The Obstacles of HR Changing Roles: A Case Study of an Automotive Company in Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estate, Thailand.

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Abstract: *With a highly competitive environment today, HR professionals are expected to transform their role from an administrator to be a business partner. Some study suggested that HR professionals should not apply a traditional practice like in the past since that role has not influenced to modern organizations. Even though HR professionals recognize what a HR strategic role or business partner is, few of them have succeeded in changing their roles. This research study is aimed to describe the obstacles occurred due to changing HR roles from an administration to be a business partner in a selected automotive company which is located in Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estate, Thailand. A qualitative research method has been chosen and employed for this study. Semi-structure interviews were used for data collection from different participants to gain details of information. For data analysis, manual coding including the process of initial coding and categorization was used to interpret the qualitative data. The research finding emerged from 9 participants who are HR professionals in a selected company. The result of the study showed that the obstacles of HR changing role are seven main categories: (1) Current HR roles, (2) Obstacles of change, (3) Factors to increase business partner role, (4) HR management's support, (5) Person who was in charge to the change of the change, (6) Feedback from employees, and (7) Expectation from HR person. The result of this study also mentioned about factors to overcoming those obstacles. Finally, the researcher provided recommendation to both HR practitioners and educators for further studies relevant to HR changing role.*

Keywords: Obstacles, Human Resources Changing Roles, A Selected Automotive Company, Administration Role, Business Partner Role

Introduction:

According to the rapidly changing business environment, companies have been challenged by high competition to perform effectively and efficiently. Consequently, HR professionals need to change their role from an administrator to be a business partner to remain the competitiveness in this global business world (Chiavenato, 2001; Herman &Gioia, 2000; Stuart, 1992; Zwell, 2000). Laabs (2000) discussed that HR professionals are expected to know the business well enough to contribute to the company objectives. They are expected to spend less time in administration or as information keeper and take much time to develop a business partner role. Stuart (1992) mentioned that HR professionals are requested to create a vision of success and implement strategies to achieve that vision also. Human Resources executives are required to be good strategic partners with business management in order to achieve the organization's vision and overall success. Therefore, many organizations expect that HR professionals will be able to develop expertise at all levels of the organization and use HR knowledge and skills for organizational growth and competitive advantage (Tyson, 1999; Swanson & Holton, 2001).

A selected company under this study was strong in their administration roles yet wanted to change to become a business partnership. Thereby, this study was intended to show the obstacles to change HR role from an administration to a business partnership and change an agent in the selected automotive company. The results of this study could be useful for setting the action plan to change the HR role.

Research Questions

1. What are the obstacles of changing HR role from an administrator to be a business partner in the selected automotive company in Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estate?
2. What factors will support the shift of HR professional role?

Literature Review

The literature review discusses: 1) HR background, 2) HR foundation, 3) Theory of change, HR roles, 4) HR competency, and 5) HR transformation

1) HR Background

The HR professionals' roles began to change as the decades went by. In the 1970s, employee concerns were raised by managers; however, they still focus on productivity. HR managers continued researching the wages, welfare, and benefits to make them competitive with the business environment (Crosby, 1996). In the 21st century, the number of requests to HR professionals to be involved and have impact in the bottom line. Currently, HR managers are driven by the bottom line. They pull employees and employers to work together in order to achieve business goals and to compete in the global market (Berea, 1998). In the current business environment, the changes still continue. Not only traditional roles or personnel administration but also HR professions are required to focus on strategic, long-term planning to become business partners and experts in helping organizations to sustain a competitive edge (Zwell, 2000).

2) HR Foundation

Swanson and Holton (2001) claimed that Human Resource Development (HRD) theory is the integration of economic, psychological, and system theories; all components are working together which is based on an ethical frame theory.

For the HR function in a selected company, it also compiled components of HR foundation to create "the HR future vision of success" which mentions on employee morale, employee development, employee relation, cost management, and processes and programs for managing their employees.

