

CORNELL HR REVIEW

THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT OF PROFESSIONAL HR ASSOCIATIONS

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There are almost half a million human resources (HR) practitioners in the United States and thousands more in countries around the world.¹ With individual membership in a professional HR association (e.g., SHRM, WorldatWork) costing an average of \$204 per year, the business of HR fraternization is a lucrative one. Recent economic woes, however, have caused many to reconsider the value of such associations, as evidenced by a decline in dues-paying members over the past two years despite an increase in the number of HR practitioners.

This paper examines how the landscape of HR associations has changed over the past few decades, and it suggests what association leaders and practitioners can do to ensure the long-term success of the industry and its stakeholders.

The Major Players

The role of HR has evolved significantly over the past century, prompting professional associations in the field to likewise adapt. In fact, 91 percent of professional HR associations have changed their names and the scope of their services since their founding, and most have made such changes more than once.

The *Society for Human Resource Management* (SHRM) is by far the largest in terms of membership, boasting seven times as many members as its nearest competitor. SHRM aims to engage the full gamut of HR functions, while some associations focus on a more narrow scope. For example, *WorldatWork* encompasses “total rewards” (i.e., compensation, benefits, work life, performance, recognition, and career development); while *Recognition Professionals International* (RPI), true to its name, focuses on employee recognition.

There are also associations that narrow their efforts, not by function but by industry; e.g., the *College and University Professional Association for Human Resources* (CUPA-HR) and the *American Society for Healthcare Human Resources Administration* (ASHHRA). The majority of professional HR associations are also headquartered in the United States. The exceptions are the 18,000-member, Canada-based *Human Resource Professionals Association* and the *Hong Kong Institute of Human Resource Management* (IHRM).

Environmental Changes Affecting Membership Benefits

Professional HR associations, like their counterparts in other fields, aim to keep members informed, interconnected, and employed. They have achieved varying levels of success

pursuing these goals via member directories, publications, discussion groups, awards, local chapters, vendor relations, government lobbying, and job boards. However, recent environmental changes have caused a need to reevaluate at least three traditional membership benefits: knowledge sharing, networking, and certification.

Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge sharing is an integral part of professional development. On the input side, it provides continuing education. On the output side, it can keep an individual on other people's minds, show one's involvement in an industry, and further one's relationships with colleagues and acquaintances.²

Professional HR associations recognize the importance of knowledge sharing and go to great lengths to secure it as a benefit of membership. However, changes in technologies and socioeconomic conditions are threatening the congruence of practitioner needs and membership benefits. For example, SHRM's *HR Magazine*, WorldatWork's *workspan* [sic], and the [International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans](#)' host of publications are all great reads, but they require membership or payment in order to view featured content, and they are only published quarterly or monthly at best. The Internet, however, provides timely and inexpensive news and opinion. Blogs dedicated to HR topics are now plentiful, and several organizations provide reliable web content free of charge. Some examples of high-quality, free online HR knowledge sharing sites include [The Bacharach Blog](#), [Knowledge@Wharton](#), [Workforce Management](#), and [Human Resource Executive](#).

While the proliferation of free and dynamic HR content on the Web may deter some from renewing association membership, others consider subscription-only HR publications well worth their cost. A senior HR manager at Shell said that he maintains his membership in an HR association solely for its publications. Additionally, the [International Public Management Association for Human Resources](#) (IPMA-HR) reports that almost 90 percent of its membership considers its publication *HR Bulletin* to be its greatest benefit.³

No matter which camp an HR practitioner may fall into, all would be wise to take advantage of the plethora of knowledge sharing opportunities available online.

Networking

Another benefit of HR association membership that is being affected by the shifting environment is networking. Whereas in the past professional HR associations provided the primary means of networking for many, there are now several networking venues that do not require facilitation by a professional association. [LinkedIn](#), for example, has experienced phenomenal success in making networking resources accessible that were previously untapped or unmanaged, as explained by LinkedIn co-founder Konstantin Guericke:

“People who have been working for at least 10 years have a network. It doesn't come from networking; it just comes automatically, from going to work. But people tend to lose touch. Those networks are valuable.... People tend to hire and make other business decisions by drawing on these personal networks. Is a job candidate honest or hard-working? You can't tell from a résumé or even from an interview. That's why people fall back on trusted relationships.”⁴

LinkedIn not only helps people keep in touch with their “rolodex” of contacts but also provides a natural and less invasive way of meeting complete strangers. Most people use LinkedIn because they want to network, so searching profiles for common interests, similar work experiences, and shared groups can yield great introductions for forming connections of value.

Other professional networking platforms include [*HRM Today*](#) and [*KODA*](#); and even [*Twitter*](#) can be an effective networking tool if used properly.

While these online services have usurped some of the market for networking, one association venue that continues to offer value is the annual convention. Although relatively more expensive, conferences can provide rich networking opportunities. Kathleen Flood (Cornell MILR '11) attended the 2009 SHRM Annual Conference & Exposition and highly recommends such conferences for HR people in a new position who desire to learn more about a particular specialty and for seasoned HR professionals who want to stay up-to-date on relevant topics.

“SHRM set up small dinners for attendees, blocked hotels rooms, organized shuttle buses to the conference, and provided lunch areas with round tables for socializing. Since most HR professionals lean towards extroversion, networking happened everywhere. A couple people told me they were happy to be with people of “their kind” and to be able to talk about HR and business issues in a more casual setting.”

Something anyone who attends a professional conference will notice, however, is the lack of attendees who either represent large-sized companies or who are further along in their career. These two groups frequently comprise conference speakers, but they are hard to find among attendees. So where do they do their networking?

