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The Permeability of HR Roles

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Abstract

Our survey of 370 executives from eight Asian countries shows that Asian managers perceive their HR professionals as unable to perform strategic and operational roles simultaneously. Using David Ulrich's four HR roles model, we show that rather than performing multiple roles ubiquitously, Asian managers tend to view the HR function as traditionally administrative in nature, and not strategic or transformational. We attempt to establish baseline empirical evidence for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Asian companies face globalization, competition, innovation, and technology issues, perhaps more rapidly than their Western counterparts. HR departments of Asian companies, among others, may be required to perform more integrating, more sophisticated tasks such as strategic planning, strategic execution, and organizational transformation. While Asian managers may recognize the need for sophisticated HR mechanisms, are they bounded by traditional perceptions of the HR function? Can Asian firms perceive of HR professionals making the leap from transaction to transformation, and from administration to strategy? Put another way, can an HR professional be perceived as performing multiple roles? This study attempts to establish a baseline of empirical evidence in Asia.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

HR Competencies And Firm Performance

HR is seen as a resource for expertise in redesigning the organization and systems to increase the firm's competitiveness (Pfeffer 1994; Ulrich 1996; Baill 1997). The evidence suggests that effective HR practices are linked to high performance work systems (Becker and Gerhart 1996; Kerr, Way, and Thacker 2007) and between high performance work systems, firm performance, and superior organizational culture (Den Hartog and Verburg 2004). Links between HR competencies and HR effectiveness were detected in high-tech (Han, Chou, Chao, and Wright 2006) and manufacturing firms (Choi and Wan 2008). HR flexibility mediates between high performance work systems and firm performance (Beltran-Madrid et al. 2009; Ketkar and Sett 2009). In sum connections have been established between HR competencies, effective HR practices, and firm performance (Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson and Younger 2007; Cascio 2005).

Ulrich's Multiple Role Model

What competencies comprise good practice? The HR function will continue its traditional roles in hiring and firing, training, and designing rewards and compensation systems. But for maximum performance HR practitioners might possess more than just

administrative competencies. Ulrich, Brockbank, Yeung, and Lake (1995) and in subsequent articles (Ulrich 1996; Ulrich and Brockbank 2005; Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson, and Younger 2007; Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson, Sandhotlz and Younger 2008) proposed a framework of four multi-competency HR roles. See **Figure 1** below.

FUTURE STRATEGIC FOCUS

Strategic Partner

Change Agent

Effective strategy execution, decisive and charismatic leadership

A change-resilient, self-renewing and agile organization

PROCESSES and SYSTEMS

PEOPLE

Efficient HR infrastructure, processes and service delivery

Higher levels of employee morale, commitment and capability

Administrative Expert

Employee Champion

DAY-TO-DAY OPERATIONAL FOCUS

HR roles are expressed along two axes: the vertical axis defines the dominant focus of HR—either Strategic or Operational—and the horizontal axis defines dominant activities of HR, either process- or people-related. The combination of these two axes illustrates four principal HR metaphors or roles: *Strategic Partner, Administrative Expert, Employee Champion,* and *Change Agent* (Ulrich 1997).

The *Strategic Partner* (SP) role comprises tasks that enhance corporate strategy execution, such as talent management, labor cost management, and integrated training. Most importantly, in performing the SP role, HR professionals are seen as actively participating in the strategy formulation process. The role of management of firm infrastructure or *Administrative Expert* (AE) role, by contrast, describes the more

"regular" HR functions of hiring, training, appraising, and paying people. The role of management of the employee contribution comprises such tasks as "paying attention to employee needs" through employee services, coaching, town hall meetings, and work teams. Ulrich assigns these tasks to the role of *Employee Champion* (EC). Finally the role of management of transformation and change comprises such tasks as cultural change or guardianship. Ulrich describes this role as *Change Agent* (CA).

While HR's transition to more strategic roles has been established in the west (Ulrich, 1997; Lawler & Mohrman, 2003), there has been little evidence if Asian HR managers have transitioned from administration into multiple roles of strategic partner, change agent, and employee champion. At best, the HR transformation to becoming more strategic has been slow or mixed (Mercer Consulting, 2006). This leads to this paper's base research question: are Asian HR managers *perceived as capable* of switching from administrative roles to more strategic and transformational roles, beyond their traditional competencies?