3) Theory of Change

Lewin (1951) presented the three-step change model; he suggested that human behavior is as a dynamic balance of forces working in the opposite direction. Behavior changes are facilitated by driving forces since they pushed employees into required directions. On the other hand, restraining forces hinder change because they push employees in the opposite direction. As the statement above, Lewin's three-step model can shift the balance in the planned change direction: 1) Unfreezing, 2) Movement, and 3) Refreezing.

However, Lippitt, Watson, and Westley (1958) presented Lippitt's phases of change theory by extending it. They focused more on thechange agent's role and responsibility, and developed the change theory into seven steps:(1) Diagnosing the problem, (2) Assessing the motivation and capacity for change, (3) Assessing the resources and motivation of the change agent, (4) Choosing progressive change objects, (5) The role of the change agents should be selected and clearly understood by all parties, (6) Maintaining the change, and (7) Gradually terminating from the helping relationship (Lippitt, Watson & Westley, 1958).

4) HR Roles

McLagan&Bedrick (1983) originated the HR wheel to define more clearly the field of HRD (Human Resources Development) activities and HRM (Human Resources Management) activities. The result of this study can identify 9 areas of HR function to explain nature of HR work.

Figure 1: Human Resource Wheel
Source: McLagan and Bedrick (1983, p. 23)

McLagan&Bedrick (1983) explained that there are several activities of HR responsibilities: recruitment planning and staffing, performance management, compensation and benefit planning, relationship development between company and employees and among employees, maintaining relations with the union and labor organizations, developing an individual employee in an organization, and career development for better staffing solutions. The first seven are management oriented and concerned with the primary functions of personnel recruitment and its connected activities and labor relations. The last four functions belong to the development of the employees and the organization.

5) HR Competency

For a selected company, it also sets the core competencies for HR professionals which work in all job families (HR generalist, Compensation and Benefits, and Learning &Organization Development): 1) HR Business Acumen, 2) Change Management, 3) Individual, Team, and Organization Capability, 4) Negotiation and Collaborative Problem Solving, and 5) Project Management.
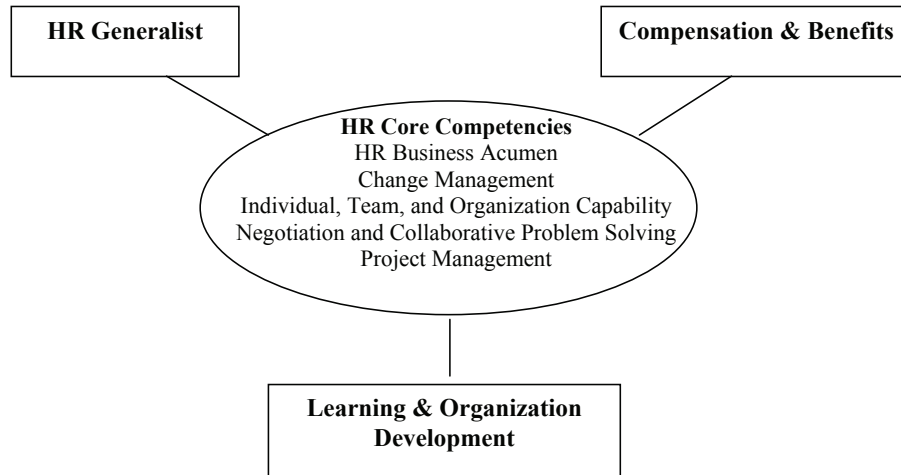
Figure 2: HR Core Competencies of the Selected Company
Source: A Selected Company, 2011

6) HR Transformation

In the past, HR professional had not been viewed as a strong component of HR's transformation; however, Ulrich (1997) encouraged them to become business partners with employees and management to serve the larger needs of the organization (Ulrich, Michael, Lake, 1997).Being a business partner in this context means that HR professionals focus on developing employees and managers to maximize their performance. It entails planning and analyzing present and future directions of the organization by taking a holistic approach, while seeking opportunities for growth and identifying constraints (Treen, 2000).

