The Professionalization of HR

An occupation is considered a profession when it requires advanced learning of either a science or other body of knowledge. HR, long considered a profession by this standard, is moving further into the realm of professionalism with an emphasis on key competencies needed to be a successful practitioner. Today, when HR leaders in academia and business discuss the professionalization of HR, they are often talking about the development of a more formally accepted body of HR knowledge and official routes to learning it, as well as minimally accepted standards of practice and general agreement around the kinds of competencies needed for success. Activity in all of these areas has been gaining momentum over the past decade. In a sense, the lines around what constitutes the occupation of HR are becoming less blurry, and this change is likely to have a direct influence on the practice of HR and the development of HR professionals well into the next decade and beyond.

The HR job outlook

One of the most basic reasons behind the professionalization of HR is simply that as an occupation it is growing and is expected to continue to do so. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Occupational Outlook Handbook forecasts employment of HR specialists to increase by 21% between 2010 and 2020, faster than the average for all occupations, as shown in Figure 1. Some HR jobs are expected to experience even more rapid growth, especially those in the employment services industry, which includes employment placement agencies, temporary help services and professional employer organizations. Here, HR employment is expected to increase by an impressive 55%. The BLS expects most increases in HR jobs to be the result of overall economic expansion. Thus, the main drag on the rapid growth of HR jobs would be an economic slowdown that would bring down the number of new jobs created. Another potential factor that could
dampen the expected growth in HR jobs would be the automation of HR processes through the use of human resource information systems (HRIS) software.¹

Along with the rise in the number of HR jobs and practitioners, there has been an increase in the number of areas of specialization within the HR profession. Many of these concentrations require in-depth technical or professional knowledge. For example, the development and use of HR software or the collection and use of HR analytics and metrics require technical skills. HR professionals dealing with legal compliance issues must have a comprehensive understanding of employment law at local, state, federal and even international levels, depending on their industry or organization. The combination of more HR practitioners and more technical and specialized knowledge required on the job creates both the impetus and the opportunity for HR practitioners, academics and other business leaders to come together as professionals to discuss what constitutes minimal standards of practice. These discussions are driving forward the development of more official parameters or recommendations around specific areas of HR practice.

Another aspect of the HR job outlook is how central human capital issues have become to organizations’ success. This is only likely to increase in the years ahead. According to the Conference Board’s CEO Challenge 2013 Summary Report, human capital is now the top challenge CEOs identify, outscoring operational excellence and innovation (see Table 1). When asked “what do you think will be the biggest investment challenge facing organizations over the next 10 years?” 43% of HR professionals said they saw human capital as the biggest investment challenge (see Figure 2). With so much depending on organizations’ investments in their human capital, there is likely to be an accompanying focus on the development of accepted standards for the most effective HR processes and practices.

### HR standards

With these trends as a backdrop, it is no real surprise that the increased specialization and professionalization of human resource management have now progressed to the point where the development of HR standards is underway. In 2009, SHRM began an intensive effort to sponsor the development of organizational HR standards. As the world’s largest association devoted to human resource management representing more than 250,000 members in over 140 countries, SHRM was able to spearhead the establishment of professional HR standards in the United States and around the globe, working through its relationships with both the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) and the International Organization of Standardization (ISO) as well as HR leaders and subject-matter experts around the world. The intent of the HR standardization process is “to capture and codify the threshold customs, procedures, and practices of our most effective practitioners in HRM;” in practice, this means

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**Table 1: CEOs’ top challenges for 2013**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Global Rank</th>
<th>Top CEO Challenges for 2013</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Human Capital</td>
<td>2.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Operational Excellence</td>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>1.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Customer Relationships</td>
<td>1.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Global Political/Economic Risk</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Government Regulation</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Global Expansion</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Corporate Brand and Reputation</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Trust in Business</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Number of responses = 729 (response rates varied for each challenge; scores are the mean of the ranks given for the challenge).


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**Figure 1: Human Resources Specialists: Percent change in employment, projected 2010-20**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total, All Occupations</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Operations Specialists</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR Specialists</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** “All Occupations” includes all occupations in the U.S. economy.