HYPOTHESES

Asian firms perceive their HR functions as more traditionally operational and administrative, and not strategic or transformational (Human Resource Asia 2010). The roles of strategy formulation and execution, and organizational transformation are normally the responsibility of top management or executive committees, which may not necessarily include HR professionals. With some exceptions, most Asian managers might typecast HR functions in specific, non-complementing roles—either operational or strategic, but not both; either people or process-oriented, but not both.

If viewed from the perspective in Figure 1, the HR professional must cross two traditional barriers: the vertical barrier between process-systems and people tasks and the horizontal barrier between strategic and operational tasks. In other words, they should be perceived as capable of performing or assuming multiple roles. An effective HR professional should move seamlessly from one role to another, without compromising performance of the other roles.

Hypothesis 1: Asian managers tend to perceive HR roles as distinct and non-complementary.

In actual practice, Asian HR managers are perceived as being unable to "permeate" the barriers across multiple roles. While ideally Asian managers might prefer to see HR professionals performing dual administrative and strategic roles, in practice they might view these roles are mutually exclusive.

Amplifying this distinction is the common practice of Asian firms to hire specialists to fill specific technical roles, such as production engineers, accountants, and corporate planners. The same holds for the HR function: Asian firms tend to hire HR specialists for recruitment, compensation, training, OD, etc. Because of the specificity of HR role hiring, HR managers in larger corporations should be perceived as being unable to perform multiple roles.

There might be exceptions to distinctiveness of roles. Smaller and mid-size companies may require HR to be done in conjunct with other roles, given their limited resources. Smaller firms should therefore view the roles of their HR managers as more ambiguous and permeable.

Hypothesis 2: Small and medium-sized companies tend to see HR roles as overlapping and ambiguous.

Finally the perception of multi-tasking might be more prevalent for managers who have broader, more heterogeneous work backgrounds, or managers who had longer tenure with their firms. In theory managers with experience in various divisions in their career, e.g. from sales to operations to marketing to other functional departments, might have a more progressive view that HR performs more than just administrative tasks.

Hypothesis 3: Managers with a broader experience tend to perceive HR roles as overlapping or complementary.

METHODS

Data and Sample

Conner and Ulrich's (1996) base research on the four roles surveyed HR managers exclusively. By contrast we conducted this survey with 370 respondents from not only the HR function, but also from top, middle, and supervisory levels of local and multinational companies. These managers were taking degree and non-degree executive programs at a business school, and came from eight countries: the Philippines, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Bhutan, Cambodia, and Korea.

						Subset Total	System Missing	Sample Total
Nationality	Philippines 177	India 50	Indonesia 93	Malaysia 30	Others 18	368	2	370
Type of Organization	Local Company 169	Locally Owned Multinational 42	Academe 7	Govern-ment 58	Foreign-Owned Multinational 107	363	7	370
No. of Employees	500 Employees or Less 123		More than 500 Employees 243			366	4	370
Gross Sales	US$50 Million or Less 151		More than US$50 Million 179			330	40	370
Rank	Top Management 94		Others (Middle Management and Rank and File) 271			365	5	370
Functional Area	Marketing, Sales Advertising 67	Operations Production 79	Logistic Distri-bution 5	Finance 32	Admin and Support Functions 33 · Human Resources 59 · Overall Mgmt Others 88	363	7	370
Variety of Experience	With Experience in Other Depts. 207		Without Experience from Other Departments 160			367	3	370
Years of Work Experience	Work Experience of 7 Years or Less 134		More than 7 Years of Work Experience 231			365	5	370
Educational Attainment	College Degree 269	Master's Degree 79	PhD 5	Others 12		365	5	370

We based the survey questionnaire on the HR Role-Assessment Survey (Conner and Ulrich 1996). Its 40 statements describe activities associated with Ulrich's four HR roles. While the original study assessed levels of quality of performance of these activities, this particular study added importance ranking as well. We asked respondents to rank from 1 to 4 their perception of their HR department's performance of these activities in terms of the amount of time spent in actual practice, reflecting the roles that preoccupied the HR department day-to-day. Note that since some respondents were themselves from HR, they in effect rated themselves. We obtained average rankings for the SP, CA, AE, and EC roles.

