

Keeping The “Human” In Human Resources: Two Generational Perspectives

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Abstract

While there have been many discussions over the last 20+ years about generational diversity in the workplace, these discussions have focused primarily on generational differences among employees. There has not been much discussion about generational differences among HR professionals. It has been a growing trend in the last several years for HR to become detached and distance itself from many issues, both personal and professional, that involve employees in the workplace. There is also evidence suggesting that different generations of HR professionals approach this matter from distinct perspectives. This article explores this trend and offers recommendations on how to “humanize” Human Resources so that it is once again more in-line with creating a work environment that is inclusive, collaborative, engaging, energizing, and ultimately, that leads to a win-win relationship for both the company and the employees who work for it.

Literature Review

In the last several years, various articles have addressed this dilemma on both sides of the issue. While many of these articles advocate for a return to the “humanization” of Human Resources once again, others more readily embrace the technology and the more transactional approach to HR Management.

A February 2019 article from Integrated Success, an HR & coaching organization, gives a historical perspective on this issue, and while recognizing the importance of integrating HR and technology, also states that: “The modern workplace descended from the Industrial Revolution, with its relentless push for ever-greater productivity. People were seen as tools; extensions of the machines they operated. Compassion and the human connection were actively engineered out of the system. As laws shifted, management became concerned with avoiding penalties, and the typical Human Resources department focused on compliance. For many leaders, it became preferable—and probably easier—to keep some distance from employees. But consistency and compliance, if taken too far, can result in serious unintended consequences”. (Integrated Success Team; 2019).

In a recent article appearing in the Harvard Business Review there is a call for a balanced approach between a people-centric approach and technology, stating the case that: “Organizational leaders are going to face many choices when it comes to smart tech in the near future. Commercial applications using smart tech are available off-the-shelf for every department from communications to accounting to service delivery. It will require informed, careful, strategic thought to ensure the technology is used to enhance our humanity and enable people to do the kinds of relational, empathetic, problem-solving activities we do best.” (Fine & Kantner, 2022)

An article in the *Armenian HR Association* states that: “*The ‘human’ in Human Resources is sometimes missing in an HR department. Keeping the ‘human’ in your company largely depends on how fair policies are, how competent HR members are, and how influential HR mentors are. The daily work of HR can influence employees to see whether or not the HR department has a humanitarian part. There are three important things HR can do to keep the human in Human Resources..... provide fair and reasonable policies; proficient services; trusted and influential mentors*”. (Elkhechen, 2020)

In the *HR Exchange Network*, there is an advocacy for the integration of moral justice and ethical behavior as a direct influence upon HR and goes on to say that: *Human Resources is primarily responsible for upholding organizational justice. By providing a formal process through which employees can voice dissatisfaction with work conditions, employment actions or treatment, Human Resources helps keep “human” in the workforce. Human Resources must also identify patterns that lead to recommended organizational improvement.* (Perimenis, 2020)

And finally, one of the consequences of HR technology that may one day be a “reality” whether we agree with it or not, is presented in a recent article in the “Walk Me Blog”: “*A large global hedge fund announced it would replace managers with artificial intelligence. As part of an attempt to standardize and improve key management duties, Bridgewater Associates enlisted a team of software engineers to develop a tool that would automate daily management of the firm’s employees. Among its key duties, the software would be responsible for hiring, firing, performance management, and other strategic decision-making for the \$160 billion company. Ray Dalio, Bridgewater’s founder, said beyond the benefits of fewer errors and greater efficiency, the software would eliminate the consequences of volatile human emotions, according to The Guardian. It’s true that your emotional state can influence how you communicate and make decisions. But is removing emotions from management really the answer? Moreover, are computers equipped to manage the nuances of employee development, provide feedback, identify skill gaps, and motivate staff? In the age of digital transformation, where should you preserve the human element, and where is it OK to go totally digital?*” (Walk Me Team; 2023).

