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Educating highly competent and principled HR professionals in the 21st century

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to determine the effectiveness of US HR Graduate Programs in preparing highly competent and principled HR professionals functioning as strategic partners and helping organisations create sustainable competitive advantages through the HR function. The paper examines the major competencies necessary for HR to serve as business partners and analyses the graduate HR programmes in developing the requisite competencies. Multiple gaps in the curriculum are identified. Strategies to enhance the quality and relevance of the graduate programmes in developing highly competent and principled HR professionals in the 21st century are discussed.

Keywords: graduate human resource curriculum; strategic HRM; organisational effectiveness; HR competencies.

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1 Introduction

Brockbank *et al.* (1999) argued that for the HR function to be a profession, HR professionals must master the concepts, language, logic, research, and practices of HR. Furthermore, HR professionals must be able to apply that knowledge to specific business settings.

One source of creating and sustaining organisation competitive advantage has been the HR function. Scholars have devoted a great deal of attention to examining the linkage between HR practices and firm performance. Based on this research, it has become clear that the HR system is one important component that can help an organisation become more effective and achieve competitive advantage (Becker and Huselid, 1998). Given the perceived effectiveness of the graduate HR curriculum in developing core competencies to perform effectively as HR professionals and the frequent gaps that exist, especially from senior management, this paper examines the graduate HR programmes in the USA, identifies themes, and comments on the effectiveness of these programmes.

Given this background, this paper attempts to determine the effectiveness of HR Graduate Programs in the USA in preparing highly competent and principled HR professionals to achieve the intended purposes of functioning as strategic partners and helping the HR function contribute to organisation competitive advantage.

First, comparison data are collected from primary and secondary sources to determine the competencies of HR professionals necessary to enhance firm performance and create sustainable competitive advantage in today's global economy. Then an analysis of 114 graduate HR programmes in the USA is conducted and used to determine the level of effectiveness in preparing highly competent and principled HR professionals for the 21st century.

2 Literature review

As human resource educators, practitioners, and others involved in the HR profession, it is imperative to continuously assess whether we are meeting the needs of this rapidly changing profession (Dyer, 1999). In defining the role of HR in progressive organisations, Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) highlighted the critical need for the dramatic refocusing of HR from what is done to what is delivered, from building HR functions for efficiency to building them for stakeholder value, and implementing best HR practices to delivering value-added HR practices. This reinforces the belief of the relationship between HR and firm performance (Becker and Huselid, 1998; Delaney and Huselid, 1996; Huselid, 1995; Youndt *et al.*, 1996).

Theoretical research on HR has suggested that systems of HR practices may lead to higher firm performance and be a source of sustained competitive advantage because these systems are often unique, causally ambiguous, and difficult to imitate (Lado and Wilson, 1994). However, HR practices can only be a source of sustained competitive advantage when they support resources or competencies that provide value to a firm (Wright *et al.*, 1994).

A related approach within the strategic perspective on Human Resource Management (HRM) pertains to how the overall set of HRM practices is generally associated with firm performance and competitive advantage (Ferris *et al.*, 1999). Central here is the resource-based perspective (Barney, 1991) noting that, collectively, a firm's human resources are believed to have implications for firm performance and provide a unique source of competitive advantage that is difficult to replicate (Wright *et al.*, 1994). Given this argument, it is crucial to ensure that graduate HR programmes are developing the necessary competencies to capitalise on a firm's human resources.

Furthermore, empirical research has examined various elements of the HR architecture with attention to role behaviours (Jackson and Schuler, 1995), employee commitment and involvement (Batt, 2002), and high performance work systems (Huselid, 1995; MacDuffie, 1995; Youndt *et al.*, 1996). In today's global economy, a firm's human capital is believed to be an important source of sustained competitive advantage. This is especially so for those firms operating in complex and dynamic competitive environments where the capability to rapidly acquire and assimilate new market and technological capabilities is the key to enduring advantage over competitors (Hayton, 2003).

2.1 HR competencies

Brockbank *et al.* (1999) identified five major competencies expected of HR professionals:

- 1 strategic contribution
- 2 personal credibility
- 3 HR delivery
- 4 business knowledge
- 5 HR technology.

Becker *et al.* (2001) suggested adding strategic HR performance management as a sixth competency.