We coded company size as small or large by number of employees and sales turnover. We captured the construct "breadth of experience" through proxies: by total years of work experience, work experience in other departments (other than the one they currently belonged to), by educational attainment (college vs. graduate level), level within the firm (top vs. middle vs. rank and file), and functional area (HR vs. non-HR). We calculated Pearson correlations for all role pairs—SP-CA, SP-EC, SP-AE, CA-EC, CA-AE, and EC-AE. Significant, negative correlations might indicate mutual exclusivity and non-permeability of roles, i.e. respondents perceive that HR professionals in their HR departments are unable to perform roles simultaneously. Insignificant correlations might indicate role independence, or put another way, zero-correlated roles do not interfere with each other, while still distinct and separate. Finally significant, positive pair-wise correlations might indicate role complementarity or permeability, i.e., respondents perceive HR professionals as able to perform the roles simultaneously. The Pearson correlations for each roles pair are depicted in Figures 2a through 2h.

RESULTS

Figure 2a. Company Size
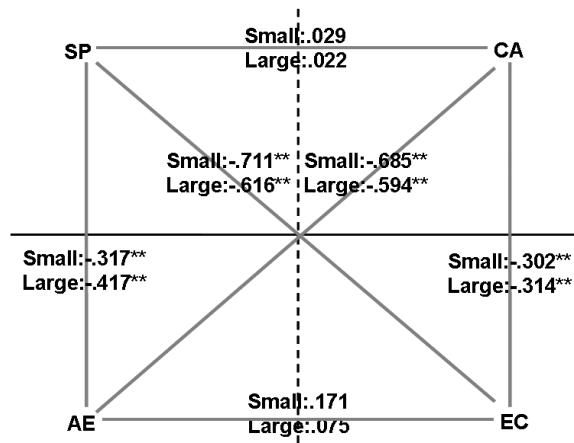Small: 500 employees or less
Large: More than 500 employees

SP ——— CA
Small:.029
Large:.022

Small:-.711** | Small:-.685**
Large:-.616** | Large:-.594**

Small:-.317**
Large:-.417**

Small:-.302**
Large:-.314**

AE ——— EC
Small:.171
Large:.075

Figure 2b. Gross Annual Sales
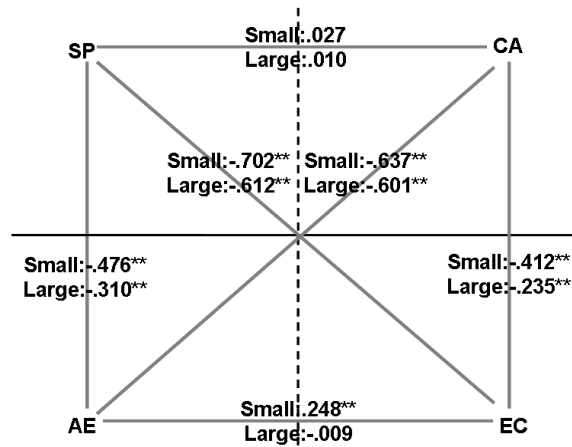Small: Sales Turnover Less than US$50M
Large: Sales Turnover More than US$50M

SP —— Small:.027 / Large:.010 —— CA

Small:-.702** / Large:-.612** | Small:-.637** / Large:-.601**

Small:-.476** / Large:-.310**   Small:-.412** / Large:-.235**

AE —— Small:.248** / Large:-.009 —— EC

Figure 2c. Educational Attainment
College or Masters

SP —— College:.026 / Masters:-.005 —— CA

College:-.651** / Masters:-.586** | College:-.638** / Masters:-.493**

College:-.377** / Masters:-.475**   College:-.287** / Masters:-.396**

AE —— College:.107 / Masters:.119 —— EC
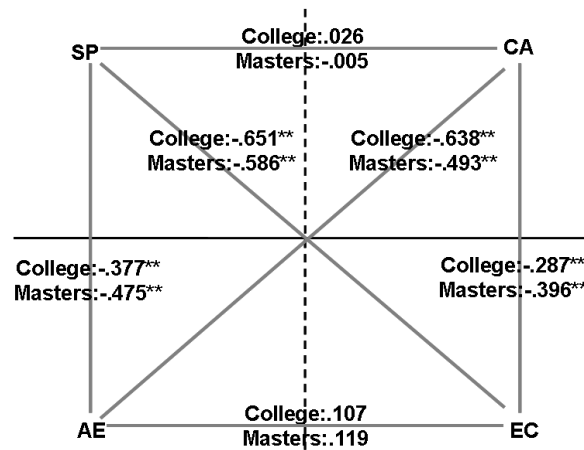
Figure 2d. Nationality
Filipino, Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Others

