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Why have HR Standards?

Ring the bell for this TAG team* grudge match. Do you support Standards or do you come from the Flexibility perspective? Sit back and watch the two teams do battle and then see whether you agree with the umpire's decisions.

Explainer: ** In wrestling a TAG team is usually a team of two wrestlers who compete, one at a time, against either member of another team. In standards development a Technical Advisory Group is known by its acronym 'TAG'.*

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The bell rings for the start of the match!

For: **Standards promote consistency in decision making. They provide precedent for considering specific issues. In doing so they give confidence to HR practitioners and to their clients.**

Against: Standards take away discretion, reduce initiative and ignore innovation. As a consequence, they reduce staff engagement.

Umpire: A strong opening salvo from both sides; no clear win here.

For: **Standards give confidence that the activities will be delivered as intended.**

Against: Standards deliver to the lowest common denominator, therefore promoting mediocrity.

Umpire: No clear win here.

For: **Standards offer organisations a competitive advantage.**

Against: The cost and benefit of standards do not stack up (a poor business case).

Umpire: No clear win here.

For: **Standards are kept quite simple.**

Against: Standards are far too complex (eg the ANSI cost-per-hire standard runs to 43 pages).

Umpire: Ninety-eight percent of organisations have less than 100 employees. There is a danger that the design of standards only meets the needs of the few.

For: **Standards specify performance expectations and thus enable objective performance evaluation.**

Against: Organisations have performance expectations set out in their strategic and operational plans. There are plenty of ways to evaluate performance without the imposition of external standards.

Umpire: Not many organisations currently have specific HR standards that are written from an outcome perspective, allowing for external performance evaluation. Advantage to the standards team.

> *'From my point of view, HR is much more like a spice cabinet from which each organization develops its own recipe'* **John Sumser**
>
> **In reply** to John Sumser: each spice contained in that cabinet should be clearly defined and made to a standard (e.g. 99% pure) so that it can be reliably used in any recipe.

For: **Standards highlight and reduce risk, especially workplace health and safety risks. By making these explicit senior managers and boards will better understand the need for controls.**

Against: Risk management is undertaken now at the organisational level - without the need for additional standards.

Umpire: No clear win here.

For: **For organisations that cross boundaries (e.g. states or countries) standards reduce inconsistency, make compliance easier and reduce costs.**

Against: Different states or countries have different cultures, legal systems and expectations. Aligning these are just too difficult.

Umpire: No clear win here but a very important question. Should we aim for international standards or is *the bite too big*? The business case needs more work.

For: **One generic set of Standards will work across all industries.**

Against: Standards don't work in the auto* industry, we are unique (*insert your own industry descriptor*).

Umpire: Advantage to the standards team; there are numerous examples of standards that work across industries, and if we get the design right standards can be expanded at the industry level to help with local application.

For: **Standards work for all sizes of organisations.**

Against: Standards only work for large organisations with specialist HR functions. Ninety-eight percent of organisations are small (< 100 staff) – it's just too complex and unnecessary.

Umpire: No clear win here. If standards are too complex they risk being irrelevant to the majority of users. A feature of the design of standards needs to be that they apply to all organisations. A design that has a simpler version for small organisations is prima facie evidence that the standard is just too complex.

For: **Standards are suitable for all sectors: public, not-for-profit etc.**

Against: (examples, some of many) the not-for-profit sector is different; the public sector is different; the private sector is different; etc

Umpire: While the objectives of these sectors may be different it is not obvious that the standards for people management should be significantly different. While scored as neutral in this instance the supporters of difference will have to clearly articulate their reasoning or risk losing this point.

For: **Standards promote whole of system consistency across related activity areas: HR teaching, membership grading, workplace activities, and certification of activities or technical systems.**

Against: Standards do not need to be integrated across all HR areas to work; HR works fine without this additional administrative and bureaucratic burden.

Umpire: Advantage to the standards team as there are obvious benefits to having HR Standards that, for example, align academic curriculum with organisational activity standards.

For: **Standards change over time on a regular or ad hoc cycle through a consensus mechanism; this provides for continuous improvement; Agility is just fragility with a dash of hope.**

Against: The CEO and the board want us to be agile and champion innovation, not push for further rigidities.

Umpire: Advantage to the standards team; the continuous improvement in accounting and auditing standards in a measured and consistent way is a powerful precedent.

> **Agility is just fragility**
> **with a dash of hope.**

For: **Standards should be designed with organisational outcomes in mind – enabling a focus on the bigger picture of achieving objectives.**

Against: Standards regulate (stifle?) activity and so far, have not focused on outcomes.

Umpire: Advantage to the standards team; there is sufficient evidence that standards developers should incorporate an outcome focus as part of the explicit design.

