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HR From the Outside In

Six Competencies for the Future of Human Resources

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Can human resources (HR) deliver value to “the business”? Yes, it can and must. And that’s just what *HR From the Outside In* is about. Following on the heels of *The Why of Work* and *HR Transformation*, it’s filled with tips for guiding and empowering HR professionals — and entire departments — so that HR might bring benefits of a different kind to everyone at your organization.

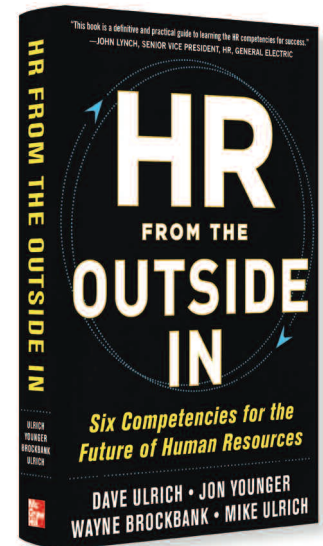
Since 1987, the authors have systematically studied the competencies that HR professionals use to contribute to their own effectiveness and to business success. In tracing and shaping the HR profession, they articulate and enhance HR’s ability to deliver on its potential and promises.

HR From the Outside In summarizes the authors’ sixth round of their 25-year research project, but it goes beyond the data to propose what’s next for the HR profession.

HR From the Outside In is for HR professionals and leaders everywhere — a population conservatively estimated at more than 1 million and growing.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The six key HR competencies and how to recognize, foster, and master them.
- How to develop HR professionals to contribute as high-performing business partners.
- How to structure an HR department that delivers maximum value.
- What it takes to stay competitive and up-to-date in the ever-growing world of HR professionals.



by Dave Ulrich, Jon Younger, Wayne Brockbank and Mike Ulrich

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Next Generation HR

"Tell us about your business."

That's how we like to start when we sit down to work with senior HR professionals. We find that it is a good litmus test for assessing the current state of HR in a company.

Most replies start with discussing the latest challenges or innovations in HR practices (hiring people, training leaders, building incentive compensation, doing HR analytics, and so forth), relating to business leaders (having a voice at the table, getting buy-in), or managing the increased personal demands of the HR job (allocating time, staying upbeat in the face of overwhelming demands). That is, HR professionals almost invariably define business as "HR business" and are inclined to talk about their current initiatives in leadership training, recruiting, engagement or rewards — the areas where they focus their attention on the job. These efforts are important, but they are not the business. They are in support of the business.

The real business is external: the context and setting in which the business operates, the expectations of key stakeholders (customers, investors, communities, partners, employees), and the strategies that give a company a unique competitive advantage. If HR professionals are truly to contribute to business performance, then their mindset must center on the goals of the business. They must take that outside reality and bring it into everything they do, practicing their craft with an eye to the business as a whole and not just their own department.

Focusing on the business of the business enables HR professionals to add meaningful and sustainable value. When they ground their work with the business, HR professionals think and behave from the outside in.

The Business of Business

The bar has been raised for HR; HR must create and deliver value in real business terms.

If people are asked to name a business, most could quickly name a famous company (such as Google) or a local establishment (such as a restaurant). But naming and understanding a business are different things. The appreciation of how a business operates requires a three-tiered approach:

- First, understand the context in which the business functions, including general societal pressures that encourage or discourage it (such as the increased interest in and access to knowledge enabled by rapid technology change that drives Google's phenomenal growth).
- Second, understand the stakeholders who shape and sustain the business, including customers, investors, regulators, competitors, partners and employees.
- Third, understand the business strategy to uniquely position the business to serve stakeholders, respond to general conditions and build competitive advantage.

Paradoxes mean that HR people and departments are effective only when they can simultaneously deliver multiple outcomes. Instead of moving from one outcome to another, HR has to do both. ●



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Approach and Findings

Effective HR professionals maintain the same high standards that companies expect of other key functional areas — that is, they must create specific and substantial value for customers and shareholders. And this is not a statement of simple hope or faith; it is a conclusion backed by 25 years of empirical research. Our Human Resource Competency Study (HRCS) has allowed us to assemble the world's largest global data set on the competencies of HR professionals.

