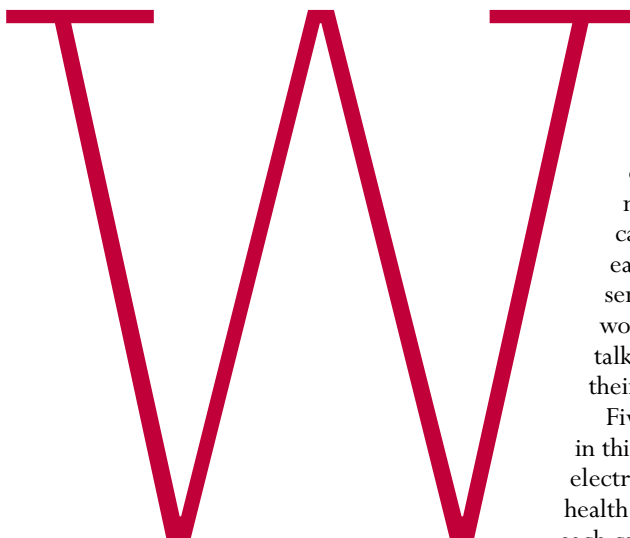


HR

What do
people
want
from you?



What do line managers, senior managers and employees really want from the HR function? And what do they think of what they get? The answers are not, as you might fear, a torrent of abuse. Face-to-face discussions with more than 100 “customers” of HR, along with more than 840 survey responses, reveal that the function is seen to be making a vital potential contribution to business and to working life. But the function could do better, especially if it learns to listen to its customers more carefully and gaze at its own navel a bit less.

HR has been busy transforming itself in recent years, but mostly in line with its own models of what it wants to be. Recognising managers and employees as customers, through whom the business value of HR is delivered, is a useful vantage point from which to evaluate the function.

This study used both structured surveys and semi-structured

interview tools to obtain feedback from line managers, senior managers and employees (who did not manage others), all of whom were more than willing to give careful feedback and were eager to help HR improve its service offering. In fact, they wondered why HR did not talk to them more often about their needs.

Five organisations took part in this survey: retail, electronics, local government, health and the civil service. In each case a fairly clear pattern of strengths and weaknesses emerged that could be used to help HR set its own priorities for improvement (*see panels*).

It is clear from the research that those outside HR clearly see it as a support function, but not in any servile sense. As one senior manager put it: “HR is there to provide a service for the rest of the organisation. It should help them to do this as efficiently and effectively as possible. HR is not an end in itself.” Another points out that “managers should be saying what the business needs” and that “HR should be in partnership with the line”.

HR does a wide variety of different things – recruitment, performance, reward, development and so on – and in each of these areas it works with the line in a different way. Add to this the restructuring that has been taking place in many organisations and it is hardly surprising that the function’s

customers are unclear about what it now offers and who they should contact about what. “The majority of staff do not know what HR does and HR does not make a conscious effort to tell them,” believes one senior manager.

Jargon makes it even harder for people to understand what the function can do for them. Much of what managers want from HR is what we might call organisational development (OD), but managers had no idea what OD was and, if they did know there was an OD team, they didn’t know what it really did. It’s clear that HR must define and offer its services in a language its customers can understand.

Most of the negative comments in the study were about pretty basic problems in accessing HR support. People issues are often urgent and stressful for managers and employees

HR REQUIREMENTS

- ◆ HR as a function needs to find out what its customers need and what their experiences of current HR services are
- ◆ HR needs to be responsive – clear about what it is there for and what services it offers, easy to contact and able to respond quickly, efficiently and effectively
- ◆ Managers want an independent-minded HR function that understands the workforce and can help management balance employee and business needs
- ◆ Customers do want an HR function with strategic business impact, but this is about solving problems that are strategically important for the business, not about writing HR strategies
- ◆ HR’s customers want a “proactive” HR function that spots issues ahead of time and works closely with managers to address them
- ◆ Customers want professional HR support from real “people partners”

Many managers and employees do not understand what HR can do. Don’t be afraid to get out there and talk to them – they’re your customers, so find out what they want and how they want it, advises *Wendy Hirsh*

and, if they cannot speak to the right person in HR or if their query is left hanging for a few days, they rapidly lose confidence in the function.

When customers talk about “getting the basics right”, they are not just talking about administration but all the day-to-day advice, which nowadays is often obtained by phone. Managers and employees want speed and accuracy from a “responsive” HR service, but they also want a service that can give advice relevant to the business and workforce context.

Both managers and non-managers felt that HR had a unique role to play in balancing the needs of the business with the needs of the workforce. At individual level, HR is often seen as acting very effectively as a mediator in serious disagreements or performance problems. It does this best when it works with both manager and employee, not displacing the manager’s responsibility, but coaching them to achieve a sensible outcome.

“We want them to be a conscience and a coach, but not to take over,” says one line manager. Another says: “As managers we get caught up in what we are trying to do in the business. HR helps us remember we are dealing with people.”

Employees also see HR as helping managers understand what is really going on. As one says: “HR needs to be like the jester to the king. It has to tell him what everyone knows but no one else dares to say – you have to be very smart to do that.”

Senior managers in turn look to HR to balance the needs of the business and its workforce at a divisional or corporate level. HR can only deliver this, however, if it has its finger on the pulse of what employees are feeling and how well they are working. So HR needs to be out and about in the business.

It is in the area of “strategic HR” that the study is most intriguing. Customers, like the function itself, do want HR to have a strategic impact on the business, although the

WHAT THE SURVEY FOUND

About one-third (31 per cent) of managers and just under a quarter (24 per cent) of non-managers were satisfied or very satisfied with HR services.

A third (34 per cent) of managers felt HR was improving, but a similar proportion (36 per cent) felt it had got worse over the past couple of years.

