

The Emerging Role of Human Resource Professionals in Sri Lanka: An Anatomy

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(Interviewee)

interviewed by

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This interview is an attempt to capturing ground realities of managing human resources in organizations in Sri Lanka and abroad. The interview that follows was based upon three broader themes/domains of inquiry:

- i) what really HR is ought to do in an organization?
- ii) what it makes a HR professional competent to assuming charge of HR function of a large organization?
- iii) how personal ability/competence coupled with sustained reputation of a HR professional earn him/her a seat in strategy making body in a large organization?
- iv) what career formation patterns are contributing mostly to a HR professional in reaching higher levels in his/her career?

Researcher: To start with, I would be pleased to know about the historical evolution of your career as a HR professional. In my observations, there can be seen a wide array of career formation patterns amongst HR professionals in Sri Lanka.

Interviewee: I started my career with hospitality industry in 1970s and then shifted gradually to banking, diversified business/conglomerates, aviation, offshore out-sourcing and again back to diversified business/conglomerates where I am today. The total span of career covers both experience in Sri Lanka and overseas.

Needless to say, that all these changes in my career across many different industries earned much needed maturity and confidence to deal with really “unusual circumstances” as a HR manager.

Researcher: That sounds interesting ... if you are to talk a little more about these unusual circumstances ...

Interviewee: Every HR manager, like professionals in other practices, deals with two types of work, i.e. usual operations and unusual operations.

The former is repetitive and most times monotonous which can be handled with the support of standards, policies and guidelines set in the organization. Sometimes we do not find much of a challenge embodied into managing these monotonous operations.

What is most challenging is handling unusual operations as they are characterized by unpredictability. We may not get any support from HR manuals or handbook in handling such operations.

My most memorable experience of handling unusual operations was associated with a critical event which occurred at my previous place of employment. It was totally a catastrophic situation in 2001 June which we had never felt in such a higher magnitude of the history of the company. I saw in my eyes how much our valued customers, employees, management and fellow countrymen as a whole suffered from this incident. Many sleepless nights for me and my colleagues ..., not only in HR department, but also in other departments handling core and support functions.

Researcher: So, tell me what you learnt from facing the challenge of bringing the situation back to normal over time ...

Interviewee: Two major lessons for building career as a HR professional; the indispensability of exercising emotional intelligence coupled with interpersonal relationships and then ability to grasp the business very past.

What is commonplace is the high likelihood of losing human touch as we deal with totally unforeseen situations. Sometimes we end up with strong emotions in our work context. The experience gathered across industries convinced me of how to be socially and technically competent to keep a cool head to manage situations full of diversity. The workforce varies from organization to organization in terms of gender composition, age distribution, educational standards, academic and professional qualifications, content of work ... A HR manager's skill is getting along with people from many different walks in life thereby increasing his/her level of tolerance of diversity.

Researcher: In your understanding, what is the role of HR in business?

Interviewee: With reference to the historical evolution of HR in Sri Lankan context, we can witness today HR gaining maturity for playing the role of business partner. If we go back to 1960^s to 1980^s, the role of HR revolved around transactional operations with an administrative orientation. Then functions of HR, i.e. recruitment, selection and hiring, payroll, discipline, grievance handling, compliance, record keeping and employee relations were considered in isolation. Human resource development was paid much attention. HR had established its identity in organizations as a back office function.

Notably, ex-servicemen and Lawyers had a demand for employment as personnel managers in organizations, be they in public or private sectors. Over decades, this scenario has changed witnessing professionally qualified people occupying HR positions owing to the expansion of HR education at universities and professional institutions in the country. Today, we can see, depending on the stage of development of industries, Sri Lankan organizations, particularly in corporate sector, have shown a gradual shift or transition from personnel to human resource

leadership. This shift has now started earning the recognition for HR where hiring right people and developing them through a planned approach are considered as the source of competitive advantage. Though the pace of transformation is slow, HR departments in many large organizations have revisited their role and reoriented it to be a partner to business, supporting business goal achievement.

Researcher: Given these historical developments, how has HR transformed its character?

Interviewee: It is maturing to the level of playing the role of business partner from being a mere implementer of the strategy in the past to both strategy maker and implementer today. In so doing, many organizations have structured in such a way where Head of HR is a key component of senior management team who is entrusted with building HR strategy aligned to business goals. Whatever HR does is required to be aligned with the corporate business plan and sector business plan, depending on the organizational configuration. In light of these practices, HR is developing steadily its identity as a front-end function.

Researcher: To play the role as a business partner, what competencies HR professionals are required to have?

Interviewee: I shall emphasize, initially, three key competencies in this regard, namely technical know-how, experience and maturity to implement HR functions applying emotional intelligence and thorough knowledge of HR technical supply chain.

Quintessential point here is that HR people need to be technically competent. The evidence from the industry shows that owing to technical competence of people occupying HR roles today, they have been able to upgrade HR in their organizations. But, unfortunately, there are occasions where this phenomenon occurs based on the individual ability of the incumbent of that role rather than the organization's necessity to have that role. Professional competence of the person heading HR and his/her team to get the acceptance of others in the organization is crucial for HR to play the role of business partner.

Another point which captures the attention in this context is that when a HR professional makes mobility across industries or organizations within the same industry, he/she needs to exercise strong emotional intelligence coupled with interpersonal relationships and the ability to grasp the business very fast.