Purpose and Vision

Over the years of the HRCS, we have focused on contributing to the progress of the HR profession. We have two specific definitions of what we mean by progress, especially in the context of our research. At the individual level, progress is defined by improvement of the overall effectiveness of HR professionals. At the business level, progress is defined by the extent to which HR competencies and activities are applied to enhance business impact. We help HR professionals understand which competencies will allow them to contribute directly to business results.

We have identified six domains of HR competency:

- Credible Activist
- Strategic Positioner
- Capability Builder
- Change Champion
- Human Resource Integrator and Innovator
- Technology Proponent. ●

Strategic Positioner

MOL, an integrated oil and gas company in Eastern Europe (Hungary, Slovakia and Croatia), faces talent challenges. It employs around 34,000 people, but its workforce has been aging over the last 20 years. With negative perceptions about work in this industry widespread among younger people, it was hard to keep up with natural attrition — especially as those willing to consider working for an energy company were rarely qualified to do so.

Members of the HR team wanted to find more effective ways of recruiting young employees. They knew that they had to change the attractiveness of natural science studies at universities. They pursued a number of activities to support natural science education and attract future employees to their industry and firm:

- They launched a “Freshhh” brand to attract and engage future employees. They held an online con-

test called “Junior Freshhh” in which 900 teams (2,500 pupils from five countries) competed on math, chemistry and physics problems.

- They created award programs for natural science teachers. More than 300 nominations of science and math teachers came from 120 different schools.
- They formed strategic partnerships with teacher associations and created scholarships at targeted universities.
- They invited winners of the Freshhh University competition to join MOL's fresh graduate program (called GROWWW), where they have unique career opportunities within MOL (300 employees a year).

The company has 30 times more applications per year since starting these initiatives. Those new employees who go through the GROWWW program have a retention rate of 92 percent and, in four years, 25 percent have moved into management positions. MOL's HR leaders calculate they have saved at least €50,000 because they did not have to use search firms to fill these positions. Finally, they have increased the engagement level throughout their workforce.

What We Mean by Strategic Positioner

MOL recognized that its talent deficit could be partially solved by investing in secondary and university education, by changing the image of natural sciences, and by creating an enticing employee value proposition.

HR professionals acting as strategic positioners help place their organization in the business context in which they operate. Positioning here refers to formal products and services as well as informal reputation. Positioning focuses on creating the future as you recognize, anticipate, and take advantage of emerging trends. Positioning requires flexibility and adaptation to discover and then respond to opportunities. Positioning is more than merely transforming your organization; it is about transforming it to fit with and shape future opportunities as defined by your selected markets.

We see four phases of becoming a strategic positioner: acquiring a grasp of finance, strategy, stakeholders, and context.

Being Business Literate

Since finance is the universal language of business, any discussions of business literacy must be grounded in finance. HR professionals should be able to interpret an income statement, balance sheet and financial analyst's report on their organization. Increasing business literacy, like learning a new language, includes many small steps:

- Start every staff meeting by reviewing financial performance data, not just to review the data but to

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subtly enhance financial literacy among the HR staff.

- Record and play the quarterly investor call for the HR staff meeting and other HR professionals.
- Place HR professionals on the distribution list for financial reports and industry trends that are sent to business leaders.
- Ensure that HR professionals master the logic of their particular business so that they know its core technical requirements.

Storyteller

You can do a great deal to create strategic unity with appropriate stories. To simplify strategy so that it creates intellectual direction and emotional support, complex demands need to be stated simply and clearly. Unfortunately, there's a tendency to think that if you can get something onto one page, it is simple and clear — but that's just not the case.

