

A Western Canadian Perspective on the HR Profession in Canada

An Interview with:

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Director, Organizational Development, Canyon Technical Services Ltd.

Chair, Human Resources Institute of Alberta

Interviewed by:

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Todd den Engelsen is currently the Director of Organizational Development with Canyon Technical Services Limited. He is Chair of the Human Resources Institute of Alberta. Queen's IRC Research Associate, Alison Hill, spoke with Todd to hear his perspectives on the role of the HR profession, and the challenges that lie ahead.

Todd believes that the future of HR is filled with opportunity and possibility, especially as corporations continue to operate within increasingly complex working environments, on a global scale. To meet these challenges, Todd encourages HR professionals to be continuous learners, to seek out and engage in professional development opportunities and cultivate a culture of learning within their organizations.

What prompted you to join the HR profession?

Initially it was my love for people and the challenge of watching them reach their potential that really prompted me to join the HR profession. I am comfortable around people; I like seeing people be successful. These feelings have not waned; however, now I also have a love for business. Helping people and organizations realize their potential is what really charges me now.

I have been in the HR profession since 1992. My career started mostly in training, doing some re-integration projects for local, provincial, and federal governments. That grew into a generalist role with the health region. I spent ten years working for a local health region as a generalist, and eventually as a labour relations specialist. For approximately the last seven years, I have been working in the oil and gas industry. In my current role, and my previous role, I have been the HR lead. In one case, bringing HR to a company, and in the second case, raising the bar in terms of what the current HR function was—providing strategic planning, strategic development, organizational design, compensation planning, etc.

In addition to my professional roles, I am a member of the Human Resources Institute of Alberta (HRIA). I am the Chair of HRIA, a three-year term, from Chair-Elect, Chair, and Past-Chair.

The results of a recent study conducted by the Human Resources Professionals Association and Knightsbridge (2011), *The Role and Future of HR: The CEO's Perspective*, suggest that CEOs are becoming increasingly aware of HR's strategic role. Based on your experience, to what extent do you agree with this finding?

Absolutely, HR is playing a more strategic role in organizations, however this is not consistent across the board. From my perspective I have seen HR take on a more strategic role in larger growing organizations, whereas in the smaller or more traditional organizations this has not been the case. I do note and agree with the study that organizations are turning to HR to provide more business acumen and strategy to support their organizations.

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I do believe that there is an increasing appetite for business to see HR take on a more strategic role. HR is positioned well to take on a strategic leadership role. Human resources sits in a seat that is able to touch every person in the organization. Whether employees are in operations, accounting, sales, or administration, the work that HR professionals do applies to every one of those individuals. HR sits in a seat that should see the organization from all angles. HR, therefore, has a more holistic approach to the organization.

In your view, how can HR professionals and the organizations in which they work ensure that HR plays an integral role in the development of corporate strategy and performance?

That's a good question! Primarily, HR needs to have the credibility to play a strategic role. Credibility comes first from having the ability, developed through learning business strategy, and earning the trust and respect of the corporate suite, the line employees, and all those in between. Naturally, most people join the HR profession because they like people, they have an affinity for people, can communicate well, and understand how to deal with people. These attributes are table stakes. HR professionals excel when they combine these skills with business acumen. I think that an HR professional really becomes a professional when they know how to move people and organizations forward, and employ their business skills. Having a high emotional intelligence quotient is one thing, but being able to go into a charged situation, identify, and clarify what the issues are, and move things forward, in a way that supports the business interests, is critical.

What unique, skills, abilities, and/or knowledge do you think HR leaders bring to the executive table?

Again, it's those people skills, knowing how to deal with people. Specifically, it is moving the organization/business and its individuals forward, providing clarity around issues, managing the talent, and ensuring the necessary business culture is created and maintained. Like I mentioned before, HR sits in a position where it can observe and reach every individual within the organization, regardless of level, regardless of service line, regardless of function. HR is able to provide clarity to what is happening in the organization and influence its direction.

Queen's IRC recently conducted a survey of HR professionals across Canada to glean their insights on their practice (Juniper & Hill, 2011). The data revealed that the top five challenges facing HR departments in Canada include talent management, employee engagement, succession planning, change management, and organizational culture creation and maintenance. To what extent do you agree with this finding?

I think this list is a high-level list and I wouldn't challenge anything on here. However, long-term, one of the other pieces I would bolt onto the list is supporting good governance. To clarify, I am referring to good corporate governance, combined with good HR governance. In public companies, where there is a governance requirement, it is ensuring that the reporting is done in an open and transparent fashion. This includes good financial reporting and management discussions and analysis.

