



Business-Oriented Human Capital Management – Quo Vadis?

An Essay on the Importance and Required Transformation of the HR Function

By Dr. Ursula Fellberg, Management and Owner of Bärenzeit

1. Introduction

For years now, we have been talking, writing, and exchanging stories about whether or not the perception, value, and effectiveness of the HR function within companies is changing and/or gaining in importance. Fancy sounding new terminology such as Human Resource Management (HRM), Process-Oriented HRM, and Human Capital Management (HCM) has surfaced with a special “business-oriented” focus. However, the facts are missing! Barack Obama’s recurrent themes of “Yes, We Can” and “Change” are also relevant to the HR function. As the latest surveys confirm, and particularly as everyday life shows us, we are still a long way from perceiving HR to be strategically important to the enterprise. HR is not considered to be aligned with the business objectives. It is not considered to bring value to employees or other dedicated professionals in the organization. It is not considered to be effective and optimized from a business (i.e., financial) perspective. There are many reasons why HR is in this situation, and they vary from organization to organization.

In this article, I discuss specific aspects of the HR function and formulate suggestions for a critical call-to-action for HR, including the needed support from IT. My goal, in these times of economic crisis, is to describe the importance of HR as a business-oriented function – a function that considers the workforce not just as an expendable resource, but as the “living” capital of the organization. By way of example, this article will provide a perspective on the uniqueness of the public sector. But maybe there is nothing really unique?

Business-oriented HCM – Quo Vadis? [Whither goest thou?]

My answer: Citius, Altius, Fortius. [Swifter, Higher, Stronger]

2. Transformation from Process-oriented HRM to Business-oriented HCM

“The outline often tells us more than a finished piece of art, because it engages us to collaborate.” – Marie Von Ebner-Eschenbach, Austrian author, 1830-1916.

If we look at the many statements on the goals and function of HRM, we can see that over the last 20 years, the words have been modernized, but nothing has really changed in terms of content. Ever shorter cycles of change in the societal and business environment put a growing focus on the personal and professional readiness for change of the workforce. This fact becomes even more apparent in the current economic crisis – as unpleasant as this may be to some.

Leveraging the potential of the workforce and finding appropriate and flexible employees comprises an increasingly important component of your organization’s ability to compete. This is not something new. Indeed, many have said that these are not new themes, but merely the recognition, vision, and goal of HRM as has been advocated for years. But where are we today? Did we do our homework? What does the vision of the HR organization look like? In this article, I will analyze these and other questions, and explore the gaps between the desired and actual role of the HR organization, demonstrating the way from process-oriented HRM to business-oriented HCM.

2.1 Process Orientation

Hypothesis 1: Process optimization is important and goal-oriented, however, it is not enough to increase the value of HR and to make HR a strategic business partner in the leadership team.

Process-oriented Human Resource Management used to be seen as the answer. But what does this really mean? HRM is the continued evolution of HR work with the goal of strengthening success criteria, such as leadership (behavior, culture, values) and flexibility of roles in order to improve organizational dynamics and workforce development (professionally and personally). The organization readily agrees that the HR department has a role to play here and should become an integral part of the organization and a driver and force for change. Thus, HR must become customer-friendly, fast, and efficient. To observe, evaluate, and jump in with a helping hand when needed and to drive change are both the challenge and the vision for HR. But is/was the HR function really capable of accomplishing this?

In recent years some companies have started down the right path: process re-engineering, process redesign, and continual process optimization. But the most

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important aspect, namely to transform the relevant people (both employees and management) and to bring the HR function early and holistically into the development of the company’s business strategy, has often been neglected.¹

Process orientation can only take place when decision-makers at every level are bold enough to articulate a vision and to rally people around it. However a crucial mistake must be avoided: setting expectations too high. The plethora of “nice-sounding” words, used with the introduction of the new process-oriented approach, the “high return on investment,” and the “radical change” promises, often incite fear at an early stage and frustration down the road because the expected “big change” rarely happens.

