

IHRM Research

Paul Kearns, IHRM Council

“Is the HR profession getting better or worse?”

On Monday 8th April 2013 I posted the above question for discussion on a selection of 10 LinkedIn HR groups, adding that:

“I am doing some research asking this simple question. If you have any evidence either way please let me know.

Thank you

Paul Kearns”

Introduction

Regardless of what the professional HR bodies across the globe are doing to maintain HR standards, LinkedIn HR Groups offer some insights into what is being discussed by practitioners on a daily basis. But how would any member of these groups know whether they are receiving the best advice or not? Is anyone acting as the arbiter or is the whole HR profession based on copycat HR practices without any evidence base?

HR is not an exact science but if it wants to be taken seriously as a profession it needs to maintain some of the hallmarks that ensure professional integrity. One founding principle of any serious profession has to be a constant search for improvements in professional practice so the question ‘Is the HR profession getting better or worse?’ seemed like the first, most obvious, question to ask.

Appendix A shows all of the main responses (without any amendments or corrections) in the order they appeared. The sample is truly global with some of the LinkedIn groups appearing to centre on India, Africa or other continents. A few correspondents entered into a dialogue between themselves but this has largely been excluded where it was deemed to be of less relevance to the main research question.

All responses should still be available on the various LinkedIn HR groups' sites.

My thanks to everyone who took part.

The purpose of the research

Behind this simply stated but highly problematic question lay many issues that are becoming increasingly important for the HR profession. Here are the key issues behind this research: -

- Is there really an HR profession, globally, worthy of the name?
- If so, how professional (and scientific) are the methods of its practitioners?
- Is the profession evidence-based?
- Is the profession ensuring that its practitioners are learning the right lessons from each other?

Summary of the key points raised by respondents

- Where no evidence was offered by a respondent no attempt has been made to offer any analysis. Some respondents suggest or cite “improvement” (C2) but do not produce any measures to support their contention.
- There was a comment that HR is not tailored to a local context (C3) - *“HR has tended towards utilizing same solution across country and culture (slow in localization)”*.
- Several referred to improvements through better ‘technology’ without supporting evidence and even without elucidating what benefits the technology is supposed to have produced. It might be *“easier to get information with just a touch of a button”* (C2) but the respondent does not explain what benefit such information brings and how it is informing decision making.
- The question of how much time HR spends on legal and compliance matters is raised (C5) but suggests that *“HR always walks the fine line of doing what is best for the employees and watching the best interests of the company.”*
- Others (F7, F8) start to distinguish between procedural/administrative work and *“human asset & organizational design”* and being *“real partners to the business”*, without any further elucidation.
- (F9) moves up the HR scale *“determining whether an HR programmed truly produced the desired result, the ability to assess future risk to the stability of the workforce and scenario planning for future employee needs and skill sets”* only to be brought down to earth again in (F10) by the suggestion of a *“‘cut-copy-paste’ system..”*
- (F11) suggests the need for change with *“It is time to break some old rules and quickly learn from new books and new experience for which books are not yet authored. They are trying to do it but very slowly.”*
- (G13) starts to try and re-define the question *“Getting better or worse at what? There are 101 interpretations of what HR should do.”* and adds the humorous but insightful *“I am assuming you are asking this of forums not made up of HR professionals too :-)”*
- (G15) takes a positive view *“surely value can be added by a plethora of creative minds? HR consult, mediate, counsel, drive, recruit, retain and develop amongst other things.”* Whilst adding that *“I think it's for the better, however, it is very much dependent on who you work for and the Mission/Message/Values portrayed.”*

- Regardless of what HR might not be doing well (G17) suggests *“I'd probably be right to think that even RBS HR got some things right.”* Without intimating why they are confident in their assertion.
- (G18) brings in timescales and re-shapes the question from the perspective of different stakeholders - *“It depends of course on what timescales you are looking at. ...Perhaps the question should be qualified - Better or Worse for whom? Shareholders, Executive Boards, employees, customers?”*
- (H20) actually responded directly to the evidence requirement ‘quantitative or qualitative’
- (H23) ‘a mixed bag’

