Strategic Human Resource Management – Distinguishing between the Urgent and the Important

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify the importance of Human Resource Professionals (HRPs) understanding the importance of their strategic contribution to their organizations and the seven strategic roles that guide them in utilizing their time effectively. Although Human Resource Management (HRM) can play a vital strategic role in enhancing the effectiveness of organizations, the professionals who perform those roles often struggle due to the many demands placed on their time. The ability of HRPs to differentiate between activities that are urgent demands and those that are truly important is often difficult. Understanding the difference between the urgent and the important can be facilitated if HRPs focus on seven strategic roles identified herein that are critical to the contributions that HRM can make to the success of organizations. The paper identifies eight common pitfalls to effective strategic HRM.

Keywords: Strategic human resource management, urgent and important tasks, challenges in human resource management

1. Introduction

Modern businesses have struggled to survive in a global environment where only 15% of employees have described themselves as "fully engaged" at work (Clifton & Harter, 2019) and 58% of employees have reported that they would rather trust a stranger than their boss (Damron, 2018). Within this challenging context, achieving long-term financial success requires that Human Resource Professionals (HRPs) are able to accomplish key strategic roles (Beaven, 2019).

The purpose of this paper is to acknowledge that HRPs in many organizations are struggling in a business environment that is both ever-changing and complex (Mack, Khare, Kramer, & Burgartz, (2016). We suggest that HRP's must distinguish between the numerous urgent tasks that confront them daily and the more important strategic contributions that enable them to optimally benefit their companies.

We begin this paper by identifying the difficult challenges of managing the urgent and the important factors of day-to-day work life. We then describe seven strategic roles of Human Resource Management (HRM) and explain why fulfilling those roles is so important in helping organizations to succeed. Following that explanation, we identify eight errors made by HRPs in failing to differentiate between important priorities and unimportant distractions and conclude the paper with a summary of its contributions for both practitioners and scholars.

2. Understanding the Urgent and Important

A challenge for virtually every organization is the managing of scarce resources – especially the limited time constraints required to perform the many tasks that confront leaders in organizations and HRPs in particular (Becker & Huselid, 2006). The need for improving the effectiveness of the HRM function is not a new concept (Ulrich, 1998), but the constantly evolving nature of the modern business world has increased pressure on HRPs to do more with fewer resources and to accomplish essential tasks in a time-sensitive world (Holbeche, 2009; Pearse, 2017; Hamid, 2019; Dhillon & Nguyen, 2021).

The challenge of effective time management affects individuals and organizations in a world where the pressure to produce and the demand for greater efficiency are factors that dominate businesses of all types (Mackenzie & Nickerson, 2009). The modern business world is both highly competitive and fast-paced and time is well acknowledged to be a scarce commodity (Adam, Whipp, & Sabelis, 2002). Quality and excellence are essential attributes for the performance of work but the ability to manage time effectively differentiates those who are most successful at fulfilling their roles from those who work hard but are less able to balance conflicting work demands (Barrett, 2019).

Although efficiency in the use of time is important, time management is ultimately measured by the degree to which desired outcomes are achieved (Cockerell, 2019). Stephen R. Covey, one of the 20th Century's most influential Americans, has written extensively about time management and Diagram 1, provided below, summarizes his highly regarded Time Management Matrix.
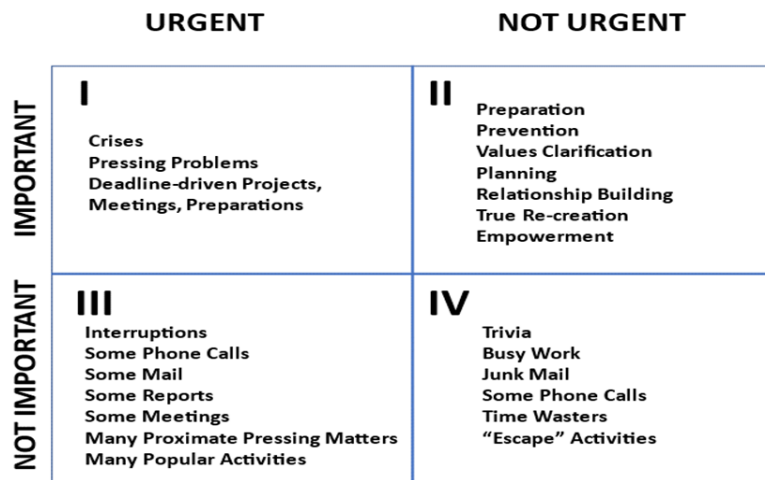
A matrix for distinguishing between the urgent and important (Covey, Merrill & Merrill, 1996, p. 37)