In addition to setting objectives too high, there is another reason why the transformation of process-oriented HR realignment in large organizations always faces the same problem: employees oftentimes don’t even know what process-oriented work means. Many times the organizational structures are not built to support change, the willingness to change is not there, and people are incapable of “cutting off old ties.”

This is why it makes sense to focus on a few, easily accessible goals. This obviously means that there has to be someone who can identify, define, and implement the goals. And this should not happen for the sole purpose of redesigning processes, rather it needs to be business-oriented.

2.2 Transformation to New Requirements for HR

Hypothesis 2: The HR organization is the driving force in the changing requirements for both employees and management and has to accept this responsibility. Excuses are no longer acceptable.

Newly defined goals and changing scope of work, as well as greater transformation responsibility, require a realignment of the HR function. The first step is to define the requirements for the HR department and HR work. This too should be based on the business strategy and provide for the development of guiding principles for long-term HR service. This requires strategic alignment on the one hand and service orientation on the other. If HR wants to become a driving force, it is crucial to automate and eliminate administrative tasks in order to create free time to focus on strategic tasks.

A rigorous process orientation leads to increased efficiencies and, through continuous improvement in the organization of the work, to decreased costs. With:

- creation of a flatter organization,
- greater transparency of the work processes,
- diminished use of resources,
- decentralization further engaging the leaders of the business units, and
- optimization of the HRIT infrastructure,

there will be free time for strategic work, internal consulting activities, and a strong service-orientation. Ultimately, increased use of HRIT tools will raise both the professionalism and competitiveness of the HR organization.

2.3 Transformation through a Mission Statement ²

Hypothesis 3: It is not enough to talk about the value and the role of the HR organization. Commonly developed, written, consistent, and communicated requirements, content, structure, and value of HR, with rigorous transformation are critical requirements for success.

It is not enough to simply internalize the goals of process-oriented work. They must also be “lived” through specific behaviors. I worked as a manager and a coach on a number of large-scale projects for both large companies and government agencies, and it has always been an advantage to have a commonly developed mission statement in order to ensure buy-in for the realignment from all involved. The HR vision and mission should not only be defined but, most importantly be “lived” – day in and day out.

Once the realignment – including the newly developed mission statement and the integration of this mission statement into the newly defined holistic approach for HR – have been completed and transferred into day-to-day life, this will strengthen not only the HR organization but also contribute positively to the overall business success.

“Every man who knows how to read has it in his power to magnify himself, to multiply the ways in which he exists, to make his life full, significant and interesting.”

– Aldous Huxley, English author, 1894-1963.

2.4 Business-oriented HCM

Hypothesis 4: The HR organization should no longer limit itself only to an administrative role, rather it must transform itself into a strategic business partner. Human resources are the company's most important capital, which represents a dynamic asset for a company.

Thinking differently and readiness for change are vital for business-oriented HCM. Early on, it was recognized that business that requires two fundamental elements: capital, in terms of property, production equipment, money; and, the so important (human) capital – the employees. Humans are the ones who make the difference in the future success or failure of a company. This is true for management as well as for those working in development, production, and services. In short, it is in every activity of the organization. Furthermore, the importance of the human capital will continue to increase as companies move away from being pure production-oriented systems to becoming learning organizations.

The HR organization must participate as an equal partner within the executive leadership team and contribute proactively to adding and creating value for the organization. The success of the company largely depends on the qualifications, the motivation and willingness to perform, and the actual observed performance, as well as the (measurable) contribution to the competitiveness of the company. The challenge for the executive leadership team is in developing hands-on and easy-to-implement tools to measure “human capital”³ in order to align HR work with the company's overall strategy.

If this goal is reached and if an open and trusting relationship is established, then we have the right to talk about business-oriented HCM. Using the different roles as an example, I will analyze this readiness for change and demonstrate whether or not the path to process-oriented HRM has been walked or not, and whether there is any chance to move toward business-oriented HCM.

