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The Future of HR

Cecile M. Schultz

Abstract

The HR function is currently dealing with a range of questions: How can HR prepare for the future? Which HR competencies will be needed? Which aspects should be focused upon? The way forward may start with capacitating HR managers to obtain the necessary competencies and be enlightened about which aspects should get specific attention in order to prepare for the future world of work. In order to progress towards a new understanding of workforce management within organisations, it is essential to shed light on HR competencies, future workspace, engagement, employment relations and resilience. Although engagement and employment relations are dated, it will still be relevant in the future, especially due to the man-machine connection, remote working and other future world of work challenges. The rebalancing of priorities and rethinking HR, so that resilience become just as important to strategic thinking as cost and efficiency, are important. It is essential that HR must go beyond the here and now in order to properly prepare for the future world of work.

Keywords: HR competencies, future workspace, engagement, employment relations, resilience

1. Introduction

The role of the HR professional has changed dramatically along with the workforce and economy, and that evolution will continue as machines and technology replace tasks once performed by humans. Tomorrow's HR leaders will need to be bigger, broader thinkers, and they will have to be tech-savvy and nimble enough to deal with an increasingly agile and restless workforce [1]. As organisations push on into the future and adapt to new realities, HR leaders should stay abreast of changes to prepare for the future world of work [2]. In order to progress towards a new understanding of workforce management within future organisations, it is essential to shed light on the different HR competencies that will be needed, future workspace, engagement, employment relations and resilience. It is important that HR academics, HR leaders and management take note that although engagement and employment relations are dated, it will still need to be addressed in the future, especially due to the man-machine connection, remote working and other future world of work challenges.

The role of the HR manager has changed dramatically along with the workforce and economy, and that evolution will continue as machines and technology replace tasks once performed by humans [2]. New technologies are here to stay, so companies need to understand and prepare for how it's already changing the relationships within the workplace. Once there is this understanding, HR can then build a plan that ensures relationships will be shaped and supported in ways that help organisations and employees now and in the future [3].

As business strategies and teams grow more agile to keep pace with recurring change in companies, HR technology must adapt as well, including providing employees with more user-friendly and efficient experiences. HR leaders should therefore revise their priorities for 2021 and onwards. Future workspace should inspire workers to communicate, collaborate, solve problems, deepen engagement and spur productivity. The implications for HR is to equip leaders to manage remote teams over the long haul, preserve the company culture with a more distributed workforce and engage workers in a cost-constrained environment. According to [4], resilient HR should support with the business transformation.

2. HR competencies

[2] found that HR leaders should have the necessary competencies to be able to make a strategic contribution, to engage properly and to add value to ensure peaceful employment relations. [2] also found that innovation, business acumen, leadership, analytics and metrics and personal characteristics such as self-efficacy, honesty, openness, agility, flexibility and adaptability are of the essence. Leveraging HR Analytics to drive all people-related decisions is an essential future HR competency [5]. HR needs to start developing core business acumen rather than standardised HR capabilities. Fundamental business drivers like economic growth, capital markets, changing customer behaviour, competition and global business trends must be clearly understood by HR leaders [6].

[7] found six distinct competencies required by HR analysts including consulting, technical knowledge, data fluency and data analysis, HR and business acumen, research and discovery and storytelling and communication. With the advent of new communication platforms and digital tools, the topic of the development of communicative competencies received a new round of interest from researchers [8]. HR should promote open dialogue and instal direct communication channels between all levels within an organisation to help keep leadership informed of employee concerns [9].

[10] found that foresight and being adaptable are essential HR competencies. Numerical data such as metrics focuses on outputs and analytics focuses on the combination of data that are part of metrics [11]. To be competitive, it is essential that HR leaders have the ability to meet the needs and future needs of line management in the workplace [12]. In order to ensure successful human and machine collaboration, HR leaders must understand analytics and automation to improve productivity and decision-making [13]. The current explosion of HR technology is far from over. On the contrary, there is hardly any HR function left that does not have an impressive range of software and tools designed to automate and digitise its processes. As automation and digitalisation continue to reshape job roles and skill needs, HR and learning groups will need to create increasingly agile and effective reskilling strategies for workers [14].

HR can navigate this new landscape by taking advantage of the advancement in technology – most notably by utilising AI and big data to open up opportunities for strategic value creation [15]. Technological agility will therefore be a key differentiator for HR's value add to business outcome [5]. There could be a more dramatic, revolutionary impact in the business environment and on workforce management from AI and technological advancements in the near future. The world is still in the early phases of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, thus many areas remain unpredictable and uncontrollable. Functional HR competencies alone will not enable successful HR careers. Specialist skills will be required to fast track HR career opportunities and career growth [5]. Within the overall HR skill sets, future-oriented capabilities

will take prominence. Functional changes in HR operations are freeing up HR professionals for more strategic work. This is also enabling the emergence of new roles such as workforce analytics professional, robot trainer, virtual culture architect, data, talent and AI integrator and cyber ecosystem designer [15].

