

## “YES” IS A SUCCESS THAT DOESN’T JUST HAPPEN BY ACCIDENT

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This chapter outlines ways you can take strategic control over your career by dispassionately assessing how your skills and experiences align with the expectations of high-potential hiring companies. Whether the economy is healthy or faltering, there are always highly desirable opportunities in HR.

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IS THERE ANY WONDER why the human resource career path is one of the most mysterious inside the corporate world? Human resources (HR) as a function is still obsessively trying to identify and quantify once and for all its financial, strategic, and operational advantage to the organization—that ever-elusive *return on investment* (ROI). If we still haven’t definitively decided for ourselves what makes a valuable HR *department*, it’s only natural that we haven’t yet thoroughly come to understand what makes a powerful, leadership-bound HR *career*—a career in which, over time, you assume greater responsibilities and opportunities to contribute to your company’s success on important, strategic levels and a career in which you’re recognized and rewarded well for those contributions. Your ambitions will ultimately take you to the highest levels of your career in organizations where your skills, talent, passion, and knowledge will be put into full use to make a strategic difference to the organizations you’re associated with and provide you with the career satisfaction and financial rewards you desire.

The same outcomes that an HR professional can offer an organization have parallel qualities and experiences that will make one HR career

successful over another. The trouble is that organizations are still trying to figure out what they want from HR. Consequently, the HR profession is still trying to figure out what core qualifications, experiences, and insights will make its key practitioners stars. And, as individuals, we're trying to figure out what we dare hope for ourselves—if only our abilities and talents can match our ambition and vision for our future. We're all learning as we go along.

Likewise, as companies are becoming increasingly clear about what they expect and need from HR—and the best companies in the world are getting closer and closer to that goal—they will be increasingly looking for HR leaders who already know what they're about! And this is the one weakness that we HR recruiters experience in our candidates over and over again. Many HR candidates, even those with brilliant résumés, don't know how brilliant they are. Or if they do, they don't know how to discuss and describe what they can do in irresistible terms that make them the obvious choice for the hiring company.

And here's the worst news of all: The recruiter probably won't tell you how or why you failed to receive that offer that was perfect for you, the one that could have brought your career to the next level! If you're lucky, recruiters may coach you in advance of the interview to help you bring out your best. But once the “no” comes down from the hiring committee, the recruiters are on to coaching the next likely candidate, always aiming for a “yes” that's perfect for both the individual and the client company. The job of the recruiter isn't to help you find a job. The job of the recruiter is to help the client company find the ideal candidate. So once you are passed over, back your résumé goes into the vast files inside the recruiter's database. How soon your résumé resurfaces will depend on how soon the recruiter is asked again for someone just like you. And that may be a while.

The reason you received a “no”? It could be something as simple and tragic as the fact that you failed to speak of your very real accomplishments in terms that the organization values. It could be something as trivial as your personal style of dress. But if it's important enough to influence the search committee's decision to pursue or not to pursue, it's important enough to you and the recruiter. And so it's up to you to find out as much as you can in advance.

Have you ever noticed that the same names crop up again and again in the People in Business news columns announcing new hires for the top jobs? There is a reason why the same group of HR stars is routinely offered the plum opportunities that open up around the country. They

are already known commodities. True, they’re probably known on the conference circuits and they’re probably the ones most routinely quoted in all the big business magazines, but they’re also completely unambiguous about who they are in the HR world, what they stand for, and what they bring to the organizational culture. They can also unemotionally and strategically plot out their best career paths. They’re even willing to turn down an opportunity if it doesn’t completely fit their vision for the next step in their career. Moving up during the early years of their careers, they may not have been known to the world, but they’re known to themselves. They know who they are, what they have to offer, and what they need at each next step of their own career paths. And they can speak fluently on the business issues that are the most compelling to the organization. And so the hiring committees have a clear picture of whom they are extending their opportunity to.

If it’s a match, it’s a *yes* from both sides. And it doesn’t happen by accident; it happens after a lot of hard work and self-scrutiny all around. It’s a buying and selling proposition in which both parties are really clear on what the product is and how valuable it is to both sides of the negotiation table. Consequently, *you* must be a known commodity, but first you have to know yourself. You have to be able to describe yourself, your experiences, and your skill sets clearly and comprehensively in terms that the hiring committee understands and can relate to. But first *you* have to know what your *product* is—you—and what you can offer eager and loyal customers—in this case your leadership teams, your employees, and the various selection committees you’ll encounter throughout your career as you progress from opportunity to opportunity.