The statement of HR transformation shows the reason why HR professionals are required to change their role from administration to business partnership. For the selected company, HR professionals are also required to change their role to be a partner with line operations.

Research Method

In this study, the researcher utilized qualitative research methodology to answer the research question. A case study strategy was used to answer the research questions through semi-structure interview with the participants who were working in the selected automotive company. The researcher's intention was to explore and understand the obstacles of HR changing role in the selected company, so the selected group of participants are working in the selected automotive company at the Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estate (ESIE) in the Eastern Region part of Thailand.

From 35 people of HR professionals in a selected company, only Senior Staff and the Leadership level were interviewed because they were prioritized as the first group that was affected by changing roles. Therefore, the total number of participants of this study are nine people. The criteria of participants are: (1) Working in the HR function in a selected company for more than three years and (2) Positioning in senior staff and leadership level.

Nine participants were interviewed using interview guide for semi-structured interview question that were audio recorded for 30-45 minute long for each interview. The interview was conducted in Thai language, and then transcribed and translated into English. The data analysis of this study was done through coding, categorizing, and theming.

During the stage of research; the researcher considered the ethical issues to maintain highly confidential background information of the participants and the site for research. Informed consent form was sent and signed by the participants prior to engage in the research. The participants' names were masked and coded numbers were used.

Data Analysis

There were nine participants who participated in this study and agreed to give detailed information about the obstacles of HR's changing roles from administration to business partner in a selected automotive company. After the data were collected, the manual coding was performed to analyze the data. Then, the translation from Thai into English language was conducted.

There were 532 initial coding found in the data from nine participants. All initials coding were categorized into 33 sub-categories and lastly formed into seven main categories by grouping, merging, and renaming techniques. Followings are the profiles of the nine participants and the results obtained from their interviews.

Table 1 Participants' profiles

Participant	Gender	Age	Education	Service years	Experience in HR/years	Current Position	Function
#P1	F	40	Master in Public Administration	8	8	Assistant Manager	Compensation and Benefits
#P2	M	43	Master in HRM	16	5	Assistance Manager	Education Training and Development
#P3	M	42	Master in Public Administration	15	9	Senior Staff	Employee Service
#P4	M	45	Master in Law	12	12	Manager	Employee Service
#P5	M	41	Master in Business Administration	14	14	Manager	Safety & Security
#P6	M	39	Bachelor in Social Science	12	12	Assistant Manager	Employee Relations function
#P7	F	36	Bachelor in Human Resources Management	14	5	Senior Staff	International Service Assistance
#P8	M	40	Ph.D. in Engineering Management	12	7	Vice President	Quality and Product Development
#P9	M	45	Master in Business Administration	9	9	Vice President	HR Department

Findings and Discussion

Research Question One

"What are the obstacles of changing HR role from an administrator (administrative expert and employee champion) to a business partner (strategic partner and change agent) in the selected automotive company in Eastern Seaboard Industrial Estate?"

