

People agenda

Keeping HRDs up-to-date with people-related issues including talent management, reward, future of work and more.

The Future of HR: can HR develop the skills needed to survive?

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The future of work is here. Technology, demographic shifts, AI and robotics are just some of the factors changing how organisations operate and specifically how they leverage human talent and other resources to create value.

So how does HR respond? What does the future hold for the function? To take a deeper look into reimagining the future of HR, PwC is convening a series of expert round table discussions consisting of leaders and practitioners from across geographies and specialisms. We'd like to invite you to join the discussion and contribute to the debate as we tackle this urgent, exciting and complex topic.

In our first meeting, we dove straight into what skills HR will require in the future to help manage a new, multi-faceted workforce comprising both people and machines. The overall message from our group was clear - due to the progress and development of technology, access to information and self-service, demand for traditional HR activities and skills is waning.

Critical questions were posed around whether there will even be a need for a function called "Human Resources" and the skills that have been historically associated with it. The group debated whether the focus should be on "Workforce Performance" in a world where it's not just humans taking part. And they identified a number shifts already taking place which are setting a precedent for the future of HR:

Becoming the guardians of good work: as technology becomes ubiquitous, there are critical skills and capabilities that can't be reduced to an algorithm. Creativity, innovation, critical thinking, complex problem solving, and emotional intelligence - the human difference - will be increasingly important. HR should take a lead by defining and being the 'guardians' of these human-centered capabilities (borrowing a phrase from Lynda Gratton), reinforcing the purpose and values that hold organisations together.

A focus on the whole workforce: HR will have a larger role to play in understanding the impact of automation - overseeing end-to-end workforce strategy that spans people and machines. Identifying, curating and developing new skills - both automated and human - and helping plan for the future is complex and requires new taxonomies, methods and solutions. HR professionals could drive this but they need the skills to define and implement new standards beyond human resources.

Enabling organisational agility: as the pace of change accelerates, is there a role for HR in leading and providing the frameworks that allow organisations to be more agile? This is not just about driving and enabling change, but helping businesses establish networks, create cross-functional teams, and helping individuals re-skill and build agility into their careers - recognising that multiple careers will increasingly be the norm.

Specialist capabilities will be key: while it's not a new idea, there was clear consensus that the "generalist" skills and capabilities that are the bedrock of many HR roles will not be demanded as frequently or in the same way for much longer. As AI continues to improve to provide richer knowledge-based advisory support the requirement for broad HR generalists is reduced. However, the need for specialist capabilities will sustain and will even increase in areas such as data and analytics, robotics and procurement. But, critically, will these skills sit in HR?

Business-led talent management: it's always been true that managing people is the responsibility of business leaders and managers - and not something that can be outsourced to HR. But as the ability of organisations to do more themselves increases, supported by technology and ever increasing access to commoditised services (e.g. in engagement, well-being and sourcing talent), what will HR do with the capacity created? Can they develop the skills needed to be relevant?

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Comments

I believe the debate is legitimate and is probably the need of the hour. Also, complacency in any field is a perfect plan for disaster and this applies to HR today as well. However, no matter how much AI and robotics take over I think major decision making power will remain in human hands. For a long time HR as a department has struggled to prove itself as being part of the strategic drive of a company and not just a mere administrative job - the struggle continues in many industries. So the question remains the same for HR. Yes, the skills and basic way of carrying out HR functions need to change. Given the right kind of platform, I believe HR will be able to

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