As you begin this book, you may be thinking to yourself that success is all about the résumé and who you know—what your education and experiences tell recruiters that you can do because you’ve already done them. It’s not. It’s about moving your product to market and being recognized. It’s about being sought after. Sometimes it’s about being associated with the right kinds of companies (for instance, one of *Fortune* magazine’s Most Admired Companies). Or sometimes you’re lucky enough to be associated with a lesser company and then you can tell the story of how you took on cultural and business challenges. Success is about how you make yourself be the best you can be so that the market will continue to want you, as opposed to someone else—and someone else’s product. This means you must have all the components and features of your product organized, up-to-date, and ready to reconfigure and upgrade as the market trends demand.

## CAREER KITTING

If you've ever purchased a computer from Dell, you're probably familiar with that mildly obsessive habit of tracking its custom assembly progress on-line. After the order is processed but before the computer can be assembled, your computer goes through a stage called *kitting*. All the necessary pieces and parts that go into successful computer manufacturing are assembled and placed in a "tote," which is like a big plastic tub, although the word calls to mind a canvas boater's bag sold by Lands' End or L.L. Bean. Keyboard, disk drives, motherboard, various memory cards, software, even the case: It all gets placed into the tote. And then the assembler has all he or she needs to put together a final product that you—the buying customer—can then put to use to meet your own objectives.

I'll return to the concept of career kitting throughout this book. For the moment, it's essential that we look at what is in your career kit currently and what additional elements you may need to add to it before you can build a world-class professional career product that is in demand. As you continue to build your product just the way you have thoughtfully designed it, you can then take yourself to the marketplace and present your product with the confidence that you have what it takes to add significant value to the HR operation. Why? Because along the way you have also assembled a community of potential customers who know what kind of professional you are, what features you offer, and how you can help them achieve their goals.

Let's look in your kit as it stands at the moment.

When client companies retain me to search for top HR executives, one of the most commonly requested attributes is *a successful track record showing progressively more skill and experience (responsibility and scope)*. In your career kit this translates into the knowledge, education, and experience that underlie everything else that you do and learn as a practicing professional. How far along in your formal education have you gone? What experiences did you have, even growing up, that have influenced the way you look at the world and process what you observe? Do you learn and produce quickly? Or slowly? Are you still upgrading your capabilities through frequent learning and experiential opportunities? Or does your résumé show evidence that you've stopped growing somewhere along the way?

My clients also ask for evidence of *business acumen*. Practical understanding of all the key issues faced by the other departments of your company—and how HR can serve those departments' needs—makes you an even more creative and effective business partner in your busi-

ness. As you will read in the interviews of HR stars included in this book, several of the leaders at the top of their game look back at the time they dropped their MBA studies and regret it to this day. Seize every opportunity to add to your career kit experiences and training that will help you build this essential component of your product.

How are your *leadership skills*? Your product is about people, and hiring managers of A Player companies want to know that you bring with you the ability to lead, inspire, and motivate your company’s employees throughout the organization. How well do you communicate with others? Can the people you work with communicate with you, knowing they’re safe to share their opinions, insights, even bad news? Do you keep confidences well? Are you a compelling, persuasive speaker? Do you responsively take action on the input of others?

My client companies often ask for *breadth and depth of HR experience in at least two or three specialty areas, such as compensation, staffing, or organization development*. As you progress through the early years of your career, you would do well to build expertise in a few specialty areas, in addition to being conversant in HR from a generalist’s role. Over time your expertise in these areas will help you sustain your personal credibility at times when your focused knowledge is more urgently needed than your more general perspectives. By the time you reach the pinnacle of your career and you are a serious candidate for the top opportunities in A Player companies, your expertise will give you the necessary *gravitas* and confidence to move forward toward the position of your career-long dreams.

Hiring managers also want to make sure you have already done in your previous roles what they are recruiting you to do in their companies. When I get the job order, this desire translates into *demonstrated ability to successfully deliver specific human resource services in a comparable company, industry, or work environment*. It’s rare for a multi-billion-dollar company to seriously consider a candidate who ran an HR function in a \$100-million to \$500-million company, for example. Or if the hiring company has an international presence, you can be sure that company will only be interested in HR leaders who have not only done that but have been there, and there, and there, and there.

This ability gives you *credibility*, which is an additional feature my clients request. They want to know that you will be able to quickly gain the confidence of the other senior executives and board members, as well as the employees throughout the company. Can you assess situations, develop solutions, and present a clear, concise business case to support your recommendations?

As I was working on this chapter, the University of Michigan released its list of five key competencies for HR professionals, which has been endorsed by the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM). I was not surprised to see that my list of six qualities most frequently asked for by clients is closely related to the University of Michigan's five competencies:

1. *Strategic contribution*: Can you elevate your perspective of day-to-day transaction activities and offer creative, big-picture plans that serve the company's long-term goals?
2. *Personal credibility*: In addition to your mastery of your profession and how it benefits company-wide objectives, do you command the respect and confidence of your colleagues? Do you have the reputation of being leaders in HR initiatives?
3. *HR delivery*: Do you have a track record of designing and delivering innovative HR programs that serve your company's objectives? Can you tell that story and back it up with a quantifiable narrative, assigning numerical value to your contributions?
4. *Business knowledge*: Do you understand how HR relates to the rest of the business in terms of your company's objectives? Can you talk about your people areas of concern using the vocabulary of the financial department? Research and development department? Legal? Production?
5. *HR technology*: Are you up-to-date on the various HR delivery programs, theories, products, practices, and, quite literally, technical innovations that support HR's delivery of essential services—especially those that will elevate you from that transactional role and open the doors for you to participate in higher-level strategic conversations?