In order to answer the research questions, the findings were summarized, and found six main obstacles of HR changing role from administration to business partner as shown below.
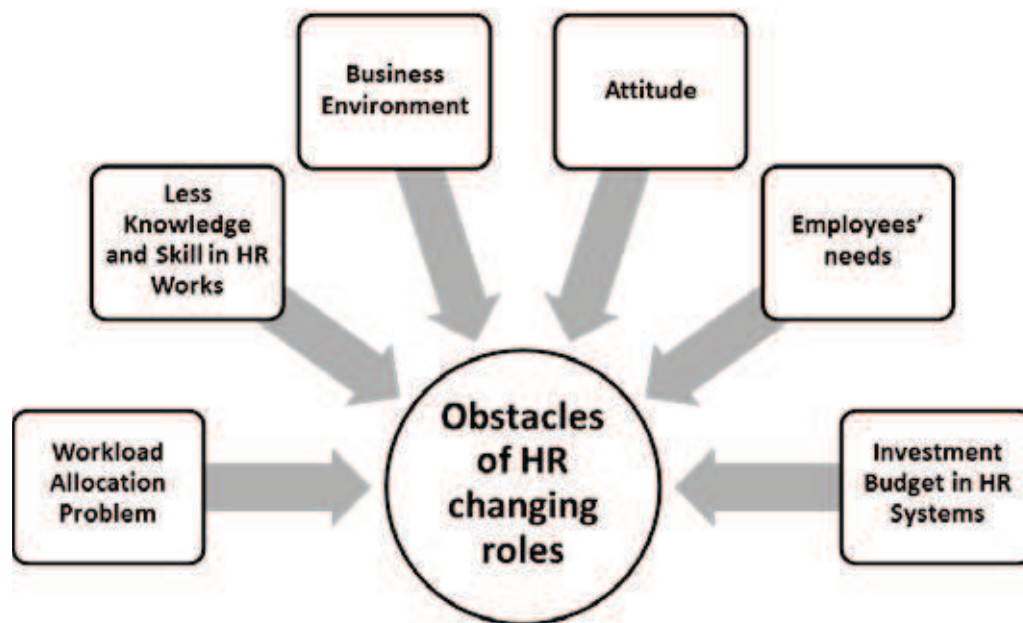

Figure 3: Obstacles of HR changing role in a selected company

The answer to the first research question emerged from the interviews as 6 categories. They are: 1) Workload allocation problem, 2) Less knowledge and skill in HR works,

3) Business Environment, 4) Employees' attitude, 5) Employees' need, and 6) Investment budget in HR system.

1) Workload Allocation

Workload allocation explains the major obstacles of HR's changing role from administration to business partner. The participants mentioned that they had no time to think about strategic development since they used most of their time to deal with routine work. P7 mentioned that *"We spend too much time dealing with employee problems; so, we don't have the time to think about the changing role to a Business Partner."* This finding linked to the statement from Lissak (2009) which found that in most organizations, employees have to walk over to the HR department just to ask a simple question or update some basic information. This is the reason why HR personnel must spend more time on routine work.

The participants also discussed that they had problems with their workload because of manpower limitation; the number of HR personnel and employees has not been balanced. The number of employees has increased from 2,500 to 9,000 people while the number of HR persons is still fixed.

2) Less knowledge and Skill in HR Works

Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson, Sandholtz, and Younger (2008) claimed that competencies of HR professionals are related to their behaviors which result in effective and superior performance. Similar with this study, the participants explained that knowledge and skills influence the change to let them know the direction and objective of HR work. However, many HR personnels in a selected company are junior level and most of them are from the administrative section. P4 pointed out that *"Over half of the HR staff members lack knowledge and skills; it's difficult to change our roles to a Business Partnership."* Sharma (2010) also shared the same opinion that the biggest barrier to HR transformation is the inability of HR to understand business.

3) Business Environment

Participants mentioned that the business environment is another factor of the obstacles. When the company needs to compete with competitors, HR will be powerful of changing management. This finding is similar to the theory of Laab (2000) who shared that in the situation and environment of the 21st century, HR professionals were required to know further about business to align human capital with business needs. Therefore, they were expected to spend less time in personnel administration and much time in business partnership. The changing of HR's role from administrative support to business partner has speeded up in the past few years due to a highly competitive environment both domestically and abroad.