Among non-managers, half (50 per cent) could see no change in the quality of HR services and a quarter (23 per cent) thought it had improved.

What people say they value in HR is not always the same as the factors that correlate with their overall satisfaction with HR.

The factors that correlated most strongly with line managers’ and employees’ satisfaction with HR were:

- ◆ Being well supported in times of change
- ◆ HR giving good advice to employees
- ◆ Being well supported when dealing with difficult people or situations
- ◆ HR getting the basics right

However, the results reveal that HR could do better in each of these areas:

- ◆ Only 27 per cent of managers and 15 per cent of non-managers felt well supported in times of change
- ◆ 38 per cent of managers but only 23 per cent of non-managers felt that HR gave good advice to employees
- ◆ 41 per cent of managers but only 14 per cent of non-managers felt well supported in dealing with difficult people or situations
- ◆ 31 per cent of managers and 37 per cent of non-managers thought HR got the basics right

Training/development and performance/reward were two areas of high potential value to both managers and non-managers. In addition, managers saw recruitment as a high-value activity for HR. Employees were very interested in effective recruitment, but were obviously not direct customers of the recruitment service once they had joined the organisation.

HR was seen as relatively effective in promoting equal opportunities, and in training and development. It was seen as less effective in performance management/reward and workforce planning/job design. Managers were more satisfied with performance/reward than non-managers.

HR helps managers understand what is really going on. It needs to be like the jester to the king. It has to tell him what everyone knows but no one else dares to say – you have to be very smart to do that

CASE STUDIES

East Sussex County Council

East Sussex County Council has an extremely diverse workforce spread over a large geographical area. Many of its employees deliver services to vulnerable people and good recruits are often scarce.

At the time of the research, the HR function had recently restructured into a centralised service with appreciable cost savings. This change had led to higher turnover in the HR team and

managers and employees felt that frontline HR staff did not yet have enough knowledge and experience to operate effectively. There were, however, some experienced and skilful people in the HR function who were highly regarded within the organisation.

Managers needed more clarity about who to contact on what topic in the new structure. HR was seen as very strong on training and

development, but further improvement was sought by managers in the speed and responsiveness of the recruitment process.

"This study has helped us to set our priorities," says Leatham Green, assistant director, personnel and training. "Greater clarity and consistency of contact points in HR, improving administration, especially in recruitment, and stronger support for the line have helped us to improve our service."

Sainsbury's

Sainsbury's Store Support Centre is home to around 3,000 people who work in areas such as finance, HR, marketing and buying. A major business improvement programme has given HR a real opportunity to work closely with business divisions. This has been much appreciated and the survey revealed that the HR function was seen as business orientated and good at helping managers to improve performance.

Senior managers, however, wanted HR to be more challenging and to strengthen resource planning, succession and career development. Training and development was an area in which both managers and non-managers wanted a more tailored service. Where senior managers had initiated a dialogue about training needs, they felt training was more relevant to the business and a better fit

to people at different career stages. HR could also help to deploy staff across divisions by encouraging lateral movement.

"This study showed us that we are seen as being of real value to the business, but that we need to ensure adequate business partner support, especially during significant change," says Michael Spiers, HR partner, trading and commercial.

word strategic itself was hardly used by the participants. They talked much more about HR helping them to solve the key people problems faced by the business. They also wanted HR to fiddle around less with policies and processes – the repeated redesign of performance management forms was a frequent irritant, for example.

Managers and employees often wanted help with these people issues at team, departmental or divisional level. But the survey revealed that it is often not clear who in HR has the time and skills to offer real problem-solving help at a local level on an ongoing basis.

Although the word "strategic" was not used much by line managers, senior managers or employees, they do want a "proactive" function. This involves enabling managers and employees to do business better by being more closely involved with tackling people problems and issues; helping to "nip problems in the bud" by spotting them early; bringing in good ideas from outside the business; being more assertive if managers are flouting policies or codes of behaviour; coaching and training managers to manage and motivate people better; and working "across the business" to achieve more consistent people management and to develop and deploy people better for the benefit of the whole firm.

A proactive HR function needs to feel close to managers and to reach out to them. As one senior manager put it: "They could just walk around more – there is no need to be embarrassed. I am quite a proactive customer and I do push a bit. But it takes two to tango."

The final set of messages from this study concerns the people within HR. Here the customers – sensibly from their point of view – want an HR function that knows about HR. Managers believe they are the business experts, but HR needs to be the people experts, fully conversant with all technical personnel issues, as

well as deeper people, work and motivation issues.


HR people certainly need to understand the business, but they also need to have real professional expertise. This applies to junior staff answering phone queries as well as to senior experts and HR leaders.

Satisfaction with HR services is strongly related to the perceived quality of HR staff, especially whether they are expert, reliable, well-informed, responsive and understand employee needs.

And so we come to business partners. Yes, managers do want them. A partner is exactly what they want: a partner who really knows about HR and will get to know their business and people too.

Non-managers also want their business partners to be visible in their department or division. They want to know who they are and to be able to approach them. Where competent business partners did exist, they were highly valued.

Reflecting on what managers have said in this study, you are left wondering whether the term “HR business partner” is in itself a misnomer, born of HR’s habit of looking at itself from its own end of the relationship.

Looked at from the managers’ end, what they want is not really a business partner at all but a “people partner” – someone with real expertise who can help them address their people issues in the business context. 

LINKS

About the author

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Further information

The study was supported by organisations belonging to the IES HR Network. A copy of the full report *What Customers Want from HR* in printed or PDF format is available from www.employment-studies.co.uk. A free report summary is also available

FROM THE CIPD

Annual conference

Wendy Hirsh is speaking at this week’s CIPD annual conference and exhibition in Harrogate.

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2008 CIPD ANNUAL
conference
& exhibition