There is nothing on either of these lists that is out of your reach. As you re-engineer your current product to serve your future market (a different employer, a different industry sector, different geographic region, or a larger company), simply consider the components you have in your current career kit. If you notice that there's a missing piece, make sure your next move will give you the chance to add that piece to your metaphorical tote. In this way, you are always modifying or redesigning your product to achieve your goals as they transform over the years (which they will as you become more confident and ambitious yourself).

When you look at your career simply as a product, you can more effectively consider its strengths and weaknesses in the context of the customers you want to sell that product to. Only you can define for yourself what HR career success looks like. And then you must masterfully engineer the many pieces of your assembly that will make your product the best purchase decision to be made by the employer of *your* choice for the leadership-bound position of strength of *your* making.

## WHY MONEY GETS LEFT ON THE TABLE

As this book is being written, we are in a down economy. In a few short years we have swung 180 degrees from being in a “War for Talent,” where employers were desperate to fill seats, to being a nation where most people will agree that “there’s nobody out there hiring.” But that’s not true. Whether we’re in a good economy or a bad one, one fact remains essentially the same: *There are always fabulous jobs that need to be filled.* In fact, the jobs that are open today are even better than they were during the so-called boom years. Employers must be more mindful of getting the absolute most and best out of every new hire. They have fewer slots they can fill; therefore employers must pack into that opportunity as much value to the ideal candidate as possible. Consequently, while there may be fewer jobs available, those that are open represent fantastic opportunities for ambitious HR careerists.

And that’s not going to change when the economy improves again. With each cycle of economic robustness, we learn that much more about how to attract and apply talent to organizational objectives. No matter what the economy is doing, the *really* smart employers recognize that passion and professionalism throughout the ranks are always essential and valued ingredients for corporate vitality and viability. So employees who know how to express and demonstrate their passion for excellence will always be in demand. The jobs may be fewer, but those that exist are by necessity more substantial. There is more opportunity to learn, engage your skills, and have an impact on the organization overall (even on your community). Each job must count for more than it used to. Therefore, you must be able to *account* for more than you used to—and be able to discuss your HR accomplishments in a vocabulary that everyone throughout the corporate leadership ranks can identify with and value.

And the lessons we’re learning now will still be valid as the economy swings toward abundance again. This is the time for HR to shine, and

those who will be successful in the long term are those who are paying the closest attention right now. Those will be the true HR business leaders we keep hearing about in the HR press. In good times and in bad, the HR career message is still the same: Be discerning. Have a plan. Recognize and take advantage of great opportunities when they unfold before you. Likewise, be willing to turn your back on fabulous offers that just aren't right for you.

It's hard to turn your back on attractive jobs, especially for the opportunity for a change in environment or more money when such chances aren't coming as frequently as they used to. But this is one of the main reasons why recruiters watch money being left on the table—the *assumption that there just aren't enough jobs out there*. By grabbing the first opportunity that comes your way, you could be reaching for false gold. Perhaps the next one would have been even more promising, with both better compensation and greater opportunity to learn and grow inside an organization that truly values human resources. But you can't take it because you're already freshly committed.

*Or you lack knowledge and/or experience in the opportunity before you.* Perhaps your knowledge and experience are inappropriate for the region or industry you want to work in. Is your area heavily unionized and you have no experience in labor law? Get some classes under your belt, at least. Be willing to take a demotion, if you must, to expose yourself to real-life labor relations experience. If you want to live eventually in Northern California, would it be helpful to have experience in a high-tech company? Certainly. If you don't have it already, seek out high-tech experience where you live now and strategize your way toward building a solid high-tech-oriented résumé (and the personal contacts that go with the experience) that will eventually be your ticket to Silicon Valley. Do you want to live in Miami, or Boston, or Washington, DC, or Cheyenne, or Phoenix? The first thing to do is research the workplace issues your desired location is facing—make sure you have some credibility, some value to offer in those areas. No matter what the change is, if you don't have the firsthand experience, make sure you have some current knowledge on the subject so that you can at least speak fluently about it. More importantly, demonstrate that you have a healthy and informed respect for the differences and that you have given thoughtful consideration as to how you would approach working in the new environment.