Old Navy (part of Gap) has done a marvelous job, creating a prototype customer named Jenny, a woman who is in her late 20s or early 30s, shops on a budget and wants to be smartly dressed. When the company considers product choices, it asks, "How will this affect Jenny?" ●

Credible Activist

Humana, headquartered in Louisville, Ky., is a leading healthcare company with 40,000 associates in the United States and Puerto Rico. It offers a wide range of insurance products and health and wellness services that incorporate an integrated approach to lifelong well-being. Humana has seized opportunities throughout its history to reinvent itself to meet changing customer needs.

In 2000, Humana had emerged from a failed merger; its stock had plummeted and costs were rising exponentially. The new CEO, Mike McCallister, called on Bonnie Hathcock, Humana's CHRO, to help create a new strategy to turn things around. Hathcock proved a credible activist indeed. She worked closely with the senior team to create the Humana Leadership Institute, bringing Humana's senior leaders together in a learning forum that engaged them in defining "Humana's dream," an aspiration to be a leader in lifelong well-being that appealed to employees emotionally as well as intellectually, thus evoking excitement and commitment. The dream has become a movement within the company that has energized associates to pursue their own well-being, provided positive outcomes, and has become a guiding force for how people think about engaging their customers.

A number of HR-led initiatives in Humana have since demonstrated the power of well-being as a driver of engagement and positive health outcomes. For example, one program demonstrated an increase in associate well-being that reduced obesity over time. The focus on well-being has also led to changes in the workplace and design of workspaces. It has inspired associates to introduce grassroots initiatives ranging from well-being fairs to physical exercise challenges such as stairs and steps campaigns. As a result of these initiatives, Humana engagement scores were more than 75 percent.

The focus on lifelong well-being is now a cornerstone of Humana's new brand identity, and Humana has broadened its focus beyond healthcare costs to preventive care and improving well-being. Said McCallister in an interview with *Fortune* magazine (March 2011), "This idea of helping people get to a better spot from the standpoint of well-being is what's going to drive us, and we think that's a business for us."

What We Mean by Credible Activist

Effective HR professionals are credible activists. Credibility comes when HR professionals focus their time and attention on the issues that matter to the business, do what they promise, meet their obligations and commitments, communicate effectively and build relationships of trust with line managers and other colleagues, and demonstrate a willingness to take professional and personal risks to create value for the business. ●

Capability Builder

How long does it take to get a feel for the atmosphere of a restaurant, grocery store, church, bank or your organization when you walk through the door? Moments, usually. This intuitive feel may be labeled many things: culture, climate, work environment, expectations, unwritten rules, ambiance, brand or identity. Regardless of what it's called, it is real, and it affects both how customers feel about doing business with a place and how employees feel about working there.

HR professionals can key into this informal intuition and help create the right organization — that is, an effective and engaging organization that does what is needed — by becoming what we call "capability builders." In the last 20 years, we have worked with leaders from dozens of companies to define and deliver the right organization. Examples come from around the world and across the gamut of business:

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- General Electric leaders have worked to create an identity of innovation, imagination and invention across the company's wide array of business.

- Harrah's has worked to build a customer service mentality among all employees that distinguishes the customer experience from that in other casinos.

Capitalizing on Organization Capability

Organizations must be designed to help deliver strategy. To do so, HR professional business leaders should focus on an organization as a set of capabilities rather than as processes, structures or systems. HR professionals should be able to do organization audits through five steps:

1. **Select the organization element in which the organization audit should occur.** This element might be the entire organization or a business unit, region, or plant.

2. **Create the content of the audit.**

3. **Collect data from multiple groups on the current and desired status of the capabilities being assessed.** This information may be collected by pursuing a variety of patterns: 90 degree, 360 degree, 720 degree.

4. **Synthesize the data to identify the most critical capabilities requiring managerial attention.** The data from the audit need to be condensed into key messages and then translated to action.

5. **Assign teams to deliver critical capabilities by putting together an action plan with steps to take and measures to monitor.** This capability plan should be focused and timely. ●

Change Champion

Change occurs in every part of personal and professional life. HR professionals should help their companies face, accept, and be open to the pressures for change rather than hide from them.

