

Book Review:

The Future of Human Resource Management: 64
Thought Leaders Explore the Critical HR Issues of
Today and Tomorrow

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It is by now well settled that whether an organisation is operating a cost-minimisation strategy or a quality or innovation strategy—and whether an empowerment human resource (HR) strategy or instrumentalist HR strategy or a mix of the two—efficacious management of the human resource is largely a critical determinant of its success. Today, strategy gurus are talking of a shift in business focus from strategy, structure, systems to process, competency building, and people focus. In several sectors across the globe there is a scramble for attracting, recruiting and retaining the best possible talent to attain competitive advantage. Different types of HR interventions are being used to make the workplace an exciting forum for realising the employee needs. At the same time, HR departments are 'on their toes' in their concern for survival; for they are more accountable for the results of their activities than ever before. If they are not able to deliver, they face the threat of extinction. And, first and foremost, they are expected to serve the line, even as they are being seen as business partners. Concerted efforts are being made to confront industrial relations (IR) issues as part of larger HRM strategy. Employers are using the latter to promote a kind of new unitarism at the workplace through a sagacious use of what the HR academics have come to label as the psychological contract. While one can recall several success stories of these efforts, there are also a large number of cases of failure of the new strategies for variegated reasons. But after a long discussion on the relevance of the HR department, the debate across the globe seems to have concluded in its favour. HR is expected to play crucial roles in enhancing employee abilities as well as organisational performance capabilities. The organisational capabilities can be seen as the deliverables of HR or the intangibles that investors see as the determinants of comparative corporate success.

As organisations face new realities, managers are expected to be abreast with new solutions for tomorrow's problems, which are themselves changing colour due to the increasing turbulence in business environment. Academics as well as HR practitioners are looking for new tools for winning the war of competition in the chaotic business environment that we find ourselves in today. They are wondering how the future will look like. In the book under review, sixty-four leading academics, consultants, and practitioners have debated this issue (i.e., the future of HR). It has been jointly published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). The latter is perhaps the biggest global association of about 200,000 HR professionals, most of whom are Americans. The book in a way is an updated version of the authors' earlier book, *Tomorrow's HR Management* (1997) that has had a big success. The broad range of issues discussed in its nine sections include: understanding and managing people; the next generation HR professionalism; mastering and playing new HR roles; creating and adapting culture to new business conditions; organisations as capabilities and not as structures; HR as a decision science; creating mutually collaborative ventures; responding to social expectations

and public policy; and building local and global balances in HR leadership. Given the much higher expectation from the HR profession in today's changeful workplace, HR managers have to attempt a more accurate and precise appreciation of the future people issues. The contributors have focused on these issues in response to the editors' call for writing on, "What is the Future of HR?"

The 47 chapters of the book, including the introduction and the conclusion, which have been contributed by some of the leading HR gurus, cover a broad spectrum of issues confronting the field. The book can be said to have provided a road map for the profession, highlighting how the HR practitioners can ensure the relevancy of their role so as to continue to be of value to people and organisations. Coleman Peterson talks about how Wal-Mart hires and retains its people; Peter Cappelli and Mike Losey discuss the possibility of a labour shortage in the U.S.; Libby Sartain examines the role expected from HR in brand development; Gordon Hewitt explains the role of HR in realising business strategy; and Frances Hesselbein is concerned with application of her leadership expertise to issues in HR governance. In Chapter 14 titled: "Changing Mental Models: HR's Most Important Task," Jeffrey Pfeffer has argued that besides being upholders and analysts of organisation culture, HR will have to prove its concern for peoples' mental models and mindsets; more so of its leaders. Jac Fitz-Enz (chapter 30) has, however, argued that the performance of the role of a strategic business partner by HR would necessitate its concern for managing culture than anything else. In chapter 26 Ulrich and Smallwood highlight the role of HR in building intangibles for enhancing shareholder value. Lynda Gratton (chapter 36) thinks that promotion of managing cooperatively will be the biggest challenge of the profession. In chapter 25, William Joyce, Nitin Nohria, and Bruce Roberson have identified what they call four plus two roles that they think would be critical for business survival; in this regard they identify the role that HR would have to play. Most authors have focused on the HR's role in increasing an organisation's capabilities. Some of the prominent capabilities that can be said to have been focused on by the chapter authors are: strategy execution; promoting culture change; promoting shared and collaborative mindsets; devising practices to cope with global realities; and promoting transparent working through corporate social responsibility. The book has also highlighted that the HR professionals must invest in themselves. It also envisages emerging roles of HR such as that of the chief integration officer; deliverer of business success; diversity manager; and the chief effectiveness officer.

While HR literature is replete with threats of redundancy for HR departments due to variegated reasons, the book is optimistic that HR will continue to grow and play a critical role as a strategic business partner and leader in attracting and retaining talent. It has examined the trends and challenges that will define the future of HR. One of the biggest strengths of the book is its reflection of some sort of unity in diversity (i.e., despite some 45 chapters expressing different perspectives, it goes remarkably well as a coherent whole). That shows very astute editing. The book succeeds immensely well in identifying the strategic HR themes for the morrow that HR professionals would have to master in order to remain relevant in the present turbulent times. No doubt, the book is highly valuable in grasping the current position, future role and the challenges being faced by the HR field. It will prove to be of immense use in facilitating an articulate understanding of the dimensions in which the HR profession is heading.

The Future of Human Resource Management is a fine addition to the management books oriented to management professionals. The publication of such books has been labelled as the emergence of an era of what a British academic has referred to as the "Heathrow Management Theory." The book is likely to be a favourite for most managers including the CEOs. It contains discussion on some of the most talked about HR themes in the contemporary practice of people management in which some of the best possible names in the HR profession have participated. It will be particularly appreciated by the busy practitioner and students who may be looking for simpler answers, not through the medium of hardcore research, but to some of the most intriguing people management queries. I must, however, add that since the book has considered the importance of the emerging economies of India and China as investment centres and as markets for Western

goods and technology, a chapter each on HR issues in these economies would have added tremendous value to this otherwise well conceptualised book. That would have met the needs of a large number of multinational companies who are looking for operations in these countries. It is to be admitted that the realities of these economies are indeed not the same as those of the industrially advanced world, and the new global manager would like to be acquainted with the nuances of the prevailing realities in these new locales for practicing entrepreneurship.

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