the economic value of their interventions is something that HR professionals will be asked to do. It may take HR a little outside of their comfort zone. I envision that in the next five years or so, we will see labour economists or accountants with the specialized ability to analyze and present the return on the investment of human capital within the HR function.

There are other challenges that I have mentioned previously that Human Resources will likely face, such as culture, alignment, and change management.

HR professionals will be asked to use economic models to determine the economic value of their interventions.

Would the HR professional who has been able to move beyond the traditional HR role and become more knowledgeable about the business be better able to face this challenge of determining the value of the return on investment on human capital?

Clearly. One question Human Resources professionals have been asking is, 'How can we get to the executive table?' The assumption that being bright and having HR professional expertise is enough to get to the executive table is incorrect. They will not get there if they do only people processes and organizational value-added. The HR professional will get to the executive table if they can deal with the strategic risks of the company. They must get

involved in the business transformation that contributes value to the company and value to the customer; then they can be part of the conversations with executives about strategic questions.

If Human Resources has the capability to talk about the best investment in human capital, then when there is a transformation within the company, their ideas and input will be sought and they can make recommendations with confidence. The need to go beyond the traditional HR role becomes even more obvious when a company engages in an acquisition. HR often wants to be part of the due diligence team to assess the extent to which the company should be purchased. They often argue that culture and leadership are the reasons they should be brought in. However, that is often not a sufficient reason to bring HR in early. It will bring them in after the acquisition. However, if they have the knowledge of what the best investment in human capital is and can assess whether their company or the acquired company will have the capability to deploy people with the best investment and to give the best return, then Human Resources becomes an essential part of the due diligence process and they become strategic. That contribution, I believe, will become more and more common. It has started to happen in some companies that have HR online information and data programs generating return on investment analyses of human capital and people and organizational processes.

What implications does the new strategic HR have for unions, industrial relations issues, and collective bargaining?

The realization by companies that there is a relationship between employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction, and profitability has become more and more evident. In many cases, adversarial industrial relations hurt employee commitment. Employee satisfaction, then, will suffer if there is a difficult environment within the company, regardless of whether there's a union or not.

This is evident with employees who have direct contact with customers. If they are not happy, there will be an immediate effect on how they interact with their customers. For those people who work in manufacturing facilities and are removed from customers, particularly in companies that have a great many quality control mechanisms and standards, it may not be as obvious that employee satisfaction will generate a certain level of customer satisfaction. It seems, however, that it does.

The relationship between employee satisfaction and profitability may lead companies to consider alternative approaches to labour-management relations that contribute to both business imperatives and positive employee relations. It leads companies to consider a version of cooperative approaches that I discussed in my first book in 1996, *Beyond the Walls of Conflict.*

Many have realized that a competitive approach with the union is somewhat dysfunctional. Companies need to compete with the competition, not with their own workforce. However, for some companies and some unions, being totally cooperative is unrealistic. So, I have coined the term, `co-opetition'—which is a balance between the two.

Co-opetition is a pragmatic approach that is driven by practicality rather than a belief in cooperation. They apply mutual gains when it is in the interest of the parties and where there are business imperatives driving the decisions. A mutual gain is recognized as part of the repertoire of choices of how to negotiate rather than the only way to proceed. Unions are more accepting of co-opetition since it is pragmatic rather than based on a belief system.

The relationship between employee satisfaction and profitability may lead companies to consider alternative approaches to labour-management relations.

You have referred to 'organizational capability.' What does it mean to build organizational capability and what role does HR play?

The term 'organizational capability' became popular through the work of David Ulrich in his 1990 book, *Organizational Capability*. It, of course, has evolved to have many different definitions. A company with organizational capability has an outstanding state of readiness to implement changes reliably, quickly, and with quality, and is, therefore, very responsive to needs. When a company that has organizational capability merges with another company, they are able to see the benefit almost immediately of that merger. While that may be an unlikely scenario, it is a goal towards which organizations strive. HR then has an important role in creating organizational capability. They must align different parts of the organization to achieve an outstanding state of readiness. They build a flexible culture that can be responsive to the challenges as they occur. They must also create the ability to implement change and to help people transition into these changes with the speed and agility that allows the organization to be successful.