Perspective #1:

People who have worked in the field of Human Resources for 40+ years in high-level executive positions seem to be acutely aware of the trend previously described above, which has become more prevalent and noticeable in recent years. Simply expressed, this is the perception that some HR professionals have lost sight of one of the most important factors that should have *always* been a part of HR, but which for some reason has instead become unfashionable, and in some cases, even appears to have fallen completely by the wayside.

In other words, the belief that one should do everything possible to “keep the human in human resources” has become diluted. While this can be interpreted in many ways, and in the interest of avoiding any ambiguity or uncertainty, HR professionals should not lose sight of utilizing good emotional intelligence, i.e. empathy, compassion, respect, equity, and yes, “humanity”, in their dealings with employees.

In this age of amazing technological advances in all areas of business, including HR, starting with fully automated payroll services that can generate dozens of types of reports in minutes, HRIS, artificial intelligence, ChatGPT and so forth, some HR people may run the risk of becoming a little complacent or jaded.

Because of this, they may somehow be giving their employees the impression of having lost sight of the “human touch”. HR professionals must be careful not to lose sight of this important characteristic, which has long defined our profession.

While these and other technological advances are marvelous timesaving and accuracy-verifying methodologies, HR professionals should not dismiss how a friendly smile, a warm greeting, a simple “good morning”, or a brief daily visit to employees’ departments simply to touch base, can go such a long way toward building better relationships, collaborations, and strong teams, which in turn leads to better productivity and profitability as well.

HR professionals should not reject HR-based technology or return to an “old-school” mentality, but instead should consider that keeping more of a balance is the most equitable way of conducting business. The vast majority of HR professionals have readily and willingly embraced many of the recent HR technologies and both recognize and appreciate their value and usefulness. At the same time, they must also acknowledge that the “human touch” in HR should not be marginalized, diminished, or disregarded either.

As stated by Dilosi: *“Employers can balance technology and staff engagement.....by prioritizing clear communication, providing training, involving employees in decision-making, offering flexibility, recognizing achievements, ensuring well-being, fostering autonomy, avoiding micromanagement, assigning meaningful tasks, balancing innovation and stability, organizing team-building activities, maintaining an open-door policy, and addressing burnout promptly. Adapting these strategies to the team's context helps create a positive work environment where technology enhances productivity while keeping staff motivated and committed.”* (Dilosi, 2023) The apparent lack of empathy and compassion, as well as the emotional indifference that some HR people exhibit towards the employees who work at their companies, has often led to the feelings of mistrust, animosity, resentment, and contempt that many workers feel toward HR. For example, when one hears employees saying things like *“I never tell HR anything because I know they'll go straight to my boss (department manager; owner, etc.) and tell them”*. Along those same lines, statements like *“Why bother going to HR? They won't help you anyway, they always side with management”* will not help HR professionals to receive endorsement or support for their organizational agendas from employees.

These feelings of mistrust and suspicion just don't develop arbitrarily in people. Something that HR said or did (or failed to say and/or do) caused them! So, how can this be corrected? What can HR professionals do to change people's minds and make them “believe” in HR again?

Difficult questions, to be sure. But, at the end of the day HR people must start somewhere, otherwise they may continue being accused of being “snitches”, “company spies”, or even worse.

The first solution that should be considered is how we view our employees. First and foremost, HR should be acknowledging them as a company's most important assets, the most invaluable and visible reason for our company's success. They should also remind themselves (and company executive management/ownership/board of directors etc.) that investing in one's employees directly correlates to investing in the company, and not allow themselves nor anyone else in the executive suite to fall back into the old and misguided corporate mindset of viewing employees as “expenses”. As very succinctly stated by Sir Richard Branson, founder and CEO of the Virgin Group: *“Your employees are your company's real competitive advantage. They're the ones making the magic happen-so long as their needs are being met.....a company's employees are its greatest asset, and your people are your product”*.