The last thing you want to do is sound presumptuous. For example, I recall one discussion in particular with a staffing director in a non-technology company in Connecticut. The candidate had very good staffing experience but was clueless about what the differences might be

in recruiting engineers in the heart of Silicon Valley (where the position was located) during the dot.com boom. When asked about how he would address the competitive issues associated with staffing at the time, he said, “We have a competitive market in Connecticut. It can’t be much different.” Wrong. I can guarantee you they did not have thousands of companies competing for a single candidate located within a twenty-five-mile radius nor candidates with five offers in hand shopping for a sixth one. He should have done his homework.

*Or you have the experience but you forgot to say so.* Recruiters do their best to match background with the requests specified by the search committees. But it’s up to you to make sure the interviewers believe that you can provide what they’re looking for. Only you can sell it. Too many times candidates will discover after the fact that the hiring committee wasn’t convinced they had the experience they need to take the company to the next phase of its objectives, even though the candidates had exactly that experience in a previous company. Didn’t they understand that you had this, this, and this experience that’s right up their alley? No, they didn’t understand. And the recruiter isn’t likely to go back and straighten them out. Everyone’s on to the next candidate for consideration.

*You lack positioning and negotiating skills that would keep you in that position of strength.* You’re either too anxious or not anxious enough, and you send the search committee the wrong message about your passion and interest in the position. If you appear over-eager, the committee might say, “That person wants the job a little too badly. There must be something wrong here.” Or if you play it cool and dignified (at least your version of cool and dignified), the committee might read that signal as aloof or disinterested. There are many ways you can express interest and passion in the company without coming across as desperate. We’ll get into those ways later in this book.

*Or you’re clueless about the buzz.* Do you know what the community is saying about you? Your company? The HR department itself? You need that information, even if it’s bad. Then you can tackle that problem head-on within the context of the interview. Sometimes the HR department—or the HR leader personally—must play the “heavy” during a certain situation or initiative. Word gets out, without benefit of understanding the surrounding circumstances. If you know what that word is, you can control the direction of that particular aspect of the interview and turn it to your advantage.

*Or you leave money on the table because you simply don’t ask for it.* HR candidates who are clueless about their value to their target marketplace may be so eager for the new opportunity that they’re afraid to

negotiate for a more valuable package for themselves. That's understandable. We're all human and we let our fears and emotions govern our actions during the most critical moment in discussions. However, keep in mind that effective negotiating results not only in more money off the table and into your pocket, but also in an elevated respect for the kind of businessperson you are. Search committees want to know that you can do business on your own behalf. That's the best assurance that you will be able to do business on the company's behalf as well.

Table 1.1 shows the broad range of income potential that you can realize as you progress through your years in HR. This is just a *taste* of what

**Table 1.1. Virtually Unlimited Earning Potential.**

<b>Position</b>	<b>Range of Pay</b>	<b>Sample Titles</b>
Entry Level	\$30,000-\$50,000	Human Resources Generalist I Benefits Analyst I Compensation Analyst I Employee Relations Representative I Labor Relations Representative I Recruiter Training Specialist I
Intermediate Level	\$50,000-\$60,000	Human Resources Generalist II Benefits Analyst II Compensation Analyst II EEO/Diversity Specialist Employee Relations Representative II HRIS Specialist Labor Relations Representative II Organization Development Specialist Pension Plan Administrator Recruiter Training Specialist II
Career/Senior Level	\$60,000-\$75,000	Human Resources Generalist III Benefits Administrator Compensation Administrator Compensation Analyst III Senior Recruiter (IT) Senior Recruiter (Management) Training Specialist III

**Table 1.1. Virtually Unlimited Earning Potential, Cont’d.**

<b>Position</b>	<b>Range of Pay</b>	<b>Sample Titles</b>
Manager Level	\$75,000-\$100,000	Human Resources Manager
		Benefits Manager
		Compensation Manager
		EEO/Diversity Manager
		Employee Assistance Program Manager
		Employee Relations Manager
		Employment Manager
		HRIS Manager
		Human Resources Call Center Manager
		Labor Relations Manager
		Management Development Manager
		Organization Development Manager
		Pension Planning and Administration Manager
		Safety Manager
		Training Manager
		Worklife Manager
Director Level	\$100,000-\$135,000	Human Resources Director
		Benefits Director
		Compensation and Benefits Director
		Compensation Director
		EEO/Diversity Director
		Employment Director
		Training Director
		Worklife Director
Executive/VP Level	\$130,000-\$190,000	Top Labor Relations Executive
		Top Compensation and Benefits Executive
		Top Compensation Executive
		Top Executive Compensation Executive
		Top Benefits Executive
		Top Employment Executive
		Top Training and Development Executive
		Top Human Resources Planning Executive
		Top EEO/Diversity Executive
		Top Human Resources Operations Executive
		Top HRIS Executive

Table 1.1. Virtually Unlimited Earning Potential, Cont'd.