You talked earlier of HR's challenge in determining which strategic initiatives to pursue? Would having this organizational capability enhance the ability to decide which strategy should have priority?

Organizational capability will help HR determine and implement strategic initiatives. However, for many people, organizational capability is difficult to grasp. It's not tangible. You don't see organizational capability. Rather, it is a 'readiness to act,' the energy that allows certain things to occur.

When Human Resources professionals say 'our job is to create organizational capability,' many people do not understand what they mean. But, if they talk about it in terms of the deliverable—for example, 'we create a flexible culture,' or 'we create an aligned organization and business,' or 'we create the ability to implement change and help people through transition' or 'we create an organization that can determine quickly the best investment in human capital—people will be able to grasp the outcome effectively. The concept of organizational capability is outstanding. However, because many leaders struggle with that level of abstraction, the concept needs to be communicated in concrete terms that focus on the actual deliverable.

What are organizations using to measure or reflect HR's contribution to business performance?

I mentioned earlier the notion of the best investment in human capital (BIHC) as being an important emerging measure that Human Resources is starting to consider. BIHC metrics are really important for Human Resources to determine so that they have a measure of human capital. They can help guide leaders on how to invest appropriately in specific areas versus other areas. It will also help HR determine the return on investments of its own initiatives.

There are two parts to the BIHC measure. These are:

1. *The return on investment of human resources initiatives.*
2. *The alignment of specific performance objectives with the balanced scorecard of the company.* A 'balanced scorecard' has been explained in the well-known book called *The Balanced Scorecard* (Kaplan and Norton 1996). It identifies the three or four key

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stakeholders to whom it wants to deliver value, such as the customer, the shareholder, the employee, and the community. They determine the metrics of overall company objectives for each stakeholder. Everybody's individual objectives then are linked to those overall macro objectives of the company. HR professionals then anchor rewards, recognition, and bonuses to the performance on the balanced scorecard.

What value does benchmarking HR practices serve?

Benchmarking is a very helpful process for Human Resources. Benchmarking is a process by which you break apart a service into a series of sub-processes and you search for external or internal examples of those processes being done in a 'best practices' way. Then you reconfigure the service to follow the best of each of the processes you have benchmarked. You ultimately do the service better by compiling all of the best practices from the individual sub-processes that you studied.

HR can continuously improve by looking externally and internally at what is being done in an excellent way. Externally, HR can identify best practices that can result in continuous improvement in what HR delivers. Internally, HR can identify best practices on a regular basis. They can become an information source that allows the company to leverage its own internal best practices and benchmarks to enhance performance in other areas. For example, one company developed outstanding capabilities in servicing the external customer. They recognized the need to deliver value in this area and developed excellent technology to measure and assess the extent to which the customer is happy with the service. Human Resources professionals brought those capabilities into the company, using the same methods to measure the effectiveness of the delivery and the satisfaction of the internal clients.

Unfortunately, this is not often done. If Human Resources did internal benchmarking, they could leverage success. However, it is unfortunate that often the only time companies find out that they are a benchmark is when another company comes to them and says `I'd like to benchmark your process.' HR should identify their internal benchmark capabilities and leverage that for their own company's benefit, not just for someone else who wants to benchmark them.

Turning to the HR professional, what are organizations looking for today?

I would be looking for three things. These are:

1. *A higher level of professional expertise.* There is recognition that HR does have a unique database. It has its own science in which there are areas of specialty. When people are asking a Human Resources professional for their input, they will have an expert opinion to offer, because they have that knowledge base and have developed that database.

2. *Outstanding influence and consulting skills.* They need to have the ability to influence, to communicate effectively, and to work through the organization for alignment and change.

3. *A much broader understanding of customer needs and business acumen.* They will then have the expertise to engage in conversations and appreciate fully the challenges within the business itself and from the demands of customers. The Human Resources professional

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will be seen as a business professional with an HR expertise. They will have the capability to influence people about the changes that are required to meet people and organizational needs.

What shills or knowledge or competencies are necessary for successful HR leadership?