Conclusions

- The overall picture is not one of a confident answer from a confident profession, backed up with clear evidence. Only a few respondents sought clarification of the question or requested more specific definition. There was no obviously systematic approach being used around the world.
- No clear definition of ‘evidence’ or ‘value’ was offered and there was no distinction made between getting basic professional standards (e.g. effective interviewing), personnel administration (i.e. pay, benefits administration), compliance/risk management (legal and regulatory) and actually adding more value in \$\$\$’s (improving sales, reducing company costs).
- All respondents avoided answering the specific question with any specific data; preferring to treat the question only as the basis for further discussion or offering purely anecdotal or personal views.
- No one suggested a standard format or method for answering such questions. If there is an accepted method in the HR profession none of the respondents brought it to our attention.
- Only 0.00543% of the total population across these LinkedIn HR groups responded. There is no data on how many clicked on this discussion question but one could infer, from the extremely low percentage, that whether the HR profession is getting better or worse is not a subject that worries too many in the profession.
- HR legislation and regulatory compliance is increasing but coping with this is more of the same rather than an improvement, per se. Unless, of course, higher workloads associated with higher levels of compliance and mandatory administration are being managed without extra cost. No evidence was presented to suggest HR is getting better at achieving real savings or efficiencies.
- Most missed the point about it being a question about the whole profession. Surely the ‘mixed bag’ notion is an oxymoron, a real profession cannot afford to have a mixed bag image. It might describe what is actually going on in the real world but it suggests there is no such thing as an ‘HR profession’.

Answering the question in principle

The research question was left intentionally short and to the point to see if anyone wanted to suggest a framework for answering. It was hoped that some respondents would offer

their own definitions of the terms used (HR, profession, 'better', 'worse') or shape the question to be answered from their own perspective (e.g. is HR getting better in their own organization, are they getting better as an HR professional?) Probably the first premise has to be the role of HR; is it administrative or strategic, or both? Only then can we ask whether that role is being performed professionally or well.

The only hint as to how the question should be answered was a very specific request for "any evidence either way" but no definition of 'evidence' was offered.

A textbook answer to the question

If the HR profession wants to answer a question such as this then it needs to have a professional method* for doing so. It has to be 'scientific' (i.e. in accordance with the scientific method) and evidence-based. Anyone who wants to call themselves an HR professional needs to be fully trained in such a method which will always follow a series of discrete steps: -

1. Establish why the question is being asked – what benefits will the answer bring?
2. Define your terms
3. Collect any existing research or other evidence
4. Construct a hypothesis – how can the HR profession improve?
5. Test out the hypothesis
6. Analyse the results and draw conclusion to check the hypothesis works.
7. Feedback the results (to the rest of the HR profession)

Following this sequence: -

1. The question is being asked simply because HR is deemed to be an important function in any organization. Without effective (professional) HR a company's performance will suffer and this will be counted in lost value (in \$'s). Also, the best HR professionals should be able to add more value (in \$'s) by exploiting the opportunities that are not identified by less professional competitors.
2. Define your terms: -
 - i. HR – the management of people in the organization for competitive advantage.
 - ii. Profession – an established body of knowledge and practical methods that have to be learned and skills developed through experience
 - iii. Better or worse? – measures of improvement or deterioration – evidence of added or lost value and lower or higher risks
3. Choose whichever evidence you wish to start with but ideally it should be prioritised. Which area of HR operations is likely to offer the biggest return on effort expended? (e.g. a bank chooses bad debt management)

4. Construct a hypothesis of how HR can influence bad debt (e.g. select those who perform best at collecting bad debts)
5. Test the hypothesis – start with a baseline of existing bad debts to return to after the experiment.
6. Analyse the results – did bad debt improve?
7. Feedback the results and offer lessons learned.

*see [Professional HR](#)

Paul Kearns
IHRM Council
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Appendix A.