If an organization cannot change as fast as the pace of change in its environment, the organization will fall behind, decline and disappear. Change in an organization should at least match the pace of change of the environment.

Factor 1: Initiating Change

Initiating change means getting started, turning pressure for change into change initiatives, and taking the first steps to move change forward. Our research showed that six competencies define the extent to which HR professionals initiate change:

1. Ensure that key leaders are supportive of major change initiatives.
2. Help people understand why change is important — create a sense of urgency.
3. Identify and overcome sources of resistance to change.
4. Help set the direction of change with clear intended outcomes.
5. Build commitment from key people to support change efforts.
6. Articulate the key decisions and actions that must happen for change to progress.

As change agents who initiate change, HR professionals help define why change matters, what should be changed, and who supports the change. In defining why change matters, HR professionals need to build a compelling intellectual and emotional case for change.

To become better at initiating change, HR professionals need practice. They can coach business leaders in the midst of change and observe what they (the HR professionals) do well and what they do not do well. They can participate on teams charged with implementing business initiatives. They can investigate how well their organization has accomplished change in the past, synthesize lessons learned, and propose new actions for the future.

Factor 2: Sustaining Change

Sustaining change means sticking with initiatives, making sure that desired changes happen, and delivering outcomes from the change. Our research identified three specific behaviors that HR professionals can demonstrate to help sustain change:

1. Ensure the availability of resources needed to stick with the change (money, information, technology, people).
2. Monitor and communicate progress of change processes.
3. Adapt learnings about change to new settings.

Individual Change

Organizations don't think; people do. HR professionals help people in organizations change by personalizing HR practices around a tailored employee value proposition, by creating a work environment that encourages personal growth, and by coaching key leaders to build a personal leadership brand.

A leadership point of view generally looks inward; it's about who I am as a leader. A personal leader brand looks outward and focuses on impacts on others. Leaders who focus on their brand more than just their

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point of view elicit greater productivity from employees, more confidence from customers, and increased security for investors.

Institutional Change

Sustained change has to become a pattern that extends beyond an isolated event. To become a pattern, the change needs to be institutionalized — that is, become part of the unspoken rules, rituals, norms, expectations, tacit assumptions, and behavioral expectations that every organization has. The patterns often determine how employees behave. When these implicit expectations are not made explicit, employees tend to perpetuate the patterns they've been living with rather than change them. HR professionals help create institutional change by exposing and confronting these hidden patterns. ●

HR Innovator and Integrator

In mid-2011, AXA Equitable faced the challenge of implementing a reduction in staff while maintaining employee productivity, and introducing more innovative and profitable insurance products to the market. Rino Piazzola, CHRO of AXA Equitable, recognized the need to recommit the organization and, with us, implemented a “work-out” initiative: engaging employees at all levels in identifying ways to take unnecessary work and cost out of the organization and enable employees to focus on the important activities — the ones that create value for customers.

Over the next three months, hundreds of ideas were generated, and a significant number were implemented — from eliminating reports that were marginally useful to identifying new and more effective ways of organizing work. An extensive review found that 80 percent of participants described work-out as having had a strong personal and organization impact, and an equal percentage described work-out as personally meaningful and relevant to their work. Groups in finance, IT and product development used work-out to kick off specific improvement efforts in their departments. In fact, more than 180 specific work-out initiatives were kicked off as part of the project. CEO Mark Pearson participated in a day-and-a-half session and wrote a note to all company executives reinforcing the importance of their participation and leadership of work-out. As a result of the success of work-out, line management identified leadership and engagement as critical organizational capabilities. HR is now addressing related needs for improvement in the development of leader coaching and performance

management skills and is looking at other ways to reinforce a culture of employee engagement.

