Intro to Human Resource Management – Reimagined: A Round Table Discussion

Abstract

Knowledge about human resource management practice could prove very beneficial for students, yet current human resource management class in many business school programs suffer from student interest and motivation problems. We argue that one of the major reasons for this missed opportunity is that the way the the classes are taught (particularly at the intro level) pertains heavily to future HR specialists, while the majority of students in the class may not aspire to be. In this proposed roundtable discussion, we would like to invite the participants to re-imagine the intro to HR class and explore the possibility of the class from the perspective of students as future employees, and illustrate the HR functions from as steps in the employment life cycle. We believe that this approach may not only increase student motivation but also help them with their careers in the HR field or not.

Key Words: Human resource management   student motivation   career

Introduction

In developing and legitimating HR as a profession, the HR curriculums across programs converge under the influences of professional associations such as the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) (Parks-Leduc et al, 2018). Human resource management class is typically one of the building blocks of an undergraduate curriculum in business schools. In many programs, it is a required course for management, if not all, majors. The designation of HR class as a required foundation course echoes the importance of HR in organizations' success and competitive advantage (Garton, 2017; Meister & Brown, 2020; Schwarz & Murphy, 2008), particularly during the ongoing pandemic (Deloitte Insight, 2020; People Profession Survey, 2020). Therefore, it is imperative that graduating business students have a basic understanding of the HR functions (North-Samardzic & de Witt, 2019; Herman, 2008). Despite its critical role as value-adding, HR suffers from a bad reputation as a professional field of practice (Cappelli, 2015) and a desirable career choice (Breitfelder & Dowling, 2008). As a result, it is not surprising that the core or foundation HR class in the curriculum does not enjoy the same enthusiasm from students as accounting or finance.

Nonetheless, the awkward situation of HR class may not entirely be the students' fault. The way HR textbooks are written has not changed much over the years. Sackett and Sackett (1982) surveyed the prevailing HR textbooks at the time and found that the textbooks tend to converge on the major topics covered. Compared with the list of topics from their research three decades ago, the "modern" HR textbooks largely retains the same structure and topics (perhaps minus the emphasis on labor relations, as the influence of labor unions continues declining in the U.S. (Wright, 2016). This functional approach to the teaching of HR often is intended to prepare students for future HR jobs, shapes the class from the perspective of an HR professional, and

demonstrates how each HR function works in an organization. For those students who wish to be HR specialists, this approach can be very illustrative. For those who are not, however, which could be the majority of students, the relevance of the content and the structure is less practical and appealing, which could result in lower motivation and interest.

HR classes' current structure is rather unfortunate, since HR is relevant for most, if not all, aspects of students' careers, from job search to retirement. Notably, HR is equally, if not more practice-oriented and less theory-laden, compared to other management subjects such as organizational behavior, leadership or strategy. In other words, even if students do not wish to build a career in the HR profession, they could still benefit from a robust knowledge of HR to advance their own job (e.g., how to ace an interview or how to make financial retirement plans). It is quite ironic, then, that students have not been convinced of HR's practical relevance for their future careers. Therefore, we believe that we must create a shift in *how* we approach HR classes to clearly communicate HR's short-term and long-term relevance to students' career (e.g., internships, job hunting, being a successful employee, etc.)

Therefore, in this proposed round table discussion, we want to address this potential opportunity and invite audience members to together re-imagine the HR class (particularly the intro level class) to the undergraduate students, from the perspective of job applicants or employees envisioning and crafting their future careers, instead of that of an HR manager supervising various HR functions. We believe that if we make the class about students, themselves, and their career success (and we definitely could), not only could they be more motivated, but also be more tuned into the materials and actually absorb more knowledge as a result than the traditional approach. Specifically, in this round table discussion, we want to focus on the following questions:

1. What should be the course objectives of a modern-day "Intro to HR" class for undergraduate students?

2. What are the appropriate ways to assess student learning in an "intro to HR" class?

3. How do we shift the focus and the structure of the "intro to HR" class from HR functions to individual career progression? What would this alternative course structure look like?

4. What activities/ exercises can we use to facilitate the HR class to be more relevant for students themselves?

Teaching Implications

A traditional HR class could be an odd existence among all management classes. On the one hand, it has a managerial component, as it focuses on attracting, managing, and developing talents. In this regard, it connects the management content learned in other classes (e.g., OB) to the practical field. On the other hand, it also involves teaching a set of laws, regulations, and nuances of numerous procedures and protocols. In this regard, it resembles professional training typically seen in accounting classes. Therefore, recognizing the duality of the HR course and striking a balance could be challenging.

