

CAHRS
Virtual
Working Group
Series:
Rethinking the
HR Operating
Model

Session 3: HR Business Partners - Lessons from Working Remotely

April 15, 2021

Companies faced many challenges in 2020 including COVID-19, natural disasters, and the effects of deep societal divides. This has had a big impact on organizations' business results, business models and employees in some extreme and different ways. Human Resources has been at the center of much of this and has made adjustments to operate in this new environment. In this working group, CAHRS Executive Director Beth Flynn-Ferry hosted a lively discussion about the challenges HRBPs face at the time of adjusting to the new normal and what they have done to address the challenges. Below is a summary of the key themes and best practices from the working group.

DISCUSSION TAKEAWAYS

Impact of the Pandemic on the HRBP Role – Themes a few Months into the Crisis

- First, the pendulum has swung back from HR focus being focused on data/analytics and performance orientation to empathy/compassion and flexibility.
- Staying connected to employees has become a challenge due to remote work and has caused HRBPs to take new approaches.
 - o More frequent, informal conversations with employees
 - o Being more intrusive and asking how employees are really doing
 - o Leveraging technology (slack) and pulse surveys
- Being “strategic” in a crisis – while the work may not have felt “strategic,” this was essential work that will have a paramount impact on how employees feel about their work and the company in the future.
- DE&I and mental health: while DE&I and mental-health and well-being have long been part of the HRBP agenda, over the past year these issues have become more important than ever.
- HRBPs are increasingly experiencing burnout and exhaustion.

New Challenges HRBPs are Facing in Supporting the Business

The themes from the prior working group are still resonating a few months later. Many HRBPs felt burdened with the increasing amount of transactional work during the pandemic. HRBPs needed to do so much firefighting that they did not have as much capacity to contribute strategically. While still critical to connect with employees and leaders, HRBPs needed to find new ways to do this. Also, new duties have been added to the job description like talent acquisition. To address this HRBP “identity crisis”, the first step might be acknowledging that it is ok to not have clearly defined roles, especially during a crisis. Beyond that, HRBPs and all employees need to have the ability to navigate in the grey. Beth also commented that since we are in the phase of change, some work that feels transactional can end up informing the strategic agenda. HRBPs can help define these emerging areas and then hand off to HR Shared Services or Centers of Excellence as appropriate.

15 participants
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The “One HR” experience has been challenging as well. HRBPs have experienced growing silos between the three pillars of HR. Many also shared that they have been undergoing HR transformation in addition to the pandemic. To deal with this issue, one company has organized a One HR Team Meeting with all HR functions present. In that meeting, people talked about what they do and shared the experience in the crisis so that everyone in HR understood everybody’s role and got to know each other better. Socialization events of this kind certainly can help close the gap between the different functions of HR.

After discussing the day-to-day challenges as HRBPs, they also shared the mental stress of working in ambiguity. During the crisis with changing work mode, safety issues, political polarization, and other things, HR professionals have faced more pressure and turbulence than ever before. Due to this, the role of HR for HR is more vital for the function than ever. Building out HRSS is also important. Breaking down existing silos and enhancing collaborations within the organizations are critical to make the day-to-day work of HRBP more manageable.

Summary tips for HRBPs:

1. Upskill HRBPs to deal with uncertainty and the new challenges for the future.
2. Embrace role ambiguity as part of the job, especially when HR departments in transformation mode.
3. Organize educational and social events across HR functions to improve the One HR experience.
4. Take care of the mental health of not only employees but also HR.

How to change the workflow to share the burden?

Today, HRBPs seem to take on responsibilities that have not belonged to them in the past. Talent acquisition (TA) is one area. Companies have taken a number of approaches to this. Some companies have TA working alongside the HRBPs. Some have HRBPs own TA for their client groups. Some companies have moved TA to the HR Shared Service (HRSS) center, although several had recently moved it back. In summary, the workflow in HR is in the redefining stage.

Besides the change in workflow within the headquarters HR department, the workflow with international offices is challenging as well. Because of the travel restriction, global HRBPs cannot travel to the local offices. This has prevented global HRBPs from getting first-hand information on time. Therefore, local HR representation becomes more important. Even more challenging, is thinking about how the local HRBPs can contribute at the international level. One company said that their overseas HRSS has been a value add as they have absorbed lots of transactional work. Also, different regions have different rules and regulations, so the corporate level regulations and policies should be localized.

Summary tips for HRBPs:

1. Redefining the role of HRBP and the two other pillars of HR could improve role clarity. However, HRBPs could benefit from developing skills to operate in ambiguity.
2. To enhance the global HR function, there should be more local HR representation.

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This Summary Report was prepared by Beth Flynn-Ferry and Chang Cheng for participants of the "HR Business Partners - Lessons from Working Remotely" Virtual Working Group.

The Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies (CAHRS) is an international center serving corporate human resources leaders and their companies by providing critical tools for building and leading high performing HR organizations. CAHRS' mission is to bring together Partners and the ILR School's world-renowned HR Studies faculty to investigate, translate and apply the latest HR research into practice excellence.

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Future Plan Regarding Transitioning Back to the Office - A Hybrid Approach

Many organizations have been making plans for transitioning back to the office this fall. Most companies believe that it will be an iterative process. They have multiple plans in case the situation changes. Most companies in the group are planning to adopt a hybrid approach: some in-person while others work remotely. Companies are also reluctant to signal that the plan will be permanent because it will evolve based on the public health status as well as company/individual performance. One issue discussed was that individual leaders may have a personal outlook on remote work. Some have embraced it because the performance is adequate, and they can expand their talent reach without requiring relocation. However, some leaders still prefer a more traditional work mode and insist that everyone should come to the office. In this case, HRBPs may need to show the benefit of hybrid approach with data as evidence that certain jobs can be performed adequately remotely.

Since many decisions continue to be in flux as companies think about returning to the office, some of our partners put together multiple task forces to discuss issues such as location specific protocols, hybrid environment, connection with employees, work-life support, new tools to interact with customers, possible facility and workspace redesign, talent management strategy, DE&I initiatives, and many more. These task forces have been analyzing their designated topics deeply and will come together to discuss and integrate.

Summary tips for HRBPs:

1. The plan for going back to the office is an evolving process.
2. Task forces can be a great way to manage workstreams within HR.

What should HRBPs stop or start doing as we move out of the pandemic?

- Let go of transactional work and focus on the strategic aspects of HR.
- Stop customizing programs and information.
- Stop handholding leaders and coach and empower them instead.
- Stop doing things directly for employees and empower them to be their own advocates.
- Be more flexible and willing to break rules.

Key Takeaways:

- Redefine the role of HRBP. As more and more HRBPs feel like they are firefighting and dealing with transactional work all the time, achieving balance between transactional work and strategic work is important.
- Break down the silos between three pillars of HR. More socialization, information sharing, and collaboration are needed to make "One HR".
- Plan for the future work model. Tentatively, many companies plan to have a hybrid working mode starting this fall. Companies are using a variety of task forces to study various work aspects relevant to adapting to the new normal.
- DE&I remains a huge focus area. Companies are not only making sure that employee voices are being heard on DE&I issues, but also striving for inclusion in the remote working mode.
- Global HRBPs challenged in remote work mode. Need more local HRBP representation because global HRBPs at headquarters cannot travel easily.