

# The SHRM Symposium on the Future of Strategic HR



HR: Leading People, Leading Organizations

# About This Report

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This report is a summary of the Society for Human Resource Management's (SHRM) Symposium on the Future of Strategic HR, held on November 21, 2005, at the Westin Grand in Washington, D.C. The symposium, organized through SHRM's Workplace Trends and Forecasting Program, brought together experienced HR practitioners and consultants from around the country, senior members of SHRM's professional staff and the 2004 Losey Award winner and leading academic professor Lee Dyer to discuss the future of Strategic HR—what it is, how to get there and what can be done to drive the transformation of HR to a more strategic profession.

The overall purpose of the symposium was to:

- Formulate a broad definition of strategic HR.
- Understand what HR professionals are currently doing to make HR more strategic.
- Determine what should be done to move the profession in a more strategic direction—specifically, to inform SHRM's activities in regard to the programs and services offered.
- Define a strategy for helping nonstrategic HR professionals become more strategic.

## About SHRM

The Society for Human Resource Management is the world's largest association devoted to human resource management. Representing more than 200,000 individual members, the Society's mission is to serve the needs of HR professionals by providing the most essential and comprehensive resources available. As an influential voice, the Society also has a mission to advance the human resource profession to ensure that HR is recognized as an essential partner in developing and executing organizational strategy. Founded in 1948, SHRM currently has more than 500 affiliated chapters within the United States and members in more than 100 countries. Visit SHRM Online at [www.shrm.org](http://www.shrm.org).

## About SHRM Research

SHRM Research produces high-quality, leading edge research and provides expertise on human resource and business issues. It generates and publishes cutting edge research used by human resource professionals to develop their knowledge and to provide strategic direction to their organizations. As a leading expert in the field of HR and workplace issues, SHRM Research works closely with leading academics, policy makers and business leaders and is one of the public faces of SHRM's knowledge and expertise.

## Acknowledgements

SHRM and the Workplace Trends and Forecasting Program would like to thank all of the HR leaders who participated in the symposium (see side bar for a full list of participants), Brad Sterl for facilitating, Mark Krasnow of Bullseye Resources for writing the meeting summary and the SHRM staff members who helped organize the event and produce the report, including Brittany Brewer, Feborah Dixon, Letty Kluttz, Katya Scanlan, Marlyn Sprowls, Jennifer Wroniewicz and the SHRM Art & Production and Internet Operations teams.

SHRM would like to extend a special thank you to Dr. Lee Dyer for his role in both planning the agenda and leading the discussion.

# Key Discussion Themes

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**There is no common definition for strategic HR, but there are common elements in how the concept is used.**

There is broad agreement that strategic HR entails employing systematic HR processes and strategies to drive business results. Strategic HR means that HR involvement is essential in all major business activities and decisions. The use of the term “strategic HR” signifies an evolution of HR from its administrative and transactional legacy. However, this term can be confusing. Many participants hope for a day when HR will simply be viewed as strategic, eliminating the need for the term “strategic HR.” Participants also see an analogy in the split of accounting and finance where accounting is administrative and finance is strategic.

**In the five-year vision for strategic HR, HR is recognized as a driver of business success, resulting in greater personal and professional success for those in HR.**

The desired future state for strategic HR is a key driver in enabling organizations to achieve their business goals. In this vision, HR is able to demonstrate clear business success, senior management realizes that investments in HR make financial sense, and HR achieves a level of respect that is comparable with other functions such as marketing and finance. In addition, more CEOs are coming from HR, and HR is seen as a “fast-track” path to the C-suite.

**There are some signs of progress in achieving this vision.**

There are many success stories, especially from large enterprises, that demonstrate that there are HR professionals who are “getting it right.” The mindset of many HR professionals has evolved to become more focused on the business, the future and the external environment. Also, there are some tools and resources to support HR professionals in their efforts to practice strategic HR.

**However, there are significant barriers to be overcome. These include lack of capabilities by those in HR and negative perceptions of others in the organization.**

These barriers are both barriers within HR and barriers in how HR is viewed more broadly.