Basic numbers with responses (my replies to online comments are shown in red):

10 LinkedIn HR groups
478,021 members
26 respondents

A. HR.com (80,222 members)

No response (has huge number of postings so they are not visible for long)

B. HR Community Global (9,831 members)

No response

C. HR Guru (14,999 members)

- 1. Yes. HR Profession getting Better because Right now, there are two things we know for sure: HR issues will always exist; and there will always be a place for talented people who understand business, organizational dynamics and the levers to maximize employee performance. Dealing with human beings and human minds is a toughest job in the world. Gaining an opportunity of HR professionalization we could feel the pulse of the people and to help them to help themselves. HR professionals are otherwise called as Human Doctors". Overall, we have reason for optimism say that HR profession getting better as our evolution continues...*
- 2. I believe the HR profession itself is getting better. The HR processes and systems are constantly changing to move with the changing times. Operational HR is automated with HRMIS so developed that it is easier to get information with just a touch of a button. Strategically as a profession there is a trend to ensure HR sits on the top decision making team; there are so many processes, tools, and structured frameworks that contribute to the overall organization effectiveness; Talent Acquisition; talent management; succession planning; job evaluation(even computer based); performance management systems; competency assessments; profiling and I can go on. With this improvement comes credibility as a number of great CEOs realize the importance of the profession and this recognition from the top contributes to the respect of the profession that in a number of countries HR practitioners have to be accredited. Now my only pet peeve is getting HR practitioners to keep up with the pace of change; think outside of the HR box to think with the bigger picture in mind thereby contributing with a visionary outlook; and allow for the demystification of HR.*
- 3. All that Siboniso (above) has said are so true. I do not want to say that HR is getting better or worse absolutely. HR has improved with improved technology, but actual*

practice has not changed because human issues in the work place has never changed. The issues have always been there but were not recognized or properly addressed. New methods have evolved in managing same issues. HR technologists have introduced new terms that are only changes in terminology but provide same old answer. HR has tended towards utilizing same solution across country and culture (slow in localization). At global level, we break up the HR function into smaller areas for the SME, but at local implementation level, we leave all the issues to an HR Generalist, thus the functional pyramid is turned upside down. The top has so many directors and SMEs which tapers down to a single HR generalist. HR relevance to the organization is given, but too often, HR tries too hard to sell itself and show its relevance to the organization.

4. *HR profession is now days is getting more challenging than ever. Being an HR person you may do number of things like marketing personnel. Targets and Goals are set as well. In terms of compensation and benefits are not too good.*

5. *HR management is becoming more complex every year. When I first began working in the HR field there were fewer laws to comply with, fewer agencies that were focused on finding every mistake that was made in order to fine you. Each year there are more laws, more regulations and more investigators. Technology has made some parts of HR easier, such as recruiting and record keeping. It is my opinion that if you want to be successful in the Human Resource field you must continue to learn and expand your abilities constantly. I love the challenges that being a successful HR Director brings to you. If you are not the type of person who loves a challenge, then HR is probably not the best field for you. If you work for a global company the challenges to keep current and legal are even more difficult. HR always walks the fine line of doing what is best for the employees and watching the best interests of the company. A successful HR Manager has to be sharp and focused. HR can be a very rewarding career.*

D. HR Professionals (140,125 members)

Question did not get posted

E. King's/Cornell

No response

F. HR & Talent Management Executive (190,997 members)

6. *Hi, Yes i believe the Hr profession is losing its spark. Managers are now being groomed to embed HR into their daily lives. they deal directly with employees and only tap on the HR professional shoulders as a sound board.*

It is sad though the many HR professionals find themselves moving into business and then again become Managers of people. Lets not be too negative. having a sound HR

background helps you to become a good leader because your understanding of the HR rules and procedures comes very handy when faced with sticky situations.

Lets do what we do best and add value to the business in becoming Business Partner....