What We Mean by HR Innovator and Integrator

HR innovator and integrator makes up a more pointed competency domain than other domains. It is an extension and expansion of the talent management and organization design competency domain from the 2007 study. The focus is on ensuring that the organization has the right talent and leadership for the current and future success of the business. It emphasizes the need for innovation in designing HR practices that drive the talent agenda of the organization.

Consideration of HR innovation and integration frequently leads to a discussion of best practice. It is all too easy to assume that best practice will work for any given organization simply because it has been identified and endorsed. In fact, best practice may be innovative, but it may be inconsistent with the needs of businesses. There are three drawbacks to a best practice approach: appropriateness, relevance and synergy.

Developing Talent

When it comes to developing employees, the focus is on both how and how well the organization is growing the technical and organizational or interpersonal skills needed for people to have productive and satisfying work lives. The actions that make up this factor are standard setting, assessment, investing in talent and follow-up.

Rather than focus on what has worked in the past by comparing low- and high-performing employees, more recent competence standards come from turning future customer expectations into present employee requirements. At any level in a company, an HR professional can facilitate a discussion of the following questions:

- What are the current social and technical competencies we have within our company?
- What are the environmental changes facing our business and what are our strategic responses?
- Given our future environment and strategic choices, what technical and social competencies must employees demonstrate? ●

Technology Proponent

From customer transactions to supplier management and from investor relations to employee engagement, technology is everywhere. Ubiquitous connectivity and pervasive digitization have transformed the face of IT in

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businesses large and small over the last two decades. Fortunately, HR can play an active role in addressing the issue of technology and information management, adding materially to its value to the business. Every aspect of the HR function — recruitment, compensation, training, employee learning, performance management, knowledge access, and even leadership development — is now enabled by information technology.

HR lags far behind technology use in operations, finance or marketing. The automation of HR functions such as payroll, performance appraisal and employee benefits can deliver efficiency; introducing employee self-service can increase it further. But this is only the starting point. The capacity for digitization of employee information, organizational roles, and workflow across functions opens up enormous opportunities for HR to improve its management of employee information and experience.

American Express has empowered its customer care professionals by providing a flexible technology platform that enables these employees to trade work shifts with each other on their own, without having to go through the hierarchy of approvals from supervisors. This allows people to improve their work-life balance. For example, someone who wants to catch up on a school soccer game or tend to a sick child can trade shifts with another willing employee. The system records all of the customer care shifts digitally, tracking them at the employee level. It thus allows management to keep employee empowerment from turning into license and damaging the customer experience. It is no surprise that this platform was recognized with the company's annual CEO innovation award. ●

Developing Yourself as an HR Professional

The competencies defined by the 2012 HRCS call on HR professionals and departments to move beyond the performance that marked HR success in earlier years. HR has experienced four waves. This evolution has led HR from a historical grounding in administration to the development of functional expertise in areas such as compensation, performance management and leadership development. In wave three, we see a shift from functional expertise to the role of strategic business partner. What we call “wave four,” or outside-in HR, emphasizes the emerging responsibility of HR to be an informed observer and interpreter of the external trends and conditions that are likely to impact business success. Its focus

builds on the prior phases, going beyond strategy to align its work with business contexts and stakeholders.

The new wave is a change in context as well as competence. HR professionals must have the skills to interpret environmental events and trends, co-create a strategic agenda that informs the human capital implications of business strategies and priorities, and play a leading role in ensuring the leadership, culture, and talent required for future success.

Here are the steps to take in an effective individual development plan:

Step 1: Own Your Career

Owning one's career requires activism — credible activism. Make the decision to use all the sources of insight and support available to you — your manager, the mentors you can recruit inside and outside your organization, and your colleagues.

Don't wait for guidance. Seek it. Step up.