- *Barriers within HR:* Many in HR, especially at smaller firms, lack the skills and competencies required for strategic HR. The field lacks a common language, and many individuals in the field do not have business knowledge and analytical skills, which restricts the ability to engage in a strategic business conversation. HR often lacks alignment with the business and has historically been averse to adopting new technology. In addition, HR has tended to focus on administration versus strategy and must, therefore, develop a more proactive, ambitious mentality that is needed to drive strategy and business results.

Overcoming these barriers requires changing behaviors. HR practitioners must become more strategic and analytical, must better understand the business and must decrease or outsource the administrative work while becoming more courageous, proactive and willing to take more risks.

- *Barriers in how HR is viewed:* Those in the C-suite as well as in other functions often perceive that HR is not aligned with the business and is not strategic. As a result, these individuals have low expectations of HR’s capabilities and the value that HR can add. Changing these perceptions will require alignment, education, greater accountability and demonstrated results.

**Many ideas were shared regarding what needs to be done and what SHRM can do to achieve this vision.**

Discussed were both high-level ideas and very concrete and specific suggestions for actions that SHRM might take. Ideas that were shared included the following:

- *Elevate the field:* This could be done by developing and promulgating a strategic HR process model, by creating a process and standards for peer-reviewed HR, and by providing direction to

HR practitioners as they develop their own HR business models.

- *Create common language, tools and metrics:* This would involve creating, disseminating and teaching a common language for HR and defining metrics to measure success in HR.
- *Help practitioners grow:* Ideas include mentoring, an HR boot camp and tools such as a checklist used for self-assessment and gap identification, as well as a strategic HR 360-degree feedback tool.
- *Disseminate success stories:* There are many successes, but not enough people know about them. SHRM could gather and disseminate such stories or use vehicles such as webinars to deliver the learnings from these successes more broadly.

- *Establish higher standards of entry to the field:* Greater emphasis on credentialing, along with data that demonstrate the value of credentialing to the business, can help improve the capabilities of HR people and improve the practice of strategic HR.

### **Messaging about strategic HR should target HR professionals as well as CEOs and others in the C-suite.**

Strategic HR is about the ability of HR professionals to drive the business. Messaging to senior executives can increase awareness of the value of strategic HR and even serve to drive demand and accountability for more strategic HR.

## What Do We Mean by Strategic HR?

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### Overview

While a consistent and accepted definition for strategic HR does not exist, participants were in agreement that “they know it when they see it.” The key element of strategic HR is that HR drives the business and is central to all important business activities.

The need to distinguish the strategic contributions of HR from the historically administrative role that HR has occupied is understood by all. However, the general hope is that over time HR will simply come to be viewed by all as strategic and won't need to invoke the label of strategic HR. The model presented through the split of the administrative accounting function from the more strategic role of finance is an evolution that HR may want to consider.

Participants also agreed that for HR to truly become strategic in an organization it must become a systematic and ingrained process.

### Key points

**Though there may be no single definition of strategic HR, participants agreed that strategic HR entailed systemically utilizing people to achieve the organization's business goals.**

According to Dr. Dyer in his introduction to the discussion, HR professionals and departments know they are strategic when:<sup>1</sup>

- They drive and are driven by the business.
- They regularly partner with line executives in developing and implementing business and HR strategies.
- They are focused on the key levers that determine competitive advantage and performance.
- They set and stick to a few critical priorities.
- They regularly measure progress and impact and use the data to stay on course.
- They develop and work toward a coherent and integrated HR system.
- They ultimately create a situation in which their organizations' executives cannot imagine running the business without paying careful attention to HR.

Participants also put forward their own definitions of strategic HR, including the following:

- Strategic HR is an organizational situation in which senior executives cannot even imagine running the business without paying careful attention to people issues and implications.

<sup>1</sup> Cascio, W. F. (2005). From business partner to driving business success: The next step in the evolution of HR management. *Human Resource Management*, 44, 2, 163.

- Strategic HR is HR that defines, modifies, informs and supports the achievement of an organization’s business model.
- Strategic HR is really about successful HR, and this is the systematic utilization of people strategies to achieve extraordinary business results.
- At its core, HR strategy has to be about talent.

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*Strategy comes down to the two or three things that will make a difference, which will really matter.*

Lee Dyer, Ph.D.

