




A CHRO'S GUIDE TO DEMONSTRATING HR'S BUSINESS IMPACT



Every department must demonstrate its impact on the business, and HR is no different. But historically it is more difficult for HR to show its return on investment—not because HR hasn’t been making an impact, but because leaders don’t always connect the dots between big business wins and how HR enabled them. And even though any organization’s biggest investment is in its people, getting other executives to hear HR’s perspective can sometimes feel like speaking on Zoom while you’re on mute.

If you feel this way, you're not the only one. "I talk to many HR leaders who feel disenfranchised, like they always get the worst seat at the table or are last on the agenda," notes Dr. Matt Poepsel, vice president of enterprise solutions at The Predictive Index. Why is this so common? To put it bluntly, "HR people are terrible salespeople," says Poepsel. Yet he also sees a way out.

"Many HR leaders tend to have this misconception that they play a supportive role," he states. "But you're not in a support function. You're in an empowerment function. So take your rightful place." This guide will help you own your place at the table by identifying how to connect the dots to demonstrate your impact.

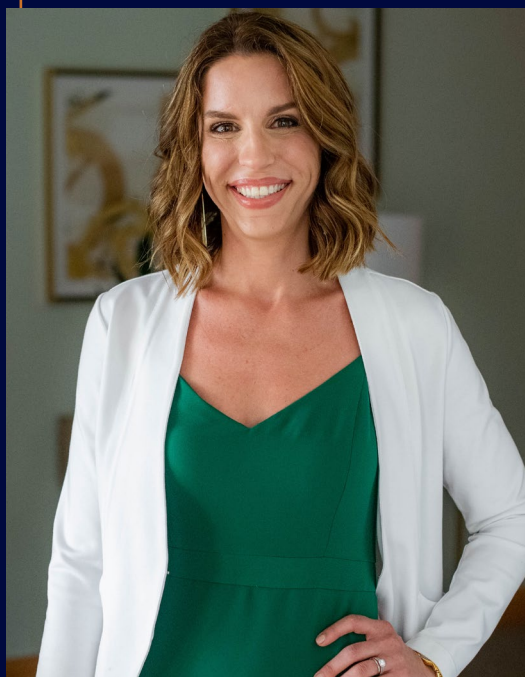


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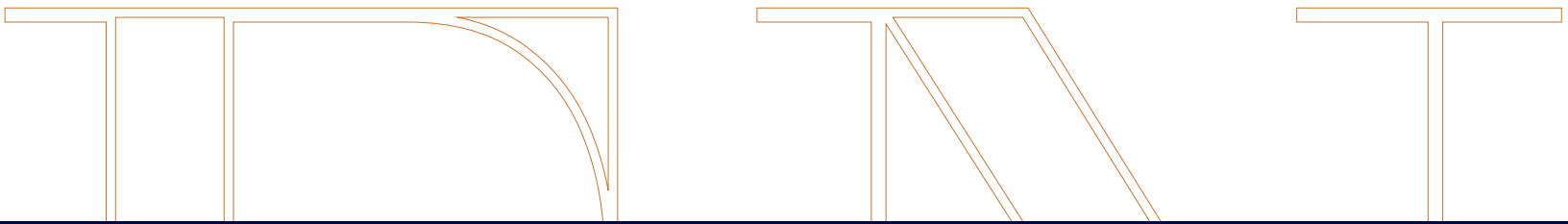
Business Strategy, *Meet Talent Strategy*

Before you begin touting results, ensure your business and talent strategies are aligned. Why? “Because once the business has mapped out their goals, you have to have people to get you there,” says Erica Rooney, chief people officer at Blue Acorn iCi. While this sounds obvious, data shows only one-third ([33%](#)) of HR leaders have alignment between their business and talent strategies.



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Poepsel suggests aligning your organization’s aspirations with its capabilities. “Approach the HR strategy like a consultant and say, ‘I understand you want this type of growth, and here’s what our people need to be capable of doing in order to achieve that type of growth.’ ”

When enhancing your talent strategy, get the ear of the CEO so they know the impact you plan to make on the organization—*especially if the CEO is new to their role*. [A 2020 report found](#) a correlation between new CEOs (both internal and external hires) and CHROs being replaced. If you get a new boss, don’t waste time in establishing your value.

Once your strategy is aligned and implemented, prepare to present results accordingly.



Present Your Strategic Impact In 4 Steps

“HR workers make miracles happen regularly, but it’s so commonplace for us we forget that we are doing them,” says Rooney. Make your workplace miracles known by taking these four steps.

1 Make It Make Sense

Your first step is translation. “Get the business to sit down and pay attention by translating your business case,” says Poepsel.

“The burden falls to HR leaders to translate the business strategy into people terms. For example, let’s say we’re a retail operation and want to expand to 10 new stores in the Midwest. It’s up to the HR leader to talk about what the people implications of that look like,” explains Poepsel, who notes that it’s unfair to expect fellow business leaders to understand people implications without a direct translation.



“Other executives didn’t train for this stuff the way we did, and our job is to help them connect those dots and make those critical connections,” says Poepsel.

Similarly, while your strategy may have you focused on the upcoming month or year, recognize what the audience will want to hear (if you want to get their ear). “If I’m going to an executive offsite, and we’re talking about the five-year plan within the business, I’ll focus my presentation on the long term, but if we’re doing a monthly review in an operations meeting, then I naturally focus on the shorter term,” says Poepsel.

2

Make It Data-Driven

Rooney is big on making her presentation data-driven versus “fluff-driven.” She also cuts it down and includes extra data in the appendix should specific questions get asked.

