
Preface

*Make things as
simple as possible
– but not simpler.*
Albert Einstein

Writing a book about strategic human resource development (SHRD) can raise suspicions. The authors are soon suspected of writing under an obviously false label. Are we not contravening the trade descriptions act? Is *strategic* not merely a new dress for an old maid: professional, needs-oriented HR development? Or even worse – is SHRD not a mere artefact – an artificial phenomenon – that has no place in real life? Are not most companies already conducting modern, that is, strategic HR development? Is the term *strategic human resource development* another empty phrase? Why do we need this book?

As one of my own clients said with his inimitable style: “At our company, HR development follows the *Caribbean Holiday* principle. ‘What do we want?’ Not, ‘what do we need?’ Cocktails, not table water”. What does the HR director of a major financial services company mean with his drastic description? He means to express his dissatisfaction with the status quo. SHRD has happily resigned to being determined rather by personal preferences of specialists than by needs of the business. That impression might be going too far in many cases, but it is an impressive sign that something needs to be done nonetheless.

Many international companies approach SHRD in a way that is not conducive to progress. Hardly a day goes by without some press release or official company statement underlining the great importance of HR development. At the same time, HR developers are under constant pressure to justify their very existence. Painful questions are being asked: What good does HR development do? How can we measure it? Have we spent our money wisely? Why does it cost so much for every single employee? Do we really need our own trainers? Or: Why do our competitors invest 30 % less than we do?

This is where this book comes in. It was written as a plea for a new way of looking at HR development. The key is to consistently align HR development with the business strategy. In short: truly strategic HR development. This requires a consistent and sustainable alignment of all HR development tools and activities with the strategy of the organisation. Specifically, HR development should be

managed in close conceptual and chronological proximity to the development of the corporate strategy itself. HR development should see itself as a (business) partner of its neighbouring units, whom it should support with its unique expert knowledge in the pursuit of its own strategic objectives. This new approach turns HR development from a mere source of costs into a fully accepted business unit with its own set of services, which makes a visible contribution to the success of the business.

Admittedly, this is not a new claim. But still, sustainable strategic awareness remains a rare beast in the hard reality of the workplace – be it due to a lack of resources or expertise or because of a sheer lack of determination. The end result is that companies lose the opportunities well-executed strategic HR development can offer. An op-ed in an American publication describes the situation in harsh terms: “After close to 20 years of hopeful rhetoric about becoming ‘strategic partners’ with a ‘seat at the table’ where the business decisions that matter are made, most human-resources professionals aren’t nearly there. They have no seat, and the table is locked inside a conference room to which they have no key” (Hammonds, 2005, *Why we hate HR. FastCompany*, 97). This is exaggerated on purpose, but it shows us the dilemma at the heart of HR in strong contrast. Everybody is talking about strategic partnerships, but few people are actually forming them. What does that mean for HR developers at German businesses? SHRD needs to break free from the old stereotype of the *office educationalist*, who only cares about soft issues. Rather, it needs to become a (co-)entrepreneur. That requires a change in mindsets, competences, and underlying structures. This book is meant as a practical manual for how to support and speed up that process.

Since its first publication in early 2008, the German version of this book has seen a number of reprints and has consistently defended its place in the bestseller lists. This great demand is a point of pride for the authors, the publisher, and myself, as the editor. The success has encouraged us to publish an English-language version of our work – in a slightly revised form – for our international readers. The demand also shows that our book fills an old lacuna in what is already a substantial body of literature on HR development. It is the answer for people who want a clearly structured and practice-oriented, but never simplistic, introduction to strategic HR development in for-profit and non-profit organisations.

The German-language editions of this book have been met with great interest among readers and were received favourably by reviewers. It makes me particularly proud that the book’s audience includes so many practitioners, academics, and students. The echo from my colleagues at other consultancy firms has shown that the concepts introduced here have already been used effectively in their client projects. The eight-stage concept has proven an effective tool for reducing the complexity of what is often a rather tough nut to crack.

Finishing this book was only possible with the aid and support of many friends and colleagues. First of all, I thank our authors, who have been highly committed throughout the process, willing to revisit their work and delivered their chapters right on time. I am also grateful for the cooperation and support of our partners at Springer, above all Martina Bihn and Ruth Milewski. Maria Wirt has managed and overseen the entire publication process with her unique and unrivalled precision.

I owe particular thanks to three people for their inspiration and the many ideas they contributed: Dave Ulrich, Rüdiger Kabst, and Klaus Döring.

One note about the following chapters: some minor redundancies and repetitions in the arguments were left on purpose, since each chapter represents a complete argument in itself. All chapters in this book have been chosen carefully to match the general argument. Introductory chapters and a good number of illustrations have been included to structure the book and guide the reader. Every author has his or her own characteristic style, which was deliberately not revised or streamlined to preserve his or her unique identity. Solely for reasons of legibility, the texts usually use the masculine form alone, even though we are naturally speaking about men and women in the book. I hope it will be an instructive and informative read. May it do its part to finally secure the place of HR development in business. It is a place that I sincerely believe it deserves. I am always interested in hearing your comments and ideas; you can find my contact details in the authors' list.

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