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**The reason for emphasizing the term “strategic” is that historically HR has not been viewed as strategic.**

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*The term ‘strategic HR’ suggests that we aren’t.*

Haven Cockerham

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Several participants commented that other functions, such as marketing, did not use the phrase “strategic.” In contrast to functions that have always been viewed as strategic, HR faces the challenge of overcoming a legacy as an administrative role that was not focused on driving the business. Use of the term “strategic” is intended to differentiate those HR activities that are strategic from other, more traditionally administrative HR responsibilities. The “strategic” label is aimed at showing other functions that HR has evolved.

However, participants strongly felt that simply adopting new terminology was not adequate because as the expression “strategic HR” became more widely used, some practitioners may have latched on to the terminology without truly changing their practices.

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*Some people in HR like to say ‘I’m strategic,’ but they often are not.*

Deb Cohen, Ph.D., SPHR

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**The term “strategic HR” is not embraced by all, and the use of the term has definite trade-offs.**

Several participants expressed hope that in the future, HR would be strategic and be consistently seen as strategic, and as a result, the term “strategic HR” would be moot and no longer necessary.

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*There is a difference between strategic HR and successful HR.*

Laura Avakian, SPHR

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**The evolution of the finance field may provide a relevant model for HR to emulate.**

Many participants felt that HR was headed in the direction that the finance field has already taken with a successful split to reflect a strategic versus an operational focus. Some felt that HR administration may become a separate department in the way that accounting had become in relation to finance.

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*Finance and accounting may provide a relevant comparison for HR. Accounting—which is an administrative function—evolved to include finance and the CFO, which are strategic operations. Today, 80% of their staffing is in accounting, and 20% is in the more strategic area of finance. Over time, I expect HR to also evolve distinctive components that encompass our strategic applications.*

Steve McElfresh, Ph.D., J.D., SPHR

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**Despite the discussion of terminology, there was consensus that actions were more important than words. The most important actions were creating systemic processes.**

There was agreement that ultimately strategic HR was about actions that leveraged HR to achieve business objectives. There was also agreement that the most important actions were not one-time actions by a charismatic leader, but ongoing actions that made strategic HR systemic. So although the process of developing and implementing strategic HR may be initiated by a charismatic and courageous HR leader who had achieved significant personal credibility and who worked with the CEO to elevate the status of HR, it was agreed that truly strategic HR was systemic, not just the province of a single charismatic HR leader.

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*Charisma is just the starting point. Robust systems and replicable best practices that are executed with excellence are more important than charisma for both the CEO and for HR. Strategic HR is not just talent, it is systems and processes. It is about execution and details.*

David Russo, SPHR

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# Looking to the Future: The Vision for Strategic HR and the Challenges in Realizing This Vision

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## Overview

Participants discussed a long-term vision of HR playing a key role in contributing to the success of the business, which would result in HR and HR professionals playing an increasingly prominent role in the organization. Part of this vision included the recognition by other functions that investments in HR helped drive success.

Yet, achieving this vision won't be easy. Formidable barriers exist that must be overcome, often through significant changes to behaviors. The skills and capabilities of those in HR must improve to become more analytical and strategic; HR must become more closely aligned with the business; HR must increasingly focus on talent and other key drivers of success while minimizing the time and resources spent on nonstrategic administration; and many in HR must change their attitudes to become more proactive, risk-taking and courageous.

At the same time, HR will have to work to overcome entrenched negative perceptions held by other functions and to overcome line managers' low expectations about HR. This will require demonstrating meaningful strategic contributions, taking initiative, developing clear metrics that are aligned with the business and being held more accountable for results.

## Key Points

**Participants share a common vision: HR drives business success that advances the profession to new heights.**

Participants envisioned a future in which HR would be viewed by the business community as the engine driving commerce and source of competitive advantage that drives all key business measures—revenues, profitability, productivity and share price. Participants also envisioned that expertise in HR, along with the ability to leverage HR to drive business results, would result in HR becoming a key source of future CEOs and business leaders.