<b>Position</b>	<b>Range of Pay</b>	<b>Sample Titles</b>
		Top Human Resources Shared Services Executive
Top HR Executive	\$225,000-\$375,000	Top Human Resources Executive

*\*All data are effective 3/1/2003, from Towers Perrin surveys. Data reflects salary ranges on a national basis; used with permission.*

is to come in your future. Improvements in the economy, the success and growth of your company, the ways you might eventually leverage your experience into consulting or paid speaking engagements, can all serve to increase your own personal income potential. It's really up to you.

## THERE ARE MANY PATHS TO THE TOP

As we've said before, HR as a profession is still discovering the many paths to career success. While it's by no means the new kid on the corporate block, it's very much a late bloomer—only now after many decades coming into and claiming its own power to be a significant contributor to corporate objectives and initiatives. And so it follows that the leadership-bound career path has not yet been completely defined and paved over for smooth (but limited) passage. There are many ways to the top, still, but they can be muddy and slippery and rife with false starts and dead ends.

But you can get started anywhere. You can be a Fulbright scholar. You could have done a stint at the London School of Economics. You could have an MBA from Harvard. Or an associate's certificate at any number of local community colleges. Or, like Jim Wall, Deloitte & Touche's national managing director of HR, you could have been a trailing spouse scanning the Help Wanted in your new city's newspaper, looking for a new way to use the skills and experiences you gained in your old job. It doesn't matter how or where you put your foot on the HR career path. But it does matter how you take the next steps, and then the next.

And it matters how you regard the overall kitting of your career and your assembled knowledge and experiences. And then it matters how you can tell the story, which we will talk about in the next chapter.

That is how you will develop your position of strength. That is what’s going to differentiate you from your competitors for the next great opportunity that’s making its way to you even now.

And *that* is what we’re going to help you learn how to achieve.

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**How to Break In**

There are many paths to the top in HR. There are also many doors into the profession itself. Although more and more people are entering HR after specifically studying for it in college, there are still plenty of ways to transition into HR from other corporate functions. No matter where you are in the company, HR can also use your expertise. The experience you have gained in other areas may have provided you skills (often referred to as *transferable skills*) that could help you easily transition into an HR role. For example:

<b>Function</b>	<b>Transferable Skills</b>	<b>Could Transition to</b>
Accounting	Math, data analysis, detail-orientation	Compensation or Benefits
Sales	Ability to assess needs and influence people	Recruiting
Marketing Communications	Writing and presentation skills	Employee Communications
Legal	Employment law, contract law, negotiating resolutions	Employee Relations or Compliance
Information Technology (IT)	Programming, report writing, systems and software technology	Human Resources Information Technology (HRIT)
Administrative	Scheduling, coordinating meetings, data entry, writing and phone skills	HR Administration, Benefits Administration, or Recruitment Coordination (which could lead to HR Representative or Generalist roles with additional training and experience)

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## SUMMARY

Success in HR is within your reach, as long as you strategically manage your career choices over time:

- As you lay out your career plan, think in terms of career kitting, in which you assemble the necessary skills and experiences to qualify for your ultimate career goals.
- Think of your combined package of skills and experiences as a product to move to the marketplace.
- No matter what the economy is doing, there are always fabulous jobs that need to be filled.
- There are many paths to the top. This book will help you identify the routes that will ensure your success!

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## INTERVIEW

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### **Paul Bianchi**

**Senior Vice President, Human Resources, PeopleSoft, Inc.**

*AS THE TOP HR EXECUTIVE for PeopleSoft, Paul Bianchi heads the people function of one of the most prominent HR suppliers in the world. The second-largest enterprise application software provider, PeopleSoft employs thirteen thousand workers in 150 countries.*

*Entering the profession over fifteen years ago, Paul immediately saw opportunities to elevate the HR function to one that would command greater respect and stature at the senior-most levels of the organization. In this interview he discusses the essential qualities HR professionals must have to develop themselves throughout their careers and achieve that kind of influence and impact when the company's most important strategic decisions are made.*

**What was the best piece of advice you have ever received?**

Actually it was a piece of advice [a former boss had given me] that was completely wrong. But it was valuable to me because it forced me to continue thinking about it as I've progressed through my career. He told me that the best HR work is transparent. That's completely wrong. If you're not clearly adding and contributing to the business proposition of the company, you quickly create questions about whether or not you should be in that job—or if the company should have that position at all. Of course, you have to balance that with the need to not appear overly concerned with politicizing your contributions or marketing your image too aggressively. Still, overall, one of the things that HR professionals probably have not done as well as other professions and functions

is say, “Here’s how we’re going to contribute to the bottom line, here’s our goal, here’s how we’re doing against it, here’s how we’re making ourselves part of creating value for our shareholders.”

