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NEW HUMAN RESOURCES ROLES TO SURVIVE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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1. INTRODUCTION.

Organizations are currently reexamining everything they do and the HR function does not escape this process. Neither has it escaped from the processes of downsizing and restructuring that HR function has often organized and conducted itself. As a result of all this, many HR professionals are going through the same anxiety as any other employees worried about the continuity of their job.

We can state that the HR function finds itself at a crossroads, on the one hand, because of the need to justify its contribution to the organization's global results, on the other hand, due to the fact that a significant part of its activities and responsibilities are being outsourced. However, in spite of everything, the future has unprecedented opportunities in store for professionals in this field (Becker et al., 1997).

These opportunities will mean that the HR function will become more relevant and will acquire more prestige inside organizations, finally leaving its secondary position. However, if it is to achieve this aim, it will have to lead the organizations' adaptation process to the changes taking place in the world of business; changes that are happening at a speed no one would have been able to think of few years ago and which have three main driving forces, namely: the globalization of economy, the spread of information technologies and the new social characteristics of the staff.

The factors mentioned above make an organization's competitive advantage depend increasingly on the way human resources are managed but, at the same time, demand a revision of the way this process has been developed so far. Consequently, HR professionals will have to replace old roles and action ways.

In this sense, the paper offers an analysis of the opportunities and threats provoked by the driving forces of the changes in the HR function, finally putting forward a series of recommendations on the role this function must play in future.

2. A CHANGING SCRIPT FOR A CHANGING WORLD.

What was the past like, what is the present like, what should the future be like? In first place, it should be remembered that this function has already gone a long way (Anderson, 1997).

So far, the HR function has not found too much trouble to adapt to the changes taking place around it, mainly because those changes were slow and, to some extent, foreseeable. However, the opposite is happening at the moment; numerous experts (Drucker, 1995; Goldman, Nagel and Preiss, 1995; Hamel and Prahalad, 1994 and Stacey, 1992) are agree on the idea that the course taken by the business world is turning dizzily and unpredictably, which is why, as Lattman and García (1992) have stated, organizations will not only have to carry out mere adaptations but will have to face real transformations as regards organization.

Although all business areas are imbued with this mutation process, the consequences taking place in the HR field are more relevant, taking into account that the enterprises have managed their workforce according to a model which is the antithesis of speed (Rucci, 1997).

The model we have referred to above has been characterized by the use of practices encouraging the standardization of processes, routine and bureaucracy. At the same time, these systems favoured a management style based on control, obedience and consistency; features which can continue to be useful to some extent, but which make it difficult for organizations to adapt fast and flexibly.

Unfortunately, there are various obstacles that prevent many organizations from changing this model. We can blame many HR professionals for their lack of capacity, corrupted both by years of accommodation to a `secondary´ function (Hatathcock, 1996) and by the ambiguity on the part of the top management when it comes to defining the role this function must play (Stroh and Miller, 1993).

In these circumstances, those HR professionals who want to survive in their jobs cannot act as wagons in the process of adaptation to the new conditions, but must become its driving force. A key role for the HR function will be to turn into a catalyst for the change (Galbraith, 1992); in other words, to be

proactive, to identify opportunities for change and improvement, to change ideas into tangible concepts and make them come true.

However, why must the HR function, and not another function, be responsible for this process? The reason is simple: the organizational change is mainly a change of behaviours and, therefore, the HR function should have an active participation in such a process. No one could imagine the production manager or the finance manager steering the change.

3. CHALLENGES FOR HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT.

As we already anticipated, there are three fundamental driving forces which speed up the mutation in the present environment: the globalization of economy, advances in technology, specially those related to information technologies, and social changes in the staff which lead to the knowledge society: driving forces that simultaneously question and challenge the HR function.

a) The globalization of economy.

The enterprise image, with clearly defined limits to show who is inside and who is outside, is becoming anachronistic (Ashkeanes et al., 1995). The classical concept of this institution is disappearing as a result of the outsourcing of activities and the constitution of networks. The border between what is considered strategic and what can be externalized is under constant revision, which means that, even if organizations go through an expansion on an international scale, if they increase their sales volume, market share, etc., it would not be strange at all that enterprises should reduce their staff.