Elements of this future vision include:

- CHROs are recognized leaders in Fortune 500 companies.
- More CEOs come from HR.
- The vast majority of businesses do not make any major business decisions without including HR in the decision-making process.
- HR is as valued and respected as finance.
- CFOs consistently invest in human capital as a way to yield better returns.
- Investors and stock market analysts recognize a link between a company's HR strategy and its stock performance.
- CEOs of successful companies view HR as a key driver of success and a consideration when evaluating business partners.
- Government officials and policy makers view strategic HR as propelling the economy to new heights by driving productivity.

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*In five years, I would like to see more CEOs through the HR track.*

Jack Phillips, Ph.D.

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**The main barriers that need to be overcome to achieve this vision include lack of skills and competencies within HR and negative perceptions of others in the organization.**

Achieving this ambitious vision requires addressing important barriers that exist within HR. These include:

- *Lack of adequate skills and competencies:* The reality is that many within the field of HR are not adequately prepared to achieve this vision of driving the business and ascending to increased levels of responsibility. Many HR professionals still lack business knowledge and literacy, do not think analytically, have not mastered strategy or the ability to engage in a strategic business conversation and do not speak the language of business. All too often, HR professionals and HR organizations are not aligned with the business; HR tends to be isolated and not connected with the rest of the business and has a tendency to

measure activities as opposed to bottom-line impact and results. Also, many HR professionals are not well-versed in the use of technology. Overcoming this barrier starts with transforming the curriculum taught to those entering HR to significantly enhance their business skills, as well as exposing those not in HR to important HR principles and practices. It also means teaching those in HR more about the business and to think more analytically and strategically. It may entail assigning HR people, as part of their development, within different areas and functions of the business outside of HR. It may also mean imposing higher standards of entry to those entering the field of HR and even steering some individuals who lack the necessary skills away from HR.

- *Focusing on the wrong things:* HR will not be able to achieve this vision if it focuses only on administration, transactions and compliance. HR's focus needs to change to be both internal and external, focusing on customers and competition as well as organizational processes. Overcoming this barrier may involve outsourcing and/or automating elements of the administrative work. It can also include following the accounting/finance model of structuring separate functions and areas to handle different types of work.

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*We frequently measure activity, not results.*

Kathleen MacDonald

- *Attitude:* Many within HR still lack the self-confidence to speak up and initiate change and—as in any profession—there remain HR professionals without sufficient ambition and motivation to drive the business and to take on more responsibility and accountability. Overcoming this barrier requires changing the attitude of those in HR and possibly changing the people. Participants believed that self-confidence, courage and assertiveness would come through greater competency, making the development of enhanced capabilities a primary area of focus. However, individuals that are simply not motivated to acquire the necessary skills should not be in leadership roles and may need to consider another career in a different field.

While addressing the barriers within HR is the necessary starting point, the other key barriers that need to be overcome to achieve the five-year vision include the following:

- *Negative perceptions of HR:* Among HR's greatest challenges is the need to alter the view held by many that HR is not aligned with the business, is not strategic and does not add value to the organization. Overcoming this barrier requires first aligning HR with the business, demonstrating value and marketing HR throughout the organization.

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*We are talking about rebranding HR.*

Libby Sartain, SPHR

- *Ignorance about HR in the C-suite and among line managers:* As with negative perceptions, ignorance among line managers and those in the C-suite is a product of not understanding the value of HR, which results in not using HR intelligently. In some cases, HR may not initiate strategic HR, and in others line managers don't demand it. The result is that business leaders get from HR what they expect, but they are not taking full advantage of what HR could deliver. Overcoming this barrier is a function of education. It requires that HR professionals are proactive in understanding the business and that they seize opportunities to erase this ignorance of the value that HR can create. Removing ignorance requires that HR be held more accountable for results and that HR has clear strategic goals and metrics.

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*Often HR is viewed as successful only if it does what the C-suite is asking for. This can make HR efficient, but if the C-suite is not asking for the right things, it is not truly leveraging HR.*

Sue Meisinger, Esq., SPHR

**For HR to achieve its desired vision, significant behavioral changes are required by individuals in HR, by the HR function and by the entire organization.**

Many of the necessary behavioral changes specifically address the barriers that need to be overcome to enable HR to reach the stated vision.