According to Becker *et al.* (2001) strategic performance management strategies support the notion that HR managers must think differently about HR. The core dimensions of this competency are:

- critical casual thinking
- understanding principles of good measurement
- estimating causal relationships
- communicating HR strategic performance results to senior line managers.

It is argued that with a stronger competency in strategic performance management, an HR professional would be better able to show correlation and causal relationships between HR systems and financial outcomes, customer value proposition, and long-term competitive advantage.

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), the University of Michigan Business School, and the Global Consulting Alliance have developed the HR Competency Toolkit, which is in part designed to enable HR professionals to assess and improve their HR skills (Brockbank and Ulrich, 2004). The Toolkit is now utilised by many HR professionals across the world. According to SHRM, competencies have emerged from being a specialised and narrow application to being a leading method for diagnosing, framing, and improving many aspects of HR.

A competency model can serve as an integrative framework for an organisation's entire HR system. It can help align the HR system vertically with the organisation's strategic objectives, or horizontally with HR practices, to ensure harmony and consistency across the many facets of HR activities that impact human performance (Rothwell and Wellins, 2004). Moreover, taking talent-management expertise forward is central to the future success of the entire HR profession (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2003). Those authors reiterate that the HR profession "can evolve into a true decision science of talent and aspire to the level of influence of disciplines such as finance and marketing". Tied to the changing demands of the HR profession are the new competencies enabling HR to be effective in driving firm performance and creating sustainable competitive advantage.

2.2 Relevance of graduate HR education

Education is a key element in achieving development and life success (Baruch, 2000). Recent changes in the roles of HR professionals place new demands on them if they are to operate successfully in a shifting business environment (Hansen, 2002). As highlighted by Giannantonio and Hurley (2002), there is a need for HR educators to critically reflect on whether graduate programmes are meeting the needs of the rapidly changing profession.

"Given the relationship between management education and the business world, market forces such as globalisation, technological change, and new workplace requirements may affect business education more than any other branch of academia" (Friga *et al.*, 2003). The importance of management education in the business world is further exacerbated given that corporations and education institutions spend a combined \$2.2 trillion on management education and training worldwide with nearly \$885 billion invested in the USA (Merrill Lynch & Co., 2000).

A critical part of management education centres around HR topics and issues. Tomlinson (2002) stated that "HR education is finally coming into its own. About ten years ago, you'd be hard pressed to find people making large investments into HR education, however corporate executives are waking up and realising the value in such an investment".

The need for deeper analysis of graduate HR education is further strengthened given the macro-environmental changes such as: rapidly evolving demographics in the workplace, emphasis on technology, globalisation, and focus on ethical behaviours. The HR function is looked upon to facilitate the management of people, processes, and systems to ensure maximisation of human capital and resources within the organisation to

create sustainable competitive advantage. The consequence for graduate HR programmes therefore is not to prepare HR professionals only within the traditional framework that includes selection, benefits, employment, but also to develop the competencies that enable learners to excel in today's highly dynamic global economy.

To develop the necessary competencies, companies are investing in Master of Business Administration (MBA) education and specialist degrees such as graduate HR programmes. At least 60 of 403 B-schools surveyed by Business Week in 2001 offered master's degrees in these new specialties. Even now, schools say, interest in the programmes has remained steady (Schneider, 2002).

Companies have invested in employees' education as a means of helping to create competitive advantage. Over the years, MBA programmes across the country have come under criticism for having too much analytical focus (Heneman, 1999). In the same research, the author also stated that specialised programmes in HR focused excessively on the people skills and not adequately on the analytical skills and concluded that in order to add value in organisations, HR professionals need both analytical and people skills.

"Some HR educators have been well attuned to corporate needs, some have not. While HR educators are committed to supplying firms with graduates who meet corporate requirements, they may not always know what is required" (Langert, 2000). A result of this, graduate HR programmes may fail to develop the particular competencies necessary to drive firm performance. The need for HR professionals to develop bottom-line orientation; to broaden themselves to function as business executives, not personnel specialists; to anticipate change; and to develop creative solutions to business are some of the other requirements and expectations of progressive HR professionals (Langert, 2000; Schuler, 1990).

