



# Building Our Competencies

## HR Professional Development on the Cheap

By Mary Anne Berzins and Loretta Harper

Over the past three decades, human resources as a profession has undergone tremendous change as a consequence of numerous external as well as internal issues. Beginning in the mid-1980s, sweeping federal legislation resulted in a limited recognition of the value that HR professionals bring to the workplace — there was lots of policy writing and rule enforcing going on in HR offices, but not much else. Then in the early 1990s, there came an increased emphasis on managing the workforce rather than simply complying with laws. In general, the workforce in higher education institutions represents 80 to 90 percent of expenses. These expenses are not just those that can be directly connected to the budget, such as payroll and benefits; they are related to elements that are more difficult to measure, such as the impact of employee actions on student enrollment and retention and donor relations.

Since the onset of the economic turbulence beginning in 2008, higher education has experienced a wave of discussion about the relevance, benefits and costs associated with producing college-educated citizens. As educators, we are engaged in conversations about access and how to deliver value-added education cost effectively. Discussions around funding models to enable us to fulfill our missions are occurring at the same time. Alongside these conversations, leadership in higher education continues to attract scrutiny in some highly visible ways. What is clear, in the midst of these continuing conversations, is that the challenge of building and enhancing competencies — individual, departmental and institutional — remains center stage. As HR professionals, we have a contemporaneous challenge — facilitating professional development not only for others in the institution, but also for ourselves.

## Meeting Expectations

The professional development challenge is made more complex in resource hungry environments where there are many demands on resources, particularly dollars and time. Human resources, like any campus department, has been forced to consider how to meet institutional expectations within challenging, budget-constrained frameworks. The truism of “more for less” has been and will continue to be part of the environmental landscape for the foreseeable future.

We know that customer expectations of HR departments are not diminishing. HR is an integral part of a landscape in which higher education is continually redefining itself. We are neither apart from the landscape nor immune to its challenges. Continual reshaping of the higher education landscape demands that, as HR professionals, we pay attention to our own competencies to meet institutional expectations not just for today, but also for tomorrow.

For us as HR professionals, the delivery of operational excellence is a given; our customers and clients expect (and in some instances demand) customized and specialized options. We are expected to partner with our customers and clients to find the optimal solutions for challenging situations as well as anticipate future ones. We are called upon to design and implement cost-effective, high-value practices which integrate strategy, technology and processes to deliver engaged, high-performing employees. Expectations of us as practitioners have never been higher and the need for agile capability never more apparent.

### A Blueprint for Professional Development

Have you seen CUPA-HR's new Learning Framework? The framework serves as a guide for building the expertise and professional competency of HR professionals working in higher education. CUPA-HR is using the framework to develop resources, conference sessions and online courses. It can also be used by individuals and teams to gauge their own proficiencies and identify gaps. To learn more, visit [www.cupahr.org/learning/framework.aspx](http://www.cupahr.org/learning/framework.aspx).

## As HR professionals, we must pay attention to our own competencies to meet institutional expectations not just for today, but also for tomorrow.

Within this dynamic framework, we oftentimes — at our peril — ignore the task of developing and enhancing our own competencies. If we are to engage with agility in the present as well as anticipate future challenges, sitting idly by and doing nothing to expand our knowledge and capability is simply not an option.

### No Time, No Money, No Resources ... No Problem

In resource-challenged environments, funds dedicated to training and development are often the first to be “reallocated,” making the task of building and enhancing competencies more daunting. In reality, not having training funds can be an excuse to do nothing; it allows us to defer the issue to another day. The downside is that the wait time for additional or “new” funding can be very long or may never end. A lack of development among HR professionals can lead to stagnation, career derailment and loss of confidence by our customers. It is, however, possible to deliver interventions to support building and enhancing competencies with limited resources.

The starting point for determining appropriate activities to build or enhance HR competencies is to be clear about what the institution requires of the HR department and expects its value proposition to be. This step necessarily involves communications with customers, clients (including the president and president's cabinet) and employees, with the data being captured through a combination of online surveys, focus groups and conversations. Data of this kind enables the department to get a clearer understanding of the types of transactional and transformational services expected by its constituent groups. This data also enables HR professionals to gauge their current professional strengths as well as areas for future development.

Using customer and client data, the human resources department at the University of Utah evolved toward a business partner model by identifying the key competencies of relationship building, understanding the organization, understanding capacity and focusing on the “right” things. The available data also facilitated a series

of internal strategic conversations about the contribution of human resources. During this process it became clear that competency development within HR was needed at three levels — individual, functional (that is, benefits, employee services, etc.) and departmental (overall human resources). As the vision for human resources was clarified, it became evident that differentiated training and development interventions would be challenging in terms of both time and dollars.

A number of tactics were utilized to address the range of training and development interventions we identified for ourselves, including:

- Leveraging existing work assignments, projects and initiatives as learning opportunities, particularly after action reviews;
- Leveraging all staff meetings to introduce educational content facilitated by subject matter experts within the institution, such as public safety, environmental health and safety, diversity and disability services;
- Utilizing short articles and blogs to facilitate discussion and learning in functional and team meetings;
- Developing in-house skill workshops on topics such as accountability, customer service, being an HR ambassador, ethical dilemmas, coaching and facilitation skills for HR professionals;
- Partnering with institutional subject matter experts to deliver workshops on topics such as creating safe environments, student employment and differing generations in the workplace;
- Utilizing free technical knowledge/skill workshops and seminars provided by vendors, law firms, chambers of commerce and community partners;
- Engaging customers in the development of new processes as well as the enhancement and review of current ones to leverage different perspectives in critical thinking and problem solving;
- Utilizing in-house training providers for technical skills, such as IT applications and services;
- Growing in-house knowledge of the institution through participation in university committees and events;

- Leveraging existing meeting and committee commitments to acquire and share knowledge with HR colleagues; and
- Focusing dollars on participation in selected national and local professional association meetings, leadership assessments and workshops, and inviting selected external speakers.

Having a broad range of tactics to address the differentiated needs has enabled the University of Utah's HR department to make available professional development to its staff at relatively low cost which, in turn, has enabled the targeting of dollars to areas where in-house expertise is not available.

## Complacency Is Not an Option

As the go-to unit for training and development in most organizations, it's easy for those of us who work in human resources to spend so much time and energy on creating and facilitating learning and development opportunities for others that we neglect our own professional development needs. However, if we truly aspire to delivering excellence, not paying attention to our own HR competencies is not really an option.

As institutional expectations have evolved, the development of HR professionals has not always evolved at the same rate. The ever changing landscape of higher education (and the preparedness of those who choose to develop their careers in human resources within it) presents an imperative for HR leaders, who must give equal attention to their own talent as well as the talent in the departments they serve. HR professionals at all levels can and should drive their own development and shape their own curriculum, and HR leaders are accountable for ensuring that the development of those who serve the needs of others in the organization is robust, timely and ongoing. 

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