**How do you achieve that level of exposure and branding and stay within the boundaries of acceptable behavior, especially when the HR professional may be uncomfortable with that kind of scrutiny?**

To be an effective HR leader in a company of any significant size, you have to be prepared to be in the white light. HR people have been too willing to retreat into the back office, saying, “We support the business; we make management run well.” I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that emphasis, per se, but I do think it undermines the contributions that are more tangible, even if they’re still qualitative and harder to measure in real numbers. You apply the human capital disciplines to the business needs, and in some cases that requires counterintuitive HR behaviors. Overall in HR, there’s not enough accountability. We’re not seeing the kind of performance we need, and we’re not holding HR professionals accountable for driving performance consistently upward.

**Are you suggesting such changes as having HR professionals alter their vocabulary and find other ways to insinuate themselves into circles of other business partners they might not have otherwise?**

“Insinuate” is a good word. Make it important for business leaders to pay attention to the human capital side. It’s about language. It’s about relationships. It’s about proving worth. And that’s where the clarity of human capital needs to come to the forefront. That’s how you move out of the back office into the front office.

**What was the moment your career changed forever?**

I got a “battlefield” promotion when my boss left the company and other senior people followed shortly thereafter. I quickly needed to figure out how to make contributions above simply functional expertise. I needed to learn to assert myself as a member of the management team and address issues they thought were most important, as well as the ones I thought were most important. It thrust me into a sink-or-swim role and changed my

perception of what kind of impact I could have, even at a super-peer level.

**What is the one thing you wish you had done differently?**

I wish I had started my career in a bigger company. While I had the opportunity to do different things in a smaller company, I didn't get the kind of good base foundation that I think would have benefited me even more.

**What is the best piece of advice you have to offer new HR professionals?**

You have to take a very aggressive responsibility toward your own development. HR professionals who differentiate themselves are the ones who are not content with learning only what their company has to teach them. They're out making connections, going to HR workshops, joining professional associations.

They're also the ones who have sought out mentoring relationships, even with senior people outside of HR. Learn from mentors in other parts of the business what makes those kinds of people successful. Go figure out what it takes to be a great salesperson in your company. Have the courage to say, "Hey, Mr. Vice President, can I buy you a cup of coffee? I'd really like to learn more about how you got to the position you're in and what that means for young people like me." You have to have the courage to step up and ask for time.

**What is the best thing that new entrants into the profession can do for themselves?**

I encourage people everywhere to pop their heads up every 1.5 to 2 years to figure out whether they are doing what they really want to do, are in the right place, with the right kind of people and the right kind of company. Without that constant opportunity in front of you to do new things, learn new things, be involved in different dynamics, and expand your opportunities, you will lose your passion for the profession, and your commitment to excellence and growth will disintegrate rapidly.

**What is the worst thing they can do?**

Stay in their office and think that doing email is work. One thing I've told my generalists as they come in is, "If you don't have to

buy a pair of shoes every six to eight months, you're not doing your job."

**What do you think about the bad reputation that HR professionals tend to suffer, such as being slaves to "administrivia" and not getting the respect they deserve?**

I think you make your own reality. If you allow yourself to buy into that reputation, you'll never have the courage to break out and figure out how HR can become a vital part of the business. It's an ongoing battle, no question about it. If you're not aggressive about your pursuit in connecting human capital discipline with business results, then you will be consigned to the fate that you create for yourself.

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## INTERVIEW

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### *Susan Bowick*

*Executive Vice President, Human Resources and  
Workforce Development, Hewlett-Packard Corporation*

*IN 1977, SUSAN BOWICK was a dissatisfied Colorado teacher just coming to realize that she despaired at the thought of pursuing that profession for the rest of her life. At the offhand suggestion of her husband, she casually applied for a job as a secretary at Hewlett-Packard. Her interviewer, however, spotted higher qualifications and offered her a job as a business analyst. She moved into HR two years later and invested her entire career in growing the people side of the business.*

*The project that tops her HR career was the controversial merger of Hewlett-Packard (HP) and Compaq—two distinctly separate cultures that, combined, would expand her employee base from 86,000 to almost 150,000 literally overnight. In this interview, conducted just before her retirement announcement, she talks about the major lessons of her career and how she grew along the way.*

#### **What is the best piece of advice you ever received?**

When I was a little girl, my German grandmother had a saying: “Remember the sun doesn’t shine every day.” When everything doesn’t go well, that’s normal. As I got older I had a lot of opportunities to remind myself: “Well, this was a learning experience; this wasn’t a good day, but I won’t let it throw me off course.” This advice was a very big part of the foundation of who I am. I expect things to go up and down and not always be perfect. I’ve always believed that you can figure out a way through even the most difficult mistake or conflict-ridden mess.

I actually have shared it with others over the years when I can tell someone has been thrown by heavy workload or something he or she didn't expect and it's affecting his or her attitude. The person hasn't developed the coping skills to go through the down times.