3. The Role of HRM/HCM in Business

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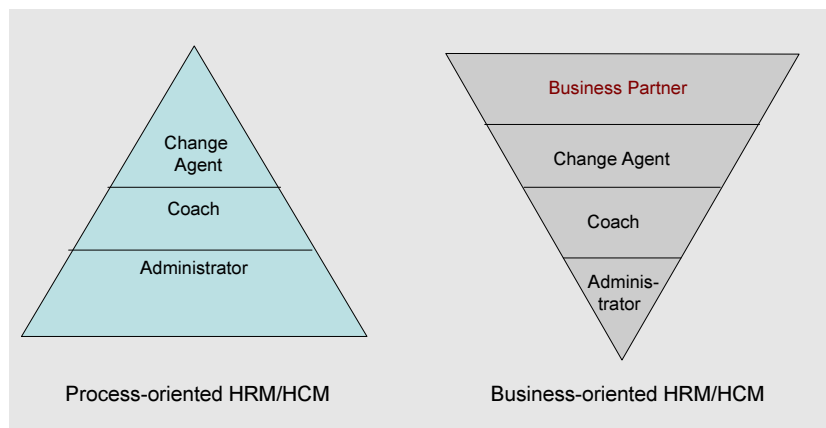


Figure 1. The Roles of HRM/HCM in Business.

3.1 Roles in the HR Organization

Hypothesis 5: HR professionals must be involved early by the executive leadership team, be in continual communication, and be an accepted partner. In order to get there, competencies, readiness for change and business knowledge have to be increased (and in some cases may be even created), role definition has to be agreed upon, and all these elements actively and rigorously followed.

Figure 1 shows two models for HRM/HCM in a company: process-oriented HRM/HCM and business-oriented HRM/HCM. Surveys have shown that a clear majority of respondents view HR as primarily in the role of **administrator** (responsible for content and process execution, such as time management, payroll, etc.). The role of the **Change Agent** (driving change) and **Business Partners** (strategic integration and support of executive leadership) are (unfortunately) not

“Those who act when others talk have an advantage in life”

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considered achieved. What’s even worse is that the crucial role of the **Coach** (care and support of employees, informs, communicates, “helps”) is not viewed as satisfactory. What’s really worrisome is that expert know-how of the HR role is not defined. Thus, we were on the right path to optimize processes and to efficiently leverage the administration. But which processes are involved?

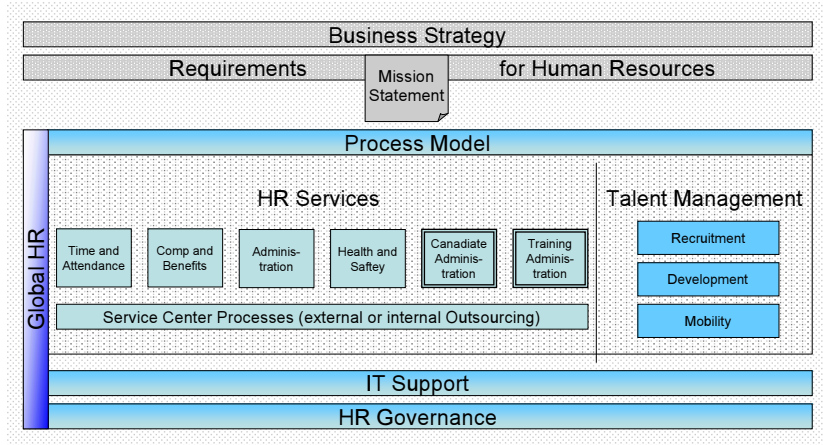


Figure 2. HR Process Model.

The process model depicted in Figure 2 is relevant for both process-oriented HRM and business-oriented HCM, since both are based on optimized HR processes. The greatest competency and the highest degree of professionalism in HR are considered to be payroll and HR administrative work. Obviously, accurate and timely processing of payroll is important; however, my experience has shown, that this easily provides excuses to push aside, or at best give low priority to, critical Talent Management processes (e.g., recruitment, development, workforce planning, HR support).

