

The Current and Future State of Human Resources Leadership

An Interview with:

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In December 2008, Hilary Sirman of Queen's IRC spoke with Antoinette Blunt, President of Ironside Consulting Services Inc. and Vice-Chair of the Human Resources Professional Association of Ontario, about the current and future state of the Human Resources profession.

Amidst increasing global competition, wars for talent, economic uncertainty and generational differences in the workforce, human resources professionals today face escalating pressures. Nonetheless, Antoinette provides a thoughtful and optimistic outlook for the function and future of HR leaders, commenting on the need to develop innovative talent management strategies, focus on recruitment and training, remain committed to lifelong learning, and actively engage in professional associations.

Below are selected excerpts of our conversation about the challenges and opportunities of HR leadership, today, and in the future.

In the midst of globalization, demographic differences in the workplace, and the war for talent in a challenging economy, what does the HR function mean to most organizations today?

The Human Resources profession today is viewed more than just a functional body of "resources". Usually when you think about the functional aspects of human resources, one would think of traditional responsibilities as to hire, recruit, discipline, lay off workers, and to terminate when necessary. But the profession is really much more than that. Amidst rapid globalization, demographic challenges, and wars for talent; today's human resources professionals are sought after for their strategic knowledge and their abilities to plan for a workforce that will sustain and support the achievement of business goals and objectives.

Organizations and businesses are looking to human resources leaders as professionals who are very creative about helping organizations and businesses to evolve. In highly competitive workplace environments, employers who are the most successful are often viewed as an "employer of choice". With increasing global competition, that is the kind of employer which businesses and organizations should strive to be viewed as. Today's employers are also very much in a war for talent – I believe that talent management has to be incorporated into what an HR professional does within a company: it is so critical to their businesses being successful.

Within the last decade or so, what has fundamentally changed in the HR environment? What are some key internal and external pressures that are impacting the current environment?

The effects of globalization on the workplace are everywhere, and ten years ago we could not say that to the same degree. I look at organizations and businesses in Northern Ontario ten years ago, for example, as being somewhat insulated from the rest of the world. We viewed globalization as something that might impact the

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major urban centres like Toronto and Vancouver. Today, we see foreign ownership of a number of our natural resource-based industries. Human resources professionals are acutely aware of the potential impacts of these types of forces. For example, businesses that face global competition today are significantly challenged, as the cost of doing business in North America can far exceed the cost of doing business in many other countries around the world. To a large degree, because of that, some businesses are struggling for their very survival.

We certainly have all heard a lot lately in the news about the perils of the North American automotive industry. The demise of this industry would have major impacts on related businesses that we probably have not even fully realized yet. There is a lot of concern out there in the marketplace. With these types of pressures, human resources professionals need to be knowledgeable about global forces, political pressures and government decisions that could impact the economy, in addition to the day-to-day needs of their organizations. These significant external pressures impact many businesses and organizations, no matter where these businesses and organizations are located in the world.

Fundamentally, what I really think has changed is the focus of human resources. More and more, I see professionals needing to have a greater level of awareness, knowledge, and understanding of broader issues - more so than they ever did in the past. Human resources professionals must absolutely have much broader knowledge of the demographics of their workforce and social trends. I was looking at a recent publication from the Society of Human Resources Management (SHRM) called "Workplace Visions". This publication talks about the changing workplace demographics and how it is important to really study these as human resources professionals will need to become more creative in attracting and retaining skilled workers and devising new and unique employee satisfaction strategies.

Human resources professionals need to understand the dynamics of a diverse workforce, and the challenges posed: it not only includes cultural diversity, but also the diversity from the new generation of workers.

We sometimes forget that older generations of worker are also diverse. We need to equally attract them, retain them, and transition them to retirement if that is their choice. In Ontario, we know that with legislated change to the Human Rights Code a couple of years ago, there is no longer mandatory retirement. As a result, we see the needs of all workers as vastly different for each generation. We did not see these demographic or generational aspects of the workforce as prevalent ten years or so ago, and these are some significant challenges to face.

The external pressures and the challenges of the market are so different that while some of the key aspects of the profession are fundamentally the same, such as recruitment and retention, how they are carried out and the need for innovation and creativity in those roles as a professional, are much different than they were in the past.