- 7. All around me and ever more I see HR needs to innovate with increasing speed: its up or out.*

The one's that are out become supportive to the finance function.

The one's that are up become involved in human asset & organizational design management, business analytic's and planning. Remember under pressure everything becomes fluent. have fun.

- 8. Too many HR people are stuck in their comfort zone i.e. admin, comp and ben, etc... The successful ones are right there in the thick of things in the business and there are many of those ! When they are real partners to the business - not just new fancy vocabulary - they are highly valuable and valued, respected and add to the bottom line while at the same time fostering a holistic , humanistic approach to managing people. I am a firm believer that profits and excellent people management go together well. And yes Judith is unfortunately right.*

- 9. From the strategic side, it's getting better from my viewpoint of the amount and type of analytics being used to drive decisions. A few examples are: determining whether an HR program truly produced the desired result, the ability to assess future risk to the stability of the workforce and scenario planning for future employee needs and skill sets. I look forward to seeing the results of your research.*

- 10. I hope people take this in positive way, sorry if anyone is offended..... we happen are consultants and talk to lot of HR in companies. We have noticed that most of the HR's here in India, are not so excited about their job. they talk like they just woke-up, lack common sense, having ego and attitude for no reason. When is goes to their jobs as HR in the company, they don't even how to do it ? Things like retention, employee engagement, training and development, Organization behavior, Organisation Development, etc are not taken into consideration. No innovation, just "cut-copy-paste" system.*

- 11. Getting better slowly and that is the worst part. It is time to break some old rules and quickly learn from new books and new experience for which books are not yet authored. They are trying to do it but very slowly.*

- 12. The HR profession, in my opinion is slowly getting better as the need for different business focuses becomes greater. HR professionals need to change with the external environment and keep up to date with legal changes, technology changes and the addition of an entirely different mentality of young adults entering the workforce. Employee engagement, talent management, organizational design and business*

strategy have become a key driver in HR and helping grow companies. I do agree, however, that with these changes, the HR hat is falling more and more to managers and that is not necessarily a good thing. This is where HR can be more of a strategic partner in training, mentoring and developing management teams to be more effective managers with regards to employee engagement and retention as well as recruiting.

G. PM (16,136 members)

13. Getting better or worse at what? There are 101 interpretations of what HR should do and the role it has in business, so you need to narrow down the field i think...

I am assuming you are asking this of forums not made up of HR professionals too :-)

(My reply to above)

Hi Jacqueline, the answer to your 'what' is easy - it has to be value. So I'm looking for evidence of value added or value lost. Not sure how HR at RBS, or their executives, would answer that one - regardless of their 'interpretation' the evidence appears plain to me.

14. IB. As someone who works in L&D and is driven by operations not HR, I think the answer is worse. This is the general consensus around my network too. I have come across a number of people who have groaned when the term "this is going to be a HR led initiative" has appeared. I rarely see good quality consultation from HR. After all they are supposed to be a support function.

15. That is a rather sweeping generalisation Will. Surely each and every HR department differs dependent on the strategic direction imposed from the top down, in which case there are occasions where by HR has to succumb to restrictions which can make life difficult for everyone involved.

By working in conjunction with L&D, CPD etc (after all it is important to develop staff), surely value can be added by a plethora of creative minds? HR consult, mediate, counsel, drive, recruit, retain and develop amongst other things. The role of HR is broad and will continually grow, I think it's for the better, however, it is very much dependent on who you work for and the Mission/Message/Values portrayed.

16. IB. I did say that the comments were made among my own network and in my personal experience. I am sure that there are some good practices out there.

I just dont see/hear, from my personal network, the things that you mention here. I have always been of the opinion that L&D should be operationally led and therefore the 'in conjunction' comment you make I can not agree with. Good debate though!

17. Far too wide a question to get a meaningful answer, I'd probably be right to think that even RBS HR got some things right.

Personally I don't see HR as a support function, people should be the centre of any organisation, creating a culture that enables them to be managed, supported and developed correctly will be vital for the long term success of any business.

