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The Evolving HRBP Role in the HR Operating Model of the Future

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Many HR functions are restructuring to be more efficient, flexible and strategically aligned to the business. HR professionals – more specifically, HR business partners – can use this research to understand the different roles they can have in the HR operating model of the future.

As HR functions restructure to be more efficient, flexible and strategically aligned to the business, new opportunities are emerging for HR business partners (HRBPs). In our HR operating model of the future, the HRBP role evolves into three new positions: strategic talent leaders, the HR problem solver pool, and people relations managers. This article provides background on the HR operating model of the future and details the responsibilities and competencies of these three new roles for HRBPs.

Introduction to the HR Operating Model of the Future

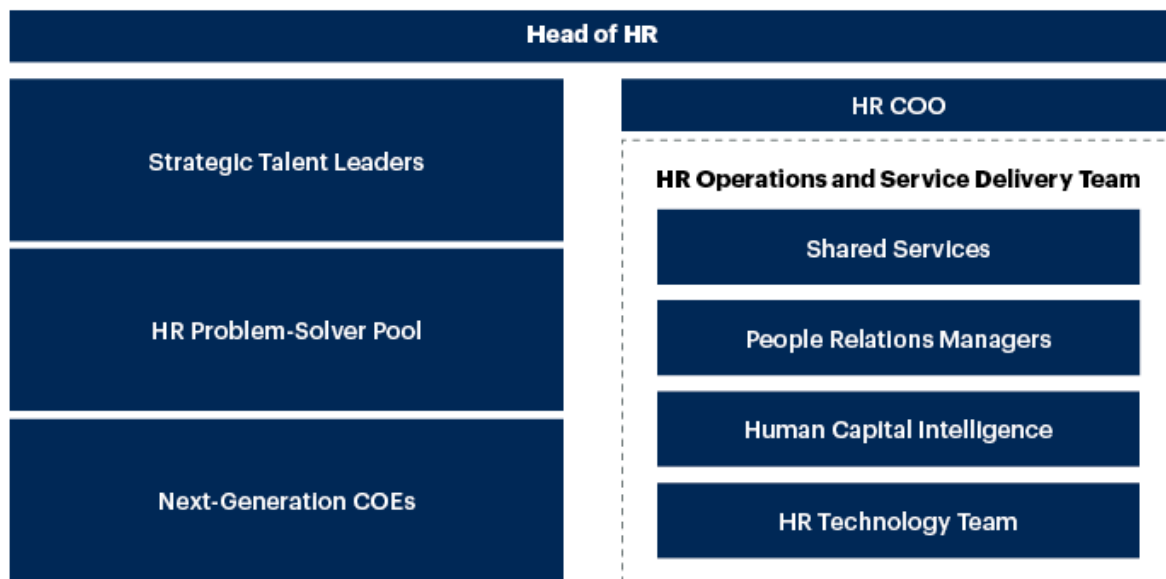
Despite drastic changes to the business environment, HR operating models have not seen much recent innovation. Most HR leaders in 2022 reported that their organizations' HR function structural elements include HRBPs, centers of excellence (COEs) and HR-only shared services, in line with the three-pillar HR operating model.¹ While incredibly effective at delivering HR expertise to the business, this model is now decades old and in some ways incongruent with the realities of work today.

Organizations today are faced with many new global challenges: persistently high inflation, growing competition for talent and unpredictable global supply chain disruptions. In this uncertain economic context, HR must become more flexible and agile, more strategically aligned with business and employee needs, and more efficient overall. **In 2022, HR leaders identified their top three reasons for restructuring the function as implementing new approaches to become more agile, improving the connection between HR and the business, and separating transactional and strategic work.**¹

To address these needs, we have developed a vision for future HR operating models, which some HR functions are beginning to adopt, either by incorporating elements of this model or overhauling their functions completely. While our research shows no singular “perfect” model exists, the HR operating model of the future provides a set of guiding principles that can help every HR leader – independent of functional size, geography or maturity – upgrade their structural model and achieve their functional goals (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The HR Operating Model of the Future

