“Strategic HR” Is Not An Oxymoron
The 1990s saw a critical shift in the world of HR. HR leaders finally began to move the needle forward in being perceived, recognized, and respected as a strategic partner.

Fast forward to the present, and while HR has done a great job of connecting the dots in championing the employee experience, many CHROs feel there's more work to be done. They believe HR still hasn't achieved its true potential, that there's still room for improvement in honing its brand image, and that it could still make an even greater impact on the health and growth of a company. The million-dollar question remains – “How”?

A survey from Information Services Group and the HRO Today Service and Technology Association, Human Resources Technology and Service Delivery Trends in 2014, reveals that organizations are increasingly positioning the HR function to make a greater contribution to their company's strategic and reputational objectives. In fact, nearly one-third (32%) of respondents cited strategic alignment with the business as the leading area of improvement their HR organizations are focusing on through 2016 – and that's ahead of even talent acquisition and retention (19%) and delivering on cost reduction targets (10%).

The new reality of work is raising the stakes, the bar, and pushing the boundaries on how companies need to operate and compete in order to succeed. And at no other time has the C-suite ever needed HR to step forward and be front and center to connect perhaps the biggest dots of all: finding people solutions that ultimately drive business solutions and innovation.

Why HR has to be the strategic partner

Today's HR is no longer just about support, and it can't afford to be. In addition to the traditional focus areas under its umbrella – which remain perennial issues – HR is expected to provide sound leadership, big picture thinking, and see down the road ahead while adding its unique people-focused voice and perspective to the enterprise. The State of the HR Profession from the Society of Human Resources Management paints a picture of HR's changing competencies showing that into the future, HR's function as a Strategic Positioner will require it to assume the roles of Credible Activist, Capability Builder, Change Champion, Human Resource Innovator and Integrator, and Technology Proponent.

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Why HR has to be the strategic partner (cont’d)

However, HR has a massive hill to climb in this regard, and many in the industry readily admit that they are ill-prepared for the challenges, changes and demands which now face them. Consider what Josh Bersin and his team of analysts presented in Deloitte’s 2015 Global Human Capital Trends report: only 6% of HR executives feel fully ready to address their leadership issues, despite a tripling of the percentage of companies rating L&D as very important since last year. Innovative leaders are taking the opportunity to reimagine their company’s culture and employee management and engagement programs, exploring new ways to cultivate leadership, build an inspiring work environment, and compete for top talent.

What’s becoming abundantly clear is that like the 1990s, HR finds itself at another seminal time in its history – becoming more ensconced in the information age; engaging multiple generations of workers under one roof; and facing an increasingly diverse, remote and globalized workforce. To succeed, HR will have to become even better creative problem solvers, consensus builders, and take a hard look at its structure, mandates and programs to assess what to keep, what to discard, and what to improve in order to continue delivering value to all of its stakeholders. Through all of this difficult change, HR must also remember that to create an enduring organization is to create one with a heart. One with a clear destination ahead, a strong captain at the helm, and core values to guide the ship. One that’s agile, maneuverable, and with a committed and passionate crew on board.

HR can not only survive, but ultimately thrive in this quest for transformation and re-invention.

10 ways to get more strategic

1. **Partner with the CMO**
   The company’s brand is a powerful tool – not just for external purposes, but also internally. In fact, that’s where the brand must originate. How employees perceive their company, their leaders, and their culture will have a massive impact on not just the employee experience, but ultimately the customer experience. CHROs and the CMO must be active collaborators – designing, refining and taking
10 ways to get more strategic (cont’d)

ownership of the brand together to ensure a powerful, consistent and singular voice is heard by all audiences.

2. **Tap into people analytics**
The input and output of data can be overwhelming these days – surpassed only by how influential it is, and how it’s shaping how everyone thinks and works. BYOD, SaaS, Cloud, Big Data – each of these provide a unique challenge and opportunity for CHROs to improve the quality, efficiency and ROI of each stage in the employee lifecycle. From helping to identify the best candidates, to predicting who’s likely to leave, embracing a data-driven approach leads to more meaningful insights, and more informed HR decisions.