Step 2: Learn About Yourself

A key competency factor in the credible activist domain is improvement through self-awareness. Learning about yourself and seeing yourself as others see you is a critical step. A useful starting point is applying the sources of individual abundance from *The Why of Work*. The seven questions presented there will help you focus:

1. *Identity*: What am I known for?
2. *Purpose and direction*: Where am I going?
3. *Relationships and teamwork*: Who is traveling with me?
4. *Positive work environment*: How do you build a work environment that facilitates the best of what you and others bring to the organization?
5. *Engagement and challenge*: What challenges most interest and excite me?
6. *Resilience and learning*: How do I learn from setbacks?
7. *Civility and delight*: What delights you, and how are you contributing to a respectful, appealing workplace?

Step 3: Define Your Brand

How do you want to be known in the organization? Whether you've consciously built it or not, like every employee, you already have a brand of some kind: how you are seen and experienced by those with whom you work. These are factors that have created your brand:

- What you choose to work on
- The people and groups you choose to work with
- What you are good at and enjoy doing
- How you respond to difficult situations

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- How you deal with challenge
- How others have experienced you and your work

Step 4: Assess Your Strengths and Weaknesses

Once you've identified what excites you and your professional brand, the HRCS provides a framework for identifying strengths and weaknesses from a competency perspective. We invite you to answer three questions:

1. What competency mix does my current role require of me?
2. What mix will be increasingly important as I develop and advance in the organization?
3. Where do I stand? What are my priorities for improvement and development?

Step 5: Create Opportunities for Growth — from the Outside In

Opportunities to both increase your impact and improve your development are best identified on an outside-in basis.

General Electric HR professionals identified the opportunity to build the GE Capital business by providing support to customers in areas of HR excellence, such as leadership development, engagement and Six Sigma. Inviting customers to send people to the GE Welch leadership center at Crotonville has generated strong business opportunities and customer loyalty — both particularly critical in emerging markets.

Step 6: Conduct Projects and Experiments

The whole point of personal development — improving competence — is turning what you know into what you do. Closing the know-do gap requires careful attention to your work assignment, backed up as needed by education and refined through project work, special assignments and external experiences. ●

The Effective HR Department

We asked the following question to determine where an HR department delivers value: How well does your HR department design and deliver HR practices that add value to the following stakeholders of your business? We referred to: investors, communities and regulators, partners, line managers, employees and customers.

The mean scores show that all respondents see HR delivering more value to employees and line managers inside the company than to customers, investors, and community stakeholders outside the company.

As we have proposed in the outside-in perspective, it is possible to have customers, investors and communities

help set the criteria for what constitutes effective HR. A CHRO might use these questions as a template:

- How aware are we of the targeted customer, investor, and community stakeholders — who they are and what they expect from us?
- In staff meetings, how much time do we spend on customer, investor and community expectations?
- As we design HR practices regarding people, performance, information and work, how much do we consider customer, investor, and community expectations?

How to Build an Effective HR Department

Having reviewed these HRCS data and our experiences working on many HR transformations, we would suggest four priorities for creating an effective HR department:

1. Create an HR business plan.
2. Finalize your HR department organization.
3. Provide good HR analytics.
4. Do HR for HR — be a role model. ●

What's So? So What? Now What?

We have chronicled the development of HR for the past 25 years. We have seen a great deal of change in HR, but also wonderful signs of its maturation as a critical business and organizational function.

As HR professionals, we must provide an interpretive ability to see the connection between what is happening outside and the opportunities or threats it portends for our organizations. And that insight must enable line managers at every level to convert vision into action — and action into results that benefit the customers and stakeholders of our organizations.

We are incredibly optimistic about the future of HR and we are inclined to believe that the golden age of HR is still climbing toward its zenith. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *HR From the Outside In*, you'll also like:

1. ***The Rare Find* by George Anders.** Drawing on the best advice of talent masters, Anders reveals powerful ideas you can apply to your own hiring.
2. ***The 2020 Workplace* by Jeanne C. Meister and Karie Willyerd.** Meister and Willyerd present a functional guide to help you and your organization create tomorrow's workplace of choice.
3. ***The HR Scorecard* by Brian Becker, Mark Huselid and Dave Ulrich.** A new approach has been developed to chart the strategic influence of HR functions and that system showcases HR's impact on business performance.