Is it then still surprising that the role of business partner has been (and still is) neglected? Developing employees into professionals and even into business leaders will not happen, if the only focus is on optimizing administrative processes. In the best case, cost reduction can be achieved – which is certainly something! But the really important activities to recognize, optimize, and most of all discuss with employees are development, wellness, work-life balance, and development of mature employees. This cannot be said enough! It is always astonishing to see how many great tools and rules are available to HR but few are aware of them and hardly anyone uses them.

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In recent times, an increasing number of administrative HR related tasks are being outsourced (either internal outsourcing when the outsourcing/restructuring is within the company or external outsourcing when the work is given to a third-party provider outside of the company). Let’s consider the role of these so-called **service centers**: the “internal” clients of the HR department are on one hand the leadership team and middle managers and on the other hand the employees. A rigorous focus on the needs and requirements of these “internal” clients, the assurance of a high level of quality, the efficiency of individual services, and the guarantee of value-added service delivery make the HR department into a client-oriented, internal service provider – and thereby into a real Service Center with high added-value.

We regularly see that HR is accessible and responsive and is generally perceived as solution-oriented by its clients. However, if client-orientation means focused alignment of HR activities on the needs and requirements of the “internal” client, we have to admit that HR still has a long way to go.

It should be easy to do: what should be done together should be agreed upon together and established as basic requirements. Internal and external performance comparisons should be carried out in order to determine which functions can be outsourced, which core activities should remain in the company, and to

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whom certain tasks can be assigned. So in this area, again, there is an emphasis on administration, but does HR really know its “internal” clients and their needs? Is this due to the perception of their role or are the right skills and competencies missing?

Unfortunately, we have to admit that it is nice to be perceived as “amiable,” “willing to help,” “friendly” or other likeable attributes; important aspects such as “business-oriented,” “solution-oriented,” “innovative” or even “strategic” are missing. Isn’t this an opportunity for HR? If we hire other employees who possess these missing attributes will we increase the value of HR?

Unfortunately it is not that easy, independent of whether the right people even exist. Certainly this is also dependent on the specific conditions within the company. We also have to ask ourselves if HR is at all capable of making strategic staffing decisions. Does the leadership team on one side and the middle management on the other side enable the HR organization to communicate with the employee, as well as to support him as a coach or to initiate and contribute to change – positive or negative – as a change agent?

3.2 Roles of the Executive Leadership Team

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It is time to take a closer look at the role of the executive leadership team, as well as of middle management. Not all companies have an HR person at the C-level (board or leadership team) who is ultimately responsible for all HR activities. When they do, it is often the “Labor Director” (*Arbeitsdirektor*, who is legally required to sit on the board). It is rarely the case that HR leaders are an integral part of the management circle and so can provide timely and strategic input. Oftentimes HR is not included in discussions with unions and even the announcement of HR re-structuring and scope is too rarely part of its responsibility. It was and still is requested that HR not only be included in the execution, but really at the planning stage of corporate strategies. Why is this not or too rarely done?

Let’s remind ourselves of the definition and acceptance of the HR role, and then we will be able to surmise some of the reasons. The perception is that administrative tasks require different qualities and skills than the role of a coach, and here we see the deficiency. HR’s distance from the executive leadership team results in a lack of the board identifying the need to early involve HR in the decision-making process. But more importantly, I see HR’s lack of knowledge regarding the business, the market, the clients (and here I mean both external and internal equally) as an obstacle.

It is crucial for HR at the leadership level to closely monitor external and internal developments, trends and dynamics (sometimes outplacement may play the most important role, other times it may be recruitment of high-potentials, or short-time employment during an economic crisis). It is activities such as change management, talent management, personal and organizational development, or leadership competency development that make a qualitative difference and add value for the business. But in this area the image and the integration of HR are way behind. Lack of qualifications of the business partners is the cause of execution problems for one out of every five companies: analytical and conceptual skills are not sufficient, social competencies are missing in large part, which leads to acceptance problems at the highest levels.

