

PERSONNEL NOTEBOOK

For Your Most Important Resource — The Human Resource

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Nine Skills of Top HR Professionals

When you're planning to hire an equipment mechanic, you first determine the skills and personal characteristics you need for that job. These might include a thorough knowledge of diesel engines, electrical systems, transmissions, infrared analyzers, and computer diagnostic equipment. You might also determine that this individual should be dependable, safety conscious, and willing to respond to emergencies.

When we hire Human Resource (HR) professionals, we tend to focus primarily on two areas: education and years of experience. These areas, however, do not tell us much about a person's ability or skills to do this job. First, we must determine the skills and personal characteristics we need for that job. So, what are they?

The founder and publisher of Business and Legal Reports (BLR), Bob Brady who spent decades meeting and supporting HR professionals, has identified a long list of desirable traits, and then narrowed them down to what he feels are the nine essential skills needed to be a top HR professional.

Here is BLR's top nine HR skills list:

1. Organization

HR management requires an orderly approach. Organized files, strong time-management skills, and personal efficiency are key to the HR function. You're dealing with people's lives and careers here, and when a manager requests a personnel file or a compensation recommendation that lines up with both the organization and the industry, it won't do to say, "I don't have a clue, but I'll see what I can dig up."

2. Multitasking

On any given day, an HR professional will deal with an employee's personal issue one minute, a benefit claim the next, and a recruiting strategy for a hard-to-fill job the minute after. And, if you're working for the average small company, you're probably handling most of the office work as well. Priorities and business needs move fast and change fast, and Mr. A doesn't much care if you're already helping Mrs. B right now. You need to be able to handle each as if he or she is the only person you're focused on at that moment.

3. Discretion and Business Ethics

As an HR professional, you are as close as it comes to being the conscience of your company as well as the keeper of confidential information. As you serve the needs of top management, you also monitor the actions of owners and officers as they relate to employees to assure proper ethics. You need to be able to interject when you feel the firm is not on the straight and narrow. That's not an easy responsibility, but you must realize that, in many cases, the HR professional is legally responsible for proper ethics. Of course, you must always handle issues appropriately and discretely, never divulging confidential information or spreading gossip. You just don't do it!

4. Dual Focus

The single most unique characteristic of HR professionals is that they must truly represent both employees and management. There are times you must make decisions to protect the individual and other times when you protect the organization, its culture, and its values. These decisions may be misunderstood by some, and you might catch some flak over it, but your position represents the relationship between the employees and management and not everyone will agree on every outcome. And, as indicated in number three above, ethics is not just about being sympathetic. It's about doing what is right in each set of circumstances.

5. Employee Trust

Employees expect HR to advocate for their concerns, yet you must also enforce top management's policies. The HR professional who can pull off this delicate balancing act wins trust from all parties.

6. Fairness

HR professionals must not only be fair, but must demonstrate fairness. This means that communication is constant and clear, that people's voices are heard, that laws and policies are followed and that privacy and respect are maintained. HR can be powerful and have a strong influence in a company; don't use it to cheat.

7. Dedication to Continuous

Improvement

Nothing in successful businesses is stagnant. Everything is in flux; everything is changing all the time. If employees are not being developed, something is passing them and you by. HR professionals need to help managers coach and develop their employees. The goal is continued improvement, innovation, and remediation. HR needs to do its own housekeeping as well. Use technology, training, networking, and other means to continuously improve the HR function and what it delivers.

8. Strategic Orientation

Forward thinking HR professionals take a leadership role and influence management's strategic path. As they assess and fill the company's labor needs, design and develop compensation tactics, and bring on board new skill sets that lead to business growth, they also identify ways to prepare for industry changes, long-range plans, and to improve productivity. They provide proof for management's oft-repeated comment that "People are our most important resource."

9. Team Orientation

Once upon a time, companies were organized into rigid hierarchies of workers led by supervisors who watched every move of every employee. Today the team concept is king. HR managers must

understand team dynamics and find ways to bring disparate personalities together to make the team work.