Consequently, the quantitative decline in HR departments is starting to become generalized, which is affecting the role that must be played by the people who are in charge of them. The solutions that experts proposed few years ago, which were adopted by some people (long-term approaches, belonging to the management committee, approaching the line leaders) have not been good enough to guarantee them a steady job in their enterprise's hierarchical structure. At present, in many cases, HR people are forced to compete with external suppliers which promise to deliver the same services with lower expenses.

On the other hand, not only do the traditional limits of the enterprise disappear and HR departments become quantitatively reduced, but also, as a result of globalization, many of the traditional sources of

competitive advantage (patents, economies of scale, access to financial resources, etc.) become less important (Pfeffer, 1994), to the point of making HR management become a key element when differentiating an organization from another (Marr and García, 1997).

Nevertheless, the globalization has also brought about, though maybe indirectly, a decisive change in the life of many employees due to the disappearance of the job for life. Organizations are using an increasingly high number of people who do not have a traditional and permanent labour relationship (Handy, 1991), which makes the incorporation of collaborators into the business plan become more difficult.

Unfortunately, in numerous enterprises, the HR professional is not still viewed as a good partner to act in globalized enviroments, but rather as the main obstacle. In order to change this situation the HR must face the following challenges:

- Creating a sense of caring and involvement among short-timers, which perhaps only exists among employees having a job for life (Bowen and Siehl, 1997 and Ehrlich, 1994).
- Developing leaders able to function in changing environments and with a global perspective (Brockbank, 1997).
- Endowing the function with contents and responsibilities appreciated by the top management and which cannot be easily externalized.

b) Information technologies.

Technological advances have undoubtedly transformed the economy, the society and the way each individual has contact with his/her fellow human beings. Of all the advances, the one that has most affected HR has been that of information technologies, above all, because, since they alter the treatment and conservation of the imformation, the `nervous system´ of organizations as well as that of the society as a whole is modified.

Information technologies have given rise to new and varied products, but also to a new revision in the management patterns. This revision is especially justified by the potential these technologies have when it comes to modifying the structures and relationships among the members of the enterprise. The centralization/decentralization as regards decision-making and the organizational communication process are the most seriously affected by these modifying processes.

On the other hand, information technologies are neither in favour nor against a specific way to structure human resources, but offer people in charge of HR a series of possibilities which had not been available for them so far (Bruns and McFarlan, 1988). The following ones stand out among the multiple options that we have:

1. Reduction of hierarchical levels. This decrease takes place because these technologies assume the task of filtering information and linking subordinates with higher posts, a task which is usually realized by middle management (Magee, 1985).

2. Loss of routine jobs. Information technologies help eliminate monotonous, dangerous and alienating jobs, allowing to endow them with more content, but also make these jobs more demanding and stressful (Mirvis, Sales and Hackett, 1992).

3. Job design on work-teams. It is becoming more and more feasible to form small work-teams, with a certain degree of autonomy, which dedicate their efforts to a specific task and which usually break up once that task has been completed, in order to integrate themselves, once again, in another group (Davidson and Davis, 1990). Enterprises thus gain in flexibility, since these structures arise, precisely, with the aim of solving problems and offering `sui generis´ goods and/or services, different from each other.

4. Work at home. Information technologies are making us move away from the traditional office, going through the automatic office, to the office at home. In parallel, we observe a change from the blue-collar worker, to the white-collar worker and then to the androgynous-collar worker, whom we do not know because he is linked to the enterprise through a telecommunications network

Anyway, regardless of the advantages offered by information technologies, we must not forget that only a suitable combination between technological innovation and HR management will allow enterprises to have access to markets with a certain degree of success. The reason is simple; the enterprise without people has not been invented yet; in practice, no matter how good the procedure is, it will become useless if individuals are not trained and willing to implement it.

c) The knowledge society.