Figure 1. Time management matrix

As suggested by this matrix, the greatest return on the investment of an individual's time is centered around activities and responsibilities in Quadrants I and II – those factors that are truly important in achieving goals, accomplishing an organizational purpose, and accomplishing results that contributed to success. Unfortunately, the research by scholars such as Henry Mintzberg (2009) has suggested that leaders in highly responsible positions are inundated with interruptions during the workday that take them away from important priorities – requiring them to spend much of each day engaged in urgent but unimportant work that consumes their time but contributes minimally to achieving important organizational priorities.

Time management requires the ability to differentiate between important tasks that need to be done, despite being barraged by constant urgent demands on one's time (Tumanishvili, 2022). Covey and his colleagues (Covey, Merrill & Merrill, 1996, pp. 25-28) explained that the quest to manage time has typically encompassed seven factors. Table 1 briefly summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of those factors.

Table 1. Factors for differentiating importance of time

Factor	Primary Focus	Strengths	Weaknesses
Control	Belief that a plan and schedule will impose control of time.	Identifying priorities and scheduling can increase order.	Control is best achieved by honoring principles, rather than attempting to control others.
Efficiency	The assumption is that "more" and "faster" are better.	Efficiency and avoiding waste apply to accomplishing many tasks.	Seeking to be "efficient" with relationships often conveys a message that people are things.
Values	The belief is that the worth of outcomes is measurable.	Acknowledging what is important can increase focus on outcomes.	What is valued may not always create results that achieve goals and improve quality of life.

Independent Achievement	The emphasis is on tasks to achieve and personal responsibilities to accomplish,	Seeking specific goals can be extremely important in accomplishing specific tasks.	When relationships with others are treated as transactional, the quality of those relationships will suffer.
Chronos	Time management is seen as linear and sequential and dictates order and formalizing activities.	Scheduling and following an agenda of priorities places emphasis on tasks to be accomplished.	Working on specific tasks within a time frame may take importance over the quality of results achieved.
Competence	Time is equated to skill sets associated with abilities matching desired outcomes.	Abilities and skills are necessary to accomplish desired results.	Character must match competence in honoring duties owed.
Management	Emphasis is on "doing things right" and the proper achievement of tasks.	Doing tasks correctly is essential to properly utilizing resources.	Management is not leading, and the focus must also be on "doing the right things."

Note. Seven factors to assess time effectiveness.

Table 1 affirms that to achieve that which most benefits others, efficiency and effectiveness must both be considered. As noted by Wintermantel and Mattimore (1998) HRM must focus on the value and importance of outcomes to be achieved, rather than merely activities engaged in and the dollars spent associated with those activities. For HRM, the achievement of results must align with the strategic objectives of an organization's mission and purpose (Brockbank, 1999).

In contrast with that which is important, urgent HRM activities are typically the by-product of ineffective planning, the failure to accurately estimate the time and resources required to accomplish tasks, or the inadequacy of the skill sets of HRPs who fail to perform their responsibilities at the level required to achieve strategic outcomes (Hall, Frink, Ferris, Hockwater, Kacmar, & Bowen, 20003). Ultimately, achieving effectiveness and accountability in HRM involves focusing on strategic outcomes while simultaneously managing the pressing issues that every organization must inevitably face (Phillips, 2009).

3. Seven Strategic HRM Roles

The top HRM scholars agree that HRPs perform a staff function that supports the strategic objectives of their respective organizations (Valentine, Meglich, Mathis, & Jackson, 2019; Bauer, Erdogan, Caughlin, & Truxillo, 2020; Verhult & DeCenzo, 2021; Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2021; Mitchell & Gamlem, 2022). In writing about seven strategic roles of HRM, Caldwell and Anderson identified those roles as critically important and essential to honoring the duties owed by HRPs to Top Management Teams (TMTs) and their organizations. Table 2, provided below, briefly explains those seven roles and their importance.