18. Paul, It depends of course on what timescales you are looking at. I think the whole Ulrich model - HR on the Board debate has made us naval gaze and lose focus on what the role is about.

I think over the years the context for HR has also changed driven by technology, globalization and the market etc etc. So a different role - better or worse? Probably on average about the same. If HR at RBS was ineffective what about the BBC(Jimmy Saville and more recently), Enron, Barclays etc.

Perhaps the question should be qualified - Better or Worse for whom? Shareholders, Executive Boards, employees, customers?

Hi Penny, yes let's not get side-tracked and let us take the long view. When I replied to Jacqueline (above) and said the 'what' is value I meant the whole, complete picture. HR may contribute in part but unless it focuses on the whole then the HR team at Barclays might have contributed to short term profit but at the expense of long term reputation, culture and performance. Technology might help parts of HR become more efficient but if in the meantime the 'whole' is getting worse then.... maybe one answer to my own question is that HR is getting worse relative to the wider role now demanded?

19. This question has prompted some interesting response! I think the key in answering the question lies in your last statement Paul (I've re-worded it as a question) - "Is HR getting worse, relative to the wider role now demanded?"

Its evident that the 'demands' placed on the HR department / function differ between organisations (i.e. the contributor above who is in an operationally managed L&D role - this role sits in the HR department in many other organisations.) The perception of whether HR as a profession is getting better or worse depends largely on the people with HR responsibility within those organisations and how they react to the demands placed upon them. It is also dependent upon the level to which HR is represented at the highest level within the organisation.

This is not unique to HR, the same could be said of any function within an organisation....."is the sales profession getting better or worse?"....."is the product management profession getting better or worse?"....its the people in the profession that make the difference.

Within my own organisation I would say that the fact that HR holds and manages; the employee engagement agenda, recruitment and people development - means that HR works within and alongside the operational departments, adding value at each stage of the employee life cycle. Demonstrating the link between the HR activities and the wider commercial objectives validates the work and the role(s).

In contrast I have met a number of 'HR Professionals' who evidently dislike people in

general! I'm sure that if I went to their organisation, staff would feel less engagement with the HR department and likely see them as the policy police or custodians of process!

I acknowledge that I've rambled a bit here, so as a short answer, if.....

- 1.the aims [demands] of the HR role and department are clearly defined and communicated....*
- 2.measured to demonstrate commercial impact....*
- 3.actioned by the right people...*

Then the HR profession 'gets better'

I appreciate that this states that the matter is specific to a particular business, however I feel this to be the only applicable way to answer. I think its impossible to generalise to a national or global level. Using the examples detailed in previous responses such as; Enron, RBS, etc., while I can see why they have been mentioned, I feel it to be a little misguided if the failures of those businesses are directed solely at HR as such failures involve a great deal of departments and professions getting things wrong, I dont feel that they provide evidence of an improvement or decline in HR as a profession.

H. Personnel Today (15,727 members)

- 20. The information you require is it quantitative or qualitative?*
- 21. Happy to have a discussion . In a nutshell the I think the profession has changed. Many Chartered members have no academic underpinning or body of knowledge.*
- 22. I am a Chartered Fellow (gained by professional assessment of competence) and I also have over 25 years of experience. I have seen HR (or personnel as it was back in the day) change considerably in that time. However in my experience HR can be either of both extremes and largely depends on the individual and the organisation.*

Employing HR as the company police to rubber stamp, hire and fire, shuffle paper and keep the company on the right side of legislation is such a waste of a resource and helps create the negative image often shared. An effective HR resource needs to be embraced by those at the top. They need to be pro-active, forward thinking and help to provide solutions. We need to get involved and have at least a general understanding of every aspect of the business.

We also need to help declutter processes, forget about good practice and provide fitting workable processes. Forget the long reports and study practice. Businesses need practical, non complicated solutions and face to face interaction.

