

Winds of Change are Blowing.... My Perspectives

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Abstract

HR is going through tectonic change in the way it will operate, be seen and practiced in the coming years. Three changes that are impacting it are geo-political, social and technological. Each one is changing the way it will operate here on. HR professionals will need to learn new skills and also get ready to expand their narrow roles. They will have to become competent in technology, understand and serve the interest of individual talent and learn to influence stakeholders in newer ways. They need to act upon three areas with urgency: learn technology, being influential to variety of stakeholders and being compassionate.

Keywords

Human resource management, technology, analytics, forces of change, business mindset

Introduction

The winds of change are blowing and humans are steeped in their smartphones. The world has become a stormier place. This century has thrown us in throes of technology change. Smartphones have become the favourite toy. Never before has so much power been given to the average human being, and to every seemingly ‘ordinary’ employee. She wants to be heard and wants to be heard through technology. She wants to share views (most of the times anonymously) on all topics touching her, annoying her, bothering her and making her happy. And all the communication has to be through her smartphone. This is her primary connect to the world.

Even her connect with her organisation is through the smartphone. Glassdoor tells her what her organisation is like, showing her a perspective which could be very different from the perspectives shared by people she interacts with daily. People Operations function has to keep up and manage Glassdoor in addition to its regular job. The job of the People Operations function is changing rapidly. Ironically, some of the skills human resources (HR) professionals took comfort in, for example, staying away from technology (for various reasons), are the very skills staring at them now coldly, giving them very little choice other than to reskill to stay relevant and productive.

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In my view, three BIG changes are shaping the new HR job:

1. Geopolitical
2. Social
3. Technological

Geopolitical Changes

These are turning organisations into organisms. Organisations have to constantly evolve and respond to the ever-changing world. Agile organisation is redefining how we need to change the HR mindset to respond to specific teams vis-à-vis the entire organisation. HR needs to cater to several different demands, not only from different functions but also from individuals in the company. HR needs to think fresh. They need to build new models of structuring the organisation—with lots of spheres, circles and ellipses in it and think beyond the traditional pyramids. In great IT companies, CEOs and chairmen can still code and hence understand the frontline engineer's mindset better than HR. Ironically, HR cannot code. Understanding business has become table stakes for HR. We still hear many HR folks say that we need to understand business. This leaves me wondering how they have been contributing to business without understanding it and how can HR even exist without clear and deep understanding of the business.

Working in the business function is the new essential for HR professionals. Ram Charan says, 'HR needs to have a round ticket in the organisation'. HR professionals should perform various organisational roles for short periods of time in order to be connected with what is happening in real time, listen to customer calls, make field visits, scrum in agile meetings, be the beta for product tests, constantly work on the ROI and productivity agenda. Borrowing again from Ram Charan, G3 (Charan, Barton, & Carrey, 2018) is the new reality for organisations. G3 is the highly powerful guiding coalition of CEO, CHRO and CFO which needs to steer the organisation in this constantly evolving and changing world.

Increasingly, we will see more and more organisations experimenting with HR professionals who have spent considerable time in production, marketing and other functions as CHRO's. It will be a welcome move for professionals from other functions to come and spend time in HR; thus, enabling them to become holistic general managers. This cross-pollination will benefit the organisations in creating value and building exciting new experience maps for all functions. This would open up new career paths for all employees of the organisation and make it ever interesting to learn new skills at all ages. HR will have to draw out these new career paths and chart out the skills needed.

Geopolitical changes are forcing us to look at the possibilities of changing the shape of organisations quickly and swiftly. These changes are also forcing us to look at changing the HR department's role; building a more agile and well-rounded HR professional who also knows other parts of business well.

Social Factors

Millennials are demanding, ever-changing and constantly connected through technology. They prefer quick, online communication and interactions vis-à-vis 'in-person', 'face-time' connects. As you discuss ideas and projects with them, they utilise the access to technology for cross-checking facts, getting the 'world's' views before they form their own opinions. With that background, young employees are constantly renegotiating the employer-employee contract. The new contract is a lot about the individual

and not about a mass of employees; we need to shift our lens to identify and address the needs of individual. Mass customisation is the new challenge for HR.

As Peter Drucker said, the best employees are volunteers—they are choosing to be here. HR needs to find ways to engage and manage them constantly. Already many HR leaders are talking about user experiences instead of employee experiences. ‘Employee’ is getting redefined as ‘user’. If we put that hat on, our organisational view immediately changes on serving the user and making the experience unforgettable. Only when the experience is unforgettable does the customer stay with us and keep coming back for more. The next few years will see progressive employers indulging the ‘users’. We see glimpses of the same in companies which are highly people dependent, for example, software, BFSI, IT, ITES. Many FMCG and manufacturing companies are benchmarking against the employee engagement practices laid down by software, IT and ITES companies. Unique and tailored services to each employee are already becoming common.