Philippines:-.022 / Indonesia:.139 / India:-.064 / Malaysia:.428* / Others:-.408

SP   CA

Philippines:-.685** / Indonesia:-.517** / India:-.630** / Malaysia:-.682** / Others:-.483* | Philippines:-.644** / Indonesia:-.573** / India:-.462** / Malaysia:-.831** / Others:-.520*

Philippines:-.341** / Indonesia:-.574** / India:-.207* / Malaysia:-.645** / Others:-.221   Philippines:-.268** / Indonesia:-.514** / India:-.289** / Malaysia:-.536** / Others:.223

Philippines:.137 / Indonesia:.057 / India:-.038 / Malaysia:.298 / Others:-.239

AE   EC

Figure 2e. Management Level
Top Management or Others

SP — Top:.161 / Others:-.030 — CA

Top:-.757** Others:-.608** | Top:-.743** Others:-.575**

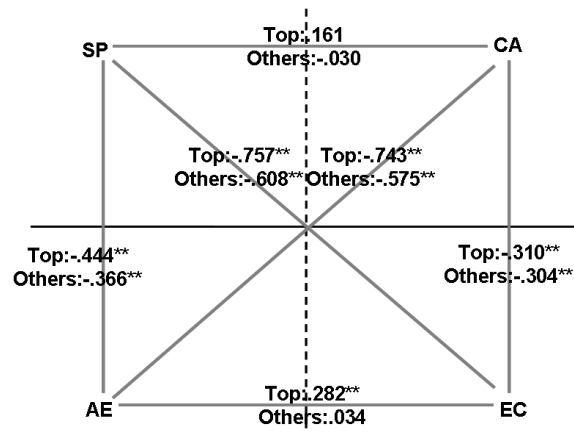Top:-.444** Others:-.366** | Top:-.310** Others:-.304**

AE — Top:.282** / Others:.034 — EC

Figure 2f. Variety of Experience
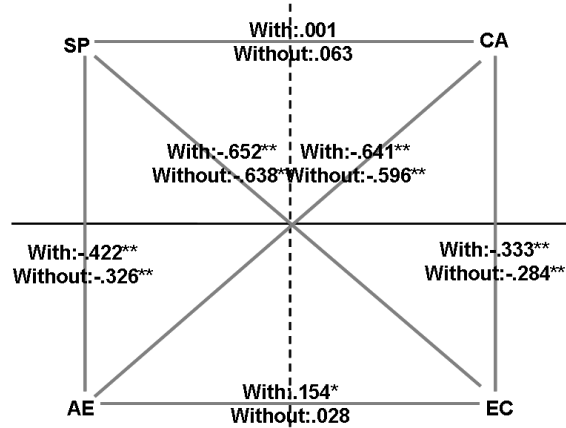With: With Experience in other Functional Areas
Without: Only One Functional Area

SP — With:.001 / Without:.063 — CA

With:-.652** Without:-.638* | With:-.641** Without:-.596**

With:-.422** Without:-.326** | With:-.333** Without:-.284**

AE — With:.154* / Without:.028 — EC

Figure 2g. Functional Area
HR or Non-HR

SP — HR:.251 / NonHR:-.024 — CA

HR:-.733** NonHR:-.638** | HR:-.753** NonHR:-.600**

HR:-.595** NonHR:-.337** | HR:-.528** Non-HR:-.266**
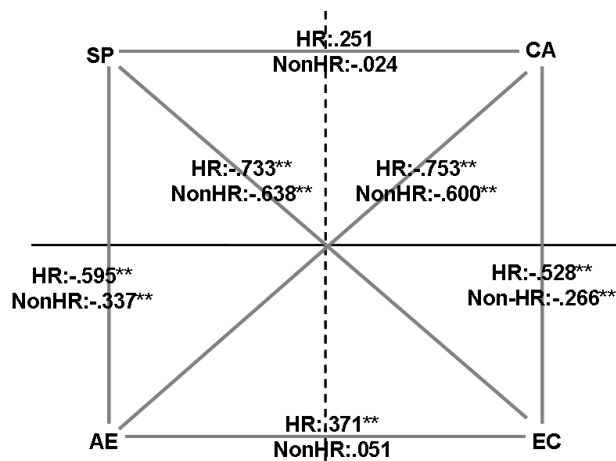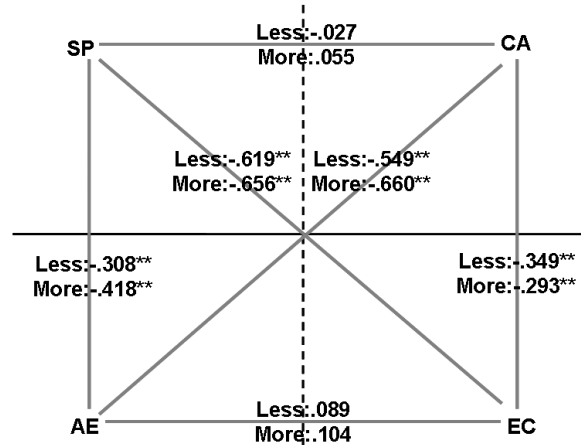
AE — HR:.371** / NonHR:.051 — EC

