

Human Resources

HR needs to step up, or get out

► John Scharges, Account Executive, Rothko

According to the latest research coming out of leading professional services company Towers Watson, the common misconception that HR exists solely as a hiring and firing function is being laid to rest as more companies are realising the positive - and negative - impact that HR can have on effective business strategy and financial performance.

Its 2010 HR Service Delivery Survey of nearly 500 large and mid-size companies around the world has shown that in 2010 organisations updated and implemented their systems as part of a long-term effort to streamline their HR service delivery approaches and processes, believing that this would increase cost-effectiveness exponentially.

The good news for these businesses is that the results proved their efforts worthwhile. Not only were a great number of HR service delivery initiatives undertaken by these organisations, but they also delivered the desired results, with most initiatives often meeting, but also exceeding, expectations.

Erna Oldenbloom, who runs the short course "HR as a Strategic Business Partner" at the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business, said that "HR managers are increasingly being expected to become value-adding strategic business partners, as companies seek to extract maximum value from organisational functions during these tighter economic times."

Oldenbloom said that in the current environment, businesses expect HR managers to consider what their business does in the market, who its clients are, and how HR can feed into the company's strategic aims. "Increasingly HR managers are realising that they need to affect a shift in thinking as the

companies that hire them are recognising the value-adding potential they possess," she said.

Sunil J Ramlall, President of HR consulting firm, Strategic HRM Consulting, echoed Oldenbloom's sentiments, saying that "today's dynamic and complex business environment signifies the need for an organization to constantly evaluate its environment, both internal and external, for challenges and opportunities, so that they can stay relevant with a competitive business strategy for sustainable growth."

However, while HR acknowledges its need for evolution, the discipline still believes that there are barriers that are inhibiting it from taking the central strategic role that it should play. According to a 2011 survey, conducted by Mercer, of 500 HR directors across Africa, Europe and the Middle East, while HR professionals do perceive their department as a strategic partner, only 15% of their time is allocated to related strategic activities.

According to Brad McCaw, a Principal at Mercer and co-author of the Mercer report, "this gap in perception and activities can be addressed by investing in the skills and training of HR staff, while also increasing awareness and people management skills among line management, to ensure their activities encompass not only the day-to-day work that needs to be done, but also support the strategic direction of the business. Measurement and analysis are also vital."

Oldenbloom has brought in experts from the US and South Africa to give the "HR as a Strategic Business Partner" programme the expertise and insight needed to address these issues, offering a unique blend of local and inter-

national perspectives. These experts include Kalpana Mistry, Chief Administrative Officer and Senior Vice President of Human Resources at VITAS Innovative Hospice Care in the US, and Ezanne Swanepoel of local people and leadership development organisation, Connemara.

Mistry, who was honoured by the Society of Human Resource Management with a National Human Capital Business Leader of the Year Award in 2007, is credited with lifting HR to strategic partner status at her organisation and will share these first-hand experiences with delegates on the programme.

The UCT GSB course will run through the School's Executive Education department, which was recently placed 53rd in the Financial Times customised education programmes ranking. The course is aimed at experienced HR professionals, consultants and managers who want to improve their strategic HR skills.

Delegates can expect, amongst other things, to develop a rich understanding of sustainable performance, become familiar with value-based management, gain an increased awareness of the role that diversity plays in today's management, develop their leadership qualities in the field of HR, and learn best practice in contemporary HR management, said Oldenbloom.

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