Another area in which HR needs to exercise caution is in believing that the staff handbook is the “company bible etched in stone”. No, it's not. A staff handbook serves to summarize, organize, codify, and memorialize in writing a specific set of processes, procedures, and moral/ethical beliefs that all employees should adhere to and practice. The reality is that sometimes a HR person needs to put aside the book and do what is right for employees! Sooner or later, they must come to the realization that not every solution to every problem that occurs in the workplace is found in the “almighty” staff handbook.

HR professionals should consider that they are (or need to be) advocates both for the company AND the employees. Therefore, it's important to strive to keep some measure of equilibrium and balance in what they do for the company as well as for employees.

As company leaders, HR professionals should focus on promoting and encouraging good ethical reasoning and moral behavior in the workplace, which must come from HR first and foremost, and then of course, from executives and management. The old adage of “leadership by example” continues to be as true today in the work environment as it was centuries ago in wars, politics, and society.

A perfect example of the above would be to provide flexible work schedules for employees who may have childcare, eldercare, or other types of family situations that may prevent them from working a strict 9AM-5PM schedule. If an employee has shown him/herself to be diligent, loyal, reliable, honest, hardworking, and long-term, does it really matter so much if the staff handbook says that work hours are strictly 9AM-5PM? For example, at the world headquarters of *Mastercard* in White Plains, NY there are various very flexible work schedules in place to address employees' needs. At *BLDG Management Co., Inc.*, a well-known, mid-sized family owned and operated real estate company that owns and manages well over 400 residential and commercial properties all over the New York metropolitan area, flexible work schedules have been the norm for well over 30 years.

Change the staff handbook so that it reflects more flexible work hours as well as the realities of the 21st century work environment. Why risk losing a valuable member of a company's staff simply because of a refusal to provide some type of reasonable accommodation? Is it then any wonder that companies which do not have flexibility with their work practices and policies have high turnover rates, declining productivity, unstable profitability, problematic growth, and more?

Perspective #2:

Younger and less experienced HR professionals may have a different perspective related to this matter. From the young HR professional's point of view, the advantages of technology have positively impacted the world of Human Resources throughout the last 20+ years.

There was a time not so long ago when someone was able to work in an office and learn directly from their peers and supervisors. However, after just a few years into the profession, as society went through the Covid-19 pandemic along with other factors, significant technological advantages happened that have impacted the way Human Resources functions in both positive and negative ways.

As an example, prior to the pandemic, meetings were always in person in the office with all parties who needed to be involved in attendance. Now, one can sit at his or her desk at home most days and dial into a virtual call with people from all over the world who need to collaborate with each other.

This is one of the positive impacts that technology has had on industry, i.e. the ability to always reach people no matter where anyone is located. This has also given more people a seat at the table, who in the past may not have been able to become involved due to geographic circumstances, time differences, language barriers, and more.

Of course, it goes without saying that there are some major benefits to technology, such as working at home, saving time and money on commutes; doing personal chores at lunchtime; being able to take care of sick children or elderly family members; and most importantly, having the ability to collaborate across the globe from one's bedroom in sweatpants if one so chooses!

Looking at the bigger picture here, by providing employees with this benefit, companies are actually investing in their wellbeing and in turn, helping to create happier, more positive, and better performing workers.

From an HR perspective, keeping the "human" in Human Resources has become more of a challenge. Employees don't always turn on their cameras when they have virtual meetings with each other. There is less opportunity to get to know one's colleagues "at the water cooler". Meetings feel more transactional than ever before. The question then arises: how can employees develop a trusting and respectful relationship with their HR executives, when the only time they speak to each other is rigidly scheduled with an agenda in place, and then in a "virtual setting" without any real human interaction, not being able to look at each other face-to-face and eye-to-eye?

While it's true that the "work from home" lifestyle can be a great component to a flexible work schedule, one which undoubtedly helps to keep employees happy and engaged, HR people still *need* to somehow "keep the human in human resources".

