



HEAD
HEART
+ BRAIN



The Success Profile for
HR Business Partners



A global study

+ The HR Business Partner role has been evolving since the 1990s and is now firmly established and well understood within the HR function.

What is much less well understood is what it takes to be an exceptional, high performing HR Business Partner. What are the skills, knowledge and attributes of the best of the breed? What is the difference that makes the difference between the best and the rest?

By 2004, Jan Hills at Head Heart + Brain found that too many client organisations were still struggling with the answer to that question. This was hampering clients' ability to identify the best candidates, guide and develop those already in position and consequently to deliver the full value of the HR transformation to the business.

We decided to invest in a search for some answers and began a global study using The Success Profile methodology. We show here how the study was conducted and what results were found. Since then the study has been regularly updated and the results verified with client companies.

How the study was conducted

Selecting the business partners

- † The study began with an initial group of 30 HR Business Partners from a range of industries across both the public and private sector. The qualifying criteria for inclusion were that they:
 - † Were identified by their business line clients as making an exceptional strategic contribution to the business
 - † Had at least 10 years' experience in HR
 - † Had full responsibility for delivering the HR agenda for their organisation, region or part of the business
 - † Were in a role where the transactional aspects were being delivered by others
 - † They were located in the UK, the US, Europe and Asia and had varying geographic remits; global, regional and local.

Since the completion of the original study, we have added to our database by interviewing many HR Business Partners in our client organisations. The database now stands at over 100 and the findings have been consistent between the original study and the larger group.

Gathering the data

+ Participants were interviewed in depth using a structured format that elicited information about instances when they had been exceptionally successful in their role and times when they had been less successful. In each case the interview drilled down into detail about their experiences at five levels:

- + When and where – the circumstantial environment in which the event occurred
- + What – the actions they took; what they did
- + How – the capabilities they drew on; how they decided on actions
- + Why – the beliefs and values that drove their decisions and led to their actions
- + Who – their sense of identity and purpose in the situation; who they are in their role

While the methodology is similar to that used in developing competency frameworks, it is important to note that the deeper dimensions focused on in the Success Profile (the how, why and who) produce a much richer picture of the full conditions that generate success.

The analysis

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The data was analysed by searching for the consistent patterns within each individual's experience (their personal blueprint for success) and subsequently between participants across the population (their shared blueprint for success). The patterns identified both for individuals and across the group were:

- + Presence or absence of an element in multiple successful incidents
- + Presence or absence of an element in multiple unsuccessful incidents

The findings

† The clearest and most interesting insight was that “attitudes” are at least as important, if not more so, than technical skills and knowledge in identifying or creating successful HR Business Partners. In this context, attitude is about how people define their role and purpose in the organisation and what they believe about themselves, the function and their role within it.

The best HR Business Partners share:

Success Factor	Definition and summary quote
Self-belief	A deep belief in the value of the HR function and their personal ability to make a valuable difference to the business “High performing HR Business Partners believe in HR and they believe in themselves.”
Independence	The confidence to have a point of view and be courageous enough to express it even if it may prove unpopular “The most successful business partners have an opinion and express it even when there is opposition”
Knowing the business	Profound knowledge and understanding of the business and its strategy and the ability to communicate in business terms “High performing HR Business Partners know the business as well as their clients.”
Relationships	The ability to build deep, strong and trusting relationships with their clients and HR colleagues “It is impossible to be successful without building deep and trusting relationships with business clients and colleagues in HR.”
One HR	A clear focus on delivering business outcomes through harnessing the whole HR function’s capabilities and being a strong role-model for the team “High performing HR Business Partners bring the whole capability of HR to the client and consistently deliver the right results.”

These attributes all need to be present to produce exceptional performance, as together they form a virtuous circle; a self-reinforcing system that generates ever-increasing credibility, influence and delivery of the right results.

The summary of findings

Self-belief

† The Business Partners we interviewed believed deeply in the function and its value to the strategic agenda of the business. They saw themselves as equal partners with their business leaders in driving success through the people agenda. They consistently defined their purpose in terms of their contribution to strategy and business performance. Beyond these deeply supportive beliefs about the importance of what they do, the best HR Business Partners also had profound confidence in their own skills and their ability to use them to make the right things happen in the business. They were also values driven; common values being integrity, delivery focus and self development.

† Sample quotes on Self-belief...

“My values guide my decisions in the context of the culture and business goals”

“I have a strong internal compass that guides my actions”

“I believe that HR makes as much difference to the success of the business as any function”

“I believe I have the skills and knowledge to make a difference in the business”

“I believe I am equal to others in the business leadership team”

“It is impossible to convince the client of something you don't believe in”

Independence

✦ Every one of the participants in our study described a willingness, or in some cases even, an obligation, to have an independent point of view. Having an opinion alone, however, is not enough. Participants also consistently described the need to have the courage to express their point of view even at the risk of being unpopular. In addition they described a persistence with maintaining their position in the face of opposition. They frequently described this ability to have and hold on to an independent opinion as one of the attributes most likely to earn the respect of their clients and enable them to build the depth of relationship required to be powerfully influential.

✦ Sample quotes on Independence...

“I’ve never been afraid of being fired for expressing my opinion”

“Be true to yourself”

“It’s my job to raise the un-discussable”

“Be willing to be tested”

“Clients value honesty and candour”

“Holding up the mirror and challenging assumptions is critical for success”

Knowing the business

✦ The participants in our study could articulate and understand the strategy and the key drivers of success. They had a focus on the competition and deep understanding of their industry or sector. They knew how their piece of the business interfaced with the rest of the organisation. They consistently mentioned the need to think and communicate in business terms and to focus on business outcomes and results, not on HR processes and jargon. This way of thinking and communicating was seen as a powerful contributor to earning the respect of clients.