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Given new pressures in today's market, and the current economy that we're facing, in what ways can HR add value to an organization's overall performance?

The human resources contribution to organizational performance is become much more complex. One area in which human resources adds value is in strategic planning. With the current downturn in the economy, I think that many employees and some employers might look at the human resources role as one of merely downsizing through employee lay-off. Although that's a role that comes with the territory, more importantly, with the pressures from today's market, human resources professionals are integral to helping businesses plan for the future and help set new paths for the achievement of corporate goals and objectives.

Human resources professionals can do this by analyzing their workforce and determining the skills that will be needed to facilitate the achievement of successful outcomes. We cannot just deal with what is happening at present. Human resources professionals must always keep an eye on "where we want to go" - despite all of the pressures of the economy. If we only stay focused on what we are dealing with currently, then we will not be able to see and determine a pathway for the future, and for success.

I also think that in our role as a member of the Senior Management Team, understanding the pressures that are facing organizations in today's economy, and knowing the strategic goals of the organization, human resources professionals can contribute to success by ensuring that the right employees are hired, and that those employees are appropriately supported and trained in their roles.

How can we measure or validate the effectiveness of Human Resources in an organization?

Measurement is very important in identifying success in the achievement of corporate goals and objectives. Measuring an organization's ability to attract and retain qualified workers are also very clear indicators of human resources effectiveness.

In business environments today where change is constant, how can HR contribute to an organization's ability to survive and thrive in times of change?

That's a great question! To manage ongoing change, human resources professionals have to stay on top of the trends that could impact the workplace, including potential skill shortages in the workplace, difficulties in recruiting as more and more baby boomers retire, and the impacts of global recruiting.

The global talent market poses many new challenges. Potential candidates have more flexibility, related to what company or organization they work for, or even where they work. Today, workplaces are not necessarily in the Corporate Head Office - they could be located anywhere in the world and still be a part of the same company. If human resources professionals are not on top of the trends of what employees are looking for in an employer, we may not be successful in our recruiting initiatives.

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I spoke earlier about the increasing diversity and cultural challenges of the diverse workforce. We know, for example in Ontario, one impetus behind the change to the Human Rights Code, where they eliminated the definition of age and mandatory retirement became obsolete in the province, was to encourage older workers to remain in the workforce for a longer period of time. Even with that legislative change, Ontario will still face significant shortages of skilled workers in many professions and trades. We cannot survive and thrive in our province unless we rely upon and actively recruit foreign, skilled workers to fill upcoming vacancies, despite the current economic condition of our province.

Another trend that human resources professionals need to be on top off is the cost drivers of business. For example, the escalation of costs of benefits with an aging workforce will mean increasing financial pressures on companies and organizations. I have seen pressures being put on employers for expansion of benefits in unionized environments. The cost of benefits has been escalating in the past few years and will continue to be a challenge.

To borrow an interesting question from the recent SHRM publication “2015: Future Scenarios for Human Resource Management”, can you describe the most optimistic scenario for HR in the next decade ahead. What does it look like?

For human resources, the most optimistic scenario that I can think of is a greater level of acknowledgement of the true “professionalism” of the profession. I think there will be more recognition given to the Human Resources Professional Association, and human resources associations in other provinces, especially to those members who have a CHRP designation. I think the public will increasingly view our association as a body of excellence.

In Ontario, the Human Resources Professionals Association (HRPA) is the regulatory body for Human Resources Management in Ontario. The overarching objective of HRPA’s regulatory organization is to protect the public by ensuring that Human Resources professionals in Ontario are competent and act in an ethical manner, and this is accomplished by our Code of Ethics and Rules of Professional Conduct. I think the public will see that the human resources profession has continued to grow and evolve, and they will be able to put their trust in our profession.

Personally, the human resources profession is my second profession. My first is nursing. Nursing is a much “older” profession that has evolved over many years. I have seen the evolution of the Human Resources profession occur at a rapid pace in the past few years - not only is our role as professionals evolving, our profession as a body is evolving as well.

Now, for the other side of that coin – the most pessimistic scenario for HR, ten years from now – what might that look like?

