



**A New Call to Action
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Introduction

The human resources profession is at a crossroads. Again.

The industry has been here before. In September 2000, two federal HR specialists authored a paper called “A Call to Action,” which outlined a crisis facing the HR profession at the time. The authors warned that HR professionals need to be involved as strategic partners within individual agencies to align HR with the agency’s goals. But for this to happen, HR professionals needed to expand their core competencies. Failure to do so would result in professional obsolescence.

Nearly 10 years later, the same thing can be said. Only now the challenge is deeper. Today’s human capital space is far different from the one anticipated in 2000. Although the report cautions about the speed of change, the thought leaders could hardly have imagined the depth of change that has affected the human capital space, including advances in technology, new federal agencies, and new regulatory frameworks. Compounding the issue is the deterioration of analytical and strategic skills among HR personnel. Some progress has been made, but it has been sporadic and inconsistent.

Given these conditions, it’s time for a new call to action for the HR profession within the federal government.

I. A Shift in Focus

Speed has become one of the primary drivers of hiring within federal agencies. It has always been the primary topic of debate within government. Now, Congress has called for speeding up the hiring process among federal agencies. Such an initiative falls squarely on the shoulders of HR professionals, but this approach poses several challenges.

For one, there is a shortage of trained individuals who can execute HR tasks at a high level within the federal government. Since 2000, technology has evolved and the government has established new departments and passed new regulations. All the while, there has been a lack of focus on improving the competencies and skills of HR professionals, as well as training new individuals entering the field.

Further complicating matters, federal agencies are increasingly relegating HR to a strictly operational role, something akin to an order-taking mentality. For some agencies, HR’s function is simply to fulfill a hiring request. Absent from the process is the act of assessing such considerations as: What skill sets are required for the job? Does the agency need certain types of individuals across the organization? Is the agency better suited to hire someone with different competencies than the ones initially outlined?



What is happening is that agencies are increasingly focused on quantity, process, and time as the primary considerations. In other words, to fill the most positions in the shortest period of time. This results in a one-size-fits-all approach to hiring among various agencies, further promoting the stereotype of HR as a mere order taker. Unfortunately, this is the wrong approach—for HR and the agencies.

If a federal research organization such as the National Institutes of Health would like to hire a world-renowned oncologist—of which there are maybe 10 in the world—the recruitment process would require a massive amount of effort from several people. The process may take a year or more. But such a thorough process isn't possible under the current quantity-and-time model. Not only is it impossible to find, recruit, and hire the right candidate in a short timeframe, the current “time is everything” model has left many HR professionals without the skills necessary to find, recruit, and hire the right candidate in any timeframe.

The fact is that in many circumstances, quantity and time are irrelevant considerations. Furthermore, quantity and time are also poor incentives for HR professionals; an HR manager can always find a way to meet time and quantity measurements. But without performing due diligence to find the right candidate, HR will likely end up delivering several prospects that don't fulfill the agency's needs, which leads to lengthening the process unnecessarily. Improvements in process are always desired but do not solve the issue of quality. It simply speeds up a process that lacks analysis.

That's why *quality* needs to be the primary driver, with speed and quantity the secondary measures of success. The ability to deliver a higher-quality pool of hiring prospects will ultimately deliver better results to federal agencies. In order to meet such quality requirements, HR professionals need the proper training and skills. But those skills have steadily been on the decline.

II. A New Landscape Requires New Skills

The authors of the 2000 paper wrote: “New roles will require a more skilled and competent HR professional with higher-level analytical and critical thinking skills. To ensure that HR is positioned to capably perform, increased emphasis will be placed on selecting and developing individuals who can clearly demonstrate that they have the competencies needed in this new environment.”

Since then, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) developed a revised competency model for HR professionals. Among the core competencies are knowledge of business systems and information technology, strong writing abilities, and analytic, strategic, and creative thinking (you can download a PDF of the OPM competency model at www.opm.gov/studies/transapp.pdf).



The OPM's new initiative is to be applauded for attempting to benchmark and analyze process requirements throughout government. But while the OPM competency model does a great job of outlining the types of training and skill sets HR professionals need, few, if any, agencies are applying the model. Much of the problem lies in the question of who will fund the training and the development of individuals against those competencies.