The economic and technological changes do not usually take place alone but are escorted by not less important social transformations. In our view, as regards the latter, the most important transformation

has been the evolution from the traditional society to what Drucker (1989) calls `the knowledge society´, based on the added value and the competitivity created by human flairs.

The starring character in this new society is the employee who has started a process of permanent education, who has intellectual flairs, carries out highly discretional work, is less faithful to the enterprise, has less acceptance for the authority, is motivated by challenging tasks and intends to satisfy needs of a higher rank. In short, an employee who does not fit into the traditional management systems.

Another important social transformation affecting the HR function is the loss of homogeneity in the staff. The male employee, even at high levels, is no longer the norm; besides, there are more and more people inside organizations that have lifestyles other than the traditional family, as well as people with different religious and cultural beliefs.

Along with this better qualification and diversity in the workforce, we should add that, in spite of the improved ethical behaviour on the part of organizations, the expectations and demands of the society in this respect are becoming more relevant. We are currently in the age of the ecologist demanding consumer and the ethical shareholder; this forces organizations to change their image, because this image is an important incentive in the behaviour of its employees, customers, investors, etc.

It follows from all this that someone must make the top management aware of the fact that organizations cannot continue to reduce their objectives to profit maximization or to their own survival, they must develop a wider conception of their role in society. Profits are a regulating element in the enterprise's life but, along with them, we must consider other human and moral factors which are, at least, as essential in the long run.

After making this broad description of the forces conditioning the future of the HR function, we could ask ourselves if the latter will be able to face them with a relative degree of success. We think that the way HR is conceived and organized in many present-day organizations urgently requires essential transformations, both as regards its internal organization, its role, and the qualification and training of the people in charge.

4. FUTURE CONTENTS FOR THE HUMAN RESOURCES FUNCTION.

Next we are going to analyze five points which, in our view, will enable this function to overcome the challenges it has to face and will also make it possible for it to acquire the prestige and importance it deserves.

4.1. HR as an outspoken advocate of employee interest.

Business decisions are characterized by their complexity, since they affect all the areas differently, which is why these areas tend to come into conflict with each other. The impact of decisions made by the management on the employees is often overlooked, unless the HR professional projects a spotlight on them. Although many people are not aware, these omissions do not help at all the people who have made the decision or the people affected by the latter (Ehrlich, 1997).

Specialized literature usually shows three different perspectives of the HR function: `employee advocate´, `administrator´ and `business partner´. The first perspective is mainly focused on the fact that employees must be treated fairly; the second concentrates on the compliance with internal regulations and procedures; the last one intends to maximize the firm's employees' productivity.

Unfortunately, when the function focuses on the employees too much, it usually forgets business needs. On the other hand, the `business partner´ perspective, in its wish to restructure organizations so as to increase productivity, often give away the employees and their interests. The `administrator´ or bureaucratic perspective, which concentrates on obedience and compliance with regulations, views employees and business not as customers, but as impediments (Ellig, 1997).

The previous approaches suggest that adopting a single role, as some professionals have been doing, is too narrow a perspective and has no value either. The most accurate solution lies in a balance between the role of `employee advocate´ and that of `business partner´. The exclusion of the administrative role is caused by the fact that these activities are the first to be externalized in any HR department restructuring process.

Luckily, the reality of recent years has made it clear that numerous professionals of this function have been abandoning the administrativist role, but, unfortunately, in order to focus on the business partner approach. In our view, in the future, the HR function, without leaving the role of business partner, must strongly encourage the employee advocate role. This means making sure that the employees' interests receive the attention they deserve and guaranteeing that they are treated fairly. In other words, that any employee who thinks he/she has received an unfair treatment can, without any fear of reprisals, let it

know to both people higher in rank and to the HR function. This will make it necessary to establish systems for the communication of the decisions adopted and a will to implement the appropriate correcting decisions.

