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A Strategic Focus

According to a survey released October 17th by the Society for Human Resource Management, more than half of 427 HR professionals at the manager and executive levels report that strategic planning is part of their function. In addition, HR managers and executives revealed that their departments contributed strategically to their organizations through initiatives such as retention programs (75%), work/life programs (70%), succession planning (69%), and health, safety, and security programs (65%).

Although it seems that HR is moving in the strategic direction, still more than 80% of respondents said that their department's focus on administrative duties limited their ability to contribute at the strategic level. If HR is under pressure to both add value strategically and to maintain the administrative side, what does the future look like for HR professionals?

Human Resources has traditionally been seen as the paper pushing, policy police who take away the “real” managers’ fun and ability to run the business the way they want. It’s up to HR to display knowledge about the business, how the department contributes to success and put dollars and cents behind those decisions. Show top level and line managers how HR can assist in solving employee issues that will not only minimize legal risk, but add to an environment of high performers that meet business goals, thus improving the bottom line. This process is often not easy or short-term, but gaining the support and confidence of these individuals is crucial to starting and staying on the path to strategic contribution.

So where should a HR professional begin? There are a number of areas that will display a commitment to the organization at the strategic level and gain respect in the process:

- Manage culture by linking pay to behaviors that support it and ensuring everyone, including executives, walk the talk.
- Apply strategic decision making and come to the table with answers, not just problems.
- Offer input on all functional areas of the business based on a third-party view and supported by logic.
- Reduce and/or outsource low value-added work, which often pigeon holes HR as bean counters.
- Improve personal credibility and take charge of your success by actively seeking opportunities to learn more about the business world in general and what makes your organization tick.
- Connect all HR activities to their impact on the business – if you can’t link it to business objectives, why are you doing it?

It’s no secret that employees are the keys to a successful business. If management realizes that the performance of the company depends on how well employees are trained and motivated, employee issues become a priority. HR must champion employee development. It must develop metrics that demonstrate the value of training, performance management systems and succession planning, as well as any program that contributes to the success of the organization and meeting those goals. If you’re not prepared to perform at a strategic level now, do everything you can to get there before someone else does.

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