First, *HR professionals will need the ability to build alliances.* There will need to be alliances with line managers to become strategic business partners. In addition, there's a need for alliances with other professionals within the company who are doing human resources-like activities but are not within the Human Resources function. Many companies have line people who may be responsible for change management or for continuous improvement or other activities that could very well have been within the HR function. Those alliances, and the ongoing conversations that result, make sure that people are proceeding in the same direction. There's also a need to build alliances with the other internal service areas. Human Resources would then have the capability to bundle their solutions and deliver a complete answer to their client, an answer that would include, for example, an information technology component, a communications strategy, etc. As a result the client will not have to ask three or four different sources to put a solution together.

Second, HR leadership needs to understand the business drivers and customer needs. This understanding will enable them to develop and design the appropriate people and organizational processes. They have to have a systemic view of HR services. They also need to be outstanding at recommending appropriate solutions and architecture that will allow the business to do what it needs to do to be successful.

Third, HR leaders need to have excellent skills in mobilizing people into action. Their good ideas need to be put into effect. They must have a delivery mindset, where things get done in a timely, high quality manner.

Let's take an individual who has been working in the HR field for several years. How can he or she retool for the future?

First, many human resources professionals have recognized that lifelong learning is something they want to promote for all the workforce, as well as themselves. They need to be educating themselves and learning constantly. Whenever there's an opportunity, they should expand their knowledge base and their understanding of what they are trying to contribute, both as HR professionals and as business partners. They need to be looking at the strategic HR issues, at best practices, and at implementing them within their companies. Some have used external coaches, such as consultants, as a one on one learning experience to help them think through business issues. That relationship, whether it's visible or invisible to others, helps the HR professional to generate the best solutions and gives them the ability to do it independently and with confidence the next time. Of course, the Human Resources professional should be reading books and attending courses and conferences to be exposed to new ideas and to achieve lifelong learning.

Second, the focus on the customer will challenge HR professionals to hear the voice of the customer directly. HR professionals might want to consider having direct contact with customers from time to time. It would be intriguing for the HR professionals to have conversations with the HR professionals in the customer organization. Also, the HR professionals should be in contact with the Human Resources leaders within the supplier organizations.

Human Resources professionals need to expand their horizons.

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Human Resources professionals need to expand their horizons. They need to continually develop and retool through different kinds of conversations that will enable the company to succeed and enhance the employability of the HR professionals themselves.

What changes are needed in Canada's industrial relations (IR) and human resources management programs, and business schools if they're going to prepare students adequately for a career in HR or IR?

IR and HR programs need to be studied closely to determine whether the challenges that I have described, if they believe they are valid challenges, are truly reflected in their curriculums. For example, are alternatives offered in the IR curriculum that reflect the variety of choices a professional entering into a business context or organizational context may face? Will that professional be able to make wise choices about whether to use a cooperative or a more traditional approach? In Human Resources, the traditional programs likely focus on people processes, which are very important, but the curriculums need to be reviewed to see if the new emphasis on how Human Resources can contribute to organizational value-added processes and business transformation processes are covered in the course offerings.

The IR and HR programs need to reflect the business context and customer value and how HR and IR professionals actually contribute value to those issues. They need to help students put their role into context and understand how they are positioned within the company, and how they can deliver value.

I believe that there will also be a demand for new kinds of programs and perhaps new kinds of degrees as a result of the redefinition of HR and IR. The normal MBA program, where the students take some organizational courses or a specialty program, may not suffice in capturing the full expertise that will be required of HR and IR. It also may not suffice if HR really wants to be a discipline unto itself. A focused degree, such as a Master of Human Resources (MHR), may be required. An MHR might actually capture some of the more in-depth expertise that will be required of HR professionals as they enter the workforce now and in the future.

There is also going to be a need for continuing education for people on the job. They will need courses or technology-distributed learning to develop their expertise in the field. Whether colleges and universities will be the ones that respond to this need is unclear. If not, I suspect there will be other private sector organizations that will respond to the need and will deliver. But, without question, the colleges and universities have the highest credibility to deliver HR continuing education.

Lifelong learning requires immediate access to learning. Nevertheless, people will still attend seminars because they not only transmit certain knowledge, but they also provide informal networking opportunities that should be encouraged. In this way HR professionals can expand their thought processes and have a better understanding of the business challenges that exist within many companies.