Practical recommendations to improve HR competencies:

- The question arises: Is HR open in their communication? Feedback from internal and external clients by means of interviews, surveys and other relevant methods will add value to ensure open communication of HR on various platforms.
- Self-reflection and feedback from superiors, subordinates and peers on one's own self-efficacy, honesty, openness, agility, flexibility and adaptability are therefore needed to improve oneself.
- In order for HR business leaders and academics to be well-developed in terms of their business acumen, they must obtain knowledge to understand business operations and functions, comprehend how HRM practices contribute to core business functions, and understand the organisation's external environment.
- Courses and training about HR analytics need to be successfully completed in order to ensure a full understanding and execution of this competency.
- HR leaders need to obtain the necessary software and tools to ensure that their practitioners are able to successfully meet the needs of their internal and external clients.
- HR leaders, HR practitioners and HR academics need to ensure that they have the ability to utilise all kinds of relevant technology and to have technological agility to be prepared for remote working, AI, career growth and other challenges in the future world of work.

3. Future workspace

The modern workplace is almost unrecognisable from ten years ago. The 9–5 has been replaced with remote working, and corner offices and rigid banks of desks have made way for flexible multi-purpose spaces. The importance of workspace design and spatial features has recently been emphasised in corporate business literature, but the volume of literature on this topic available from peer-reviewed journals is still limited [12]. We are heading towards a future where more employees are working from home, and increasingly reliant on a digital workplace that can fit their needs.

The recent health crisis has made this clear. Re-establishing organisational culture will become a top priority for HR departments as organisations look to adopt more flexible working arrangements. Pre-COVID, many organisations used lunchrooms, office collaboration spaces, and conference rooms to promote idea sharing and organic conversations across titles and departments. Companies are now finding virtual colleague relationships are starting to polarise into common roles and sectors [16]. There will likely be a major shift towards hybrid working models that capitalise on the benefits of both remote and office working [9].

Managers as well as HR leaders should constantly plan and shape how their organisation can improve future workspace so that it is beneficial for the business and the employees [17]. The future workspace should support agile working

of employees and manager [18]. De [19] emphasise the importance of involving end-users in planning and designing their workspace. Advancement in future workspace, technology, robotics and artificial intelligence (AI) suggests new work design. Programs for skilling up for new jobs and for developing interfaces between human and machines must be rapid, flexible and tailored to maximise the potential value created by human and machines [20]. To plan the future workspace, it is recommended that HR managers involve line management and other stakeholders such as IT and other relevant staff members [21].

An employee's office, home, a third places such as a coffee shop can be seen as workspaces [22]. [19] state that is important to be innovative when planning workspace. Innovation is what agile is all about [23]. Agile is a framework and a working mind-set which helps respond to changing requirements. The concept of agile working revolves around empowering staff to work where, when and how they choose, to ensure they perform at their best. As organisations look to accelerate the pace of remote working in the foreseeable future, it is essential that to make a conscious effort to preserve their core values and emphasise building a workplace that puts people at the forefront of every decision [9]. With less visibility on employees, leaders and managers have to determine how to both monitor and measure productivity. HR leaders need to reassess and modify metrics for what performance looks like due to the new remote working in many companies [16]. New workspaces seem to be accompanying new challenges for HR and management.

Practical recommendations to improve future workspace:

- In the past, HR was not always part of workspace planning but in the future world of work, this will be a requirement for HR leaders.
- This new challenge needs to get the necessary attention and HR should therefore discuss this topic with top management, line management and the workers to create an awareness of their future role in planning workspace.
- Traditional thinking about workspace will be challenged and HR should therefore be a change agent in this regard.
- HR leaders need to embark on improving their knowledge about workspace to best accommodate future work.

4. Engagement

Humans have a basic need for belonging and connection. This fact will be even more so in the future world of work due to technology and man-machine challenges. A lack of interpersonal relationships can negatively impact our health, our ability to adjust, and overall well-being. These truths extend to the workplace. Employees want and need to build relationships at work. Personal connections with managers, leaders, coworkers, and customers lead to increased employee engagement and performance [24]. [25] defines an engaged employee as “those who are involved in, enthusiastic about, and committed to their work and workplace”. Engagement in the workplace has evolved considerably over the last decade. From remote work privileges to flexible hours, many of the benefits that were once viewed as benefits are now an expectation for the working world [26].

