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Unpacking the HR Business Partner Role: Current Challenges and Future Directions

The CAHRS Fall Partner meeting this year took place on October 24th to a full house at the Statler amphitheater. Brad Bell, CAHRS Academic Director and William J. Conaty Professor of Strategic Human Resources, kicked off the meeting by acknowledging that the change and disruption experienced over the past several years is driving transformation in both our businesses and HR functions. HRBPs sit at this intersection and thus have been on the frontlines of helping their organizations navigate this changing landscape. The role itself has evolved in recent years as HRBPs face new and heightened demands from the leaders and businesses they support. At the same time, HRBPs are a historically underserved segment of the HR population and have few forums available to learn from one another and share best practices.

This year's Partner Meeting is part of a broader effort on behalf of CAHRS to better understand the evolving HRBP role and to develop resources that those in the role, or aspiring for the role, can leverage to increase their efficiency and effectiveness. As summarized below, the presentations by both CAHRS partners and Cornell faculty highlight not only the critical role of HRBPs in driving transformation but also the myriad challenges attached to this responsibility.

Presentations Overviews:

In his Keynote *We're Going to Need a Bigger Boat*, Kevin Cox, President, LKC Advisory, distilled two primarily business issues: managing culture and, even more important, smarter productivity (e.g., learning to integrate technology – primarily AI – with increasingly higher-level employee competencies to pursue innovation in the new competitive reality). He also highlighted getting away from the “slash and burn” mentality when it comes to managing talent, and questioned what comes after employee engagement (which looks like employee experience or “EX.”) With the HR function, and HRBPs in particular, facing more pressure than ever before, we will need to address a number of important questions:

- Given the demise of academy companies, how do we develop and retain our future stars?
- Is our business acumen where it needs to be?
- Do we have clarity around our purpose and the courage necessary to remain true to it?
- How do we find space to innovate when it feels like we are just “hanging on”?

Christy Pambianchi, Executive Vice President and Chief People Officer, Intel Corporation, shared her take on the transformation of the HRBP role in *Transforming HR: Aligning People Strategy with Business Evolution*. Upon entering her new role, she referred to her own “playbook”. First, define the HR strategy and purpose, redesign the HR organizational structure, and deliver HR's long-range plan. Next, deliver the foundation to win with talent, which includes redesigning compensation, delivering proactive and bold talent acquisition results, and refreshing the EVP. Third, strengthen talent solutions while also managing cost reductions. Finally, elevate systems and the operating model through leader development solutions, refreshed RISE goals, robust internal mobility programs, and scalable workforce planning solutions. Key takeaways from Intel's journey include:

- The importance of understanding the company's transformational needs
- Ensuring the business HR team are experts in their groups' strategic objectives
- Using business signals as a basis for HR objectives
- Establishing an operational and structural framework that puts customer needs first
- Inspiring the HR team through a compelling organizational culture and mission.

Procter & Gamble's **Niall de Lacy**, Senior Vice President, Human Resources, Global Beauty, Grooming & Corporate Functions, and **Tommy Montoya**, Senior Director, Global HR Strategy, Talent & Capability, shared the company's transformation history in their presentation *Organized for Outcomes*. With such a long and storied history, P&G needs to be very intentional about avoiding complacency. As a result, the company is focused on transforming into an outcome-based organization, which has processes that efficiently deliver on outcomes, systems that are transparent and enable decisions faster and simpler, a culture that values driving decision accountability and speed, and a structure that supports outcomes empowered by multi-skilled teams. As part of this transformation, they have also needed to evolve their HR talent through dynamic skill-building for outcomes, business unit flexibility that allows for skill-based jobs and roles, permeable cross-functional talent flow, and visibility and access to critical development opportunities.

Rebecca Kehoe, ILR HR Studies Professor, shared her most recent research on the increasing the role of line managers in the delivery of HRM in her presentation *Supporting Line Managers in HR Policy Implementation*. Although HR develops and disseminates policy, line managers implement it and all too often what HR intends is not quite what happens in practice. Rebecca's work suggests there are three main causes of inconsistent HR policy implementation, each of which HRBPs can address through different strategies. The first cause is a lack of relevant skills or policy understanding among line managers, which HRBPs can tackle through ongoing coaching and increased communication with their leaders. A second cause is a lack of buy-in or motivation among line managers, which suggests that HRBPs need to better understand what their leaders care about and make a strong business case for HR policies. Finally, line managers may lack the capacity (e.g., time, resources) to properly implement HR policies, which HRBPs can solve by involving line managers early in policy development and proactively identifying their challenges and concerns.