P5 shared, *"We should see the range of company growth; some ranges need a lot of growth, but some ranges need to be stable. This situation reflects the business strategy of changing opportunity."*

4) Employee's Attitude

The participants discussed that each employee has different ideas; people are still the main problem of the change. To reduce unexpected behavior from the change, so, HR and executive management should have clear policies and transfer the information of the change to employees to let them know the direction and advantages of the change. *"People are still the main problem of change; different people carry different attitudes. If we will change, we must explain the reason of change and how the change benefits them,"* said P6. The findings from the participants above are similar to the theory of change of Lewin (1951) who mentioned that to unfreeze the existing situation or status quo is the first step of changing the behavior process. This step is very important for the change since it helps reduce pressure and stress of individual resistance and group conformity. The activities which can facilitate the unfreezing step are motivating the participants to change, and build trust and recognition.

The participants pointed out that those employees will agree and cooperate with the change if it is productive for them and organization. Similar to the statement from Lewin (1951) who claimed that there are some actions which can support the movement step; motivate employees to realize that the status quo is not beneficial to them and let them view the situation in a positive perspective; and, provide needed information to employees and respect their opinions.

5) Employees' Need

Traditional HR functions are staffing, recruiting, compensation, and benefits. The HR professionals' role was slow to change as an organizational transform. However, the roles of HR professionals did not change even though the nature of work continued to change over time; staffing and other administrative work continued to be their major duties (Losey, 1998). Similar with this study, the participants claimed that most employees understand that HR must provide service to them as routine. Those employees expected that every time they come to see HR personnel, they must be available to immediately serve their needs.

The participants shared that when HR launched employee self-service, the employees think that HR was trying to push HR jobs to supervisors or employees. This situation happened because employees did not understand the HR roles. If HR has planned to change its role, the HR should educate employees to understand the new HR role. Fitzgerald (2004) found that to get rid of the idea of personnel administration or paper pusher, HR professionals must continually remind executives and employees about what HR does to change their perceptions.

6) Investment Budget in HR System

Lissak (2009) said that outsourcing of administrative tasks, such as recruitment, payroll and benefit administration to specialized external providers would enable HR to focus on the organization's strategic priorities. In this study, the participants pointed out that budgets are other main factors of the change since they need to develop a new system to improve the work process and reduce some administrative work by outsourcing and investing in Human Resource Information System or HRIS.

Walkinshaw (2010) claimed that budget is not just about money. It is essential to have a robust business case for any transformation, but business leaders should recognize that transforming HR will be more of an investment in building capabilities than a cost management exercise However, the participants mentioned that the company wants to see a return on investment (ROI) which is difficult for HR to show because most of HR's routines are service providing. So, HR must show their performance to management in terms of employee satisfaction to allow them to consider more budget for HR's work. The discussion from the participants aligned with the study from Ulrich (1997) which suggested that the impact of HR practices on business results can and must be measured. HR professionals must learn how to translate their work into financial performance and add value, not reduce costs. HR practices must create value by increasing intellectual capital within the firm.

Research Question Two

"What factors will support the shift of HR professional role?"

Regarding the obstacles of change as above, participants also provided the solution to overcoming those obstacles in various perspectives which are the factors to support the change.
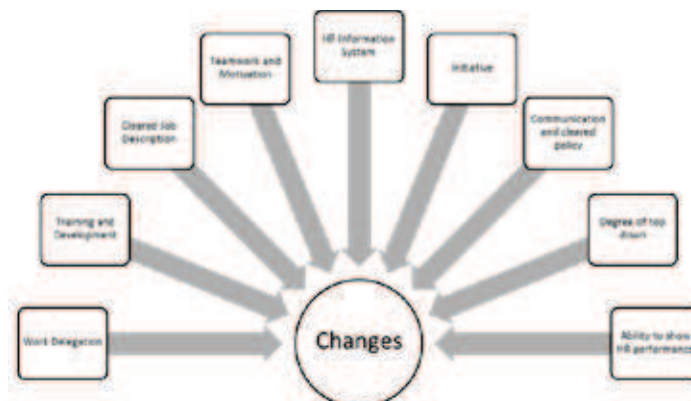

Figure 4: Factors to support the changes

From the research findings, factors to support the change are: 1) Work delegation, 2) Training and Development, 3) Teamwork and Motivation, 4) HR Information System, 5) Initiatively, 6) Communication and clear policies, 7) Degree of top down, and 8) Ability to show HR performance. Each factor will be discussed in the following sections which are based on the research findings and the theoretical frameworks.