I think that there is the potential for human resources professionals in organizations or businesses to potentially fail if they are unable recruit and retain the workers

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necessary to run the business and achieve goals. We know that technology in many cases has replaced the roles of some workers but we also know that people are, and will remain, necessary and integral to all workplaces. Thank goodness we are not dealing with such a high level of technology that human beings are being totally replaced! However, I do think that unlike technology, human beings and skilled workers – professionals – in many areas, are quickly becoming scarce resources.

With the onset of retirement for baby boomers and the global competition for skilled workers and professionals, if we do not gain the skills as professionals in order to be able to manage talent within our organizations, we could fail to support our businesses and organizations effectively.

What does the next decade look like in terms of HR leadership in Labour Relations?

Human resources professionals can bring diverse and strategic information about the challenges that their businesses and organizations are facing in order to survive and thrive to the collective bargaining table and relationships with union officials. It is not enough just to enter into collective bargaining with knowledge of the provisions of collective agreements in other related businesses. That strategy type of negotiation in both private and public sectors is just not going to cut it anymore.

Human resources professionals must consider labour relations and collective bargaining from a broader perspective and bring this information to the table. We need to explain the kinds of pressures and challenges that businesses and organizations are facing. As collective agreements are re-negotiated, traditionally the expectations of unions have been higher compensation, improved benefits and better working conditions. This may no longer be the case as issues such as the very survival of the business or organization must be forefront on the bargaining table.

Human resources professionals can play a key role in helping unions understand the broader issues, such as global competitiveness. We can be instrumental in seeking solutions collaboratively and ensuring all parties understand the challenges facing the business or organization. I think discussing issues frankly will help to enhance creative and innovative solutions in negotiations. These are absolutely key ingredients to success in working with unions and in collective bargaining.

I also think human resources professionals will have to continue to be aware of the trends and settlements across all industries. For example, if you look at the Ministry of Labour Collective Bargaining Highlights, October 2008, you will notice that the average annual increase year to date in the public sector is 3 percent, but in the private sector, it is 1.9 percent. There is quite a significant difference. We know that the private sector has really been hit hard by the effects of global competition and the economy. In the public sector, unions have retained their positions of high wage increase demands despite the economic condition. I believe that employers in the public sector will not be able to continue to support such high demands.

We need to explain the kinds of pressures and challenges that businesses and organizations are facing.

What skills, knowledge or experience are necessary for successful HR leadership? What will organizations look for in their HR people in the next ten years?

First of all, I believe it is really important that we consciously allow ourselves to dream about the future of our businesses and of our organization. This means dreaming about what we would ideally like to achieve. Lofty dreams have their place in our organizations. If we allow ourselves to dream of the impossible, then we can start thinking about how to make it possible.

The question then becomes how to move from those ideas to action and outcomes. I believe that successful human resources leaders are people who understand the importance of dreams but also understand how to link together vision, mission, values and strategic goals and find the way to implement dreams to realistic solutions; they can see the big picture. These leaders can understand the strategy, the goals and the interdependencies of work needed to achieve the goals.

Successful leaders are also those who have mastered both communication and relationship management skills. They demonstrate extraordinary performance; they are viewed as credible leaders by employees because they have won their trust. Trust is something that can only be earned – it does not come with the job.

Successful human resources leaders can also think critically and analytically and, more importantly, they can mobilize people in their organization when they need to because of the trust they have earned. Successful leaders also help organizations to retain the best people because they know how to engage passion in others. Passion results in inspiration, motivation and moving forward towards achieving corporate goals.

Human resources leaders are good coaches, and they are good mentors. Successful leaders also demonstrate courage in difficult turbulent times, and they take “reasoned risks”, to ensure achievement of corporate goals. We spoke earlier about change, and how we can be successful with change, and in a turbulent world, we have to be willing to take “reasoned risks”.

Our new generation of workers is not prepared to stay in one company or organization for a lifetime. They do not have a blind allegiance to one company; they are going to want to understand their role and their purpose and what they can do to make a difference. So with that in mind, successful human resources leaders are people who will ensure that employees have a clear understanding of their role, and are given opportunities to make a difference. Once an employee understands the role that they play and can see that they are valuable, then they become more engaged, and then they can help make a difference in the success of any business or organization.