There is a lot of demand for the millennials with New Age skill sets and they have a variety of choices available to them. Identity remains a core to these employees. They want to be recognised and appreciated for their individuality. More and more organisations, their functions and practices will have to cater to this uniqueness. HR will have to plug into these needs and create unique platforms for individuals to remain engaged with their work. It may include creating a unique career path, learning experiences and HR services for almost 70 per cent–80 per cent of the individuals in the company. This will help them engage as individuals and feel cared for. HR will need to have the unique balance of being tech-savvy as well as compassionate. They will have to encourage conversations and continuously keep connections in a world where employees increasingly want to engage through technology (read ‘smartphone’). Compassion, empathy and speed of response will be the competencies needed by new HR.

HR will need to engage and not only build the engagement calendar. How do you give and receive feedback constantly to improve performance and recognise good work—akin to social media, but without the unhealthy pressure? HR needs to build the marketing mindset and the market segmentation skills to build their solutions around various ‘user’ (employee) segments in the organisation. People Operations department has to also be a marketing department, segmenting and catering to the unique ‘user’ (employee) needs.

Technology

Welcome to the world of Watson! IBM’s Watson is throwing deep insights about employees. AI is helping share insights about employees faster than HR can. The accuracy and speed of such insight is unmatched by humans. HR needs to understand, build unique insights and then leverage it. If you ask an average HR professional to decide on the technology she has to choose to serve the talent needs of the organisation, it is likely that she is confused. This role is similar to the role of a translator—hear someone speak in a different language, and share it (without losing the intended meaning) with a third party. Imagine being a translator who only knows one language. Does not work, does it? Why should HR then not know the language of technology? HR performs a translator’s role—translate the technology aspects into high impact decisions by interfacing with the board and management, while also providing insights, rather than a verbatim translation. So knowing, both ‘languages’ is imperative.

Look at this dichotomy in another way. On one side, digital HR products are being built and sold by engineers having limited understanding of the exact need. On the other, HR managers are not tech-savvy and do not understand the technical specifications of the technology they are buying. They need to

answer questions on how long will this HR tech system last, what are the alternatives, how will this system talk to other IT systems, how can I make life easy for everyone whom this system touches and how technology will shape in the next 10 years and how much should I spend on this system?

No longer is HR governed with mere operational efficiency. Paper pushing is out, and insights are the new currency of HR. Insights, provided by data, are the new benchmark for operational efficiency. In this new paradigm, technology is an enabler: gathering data, churning the numbers, and generating insights. As we shift towards the networked organisation, the potential for generating deeper insights is higher—simply because the data is now even more miniscule. Pulse surveys are being replaced by longitudinal, always on employee engagement platforms using real-time data. Watson is telling managers where their best talent is, and Humu is nudging employees into realms of higher productivity, sending nudges just before critical meetings. This is something the HR manager of three years ago would not have been able to do—you would have called it overreach, or getting into someone's business.

Where does this entire 'Sweeping Wind of Change' leave HR? Compensation sheets are automated. Learning and development plans can be automated and are being automated. So ...HR?

Well, HR is in the unique position of understanding technology, designing and moulding it, and bringing value to the domain and to technology. To the question of what happens to HR once technology moves in, well, it is suffice to say that it complements the human effort and replaces the routine.

Navigating the vast ocean of IT/digital world with limited understanding of technology usually leaves HR managers behind. HR needs to understand technology the way 20 years ago it needed to understand business. If data is the new oil, 'insights' is petrol (the refined product); and this petrol will drive the organisational engine. Understanding business is now hygiene, matching the needs of business through technology solutions and integration of the two to bring out the best in humans is the new challenge for HR. HR needs to embrace this change, and the challenge it presents, with open arms. Most of the services for employees are now a click away. More and more digital is reality and is going to play a crucial and essential role in HR.

I say HR's top three 'From-To' will be

From	To
Understanding business (Ulrich's 1997 view)	Understanding technology
Serving organisation	Understanding & serving individual talent
Advising business	Influencing stakeholders

Business to Technology

This is an imminent shift. HR leaders now know their business very well. For the past 20 years (when Dave Ulrich shared the details of the shift HR folks needed to make), many HR leaders are now a part of the management and leadership councils of their respective businesses. They have been accepted and they continuously make significant contributions on the table. Many HR leaders have successfully transitioned into the role of CEOs and run successful businesses.