3 Methodology and sample

Data regarding the competencies expected of HR professionals in the 21st century were gathered through a study utilising a cross-sectional design collecting data at one point in time (Gall *et al.*, 1996). In addition, descriptive statistics was used to tabulate the data. The target population was HR professionals in the upper Midwest region of the US HR professionals for the purpose of this study included individuals who practiced in the field of human resource management and held full-time exempt positions. Surveys were sent to 224 HR professionals at 66 different companies. The 66 companies were selected through stratified random sampling as a means to ensure population validity. The 66 companies represented Fortune 500 companies, other large and medium-sized companies in retail, banking and finance, government, agriculture, education, manufacturing, and transportation industries. There were a total of 108 participants from the 66 companies with no more than two employees from the same company included in the results. In addition, the authors utilised secondary sources as a means of identifying the competencies necessary to enhance HR performance in organisations. This was done primarily through review of scholarly articles and relevant books.

To gather information on graduate HR programmes across the USA, the second edition of the SHRM publication 'Graduate Programs in Human Resource Management' was used combined with websites of various university HR programmes and professional HR organisations and secondary literature sources. The SHRM publication included

detailed information on 114 HR-related masters programmes including a description of the degree, degree requirements, curriculum, and other pertinent information. The university websites were used to review any updates in programme requirements and if there were any curriculum changes in the last one to two years. The study limited university curriculum to graduate programmes given that previous work has been done around the undergraduate area and mainly through the assumption that HR professionals take a broad undergraduate degree and specialise in the graduate degree.

4 Results

Based on the findings of Brockbank *et al.* (1997) and Becker and Gerhart (1996), knowledge of the business, strategic contribution, personal credibility, HR delivery, HR technology, and measurement are some of the most critical competencies HR professionals should possess to effectively function as strategic business partners. The results of the upper Midwest competency survey study showed that only some of these competencies were identified as core competencies of HR professionals in today's global economy.

As Table 1 indicates, the participants of the study did not all agree that the listed competencies were seen as critical to success in the HR profession. The results showed that knowledge of the business, HR delivery, and strategic contribution were viewed as the most important competencies. Quite surprising, especially given the emphasis on ethical standards and emphasis on gaining respect in organisations, personal credibility was cited with relatively low frequency as compared to the other measures.

Table 1 Frequency of self-identified core competencies

		<i>Knowledge of the business</i>	<i>Strategic contribution</i>	<i>Personal credibility</i>	<i>HR delivery</i>	<i>HR technology</i>	<i>HR measurement</i>
N	Total	108	108	108	108	108	108
	Frequency	70	59	38	65	53	17

The results of this study also showed that on average, HR professionals spend most of their time functioning as internal consultants, executing staffing activities, and implementing HR strategies. At the same time, the least amount of time was spent dealing with legal issues, labour relations, and quite notably partnering with senior executives on strategy formulation. Table 2 provides a complete list of the activities where HR professional are spending their time and other investments.

Ulrich (1997) noted that the pace of change required by technology, globalisation, profitable growth, and customer demands places workforce competence and organisational capabilities at centre stage. Organisational capabilities are things an organisation does better than its competition, a source of competitive advantage (*e.g.*, streamlining order-to-remittance process, learning more quickly than competitors, organising around customer requirements, *etc.*).

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of HR activities (percentage of time spent on particular activities)