One place is at work. An advantage of working for a large company is having a greater number of HR professionals with whom to network. HR leadership development programs, moreover, augment early professionals' value and contact base by casting them into “graduating classes” and by rotating them through various HR departments and locations.

Outside the workplace, there are also organizations that facilitate networking for senior HR executives. [*The Conference Board*](#), for example, enables senior executives to network while sharing best practices as members of interest-specific committees. Membership is exclusive, as prospective members may initiate the membership process, but membership

is only extended to selected applicants. Similar organizations include the [*HR Policy Association*](#) and the [*National Academy of Human Resources*](#).

An organization that embodies similar exclusivity is Cornell University's [*Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies*](#) (CAHRS) Partnership program. What is unique about this program is how it provides opportunities for its partners to network not only with each other but also with faculty and students at the university's School of Industrial & Labor Relations (ILR). For instance, its bi-annual partner meetings allow members to network at the headquarters of its partner companies. Furthermore, members have exclusive access to ILR student recruiting through executive guest lectures, directed study projects, and an annual executive roundtable event.

This leads to another venue where professional HR associations have significantly facilitated HR networking: the college campus. Members of student chapters of HR associations reap the benefits of national level membership at a significantly discounted membership rate. They begin to form a local HR network via chapter meetings, HR-focused competitions, and special lectures.

Concurrent engagement of undergraduate and graduate students, however, by such professional chapters has been elusive. Jacob Nishida (Purdue MSHRM '10) suggests that this may be due in part to the different needs the two groups seek to satisfy. "Developmentally, graduate and undergraduate students are in different places in their knowledge of HR. Most of [Purdue's] graduate students have HR work experience while [its] undergraduate students are just beginning to understand what HR is all about." Consequently, Purdue's student chapter of SHRM caters mainly to graduate students.

Students at other universities have sought to address the distinct needs of the two student bodies by creating their own HR associations. For example, the student chapter of SHRM at Michigan State University has long been dominated by graduate students. In 1997, students at the university created the [*Human Resource Association*](#) as an organization for undergraduate students interested in HR.⁵

Other schools have experienced the opposite plight: student chapters catering more to undergraduate students. In 2002, students at Cornell University aimed to address the issue by creating the [*Strategic HR, Leadership, and Organizational Effectiveness*](#) (SHRLOE) group. Current SHRLOE president Aaron Hamilton (Cornell MILR '11) said that the group's focus on the graduate student population enables it to "provide compelling speakers, workshops and symposiums that are tailored to the needs of future HR leaders entering the business world." Last year, the organization hosted such events as a leadership trek at West Point and a symposium on Cornell's campus featuring several top HR executives. Pennsylvania State University has a similar organization, the [*Society of Labor Studies and Employment Relations*](#) (SLER), which hosts a student-faculty lunch program and organizes field trips to local businesses.

Clearly, professional HR associations still offer valuable networking opportunities. However, with the myriad of opportunities now available, HR practitioners can achieve greater success by being strategic in their networking activities.

Certification

Certification programs (e.g., PHR, CEBS, CCP) represent another benefit (and a major business component) of most professional HR associations. Fees for exams, preparation materials, and classes represent significant sources of revenue for associations. Furthermore, certification encourages continued association membership, as bearers must periodically re-certify. Plus, certified professionals who display credentials and diplomas provide free advertising for their respective associations.

The value of HR certification, nevertheless, is to a great extent idiosyncratic. Education level, field of study, amount and type of work experience, and career goals are a few factors that can assist in evaluating one's internal rate of return with regards to certification. HR certification can differentiate an applicant in a job pool and convey competence and dedication to the field; but there are several other ways—some much more powerful—that these goals can be achieved.

In order to strengthen certification programs, the author suggests implementing a university coursework requirement. The designation of Certified Public Accountant (CPA), for example, is arguably the most recognized certification in the world. In order to earn it, one must satisfy the “Three Es”: examination, experience, and education. Some HR certification programs require only examination, others examination and pertinent work experience, but not one mandates any formal education in HR or business management. For CPA licensure, applicants must complete a certain number of credit hours in accounting and business courses, depending on their level of education. In Ohio, for example, an aspiring CPA who holds a bachelor's degree needs to have taken 30 credit hours in accounting and 24 credit hours in non-accounting business courses in order to qualify to take the exams.⁶

SHRM is moving towards this three-pronged approach. Currently, applicants for the Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) certification—the society's “highest” designation—need only two years of exempt-level HR experience. However, starting in 2011, SPHR candidates with less than a bachelor's degree must have at least *seven years* of exempt-level HR experience. The work experience requirement is then five years for those with a bachelor's degree and four years for those with a master's degree or higher. Similar changes are being made to its other certification programs as well.⁷

While these changes will help raise the bar, they will still lack the benefits that pertinent university-level training provides. As previously stated, HR certifications help a job candidate stand out. However, if upward mobility is one's goal,⁸ then an HR certification program needs to represent something more rigorous and comprehensive. Professional HR associations should seek to achieve synergies with academia, building certification programs upon a foundation of traditional education—not trying to replace it. Hence,

until HR certification programs change to reflect this tripartite ideal, aspiring HR executives might be wise to seek out pertinent university training on their own accord.

Conclusion

HR associations have done much over the last several decades to empower individuals in the profession and to strengthen the industry as a whole. However, recent environmental changes have spurred a need to reevaluate at least three traditional membership benefits: knowledge sharing, networking, and certification. Professional HR associations continue to offer real value to the profession, but practitioners will benefit most by being more strategic about their membership decisions and activities. 8

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