The emphasis on analytical and strategic thinking is especially critical, as that affects how well HR professionals integrate the other core competencies within their jobs. Technology, for example, has become an even bigger driving force in HR since the beginning of the decade. February 2000 saw the launch the first Web-based recruiting program in federal government. Today, a federal HR professional requires knowledge of enterprise resource planning software, automated staffing systems, and database management, among other tools with high learning curves.

These technologies are essential in managing HR programs. But HR professionals are left to adapt their work to serve the technology rather than the other way around. Too many agencies have not examined their business processes to determine how they can use technology more effectively. As a result, HR professionals are left trying to manage cumbersome back-office systems out of context to the agencies' business processes and goals, making ineffective and inefficient use of technology.

In order to improve service delivery in the HR field, federal agencies need to figure out how to use technology more efficiently and effectively. That requires critical thinking and analytical skills.

This leads back to the problem of being measured on quantity and time. Because of the emphasis on these measurements, the HR industry has focused on individuals who are capable of handling technology rather than individuals who possess analytical skills in the use of technology. To take the analogy of a car manufacturer, there are process workers (those who work the assembly line) and there are creative workers (those who design and engineer the car). The HR industry has been hiring too many assembly line workers and not enough creative workers.

If more HR professionals possessed analytical skills, they would be better equipped to develop a strategic approach to their jobs. When you have a workforce equipped with these skills, HR will be able to earn a seat at the table with management.



III. Time for a New Summit

On July 10, 2000, the Federal Section of the International Personnel Management Association sponsored a summit meeting that included individuals representing senior human resource leaders and practitioners, the OPM, and professional organizations to discuss the future of the federal human resource profession. The meeting was convened as a way of acknowledging the turning point facing the federal sector, to gain insight regarding the challenges at hand, and to develop consensus for a common path forward.

Unfortunately, nobody took ownership of the recommendations—not the HR professionals, not the federal agencies. Nine years have passed and there are no formal in-depth developmental programs to train HR professionals. As a result, the HR profession finds itself in the same position as it was in 2000.

One cannot deny that progress has been made, but that progress has too often been inconsistent or has not kept pace with changes in the government's needs. HR's role in the overall strategic direction of federal agencies has not been adequately defined.

What government leaders need is professional and consistent application in the field. HR is one of the few fields in the federal government that is practiced across all organizations. The 2000 report anticipated a shift toward a strategic role for HR. The focus since then has been on transactions and processing.

The time has come for a second summit. The federal government needs a clear direction to create a roadmap for the HR profession for the year 2010 and beyond. And this roadmap must have a sponsor that will take ownership of the deadlines, budgets, and procedures that are necessary to meet this new mandate.

Such a summit has to have widespread support among various groups. Thought leaders from both the federal government and private industry need to get together and develop a roadmap for the HR profession. Because outsourcing has an ever increasing presence in federal HR, and because many of the systems and technology applied today are commercial products modified for the government, it's essential for private industry leaders to be involved.

The relevancy of HR within the federal government is in question. Is the profession's relevancy how quickly it processes orders, or is it in its value as part of the management team and the human capital within each agency? If the industry continues on its current path, HR as we know it will become irrelevant. By creating a roadmap and taking concrete steps to see it through, HR can become a strategic partner within the federal agencies.

The path to relevancy begins with improving the foundation—the competencies, the analytical skills, and the capabilities of HR individuals. Management and leadership will not let HR be part of the strategic direction unless it can perform its basic core function. On the other hand, if the HR industry does not improve its core function, it will never get that seat at the table.

As David Ulrich wrote in his essay “A New Mandate for Human Resources”: “HR cannot expand its role in an organization without the requisite expertise.... If HR is to effect real change, it must be made up of people who have the skills they need to work from a base of confidence and earn what too often it lacks—respect.”

The bottom line is that federal agencies are made up of human capital. But who is going to find and manage the human capital? Without it, agencies don't exist.

The HR profession is at a crossroads to determine whether it's going to continue to be relevant and be a partner in the strategic direction of the agencies, or simply an operations backroom process group whose job will be to fill in the blanks, push the send button, and repetitively process tasks like an assembly line worker.

The time is now to decide what HR in the federal space is going to be, create a roadmap, and support it. It's time for a new summit to take the HR profession through the 21st century. It's time for “A New Call to Action.”

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