

Embracing The Consulting Role

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Part 1 of 2, Part 2 in next month's issue



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This article is adapted from the book, "Shaping Your HR Role: Succeeding in Today's Organizations" to be published by Butterworth-Heinemann/Elsivier in 2005. © All rights reserved. William M. Kahnweiler, Ph.D. and Jennifer B. Kahnweiler, Ph.D.

For over 20 years, we have heard countless line executives and managers, HR thought leaders, and researchers urge HR professionals to act more like consultants and less like order takers. We predict that the need for HR to embrace a consulting role will continue unabated. As organizations continue to search for ways to identify and solve complex challenges quickly, effectively, and inexpensively, increased demand for HR consulting capabilities seems likely.

What Is HR Consulting?

Of course, definitions vary. We view it as a process that typically begins with the HR professional differentiating between client wants and client needs. Based on this diagnosis, the HR professional then works with the client to address those needs. Clients often come to us thinking they know what the problem is; but just as often, their diagnosis reflects what they want and not what they truly need. Once the client and HR professional reach agreement on true client needs, they work collaboratively to address those needs.

Perhaps the best way to describe the role of an internal HR consultant is to distinguish it from "having an HR job" in an organization. We see 5 key differences:

1. Consulting is more ambiguous than other forms of HR work. The problems are rarely clearly visible, defined, and straightforward. Ditto the solutions to the problems.
2. Consulting is project-based whereas other aspects of HR work tend to be more or less routinized and transactional.
3. Some internal consultants act as their own P & L center. That is, they charge managers in the organization for their services and are expected to continually bring in new business that exceeds the cost the organization pays for employing them. Such structures in non-consulting HR jobs are rare.
4. Consulting work provides more variety than other HR jobs do. Because consulting tends to be project-based rather than job-description driven, variety is the name of the consulting game.
5. Most HR jobs require considerable skill. When you add consulting to the mix, even more skills are required, be they technical, managerial, interpersonal, business, or functional.

As you delve further into the HR consulting world, expect these differences to emerge. You should also expect your clients to be somewhat confused initially if they are accustomed to seeing you as "an HR employee" and not "an HR consultant."

Why Is HR Consulting Important?

We think the transition to a consulting role is positive trend in our profession, for as consultants we respond to the real needs of our clients. Consequently, our value increases. When we consult, we are market-driven, not product-driven. Our career identity as a consultant (whether we consult all the time, 5% of the time, or something in between) allows us to respond effectively to our customer's concerns, needs, and challenges. When our career identity is enslaved by a rigid

(continued on page 7)

Ethics Corner

In a recent survey of more than 800 MBA students from 11 top business schools, 97 percent of those polled stated that they would forgo some financial benefits for an opportunity to work for a company committed to corporate social responsibility and ethics. The Stanford University poll also asked participants to rank 14 company attributes in order of importance, and "ethical reputation" ranked in the top-third of the participants' choices.

Embarrassing corporate debacles from Enron and WorldCom certainly has contributed to a renewed awareness of business ethics.

While considerable time and effort has been given to ethical education in past decades, only recently have corporate employees seen first-hand the devastating consequences of failing to recognize accountability and integrity through the national news as several Fortune 100 companies have toppled.

To supplement efforts by your own organization to strengthen their ethical culture, The Human Resource is pleased to offer a regular ethic's column that will include both original and previously published articles dealing with a wide range of business ethics and corporate responsibility issues. If you have a suggestion for a future column, please contact The Human Resource Staff Writer Shane Youngblood of Randstad North America at 770-262-5353 and shane.youngblood@us.randstad.com.

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(continued from page 5)

job title (“I am a Benefits Specialist II”) or a narrow product line (“I provide managers with lists of viable job candidates”) we are usually limited in the range of solutions we have to offer clients and organizations.

Look at it from the customer’s point of view. Say you have a talent retention problem and go to an HR person for help. That person has an array of products to offer. But what if none of them really addresses retaining your valued employees? Then what? More likely than not, you will not engage the HR person for help and you’ll seek help elsewhere or try to deal with the issue yourself. As the customer, your perceived value of HR will be minimal. In addition, it is unlikely that you will approach HR with a complex concern the next time. On the other hand, if your HR person employs a consultative role, they will spend the necessary time and effort working with you to uncover the real issue (perhaps retention is but a symptom of the real issue, which is a poor manager), and then work with you to address it.

Keep in mind that, as a consultant, you should focus on the real needs of your clients and your organization and not so much on those tasks you can perform in your sleep or enjoy doing the most. This can make the transition to consulting

quite challenging. However, if you make the commitment to embrace the HR consulting role and take the necessary steps to enhance your consulting skills, chances are you will meet these challenges. And if enough of us follow through on our commitment, perhaps we will all hear fewer people urging us to “start acting like consultants.”

Comments welcomed at Jennifer@aboutyouinc.com and wkahnweiler@gsu.edu.



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HR Excellence Award Winners

Grand Prize Winners

HomeBanc

Recruiting & Retention

HomeBanc successfully used online assessment tools and interviews to ensure cultural job fit. With a holistic approach to recruitment, they performed careful initial assessments and followed up with focused training and integration. This resulted in dramatically low turnover, and a significant increase in the bottom line.

Randstad North America

Recruiting & Retention

Randstad developed a comprehensive new hire assimilation process that was highly aligned with business strategy. By implementing the right programs at the right time, they significantly increased productivity and revenue.

Outstanding Achievements

BioLab

Communications Integrity

BioLab’s crisis management plan was put to the test this year by a warehouse fire. The successful activation of the plan and the strong leadership behind it resulted in minimal environmental impact and only 3 lost days of production. The lessons learned from this initiative can benefit any organization – always be ready!

Equifax

Recruiting & Retention

Equifax established a sustained commitment to a long-term mentoring program, which is very difficult to achieve. The program resulted in reduced turnover, an increase in employee promotions, and recognition of the program’s value.

Honorable Mentions

BellSouth Advertising & Publishing Corporation

HR Services & Technology

BellSouth’s “Lost Time Initiative” created a single consolidated reporting system for tracking, reporting and communication within the division. This initiative successfully measures the company’s “lost time” or total absence rate of employees, resulting in enhanced FMLA management and timekeeping, and a new commitment to managing attendance.

Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta

Recruiting & Retention

In the face of major industry change, Children’s Healthcare implemented true HR “best practices” to ensure employee satisfaction and improve retention. This included an expanded new hire assimilation program, a streamlined recruiting process, as well as a “retention toolkit” for leaders within the organization.

