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Practising what we

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As the business function responsible for people, HR has championed the benefits of developing talent management programmes within organisations more than any other department. But does this commitment to developing a pool of gifted individuals who can help a company meet its immediate and long-term objectives reach as far as the HR department itself? As you might imagine, the picture is mixed. Anna Marie Detert, senior consultant at HR consultancy Towers Perrin, believes there are extremes at each end of the spectrum. In general, she says, HR departments that are doing talent management well tend to be in organisations where the HR director role is taken seriously. "They are also HR departments where employees understand the business strategy and its drivers," she says. "In these organisations, HR knows exactly what the business wants and what it has to do to develop the right people." On the other hand, HR functions that are struggling with talent management are characterised as having no defined career path for their HR staff and tend to be unclear about how HR fits in with the rest of the business.

In these instances, any talent management that does take place probably happens in isolation. Lack of integration At present, Detert estimates the majority of organisations are still at this latter stage and that currently only around 40% of organisations have seriously integrated HR into their talent management programmes. She believes, however, that this scenario is improving as "HR is regarded as more important and as companies rethink their talent management processes". But in a lot of cases the opposite is true, with HR on the periphery of talent management initiatives as, like other functions such as finance, it is not regarded as central to the business in many organisations. This attitude is particularly prevalent in technical and engineering companies, according to Sue Filmer, a principal adviser on human capital at Mercer Human Resource Consulting. "In these sectors, the onus is on developing technical skillsets. The personal, softer skillsets of HR are regarded as less vital to the business," she says. Sheer size, or lack of it, may also play a role, adds Filmer. Whereas in a medium-sized business there might be thousands of people in core operational roles, the HR departments may be small, with only a handful of staff. It may be that in this scenario, companies decide there is no need to apply talent management to what is seen as a minor function. Limited horizons Since some HR departments are limited in scope, Filmer says HR professionals who are on talent management programmes often find their development takes them into roles across the rest of the business. She says a compensation and benefits specialist, for example, may be moved across different groups of the business or across the globe to get experience in different settings. If a company is moving towards a business partner-type model then they might be developed to be able to offer this kind of service. "Some organisations will also move HR people out of their function and into operational roles in the business, and move operational people into HR," says Filmer. Detert says she has seen a trend towards HR talent being paired up with a business mentor, who can help them grasp the finer details of business dynamics and how to manage large budgets. Those at the heart of their company's talent management programmes insist that if they are to offer HR staff satisfactory development opportunities and grow the skills required by modern businesses, this cannot

happen solely within HR departments, but has to be part of an organisation-wide initiative. This is demonstrated by the types of skills sought, which aren't HR-specific, but tend to be more about the attitude and make-up of individuals. At IT recruitment company Greythorn, global HR director Anna Gibbons says when it comes to identifying talented HR people, the traits she looks for are innovation, creative thinking and ambition. "Identifying HR talent is less about being competent at a process and more about the personality of the individual," she says. At HSBC, head of talent management James Taylor says the HR employees who make it into the bank's talent pool are those who display leadership skills. "They have to be technically proficient in their HR role, but this is only a ticket to the game," he says. "Our talent management programme is looking for leaders who can take the company through major change and drive the business forward." Broad experience And talent managers are increasingly having to deal with the movement of their top HR people - not just around the business, but away from the business, as they move between companies to gain the experience they need. Taylor says this trend is especially prevalent among HR professionals who specialise in one particular area, such as reward or development. If career development options are narrow within their own organisation, they are increasingly looking to broaden their experience by working in a number of different sectors and types of organisations, such as an overseas company, a consultancy or moving between private and public sector organisations. He says today's HR talent management programmes need to factor in those HR professionals who are coming from outside. They need to think about their resourcing model for HR and how many HR people they want to grow within the company by identifying the people who understand its culture and its deeper dynamics. They also need to decide how many they plan to recruit from outside who will bring with them fresh perspectives to take the company forward, he adds. "Companies need to get smarter about saying goodbye," says Taylor. One way of doing this, he suggests, is to create an alumni-type programme similar to that pioneered by business consultancy Deloitte, where the company keeps in touch with its former staff, celebrates their success elsewhere and leaves the door open for them to return. Satisfying ambitions Offering secondments and career breaks for HR professionals eager to taste other businesses and sectors may also be a way of building talent and satisfying personal ambitions. At HR recruitment specialists Courtenay HR, leader Gareth Jones says getting used to employee 'churn' will be an increasing element of HR talent management in the future. "The key to good HR talent management is offering people a good way in and a good way out," he says. Jones stresses that today's talent managers must get switched on to the social networking scene that is now second nature to young HR professionals and tomorrow's talent. This involvement should include monitoring talent at other organisations and creating a dialogue with them, so that they are aware of you as an organisation and will, therefore, be more likely to come to you for their next career move. "Just as companies track their customers, talent managers should be tracking the HR talent in the marketplace," says Jones. HR talent management must be part of a company-wide talent initiative. Don't concentrate on developing technical skills. Look more at the personality and the attitude of the individual. Understand the business strategy and what kind of HR talent is required to take the organisation forward. Consider sending your HR staff to different groups within the organisation as well as different functions across the business. Be prepared to let talent go, as the free-flowing movement of talent between businesses is a reality, and one that will allow you to recruit new talent with fresh ideas. Track talent within the marketplace and network with them so they may consider working for you in future. At HSBC bank, James Taylor, who oversees the talent management programme across the European retail and high street part of the business, says when it comes to identifying HR talent the company is looking for "leaders who can take the company through major change, drive the business forward and develop people plans aligned with the organisation's strategy". The HR element of HSBC's talent management programme started 11 months ago and is part of a company-wide process of identifying talent across the business. Taylor describes the identification process as "robust and multiple". It features 360-degree feedback questionnaires that are assessed by an accredited provider before being put before an in-house talent programme panel. Those that are selected are considered as part of the succession plan for HR and for more complex roles across the business. "They don't have to have to be specialists in a particular area - we are trying to develop a broad understanding of HR and how it supports the business," says Taylor. "If they have the qualities to be in the talent pool we will help them develop expertise in areas such as reward and resourcing if required." How exactly this will be done is now being worked on as part of the company's career advancement framework. "We will ensure that they get business experience and technical knowledge, and that their capabilities are developed in line with our succession and contingency plans," adds Taylor.

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