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Governance also includes disclosing things in a proper and transparent way. So, one of the things that I think is really relevant and may resonate with many right now is the economic crisis. When HR departments discuss executive compensation in times of economic downturn, they can easily put their company in an awkward position, or a very favourable position, depending on how the executive compensation plan is structured. Being able to strategically structure executive compensation plans is a relevant skill set and a challenge that is ahead of the HR profession, one that we need to be mindful of. This challenge may be greater in the US than in Canada, but I wouldn't undermine the growing importance of its need.

In what ways are the challenges facing the HR profession in Alberta any different from, or similar to, the challenges in the rest of Canada?

Currently, Alberta is in strong growth mode, while the rest of Canada, with some localized exceptions, is either contracting or maintaining. Due to the energy demands, our employment levels are the highest in the country. In fact, many of my colleagues are recruiting from across the country and from overseas to meet the recruitment demand. While our industry has experienced its own ups and downs the Petroleum Human Resources Council of Canada (2011) predicts that in the next ten years we will be looking for another 130,000 workers to just fuel this one industry. When you add what will be needed in health care, education, construction and other supportive industries it is easy to see that we will have unique challenges here in Alberta.

While I may be a little biased as I am an Albertan, the main difference is the business and employment opportunities in Alberta are tremendous right now. As an employer, this means there is stiff competition for your employees, so you had better treat them right.

Given the challenges facing HR departments, how do you see the HR profession in Canada changing in the next decade?

Clearly, our business acumen is going to need to increase. We will need to become astute with marrying the interests of business with employee values. In addition to practicing good governance, understanding the concept of global ethics is essential. As Canada, in particular, increasingly becomes a mosaic culture, we're going to need to interact and work in a multicultural environment. This interaction includes working with new employees who enter Canada from other cultures and developing strong business relationships, as we buy goods and services from other countries and cultures. In the future, organizations will need to be mindful of developing and implementing a global ethics policy that applies to where goods and services are purchased. That's a little bit out there. I haven't heard many people speak about global ethics yet. There's an obvious challenge associated with marrying the interests of business with the mosaic of employee values. Employee values will become increasingly complex, as we have increasingly multicultural workplaces and organizations.

As a personal example, I have been involved in recruiting labour or sending work to be completed in places like the Philippines and Sri Lanka. I have also

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recruited staff from Russia and Romania. These examples highlight the impact that globalization has on organizations and the HR function.

Admittedly, my experience is but a drop in the bucket in comparison to what my colleagues have done. The international labour trade is only going to grow. I would expect that there's going to be more and more trade with India and China. As such, Canada will need to prepare its immigration policies to meet the demand for labour.

Ezra Levant's book *Ethical Oil* (2010) underscores what is happening in Canada. A Canadian business with Canadian clients is not just a Canadian business anymore. We're buying products from other countries. Those other countries may, or may not, be all that ethical. There's an increasing urgency to discuss human rights issues. For example, considering if an organization should be doing business with a company whose oil is pillaging its own country. The answer may not be as simple as: "No, we should not do business with them." The answer may be, that we should do business with them so we can help that country build hospitals, and schools. I think that discussion is yet to come about. It's on the margins right now, but I expect that in the next ten years that discussion will be pushed more and more to the forefront. As organizations continue to change, so too will the skills and knowledge required by HR professionals. HR will need to assume a lead role in helping businesses to manage their increasingly complex operating environments.

To best meet these HR challenges, what skills, competencies, and knowledge do you think are currently, or will be, critical for individuals in an HR leadership role?

The most critical knowledge that an HR professional can have is business acumen. That is an immediate need and will always be a need. This means developing your business skills, knowledge, and network. Also, understanding global cultures and generational differences, and the work styles that come out of those different groups. So, the work and learning styles that result in a global culture, with generational differences.

What suggestions do you have for HR departments to equip themselves for the changes ahead?

First, HR departments need to embrace the concept of learning, including learning outside your comfort zone. As I mentioned, most people get into the HR field because they like people. The business skills and knowledge required by the profession may mean that HR practitioners need to learn outside their comfort zone. For example, take an accounting, sales, marketing, or international business course. Embracing learning means not only participating in individual professional development, but creating a culture of learning within their own workplace. That is, ensuring that the organization has a learning focus.

In the second chapter of Senge's (1990) *Fifth Discipline* he talks about companies having a "learning disability" (pp. 17–26), where they have the mentality that,

“This worked for us last year, so let’s just keep doing the same thing.” That doesn’t work. Organizations have very changing dynamics.

I think that HR professionals individually, and HR departments collectively, need to establish credibility externally (to the public) and internally (within the organization), through learning, and continuous professional development.