Among the behaviors that need to be developed by **individuals** in HR are:

- *A willingness to change:* Historically, many in HR have not engaged in rapid or significant change and have been averse to change. However, to transform HR to become more strategic and a more significant contributor to the business requires that individuals must be willing to constantly change and develop new capabilities.
- *A more analytical and strategic orientation:* HR professionals must develop the analytical and strategic capabilities that are necessary in all managerial functions and business leadership roles.
- *Greater initiative, courage and accountability:* The attitude of those in HR must change. HR leaders must proactively step to the forefront to work with line managers and business unit leaders to craft solutions. Those in HR must be willing to be held accountable for results, must be willing to take greater risks, must become more willing to make hard decisions and must be proactive in managing their own careers.

Among the behaviors that need to be developed by the **HR function** are:

- *A continuous examination and reshaping of competencies:* As the environment changes and human capital needs evolve, the HR function must engage in a constant self-examination and reshaping of the competencies needed within HR.
- *A greater understanding of and alignment with the business:* The idea is that HR understands the business and the strategy and is aligned with the business. When HR is aligned, HR is no longer just a partner with the business—it is a fundamental part of the business.

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*In five years, I would hope that HR is involved in all critical business decisions.*

Kathy Compton

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- *Greater prioritization and focus on what really matters:* As a function, HR needs to be better at priority setting and devoting time and effort to strategic matters. In changing behaviors to become more strategic, the HR function needs to

develop expertise in overseeing the outsourcing of administrative functions.

- *Finding and developing talent:* As was mentioned previously, but was reiterated throughout the symposium, a key way in which HR delivers on its mission and contributes to the business is through attracting, developing and retaining talent. Yet, despite the importance of talent, many HR organizations are not focused enough on the concept of talent, requiring a change in their behavior.
- *Even greater and more consistent excellence in execution:* Strategic HR is not just about talent, it is also about systems and processes. It's not just a broad aspirational statement, it is about execution and details. The behavior that is needed is not just performing tasks, but aligning with the strategy and executing the strategy.

Among the behaviors that need to be developed by the entire **organization** are:

- *Making line managers into strategic HR practitioners:* The behaviors that are desired are for line and business unit managers to recognize the importance of managing and leveraging their human resources and to view that responsibility as a key part of their jobs. HR's role is to facilitate this process and work with the business managers to make the proper and productive management of human capital an integral part of their jobs.
- *Holding HR accountable:* Because in many organizations the expectations for HR are low and are unclear, senior management does not hold HR accountable. To rise to the level of being strategic, HR must also be accountable for results.

# Where Are We in Achieving the Vision of Strategic HR? How Will This Vision Become Reality?

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## Overview

There are signs of progress in achieving the vision of strategic HR. These include numerous success stories where HR is contributing to the organization's bottom line, the development of some tools and resources to support practitioners, and an evolution in the mindset of many practitioners toward the focus on the business.

But there is a long way to go. HR lacks a common language, common tools, common metrics and barriers to entry. HR's expectations and priorities are often not aligned with the business. And many practitioners, especially those in smaller enterprises, are not aware of existing tools and resources or success stories.

There is much that SHRM can do. Many ideas were shared about programs and tools that SHRM could take the lead in developing to create a common language and metrics, help make the practice of strategic HR a more systematic process, and help HR practitioners grow. SHRM also plays a key role in messaging to those in HR as well as those in the C-suite.

## What Is HR Currently Doing?

Though many participants felt that progress was slow, there were some positive signs that HR was beginning to play a more strategic role. Participants agreed that there was no shortage of companies that presented compelling case studies about strategic HR initiatives and that many of these organizations saw these initiatives as such an important source of competitive advantage that they were increasingly reluctant to share details. Some participants felt that issues such as employee engagement were also coming close to being seen as a widely accepted HR metric while others expressed skepticism that the measures of these types of issues were clear and consistent. Many participants felt that HR was definitely evolving to become more strategic and that SHRM was playing a key role in driving this evolution. SHRM leaders noted that there had

been a noticeable increase in individuals interested in SHRM programming emphasizing strategic HR.