**Source:** U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Employment Projections Program
assembling interested parties. While these stakeholders can be SHRM members, they are also nonmembers, academics, business leaders of many kinds and other laymen to the HR field.²

A key principle in any standards development process, including HR standards development, is establishing a consensus. With this in mind, each proposed HR standard that has been put forward is subsequently investigated and developed through the use of a taskforce to reach a resolution on any issues related to the proposed standard. The taskforces must reach substantial agreement in order to have a consensus, which is defined as “more than a simple majority, but not necessarily unanimous agreement.” Thus far, these consensus-based taskforces have been able to produce three published ANSI-approved HR standards: 1) Performance Management, 2) Cost-per-Hire and 3) Workplace Violence Prevention and Intervention. One proposed standard on human resource indices for investors was discontinued due to feedback from stakeholders about its market relevance. Many proposed standards are currently in development in workgroups, including standards on job description, workforce planning (basic elements), human resources metrics panel (dashboard), turnover metrics definition, organizational diversity and inclusion program, diversity metrics panel, and lead diversity/inclusion professional.³

**HR knowledge and competencies**

Standards are focused on the processes, procedures and practice of human resource management and, as such, are especially concerned with organizational behaviors and processes. At the more individual level, the ability to apply HR knowledge and expertise is now firmly established as a professional necessity for HR practitioners. The number of ways this capability is being measured is also expanding, based on the type of HR knowledge or area of specialization and the stage of the HR practitioner’s career.

Beginning at the new-graduate level is the SHRM Assurance of Learning® Assessment, which was established in 2011. The exam is a four-hour assessment restricted to students who have taken the requisite HR courses toward a bachelor’s or master’s degree and is meant to demonstrate that students have acquired the knowledge required for entry-level HR work. For HR professionals further along in their career, the HR Certification Institute develops and delivers credentialing programs, including the Professional in Human Resources (PHR) and the Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) certifications. The PHR and SPHR exams are designed “to validate mastery in the field of human resource management and to promote organizational effectiveness.”⁴ The Global Professional in Human Resources (GPHR) certification is aimed at HR professionals with global HR responsibilities. Additional certifications available include California-specific certifications (PHR-CA/SPHR-CA) as well as two new certifications, the HR Business Professional (HRBP), “a globally relevant credential that is designed to validate professional-level core human resource knowledge and skills,”⁵ and the HR Management Professional (HRMP) credential, which is “designed to validate management-level core human resource knowledge and skills.”⁶

Areas of HR specialization also have various types of certification available, such as the Certified Compensation Professional (CCP) and Certified Benefits
The increasing number of HR certifications available speaks to the growing technical complexity of the HR profession. Another sign of the growing professionalization of HR is that the demand for HR job candidates who hold one or more of these certifications is rising. Some organizations are even making certification a requirement for their HR employees.

In addition to the development of a comprehensive array of HR certifications and assessments, HR competencies are also being recognized through a range of HR competency models. These models include those developed within and for specific organizations, such as the U.S. government’s Office of Personnel Management’s HR competency models, and those meant to be more universally applicable. The newest of these is the SHRM Elements for HR Success model. It comprises nine competencies; eight are behavioral competencies, and one is technical.

For HR professionals, these developments are not unexpected or, in some ways, even that new. In fact, many HR practitioners have been active participants in this long-term process of specialization and professionalization. Any HR practitioner who has acquired one of the various available forms of HR certification and encouraged his or her HR colleagues or mentees to do so as well, or who has volunteered to help define the body of HR knowledge for assessment or the HR standards being developed via participation in the U.S. and global HR standards taskforces has taken on a leadership role in this process.

What may be new is that the efforts of these HR professionals are being increasingly recognized outside of the profession. As business leaders grow more concerned with human capital issues, they will turn to their HR leaders for guidance on how to ensure the best human capital practices for their organization. As HR knowledge, standards and competencies become more clearly defined, business leaders will have a better insight into how their HR functions operate and succeed. In the years ahead, HR practitioners and other HR leaders will continue to define and redefine what it means to be an HR professional.

Endnotes

3. Ibid.
7. See WorldatWork website (www.worldatwork.org) for more information. See SHRM HR Competencies Model Initiative website (www.shrm.org/HRCompetencies) for more information about “SHRM Elements for HR Success.”

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