A Comparative Study of HR Managers' Competencies in Strategic Roles

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[Abstract] The competitive business environment is pushing the human resource (HR) function beyond its traditional administrative role into a strategic role in business. The comparative study described here examined the perceived importance and ability of human resource (HR) managers in their strategic roles, as perceived by HR managers and non-HR managers. A mail survey was used to collect quantitative data in the domains of *strategic management, business knowledge, management of talent, employee relations, quality of work-family life,* and *information technology*. Non-HR managers rated the importance of HR managers' strategic roles significantly higher than the perceived ability of HR managers in those strategic roles. Furthermore, non-HR managers rated the ability of HR managers significantly lower than how HR managers self-rated their own abilities.

[Keywords] HR managers; strategic competencies; importance; ability; survey

Introduction

HR's transformation from an administrative support function to a strategic business partner (i.e., a metaphor for HR helping to ensure the success of business strategies) has accelerated in recent years and has intensified due to changes, among others, in increased competition and workforce demographics (Baird & Meshoulam, 1984; Buyens & De Vos, 2001; Laabs, 2000). The slowness of this transformation is attributed to HR professionals' lack of business and leadership skills and other employees' negative perceptions of their competencies. Few HR professionals are perceived to possess the business acumen, functional expertise, and strategic thinking necessary to move their companies forward (e.g., Fulford & Enz, 1995; Martell & Carroll, 1995; Wright, McMahan, McCormick, & Sherman, 1998; Yeung, Woolcock, & Sullivan, 1996). Yet, without HR's transformation to managing the HR function strategically, the executive team may continue to regard the HR department as a drain on firm resources and not as a contributor to firm performance. This perceived HR image is likely to distort its effectiveness as a strategic partner. So, being fully competent in human relations is no longer enough for HR professionals to have entry into strategic discussions (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich, Brockbank, & Johnson, 2009).

Literature Review

In light of prior HR studies, HR professionals can anticipate encountering significant hurdles in becoming a strategic partner. Data from middle and senior managers indicated that "HR directors play a less significant role in the launching of HR strategies in a significant proportion of organizations" than their fellow colleagues (Skinner & Mabey, 1997, p. 473). Likewise, a case study showed that HR professionals' input was not sought when an organization was engaged in a merger and acquisition activity (Jeris, Johnson, & Anthony, 2002). The implication is that HR professionals are not regarded as competent to perform other than administrative tasks.

Prior work also indicates that general managers consider other functional areas, such as research and development, manufacturing, and marketing more important in implementing business strategies than HR (Martell & Carroll, 1995). The largest impact of HR is perceived to be in its traditional employee related issues, a view which narrows the possibility of HR to turn into a strategic contributor (Fulford & Enz, 1995). Even more discouraging is the finding that an HR executive's high involvement in strategic planning had a negative relationship to a firm's performance (Wright et al., 1998).

Not surprisingly, HR leaders got the lowest ratings in aligning HR processes (e.g., strategic staffing, development, and leadership succession) with business strategy, as assessed by HR leaders and others (Walker & Reif, 1999). Another study offers a further pessimistic look at the HR function and whether HR staff can build strategic partnerships because HR had only background administrative functions (Cunningham & Hyman, 1999).

Purpose of the Study

The present study examines the perceived competencies that are required of HR professionals in strategic management and to identify any competency gaps as seen by HR managers and non-HR managers. This is accomplished by asking HR managers and non-HR managers of various organizations to evaluate the competencies required for HR's strategic roles. In particular, the focus of the study is on (a) the importance of HR managers' competencies and (b) the present ability levels of HR managers as perceived by HR and non-HR managers at their organizations.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of HR managers (i.e., HR respondents) ($n = 44$) and non-HR managers (i.e., non-HR respondents) ($n = 76$) drawn from organizations in the northern Midwest region of the United States. The subgroups were as follows: Female HR ($n = 30$), male HR ($n = 14$), female non-HR ($n = 33$), and male non-HR ($n = 43$) managers. Primary participants were HR managers who were members of the Society for Human Resource Management. They were asked to identify four secondary study participants at the managerial level outside the HR function within their organizations. Both female HR and female non-HR participants were predominantly working as managers, whereas male HR participantss were likely to be directors and male non-HR participants were either managers or vice presidents. The study participants, to a large extent, represented small to medium size organizations with a total employment of up to 500 employees. Their organizations were mostly in services, manufacturing, and insurance, although other types of industries were represented as well.

Almost all of the HR participants (i.e., HR managers) performed multiple functions in HR. More than a third of the non-HR participants (i.e., non-HR managers) worked in operations/production and, to some degree, in sales or finance/accounting. A majority of the HR participants had a bachelor's degree and about 30% of them had also a master's degree. Their field of degree was largely in business or human resource management/human resource administration. Some had a degree in management, economics, and psychology and even in political science, law, and physical education.