The HR leaders should engage with the line manager to improve overall performance [27]. Employee engagement can be a critical tool in helping organisations to respond rapidly to moving business environments, as well as playing a key role in

growth and sustainability [28]. Traumatic events such as the Covid-19 pandemic has taught us the importance of embracing our humanity, including the need for compassion in the workplace. It is therefore important to acknowledge that we are all going through challenges, some shared and some unique, that benefit from others' empathy [29]. [30] found that the importance of infusing HR with a psychological concern for human dignity results in respect for humanity at work, as well as advocacy for employees and their communities.

[10] found that meaningful engagement is essential and not mere engaging for the sake of engaging. This can be ascribed to the fact that managers and HR leaders will have to invest in people and guide them into discovering purpose and making a difference in the future workplace [10]. This is of utmost importance in order to ensure productivity in the future world of work. When it comes to measuring and tracking engagement, most companies still evaluate engagement on an annual, or longer, basis using traditional survey techniques [31]. While these practices have provided a wealth of insight into the dimensions and impact of engagement, it is time to rethink how we are measuring engagement and, more importantly, how the same digital tools can be applied towards improving the productivity, retention, and satisfaction of the workforce. The employee engagement is positively correlated to level of leadership engagement and top management should therefore have a vision and commitment [32].

Technology alone cannot drive employee engagement. Technology does not create a safe space for culture. It does other things, like support connection, communication and collaboration [33]. It is therefore the role of the HR leader to drive engagement and support to management in order to ensure appropriate engagement. To create a more engaged, worker-focused organisation, you need to align around a common, unified vision that clearly explains the problem and the way you want to solve it [33]. It looks like there could be a shift from engagement to experience, and employees will expect a truly personalised employee journey, from first point of contact right through to their continued employment [28].

[5] proposes ongoing employee surveys to sustain and engage employee participation in building the organisation's desired digital culture. [9] agrees by stating that focusing on employee engagement through pulse and satisfaction surveys is a great way to gauge their experience and ideas, and get their recommendations on how best to transition to the new normal. [9] also states that by introducing diversity, equality, and inclusion policies and programmes will help support organisational culture and create an environment that promotes trust, unity, empathy, and engagement. In the future, the concept of engagement, which gauges passion, commitment, and effort, will give way to employee experience, which is the journey that an employee takes in an organisation [6].

Practical recommendations to improve engagement:

- There seems to be a perception among HR scholars and HR leaders that engagement is dated and will not need attention in the future. According to the above literature review, it is clear that engagement will be an ongoing practice in the future world of work.
- The reason for this ongoing practice is due to various human needs such as well-being, trust and support due to various future personal and work challenges that will need to be addressed.
- Unfortunately, engagement is time-consuming and therefore needs deliberate planning to ensure continuous informal and formal meetings and conversations with management, workers and other relevant stakeholders.

5. Employment relations

One of the biggest lingering questions is about how future relationships will look as technology keeps coming into the workplace. How will relationships evolve as robots, automation, and artificial intelligence become more common in the workplace? How do workers feel about these changes? Although workers may feel better about technology in the workplace, there is concerns about how automation, robots, and AI will affect work and employment relations [3]. There has been less discussion on what happens to the jobs and experiences of workers in flexible employment relationships (e.g. temporary agency work and other forms of subcontracted labor, as well as new forms of working, such as in the gig economy) [34]. Gig workers can be classified into crowd workers, who are completing and delivering tasks online—location independent, and work-on-demand workers, who are completing and delivering tasks offline—location-dependent (although it is location dependent the work is not inevitably performed on-site and hence still shows location flexibility) [34].

Digital transformation and the reorganisation of the firm have given rise to new forms of work that diverge significantly from the standard employment relationship [35]. The fourth industrial revolution does not only bring change to future world of work but such change comes with significant threats and opportunities to the relationship between employment relations stakeholders [36]. Employment relations is a dynamic matter and therefore needs constant attention to ensure harmony and productivity [12]. When employers, employees and trade unions or other employee representatives work together in a relationship of mutual trust, difficulties can be discussed and sorted out before they become problems, productivity and profitability can be increased with greater rewards for the workforce [37]. The key to this advantage is partnership and this partnership can be a positive force for generating ideas, reacting quickly and making optimum use of the skill and knowledge of workforce and management alike [37].

How workers engage in new forms of employment relations can be very challenging for employers [38]. [39] raise a concern that the digitalisation of workspaces may influence the relations between the employer and employee. HR will need to help assess which tasks throughout the organisation can be automated and then reskill those whose jobs are affected by automation [1]. This may have an effect on employment relations. Any successful business requires trusted relationships. However, traditional ways of growing and nurturing networks —conferences, coffee meetups, and more—are not options in many workplaces these days, at least at the beginning of this year. HR must assist with the adapting to new ways of facilitating relationships and creating cohesive teams in less-than-ideal circumstances [29].