Researcher: There is a growing understanding amongst HR professionals in Sri Lanka today that line managers can play a vital role in delivering HR services. How do you justify this phenomenon?

Interviewee: I quite agree with this point of view. Indeed, HR is a line function, be it in manufacturing, service, public sector, private sector or non-governmental organizations. All line managers are people managers who can act as an effective delivery point of all HR policies and practices of an organization. It is line managers who interact closely with, for example, employees at plant/floor level thereby line managers can develop a mutually beneficial rapport with them for delivering HR services.

In delivering certain HR services, the active involvement of line managers is indispensable. For instance, recruitment and selection, performance management, Learning & Development etc.

Researcher: If all line managers are HR people managers, then why we need a HR department for an organization?

Interviewee : People working in HR departments discharge their duties and responsibilities as catalyst or facilitators who have the specialized expertise of HR. This is what I emphasized earlier as technical competence. Line managers are experts in their own domain of work, not in HR. So what HR departments are required to do is to share its technical competence with line managers and train them systematically on delivering HR functions in relation to the size of the workforce they manage. This is a kind of building partnership between HR department and line managers.

On top of all these initiatives, HR departments should recognize explicitly line managers as people managers and then take the measures to build competencies in those line managers to manage their people, of course with the support of HR department.

Researcher: Today we can observe an expansion of HR education, both academic and professional, in Sri Lanka. How do you see this expansion for the further advancement of HR profession in Sri Lanka?

Interviewee: The developments in HR education sector for the past two decades are quite impressive. From a chronological point of view, Institute of Personnel Management Sri Lanka (Inc), being the oldest professional HR body in Sri Lanka, has been playing a vital role in re-orienting professional HR education. It has started offering a wide range of courses and programs for the HR practitioners as well as people who are aspiring to be HR practitioners. The National Institute of Business Management (NIBM) conducts a Diploma program in HR through which we can educate many prospective HR practitioners. The Association of Human Resources Professionals too plays a vital role in facilitating professional development of HR practitioners while creating a dynamic platform for networking and sharing of experience and knowledge.

On the other hand, quite interestingly, many universities in Sri Lanka have started offering Bachelor degree programs in human resource management. These programs cover a wide range of HR functions apart from imparting knowledge on other functional areas of management to undergraduates.

Researcher: For developing HR professionals, to what extent the combination of academic and professional education contributes?

Interviewee: For making a thorough HR professional, we need both dimensions incorporated into HR education. Through academic HR, undergraduates can acquire sound conceptual frameworks and skills for analytical thinking and conducting research. On the contrary, the emphasis of professional HR education is creating the environment for learners to acquire skills needed for managing people while exposing them to a multitude of real HR practices in

organizations. And also, professional HR education can support HR professionals with their lifelong learning.

Researcher: What is your advice for a person who is aspiring to start receiving HR education for becoming a HR professional?

Interviewee: Be positive in your thinking; be prepared to acquire broad-based knowledge of HR and other functional areas of business primarily Marketing /IT / Finance. Once you are thorough with almost all functions of HR, you can start initially your career with any function. With a growing maturity and experience, you can think of getting into certain specialized areas of HR. Nevertheless, you need to keep your eye on how other functional areas of business are working and how HR function can be linked up with them thereby HR playing the role of business partner.

Researcher: To conclude, how do you project the future of HR profession in Sri Lanka? What challenges our HR professionals are facing today?

Interviewee: HR as an academic discipline and a professional practice is constantly evolving. Our HR professionals dealing with certain major challenges today. Amongst them, managing the size of workforce in an era which has been adversely affected by global financial meltdown is predominant. Other challenges include retaining good quality people, managing wage structure in terms of salary increases given the rising rate of inflation etc. We as HR professionals can build further our credibility in the minds of our stakeholders by addressing effectively these challenges.

There is a promising future for HR profession and HR professionals in Sri Lanka. What we need is to embark on lifelong learning for improving continually our competencies for playing our role as a business partner.

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Mr. Sunil Dissanayake graduated in Hotel Management from the Ceylon Hotel School in 1974, and served as a Senior Hotel Manager at Ceylon Hotels Corporation. Thereafter, he was Senior Lecturer and Head - Faculty of Accommodation Operations at the Ceylon Hotel School. While in this position he was awarded an ILO Fellowship to specialize in training methodology in Devon, UK.

He then served as Training & Personnel Manager of the hotel management arm of John Keells Holdings, and later as Staff Training Manager at the Le Meridien (Galadari hotel) Colombo. Later he had stints as Staff Training Manager of the Ramada Hotel, Dubai, UAE before joining Citibank in the Gulf, which he served between 1990 and 1994. He was Head of Human Resources (Gulf) based in Dubai, at the time he left Citibank.

On returning to Sri Lanka, he joined Carson Cumber batch as General Manager – Human Resources and served them between 1994 and 2000. He was promoted as Director Carsons Management Services 1996. He then joined Sri Lankan Airlines in 2000 and served them as Head of Human Resources up to 2007

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Dr. Dassanayake holds the unique reputation of being a recipient of both US Fulbright (junior) and Japanese Government Postgraduate Research (MONBUKAGAKUSHO) Scholarships. In his current position as Specialist at CPSC, he has conducted In-country Programs in Thailand, Fiji Islands and Bhutan for a variety of stakeholders in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector. His recent most teaching and research interests lie in HRD in BPO industry, Japanese-style HRM, labor markets, and current issues and challenges of TVET in Asia and Pacific region.