Only qualified, motivated, client-focused, and business-oriented people in the HR function will ensure business success over the long run. I suggest the following steps to continue down the path of making HR professionals more qualified, integrating them in the business and helping them live a business-oriented HCM:

- qualifying HR professionals as one of the top priorities (competency development with a business focus),
- diversifying teams with people from different age groups in order to combine different performance, competencies and experience profiles,
- enhancing the image and social competencies of HR professionals in terms of, for instance, frequency of contacts and greater acceptance with clients (leadership and employees) and greater influence at the management level,
- collaborating and agreeing on clearly defined roles and tasks for strategic HR work, so as to meet everyone’s expectations, as well as efficient and a mean-

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- ingful personal management,
- increasing the commitment to company performance, for instance with specific compensation packages (such as granting stock for achieving goals), and
- implementing an honest acceptance management and a holistic transformation process for all involved, and all of this quickly. It is nearly high noon and the economic times are ticking away fast.

4. Leadership as a Prerequisite or a Consequence of HR Effectiveness?

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Hypothesis 6: To achieve business-oriented HCM, the leaders must go through a change process. This must happen quickly and in a sustained and consistent way. We must ensure that they proactively execute their role and demonstrate the culture and values in an observant fashion.

Is it really necessary to have a special section on the most self-evident thing in the world? In my view, the substantial difference between process-oriented HRM and business-oriented HCM lies in the role of the business partner. Only with leadership at every level (corporate, management, departmental, and team) is it possible for roles to be understood and accepted by everyone involved.

Leaders who recognize, realize and execute the responsibility incumbent to their role have to accept that the quality of their human resource leadership depends on how their personality not only brings employee satisfaction but also overall success to the business. As if that were so easy. The most straight-forward elements of the company’s leadership, culture and values are too rarely, if at all, lived and exemplified. Fewer and fewer employees spend their career working for a single company; still, loyalty, sense of duty, hard work and discipline should play an important role in workers’ professional lives. However, on top of these self-evident values, another set of values has come to the forefront and a balance needs to be found: flexible work hours and location, fun and fulfilling professional activities, and intercultural exchange of experiences. These are all themes for which leaders must find a compromise between the company’s interests and the personal desires and needs of employees. In this respect, talks should prevail over exchange of e-mails, and early integration in the Coach and Change Agent role can only be an advantage here.

The dilemma is that many companies today lack true leadership. All too often, companies undergo numerous and continual restructurings and reorganizations, and the need and understanding is not communicated (or hardly available). This leads to a lack of orientation for the employees’ day-to-day work. When the leaders don’t know “where they are headed,” how can they lead their teams and be role models? Development of leaders and managers has been a top priority for HR for years, but how seriously is this important activity really taken? Leadership takes on a special role in relationship to HR: one dimension relates to the leaders’ knowledge (“MitWisser”) of the overall business strategy as developed by the executive team; the second dimension relates to the leaders’ thinking (“Mit-Denker”) through understanding and execution of change; the third relates to the leaders’ capability to understand the employees’ needs (“MitFühler”); and, finally to the work the leaders must accomplish themselves (“MitArbeiter”).

It would be beyond the scope of this article to discuss the different types of leadership and personnel development programs. In all cases, I recommend a holistic, competency-based approach to personnel development that equally incorporates professional competency, personal competency, methodology competency, and most of all, social competency. What makes the difference is that the business partner of the leadership team takes on a consultative role and is in the position as Coach to leverage the HR activities from the service center, as well as from the talent management function. This means that the HR Business Partner must possess comprehensive knowledge of the responsibilities of the leadership team. Only a close working relationship with mutual understanding – in other words a classical client relationship just like we take for granted in business – can lead to optimal results.

**“Even a heavy door
needs only a small key.”**

– Charles Dickens, British author, 1812-1870.

5. HR in Public Government Agencies with regard to Globalization, Demographic Change and Process Optimization.

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Hypothesis 7: e-Government, proximity to the people, service orientation, and globalization can be more than just modern words, if skills and employee behaviors in Public Service are re-aligned and if the entire HR function is prepared to become process-oriented and work with a new set of conditions.

