

Going It Solo

New to HR? You're Not Alone!

Congratulations. You have been assigned to one of the most critical functions in your company. You are now responsible for the people-oriented policies and procedures in your organization. In many ways, the future success of your company lies with you.

Your job is anything but simple. At first glance, the magnitude of all your new challenges may seem overwhelming. However, every challenge presents a corresponding opportunity for you to take and maintain a strong leadership position in your company.

You were chosen for this position for a reason. You have demonstrated that you are able to juggle multiple priorities. You have also demonstrated you can be trusted. Your company's management team wanted a Human Resources professional who could serve the needs of employees, management, and shareholders. Since effective management of these three areas is critical to the future success of your company, you are well positioned to become a strong leadership role model if you accept the challenges and pursue the opportunities vigorously.

Your Skill Set

Let's take a look at some of the skills and characteristics that are necessary to successfully fulfill the HR professional's role. By choosing you for this position, your management team has expressed confidence that you possess these skills:

- **Organization.** HR requires an organized and orderly approach. Organized files, good time management, and personal efficiency are essential to the HR function. For example, managers want timely access to accurate personnel files, and they need advice on compensation and workplace features such as flextime.
- **Multitasking.** Solo professionals are likely to be handling an employee's personal issue 1 minute, a benefit claim the next, and a recruiting strategy for a hard-to-fill engineering job the minute after that. Priorities and business needs change fast, and you'll need to change with them.
- **Discretion and ethics.** HR is the conscience of the company, as well as the repository of confidential information. Along with speaking the language and serving the needs of top management, you will monitor management's approach to employees to ensure that proper business ethics are observed. The HR professional must push back whenever it's necessary to keep the whole firm on the straight and narrow. And you will be responsible for handling appropriately—and never divulging to the wrong parties—confidential information about everyone in the organization.
- **A dual focus.** HR professionals need to consider the needs of both employees and management. Employees need to trust HR. They look for confidentiality and expect HR to advocate for their concerns. Yet HR must also advocate for enforcing top management's policies. This can be a difficult balancing act.

- **Fairness.** Successful HR professionals demonstrate fairness and inspire trust. However, fairness doesn't mean that everyone must be treated equally. Rather, it means that communication is clear, that peoples' voices are heard, that laws are followed, and that privacy and respect is maintained.
- **A focus on training and continuous improvement.** HR professionals need to help managers coach and develop their employees. The goal is continued improvement and innovation as well as remediation.
- **A strategic orientation.** Forward-thinking HR professionals take a leadership role and influence the strategic path that management takes. It's part of HR's responsibility to ensure that the organization flourishes and avoids problems.
- **A team orientation.** HR must understand the dynamics of teams and find ways to make them work. That's because most companies today are often organized into teams, rather than into hierarchies headed by supervisors and managers.

Your Roles and Responsibilities

What are the specific roles and responsibilities of the HR professional in a department of one? The answer to that question has changed dramatically in the past few years. In the current climate, businesses have flatter organizations, more diversity, greater numbers of temporary and contract workers, a team-based structure, a better-educated workforce, and a customer-driven service economy. In addition, workers tend to be more mobile and less loyal, with several generations represented in the workplace at once. It is not unusual for a worker to change jobs every 2 years or so.

So, given these factors, the HR function covers a wide variety of responsibilities. There are administrative duties, such as keeping accurate records of what the organization is doing and what its employees are doing. There are training and development activities, such as workshops and the continuing education of workers. There are issues with benefits, such as researching and implementing employee insurance and 401(k)s. And there are legal issues, such as ensuring that the organization is complying with all employment, safety, and health laws.

Essentially, HR management plays a pivotal role in:

- Developing strategies to make sure the organization has the people it needs to meet short- and long-term goals.
- Creating and communicating organizational policies and practices
- Ensuring the organization complies with employment and safety laws
- Keeping thorough records and ensuring confidentiality
- Attracting, retaining, developing, and motivating excellent employees
- Communicating with and training employees and managers
- Developing and implementing a fair and equitable compensation system
- Improving job performance, increasing quality and quantity of work
- Developing and implementing a fair and legal disciplinary system
- Discharging poor performers
- Auditing HR departmental effectiveness
- Contributing to the organization's strategic planning

Your Day-to-Day Mission

As a solo HR practitioner, you can expect to spend about 40 percent of your day handling questions, attending budgeting and strategic planning meetings, and interviewing prospective employees. The rest of your time will most likely be spent on administrative matters such as contacting service providers (payroll, healthcare insurance, bank officers, etc.) and managing paper flow and records.

You will be called on to take the lead when there is a workplace conflict or deal with a difficult or unsympathetic boss or supervisor who is creating headaches for you. You might come into work expecting a calm day and encounter a workplace emergency.