We recognize that it can be an uncomfortable role, above all, when we are dealing with situations in which quick decision-making procedures are required; but the will on the part of the HR function to play this role, even under hostile circumstances, will help it reach the reputation and prestige this function is after.

Closely related to the role of advocate employee is the subject of the introduction of ethics into organizations. In future, successful leaders will look less like the innovating Shumpeterian entrepreneur and they will become more similar to the leader. This is why those who follow an ethical behaviour will be more successful, since people will have more trust in their decisions.

The HR function must make sure that all managers follow some ethical behaviour, but not considering them as a restriction to their personal autonomy, but as the easiest way to achieve the involvement of the staff. However, it is not advisable to forget the role played by personal example in this aspect. It is not possible to encourage the adoption of ethical approaches if we do not practise what we preach. An ethical behaviour on the part of the HR manager is essential, not only for the organization, but also to improve his/her own prestige and position. The reason is very clear, an ethical behaviour favours, promotes and causes to grow the main action weapon: credibility.

4.2. HR management and the HR department.

There are many symptoms showing that lack of clarity exists as regards the person responsible for HR management. The future managers and HR staff will have to understand that line managers are the people leaders in their organizations and, as such, the people having the most responsibility as regards HR management.

Unfortunately, many line leaders seem to want a HR person who takes people work off their agendas, allowing them to concentrate, exclusively, on the important business work. Apparently, they do not understand that people work is the important one, that is, the key work in management. If a manager does not want to be responsible for the people side of the job, he/she should be transferred to a technical individual contributor job, which, is what he/she wants anyway, leaving for others to lead human resources (Christensen, 1997).

In parallel, many HR practitioners have wanted to appropriate tasks that corresponded to line managers, with the aim of ensuring that their jobs had a strong content, which, in turn, would be a guarantee of a good pay as well as of their continuity in the hierarchical structure. This mistaken behaviour has degenerated into an administrativist approach to the function that has caused a conflict with the other managers.

We believe that a firm interested in surviving within a globalized framework must avoid the exclusive and specialized treatment of HR subjects by a single department, encouraging the staff manager to approach the line. However, unfortunately, HR professionals are not always accepted by line managers; besides, the hierarchical structures in many enterprises keep fragmentation and specialization features that make it impossible for HR professionals to be listened to, following popular phrases like `stick to what you know´ or `let the cobbler stick to his last´ (Dowd, 1995).

For all these reasons, the HR function must cope with the challenge of walking on a fine line which ensures that managers assume full responsibility for the people side of business, simultaneously providing the tools and coaching needed to guarantee success.

Line managers must be the real starring characters in HR management, while specialists must become internal consultants (Gómez-Mejía, Balkin and Cardy, 1995). But, does this mean that HR people must be responsible for nothing? Of course not. The question is not whether they are responsible or not, but what they are responsible for and before whom. HR people is responsible before the top management for an excellent HR process, tools and coaching that work; they will also have to exert an influence on the managers so that the latter will use the tools HR people have designed for them. If the current tools and coaching do not work, the management will have to find HR providers able to supply tools and coach that work.

Approaching the line, delegating staff managing into middle management is a new responsibility the HR function must assume. However, although some people believe that these professionals' job is simple and that anybody can do it, this is completely untrue. Like any other profession, it has a body of knowledge that can be taught, learned and assessed. This is why, before assigning responsibilities to the line, it is necessary to train people. Subjects that have traditionally been in a specialized department cannot simply be handed over to the line, there must be a previous specific and precise training.

Finally, it should be remembered that in order to teach the new people in charge, the HR staff must gain their respect, therefore, they must do a great effort to understand the business.

4.3. Overcoming the inward focus.

Traditionally, the tightness of labour markets, the influence of government policies regulating employment relationships, as well as the strength or threat of unionizations, have been the factors affecting most the HR function. At present, these forces are gradually becoming less important, market competitivity being the aspect which most strongly conditions HR practices. The concepts of productivity, customer quality, restructuring, downsizing and core competences are becoming more and more common in specialized literature. This reflects that the main concern of professionals in this field lately has been to become business partners of the top management (Kochan and Capelli, 1984; Jacoby, 1985 and Baron, Dobbins and Jennings, 1986).