The HR Operating Model of the Future



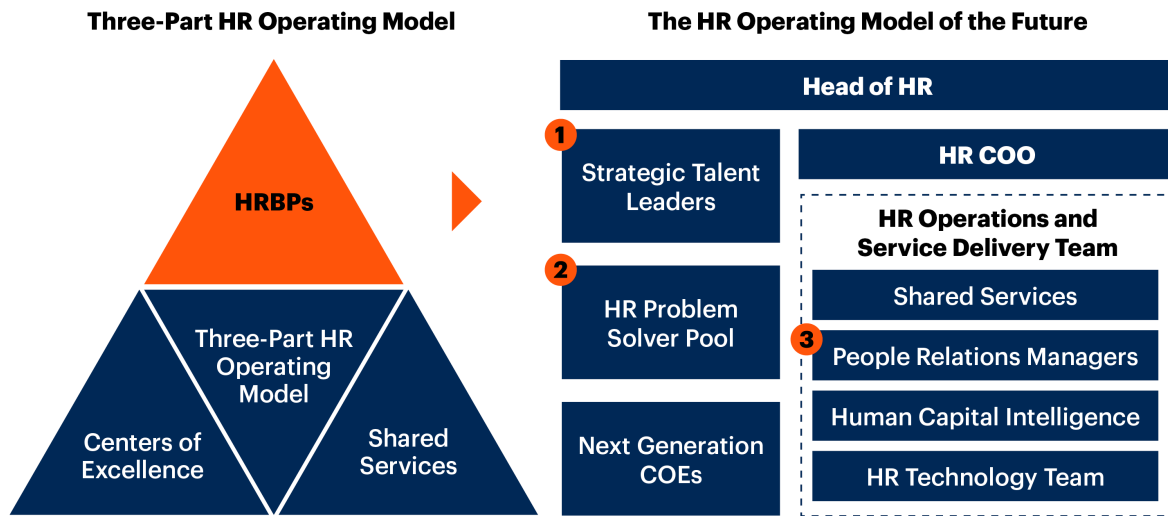
Source: Gartner
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The HR operating model of the future differs in several key ways from the three-part HR operating model. For one, COEs have become leaner “next generation COEs,” flexing their subject matter expertise in specialized areas agilely as talent needs change. Additionally, a broader HR operations and service delivery team hosts the data, analytics and technology capabilities that drive HR’s operational efficiency, expanding beyond the traditional remit of shared services. Finally, the HRBP role transitions to three new, different-in-kind roles: **strategic talent leaders**, the **HR problem solver pool** and **people relations managers** (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Realignment of HRBPs in the HR Operating Model of the Future

Realignment of HRBPs in the HR Operating Model of the Future



Source: Gartner
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Role 1: Strategic Talent Leaders

Role Description

Strategic talent leaders are an analytically oriented, VP-level evolution of the HRBP, focusing on HR’s strategic priorities. They identify the most pressing talent opportunities and challenges throughout the organization and are aligned with a specific business unit or function, owning talent management strategy for that group.

By removing the operational work from the HRBP role, strategic talent leaders can fully dedicate themselves to the most pressing strategic priorities of the function. Within the HR operating model of the future, the HR operations and service delivery team, which includes people relations managers, can fully own operational tasks (see Role 3).

Skills and Competencies for This Role

Effective strategic talent leaders must think holistically about the strategy of the business and talent processes that support the business’s goals. Strategic talent leaders must have a breadth and depth of experience within HR that allows them to understand their business unit and develop appropriate solutions.

Success in this role requires strong business acumen and talent management skills to work with and influence the aligned business unit or functional leader. Strategic talent leaders must also have strong strategic consulting and relationship management skills that enable collaboration and networking both within the HR function and throughout the organization, leading to synergies in work and business goals. A background in consulting is not a requirement for this role, but strategic talent leaders must listen to the problems of the business, challenge business leader assumptions, teach leaders about the talent implications of decisions, and then present alternate explanations and ideas.

High proficiency in data judgment will help strategic talent leaders analyze, interpret and communicate data effectively and responsibly so they can drive business outcomes. An added emphasis on data will allow the HR function to assess its progress and quantify the value of its impact on the business at large.

In today's business environment, strategic talent leaders are also required to provide strategic inputs to ensure equity and inclusion, address turnover and retention in a competitive labor market, help managers evaluate performance without bias, and monitor employee sentiment and wellness.

This role entails much less hands-on work than a traditional HRBP because a lot of operational tasks are passed to the shared services center or people relations manager. Strategic talent leaders have much less day-to-day operational contact with mid- and lower-level managers and frontline employees. This role might not be well-suited for HRBPs who would feel out of touch with their business unit or function if they could not replace firsthand interactions with data to assess the state of the talent in the unit.