To be effective HR must have a can-do attitude and steady determination but most of all be prepared to work with and listen to others, thus building relationships built on

face to face experiences rather than issuing communications from our ivory towers. Essentially we need to put the human back into human resources.

I have enjoyed a very challenging and varied career and have seen and dealt with most things in my time. However the one thing you can be sure of with HR is you never know what's around the corner and I am looking forward to many more experiences in the future.

23. I have worked in HR now for about 14 years and have never operated with a "personnel" mindset, but rather a business focussed value adding HR partner. However, I come across many HR professionals who still operate with a "personnel" mindset and see it as their role to implement rules in an isolated way. So I would say it always has been, and remains, a mixed bag unfortunately!

Owen - quantitative and qualitative evidence but it all has to connect back to both the value (\$) and values the organization is trying to create (e.g. is HR helping BAE develop a culture of doing business without getting involved in bribes? <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/bae>) - this research is that serious

Rick - maybe there is too much fluff out there rather than knowledge because none of the 'professional' bodies discriminate between their paying members' practices?

Julie - amen to "forget about good practice and provide fitting workable processes" - as long as those practices are evidence-based

Lynn - can we have a 'mixed bag profession'? How would we feel about a mixed bag medical profession? I have never wanted to visit a homeopath, for instance.

24. (Lynn) No we don't want a mixed bag, but it is what we have

25. Unlike say Legal, Finance and Procurement, which are reasonably stable insofar as the skill sets and organisational expectations around what they need to deliver, HR, like IT and Marketing needs to be aligned and/or adjust to how the business operates. In other words, manage change in an inward as well as outward sense...as befitting anything that touches people and processes.

26. (Noel) So, to answer the question raised, it would depend on adaptable the function/HR people are, how they contribute to the strategy (setting and delivering), and the degree to which they clearly understanding and communicating with their key customer, line management. Paul - there is a mixed bag medical profession! Even if you define medicine as narrowly as relating to doctors, there is a big difference between what GPs do and what surgeons and specialist hospital consultants do. Strategic HR feels more akin to the latter and not everyone in 'HR' is involved in it. Most of what HR does is admin, surely? Having said that, policy, procedure and processes could benefit from being evidence based too, I expect.

Hi Noel, I take your point about 'mixed bag professions' but all GPs, surgeons and hospital consultants are controlled by the common standards of evidence-based methods and the existence of a professional register - no such evidence base or professional register exists in HR. This means I have been able to work in the field of HR for over 30 years without any fear

of having my livelihood taken away - but so have any charlatans in HR who have no evidence that their methods work - that is a real mixed bag where the unprofessional undermine the whole profession. If medicine were to be run on the same basis as HR you would have to keep your fingers tightly crossed if you ended up on the operating table! Yes, you're absolutely right, professionalism means most at a strategic level but all HR admin stems from strategic HR decisions - or the default position of no HR strategy. A professional HR strategy should be the best way to run efficient administration: admin in the absence of a clear HR strategy is not only unprofessional it is also very expensive, constantly having to clear up the management mess. That is why the answer to my own question, in the absence of any better evidence presented by other members here, is that HR is definitely getting worse.

27. (Noel) Yes, and nurses can be struck off too (by the NMC). This is an interesting debate. I'd like to see some comment from those who believe 'standards' fix HR interventions in how things were done in the past when they need to remain adaptable (ie what worked then won't work in a changed environment) - this seems to be the crux of resistance to EBHR.

28. I think it very much depends on the person and the business when looking at whether the profession has got better or worse. My career in HR commenced in the mid 90's when HR was extremely tactical and when employee relations matters seemed to dominate the agenda. Since this time, the landscape has changed immensely, affected by the economic agenda, and political influences.

In my world, the profession has improved. I have seen a real shift where HR professionals have become more commercial and taken an active part in the business and where there is space at the top table for HR. Long may this continue, but for it to do so, we need to continue to develop and evolve as HR professionals and to continually add value to the businesses that we support.

I. Talent Management

No response (other than 1 like)

J. Young HR Professionals

No response