But the era of merely understanding business is past. It is hard for even business leaders and CEOs to be prepared for the rapid technological changes and disruptions that the market throws at them. Technology is indeed *the biggest* disruptor of our lives—be it our jobs, our governments, our businesses and our social fabric. We are also thriving and growing because of technology. Our productivity has both gone up and down at the same time because of it.

Technology will significantly change the experience of an employee; how she gets recruited, how she is inducted, how she is remunerated, how is her performance managed, how is her learning on the job, how do her routine enquiries on HR get solved, how does she get feedback, how does she plan, how does she get rewarded or how is she exited. More often than not, all the above will be impacted by technology. Technology companies are building different solutions based on their conviction in each of these aspects and you may find dozens of solutions to solve the same problem. As an HR professional, to be able to make the right decision, it would be imperative to have the conviction, and also the data and relevant knowledge. Otherwise, you would have to rely on and abide by IT/finance and then your seat on the table could be at risk.

Therefore, it is imperative for HR to understand technology and make rapid bold decisions through it to build your company—understand technology and have an opinion on the same.

Organisation to Individual

More face-to-face interaction with employees will be needed and less of it will be available. HR will have to learn to speak to people who are increasingly spending time in a virtual world and on their phones. HR needs to look up from their own phones and start connecting with the individual and their unique needs. They will have to constantly bridge the gap between what the organisation can do and the unique needs of the employee. Technology will help with the data and nudges, but the interactions with humans will help employees stay or leave. Compassion will increasingly distinguish HR professionals from other functional skills. HR professionals who are compassionate will have more connections and more influence in the corporate world. Mindfulness and presence will have to be learnt and deliberately practiced by leading HR professionals. The ability to connect on one-to-one level will be highly valuable.

Advice to Influence

A significant shift will have to be made from merely stating an opinion and sharing advice to influencing all the stakeholders for the decisions to be taken. It requires business savviness as well as behavioural economics (BE) principles. I often say and am fully convinced that BE101 course is the need of the hour for HR professionals. There has always been the convergence of economics, psychology and sociology which drives HR, and it is becoming prominent and significant now. Increasingly HR professionals will rely on the frameworks from these fields and choose the appropriate ones to influence employees, shareholders and management team members. HR professionals will increasingly play the part of steering the organisation on its chosen strategic path. The ability to lead and manage change will be increasingly called for as the environment stays dynamic. HR will have to build organisations which are fluid and agile.

There are three immediate actionables for HR professionals.

Learn Technology: Bersin's annual technology reports (Bersin) are an excellent source of keeping up with HR technology world. He regularly posts blogs on HR tech and his views on HR technology are well respected across the world. HR professionals should regularly spend time with IT head to decipher and understand the new technologies emerging and what problems they can help solve for operations, engagement and productivity enhancement. HR professionals should learn about cloud applications. They should build their own decision-making matrix for purchasing any new HR technology, implementing and evaluating the same. There are templates³ available for the same for purchase which

can help HR professionals to build thorough request for proposals (RFPs). HR professionals need to be on top of the technology aspects.

Be Compassionate: In an increasing world of technology and virtual world, learn to contact, listen and empathise with your customer, employee and stakeholders. More and more weaning away from your smartphone is required to be present. Skills of being mindful, have a conversation, being genuinely interested in how others are and what keeps them engaged, motivated will be needed. HR needs to hone these through practices which might be completely outside of corporate including yoga, coaching and counselling.

Being Influential: Mapping out the needs of your stakeholders, understanding their pressures and building a game plan needs to be learnt. HR has to learn old skills of influencing from bygone eras which required spending a lot of time with unions and being always ready with plans A, B and C. These skills of mapping your stakeholder, recognising when you need to push and when you need to pull, when you reciprocate and when you use authority have to be learnt and practiced. This will help manage the constantly shifting corporate and geopolitical scenarios. HR professionals need to learn this skill from a combination of behaviour economics, fields of psychology and science of persuasion.⁴

The new role of HR is promising and here for the future. What is unclear, however, is whether this opportunity will be utilised by business leaders as HR heads or by HR professionals transforming themselves to meet to shape their business.

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Author's Bio-sketch

Rajan Kalia works in the area of business enablement and leapfrogging organisations to the next orbit of growth. His firm focuses on four practice areas: talent management, people decisions, organisation transformation and leadership skilling. He has created the revolutionary One-minute Feedback mobile application tool, Karma Notes.

Rajan has a rich and varied experience of 26 years in HR. He does cutting edge talent management work with Marc Effron for Fortune 100 companies; in India, he works with Harvard Business Press, Stanford Seed, SHRM and DDI advising, consulting, teaching and coaching their clients.

Rajan has a masters in personnel management and industrial relations from Panjab University, Chandigarh.