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HR skills inadequate? Research details challenges for 21st century employers

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Few would deny that the human resources department has its hands full. With change bombarding the workplace at an ever-increasing pace, HR professionals feel the heat. Now, a new study examining 21st century workplace trends concludes that HR is at risk of getting burned.

The Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends 2014 report sounds a dire warning. The report, which brings together 15 years of research along with the views of more than 2,500 business and HR leaders in 94 countries, goes so far as to say HR is “playing catch up,” and there’s a need to “reskill” the HR function. In fact, reskilling HR was one of the top three concerns identified in the study.

Seventy-seven percent of the study’s participants see the need for HR to develop new skills. They say today’s HR professionals lack the skills and data they need in the modern work environment. More than a third (34 percent) of respondents said their HR and talent programs are just “getting by” or even “underperforming.”

“Critical mission”

“There’s no doubt that human capital strategies are now a major factor in business growth,” says Jason Geller, national managing director for U.S. human capital consulting at Deloitte Consulting LLP. “Yet, today’s HR departments are not equipped to face the challenges of this new role. When you add to this the rapidly changing landscape of HR technologies, such as cloud and big data, and their impact on attracting, retaining, and developing talent, it becomes clear that reskilling HR teams is arguably the most critical mission for organizations today.” “Playing catch up”? A need to “reskill HR”? The Deloitte report uses tough words and highlights big challenges for the profession. [Jerry Glass](#) and [Brad Federman](#) of [F&H Solutions Group](#), a national human resources consulting firm, are on the front lines of the changing workplace, and they have ideas about how HR should respond.

Creativity versus compliance is one area HR needs to examine, Glass and Federman say. Glass, the firm’s president, says the HR function often is still largely risk averse, and “anything you want to do in HR still gets run by legal.”

Federman, F&H’s chief operating officer, agrees. “The joke goes if you have an idea you want to kill, bring it to HR or the legal team,” he says. “If you come up with a fantastic idea, something that’s not been done before, most business people will say, ‘Fantastic, how do we make it work?’ but HR will pick apart the idea. It won’t get off the ground. HR can sometimes hold an organization back from doing good things.”

Glass says reskilling HR includes teaching the brain to act differently. “When you have a great idea, the easiest thing to do is to say why it won’t work,” he says. But he wants to train people to explore how to say yes instead of automatically saying no.

Federman says he sees HR professionals struggling to figure out how to administer the [Family and Medical Leave Act](#) and other compliance issues when they can outsource those tasks and focus on what’s going to add value to the organization.



Paradigm shift on engagement, recruitment

Retention and engagement, along with leadership development, were other concerns explored in the Deloitte study, and Federman says a paradigm shift is needed. Surveying employees is good, he says, but too often more money is put into conducting the survey than is invested in dealing with what's learned from it. Engagement shouldn't just be thought of in terms of a two- or three-month action plan.

Not only do managers need to focus on engagement of their employees, they also need to think about their own engagement, Federman says. "If I'm disengaged, my employees will be disengaged, guaranteed," he says.

Federman says organizations need to encourage the concept of accountability and individual responsibility among employees. He says surveys show that most employees say their coworkers have as much or more impact on their engagement as their managers, but it's the managers who get blamed.

The challenge to attract top talent is mentioned in the Deloitte study as a serious competitive issue, and Glass says finding the right talent has been difficult for a long time. He says talented individuals are always going to want a challenge. So the employer needs to focus on employees' career paths as a way to keep them interested.

Federman says organizations need to support career growth by giving employees the ability to manage their careers. When that happens, people will want to stay with their organization and when they do change employers it will be for the right reasons.

Trust and transparency play a role along with an organization's values, Federman says. When organizations get involved in community charitable events for more than just public relations reasons, employees have a sense of pride that their employer is supporting their value system.

Millennial challenge

The change the Millennial generation is bringing to the workplace is another challenge for HR. Glass says HR needs to learn how to get the Millennial workers engaged and understanding the employer's mission and objectives when the forms of communicating HR is used to aren't working.

Glass says he recently spoke to a group of 35 Millennials and asked how many of them regularly read a print newspaper. Only three raised their hands. Most get their news online and may not even click to read an entire article.

Federman says when employees are just picking up snippets and doing a lot of things at the same time, two things happen: They make decisions based on limited information, and because they're so tied to technology, they don't shut down. That leads to burnout as well as communicating via technology on things that need to be communicated in person.

HR's ability to set ground rules for effectively managing communication with the youngest members of the workforce will be key to success, Glass says.

About: Tammy:

Tammy Binford writes and edits news alerts and newsletter articles on labor and employment law topics for BLR Web and print publications. In addition, she writes for [HR Hero Line](#) and [Diversity Insight](#), two of the ezines and blogs found on [HRHero.com](#).