Survey Instruments

Current literature detailing competencies, critical for the roles of HR in strategic management, was used as a framework for examining HR managers' competencies. A survey instrument that incorporates the domains of *strategic management, business knowledge, management of talent, employee relations, quality of work-family life,* and *information technology* was developed to gather data regarding the importance of HR managers' competencies and their ability level in these competencies.

The 2005-study employed two slightly different versions of a self-administered survey: one for HR managers and the other for non-HR managers. The first section of each survey instrument consisted of 37 mutually exclusive closed-ended statements grouped by content. The statements covered the six domains. Ratings were on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (*not important*) to 5 (*extremely important*). These numbers were anchored with the following statements: *Not important*, *somewhat unimportant*, *neither important or unimportant*, *somewhat important*, and *extremely important*. The second section of the surveys consisted of eight demographic items clustered at the end of each survey. Another dimension of the survey instruments was to determine how HR managers rate their own ability as compared to the ratings of non-HR managers for the same set of competency domains. The rating scale was also on a 5-point scale that ranged from 1 (*none at all*) to 5 (*high*). These numbers were anchored with the following statements: *None at all*, *below average*, *average*, *above average*, and *high*.

In summary, the 37 statements for competencies were rated in two ways: (a) for importance of the competency to the participants' organization (1 = *not important*, 5 = *extremely important*) and (b) for ability of an HR manager in the same competency at the participants' organization (1 = *none at all*, 5 = *high*).

Procedure

HR managers were asked to rate the importance of the HR strategic competencies to their organization and to rate their own qualifications. Similarly, non-HR managers were asked to rate the importance of the same set of HR strategic competencies to their organization and to rate an HR manager's ability level in the same competencies at their organization.

Results

Overall, HR managers and non-HR managers ($N = 120$) were in a reasonable agreement about the level of importance of the six competency domains at their organizations. They perceived *strategic management* as the most important competency and *information technology* as the least important competency for HR managers. Female managers perceived the level of the importance of most of the competencies at a somewhat higher level than male managers. A one-way analysis of variance or ANOVA did not, however, indicate any significant differences in the responses of the four subgroups regarding their importance ratings at the .05 level of significance. The decision rule for the study was that if the *p* value falls at or below .05, there is a significant difference.

Table 1. *Group Statistics and Significance Test of HR Managers' Ability by HR and Non-HR* **Managers**

| Competency | | Managers | | | | |
| | | HR | Non-HR | Total | *t* | *p* |
		($n = 44$)	($n = 76$)	($N = 120$)		
Strategic management	*M*	4.10	3.59	3.78	3.78	<.01*
	SD	0.51	0.80	0.75		
Business knowledge	*M*	3.93	3.28	3.52	5.11	<.01*
	SD	0.57	0.71	0.73		
Management of talent	*M*	3.82	3.29	3.48	3.09	<.01*
	SD	0.69	1.02	0.95		
Employee relations	*M*	3.54	3.24	3.35	1.77	.08
	SD	0.74	0.95	0.89		
Quality of work-family life	*M*	3.62	3.33	3.43	1.38	.17
	SD	0.90	1.23	1.13		
Information technology	*M*	3.50	3.41	3.44	0.46	.65
	SD	0.84	1.03	0.96		

Note. Ratings were on a 5-point scale (1 = *none at all,* 5 = *high*).

*Significant if $p \leq .05$.

The first half of Table 1 shows group statistics of HR and non-HR managers' ability ratings. HR managers ($n = 44$) perceived their own ability level as *above average* in the six competency domains, whereas non-HR managers ($n = 76$) perceived HR managers' ability level as *above average* only in *strategic management* and *information technology.* The non-HR managers perceived the ability at a *below average* level in the other four competency domains. More specifically, HR managers perceived their own ability in *strategic management* ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.51$) at the highest level and in *information technology* at the lowest level ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.84$). Non-HR managers gave the highest ratings to the ability of HR

managers in *strategic management* (*M* = 3.59, *SD* = 0.80) and the lowest ratings to *employee relations* (*M* = 3.24, *SD* = 0.95). The second half of Table 1 presents the results of an independent groups *t* test used to identify significant differences in the ratings of HR managers (*n* = 44) and non-HR managers (*n* = 76). The demographics of the two groups represented an independent variable and the ratings of the perceived HR ability represented dependent variables. HR managers rated their own ability significantly higher than non-HR managers rated them in *strategic management* (*t* = 3.78, *p* < .01), *business knowledge* (*t* = 5.11, *p* < .01), and *management of talent* (*t* = 3.09, *p* < .01) at the .05 level (two-tailed).