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*SHRM has helped raise the bar and has increased the expectations [that senior executives have for HR]. The conversations that senior HR people have with each other are different today—senior HR people talk with each other about business.*

Kristi Acuff, SPHR

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One area of concern was that HR at small and medium-sized organizations was lagging behind HR at larger ones in becoming more strategic. The participants were in general agreement that there was a big divide between the capabilities, sophistication and ability to make HR strategic in large organizations versus smaller ones, and this could be a key area for future SHRM efforts aimed at advancing the profession and supporting HR practitioners in their efforts to become more strategic. The biggest problem may be that HR professionals at small and medium-sized companies may lack the time and resources to focus on strategy. They may also need a model that is different from large companies to succeed. However, smaller companies have a key advantage in that at most such organizations HR works closely with the CEO.

## What Needs to Be Done?

**Achieving the five-year vision requires elevating the field through a broad series of efforts such as a common language, better tools and metrics, and providing a picture of success.**

- *Elevating the field; deciding where to invest:* Some participants argued that the overall emphasis should be on “elevating the field.” However, because doing so requires changing people and their behaviors, which is difficult, segmenting the market of HR professionals and then choosing strategically where to invest time and resources may be the best course of action.

- *Aligning expectations:* A key to success is aligning the expectations of the C-suite and HR, aligning internal and external expectations, and aligning the expectations of those who are the consumers of HR with those who deliver HR.

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*In five years, I would like the C-suite and HR to have the same expectations about HR; to both define strategic HR the same way.*

Jane Lewis, SPHR

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- *Developing common language and definitions:* HR lacks a consistent language, and many HR professionals do not speak the language of strategy. Achieving HR's vision requires that HR adopts a common language and common definitions of success.
- *Creating common and effective tools, metrics and analytics:* A key issue that was emphasized repeatedly was that HR lacked consistent tools, metrics and analytics. There is not an accepted methodology for measuring the effectiveness of HR strategy, and the tools and analytics that exist today are not adequate.

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*In five years, I want measuring HR's effect on the bottom line to be the norm.*

Steve Williams, Ph.D., SPHR

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- *Instilling discipline:* Progressing toward the vision of strategic HR starts with HR professionals having the discipline to talk about strategy. This discipline is supported by an analytical underpinning and is then acted on through specific programs.
- *Enabling growth:* Elevating the profession requires helping people grow. In order to go beyond the basics of HR to become more strategic, individuals will need support in order to take the next steps. Mentoring programs may be a key way to enable growth.
- *A picture of success:* An important part of fostering growth is painting a picture of success. The key is to show HR practitioners success stories of other practitioners who are getting it right in achieving strategic HR.

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*We need to tell great stories about the people who are getting it right, and we need to get those stories out there.*

Libby Sartain, SPHR

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- *Career management tools:* Part of developing entails having a set of tools to chart and manage one's career. This can involve self-assessment tools, career pathing and decision tools to help guide important career decisions.
- *Higher standards of entry into the HR field:* This issue was raised repeatedly throughout the symposium, with many participants expressing the view that elevating the profession must entail creating higher standards to entering it. Today, many who are in the HR profession have little or no relevant knowledge or experience. The new standards could include levels of education or experience or professional certifications.

## What Should SHRM Do?

Participants offered a wealth of ideas on specific, concrete action steps that SHRM should consider. Many of these specific ideas addressed barriers that were mentioned earlier and also provided greater specificity to the generalities mentioned above. These ideas have been grouped into common themes.

### Elevate the field by improving the practice of strategic HR

- Develop and promulgate a strategic HR process model.
- Create a process and standards for peer-reviewed HR best practices.
- Create simple how-to guides for developing business partnerships.
- Emphasize the role of HR in corporate governance.

### Align expectations and create common language, tools and metrics

- Develop expectation models.
- Create a common language of what success in the field of HR means, particularly measurements that evaluate the effectiveness of HR strategy.

- Teach the language of business.
- Provide tools that help free practitioners from administrative work.

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*We need to be able to tell CEOs what to look for in a senior HR person.*

Steve Miranda, SPHR, GPHR

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#### Help practitioners grow

- Help members get ahead of the curve on technology.
- Encourage mentoring among SHRM members.
- Contribute to the development of strategic HR 360-degree feedback instruments to get feedback from peers, bosses and subordinates.
- Develop assessment tools that allow practitioners to test themselves and identify gaps.

