

Human Resources Roundtable 2003

Current Issues and Future Developments

The four key values that currently define the Hotel School's research and teaching are rigor, relevance, relationships, and reach. The 2003 Human Resources (HR) Roundtable, which brought together some of the most forward-thinking HR executives and consultants in the industry, provided a remarkable opportunity to reinforce each of these values. The primary objective of this industry-focused roundtable was to create a forum for sharing information about important HR topics to generate ideas for improving HR practice, education, and research. Our discussions and debates examined some of the most vexing HR problems in the hospitality industry and generated several important insights concerning the future of HR—two of which are addressed in the articles that appear in this special section. This forum also provided an excellent means for forging connections between industry and academe. Practitioners were exposed to some of the recent research advances in the HR discipline, and the academics learned how some of

the top hospitality firms were coping with critical HR decisions and problems.

The format and content of this roundtable were developed from ideas and suggestions that were submitted by the participants during the planning stages of this event. Similar to the legal roundtable examined in the May 2004 *Cornell Quarterly*, we dispensed with the typical PowerPoint presentation format and pursued an engaging, discussion-based approach. Regarding content, we decided to delve into three primary topics: the evolving role of HR in the industry; the strategies for winning the talent war; and the ways to identify, develop, and deploy the next generation of leaders. In addition, we set aside time at the end of the program to address several additional concerns that did not require intensive attention—affectionately referred to as “hot topics.” Examples included using information systems to enhance decision making, curtailing increases in benefits costs, and managing involuntary turnover. In the end, everyone walked away

with a valuable experience. The executives gained insights regarding the utility of their current policies and practices, and the academics identified ways to enhance their courses and research agendas.

Our first topic—one that received substantial attention throughout the program because it came up over and over again!—explored the role of HR in the development and implementation of firms' strategy. In particular, we spent a great deal of time discussing how HR contributes to firms' success. As expected, there was a great deal of unanimity regarding the need to show value in objective terms. However, it was also acknowledged that there are a number of difficulties in demonstrating impact. Part of the difficulty stems from a lack of information. Many times, the requisite data are not tracked or the technology and know-how required to integrate data sources do not exist. In addition, although less problematic today than a few years ago, some of the (non-HR) executives who sit around the strategic planning table simply do not believe that HR is a source of competitive advantage and do not see HR's playing a central role in formulating firm strategy. Thus, attempts to show how HR contributes to a firm's performance fall on deaf ears. Even with growing evidence that HR does indeed contribute to firms' success, it became apparent that more attention to this topic was warranted. Based on this discussion, Michael Warech and I wrote an article that describes several approaches for assessing the impact of HR and that presents the results from two studies that demonstrate the positive influence of HR on organizational performance.

Another topic that stimulated a great deal of discussion was the competencies of operations-level HR professionals. Many of the roundtable participants expressed concern about the functional

expertise of unit-level HR staff, as well as their abilities to apply their HR skills and knowledge to achieve business results. Some of these concerns may have arisen because HR professionals were early career specialists—staffing managers, benefits administrators, and the like—and as such, they did not have opportunities to develop a comprehensive skill and knowledge base in the various facets of a company's operation. Another reason is that many firms still do not emphasize a strategic mind set. The focus is primarily on functional performance—not overall business performance. Given the concerns regarding this “credibility gap,” Abigail Spencer and I wrote an article that discusses the importance of enhancing professionalism among operations-level HR staff and that describes ARAMARK's approach to developing HR-specific and broader business-related competencies.

Given the success of this program, we are planning another roundtable for 2005 and for every other year thereafter. I would like to thank my Hotel School colleagues and industry professionals for participating in this event: from the Hotel School, faculty members Judi Brownell, Jeff Harrison, Tim Hinkin, Craig Lundberg, Tony Simons, Dave Sherwyn, Mike Sturman, Gary Thompson, and Kate Walsh and the students from our undergraduate and MMH programs who have a passion for HR. I would also like to thank Cathy Enz, the former executive director of the Center for Hospitality Research, for her sage advice and support for this effort. From the industry, I thank Roger Ahlfed, from Uno Restaurants; Ari Kandel, from William M. Mercer; JoAnne Kruse, from Cendant Corporation; John Longstreet, from ClubCorp USA; Todd McCarty, from Starwood Hotels and Resorts; Alan Momeyer, from Loews Corporation; John Prutsman, from Applebee's International;

Abigail Spencer, from ARAMARK Corporation; Scott Tannenbaum, from the Group for Organizational Effectiveness; Michael Warech, from Watson Wyatt Worldwide; and John Young, from Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts. I am grateful for the industry's support of our educational mission and its willingness to share its views on some important issues that

will have a critical influence on the future of HR practice in the hospitality industry for years to come. I am confident that our discussions will help shape future HR strategies, and I look forward to seeing some of the prescriptions that were offered put into practice—*J.B.T.*