Role 2: HR Problem Solvers

Role Description

A dynamic pool of problem solvers that works on various strategic projects is a critical component of the HR operating model of the future. This team works together on some of the more project-based work formerly owned by the HRBP and other HR experts, such as creating and upgrading resources, practices and policies used by HR and the workforce. The HR problem solver pool effectively serves as the "flex muscle" of the HR function, agilely working on projects and solving HR's most pressing challenges. Those involved with this team can either be a part of other workstreams or be a permanent member of the pool.

Problem solvers' primary job is to define talent problems and hypothesize, test and build solutions. Problem solvers work agilely on more temporary project assignments and can be redeployed based on need. Problem solvers work closely with their end users – employees and managers – and with COE teams who provide them with deep HR expertise to help them with their project assignments so they can deliver customer-centric solutions. Examples of projects that some organizations have used a problem-solver pool for include revamping onboarding processes, refreshing competency models, updating employee value propositions and implementing diversity recruiting strategies.

HRBPs are great additions to the problem-solver team due to their understanding of employee needs. They can provide unique value to the team with their understanding of the business and can help design relevant, scalable solutions.

Skills and Competencies for This Role

The types of projects the problem solver pool will address will influence the skills and competencies most appropriate for the role. However, any HRBPs who move into the problem solver pool should demonstrate high agility by embracing innovative ideas, being comfortable with iterative ways of working, synthesizing a wide range of information, having interest in collaborating with individuals throughout HR and the organization, and possessing the ability to tailor communication based on their audience.

Core competencies for this role are similar to those of a consultant competency model: project management, consultative problem solving, relationship management, growth mindset, and creativity and innovation. Project management and the ability to work toward strict deadlines will be particularly important skills for a member of the problem solver pool, given the large number of interdependencies that problem solver pool projects tend to involve.

This role is not a good fit for those who enjoy routine, as the nature of the project work means frequent change. If the organization does not have a full-time problem-solver pool, getting involved in projects through the pool can be a great opportunity to develop skills and gain exposure to other areas of HR and the business. Current HR problem solvers who aspire to a strategic talent leader role should focus on building their proficiency in strategic HR expertise and understanding HR's objectives and processes more broadly as they pertain to the overall strategy of the function.

Role 3: People Relations Managers

Role Description

People relations managers comprise a central pool of HR staff that help address employees' and managers' most urgent needs. This role owns much of the work that is traditionally owned by the HRBP role, including compliance and employee relations issues (e.g., mediating workplace disputes, harassment claims or other legal matters) and people manager support responsibilities that are not self-serve or automated (e.g., people management coaching). People relations managers play a key role in supporting the workforce and ensuring employees are engaged, productive and happy.

People relations managers sit within the HR operations and service delivery team, alongside shared services, human capital intelligence and the HR technology team. Depending on your HR structure and your division of operational responsibilities, HRBPs moving to this team may also or instead choose to work in shared services, focusing on driving process efficiencies.

By handling much of the operational work originally done by HRBPs, people relations managers play a critical role in ensuring the strategic talent leaders have more space and time to focus on strategic thinking.

Skills and Competencies for This Role

The role of people relations manager is most similar to that of a junior-level HRBP who is not heavily involved in strategic work. HRBPs who have a strong foundational understanding of talent management and understand the processes, policies and systems within HR are well-suited to this role. The types of HRBPs who enjoy this role like working directly with employees and midlevel or frontline managers, and are able to resolve conflicts and problems quickly.

Moving from a people relations manager role into a strategic talent leader role is a reasonable step in an HR career within the HR operating model of the future. However, this move often means less direct contact with employees along with more longer-term problem solving. People relations managers who aspire to a strategic talent leader role should focus on increasing their proficiency in data judgment and deepening their industry and organizational knowledge.

Recommended by the Authors for Gartner Clients

[HR Professionals Competency Model](#)

[HR Professionals Competency Model: Resource Guide for HR Professionals](#)

[HR Competency Self-Development Resources for HR Professionals Primer for 2022](#)

Tool: Business Acumen Builder for HR Professionals

Tool: Active Listening Guide for HR Professionals

Webinar: The Future of HRBPs in An Agile Environment

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Evaluate Three Structure Options for the HR Business Partner Role

The HR Operating Model of the Future

Evidence

¹ **2022 Gartner State of HR Transformation Execution Survey.** This survey was conducted online from 4 April to 25 April 2022 to understand the current state of transformation within the HR function. In total, 38 Gartner Research Circle members participated. Members from North America (n = 27), EMEA (n = 4) and Asia/Pacific (n = 6) responded to the survey.

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