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*SHRM should consider creating an ‘HR boot camp.’ We talked about the need for HR executives to take risks [to become more strategic], and calculated risk taking is a behavior or skill often reinforced and taught in entrepreneurial boot camps for new CEOs. You could do the same type of learning for HR executives in an HR boot camp.*

Theresa Welbourne, Ph.D.

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#### Disseminate success stories

- Research and disseminate stories about HR changing its strategy to achieve a business goal.

#### Create higher standards of entry into the HR profession

- Create a credentialing process not only as a way of assessing skills but to help in the dissemination and sharing of best practices.
- Continue to develop research into the bottom-line value of credentialing.

#### Increase awareness of strategic HR

- Recognize HR leaders who are making a strategic difference, including “up-and-comers.”
- Encourage the participation of non-HR business leaders at targeted SHRM programs and conferences.
- Look for opportunities to emphasize the importance of HR in the broader business media.

## Who Should Be Messaged for Strategic HR? What Is the Message?

Participants identified four specific targets and discussed messages for each of these targets.

#### HR professionals

Most participants agreed that at this time HR professionals should be a primary target for messaging about strategic HR. Appropriate messaging should reinforce the positives—that the practice of HR has come a long way and that the HR profession is doing great things. Messaging about strategic HR also needs to be about HR’s strategic role in driving the business. The message and focus of those in HR should be to use their positions to drive the business to achieve its goals through human capital.

#### CEOs and others in the C-suite

Several participants saw this audience as a key target for SHRM messaging. This includes the CEO and the other functions that comprise the C-suite, such as marketing and finance. Three distinct objectives and messages were discussed:

- *General awareness:* One line of thinking is to offer programming and deliver messaging that increases awareness in the C-suite of HR’s capabilities and the strategic value that HR can provide.

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*SHRM needs to make HR more visible in non-HR settings.*

Irene Helsinger, SPHR

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- *Accountability:* This idea raises the bar beyond just general awareness and advocates conveying to the C-suite what they can expect from HR. Educating CEOs about what to expect from and demand of HR and senior HR leaders is an important part of establishing accountability.
- *Demand creation:* Some participants went even further, believing that the objective of messaging should go beyond educating CEOs about HR and aiming to actually “create the market” for HR and spark demand for strategic HR. However, others expressed concern that creating demand in the absence of an adequate supply of strategic HR professionals would be

projecting a message upon which HR may not yet be ready to deliver. Several different ideas were shared for how this messaging might take place. Those ideas ranged from regular HR-focused columns in high-level business journals to messaging the C-suite from business academics who have reached guru status.

#### **Those who are doing HR but are not in HR**

SHRM must continue to share knowledge and information with people who are involved in HR, but who are not HR professionals per se. The message would be one of educating these groups about what strategic HR is and making them aware of the tools, resources and training that currently exist from SHRM to help them grow and do their jobs even better.

#### **Schools—students and faculty**

A few participants felt strongly that SHRM should exert more influence on business schools to have HR more prominently featured in the curricula and send a message to students that HR was a field to which they should aspire. Other participants expressed some skepticism about this approach, commenting that students were most likely to pursue those positions that paid the most, regardless of the messaging. This factor may ultimately depend on demand—if line managers and business leaders begin to demand HR competencies from business executives, academics and business schools will be motivated to provide it.

## Conclusion

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When asked to reflect on the ways they have used strategy in the past, the symposium participants considered the role strategy played in everyday life. The strategies that lead to success in even the most ordinary undertakings can also be applied to the development of strategic—and successful—HR. For example:

- *Knowing the game:* Knowing the game entails understanding the options available and understanding competitors' options and likely behaviors. This understanding comes through experience and preparation.
- *Scanning the environment and adjusting:* Winning requires knowing what is going on around you, having good plans and backup plans and making the proper adjustments as circumstances change.

- *Working as a team:* Success requires cooperation, collaboration and communication. It requires understanding the capabilities of one's teammates, knowing how they are thinking and forming a close bond.

- *Taking calculated risks:* Success is often contingent upon taking risks. However, winning is not about taking foolish risks, but requires understanding the various options available, the probabilities of each option and then taking prudent risks at the right time.

Finally, and most importantly, a winning strategy requires believing in oneself. A critical element of winning is having a belief that you can—and will—win. Success is related to confidence, passion, tenacity and never giving up. ■

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