Nine Skills Plus One Big Caveat

Although these skills are numbered, the rank of importance may well change from one company to the next, so each company can prioritize them to fit its own business strategy.

This leads to an important caveat, as expressed by Bob Brady: “HR is a creature of, and serves the business strategy,” says Brady. “It’s important for HR people to know what that strategy is and what makes the business tick so the approach to HR can be tailored accordingly. Never think of HR in isolation,” he advises, “because, if HR professionals think of themselves as ‘just HR,’ that’s also what the rest of the organization will think.”

Many people believe that the modern-day personnel system was formed by the military in 1914 for World War I. The military’s methods of recruiting, training, record keeping, policy development, and discipline were such a success for handling large numbers of “employees” and seemed like a potential value to large corporations still in the industrial revolution, that they were used for the rest of the 20th century as the model for today’s personnel system. Does the military have such a list? You bet! Theirs has been around a bit longer. See how it compares to Bob’s list. Following is a brief description:

U.S. Armed Forces 11 Principles for Leadership:

1. Know Yourself and Seek Self-Improvement:

Evaluate your weaknesses and strengths and improve on them daily. Make sure your staff does as well.

2. Be Technically and Tactically Proficient

Keep current with the latest technical development in your field and know how to use your resources for maximum return on your investment.

3. Develop a Sense of Responsibility Among Your Subordinates

Drive accountability down to the base level among your staff. Make sure they are aware that you hold them accountable for their actions and assignments.

4. Make Sound and Timely Decisions

Make sure that your decisions are well thought-out and take into account all relevant information. Don’t act rashly or out of anger, desperation, or any other emotion.

5. Set the Example

Lead from the front, and make sure that your staff sees you as the role model. Be visible in your daily activities. Hold yourself to a higher standard, this will, motivate subordinates to improve themselves.

6. Know Your People and Look Out for Their Welfare

Only by demonstrating that you are interested and concerned for their welfare will you win over their loyalty. A good leader is a compassionate listener and understands what motivates his/her staff.

7. Keep Your People Informed

Information is the lifeblood of any organization and only good if it is shared across the widest possible spectrum. Share your ideas and knowledge with your staff, and make them feel included and valuable.

8. Seek Responsibility and Take Responsibility for Your Actions

Be prepared for your next assignment and take charge of all areas of responsibility. If a mistake is made, stand up and take the heat. By doing so, you will demonstrate a key principle of leadership — we all make mistakes, we are all fallible, but it is how we respond to our mistakes that separates the professionals from the pretenders.

9. Ensure Assigned Tasks Are Understood, Supervised, and Accomplished

You need to trust your people but verify their work. Trust your employees to do their jobs, but verify that the work has been done to your standards. By doing so, you will be involved, accountable, and creditable with your superiors.

10. Train Your People as a Team

Have your staff work together as a team and cross-train them on each other's responsibilities. This allows them to use each other's strengths and feed off the team's synergy. Teamwork develops a sense of shared responsibility and commitment to the objective.

11. Use Your Team in Accordance With Its Capabilities

Know your people, your departments, and your limitations. Don't take on more than you should. By knowing your limitations, you'll know when to call in reinforcements.

HR Skills of the Future

Some may consider these two lists to be outmoded; they don't fit the new workforce, too much structure and too many rules. So, should we consider what HR skills will be needed for the future? Well, we have a projection of what future HR skills will be needed from two of the country's most prestigious organizations: Mercer Human Resource Consulting and Harvard Business School Publishing.

They cite recruitment, development, and retention of talent as the top three HR skills. Also, they believe that HR professionals need to have a deeper understanding of the company's business and be able to do what it takes to get the job done. Working comfortably with employees and leading the company in concert with the other company leaders was also included, as was developing their and their people's skills.

Sounds pretty much like the same list to me. Only one new skill was forecasted as a need for the future HR professionals; it was the need to speak multiple languages. It really is a global economy.

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