Practical recommendations to improve employment relations:

- As in the case of engagement, employment relations will also still need to be focused on in the future as a result of various challenges.
- The complexity of employment relations due to challenges such as digitalisation, automation and gig workers, necessitates a rethinking of this HR responsibility.
- Mutual trust and productivity between management, workers, trade unions and other employee representatives need to be facilitated by HR leaders. This can be done by establishing platforms where open communication between these stakeholders are possible and reliable.

6. Resilience

There are all kinds of adversity and trauma in life. The response to trauma may include shattered beliefs about the self, others, and the future [40]. HR leaders should be resilient in order to have the ability to withstand adversity, bounce back, and grow despite life's downturns. [10] found that resilience is an important ingredient to ensure a successful future workplace. Flexibility, adaptability, and perseverance can help people tap into their resilience by changing certain thoughts and behaviours [41]. It was also found that enough sleep, eating well, exercising, and social support can assist to being resilient [42].

The involvement of automation processes and the use of robots in the fourth industrial revolution have necessitated management to rethink and improve issues related to human resources (HR) to ensure organisational performance [43]. Nurturing resilience as a core value and building HR processes that support resilience through encouraging career path shifts, job sculpting and job crafting opportunities are of utmost importance [5].

[4] mentions the four phases of the Covid-19 pandemic:

- React: figure out what's going on.
- Respond: take immediate actions to reduce harm or help teams.
- Return: come back to a new work environment or back to the office.
- Transform: redesign jobs, services, and customer offerings for the new world.

[4] also refers to the Big Reset in HR which indicates that HR must move from being responsive (efficient) to resilient (adaptive). As business strategies continue to evolve, organisations will need to take deliberate action to prioritise resilience and not just focus on efficiency if they want to succeed in their strategic ambitions [44]. Resilient HR refers to HR being cross-trained, highly collaborative, distributed, coordinated and agile. Hybrid workforce models can increase agility and resilience, drive competitive differentiation and save money [45]. Hybrid workforce planning is a deliberate design that enables employees to flow through various work sites — from remote solo locations and microsites of small populations to traditional concentrated facilities (offices, factories, retail, etc.) [45]. In such a hybrid workforce, managers will need to trust in the goals they have set — and trust employees to work productively against those goals, regardless of location. Employees on the other hand will need to be flexible and comfortable moving between various work environments when the need arises [45]. [46] accentuates that a shift from managing the employee experience to managing the life experience of the employees, employees' flexibility over "when" they work, recruiting that will be increasingly automated, mental health support that will become the norm, as well as the distributing of the Covid-19 vaccine should be addressed as part of future HR. These are clear examples of how important resilience is going to be in future work in order to deal with such various burning issues.

Practical recommendations to improve resilience:

- A survey to obtain a snapshot and conducting focus groups to obtain detailed information of the current resilience climate within the organisation will assist HR leaders and HR academics to better investigate, prepare and upskill management, workers and HR themselves.

- The above types of investigations are of utmost importance because a lack of resilience, organisations will not be able to thrive in the future world of work. HR leaders therefore need to develop a strategy or an approach to best fit the development of resilience of HR, management and workers.
- Mentoring, coaching and training are examples of effective methods to improve one's resilience.

7. Conclusion

Due to the pandemic's effect on the economy, organisations were quickly forced to transform and adapt to the new normal in order to survive. It is vital that HR evolves and transforms across every element of the HR lifecycle to meet a new set of organisational needs. The pandemic is not just a public health crisis – it's also an economic transformation where products, services, customer experiences, and physical work locations may change. While new technologies can help immeasurably when viewed as a tool to contribute to well thought-out change, organisational objectives and priorities, that alone will not be enough. Resilient HR means that HR professionals and leaders, are set up to quickly enable this transformation – not only helping people come back to work, but also helping the company transform in the fastest, most positive way. HR leaders should therefore develop a strategy that encompasses the enhancement of their own HR competencies, future workspace, engagement, employment relations and resilience. The execution of the strategy will assist to strategically position and prepare the organisation to effectively deal with future work challenges and developments.

A range of avenues for future research can therefore be identified. First, research could be broadened to obtain more insight into the future of HR. Second, case studies can be conducted to investigate the views of public and private sector managers regarding their future expectations of their HR managers. Third, future research should also suggest a study using statistical methods to determine the relationships between HR competencies, future workspace, engagement, employment relations and resilience.

In conclusion, it is essential that HR must go beyond the here and now in order to properly prepare for the future world of work.

Acknowledgements

This chapter drew on research funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa (reference number TTK150621119893) as well as by the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) in South Africa. This funding is gratefully acknowledged.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Thanks

A word of gratitude is expressed towards Christiaan Schultz whom assisted with the technical editing of the references in this chapter.

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