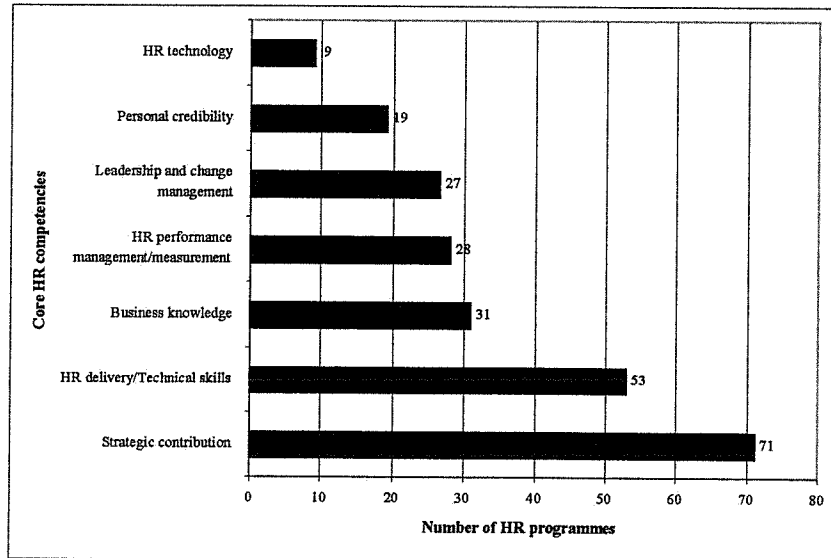
	<i>N</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>
Change agent	108	0	30	8.37	7.898
Administrative tasks	108	0	40	9.44	9.451
Staffing	106	0	90	14.40	18.270
Compensation	108	0	70	7.44	11.697
Organisational assessment	106	0	35	7.27	6.589
Designing HR strategies	108	0	40	7.69	7.617
Implementing HR strategies	108	0	45	11.00	9.899
Internal consultant	108	0	40	15.74	9.614
Legal matters	108	0	15	5.06	4.731
Partnering with senior executives on strategy formulation	108	0	25	6.16	5.797
Labour relations	108	0	25	5.24	6.478
Valid <i>N</i> (listwise)	106				

Given the expectation of the HR function to effectively participate in strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation in order to create sustainable competitive advantage, it is evident that there is significant need for analysing HR's priorities. As the results of the competency study indicate, far too little time was spent partnering with other executives on business strategy formulation and an excessive amount of time was spent on administrative tasks. In addition, very little effort and attention was paid to assessing the effectiveness of HR strategies.

Reflecting on the generally accepted factors that determine HR's effectiveness, education stands out as one of the most likely factors to determine the success of the HR professional. In a study conducted by Ramlall (2006), there is a direct relationship between years of education, level of compensation, and career growth.

In assessing the US graduate HR programmes, a total of 114 graduate HR programmes were included in the study. The programmes included mostly MBAs in HR, MA in HR/IR/LR, and MS in HR. The average number of semester credits required to complete a Masters degree (includes MBA, MA, and MS) is approximately 40 with an average of approximately 24 HR credits required.

Figure 1 provides a comprehensive list of the classes required by universities. The list also includes 'popular electives'. It was extremely encouraging that 71 of the 114 schools required a course on HR Strategy and that it was the most frequently required class across these programmes. Employment Law has traditionally been one of the core HR requirements and is one of the core areas covered under the SHRM certification for the Professional in Human Resources (PHR) and Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) certifications. So it is not surprising that 70 of the 114 schools required their students to take a class in Employment Law, thus helping HR professionals to grasp the fundamentals in this area.

Figure 1 Number of HR programmes targeting the core HR competencies

Of the 114 graduate programmes included in the study, 64, 58, and 56 schools required the traditional components of HR: Employee Training and Development, Employee Selection, and Compensation and Benefits respectively. This finding speaks to the need to develop technical competencies in these core HR areas. However, as Ulrich (1997) pointed out, HR professionals must focus on both the strategic and the operational, both long-term and short-term. As such, it is imperative to be experts in the transactional activities and to master, align, and leverage these practices so that employees, customers, and investors receive value.

Given the desire and the need for the HR profession to function as strategic business partners and change agents, competencies aligned with contribution, personal credibility, HR delivery, business knowledge, HR technology and strategic HR performance management also are of utmost importance. Hence, it would be a reasonable expectation that graduate HR programmes target these competencies as part of the delivery of education.

Unfortunately, the results show that little emphasis is placed on (a) performance management, (b) organisation change and development (OD), (c) HR technology, and (d) leadership. Furthermore, one of the most espoused roles of HR is that of a strategic partner. How can HR professionals effectively deliver HR services without understanding other critical aspects of the business? It is quite unfortunate that only approximately 25% of the graduate HR programmes require Accounting, Marketing, and Finance. Business leaders expect HR professionals to integrate Accounting, Marketing, and Finance among other subject matters within the context of strategy formulation, implementation, and evaluation.

In the pursuit of maximising profits, companies such as Enron, Worldcom, and several others have been accused of highly unethical practices in recent years. As such, ethics has become an even more relevant component of the graduate business education. According to the recent SHRM 2004–2005 Workplace Forecast: A Strategic Outlook, a key issue confronting the human resource profession over the coming years will be defining its role in promoting corporate ethics. One of the biggest concerns of HR professionals in this regard will likely be the erosion of employee trust and organisational loyalty that ethics violations by company leaders can bring about.