The most difficult feature of the HR professional's job is handling the difficult interpersonal challenges involved in the staffing of a company. Some people call it the "dirty work" of HR—dealing with understaffing, refereeing disputes between mismatched personalities, firing employees, informing employees of small (or nonexistent) bonuses, and reprimanding irresponsible employees.

Performing these tasks can be disheartening for HR managers, who want to support and assist employees rather than discipline them. Many HR managers regret that employees dislike, fear, or avoid them because of this role. It can be a lonely road. "What do you do when your job is to keep in touch with the company's needs, but no one wants to meet with you?" wrote one HR professional.

Remind yourself once again that you are in HR because you are skilled at jumping over hurdles and solving interpersonal problems. Your role isn't to make everyone like you. You won't win all your battles, and there *will* be some people who don't like you, despite your best efforts to be fair and honest.

Your main missions are to gauge and fill the labor needs of your company; help to attract and retain the most qualified employees; fulfill employee financial, benefits-related, and psychological needs; and weather the economy through good management of benefits. That's a fairly comprehensive list of duties. Are you up for the challenge?

You're going to need to straddle the fence between the "soft" and "hard" sides of the business. It's the nature of your job. But if you have to ultimately pick a side, here are the watchwords: *Think and act strategically at all times if you want to be a player!*

Take things one step at a time. Remember that you are not alone in this—even if you are a solo practitioner. This manual will walk you through the basics and refer you to other resources that you can tap into. So take a deep breath and hold on. You are in for an interesting ride!

The Solo Practitioner: How to Get Started

The solo HR practitioner is unique in that he or she is probably charged with the overall HR responsibilities for a firm with between 50 and 150 employees. This means that the HR professional in a smaller firm becomes a jack-of-all-trades. He or she is involved in hiring, resource allocation, compensation, benefits, compliance with laws affecting employees and the workplace, and safety and health issues.

This multiplicity of tasks requires individuals with strong organizational skills who can quickly shift from project to project and topic to topic without becoming overwhelmed.

A good first step for the new solo HR practitioner would be to quickly learn HR jargon and develop a network of people and resources that you can turn to when you have questions or problems. You probably won't have the luxury of any down time, so be prompt and aggressive about gaining needed skills and knowledge.

Access the Resources You Need

Here are some ways to get up to speed and start building your HR resource network:

- **Buy books and subscribe to resources.** The fact that you bought this book demonstrates that you are already on track for your self-education initiative. There are many other excellent books, manuals, newsletters, journals, and electronic resources available to HR professionals. Some offer depth in a particular area such as employee relations or compliance issues. (A listing of available materials can be found in Chapter 5 of this book.) Business & Legal Resources (BLR[®]) offers a wealth of manuals, newsletters, and electronic resources available at the click of your mouse. Go to BLR's website at www.blr.com for more information.
- **Join the local and national chapters of trade associations.** For example, one highly recommended group is the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). It is the world's largest association devoted to human resources management. Representing more than 200,000 individual members, SHRM's mission is both to serve human resources management professionals and to advance the profession. For more information, visit SHRM Online at www.shrm.org.
- **Prepare to obtain HR certification.** A quick online search will point you to numerous resources to learn about certification. Certification can be achieved at many colleges or can even be obtained online. Some programs are better than others, so it would be wise to check with SHRM, WorldatWork, or other professional groups to ascertain that you are getting the best training available.
- **Use the Internet.** If you have a question about the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) or the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)—or virtually any legislation or compliance issue—general information is readily available online. Your initial goal is to become conversant, but as you face new challenges, you can get online any time to tap into information or answer a question that comes up for you. You may also want to sign up for free e-mail newsletters, such as BLR's *HR Daily Advisor*, that are available at such sites as HRDailyAdvisor.blr.com. These will alert you to new developments in the HR field and to important deadlines that you need to observe for filing paperwork, etc.
- **Call colleagues for advice.** Developing a network is probably one of the most worthwhile activities you can pursue during your first days as an HR manager. Don't hesitate to call an HR professional in a company of similar size—even if you don't know the person—for guidance and advice. You'll find that HR professionals are a very friendly, open, and helpful group. Few questions are off-limits. You can also be sure that HR people know how to maintain confidentiality, so you can rest assured that they will honor your privacy just as you will honor theirs. You might also participate in BLR's HR Forum (Community.blr.com) as a way to keep in touch with your colleagues.
- **Visit the libraries of area business schools.** Need some help with team building or leadership? Are you looking to learn business terminology or budgeting so that you can be a strategic member of the management team? You'll find a wealth of material at area community colleges and business schools that you won't find online or in public libraries. You may even be able to arrange an appointment with a professor or graduate student who can advise you on a specific question.

Although you may be the lone HR person at your company, you don't need to go it alone. Advice is just a phone call or mouse click away!