### **What was the moment that changed your career forever?**

It was when I decided to get out of teaching and start at HP. I was teaching business subjects at the high school and community college level, and I was miserable. I woke up one day and said, "I just can't imagine myself doing this for the next twenty to thirty years." My husband, who had run a junior achievement program for HP, had seen an ad for a glorified secretarial job for the company. He said, "Susan, I think you have the personality to fit in there, and you'd really like HP. Why don't you send in your résumé?"

I said, "Oh, I've got my degree. I worked as a secretary to get through college. I don't want to go back and do that!" He said, "Just give it a try."

Once I got over my original objections, I sent in my résumé. I had to go down and take them work samples—which was demeaning to me because I was *teaching* those subjects! The boss who interviewed me for the job offered me a job more as a business analyst rather than strict secretarial work, and my life really changed. I started doing something where I wasn't confined by a job description or rigid structure, like teaching had been. I was able to use my creativity, figuring out what needed to be done. I had found a place where I could think.

The other step "back" was inside HP when the man I worked for got a promotion. By that time I was in a group HR manager job, which was pretty high in HP. There were two of us in that position at that point, and I knew my boss didn't need two group HR managers. But he didn't make the move to say whether it would be me or this other guy. So I was the one who decided, "This is for the birds."

I saw a job that was open inside HP. It wasn't in the Bay Area. It was in San Diego and several levels lower than I was. It was a site personnel manager, but it was in a business I had never worked in. I had been a site personnel manager before. I knew that I liked it. So I volunteered to be interviewed, and I took the transfer to San Diego. Again, it was a demotion. My colleagues thought I was nuts. It wasn't the traditional onward and upward

career path. But I did it so I could go learn and experience a different part of the business I didn't know.

**How did that benefit you in the long term?**

Ultimately, I think that move is what got me here today. It was a move into the printer business. I went from site personnel manager to group personnel manager over all of HP's printer business in less than a year. And then my boss at the time was promoted to having 80 percent of HP's business, and I went with him to where I then had 80 percent of the global HR business at HP. When Pete Peterson, my predecessor, retired, he had identified two of us as internal candidates who were most likely to be considered for his replacement. I was the one, luckily, who was selected for the corporate job.

**Not only did you have a track record of doing good work throughout your career, you also had the good fortune of being noticed. Do you have any suggestions on how HR professionals can make sure their contributions actually get the attention of the people who can help them along in their careers?**

I try to look at the world through my boss's eyes, not just mine. I've always found in HR, in particular, if you understand the business, the organization structure, the culture, HR is just a candy store of tools to help the boss get better results through people. And so bosses don't look at it as "HR for HR's sake." They start seeing it as a marvelous contribution. And it's worked time after time after time that the boss in the organization got better results than he would have on his own.

It's because I have always felt my priority has been to make the business more competitive and to make it a better place to work from the employees' standpoint. These two objectives don't have to be at odds with each other. Let's face it. A lot of the things we deal with are the things the line managers are the least comfortable with. Many of the line teams appreciate someone who helps them be better at parts of the job that they might naturally avoid.

**What would you have done differently if you could do it over again?**

I wish I had worked overseas earlier in my career. I didn't realize how important globalization is and the need to understand from firsthand experience different cultures and different ways of viewing what is a U.S.-centric company. For a variety of reasons

I didn't actively go after that when it was brought up earlier in my career. And, knowing what I know now, I would have.

A lot of the emerging markets and untapped skill sets are in Asia, Eastern Europe, Middle East, Russia. Get ahead of it today. Those are the places I would take a transfer to—and learn as much as I could about the regional expansion firsthand.

**What advice do you have to share with HR professionals on their way up?**

Don't think that the only way to progress is up. Be really willing to actively pursue horizontal moves, even demotions, if you're going to learn something that's new, that's going to be vital, that's going to help you understand a part of the company or a part of the HR skill set that you don't currently have.

As long as you're learning and building your skill sets, don't pay that much attention to job title or pay levels—the short-term rewards. Careers are a long-term thing. And I see a lot of people limiting their thinking by only looking at a vertical progression.

**What do HR professionals need now that you didn't need when you started your career?**

The first thing that comes to my mind is that you have to bring into HR some of the same technology and practices it takes to run the business. Knowing what it takes to go fast, to enable basic things, is just entry into the game today. It's not the complete job. Ten or fifteen years ago, if you were able to run a huge global project, that was a breakthrough. Today, we in HR have had to *lead* the use of technology to enable integration. Build on that and do things like knowledge management, metrics, and global workforce surveys.

The second thing, which I mentioned earlier, is the ability to work globally. Frequently, our most effective teams are dispersed global teams that have figured out how to work together. Technology again is an enabler. All of a sudden you can select the best talent anywhere in the world, no matter where they sit, bring them together, and get them productive. This is an example of how technology and the ability to operate globally enables a company in a way that hasn't been done before.