What advice would you give to someone who is contemplating a new career in HR, or to a current professional who has been in practice for some time, and is looking at career change within the field?

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Absolutely the most important advice that I would give is to be committed to life-long learning. That advice was given to me by a professor in my last year of university when I was going through for my Bachelor's degree in Nursing – that was 31 years ago. I have undergone a fundamental shift in my profession from Nursing to Human Resources and Labour Relations. While I personally completed a Master's degree, I am not just referring here to formal education. I think a commitment to life-long learning is both formal learning and informal learning. It's important to learn something new every day – it keeps your mind fresh, it keeps you continually challenged.

Problems and challenges of the workplace are constantly evolving. If one is not committed to learning something new, you will soon be at a point where you are going to be ineffective in being a part of change. It is important to always believe that you can achieve whatever you set your mind to do; to strive for very high goals.

The other piece of advice I would offer is to become involved in our profession. For someone new in human resources or seeking a career change, I have found there is nothing more exciting than helping to shape the profession. I very much believe in the profession of human resources, so I think that anyone who is involved in human resources should first of all become a member of our association.

Secondly, they should participate in their local chapter, and then consider a role on the Provincial Board of Directors. I have been on this board for a number of years. It has been a learning experience beyond compare. Through my involvement, I have had the opportunity to collaborate and work with a group of dynamic leaders to help shape our profession for the future, provide advice to government on important policies and legislative matters and help develop our Rules of Conduct and standards of practice, just to name a few. It's absolutely thrilling!

This is what I would recommend to a new professional or someone changing a field: become involved, and make a difference.

In your opinion, are Canada's business schools and management programs today adequately preparing the next generation of HR managers and leaders?

I believe that formal education courses, especially at the entry level to Human Resources, are much more focused on what has been considered the core aspects of the profession. I do not believe that there is enough emphasis on broader areas such as the impact of globalization, cultural diversity, diverse workplaces, political factors and issues like environmental sustainability and how these affect organizations and businesses.

The world of work is changing drastically, and I do not think we have caught up with it from a formal education perspective. Certainly, I think that business schools and management programs often offer seminars or work shops or conferences on

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these leading edge topics, but I think we need to expand this and incorporate more of it into the formal educational process.

I have not gone to different schools and management programs today and actually viewed course content across Canada, but certainly when I sit down and I talk to people, including new business graduates that have been working with me, the answer is, no. It may be that the change is so rapid that it is difficult to keep up with those issues, and I think that is where there is added value to making sure that one keeps current by attending workshops and conferences and being committed to learning something new every day.

I think programs need to evolve as quickly as the workplace is evolving. You need to keep the fundamentals, but you need to add value by bringing in what is currently happening to bridge the two.

Within the last decade, it seems there has been an increase in the type and amount of work being done by teams in today's organizations. Given the variety of demands and challenges of working in teams posed by geography, flexible work schedules, demographics, etc, what advice can you offer to organizations to help build more effective teams?

I have worked with different organizations and businesses where there seems to be a lack of cohesiveness and appreciation for the value those individual members bring to the team. I think that this stems from either a lack of, or ineffective, communication and dialogue. We can read so much about communication – there is never enough. But what employees really need is the opportunity to dialogue with others in their organization. To explain, dialogue is more than communication – it is you hearing back from me and vice versa. It is not just one way communication.

All employees, no matter what their role is in an organization or business, need to know what is happening, and they need to find out before they read about it in the news. There is nothing more disturbing to employees than finding out news about something that is going on in their company or business by hearing it when they watch TV or by reading it in a newspaper. I think that teams will be more effective if everyone who is a part of that team first hears what is going on from their leaders and colleagues within the organization.

Knowing what is happening in the organization does not necessarily go hand in hand with being able to have a part in making the decision, but at least you are 'in on things'; you know what is happening: you have been informed. This type of dialogue builds your sense of value as a contributing member to that team in the organization – it is absolutely fundamental.

On certain issues, management may have more information and a broader understanding of the macro issues than front line employees. For example, in today's business environments, managers may have greater understanding about external market pressures; but every employee needs to know within that organization, and they need to know first from within.