Schramm (2004) concluded that not only do employees and HR professionals have different perceptions regarding the degree of ethical behaviour shown by organisational leaders, but HR professionals also believe employees find their organisation's leadership to be more ethical than employees actually rate it. She also stated that the disparity suggests that employee perceptions may benefit from greater transparency and awareness of procedures designed to prevent ethics violations by corporate leaders. HR professionals already have a closer vantage point than most employees for observing the behaviour of company leadership. The fact that HR professionals have more positive views is a good sign.

It is therefore noteworthy that only 19 of the 114 graduate HR programmes required a course in ethics. This is not to infer that ethics is not covered in the respective classes, but only 19 of the school required an entire class in ethics. Given the growing importance of this topic as a means of sustaining competitive advantage, it may be advantageous to include an entire class on ethics. Rosshem (2004) stated that with HR having expertise in organisational structure, training and people-oriented information systems, human resources is in a position to help other departments align compliance processes with corporate goals ranging from operational efficiency to high ethical standards. Furthermore, HR professionals are able to communicate to key executives the financial repercussions of lacking a strong ethical stance, and the fallout effects on customers, employees, and shareholders.

5 Discussion and conclusion

As cited in Lawler and Mohrman (2003), articles, books, and studies have all argued that HR professionals need to become more effective strategic business partners. Ulrich and Beatty (2001) argued that HR has to even transition from strategic business partners to be coming players in organisations. Given that numerous studies have shown a positive relationship between strategic HRM and firm performance, this study sought to determine the effectiveness of graduate HR programmes across the USA in developing the relevant competencies necessary to foster high firm performance.

It is quite evident in reviewing the literature and analysing the results of the study that the graduate programmes are able to achieve the intended goal of developing the relevant technical competencies in HR. Nevertheless, it is also evident that to be true strategic business partners, HR competencies have to be much broader than within the boundaries of traditional HR. Much greater emphasis ought to be given to developing broader business competencies to include all components of skills necessary to effectively manage a business in the global economy.

Focusing on the traditional HR competencies enables HR professionals to be strategic indeed, but it is a much too narrow span to effectively create value for the organisation. The following recommendations are based on a comparison of the literature and graduate HR programmes as far as what is required of HR professionals and what graduate HR programmes are delivering.

5.1 Implications for research

It would be of great utility to HR academics, practitioners, and students to do an empirical study on the performance outcomes of HR professionals based on self and supervisor assessment of HR employees' level of competence in the various critical areas. It would also be advantageous to compare across industries, type of position, and educational attainment. Too often, we as academicians continue offering classes that have been relevant in the past without doing the necessary environmental scanning and making appropriate changes to develop the competencies needed to succeed in today's economy and also to compete effectively in the future.

5.2 Implications for practice

Given the competencies that are expected of HR professionals today, organisations should continuously assess their level of expertise to determine the fit with expectations and HR delivery. One of the harsh realities is that some HR professionals do not possess the necessary skills to contribute effectively and it may be extremely difficult to develop the requisite skills in a relatively short period of time. Companies would be faced with hiring HR professionals, investing in the developing of new companies, and even reallocating transferring employees based on fit and interest.

Investments in graduate HR education through tuition reimbursements, flexible work hours, and opportunity to practice theories are some ways in which companies can invest to enhance the performance of HR professionals in the 21st century. It is an investment that would pay significant dividends in the short and long term for the company. In addition, HR professions without a graduate HR degree should seize opportunities to pursue graduate education as a means of developing one's HR and business expertise and hence, one's performance as an HR professional.

The goal of this paper was to determine the effectiveness of HR Graduate Programs in the USA in preparing highly competent and principled HR professionals to achieve the intended purpose of functioning as strategic partners and helping the HR function achieve the planned competitive advantages. As evidenced, there is a mixed result with some level of success in offering the relevant and adequate technical aspects of HR.

Nevertheless, there are multiple changes necessary for the graduate curriculum to be fully effective in preparing HR professionals to function as true strategic business partners. Through partnerships among universities, business leaders, and students, there is great hope for HR continuing and improving its value-added outputs to creating sustainable competitive advantages.

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