Deloitte’s *Global Human Capital Trends* report brings to light that while 3 in 4 companies believe that using people analytics to address complex business and talent needs is important, only 8% believe their company is strong in this area. The fact is that this is a new discipline for most organizations. Companies are still learning what “people analytics” means and how it can give them a competitive edge. Innovative HR teams are developing capabilities to understand what leads to a high-performance workforce, uncovering the KPIs of hiring, retention, and effective leadership. They’re learning what HR data correlates to business performance so they can improve processes and maximize investments in talent and technology.

3. **Prevent and break down silos**
Unless you’re in the business of storing grain, silos are bad news for any organization – with fragmentation, duplication, and poor communication often being the end result. For HR, that means paying extra attention to keeping talent management processes integrated, with a holistic eye on quality and efficiency. The process of onboarding for example, can no longer afford to be just a brief and informal preparatory exercise, but needs to encompass deeper employee learning and understanding that will set the employee up for success further down the road.

At Ochsner Health System – a leading healthcare system in Louisiana
with 15k employees – HR leader Melissa Sparks led the streamlining of their onboarding process by aligning with all the key stakeholders, investing in technology and shifting to a comprehensive 365-day plan for engaging and educating new hires from pre-boarding to onboarding and beyond. This increased employee satisfaction to 96%, improved time-to-productivity by 50%, and reduced their annual costs by up to $1M. Read the details of Melissa Spark's success story here.

4. **Embrace technology & multimedia**

In the past, technology and HR have not always seen eye to eye. However, with ever-increasing demands, decreased capacity, and changing user preferences, CHROs have come to rely on technology to extend their reach, and to help deliver results.

The days of delivering static communications through just the printed word or a company PC are in the rear view mirror, and employee communications are rapidly and effectively being delivered through video and animation on a variety of platforms, especially mobile devices.

Multimedia communications is a must-have to remain relevant with today’s workforce.

Rosemary Arriada-Keiper, Senior Director, Global Rewards at Adobe has embraced technology and multi-media and transitioned benefits orientation to a self-service digital experience to increase employee engagement and education across the employee lifecycle. Get inspired by reading Rosemary’s story here.

GuideSpark clients are achieving great business results by adopting multimedia communications. Read about how companies are realizing great ROI from saving time and money, increasing plan participation, to increasing overall employee engagement.

5. **Think about bottom line cost savings**

It's a challenge for any line of business to produce tangible results while remaining cost efficient, and HR is no exception. However,
priorities such as investments in the workforce can account for over 30% of an organization’s revenue according to PwC, so it can be a delicate balance to find.

HR must adopt a critical eye to its operations and programs in an effort to maximize value. This includes reducing duplication and overlap in roles and responsibilities, simplifying or automating repeatable processes, and improving budgeting and reporting, among others.

6. **Introduce measurable goals for all**
   It’s said that one of the golden rules of a successful business is not team building, but rather team alignment – ensuring that every employee is not just familiar with their job, but also how that job contributes to their team, their department, and the overall goals for the business. Yet this notion often falls short in execution, as many roles – particularly administrative ones – lack the concrete goals that form the backbone of this alignment.

   By introducing realistic and meaningful goals and objectives for all jobs within the company, organizations will not only become more efficient, they can spark the motivation and performance within individual employees.

7. **Prioritize employee engagement**
   Disengaged employees have been reaching uncomfortable levels in recent years. According to a [May 2015 Gallup poll](https://www.gallup.com/poll/204339/employees-engaged-jobs.aspx), less than one-third (31.5%) of workers are engaged in their jobs. And the issue is quickly securing a spot on the podium of the biggest organizational challenges – right next to finding and retaining great talent. Eighty four percent of leaders in The Economist’s [Re-engaging with Engagement](https://www.economist.com/search/engagement) study say disengaged employees are one of the three biggest threats facing their business. Losing a top-notch employee doesn't come cheap, often costing one to two years worth of pay and benefits. Multiply that by dozens, perhaps hundreds, and it’s easy to see the catastrophic downside.