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Effective teams are comprised of people who have the right tools, right technology, processes and support for employees to work together effectively. In the last nine years, I have worked with many different businesses and organizations; and no matter where I go, I see challenges because there are fundamental relationship and communication problems. It does not matter what line of business that you are in, these are huge blocks that get in the way of trying to achieve what needs to be achieved in a workplace: if we do not have employees that can get along, feel valued and a part of that process, and know that someone is willing to listen and at least take their perspective into consideration, or give them information, and feel respected for their contribution, then no matter how many “teams” are put in place, businesses and organizations are simply not going to be successful in the long run.

HR professionals have many demands placed on their time. From a personal standpoint of your own career, what advice would you give to your HR colleagues and members of the profession to achieve greater balance in a demanding and hectic business environment?

This is really about work-life balance. We live in a rapidly changing world. Organizations change, businesses change, some reinvent themselves, others fail; but these are evolutionary events, and they do not need to stand in the way of personal success. To have balance means that you have to, first of all, look at yourself. That is where success really begins. Having balance means being committed to making a difference.

It is critically important that individuals allow themselves to become energized by each small success they achieve. Life is very precious. People who are important to us in our work life, and in our personal life, need our time and our energies. If we invest all that we have in only one area and only aspect, then there is little room for everyone and everything else that is really important in life. Although I think that work is very important, it cannot be everything.

If we strive for and achieve some balance, then we can realize that it is not just the long hours of work that generate success. This is an area where many of us seem to get caught up: “if we work more, longer hours and more days, then we will be successful”. It is absolutely essential that we really look at how we do our work and how we spend quality work time.

I think to be successful, one has to be committed, but most importantly, I think one must have a relentless passion for their work. If you have passion for achieving goals in business, it can be very infectious. And some types of infections are good – and that’s advice coming from a nurse!

Passion can be instilled in others, by example. I think that passion really stems from a deep sense of purpose and excitement for success and it is demonstrated by celebrating successes with people we work with, who make things happen by working together. If we want to have collaboration and a team environment then we need to bring in someone who is truly passionate about what they do. With that, we will see a ripple effect throughout the entire team and then we are going to see success.

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I truly believe that too many people are afraid to talk about passion at work because they do not understand the passion of work. I absolutely love what I do. I have fun. I find it exciting, I find it challenging, and I am happy to do what I do, every single day. If you lose that somewhere along the way, then never mind not having enough balance, you may just lose the excitement and thrill of being involved in the workforce at all!



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Antoinette is the President of Ironside Consulting Services Inc., a company specializing in the provision of a variety of human resources and labour relations services for employers in Northern Ontario for eight years. Her company offers a variety of services for employers including organizational review and design, training in numerous areas including relationship management, communication and team building, complaints investigation, re-design and development of policies and procedures, compensation system review including pay equity services, early stage grievance management, collective bargaining for employers, nominee services for employers, performance management system design, leadership training and coaching.

Antoinette's educational background includes a Bachelor of Science Degree in Nursing, Bachelor of Arts Degree, Diploma in Health and Human Service Management and a Masters Degree in Public Administration. She is also a Certified Human Resources Professional, a designation recognized across Canada.

Antoinette has over 20 years experience in management in the health care industry including Branch Executive Director, Victorian Order of Nurses Algoma and a term position as Provincial Director of Labour Relations for VON (Ontario).

Antoinette is currently a member of the Board of Directors of the Human Resources Professional Association of Ontario (HRPA of Ontario) and most recently was elected to the position of Vice Chair. The association represents over 17,000 members across the province and internationally. Antoinette is also Chair of the Chapter Governance Task Force, member and Past Chair of the Government Relations Committee and Vice-Chair of the Appeals Committee for the association. Antoinette is committed to her community and has a strong sense of volunteerism. Her key personal strengths include a collaborative, team approach with a strong focus on results. She is passionate about her work and she continuously strives for quality improvement in everything she does.

In 2005, Antoinette was named by the Sault Ste. Marie Chamber of Commerce as the winner of the Athena Award, an internationally recognized award honouring exceptional women leaders, who inspire others to achieve excellence in their professional and personal lives. In 2006 and again in 2007, Antoinette was nominated for a Northern Ontario Influential Woman Award.

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