**What is the best thing new entrants can do for themselves?**

You need to understand the business you're working in first, and you do have to speak the language of the business. Part of what

has held HR back, as compared to IT and Finance, for instance, is that frequently we can speak the language of HR first but cannot clearly articulate how it benefits the business. Or we're not comfortable with talking in business terms. If you use the vast capabilities and resources in HR and position them in terms of what they will do to help the business become more successful, or a better place for the employees to work, you get much better results and a much better connection with line teams who ultimately have to jointly own everything that HR brings to the table. And so, to me, that is the most critical foundational skill for the HR professional.

I think every new entrant should have some accounting classes, some business law classes, and some economics classes. I don't think you have to have an MBA, but you should go to an executive program and be familiar with case study methodology.

**How important is it for the HR practitioner to actually have a passion for the company's product?**

I don't think that one is a make-or-break issue. My first twelve years were in test and measurement, and I never fell in love with the dynamic signal analyzer. I just felt happy if I could describe what our customers did with it. You have to have an appreciation for what it takes to develop and design and sell the product.

There are other businesses, like the businesses that HP is in now, that you *can* get passionate about: digital imaging, printers, PCs, and more consumer products. I don't think it's a prerequisite that you love the project or be passionate about what you're producing. But you need to understand it. Understand the whole product life cycle. You need to understand the development, manufacture, distribution, service, where the money is made, and the interdependence and connections among all those things. You need to understand that whole profit model, product inception, on through customer use and disposal.

**What's the worst thing HR professionals can do to limit their potential?**

In general, if someone looks for approval or direction from others before taking a risk, regardless of what you set out to do, you're going to be limited by other people's opinions of where you come from. It can be especially true in HR, where a lot of people don't expect very much from you. Starting out, if I lived up only to those expectations—or *down* to those expectations, I

should say—it would have been a very disappointing career. Line managers need the HR team to set high expectations, articulate them, and then deliver.

**What characteristics and qualities do you look for when hiring a new HR professional?**

It's hard not to have ten pages of everything that can go into this profession. But there are certainly a set of core characteristics that make up the foundation.

You need to be *value-oriented*. You need to have an internal focus of control. You're going to have to deal with a lot of conflict and change and situations where there is no cookbook. So you have to be very well grounded, have a sense of humor and objectivity, and not be seen as a political player. And you need to be able to go to sleep at night and get up the next day with the personal stamina and objectivity to be able to help the organization. You need to have a strong personal base.

And, of course, you have to have a *business orientation*. You have to be able to speak the language of line management, profit and loss, and synthesize out HR implications of what the business or management team needs.

We all need some *technical competence*: labor law, the ability to deliver training programs, and the ability to work across functions. We tend to operate in silos inside the HR department, which doesn't help our customers. Our line managers want an integrated service from HR. They don't want to get a set of salary ranges here, a set of evaluation processes here, the annual stock program here. They want someone to present this to them in terms of an integrated performance *system*. In order to do that, HR people have to work across functional silos. I don't expect people to be *experts* across the silos, but I expect them to understand where there is a place for them to connect what they're doing with everyone else. And to be able to lead a team of other specialists who may not be in their area of expertise, and be more solution-oriented and not be a stand-alone producer.

That's why HR sometimes gets a bad rap. They forget to look at what they do from the manager's perspective.

**When did you take a risk in your career and have it pay off?**

Not to be melodramatic, but every day you have to take risks, intervene, and bring issues to the table that other people might

just as soon ignore. The real risk is when you don't deal with the conflict.

We call it "moose launching." Blast that thing right into the middle of the table! It means frequently I have to be the person who gets that issue that everyone is talking about around the cooler onto the table and make it a legitimate topic of discussion. I have this iceberg model that shows how typically all line managers gravitate to what we see above the waterline. It's all that happens *below* the waterline—how power is distributed, how we deal with conflict, how we deal with protracted periods of uncertainty where people don't know what tomorrow may bring—that is where the real issues lie. Actively managing that—I think that's a daily act of risk taking for a lot of HR professionals.

You're the one who has to understand the dynamics below the waterline and get those issues on the table. If you don't work them through, along with the hard issues, you'll never get the results you need.

**So what's the pain you feel when you launch the moose?**

It's usually the question: Am I the only one who thinks we should work on this? If I launch the moose, is there going to be anyone else in the room who will also say, "Yes, that's an issue." No matter how experienced you are, other people are going to look at you like, "Man, are you ever coming in from left field!"

With experience, you learn how to trust your judgment and sixth sense.

**Have you ever thought about doing anything other than HR?**

Not once I got in it. I just found it to be the most complex and challenging and rewarding thing that I could possibly do.

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