What areas of HR will take on greater importance as we approach the new millennium and beyond?

We have already discussed several areas of great importance to HR. These include creating a flexible culture, organizational capability and alignment, and implementing change.

People on the job will need courses or technology-distributed learning to develop their expertise in the field.

Other areas for HR include the following:

1. *Technology drivers that create opportunities for Human Resources.* The Year 2000 technology problem (Y2K) became a blessing in disguise for Human Resources. Many HR professionals used the Y2K problem as an opportunity for a business case to buy the new technology that is Year 2000 compliant. The new technology gave them the capability to foster employee self-reliance and allow managers to become HR leaders through the technology support. Human Resources professionals will need to know how to leverage and get maximum value from the technology in order to deliver on their promise to the company

2. *The return on investment in human capital which will demonstrate the financial value of human capital investments.* I suggest that this will be an important driver in the future.

3. *Retaining the best employees to support a strong positive culture.* This will continue to be an issue of great importance to HR as it proceeds forward.

4. *The capability to manage vendors.* As they deploy work to external services, or, in some cases, to internal services, they will need to know how to manage those services and guarantee quality. HR will need to develop vendor management skills, through technology and through relationships with the supplier organizations.

You have a new book that just came out entitled High Impact HR: Transforming Human Resources for Competitive Advantage (Weiss 1999). Can you briefly describe what it is about and what your intentions were when you decided to write the book?

The Human Resources field is in the process of dramatic change. Three or four years ago, people were talking about the demise of HR and asked whether it was really necessary. What has emerged from research and debate is a redefinition of HR. HR is now being positioned to contribute to business transformation in new ways based on the competencies of HR professionals.

Almost all the books in the HR area are what is called 'contributor' books. These are books that have topic areas, and a variety of authors write the chapters. The editor then brings the pieces together into one book. The individual authors give their own perspectives and, in many cases, are operating from their own independent models. There have been very few HR books where there has been one voice and an integrated view of what HR should do.

I was concerned about the ability of Human Resources professionals to really understand how they can transform their organizations for competitive advantage. With that concern in mind, I believed it was important to have a book written with one voice, with it's own internal coherency, that would allow people to understand what it means to become excellent in people processes, in organizational value-added processes, and in business transformation processes. In addition, HR needed to know what to abandon and what is crucial to the strategic direction of the company.

I also became aware of the need for Human Resources professionals to shift their attention from thinking about internal customers to focusing on delivering value to the external customer as part of their primary mandate. That thought needed to be communicated very clearly. The implications for the way HR should be configured, should be governed, and should deliver services needed to be understood.

The Human Resources field is in the process of dramatic change.

As a result, I wrote the book as a guide to Human Resources professionals so that they will understand conceptually and practically what they need to do. There are many practical insights into how HR professionals can become strategic business partners and also deliver the basic services expected of them. The book will show HR professionals how to get to the table and become strategic business partners.

In addition to the guidance and framework that it provides Human Resources professionals, the book will help executives and senior leaders understand what HR is about in their own language. Many executives do not understand the business contribution that gives strategic value to HR. It's my hope that a book such as *High Impact HR* will help executives appreciate the value that Human Resources can offer. The book may also stimulate change within organizations and define the strategic expectations of Human Resources leadership.

Finally, there is an important need to look at the curriculum of Human Resources within universities and other educational institutions. *High Impact HR* will provide university professors with a text for curriculum and courses that will train future Human Resources professionals. The book will hopefully make a meaningful contribution to the field of HR and to the future of HR professionals.

Is there anything else you want to add or comment on?

It is a very exciting time for Human Resources professionals. Just a few years ago it was a very frightening time; it seemed that there was not a clear mandate of what Human Resources professionals could contribute. The opportunities are there now for Human Resources professionals to add strategic value to the company. And they can do it. If they choose to discover the path that really adds value for competitive advantage and customer service, Human Resources can be major catalysts for the success of the company. HR professionals can bring their expertise and knowledge to help companies and employees fulfill their potential and succeed. The future of Human Resources is waiting to be created; HR professionals can seize the opportunity.

Human Resources can be major catalysts for the success of the company.

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