The bulk of a typical HR textbook offers a sheer volume of information regarding labor laws and regulations, HR specific functions and procedures that can easily become overwhelming for students. Indeed, the "management" side of HR often needs to make room for the administrative side, and the goal of the course often gets narrowed down to understanding HR functions. This is not to say that the HR courses are necessarily dry and dull. HR educators put a great deal of effort to make the HR class alive and provide immersive and experiential learning for students, using exercises (Renard, 2008), cases (Manisaligil & Bilimoria, 2016),

4

movies (Bumpus, 2000), simulations (Bedell, Floyd, Nicols, & Ellis, 2007; North-Samardzic & de Witt, 2019) and full-blown service-learning projects (Madsen & Turnbull, 2006). While these techniques improve the *process* element of teaching HR, they do not address the course's *content* element. For professional HR training, the current content is necessary for more advanced classes such as talent management, training and development, and compensation. Yet, for students not wanting a career in the HR profession, these pedagogical innovations still fall short of demonstrating HR topics' relevance to the students' career as a non HR major.

Some scholars offered an alternative HR class approach, one that focused on competency (McEvoy, Hayton, Warnick, Mumford, Hanks, & Blahna, 2005; Wooten & Elden, 2000). The competency models prescribed focus on a broad set of intellectual and professional development areas (.e. competencies). As such, the models are aimed at the program level rather than the course level. Granted, these competency models overlap with soft skills (Ritter, Small, Mortimer, & Doll, 2018) or managerial skills (Paglis, 2013) that could be engineered into a single course. Yet, while these skills are essential and instructors should try to develop these skills for students at every opportunity, it is less domain-specific to HR. From a developmental perspective, the skills component in the competency model is primarily aimed at students' employability (Riebe & Jackson, 2014), focused on the set of skills or competencies that employers want.

Similarly, universities' career centers tend to focus on getting the students a suitable placement, above anything else. Thus, the focus is to help students develop tactical skills to land a position. At the same time, a career does not stop at being hired upon graduation. Instead, it is a start of a cyclical process of various stages filled with ups and downs. Arguably, knowledge of HR functions is an integral part of students' future career success, from activities before landing

a job (including job hunting, job application, and interviews) to job performance (including training, career development, retirement) and other career moves.

The necessary skills for navigating success in the career progression go beyond acquiring the soft skills or employability skills typically taught in the university career centers. Students need to acquire factual knowledge of the job market (e.g., labor supply and demand, labor laws, typical administrative procedures in the organization), develop a tactical understanding of career maneuvers (e.g., interview performance, developmental opportunities, retirement planning), as well as developing strategic thinking (e.g., how to build and realize the human capital for oneself for the long term). Indeed, employees have different learning needs at different stages in their career (Gerpott et al., 2017). Therefore, college students need to acquire both the soft skills and the concrete career managing skills discussed above. Consequently, we argue that the HR class provides a perfect setting for filling this void by shifting HR classes' content focus from preparing students to take an HR role to equip prospective and current employees with the necessary success toolbox. In the HR course, we would create contents essential for students' career success and help them develop the corresponding career managing skills and competencies.

Therefore, we believe such a shift in focus could address two gaps simultaneously: the motivation gap and the career managing skill gap. As such, this approach holds promises for both pedagogical implications and practical implications as well. And MOBTS is a perfect place to start the conversation, gather ideas, and gain inspiration for a new alternative approach to the intro to HR class, re-imagined.

Proposed Timeline

As a round table discussion, we want to provide the audience with ample amount of time to express and exchange their thoughts and opinions, and also leave time for taking stock and crafting a viable path forward. We, the organizers, mainly serve as facilitators. We do have our own opinions, but we plan to hold them for last.

Specifically, we propose a four-part session procedure. At the beginning, we will present a general introduction of the session and highlight the purpose and intent of this session. Part two will be a focused on discussion with the purpose of shifting the focus of "intro to HR class", particularly at the undergraduate level. Then, in part three, depending on the size of the audience, we will divide the audience into breakout rooms to solicit and brainstorm ideas for the student-centered HR class. At last, we want to have a general discussion and aggregate the thoughts and ideas that come out of the breakout rooms and make calls for actions or highlight further questions or issues to be addressed. The table below show the specific proposed timeline:

Content	Time
Introduction	5 minutes
General discussion on the purpose of HR class	15 minutes
Group discussion about the shift	10 minutes
Breakout room session for ideas	15 minutes
Final discussion	15 minutes
Total	60 minutes

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