



Driving Business Imperatives Through
Exponential Business HR-Ten Attributes:
Elevating Business HR to Exponential



The world of work has changed. Some say it has changed forever. The impact of COVID-19, social-justice issues, changing worker expectations and the fast pace of the changing technology landscape has accelerated these changes. We outlined three phases that leaders would navigate in their organizations through these challenging times¹. The first is responding to the current situation and addressing urgent needs. The second phase is recovering, learning from the situation, and emerging stronger and finally thriving, preparing for, and shaping a new normal.

The business is asking HR to lead from the front through these phases. Specifically, business leaders are turning to the HR business partner to help address challenging issues like returning to the workplace, managing vaccine regulations, creating hybrid work teams, building inclusive and equitable teams, cultures, and practices, defining the future of work with humans and machines, elevating the worker experience, and supporting workers' physical and mental and emotion health. That's a lot, yet it's all very much aligned to the long-running focus for HR to drive strategic impact for the business and workforce. Some HR business partners are successfully leading their organizations through these challenges, while others find it challenging to shift from a focus on HR administrative and transaction work.

In this article we are going to discuss what separates HR business partners that are successfully and exponentially impacting their organizations. We will define and outline three things they know, three things they have, and four actions they take that traditional HR business partners do not (see Diagram 1)². We will apply these ten attributes to our present-day work challenges and how these capabilities enable HR business partners to have sustainable performance.

Diagram 1



¹ From Survive to Thrive: The Future of Work in a Post-Pandemic World. Erica Volini, Steve Hatfield, Nicole Scoble-Williams. Retrieved December 2021.

² Unleashing the Value and Impact of HR on the Business. Business HR Academy. HR Professional Academy. Gary Johnsen, 2021.

HR business partners who deliver differentiated performance and impact know and continually grow their knowledge in three categories: 1. HR practices and services 2. Business goals, functions, and processes (work and the business operating model) and 3. The marketplace, customers, and the competition. First and fundamental, they are plugged into the HR profession, staying up to date and knowledgeable of HR leading practices, regulations, and innovations. They are reading, watching, and listening to thought leaders share leading people and HR practices to address the most pressing workforce and workplace challenges. In addition to staying abreast of research, they know their own organization's full suite of HR services, programs, and policies. They have a brand and are looked to as HR experts by their leaders and organizations to guide, support and promote the right HR solutions for leaders, teams, and workers. Most HR business partners possess this first category of knowledge. What begins to separate some HR business partners is knowledge in the second and third categories.

The second category of knowledge is knowledge of business goals, functions and processes which we refer to as the work and the business operating model. HR business partners take time to observe, study and learn about the work. They can answer questions like:

1. What are the business imperatives and key outcomes?
2. How is work done – and done best?
3. What are the jobs?
4. What are the key business processes?
5. What are the capabilities and skills needed to be successful?

The third category of knowledge that clearly differentiates [Exponential HR](#) Business Partners is knowledge of the marketplace, the customers, and competitors. These HR business partners thoroughly understand customer expectations, the value the business provides customers, the organization's differentiated business strategy, the competitive landscape, economic and social dynamics, and labor market trends^{3,4}. This external knowledge propels HR business partners into a role of a valued business leader, who contributes to business strategy, talent insights, and the future of work and business operations.

Shifting from the three things they know, the three things Exponential HR business partners have is a business mindset, consulting agility and data literacy, and relationship savviness. First, they think, speak and work as business leaders. They have made the shift from working in the business to working on the business⁵. They are recognized in the conference room as business leaders vs. HR generalists. When they log on in the morning, they are thinking about how to meet the business and workforce challenges. They are strategizing how to apply their knowledge of leadership, teams, culture, talent, and HR solutions to address and solve the most critical business outcomes. They apply proven consulting skills, design thinking principles and data literacy to identify business challenges, provide data insights, lead initiatives, and develop innovative talent and workforce solutions to solve the challenges. Perhaps most important among all attributes is outstanding relationship management skills. They have as much emotional intelligence as intellectual intelligence⁶. They have a people-oriented approach, they sense others, read the room, adapt their interpersonal styles and are easy to work with. They possess what the transformational leadership calls "partner-up ability"⁷. The ability to partner with all types of stakeholder groups and business leaders to mutually address and solve business outcomes is more important than ever given the non-stop, iterative change that defines business today.

³ Exponential HR: Break Away from Traditional Operating Models to Achieve Work Outcomes, Arthur Mazor, Andrew Hill, Gary Johnsen, and Et al, Deloitte, 2019

⁴ HR Competency Study, 8th Round. Dave Ulrich, Mike Ulrich, Erin Wilson Burns, Patrick Wright, The RBL Group April 2021.

⁵ Unleashing the Value and Impact of HR on the Business. Business HR Academy. HR Professional Academy. Gary Johnsen, 2021.

⁶ The Emotionally Intelligent Leader, Harvard Business Review, Daniel Goldman, 2019.

⁷ The 4R Model of Transformation Leadership. Journal of Business and Leadership, Spring 2010

The three things the HR business partner knows with the three things they have, come together, and fuel the four actions they take on the job to create value for customers, the business, and the workforce.