Table 2. Seven strategic roles of HRM

HRM Strategic Role	Description	Comment
Support the Organization Strategy	HRM exists to support the TMT, its strategic goals, and achieve its mission and purpose.	HRM does not establish its own goals, but its entire purpose is to support the organization's leadership.
Sustain Organization Culture	Assist the TMT to create an organizational culture aligned with its mission and strategy.	The TMT defines that culture with input from HRPs who then contribute to creating aligned systems and programs.

Performance of Specialized HRM Tasks	Conduct the operational functions of recruitment, testing, compensation, training, and development, etc.	HRPs must become subject matter experts about these specialized tasks and perform them with excellence.
Serve as Business Partners	Consult with and assist departments to assist them in achieving efficiency and effectiveness.	The HRM role is to be an internal organizational consultant for managers and supervisors.
Provide an Employee Voice	Gather information from employees to help the TMT to formulate and implement a plan to empower employees in their roles.	Establish relationships that demonstrate that HRPs are trustworthy advocates of organizational success.
Sustain Continuous Improvement	Create systems that support individual and organizational learning, innovation, and creation of new knowledge.	Implement training and development programs that support, enhance, and develop employee skill sets.
Monitor Organizational Climate	Research and evaluate the organization environment to help the organization stay current and optimally effective.	Provide information to the TMT and assist teams within the organization to assist the organization in adapting.

Note. Description of seven strategic priorities of HRM (Caldwell & Anderson, 2018, Ch. 2).

Each of these strategic roles contributes to the strategic success of the organizations that HRPs serve. Unfortunately, the research about HRM confirms that those who work in the field are often unprepared to fulfill these roles effectively (Cardy, Gomez-Mejilla, & Balkin, 2016). The challenge for HRPs is to constantly improve their skills so that they can perform these seven strategic functions effectively (Caldwell, Truong, Linh, & Tuan, 2011). However, accomplishing these seven functions requires that the HRM role is properly understood by a company's TMT and that HRM departments are supported with the resources required to address the demands of their organizations in accomplishing HRM responsibilities.

4. Common Pitfalls in Strategic Management

The struggle that HRPs encounter in fulfilling their professional obligations is to recognize the tasks that are most important in carrying out their responsibilities. Although acknowledging the constraints on their time is a necessary part of effective time management, HRPs make errors in fulfilling their strategic responsibilities. The following are eight examples of pitfalls that should be avoided as HRPs perform their roles.

4.1 Emphasizing Activities not Outcomes

Because HRM is a strategic activity, HRPs must focus on results to be achieved rather than tasks to be accomplished. Systems, processes, and programs must be aligned to accomplish organizational goals and how those factors interrelate in the pursuit of strategic goals must be the priority of HRPs (Armstrong, 2006).

4.2 Underinvesting in Building Key Relationships

The roles of HRPs demand that they establish high quality relationships with the people with whom they interact. Being too busy to build those relationships results in HRPs failing to establish their personal and professional credibility with the TMT and the other individuals with whom HRPs interact (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020).

4.3 Avoiding the "Difficult" Tasks

A common human tendency is to engage in activities that one does well and to defer performing the more difficult tasks that are personally challenging (Coaching, 2022). Those difficult tasks demand diligent effort and high levels of skill. When HRPs avoid the difficult tasks that are strategically important, their organizations inevitably suffer.

4.4 Misreading and Skipping Critical Steps

A common mistake made by HRPs is in bypassing critical steps that are essential to producing important outcomes. For example, failing to conduct a thorough job analysis can result in a broad array of domino effect errors in recruitment, selection, performance assessment, and organization analysis. Unfortunately, overlooking conducting a job analysis is a common occurrence in many organizations (Goodstein, Prien, Campbell, & Goodstein, 2009).

4.5 Overlooking Documenting Key Outcomes

In the rush of performing their many responsibilities, HRPs may fail to report tasks that they have performed that contribute to organization improvement. Taking the time to report those meaningful outcomes enables HRPs to be more fully understood and appreciated for their service to the organization and increases their credibility as strategic contributors (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998).

