# Overcoming HR Challenges in Higher Education

By Theresa M. Welbourne, Ph.D., University of Michigan

The topic of HR in higher education is something that is of particular interest to me, as my career has spanned both the human resource management profession and the world of higher education. My early career in HR was in private organizations; then I moved on to HR consulting, and after that, I obtained my Ph.D. with a major in human resources, minor in research methods and moved to a full-time academic job (worked at Cornell University, then at the University of Michigan). In my academic roles, I taught Human Resource Management to undergraduates, master's students, Ph.D. students, and executives. And in this academic role, I also worked with the HR departments in our universities.

Here are a few of my observations:

- It's hard to figure out who's "in charge" in a university setting. Sure, there are deans, but these individuals have a very difficult time telling any faculty what to do because faculty don't really report to deans; they write and work for the "field." Not having a real boss makes it difficult to align employees to a strategy, and not being able to do this makes it complicated to deliver a strategic HR function.
- Faculty are difficult to deal with, in part, due to the tenure system, which grants people who accomplish a lot in the first part of their career a job for life. A friend once told me when I was a doctoral student that I was a "mouse in training to be a rat." I also heard that trying to get faculty to do anything is like "herding cats." I wonder why there are so many small animal analogies used when talking about faculty.
- Universities are run by committees of people who really don't want to be involved in committees because this work rarely "counts." That brings up the concept of rewards. Remember, the star players have jobs for life; that makes it really tough to be creative with your rewards programs.
- Students are an odd customer; they "sort of" fall into the HR domain, but then they don't. They walk the halls; their existence creates HR challenges, but they don't really work for anyone at the institution.
- Universities are slow to change; these are institutions with much tradition.

This all adds up to the HR department within a university needing to use persuasion to get things done. But at the same time, the HR department in a university may, by nature of the way the institution works, have one of the lowest power bases of any HR departments in any institution.

With a low power base, how is the HR department in any university supposed to transition from an administrative to a strategic function? How can HR executives in institutions of higher education improve HR practices to gain competitive advantage for their organizations?

## LEARN TO PLAY IN THEIR SANDBOX!

Universities value data, sharing learning from data, and publishing research. These are things that HR executives can learn to do and can excel at, on their own or with the help of faculty at their schools.

## CREATING AN HR DATA AND RESEARCH CULTURE: 10 TIPS

1. Find out who, in your school or university, is doing research on "people management" issues and engage in a relationship with these individuals. You can offer university HR data for research purposes (to help these faculty with their research) in exchange for their helping you solve a pressing problem you are challenged with in your HR department.
2. Know your data. Find out what types of HR data you have access to and know it well. The HRIS systems used in most universities and colleges now have a wealth of data on employees, and you can trend employee data to look at predictions of

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turnover, high performance, and more.

3. Work with the career development offices and understand the type of student data that are available for doing research on HR challenges e.g., recruitment, selection, compensation, etc.

4. Conduct a small study within your institution to get started with your research culture. Compare HR data in departments that are high performers versus lower performers (performance can be measured via success in obtaining grants, turnover, student evaluations, number of publications, etc. Use that data to develop a short white paper that you can then circulate to faculty (or department chairs) in order to start a discussion on academic best HR practices (keep the name of the departments confidential).

5. After you have successfully developed a working relationship with faculty who are researching or teaching HR or people management topics, work with these individuals to do academic research using your HR data. As the project evolves, make sure you are part of the study and that you are there when results are shared. In addition to the academic findings, make sure you are helping translate the research into practices that can help your school excel.

6. Write your own version of the academic paper, changing the focus so that it will be of interest to your colleagues in HR within other universities. Present your version of the paper at a professional HR conference. Start building the knowledge base and prestige of your HR department among your colleagues in "the field" because HR executives too belong to a larger body of professionals who learn from each other.

7. Publish your own papers. There are many outlets for case studies and research on HR topics, including HR in higher education.

8. Find out from faculty what's new in HR from their perspective. Ask what you should be reading in addition to the practitioner outlets. Start learning a bit about the HR research in addition to HR practice. In addition to the *IHRIM.link* and the online *IHRIM Journal*, read *Human Resource Management* (supported by SHRM and the University of Michigan).

9. Conduct additional research of your employees. Consider using survey processes to supplement your archival HR data. Use that data to hold your academic colleagues/managers accountable for the people they manage.

10. Help academics become better people managers. Provide learning opportunities and/or coaching for them. Faculty are often thrown into management positions with little or no training in management (even those who teach management by the way). They need help in the same way that doctors need training in "bedside manner." Being the best athlete does not equal being the best leader.

### IMPROVE HR SKILLS OF ALL MANAGERS

In a study that I did two years ago with colleges and university HR leaders, I researched various aspects of HR confidence. One question focused on degree of confidence in academic leaders' effectiveness as HR leaders or people managers. The average response from 192 people was 2.93 (1 to 5 scale); a total of 36 percent said they were confident (rated 4 or 5 on a 1 to 5 scale where 1 is not at all confident and 5 is very confident). This is a low number, and it presents a great challenge for HR executives.

Institutions of higher education can benefit as much as any other organization by superior HR practices because people are critical to the success of any college or university. If HR can improve the people management practices of the leaders who are running universities, they will ultimately improve the education every student receives, and this will have impact far and beyond their own institution. The responsibility of HR departments in higher education is profound, and the challenge is significant. The key to success is to entice leaders in their organizations to want to improve, and one way to do this is to work the way they work. In other words, as I said, "play in their sandbox."

Use data to provide convincing arguments that improving their HR skills and the environment for HR in general will have benefits for all. Academics value data, and if HR can learn to use data well, the prestige of the department and their ability to persuade and be strategic will improve significantly.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Theresa M. Welbourne, Ph.D., is the founder, president and CEO of eePulse, Inc., adjunct professor of executive education at the University of Michigan Business School, and editor-in-chief for *Human Resource Management Journal.* Her organization delivers Web-based leadership tools and research for continuous improvement and change management and, in collaboration with the Michigan Business School and the Center for Effective Organizations at USC, has introduced the Learning Leaders Forum, whose members work to improve the HR function and their organizations. For examples of research studies done with HR departments in universities or for more information on building a data and research culture in your school, you can contact Dr. Welbourne directly at twelbour@umich.edu.

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