✦ Sample quotes on Knowing the business...

“Articulate the business strategy and the HR (people and structure) implications”

“Make links across the business - take a holistic view”

“Have a broad interest and knowledge, not just HR but economic and political implications”

“Use the business language”

“Focus on business outcomes - that is what strategy is”

“Position ideas so the business understands the benefits”

“There are many solutions to any business issue. It is important to be flexible and to find a solution that the client can buy-in to”

Relationships

✦ The group we studied constantly referred to the importance of their relationships and described how they invested heavily in building strength, depth and trust in their relations with others. They did not focus on client relationships alone, but recognised the need for equally strong relationships with colleagues across the HR function. What was also striking about these relationships was that they were not always comfortable, but real, honest and often challenging. Time and time again they described having been able to make a difference and get things done as a direct result of the strength of their relationships.

✦ Sample quotes on relationships...

“Build trusting relationships for the purpose of improving the effectiveness of people”

“Listen to the words, tone and emotions”

“Put yourself in the client’s shoes”

“Know the client’s interest, concerns and values”

“Relationships are built over time and multiple transactions”

“I will challenge the client where their actions will damage the business or themselves”

One HR

+ Our HR Business Partners shared a common focus on delivering quality business outcomes. They had fully embraced the change within their function and held themselves accountable for delivering results through others within HR. They took responsibility for influencing the corporate HR agenda to meet the needs of their clients, but also took responsibility for educating their clients about the importance of the corporate HR agenda. They were strong role models for their teams to follow.

A strong track record of delivering the right results for the business was the other factor in earning the respect and trust of the business clients.

+ Sample quotes on One HR...

“Deliver the whole HR function”

“My mindset is I’m accountable but not responsible for the delivery”

“Structure support to free up resource for the strategic agenda”

“HR interventions (and products) must align with business goals and reinforce each other”

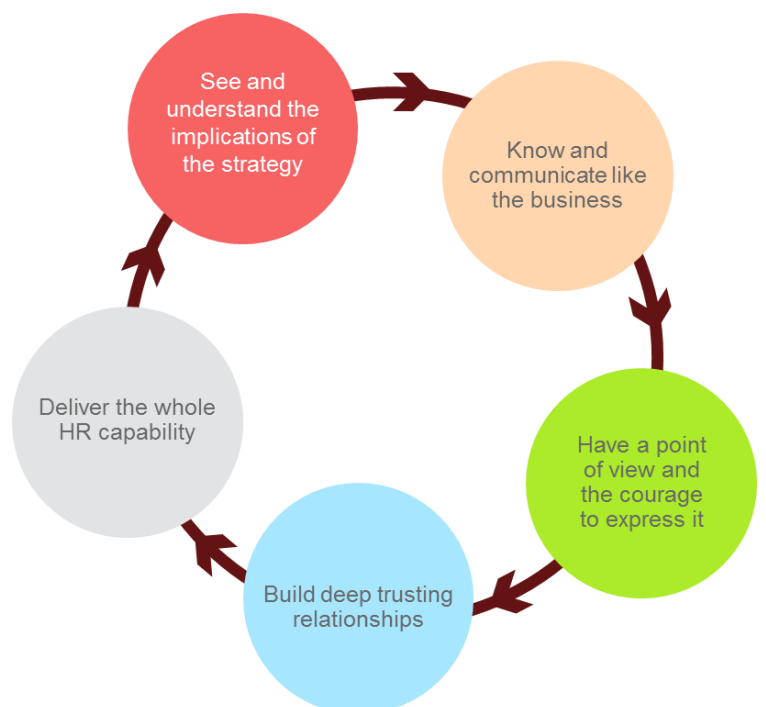
“Set standards and model them”

“There are many solutions to any business issue. It is important to be flexible and to find a solution that the client can buy-in to”

The success profile for HR business partners

A model for success

† A lot of what makes Business Partners successful is how they apply their technical skills in the business. The model below shows the common ways which we have found they do this.



The implications

✦ What is clear from these findings is that it is not enough for an HR Business Partner to have strong HR skills and knowledge. These may be necessary, but they are essentially baseline qualifying criteria.

In selection, for the “difference that makes the difference” companies must look deeper. They must look for those who believe they deserve and can make good use of a seat at the management table, acting with independence and courage. They must look for those who think, act and communicate like business people with real commercial instinct and knowledge. They must look for those who are willing to invest in building strong, equal and challenging relationships with their clients and colleagues. They must look for those who drive for the delivery of meaningful results for the business through harnessing the whole HR Function and can inspire their HR colleagues to join them in that drive.

That can be a tall order and not all high performing HR Business Partners are born. They can be developed, but if they are to be developed successfully, the focus of their development should be on their underlying beliefs; their ways of thinking about and approaching what they do. There may be skills they need, but these alone will not generate exceptional success.

✦ “It is the mindset that makes the difference.”

Further information

✦ The Head Heart + Brain team have deep understanding and experience working with HR Functions to help them make a difference to their business HR. If you'd like to find out more about our development work and HR research get in touch at partners@hhab.co.uk or visit our web site www.headheartbrain.com

The team at Head Heart + Brain work with the rational and cognitive content - the head; with the emotions focusing on how people are successful - the heart and with the brain using the findings from neuroscience to inform their work.