Locations of the significant differences in the data were identified through a multiple means comparison (data matrix not shown). For this purpose, the ratings of the subgroups consisting of female HR (*n* = 30), male HR (*n* = 14), female non-HR (*n* = 33), and male non-HR (*n* = 43) managers were included in the testing. The Levene test of homogeneity of variance was employed to decide which *post hoc* test was appropriate for the multiple comparisons of the subgroup means. For the significance test, the difference had to be .01 (.05 / 4). The Levene test showed that the variances in all of the subgroups were equal (.44 ≤ *p* ≥ .02). Subsequently, the Scheffé *post hoc* test was used with the assumption that the variances were equal and because the subgroups were of different sizes. The significance was measured at the .05 level.

The Levene test showed that female HR managers rated their own ability competencies significantly higher than female non-HR managers rated them in *strategic management* (*p* = .01), *business knowledge* (*p* = .03), and *management of talent* (*p* = .03). Similarly, female and male HR managers rated themselves significantly higher (both at *p* < .01) than how male non-HR managers rated them in the *business knowledge* competency. Finally, male HR managers also rated themselves significantly higher (*p* = .04) than female non-HR managers rated them for *business knowledge*.

Competency ratings from the point of view of HR managers (*n* = 44) were used to identify differences between the perceived level of importance and ability in each competency domain (first half of Table 2). The Pearson product-moment correlation (designated as the letter *r*) was applied to the data to determine how strong or weak the relationship or correlation between the variables of importance and ability was.

Table 2. *Pearson correlations for importance and ability by HR and non-HR managers*

	Managers			
Competency	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*
Strategic management	.39*	.01	.40**	<.01
Business knowledge	.53**	<.01	.40**	<.01
Management of talent	.31*	.04	.49**	<.01
Employee relations	.50**	<.01	.29*	.01
Quality of work-family life	.38*	.01	.62**	<.01
Information technology	.55**	<.01	.57**	<.01

Note. [a]*n* = 44. [b]*n* = 76.

*r was significant at .05 level, two-tailed. **r was significant at .01 level, two-tailed

The variables of importance and ability appeared moderately related in *information technology* (*r* = .55, *p* < .01), *business knowledge* (*r* = .53, *p* < .01), and *employee relations* (*r* = .50, *p* < .01) at the .01 level, whereas *strategic management* (*r* = .39, *p* = .01), *quality of work-family life* (*r* = .38, *p* = .01), and *management of talent* (*r* = .31, *p* = .04) had a low correlation at the .05 level of significance. Ergo, *r-*

statistics indicated that each competency domain of the importance variable was positively and linearly associated with the corresponding ability variable among the ratings of HR managers. It is unknown, however, if there was a third variable causing the linear relationship between importance and ability ratings, or if the variable importance caused the variable ability to be correlated, or vice versa, or the relationship may have been a coincidence. To test the significance of the correlation coefficients and to identify any significant differences between the competency pairs of importance and ability, a paired samples *t* test was conducted. But none of the differences between the six pairs showed significant *p* values.

Competency ratings from the point of view of non-HR managers (*n* = 76) were used to identify any differences between their perceived level of importance and ability in each of the six competency domains (second half of Table 2). Again, the Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted to determine the strength of the relationship between the two variables. As the second half of Table 2 exhibits, moderate correlations were identified for *quality of work-family life* (*r* = .62, *p* < .01), *information technology* (*r* = .57, *p* < .01), and *management of talent* (*r* = .49, *p* < .01) at the .01 level of measurement (two-tailed). Other competency domains had a low correlation at the same level of measurement. The domain of *employee relations* (*r* = .29, *p* = .01) had the lowest correlation at the .05 level of p measurement (two-tailed). These positive correlation coefficients indicated that relationships between the two variables were linear for all the competency domains. Nevertheless, these coefficients do not explain any causal connection between the variables of importance and ability.

A paired samples *t* test showed that the correlations between each domain pair of importance and ability - data for the variables came from the same source (i.e., non-HR managers) - were significant, as reported by the *p* values (*p* ≤ .01) in Table 3.

Table 3. *Paired Samples Test for Importance and Ability by Non-HR Managers[a]*

Pairs	Paired differences			
	M	*SD*	*t*	*p*
Importance and ability				
Strategic management	0.51	0.80	5.53	<.01*
Business knowledge	0.46	0.80	5.05	<.01*
Management of talent	0.78	0.94	7.20	<.01*
Employee relations	0.46	1.07	3.77	<.01*
Quality of work-family life	0.41	1.01	3.55	<.01*
Information technology	0.29	0.88	2.87	.01*

Note. [a]n = 76.
*Significant if *p* ≤ .05.