   While acknowledging a disengagement problem is relatively easy, identifying the root causes and developing solutions most certainly is not, which is why being proactive is always the preferred course of action.

8. **Be prepared for big shifts in the workforce**
   As if talent management wasn’t difficult enough on its own, CHROs are now faced with having to fit demographic, geographic and diversity management into the puzzle as well.

   ‘Baby Boomers’ are expected to exit the workforce in large numbers over the next 15-25 years, the
10 ways to get more strategic (cont’d)

‘Millennials’ and ‘Gen X’ groups coming in are widely believed to lack the skills necessary for success, and according to the U.S. Department of Labor, more than half of the total labor force increase over the past 16 years was attributed to foreign-born workers. The workforce is also made up of an increasing number of freelancers – more than 1/3 according to Forbes – and they’re largely connecting and communicating virtually, requiring HR to not only grasp the fundamentals of social and mobile technology, but also how it impacts and redefines performance management, team building, and managing expectations.

9. Drive leadership development
A company’s growth isn’t always measured in terms of size, but also capabilities. However, with this comes the question of whether the company has the right talent pool and programs to identify and foster tomorrow’s leaders. Research from KPMG’s Rethinking Human Resources in a Changing World suggests that as HR transitions into a more strategic, higher-value added partner, it will need to assume a greater role in the shaping of the organization’s “people agenda” and adopt a more advisory role in driving company goals by way of specialized leadership solutions. It’s incumbent upon HR to own this conversation, and to recognize that the term ‘leadership’ is as much a function as it is a position, or, put another way, it’s better to create a team of leaders than a leadership team.

And with a shift to thinking globally, and not just locally, developing this leadership capability internally through coaching, professional development and succession planning will be critical, and poses a tremendous opportunity for HR.

10. Tackle culture head-on
Perhaps no other word is more underestimated and misunderstood than workplace culture. Like a moth in a closet, a poor culture can go unnoticed for long periods of time, and only be discovered once significant damage has already been done to the fabric that holds everything together. However, culture doesn't always have to be an exercise in repair. Many companies are recognizing that culture is a powerful attraction and retention tool – even above and beyond salary and perks – and that it has a direct impact on a company’s financial performance. And according to Employee Job Satisfaction and Engagement research from the Society for Human Resource Management, organizations with a particularly strong corporate culture interlock it into their brand, encouraging employees to “live the brand.”

For HR, this means developing programs and activities that create awareness and punctuate the vitality of the company’s culture, its history, its traditions and belief systems, while tying all stages of the employee lifecycle to that culture, and the values and vision of the company.
So, what does the future hold?

It’s been a long journey to where HR finds itself now. And clearly that’s in large part to the forward-looking, strategic thinking CHROs who have successfully transformed their departments through these periods of change. However, for HR to continue to evolve, so must its membership. To keep pace, CHROs must be part coach, part technologist, part internal consultant, and continue to redefine themselves as owners, and not just business partners.

Change is coming from all directions, and organizations need HR to be the hub. Successfully doing so will place HR in a strong position to meet whatever challenges their companies will face over the next two decades.

About GuideSpark

GuideSpark, the leader in employee communications and engagement, transforms how organizations communicate and engage with their employees through customized video and mobile experiences for every stage of the employee life cycle, from onboarding to benefits, compensation and more. The solution is accessible via a robust platform that provides an interactive user experience and deep analytics on employee engagement. GuideSpark, named to the Inc. 5000 list of “America's fastest-growing companies,” serves hundreds of enterprise customers across all industries and millions of employees. By leveraging content and technology, GuideSpark helps its customers transform their employee communications to increase engagement, create efficiencies by saving time and money, deliver consistent messaging and get peace of mind knowing that their employees understand the value of working for the company.