Many HR people mistakenly tend to conceive their job as being exclusively centered on making their enterprises more competitive. This is no doubt an important objective, but, unfortunately, it only reflects an internal role of the HR profession. We could ask ourselves if this inward orientation has created a myopic vision disconnected from the changing realities in the workplace and the problems and challenges of employment (labour relationships becoming more precarious and instable, unemployment, welfare state, etc.) (Kochan, 1997). We are afraid the answer to the preceding question is affirmative.

Taking all this into account, HR professionals should learn to negotiate, to build coalitions and to solve problems with multiple internal and external interests and involving organizations which include professionals in other firms, the government, educational institutions, trade unions and professional associations.

The first and foremost reason for this new role lies in the fact that the solution for these problems exceeds the capacity of any firm individually considered. Isolated action would place any enterprise in a disadvantageous position if these actions are not followed by its competitors. This is a type of situation which requires coordinated efforts on the part of all the key actors and institutions having to do with
employment policies and practices.

The second reason lies in the fact that the positive relationships with society can improve the enterprise's image and promote it so that customers, investors will choose it or as an employer (Lobel 1996).

Finally, considering that it has been repeated over and over again for a long time now, that corporations must focus on their relationships with customers, it is logical to assume that these enterprises must not forget a new source of customers, the community. A laissez-faire attitude like the one adopted so far can no longer be the appropriate one (Lobel, 1997).

These responsibilities we have just mentioned will little by little acquire a more significant role in the agendas of HR professionals. The way they respond to these tensions will affect these professionals' influence and status, both inside the enterprise and in society as a whole.

4.4. Focusing on results rather than on activities.

Until recently, HR departments have concentrated more on applying a series of regulations and procedures than in the specific results obtained through them. Visible evidence for this is provided by the index of many books, in which we find terms such as `recruitment´, `performance appraisal´, `pay and benefits systems´, `collective bargaining´, etc., which might transmit the impression that these techniques have an intrinsic value and do not need to be considered as regards their fitting in the strategy, or as regards their effect on the results (Armstrong, 1992). Books should contain in their index terms such as `globalization´, `customer intimacy´, `operational excellence´, `operating margin´ and other business strategies; this way each one of the chapters would show how HR activities contribute to business goals (Ulrich, 1997).

Under these new circumstances, the existence of this new manager and his/her department will only be justified if it all *adds value* to the organization in the wide and current sense of the latter term. In other words, neither in the application of some specific systems nor in the implementation of some guidelines, but on the achievement of objectives. This is why HR people will have to examine their programmes and systems in search of results adding value, in such a way that activities which do not do so will be excised through downsizing, delayering and, especially, through outsourcing (Steward, 1996 and Fitz-enz, 1992).

The same as in a football team, the HR function must be in the playing field, like the other departments, and, of course, ready to score. It will logically not be able to become the top scorer, but neither will it be someone who is always a reserve nor someone who is never called for the games.

This means that the HR function will only exist in future enterprises when it helps the firm to move

forward and when it is not all differentiated from what constitutes the business core, and when it contributes to the enterprise's profitability and survival. Once they know how they want the HR function to contribute to the organization's success, it will become much easier to define and shape the activities that must carried out.

4.5. Measuring the HR function's impact.

When it comes to proving that the HR function is profitable we must analyze the profits it provides; the difficult task is proving the existence of such profits in quantitative terms and relating them to the enterprise performance.

The task of producing benefits is very closely related to that of `selling´. Thus, a good approach in order to determine this contribution is the consideration of the HR manager as someone delivering services, placing his/her department in the centre of a system of internal and external customers (top and middle management, staff viewed both as a whole and according to categories, trade unions, external customers such as public administrations, subcontractors, etc.).

HR professionals must bear in mind that they must take the initiative in everything they do, in order to show their usefulness and value. No matter which initiative is going to be introduced, it is necessary to reach a previous agreement on how that effort is going to be measured and evaluated (Dowd, 1995).