But what data has the most significant impact? Poepsel suggests focusing on mechanics over minutiae. Take data about presenteeism as an example. You can share A) the percentage of workers showing up or B) why it matters. “I don’t want to hear about presenteeism by itself. I want to see the mechanics of how presenteeism shows up,” explains Poepsel.

“I want to understand how presenteeism translates into pushing back project schedules or putting a launch at risk, because that’ll get execs’ attention, right?” Of course, metrics like “time-to-fill” are essential, but those are your metrics, and you must understand that won’t be meaningful to every colleague—plan to show the effect, not just the data.

Try thinking like a marketer to do this. It’s commonplace in marketing to analyze what campaign led a buyer to the website, what they purchased or how long they stayed. You can collect the same data in HR. Imagine that new hires said during the interview phase that they applied because they saw an employer-branding video on LinkedIn. Track those employees. Are they more likely to stay? More likely to be high-producers? More likely to consume learning activities? Or more likely to be rated highly by their managers? If yes, “suddenly, you’ve got custom data to make a business case for employer branding,” says Poepsel.

But even the best metrics require a dash of storytelling.

3

Make It Storylike

Transform your text and data with storytelling. “When you tell stories, not only do you create energy through the story, you create this North Star about where we’re going, making it much easier to retain,” says Poepsel. “But the reality is not nearly enough leaders, especially HR leaders, spend enough time studying storytelling.”

“I see many L&D professionals saying, ‘Here’s how many minutes were watched in our LinkedIn library,’ but who cares about that?” says Poepsel. “I want to know what they’re learning and how that will impact the business.” Hearing that employees have spent 100 hours in the library tells executives functionally nothing. Telling executives that half of the employees are increasing their productivity by learning how to automate basic tasks with AI—now that’s something.

Poepsel poses another example: Say you’re opening a new physical retail space. Don’t go into the executive meeting saying you don’t have enough staff to operate. Make the people around the table imagine what not having enough people would look like, whether it means postponing the opening, utter chaos that dilutes brand reputation, or lost revenue from not having enough staff to sell the products. It hits differently.

Pro tip: In another nod to thinking like a marketer, HR leaders could gain helpful insight on selling internally from Donald Miller’s [Building a Story Brand](#).



4

Make It Personal



Take your storytelling further by making fellow executives part of the story. Rooney likes to be more convincing by getting personal and pulling an executive's key team members into her presentations. "I will tie in their No. 2 or someone essential to their team's success and talk about individuals leaving and how talent retention is crucial," she says.

When talking about success, Rooney promotes her team and the whole organization rather than taking the credit herself because "the success of my organization isn't just on me." Poepsel agrees and sees centering the organization as a way to overcome HR's hesitation to sell itself. "You're not saying look at 'me,' you're talking about look at 'we,' which makes it easier to be promotional when you share the spotlight," he says.

Another way to make it personal is to lean on an executive with whom you've partnered and have a strong relationship. Consider saying to your chosen executive that you're going to bring up a point in a meeting, and you'd appreciate it if you could ask them to share their experience working with your team.

"Show that, by partnering with me, here's what we were able to do together. That makes HR results a little more palatable for other leaders in the room," explains Poepsel.

Getting Buy-In from the Board:

“When presenting to the board, time is often limited, so I jump right in with the facts and the figures because I know the board is often numbers and data-driven,” says Rooney. “I also tend to avoid historical data and focus on what we did, how we did it, and what we need right now.”

When it comes to storytelling, make sure the story you tell the board aligns with the one from the CEO. “When you go out of a board meeting, and the members say what everyone had to say was consistent, that’s a good sign of a well-run company,” explains Poepsel.

This principle means executives should align their stories beforehand—but don’t be afraid to steer the narrative when deciding what to say. (Remember, you’re not in a supportive function but an empowering one.) “Sometimes that means that, as an HR leader, you must have the courage to say, *‘I don’t feel like I can support your message; we need to carve out time before the board meeting to reach alignment,’*” offers Poepsel.

Make It Public

When HR looks good, so too does the employer brand. “One of the most important things you can do if you are looking to grow your organization and bring in top talent is having a strong employer value proposition,” says Rooney. “And that strong EVP must come out in the employer brand.”

Consider partnering with your PR or marketing teams to make your employer brand more visible. “The door’s wide open for HR execs to position themselves by positioning the organization’s employer brand, making current employees more sticky and making the organizations a more attractive place to work,” says Poepsel, who points to [Bosch](#) as inspiration—saying they do a great job talking about the employer brand and culture on their website and are simultaneously very active on [social media](#).

Build Your Impact Sooner

Beyond any HR metrics and presentations, “demonstrate impact by solving problems for people,” urges Rooney.

“You must understand executives’ needs, frustrations, accomplishments, fears—the whole gamut. You also have to understand the industry. You have to be knowledgeable about what is going on and how trends will impact the organization to be seen as an impactful business partner,” says Rooney.

Poepsel adds, “When you’ve created value, you can extract value, and you can ask for value.” And that goes for the relationship you have with the CEO, too.

As Poepsel says, “There is no business result that doesn’t pass through people.” It’s on you to continue to spotlight this to fellow executives.

Go to people leaders, uncover their needs, and then connect the dots for them on how HR can enhance their work. When you make an impact, don’t be shy about celebrating. It doesn’t always have to be in a big meeting. **Throw it on Slack. Give a shoutout at an all-hands meeting. Forward an email to the CEO (with context, of course). Keep track of your results.** Rooney keeps an Excel spreadsheet for her team and a tab for each team member on what they or the team have done well.

You must take your rightful place in that empowering function and “make peace with the selling aspect of the HR role,” says Poepsel. “And if you don’t do it for yourself, do it for the welfare of your people.”

Take your place, and get comfortable.



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