4.6 Failing to Identify Work Distraction Patterns

A common error in time management is in overlooking how time has been used and failing to recognize the patterns of the urgent distractions that arise on a consistent basis. Identifying how unproductive choices occur can enable HRPs to develop strategies for avoiding the root causes for those distractions which result in the ineffective use of time (Dumitrascu, 2017).

4.7 Underestimating Project Time Requirements

Misreading the time necessary to accomplish an important HRM priority can lead to rushing to complete a project and taking short-cuts that result in a poor result. Accomplishing a deadline but failing to perform at the level necessary to meet an organization's needs is ultimately counterproductive (Kruse, 2015).

4.8 Failing to Confront the Truth

Every organization encounter situation in which intended objectives have not been achieved or mistakes have been made that need to be rectified. A sad reality is that the human tendency is to smooth over the "bad news" of an organization failing to meet performance expectations. Confronting reality and identifying the steps needed to get on the right path are responsibilities that HRPs need to address in advising the TMT (Trivers, 2010).

By carefully avoiding these eight mistakes, HRPs can exponentially improve the effectiveness of their efforts in assisting their organizations.

5. Contributions of the Paper

In writing about the importance of HRM, we have sought to focus on the strategic contributions that those who work in that field can make to their organizations. From our perspective this paper provides value for HRM practitioners and scholars in six important ways:

1) We affirm and emphasize the important role of HRM in contributing to an organization's strategic effectiveness. In many organizations, HRM does not play an active strategic role for many significant reasons. We urge HRPs to "up their game" and demonstrate that they add value to their organizations. We also encourage academic institutions to increase their effectiveness in preparing graduates of academic programs for HRM roles.

2) We identify practical challenges to HRPs as they struggle with urgent problems that limit their ability to focus on strategic issues that are truly important. Although these same challenges affect many of today's employees at all levels of an organization, the obligation of HRPs is to improve their ability to focus their time and efforts on their strategic roles as they support their organizations.

3) We identify seven criteria for measuring time effectiveness that apply to HRPs and explain their strengths and limitations. As HRPs examine how they utilize their time, these seven criteria can increase their ability to distinguish between the urgent and important demands on their time.

4) We affirm seven critically important strategic roles that HRM can contribute to assist their organizations to excel. We encourage practitioners and scholars alike to share dialogue about HRP responsibilities associated with these seven roles and encourage educators to increase their focus on those roles as they prepare business graduates to enter the workworld.

5) We identify eight pitfalls that hinder HRPs in achieving their strategic responsibilities. Avoiding these recurring errors can enable HRPs to utilize their time and energy more effectively as they perform their demanding roles.

6) We clarify why the HRM role in organizations is undervalued and misunderstood by TMTs and HRPs alike. The message of this paper is that the seven strategic roles cited in this paper identify important contributions that HRM can make to organizations – but that those seven roles are rarely understood. Practitioners and scholars have begun to expand their understanding of the HRM role in serving their organizations, but much needs to be done to exponentially increase this understanding – particularly for the TMTs who hold HRPs accountable.

6. Conclusion

The importance of the HRM function in contributing to the overall strategic success of today's organization has become increasingly evident over the last several decades as experts have recognized the importance of treating employees as valued assets and partners (Pfeffer, 1998; Covey, 2004; Block, 2013). Despite the many demands on their time, the ability of HRPs to make an important strategic contribution can be further enhanced by distinguishing between those urgent but far less important tasks that consume their time and those that enable their organizations to achieve important strategic goals.

The seven roles of HRM identified in this paper must be understood by HRPs if they are to be achieved at a level that best serves the strategic objectives of their organizations. In addition, the insights available from understanding how priorities are often overlooked or undervalued must also be understood by HRPs and their TMTs. Until TMTs also understand the proper function of HRM, it is unlikely that the contributions of HRPs to their organizations' success is likely to change.

We encourage scholars, practitioners, and academic leaders to thoughtfully engage in dialogue regarding the roles and contributions of HRM and that they increase the importance of preparing HRPs to accomplish their highest potential in supporting the organizations that they serve. Without this dialogue, the status quo in the ways in which HRM functions in organizations are likely to remain unchanged – to the detriment of organizations served by HRPs as well as to the individuals who serve in those important roles.

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