In line with that challenge, HR professionals have started resorting to a relatively new phenomenon called the "Virtual Happy or Social Hour".

Virtual happy hours are social events held over video conferencing platforms like Zoom, Webex, and Google Meet. The goal of these events is to have fun and build relationships between attendees. Virtual happy hour ideas are specific games, activities, and themes that you can use to boost engagement further.

While it remains to be seen how effective the concept of a virtual social hour or happy hour will be in the 21st century workplace, it is a step in the right direction for everyone involved in people management.

There are indeed some circumstances where one cannot always have the luxury of being in-person with the people we are collaborating with and this alone is one of the most spectacular impacts of technology. But it also changes things about the culture of a company and the way HR functions within it.

What could this mean for the future state of affairs regarding Human Resources? For one thing, it is vitally important that companies make it mandatory to meet with employees both virtually and also in person, whenever possible. Whether that in-person meeting takes place in the office, at a coffee shop, or traveling to a business conference, the in-person connection is *crucial* and must not be lost.

The in-person conversations are where one learns what someone did over the weekend, or what hobbies they are into, which can often lead to discovering similarities and compatibilities, and most importantly, to building the foundations of a real, honest-to-goodness human relationship.

The HR profession is a relationship-driven, relationship-first field, and in order for employees to trust an HR professional, that relationship needs to start somewhere.

Discussion:

The different HR generational perspectives expressed here have more commonalities than differences. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that HR professionals have certain differences in perspectives related to this trend.

For example, more seasoned HR people who have worked in the field for a substantial amount of time, and especially those who embraced HR technology gradually and over a period of time, generally seem more amenable at ensuring that there is a “balance” between using all that technology has to offer, but not at the expense of employees’ needs or wellbeing. At the same time, some younger HR professionals who have not worked in the field for a very long time, are ambivalent about using a more personal touch when dealing with employees and may even prefer to utilize technology and/or a more codified approach rather than the more personal touch that has long characterized the HR profession.

Nevertheless, both sides of HR professionals have come to the same realization: that by “keeping the ‘human’ in Human Resources, they are helping a company to prosper and grow, and are adding value to the “human capital” which enriches a company beyond all others, i.e. it’s employees.

Conclusion:

In today’s business environment, it is of utmost importance to convey the need to keep the “human” in Human Resources, and while there may be certain generational nuances at play, neither the highly experienced HR professionals nor the less-seasoned ones are far apart in their mutual desire to position their employees as the greatest asset a company has.

An important part of what is referred to in Human Resource Management as good “human capital management” is the ability to learn about people, to establish and maintain a good working relationship with them over time, and to utilize sound judgment, fairness, and emotional intelligence. Most of all, practicing good “human capital management” will help employees, managers, ownership, and boards of directors to understand that these practices will lead to greater company stability, improved employee retention, better productivity, and ultimately, greater profitability for any organization that is willing to make the effort.

HR professionals must realize that while the impact of technology is formidable, nothing will ever compare to the richness of a live-and-person human relationship. Shifting from working in an office and knowing employees and their kids’ names, to virtual calls in a purely transactional setting, has changed the dynamics of our working relationships.

Nothing will ever replace the positive impact of a simple “good morning” in the office on a working relationship, especially when HR needs their employees to trust them. HR must show employees that they support them adequately and stand ready to motivate, encourage and train them to be the best possible employees they can be. By helping them achieve this, we will assuredly enhance their chances for professional growth, as well as help them to impact the company’s bottom line.

HR professionals of all generations must also recognize the difference between embracing technology, and letting it take over one’s workstyle. We must embrace the advantages it has brought to the HR field when it comes to the new way of working, but we cannot let it take the “human” out of human resources either. It’s certainly good to adjust to everchanging technologies and methodologies, such as allowing employees to work from home on days when they need more flexibility, but the opportunity to build in-person connections with employees is invaluable to the success of a healthy work environment and must not be neglected or trivialized either.

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