Figure 2h. Years of Work Experience
Less: Up to 7 years of Work Experience
More: More than 7 years of Work Experience

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                    Less:-.027
   SP───────────────More:.055───────────────CA
     \                  ┊                  /
       \                ┊                /
         \    Less:-.619** ┊ Less:-.549**  /
           \  More:-.656** ┊ More:-.660** /
             \            ┊            /
   ──────────────────────┼──────────────────────
     Less:-.308**        ┊        Less:.349**
     More:-.418**        ┊        More:-.293**
             /            ┊            \
           /              ┊              \
         /                ┊                \
       /                  ┊                  \
   AE───────────────Less:.089───────────────EC
                    More:.104
```

In Figure 2a, controlling for company size by number of employees, certain operations-strategy role pairs are negatively correlated: SP-EC (r_s=-0.711, r_l=-0.616), AE-CA (r_s=-0.685, r_l=-0.594), SP-AE (r_s=-0.317, r_l=-0.417), and EC-CA (r_s=-0.302, r_l=-0.314). (All correlations were significant at the .01 level) These results show that HR professionals were perceived to do either strategic or operational tasks—but not both. HR professionals were perceived unable to permeate the strategy-operations wall, more so when crossing diagonally between the strategy-operations and process-people barriers.

In contrast, the correlations between SP and CA (r_s=0.029, r_l=0.022), and AE and EC (r_s=0.171, r_l=0.075) were insignificant. This indicates that at best, HR professionals were perceived as able to perform SP and CA independently, or AE and EC independently. Survey respondents perceived their HR department and professionals as able to perform process-system tasks without interference from the people tasks. HR professionals could effectively permeate the people and process barriers easily, though the people roles were still perceived as distinct from process roles.

The results were similar when controlled for other factors: size by annual sales (figure 2b), educational attainment of respondent (figure 2c), nationality (figure 2d), management level (figure 2e), variety of experience (figure 2f), functional area (Fig. 2g), or work experience (figure 2h). HR was generally perceived as unable to perform strategic and operational tasks simultaneously, while able to perform process-system tasks and people tasks without interference.

There were minor exceptions to these results, such as a positive correlation between SP and CA (r = 0.428, p< 0.01), for Malaysians. These findings, however, are tempered by the small Malaysian subsample (n=30).

In figure 2b, controlling for company size by sales, HR professionals were perceived as performing AE and EC complementarily (r_s=0.248, p<.01), in partial support of H2. Smaller firms perceived their HR managers as capable of multiple operational tasks. These same small firms, however, perceived strategic tasks such as SP-CA as distinct (r_s =0.027), though not necessarily interfering with each other.

For H3, we tested if managers with broader work experience perceived functions as complementary. H3 was partially supported. On the one hand figure 2f (variety of experience), respondents with experience from more than one functional area perceived HR's ability to perform AE and EC tasks as slightly positive and significant (r=0.154, p<.05). On the other hand these same respondents could not perceive SP and CA as complementary (r=0.001). These results are similar to figure 2e (top vs. middle management). Other breadth of experience controls, however (years of work experience, educational attainment), did not show any significant correlations for the other role pairs.

Interestingly the HR managers in figure 2g perceived themselves as capable of simultaneously performing all four roles of AE and EC (r=0.371, p<.01) and SP and CA (r=0.251, p=0.055). Non-HR managers were less optimistic and merely perceived their HR managers as performing these tasks independently.

DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Non-Permeability of Strategic and Operational Roles and the Relative Permeability of Process-People Roles

The results show that Asian managers perceive their own HR professionals as unable to permeate the barrier between operational and strategic tasks, but able to permeate the people and process barrier. HR professionals were perceived to have difficulty performing both strategic and operations-oriented tasks. While senior or more experienced managers and managers from smaller companies concede that HR professionals can switch between administration (AE) and employee championing (EC), SP and CA remain independent as HR tasks.

Future research might investigate HR's perceived inability to shift between strategic and operational roles: Ulrich (1996) himself declared that his role construct pairs, especially SP-EC, and CA-AE, had inherent paradoxes for execution:

