

Thought leaders predict what's in store for HR

The world of work is changing at a rapid pace, but speakers at this year's conference were divided about how the HR function is changing along with it. How will HR jobs look in five, 10 or 15 years' time?

The answer is that 80 per cent of the role "will no longer exist", Lisbeth Claus, associate dean and professor of global HR at Willamette University in the US, prophesied to delegates. She said that HR had undergone such a massive transformation since 1975, when she first began tracking the profession, from in-house, transactional services to outsourced shared services that the functional elements were no longer even taught at Willamette.

She said HR now needed to focus on being more strategic and acquiring global competencies.

"Domestic HR is now global, and global HR is now domestic," she said.

Claus also urged HR to make the most of new technology and brand positioning to reach younger and future generations.

But according to Peter Reilly, director of HR research and consultancy at the Institute for Employment Studies, traditional HR departments are still typical. Outlining his latest research for the CIPD – The Changing HR Function: Transforming HR? – he said that only 4 per cent of employers had outsourced their entire shared services operation. And, while 80 per cent of firms had HR business partners, many of them were engaged in routine operational work, far removed from the strategic role suggested by the title.

Angela O'Connor, chief people officer at the National Policing Improvement Agency, told delegates that the next generation of transformational HR professionals would need to "exhibit heretical behaviour" and discard many of the old HR procedures. She said, for example, that performance management should be used to bring about change, rather than just be something that happened periodically at appraisals.

For John Boudreau, professor and research director at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business, the future of HR lies in identifying pivotal areas to the organisation where changing the talent will improve business effectiveness. Drawing on the evolution of more "mature" professions, such as finance and marketing, he said the future of HR "is very bright", but urged delegates

to use the war for talent to help leaders outside of the function to make successful strategic decisions.

“In the future, together, HR and leaders will make world-class decisions about the talent that matters most,” he said.

In a seminar, a panel of recruitment experts urged HR professionals of the future to demonstrate a broad business understanding, alongside their sound knowledge of HR. Samantha Allen, managing director of Boyden Global Executive Search, said that at the moment “you can’t see the real commercial contribution HR candidates have made to the business they have worked in”. Mike Haffenden, search consultant at Strategic Dimensions, went as far as to say that HR people are currently “jargon rich and knowledge light”.

The panellists agreed that demonstrating a thorough knowledge of the business and sector people are working in, as well as building a sound reputation, would be important when securing HR jobs in the future.

HR’s fortunes could also be bound up in the general workplace trends identified by futurologist Anne Lise Kjaer. She predicted that employees of the future would be increasingly looking for personal fulfilment and ethical values. She spoke of the emergence of “empowerment companies that embrace ethical, empathic and inspiring branding and mission statements”.

She also predicted a worldwide trend away from mass labour movement and towards homeworking as technologies advance. “Why move country if you can do the same job from your home country?” she asked.

Kjaer urged HR to take “a body and soul approach” to open the door to new workplace trends, “combined with a lot of common sense”.

I The Changing HR Function: Transforming HR? by Peter Reilly is available from www.cipd.co.uk/researchreports

What is the future of HR? Email your letters to letters@peoplemanagement.co.uk

“Leadership is not a Popularity contest. It’s very important to engage with people, but at the end of the day you have to make the call”

Allan Leighton, chairman of Royal Mail Group

“If senior executives behave in a dysfunctional way, it is the responsibility of the hr

function to get them to change their dysfunctional behaviour”

Lynda Gratton, professor of management practice at London Business School

“more people trusted kit-kat than trusted tony blair”

Glyn House, operations director, Wagamama, on employer branding

“We don't offer homeworking or performance related pay, but cream cakes really do work”

Rachel Dobson, partner and head of HR at Manchester law firm Pannone

“Stories tell us the long-term direction of ourselves and our organisation. They tell us who the winners and losers will be”

Kevin Money, chartered psychologist and director of the school of reputation and relationships at Henley Management College

“Using change as an excuse for low engagement is not acceptable. During difficult times you should work harder to help people through”

Martyn Phillips, HR director at B&Q

“HR has a critical role in driving innovation. Nobody else cares as deeply about these management principles”

Julian Birkinshaw, professor of strategic and international management at London Business School

“It is not difficult to bring [diverse] groups in – what is difficult is keeping them”

Larissa Harrison, HR director for change at PepsiCo UK and Ireland