Evaluating the impact of the HR function is a task with numerous inconvenients. In some enterprises, it is not considered an essential activity in the improvement of the HR function itself. In others, complaints exist as to the fact that it generates many frustrations and that it takes a long time. Others think that it is a good theory, but it is difficult to put it into practice (Fonda and Buckton, 1995). This tells us that the problems concerning the evaluation of the HR function are not limited to the design of a series of tools or technical aspects, but that, first of all, this evaluation must reflect a very specific and precise way of thinking and acting on the part of everyone in the HR function.

Therefore, in addition to the contents mentioned above, HR practitioners must incorporate the following tasks into their agendas:

- Carrying out a periodical evaluation of the way customers perceive the quality of the services delivered to them.
- Collaborating closely with the service addressees, giving them the opportunity to participate actively in the design of the different HR management processes.
- Showing how decisions taken in the HR function affect the value of the enterprise.
- Determining the relationship between investment in HR programmes and growth, costs or other financial variables.
- Quantifying the impact of lack of investment in HR.

5. CONCLUSIONS.

That so much is said and written on the future of the HR function is due, in our view, to the fact that we are witnessing a change of paradigm in the world of HR management which means the disappearance of the reasons justifying the existence of the traditional HR departments, namely, a) an enterprise with clearly defined limits, b) great and complex hierarchical structures based on perfectly differentiated posts and c) homogeneous staff with whom there was a will to maintain a lifelong relationship.

The previous conditions are disappearing at top speed. As regards the first condition, the limits of organizations, they are becoming less and less defined due to subcontracting, to the point that it is starting to be difficult to distinguish suppliers, customers or subcontractors from internal staff. The way employees are managed becomes a source of competitive advantage for firms, but, simultaneously, the traditional labour relationship (full and lifelong dedication) disappears, which makes it more complicated to integrate organizational members into a joint project.

Concerning the second condition, the organizations' hierarchical structures become flattened, middle management being reduced and promotion chances decreasing. Routine tasks disappear, but, at the same time, jobs become more demanding and stressful. The concept of workplace, with a group of perfectly specified activities and responsibilities, is becoming diluted, work groups or teams acquiring more and more importance, which means a transformation in the development of the traditional professional career.

Regarding the third condition, the staff become increasingly heterogeneous in terms of cultures or types of contract relationship. There has been an increase in the number of highly qualified employees,

less faithful and not very willing to accept the authority. On the other hand, the society becomes more and more demanding towards organizations as for social responsibility and ethical behaviour.

It is obvious that those HR professionals wanting to apply the functioning schemes existing prior to this change, are going to experience problems to survive inside their organizations. Those who survive will finally abandon their secondary role and will acquire prestige and importance inside their organizations. They will be awarded this prominence by the top management to acknowledge their efforts in adapting the organizations to the changing environment, but also for their actions oriented to achieving a HR function with the following characteristics:

1) It will have renounced to its administrativist approach, becoming a business partner of the top management, but without forgetting the role of advocate of interest employee. It will be greatly involved in the introduction of ethical approaches with its main action weapons: credibility and personal example.

2) A part of its functions will have been subcontracted, others will have been delegated onto line managers, which will provoke its quantitative decrease; but at the same time, it will be better equipped in qualitative terms. This will make line managers be more concerned about the human aspect of their job thanks to the training received in this respect, the coordination and the instruments provided by HR people.

3) This function will become strongly concerned with the problems of the surrounding society; and without forgetting internal affairs, it will take into account economic and social problems. A function which actively collaborates with governments, teaching institutions, trade unions and professional associations in order to solve the previous problems.

4) It will be readily willing to enter the business field game, but not simply to play, but to score. A function whose main concern is improving the organization's results, to the detriment of a series of programmes and activities.

5) It will be considered an entity delivering services to all the members of the organization, in the wide sense of the latter term; its main concern will be satisfying its customers and showing the management what its contributions are to the organization's global results.

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