You talked with Daphne [FitzGerald] (Hill, 2011) about the HR value proposition. I think she was very wise in pointing out the importance of creating a value proposition. One of HR’s downfalls is our inability to articulate what we do, and what our value proposition is, not only to business, but to the public. My sense is that the public opinion of what HR does is a low opinion, an opinion far below what we are capable of, and far below of what we should also be doing. Therefore, in order for HR departments to equip themselves for the changes ahead, they must develop their own capacity, and inform the communities around them, by managing and shaping their expectations of what HR is and what HR can do. Our associations and the HR profession, as a whole, would do well to articulate and publicize what our value proposition is.

Do you think that colleges and universities adequately prepare learners for roles in the HR profession?

That’s a tough question, because every college and university has a slightly different perspective. I’d hate to make a global statement that the academic institutions are good or bad. So, my answer is: “Yes, but…” Yes, they are, but there needs to be a healthy realization that school is not the only place to learn. It shouldn’t be the only place that you learn. I advocate co-op programs, online learning, and learning from real life experiences, in addition to formal education. I encourage embracing the concept of lifelong learning as a stepping-stone to becoming a successful HR professional.

The Advanced HR program offered by Queen’s IRC draws on the HR competencies proposed by Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson, Sandholtz, and Younger (2008). These authors outline six key roles for HR professionals: Credible Activists, Culture and Change Stewards, Talent Managers/ Organizational Designer, Strategy Architects, Operational Executors, and Business Allies. Drawing on the roles defined by Ulrich et al., and based on your own experience, what do you see as the most crucial role for the HR profession today?

I like the list. If I were to put the roles of an HR professional identified by Ulrich et al. in a hierarchy, I would say that Business Ally is probably the top. In order to be a Business Ally, we need to be a Credible Activist, a Cultural and Change Steward, a Talent Manager, a Strategy Architect, and an Operational Executor. I think that these competencies combined enable an HR professional to be a successful Business Ally, or a business partner. I would also add a strong understanding of organizational effectiveness, sustainable executive compensation, and good governance to the list of competencies.

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The future of HR is bright.

Queen's IRC Director, Paul Juniper, is focusing some of his work on the future of HR in Canada. Based on your expertise, how would you describe the future of the HR profession?

I think that the future of HR is bright. As you may know, there are more head offices in Calgary than in any other Canadian city. If I were talking with a young recruit, I would say that HR is a great industry to get into. It's in high demand. There is an abundance of learning and growth opportunities within HR. For someone who is mid to senior-level in their career, my discussion would focus on how we keep the profession's momentum going, and how we can shape the table at which we are working. That is, how we can ensure that new professionals entering HR have the opportunities to develop their skills and abilities, and how we can shape the expectations of those leading the young professionals. More specifically, we need to ensure that the CEOs leading the junior HR professionals establish criteria for the profession, such as business acumen, credibility, effective communication, some global intelligence, and a global mindset. In short, I think that HR is a great career to get into, but there is a lot more that HR should be doing.

Reflecting on your career, given the opportunity, is there anything that you would do differently?

I think I would have pursued business acumen with a greater fervor, earlier in my career. If I knew then what I know now, I think that is the only thing that I would have done differently. I would have pursued business knowledge earlier, harder, faster, and quicker than I did.

I have really loved my career. I wish I would have understood where HR could be when I started in the profession. I don't think anybody really identified the value proposition of HR clearly enough. I wasn't shown the profession's vision clearly enough. It looked like HR was a subservient role in organizations, rather than a true business partner.

Although I am a critic of HR, in that I don't think we have identified our value proposition very well, I am also guilty of that. I need to make sure that I am better able to articulate HR's value proposition as well, not only for my team, and myself, my profession and my employer.

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Todd den Engelsen currently holds the position of Director, Organizational Development for a rapidly growing and publicly traded Oil & Gas company. As a member of the Senior Management Team, his role is to oversee Human Resources Management, Talent Development and Organizational Design in one of the fastest growing Oil & Gas companies in North America. With 19 years experience in Human

Resources, Todd has had the opportunity to provide leadership in private enterprise, large and small nonprofit organizations, health care and large multi-national publicly traded companies. He has delivered his Human Resource leadership in the areas of employee and labour relations, organizational design, strategic planning, mergers and acquisitions, compensation, re-organization/ layoffs and growth. The reality check? He self discloses that Benefit Programs are not his area of strength.

In addition to his day job, Todd volunteers his time in nonprofit leadership, speaks on various leadership and HR topics and holds the position of Chair, Board of Directors for the Human Resources Institute of Alberta. He has taken on the task of shaping the profession of Human Resources and its image in the public and business community. More detail of this role can be found on the HRIA website <http://www.hria.ca> & via Todd's LinkedIn page at <http://www.linkedin.com/pub/todd-denengelsen/19/10/18b>

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