Action 1: Always-On Sensing

First, the HR business partner has an embedded GPS that continually senses workplace and workforce trends, patterns, and sentiments. This constant flow of information is useful to anticipate workforce needs for better, faster, and more accurate business decisions and provide HR critical data when building and/or modifying HR solutions. This always-on sensing does not replace engagement surveys and pulse checks that organizations might conduct; it supplements that information. The HR business partner listens to conversations and observes behavior standing around the water cooler, having lunch, attending meetings, and working on projects. They sense around four critical areas (see diagram 2)⁸.

1. Direct-Is there clear and understood business plan? Is there a constant channel to interact and obtain customer sentiment? Have ways of working been defined, implemented and people held accountable?
2. Acquire-Is there workforce planning? Are there effective practices around talent acquisition and onboarding? Is there a program to assimilate and engage talent?
3. Align-Are skills and jobs defined? Are the right organization structures in place? Are there performance management and reward programs?
4. Elevate-Is there on-going skills, capability, and career building programs? Is there leadership development and succession programs in place?

Any one of the questions above, if not answered effectively, well and/or misaligned to business strategy may serve as input into organizational health and performance.

Case Study

Sensing with Impact

After some senior level leadership transitions, a HR business partner sensed that there was an unusual amount of chatter and talk of resignations within the office of general counsel and the legal professionals. She proactively gathered more information, talked to her senior leaders, shared her intelligence, and worked with others to put together a leadership toolkit to proactively bend the curve on unwanted turnover. Without this sensing and intervention, turnover was predicted to be in the high teens, and with it, annual turnover was decreased to 9%.

⁸ Unleashing the Value and Impact of HR on the Business. Business HR Academy. HR Professional Academy. Gary Johnsen, 2021.

Diagram 2



Action 2: Coaching the Business

Business HR professionals are coaches to business leaders, guiding business leaders holistically on all things talent, team effectiveness, ways of working, and people management skills⁹. Through information gathered through the [Deloitte HR Professional Academy](#) (an immersive learning experience focused on HR business partner development) and many Business HR client projects, HR business partners most frequently coach business leaders across:

1. Developing a growth mindset
2. Building resilience
3. Creating an inclusive culture
4. Leading change
5. Motivating others
6. Dealing with low performers
7. Infusing agility in talent and teams
8. Addressing DEI issues
9. Helping others grow
10. Leading teams

Case Study

Coaching Business Leaders with Impact

One HR business partner coached a business leader how to lead and champion a digital transformation for her region of retail stores. The HR business partner worked with the leader on change management practices, communications, and stakeholder engagement. This resulted in her region being the second fastest region to adopt and use the digital tools and devices.

⁹ Critical Differentiators of Top HR Business Partners, Kincentric, J. Michael Lane, University of California, San Francisco, retrieved 2021.

Action 3: Elevate Strategic Consulting and Advising Skills

HR business partners address business outcomes with solid strategic consulting and advising skills. Through always-on sensing, they can detect opportunities that can turn into strategic initiatives for the business. They are in partnership with the business and HR leaders to prioritize and select the right strategic initiatives to address. The key differentiated skill here is that the HR business partner can frame the issue as a business problem not a HR problem, which gets the business leader's attention. Instead of defining the problem as a recruiting issue, the Exponential HR business partner can monetize the problem and define it as 25% increase in overtime wages in the last 6 months and/or lost 37% productive revenue because of longer than expected hiring cycles and more turnover than predicted. Once defined as a business problem, another key skill is the HR business partner's ability to form and work with cross-functional teams to validate the business problem, collect, analyze, and use data to demonstrate performance gaps, perform root cause analysis, develop ideas and prototypes to solve the root causes, build and pilot the potential solutions and deploy solutions that make a measurable impact on the business problem.

Action 4: Operate Workforce Programs for Impact

HR business partners are organized, focused on execution, lead teams and facilitate successions that deliver on business goals. They take time to prepare for working sessions, meetings, and programs by drawing out the end-to-end process, leveraging the right team, developing materials, planning agendas, and preparing participants with pre-work and pre-reads. They use agile planning to break work down into sprints with clear deliverables, roles and responsibilities, accountabilities, and sprint reviews. They continually look for ways to improve, conduct retrospective reviews for lessons and insights, and seek advice on how to improve execution. They possess proficiency in the following areas:

1. Keep the business outcome as the focus
2. Figure out the processes necessary to get things done
3. Organize people and activities
4. Track leading indicators that the work is getting done and pivots when needed
5. Create and leads a culture of team accountability
6. Sense and catch potential problems before they get too big
7. Use people strengths to get things done

A lot has changed in the world of work. A lot is continuing to change. The traditional role of the "HR generalist" is no longer sufficient to address these challenges at the true speed of business today. The successful HR business partners of today's – and tomorrow's – organization know about HR, the business, and the market. They think and act as business leaders, partnering with others to address critical business outcomes. Finally, they have a sixth sense for what is going on in the organization, teams, and individuals, enabling them to proactively address business and workforce challenges and build leadership acumen in others. These HR business partner attributes will exponentially impact the business and fuel sustained performance.

Case Study

Consulting with Impact

One HR business partner initiated a project to increase on time departures rate for international flights at one airport. She discovered conflicting management practices and improved collaborative management practices between employees and contract workers. This resulted in a 60% increase for on time departures over a nine-month period.

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