Chris Scalia, Chief Transformation Officer & Chief Human Resources Officer, Hershey, spoke about transformation in *HR Leads the Way: Transforming Hershey into a Leading Snacking Powerhouse*. As a company, Hershey experienced tremendous growth between 2019 and 2023 but has more recently encountered a host of both external pressures and internal challenges that have underscored the need for transformation. The transformation journey Hershey has embarked on is ambitious in that it involves shifting the portfolio, business model, and culture to create a new Hershey. To lead this journey, HR had to first transform itself, which it did by making two commitments to all stakeholders: (1) delivering top and bottom-line value, and (2) transforming how we work across people, process, and tools. To deliver on these commitments, Hershey has reset HR's core service delivery model and has placed big bets in areas that have the potential to create advantage. Several key takeaways that emerged from Chris' presentation include:

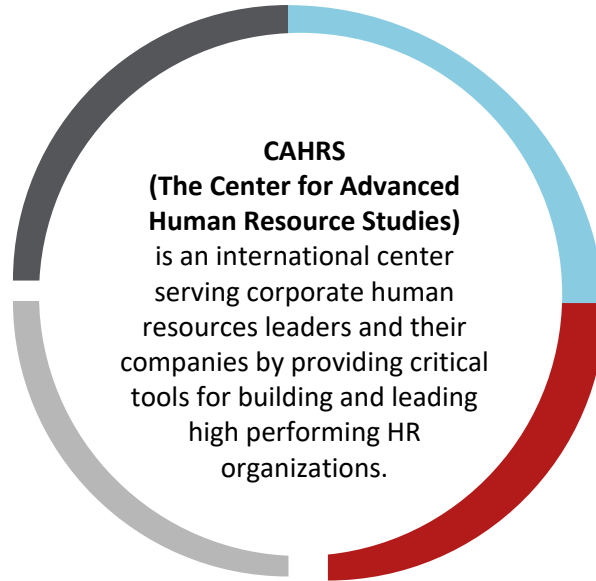
- Transformation is foreign and episodic to many leaders and teams; invest now in building the capability
- Transformative leadership is in short supply; develop and select now
- Balance culture of people and high performance; manage this polarity carefully

Tionna Michelle Prescott, Vice President HR, IBM Finance & Operations, focused on applications internal to HR in *Transforming IBM HR*. She highlighted that transformation is no longer episodic; instead, it should involve pragmatic and continuous improvement efforts that serve as the catalyst for big transformational changes. IBM HR has adopted a three-pronged, core mantra to guide their transformation efforts: Eliminate, Simplify, Automate. To achieve these goals, they have leveraged AI to create a tiered support model, which frees up SMEs to drive higher-value work. In doing so, IBM's Principles for Trust and Transparency have been critical for holding AI to high ethical standards and ensuring explainability, fairness, robustness, transparency, and privacy in all applications.

ILR HR Studies Professor and Director of ILR Graduate Studies **Chris Collins** shared his research on the employee experience in his presentation *Impacting the Employee Experience Through the Lens of the HR Business Partner*. He parsed the difference between EX and its many predecessors and explored whether and how it is different when it comes to affecting important employee and business outcomes. Rather than relying on a employee lifecycle model, Chris argued that we should think about how the employee experience is shaped through three different types of touchpoints:

- Episodic touchpoints that occur at different points in life (e.g., needing to update benefits due to a change in one's family)
- Reflection touchpoints that occur with a moderate degree of regularity and involve employees evaluating whether they are "getting back what they are putting in"
- Day-to-day touchpoints that shape employees' views on "what it is like to work here every day"

This framework can help HRBPs to identify where they can have the greatest impact on the employee experience. Episodic touchpoints, for example, can often be best handled through technology and centralized shared services. However, day-to-day touchpoints often do not have a single owner and tend to be much more dynamic, suggesting this is where human intervention by HRBPs is necessary and important.



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