> As strategic partners with managers, HR professionals partner with managers and are seen as part of management. Taken to an extreme, this may alienate employees from both HR and management. …As employee champions in partnership with managers and employees, HR professionals ensure that the concerns and needs of employees are voiced to management. Taken to an extreme, this may alienate the HR function from management, who may not want to work with HR people whom they see as insensitive to business realities and advocates of employees… "HR professionals must also balance the need for change, innovation, and transformation with the need for continuity, discipline and stability. This tension between their roles as change agents and as administrative experts yields a number of paradoxes that must be managed… (Ulrich 1996, 45-46)

Another set of conditions that might deter permeability might be inherent, personal preferences of HR practitioners. It could be argued that individuals may be naturally predisposed to strategic tasks and not for operational activities (Piatt 1983; Fountain and Filmer 1987; Gardner and Martinko 1996; Hermann 1998; Neethling and Rache 2005).

A third set of conditions that drive permeability might be in HR professional's organizational learning environment. The HR professional's ability to switch roles might be a function of the HR professional's experience and requisite variety, the organization's maturity and presence of formal HR systems (Aggarwal and Srinivasan 2008), learning attitudes (Maurer, Wrenn, Pierce, Tross, and Collins 2003), even psychological safety (Edmonson 1999).

FUTURE RESEARCH AND SUMMARY

Without establishing clear and measurable benchmarks of performance, the strategic role of HR in firms remains hazy (Boudreau 2007). Measuring HR performance is a challenge, even with many proponents of HR performance benchmarks and scorecards (Walker and MacDonald 2001; Feather 2008; Philips and Philips 2009; Mahoney-Phillips

and Adams 2010). Future research might examine whether Asian HR professionals are cognitively limited and incapable of performing the many complex roles such as those suggested by cognitive limitation and brain preference theories. Are Asian firms relatively inadequate in complexity of organizational support structures (McKelvey 2010)? Asian HR practitioners, especially those with specialist, focused training and skill sets, may lack the requisite variety for coping in new environments (Lengnick-Hall and Sanders 1997), or may lack adequate group understanding of the firm's various functional tasks (Hubert and Lewis 2010). From a research perspective more robust models should test the causality between these factors and HR competencies. From a methods perspective the use of survey instruments or typologies like Ulrich's may also be too granular in capturing the nuances of Asian HR practices. We might instead use qualitative techniques such as case analysis or grounded theory to build a deeper, more balanced understanding of Asian HR practices.

For the Asian HR practitioner the incomplete strategic competencies point to a number of remedies: at minimum, the firm's executive committee must somehow acknowledge the importance of HR in its strategic and transformational initiatives. Top management must agree to possible overhauls of their HR structure, systems and processes, to be more aligned to business operations, and must invest in the retooling of HR professionals. Apart from defining clearer metrics to measure HR performance, firms must begin to source their HR personnel less from technical specialist backgrounds, and more from a variety of functions and backgrounds within and outside the company. HR ought to demonstrate a willingness to rotate people between HR and other departments, for better cross-functional understanding and higher visibility in the company. The HR function must establish credibility with line managers, by learning the language of business and being exposed to business realities. HR must find quicker ways to re-tool themselves as business' strategic partners else they run the risk of being outsourced as firms look increasingly outside for the next HR leader (Salkey 2006; Ostrowski 2010).

Finally, are the expectations for HR to permeate multiple roles too high, or Ulrich's roles too ambitious? As Bolton suggests, it is time to redefine where HR adds most value as a strategic partner: in what industries and what types of organizations, and

which types of corporate culture? There seems to be inconsistent progress in the role of HR. Lawler and Mohrman's 1995, 1998 and 2001 surveys point out that in more knowledge-intensive firms, HR managers with HR backgrounds tend to be full partners of strategy rather than HR managers who come from line functions. The same studies, however, did not inform about less knowledge-intensive firms. The proper roles for HR are not one-size-fits-all, but rather contingent upon industry, competitive position, size, and business model conditions.

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