What has been continually changing in private business will also take place in government agencies. In order to meet the increasing demands of an ever faster changing world and to support ongoing development, government agencies will have to go through fundamental and sustained change to become innovation friendly administrative structures.

The requirement for “learning” in Public Service agencies and lifelong learning for employees is the cornerstone for successful existence in a changing environment. Government agencies are increasingly in competition with private business for the most talented workforce. Public administration must develop and retain competent and committed leaders at all levels. Core competencies in the areas of team leadership, health management, resource management, division leadership, process-oriented work, and change process design are absolutely essential. Modern employee management tools, such as goal setting, performance reviews, personal leadership, and employee discussions, must be comprehensively introduced at all levels and become common practice for leaders. The expectations of citizens and companies in terms of quality and speed of public service have increased. Demographic change will not only influence societal and economic development, but it will also impact the work assignments, structures, and finances of public administration. Most of all, the fast-paced evolution of information technology, combined with the challenging public administration financial situation, make process-oriented reform of the government and administration an absolute necessity.

Important components of this modernization are simplification and automation, including linking processes between agencies, citizens and companies. A process-oriented administration does not consider processes only from a legal requirements perspective, but also from an efficiency and ease-of-use standpoint. A networked administration provides support for organizing decision-making processes and providing support activities with regional independence (e.g., Service Centers, Shared Services). Work evaluation and business process optimization help to focus concentration on core activities and process improvement. The modernization of administration, increased Internet usage and networked systems, as well as new responsibilities require increased flexibility, strong service orientation, and high professional and social competencies from leaders and line workers. In the meantime, standardized cross-divisional activities, for example, can be bundled together and offloaded to centralized service providers. The individual resources that are freed up can, thus, be redirected toward higher priority core business activities.

Furthermore, due to increasing globalization through inclusion in the European community, service delivery guidelines and international requirements focus, workers must communicate in foreign languages (mainly English) and sometimes (at least for some amount of time) work abroad. This applies to all administration levels, whether city, state or federal.

Let us now return to our initial question as to whether Public Service agencies can boast about being ready for process-oriented HRM or even business-oriented HCM? As with private companies, there are varying conditions and levels of development across agencies; still, we must acknowledge that public administration has a definite need to catch up. Granted, some public administration agencies, especially those that are isolated and independent, have invested in process optimization and implemented standard software. In others, however, nothing has been accomplished. e-Government is certainly the right approach, however, we should not forget the workers, as they are the ones who communicate and collaborate electronically with citizens and businesses.

I recommend conducting an honest, but structured, process optimization of HR's tasks, processes, and roles and granting HR a new role that meets the requirements

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– Saint-Augustine, Roman theologian, 354-430.

it faces. Then it may be possible to talk about process- or business-oriented HCM in public administration. Because of federal and divisional structures, I suggest consolidating HR and developing one HR partner. With deep professional expertise and the necessary competencies in HR questions, this person could become the “business partner” for the respective public authorities’ nominated leaders.

7. IT Support: A Means but not the End

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Hypothesis 8: Poor or lack of IT support, particularly in the area of personal software, doesn’t exist anymore. Businesses and public service agencies can find the right product for every requirement and challenge, if the responsible professionals and leaders know what their needs are. Supply and demand can then be brought in line with employee use for workable solutions.

Much has changed since HRM software found its way into HR departments about 30 years ago. With improved, modern technology, high individuality, such as the increasing spread of workflow and self-service functionality, today’s systems can substantially decrease administrative workload. Software is a critical requirement for successful HR. This is the opinion of 98 percent of the business leaders, managers and employees in HR who responded to a survey carried out jointly by *Personal Manager Magazine* and online HRM portal. The typical functional areas for HRM/HCM software include different personal administration processes, beginning with core data entry and administration all the way to digital employee documents, time capture and travel expense reporting. Most companies implement HR software for administrative processes, especially payroll processing. I will point out that, by all means, the goal of IT support should not only be to save money and time. Rather, HR decision-makers must make more time for strategic activities in order to be able to realize their role as a business partner and coach.