The *t* values had a high range from 2.87 to 7.20 with *p* values falling well below the region of .05. Thus, non-HR managers' perceptions of the importance of each of the six competency domains to their organizations and their perceptions of the present ability levels of HR managers at their organizations were in disagreement. Simply put, they perceived the importance of the competencies at the higher level than the abilities of HR managers at their organizations.

Discussion

The *strategic management* domain contained analytical, visioning, and leadership skills that the managers viewed as important for HR. Prior research, however, showed the opposite of what was observed in the

present study; HR practitioners gave the lowest score for their strategic role (Conner & Ulrich, 1996). However, this finding may be biased toward strategic issues, because data was collected at HR professionals' development workshops. Significant differences in the domains of *strategic management*, *business knowledge*, and *management of talent* between the ratings of HR managers and non-HR managers indicated that the managers were not in consensus about the perceived ability level of HR managers in these three domains. HR managers' self-ratings about their ability were considerably higher than the ratings provided by non-HR managers. This is consistent with other studies with HR professionals giving higher ratings for their performance than a non-HR group (e.g., Ulrich, Brockbank, Yeung, & Lake, 1995; Wright, McMahan, Snell, & Gerhart, 2001). The differences in perceptions may partially explain why HR professionals' involvement at the strategic level is proceeding at a slow pace.

The majority of HR managers in this study were responsible for most of the HR functions, which was likely due to the small organizational size. In smaller organizations, HR professionals typically perform transactional activities making it difficult for them to move to strategic roles (e.g., Caldwell, 2008). On the other hand, other prior research suggests that the expectations of HR professionals are not affected by the company size up to 20,000 employees (Ulrich et al., 1995). Regardless, being responsible for benefits, compensation, recruiting, and labor relations, among others, may have constrained less experienced HR managers' efforts to move from an administrative to a strategic function. Also, staffing constraints may have imposed limitations on HR managers' contribution at a strategic level.

HR managers fell short of executing business strategies and contributing to long-term planning, as perceived by non-HR managers. Yet, *business knowledge* is considered highly important for HR's new role, whether it be as a strategic or business partner (e.g., Caudron, 2003; Fulford & Enz, 1995; Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich et al., 1995; Zwell, 2000). In a prior study, CEOs "expected the HR function to have an in-depth knowledge of business, a strategic focus on business issues, and the ability to execute strategies having HR implications" (Lawson & Limbrick, 1996, p. 73). Undoubtedly, these expectations are challenging for HR professionals because they deviate from their traditional practices which have not been seen as providing economic value to the company (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, & Wright, 2000).

An implication of the low score in *management of talent* is that HR managers are not able to attract, develop, and retain the right talent for competitive advantage at the level expected at their organizations. It further suggests that HR managers are not collaborating with line managers and others outside the HR function to enhance a competitive edge for their organizations through utilization of the workforce talent.

A variety of factors may have influenced non-HR managers' perceptions of HR managers' ability. The length of time non-HR managers had known an HR manager, and possibly, the HR managers' managerial or leadership style could have affected the raters' perceptions. Prior research shows that raters are influenced by their off-work relationship with ratees (Eichinger & Lombardo, 2004). Knowing a person for one to three years seems to provide the most accurate competency ratings. How much non-HR managers were in contact with HR managers or how long time they had known each other could not be determined from the present study.

The findings indicated no significant differences in the ratings of HR managers between the paired variables of importance and ability. They may, thus, have perceived their own ability level according to how important they believed a competency domain was to their organization. In contrast, they failed to meet non-HR managers' expectations of demonstrating a high level of ability in all competency domains. This suggests that HR managers had perceived deficiencies at a strategic level. These deficiencies may be partly due to their lack of trusting relationships with those outside the HR function found critical for HR's credibility (Truss & Gill, 2007). A view that HR managers add no or little value to their organizations may also explain the significant differences between the importance and ability ratings among non-HR managers (e.g., Brockett, 2009). Finally, the culture of the organizations studied might have constrained HR managers' ability to be empowered or there may have been some confusion about their responsibilities as indicated by prior work (Guest & King, 2004).

Limitations and Recommendations

The study findings have limitations. First, the sample was not randomly selected and represented only a

northern Midwest region of the United States. Hence, the study participants are not claimed to represent the population. Second, they were from small to medium size organizations and, therefore, generalizing from the findings to large organizations is not recommended. Third, subjective ratings can be biased and impacted by a variety of factors some of which were delineated in the discussion.

Judging from the findings, HR professionals need to develop competencies in strategic management. Lack of such competencies is likely to prompt the demand for other professionals with business background outside the HR function to take over strategic HR roles. A prior study involving executives suggests that competency increases perceived credibility, which was associated with a significant source of power (Kanter, 1993). So, having work experience from functional units is likely to maximize HR professionals' contribution in a strategic function.

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