

Transforming HRM Into A Profession: Can We? Should We?

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HR as a Profession vs Professionalizing the HR Function

Recent studies and feedback from sources in the industry (“HR Industry needs more professionalization: Survey” ChannelNews Asia, 26 May 2015) suggests that most of the HR practitioners working in the HR field today are more administrative in impact and execution than strategic in scope. The WDA report goes on to propose three key thrusts to ‘enhance the professionalism’ to make ‘HR a strategic partner’ (the press release can be obtained here from the WDA website at http://www.wda.gov.sg/content/wdawebiste/L209-001About-Us/L219-PressReleases/26_May_2015.html)

No one challenges that any field should be immune to upgrading and change – least of all the HR function. I am putting forward a very different argument that HR should be considered a profession, and the HR bodies and government institutions should work towards that end.

Now, you might think, wait a minute. Can HR be a profession? Isn’t it one already? Isn’t enhancing the professionalism of HR practitioners similar to making HR a profession?

Let us pause and consider each of these queries in turn.

Query 1: Is Human Resource Management a Professional Field?

It is not. The difference between the HR field as a function and HR as a profession can be easily illustrated by looking at a recognized business profession of Accounting.

What is the difference between a bookkeeper and an accountant?

Let us start with the similarities - a bookkeeper manages the finance administration and maintains the ledger. Similarly, an accountant performs the same function (arguably in a more complex manner, with

greater complexities in their treatment and consideration of the accounts). At the end of the day, they share the common principle that the books must balance. (This is a gross oversimplification – I’m very aware)

The bookkeeper may even be a finance manager, but he or she is not a professional, he/she is not bound by the code of conduct of the profession, and is not recognized. If mistakes are made in the course of their duties, they can be dismissed from employment but they cannot be disbarred from their profession. More importantly, they are also not protected by their professional body when coerced to make decisions that are detrimental to their professional judgment.

So currently, practitioners in the HR field are more similar to bookkeeping than accountants – when we are making the comparison of HR as a function vs HR as a profession.

Perhaps the most simple litmus test is to check the practical barriers of entry into a profession – e.g. accounting, legal, medical, and engineers (chemical, civil, mechanical, electrical, and aerospace) are examples of professions where the threshold amount of knowledge to practice the profession required almost demands the requisite investment and time. The reward is the license to operate and protection from coercion by customers. On the other hand, these professions also punish professionals that are professionally negligent or break professional codes of conduct.

There are other professions that are well-regarded but do not require more than the requisite certificates – these include IT ‘professionals’, banking ‘professionals’, marketing ‘professionals’ and HR ‘professionals’.

Therefore, on this basis – it seems the conclusion is that HR should not be regarded as a Profession, ranked alongside Law, Accountancy, Medicine, etc.

Query 2: Can HR be a Profession? Should HR be a Profession?

But can HR be a profession? Yes.

Should HR be regarded as a profession today? This is harder to answer but I would put forward a qualified 'yes.

Historically, professions exist because of either complexity of their functions or 'secret' knowledge not open to all. For example, accountants and lawyers have a very complicated set of 'closed or esoteric knowledge that takes years to learn and some more years to master. Civil engineers may take 4 years to graduate with a degree and more years before they can attain a Qualified Person status to sign off plans. If the civil engineers are negligent, they can lose their professional license to practice and their companies are liable to suits.

Human Resource Management has evolved from hiring and firing workers and managers, as well as paying them and administering to them in-between to something a lot more complex. At its most sophisticated, HR personnel must design and drive a Strategic HR blueprint aligned with the organization's global/ regional strategy ensuring that the right set of skills (competency management) are deployed in the right number (manpower planning) of highly-engaged personnel (organization development and culture), working in a coordinated orchestra of activities (performance management) to outperform the competition in a sustainable manner.

At its most basic, HR personnel is tasked to ensure that the company's labor-management practices do not run afoul of the Employment Act.

Today even this minimum standard cannot be attained by many companies in Singapore, especially SMEs. We read that workers are denied their basic rights, (salaries, or rest days) either on purpose or through ignorance of the regulations. If an HR 'professional' is ignorant of basic details of the Employment Act – how then can we expect them to leap-frog to the next level of Strategic HR, as professionals?

I have a possible suggestion (and readers are welcome to provide more food for thought), HR should be a licensed profession

In other words, to practice HR^[1] there should be a minimum level of standard – either in knowledge or ability to perform at work. This should be especially for HR Administrative Functions such as Hiring,

Cessation of Employment, Salary Administration, Compensation disputes, etc. that a company is legally bound by Employment Act. Ignorance of the law is not an excuse to break the law, but ignorance of Employment Law should bar HR practitioners from practicing HR when they are not qualified.

Now should all HR practitioners be licensed? Should all companies be required to hire licensed HR practitioners? Eventually, I think yes – but with qualifications.

Any company with less than 3 headcounts would probably find such a licensed HR professional to be an unaffordable and unrequired luxury to insource. However, if the company needs to hire foreign labor, then they should be required to avail themselves of the advice and services of a licensed HR practitioner. The HR practitioner needs not to be in-house but could be an outsourced shared service HR provider – let us not belabor the point on costs: increasing demand for these outsourced shared service providers would attract more players and competition would cost proves to fall^[2].

Of course, a licensing scheme would require an HR accreditation framework to base the assessments on, but there are many such frameworks in the industry and it requires some level of customization to fit the requirements to the licensing scheme for HR professionals. Perhaps licensing is one pillar on which the HR practitioners and industry champions can build to build HR into a professional field.

Query 3: Isn't enhancing the professionalism of HR practitioners similar to making HR a profession?

Not yet. All professional fields have a nationally-recognized professional body with the mandate to protect the professionals from undue influence and coercion and to punish their own professional 'flock' if they flout or contravene their codes of conduct.

However, HRM practitioners are today not insulated or immune from coercive threats, such as the threat of termination of employment, in not executing the instructions of senior management which could result in the company breaking the law or incorporating unfair HR practices. Licensed HR practitioners must be protected from these influences in order to discharge their duties correctly, legally, and in good conscience. The workers have unions to fall back on, but HR practitioners as PMETs do not have such clear protection from 'their protectors'. (Perhaps it is time to explore the unionization of HR practitioners?)

On the other hand, employers have to be protected from licensed HR practitioners offering bad advice or executing tasks with negligence. Professional bodies also can revoke the right to practice as additional punishment if they fail in their duties due to negligence. Therefore, the professional bodies often have a disciplinary council to preside and determine whether a professional member has not discharged his duties to the best of his 'professional knowledge and abilities.

Therefore, to be a recognized professional body, HR needs the following:

- A professional competency framework that can license/accredit professionals who are able to be assessed fairly to achieve the standards required
- A nationally recognized professional Body governing the rights of the professionals to ensure that they are able to discharge their duties correctly, legally, and in good conscience
- A nationally- recognized disciplinary committee/council to preside and determine if breaches of good conduct by HR 'professionals' have occurred and if so determine the merited punishment including revoking the professional status

The post "Transforming HRM Into A Profession: Can We? Should We?" was first published by Ethan Tan here <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/transforming-hrm-profession-can-we-should-ethan-tan/>

About Ethan Tan

Ethan is the Principal Consultant for The 8th Pinnacle Pte Ltd. In his role, he leads business transformation projects with clients from the private and public sectors across Asia-Pacific. He is the Practice Lead for Change Management, Leadership Development, Sales, and Business Development Technology with clients.

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