A key element in the selection and implementation of HRM/HCM software today is the IT support of HR processes with SAP, or perhaps Oracle/PeopleSoft. The time of large ERP implementations is now in the past. In its place, software solutions for e-business, employee portals, and document management have clearly strengthened their positions. What is being sought today are concrete solutions for specific processes; in this case, companies are purposely choosing niche players. Private industry and public sector alike complain that there is a large variety of HRM/HCM systems vendors for which they lack an overview in terms of functionality, usage, financials, etc. I, myself, within the scope of this article can only talk about the products that I personally know and can evaluate. Strikingly intuitive and straightforward data manipulation without programming skills (Apple-like) are extremely important for managers and others. Flexible ways to extract information with Web-based technologies make a product into a genuine management tool and bring greater acceptance, as well as the willingness to change and (hopefully) the readiness to change within the HR function. The use of workflow with reminders and helpful hints and flexible expandable roles are important requirements – in most organizations and certainly within the public sector – for the much-needed process optimization and HR realignment.

Amongst the numerous, specialized HCM products, one product stands out more than the others: the software, Workday, newly released on the American and part of the European market, fulfills the expectations. Integration with legacy HRM/HCM systems is simple to achieve, and gradual, economic adoption that supports the use of Workday along with integration to other products such as, for instance SAP specifically their industry-specific payroll applications, is possible.

Out of experience, I can only recommend that before picking any system, you should conduct a thorough analysis on exactly what the company really wants, how much HRM/HCM should be implemented or developed, what exactly the budget is, and, last but not least, what is the willingness for change and the readiness amongst employees to experience the introduction of new software or the adoption of standard, “out-of-the-box” software. With the right choice and full usage, technology support offers what is needed for process-oriented HRM/HCM.

Ultimately, the way to a business-oriented HCM is dependent on the defined, accepted, and realized role of the business partners. What is needed here is leadership so that HRM/HCM will have the desired impact – for the benefit of the employees and for the success of the organization, either private or public.

Ultimately, the way to a business-oriented HCM is dependent on the defined, accepted, and realized role of the business partners.

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Endnotes

- 1 Optimierung personalwirtschaftlicher Prozesse: Prof. Wolfgang Jäger; Dr. Ursula Fellberg PERSONAL 2/1999.
- 2 Prozessoptimierung im Personalmanagement: Dr. Ursula Fellberg, Jahrbuch Personalentwicklung und Weiterentwicklung 2000/2001.
- 3 There has a big controversy since 2004 when the expression "human capital" was chosen as the negative buzzword of the year. Many economists have been upset and as was written in a public letter from the Human-Capital-Club that the expression doesn't lead to depreciation of the workforce, rather to appreciation.

Dr. Ursula Christina Fellberg, PhD, studied Business Administration at the Technical University Berlin. She worked as a research assistant for the chair in Statistics at the Technical University Berlin and at Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich. Subsequently, she worked for several years as a researcher at the Ifo Institute for Economic Research. The institute's Business Climate Index was also the theme of her PHD dissertation.

In 1979, Dr. Fellberg made her way into the private business world when she was hired by Siemens AG Munich. She led various departments with company-wide responsibilities in the HR field. From 1997 on she was in charge of the international development of HRM practices within Siemens Business Services in Germany. She advised businesses of all branches on the implementation of best practice solutions and was a management consultant for Siemens Public Sector business. In 2004, she became the leader of Public Sector with Siemens Business Services Germany (now Siemens IT Solutions and Services).

The high degree of acceptance and esteem that partners and clients have for her stems, not only from her technical competence, but also from the fact that she is a real go-getter. Strengthened by a diverse skill set and temperament, she has now started her own company and is actively involved in sharing her HR expertise. Her company, Bärenzeit (www.baerenzeit.com), founded in November 2008, is dedicated to "spreading a bear-ful joy of life, in word, image and action."