For: **Standards offer the best opportunity for technical integration (eg HR Open System Consortium) and interoperability …**

Against: Enterprise systems deliver this outcome now.

Umpire: Advantage to the standards team; once we have evidence across multiple data points big data analysis can do for HR what it has delivered for other sectors.

For: **Standards give you an edge in the marketplace for early adopters, especially when independently certified.**

Against: Just another HR fad, one of many, won't last 12 months. In my day …

Umpire: No clear win here; there is a danger that momentum will run out before national and international agreement is reached. The current ISO standards do not have an overarching framework to explain how they all fit together.

For: **In order to evaluate organisational activities, you need to have standards in place (e.g. performance auditing).**

Against   Audits against standards are expensive, time consuming and unnecessary. Management assurance is sufficient; audit assurance is just overkill.

Umpire: No clear win here; the move to third party evaluation requires a well-argued business case.

For: **Standards reduce costs by systematising activities and reducing needless variation.**

Against   Standards regulate (stifle?) activity.

Umpire: No clear win here.

For: **Flexibility is just *make-it-up-as-you-go*; a quest for needless variation.**

Against   Standards are inflexible and hold back industry.

Umpire: Advantage to the flexibility team; the design of HR standards needs to address flexibility requirements.

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│   **Flexibility is just a quest for** │
│   **needless variation …** │
│   │
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For: **Standards ensure that the right amount of an activity is undertaken; neither too little or not enough.**

Against   Standards distract from organisational priorities and emphasis is placed on the wrong things.

Umpire: Advantage to the flexibility team; there are plenty of examples where external regulation directs us to do activities that are perceived to add no value.

For: **Standards promote the professionalism of HR.**

Against   The professionalism of HR comes via individual *certification* programs.

Umpire: Advantage to the standards team; the current concentration on individual certification, while not linking these to curriculum and activity standards, is profoundly disappointing. Why can't HR certification bodies extend their focus to activity standards?

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Match Results

How did you score the match; which side were you on to start? Did you change your view?

See how easy it was to fall into the *Standards* vs. *Flexibility* trap?

Standards with flexibility and creativity is not an oxymoron; it is a matter of appropriate design.

> *Standards* with *flexibility* and creativity is not an oxymoron; it is a matter of appropriate design.

There needs to be a better discussion around the design principles for HR Standards as well as changing the current process of engaging content experts to develop individual HR Standards. We have enough HR content specialists – we need to find better framework designers and integrators.

If we summarise the different ways of approaching the issue it might look like:

Focus	Standardisation without variation	Solid, rigid, black letter compliance; e.g. minimum wage rates
Aim - Standards	Standards, with flexibility	Accept the worth of Standards; designed to provide the right point of balance between standards and flexibility.
Aim - Flexibility	Flexibility, built with a secure standards base; agility; needed variation	The primary aim is flexibility. Some aspects are solid but where there can be variation these options are available.
Focus	Flexibility as needless variation; agility seen as	The balance shifts from certainty toward chaos.

	fragility with a dash of hope.	
Focus	Make-it-up-as-you-go	The ultimate form of flexibility, as you can choose from any available option.

HR Spice Cabinet

A *framework* for how all the HR Standards should fit together would be a good start. The framework needs to recognise that the HR 'Spice Cabinet' (Sumser 2016) is real, and that many (if not all) HR functions can be undertaken by line managers, other departments (e.g. Finance, Operations etc) or outsourced.

It is a framework for the organisation, not for the HR Department. More broadly, there needs to be a recognition that the debate on the **Standards – Flexibility continuum** is about adopting a position that both supports HR Standards *and* cautions against making them too complex or too rigid, and ensuring they are strongly related to organisational outcomes.

Is there a recent example? Take a closer look at the work of Marius Meyer at the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP). They have comprehensive national standards, within a framework that ties it all together. They have a national auditing unit for evaluating organisations against the standards. They focus on more than just certification of individual practitioners. They have case studies that show the positive benefits of moving to professionalise HR through Standards.

The pressing issues facing HR Standards developers are:

- The need for a framework to tie the individual standards together (a spice cabinet)
- the need for them to apply to all organisations
- they must not be too complex for the majority of users
- they must address the outcomes we want from organisational activity
- they must allow for the right balance between that which must not be compromised and that which can support needed variation.
- they need to be accepted as voluntary standards – they should not ever be mandated until proven to be robust and delivering productivity benefits at the international level.
- they must be accessible – this is a pressing issue – many organisations around the world do not have reliable electricity and internet access.
- they must address the need to be consistent across individual (competency), grading (membership), organisational (activity) and higher educational teaching (curriculum) criteria.
- they should be evidence-based, with a regular review cycle.

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