1) Work Delegation

The participants agreed that work delegation is a factor to support the change by reducing some routine or administration work of senior employees and let them spend much time on working on strategic planning. P2 also added that *"Delegation is required for HR professionals, especially at the leadership level. I think HR junior staff should be responsible for the administration role; and HR senior staff should work more on business strategy."* P5 concluded that "*Administration roles are still needed, but leadership must select some paperwork for junior staff."*

The participants discussed that to reduce non-value tasks and increase the business partner role, outsourcing and employee self-service system are other ideas for work delegation. The findings from the participants are similar to the survey of Mercer Human Resources Consulting (2006) that the most significant areas of outsourcing in Europe today are pension administration, relocation services, payroll and coaching. In practice, many of these arrangements are co-sourced, a combination of internal and external servicing rather than full outsourcing. In all other activities, respondents report uses more established in-sourced organizational models of HR.

2) Training and Development

The participants strongly agreed that the HR new role is not just an administration job. HR personnel cannot change to business partner if they lack the knowledge and skills in both HR and the company's business. The findings from the participants linked to the statement of Ulrich (1997) who mentioned that HR is not anybody's job; there are new generational roles that they have to perform.

P1 also suggested that if HR personnel know and understand their role, they will be able to set individual objectives which align to business goals. P1 emphasized that "Training and coaching are the tools which I will use to develop my team's capability." P1 shared that HR management should have time to take care of and to coach HR staff closely to improve their working plan. Moreover, line managers should know and understand HR roles through training methods to let them accept the new HR role.

Follis (2001) shared that to change HR's role, increasing awareness among line managers and HR professionals should be considered. HR should provide knowledge in HR management to line managers for better cooperation. The participants shared the same opinion that not only HR personnel, but line managers should know and understand the HR role to walk in the same direction.

3) Teamwork and Motivation

Lippitt, Watson, and Westley (1958) presented the steps of changing human behavior. The third step of the change is to assess the resources and motivation of the change agent. This includes the change agent's commitment to change, power, and stamina." This theory is the same as the findings from the participants who mentioned that teamwork and motivation influence the HR changing roles. When the working team has good teamwork and motivation to work, every task is possible to succeed. Not only role and responsibility of each HR person are important but also all of them should know each other's roles to let them understand the relation and connection about the overall of HR roles. They can create teamwork if they know that they have the same direction of how to work.

P4 also mentioned that *"If we are not one team, we cannot walk in the same direction. All leaders must help together."* P4 explained more that some HR staff do not have the motivation to develop themselves because they do not know thedirection to go and do not have better rewards; this will become the major obstacle of change.

4) HR Information System (HRIS)

The participants claimed that HRIS is the influencing factor to support the change. They shared that the main HR role is to deal with employees' issues and the principle HR work is service providing so that some HR work can be reduced by HRIS, which helps HR personnel to manage their work well.

A participant explained that HR must deal with people issues, which happen every day. The parent company supported the HR workload by providing HRIS; this not only reduces working time but also increases accuracy in HR work. P1 mentioned that *"For me, I have applied many tools to support my work; HRIS is useful to solve HR work processes."* This finding is similar to the statement from Ulrich (1997), Kesler & Law (1997), and Mercer Human Resources Consulting (2006) which claimed that HRIS helps HR personnel to do more tasks with less time. In the past, HR personnel managed a lot of paperwork; however, information system helped HR personnel manage paperwork by online self-service. HRIS also helps improve employee's satisfaction because HR personnel can provide timely and efficient service for them. The participants also shared the same idea that innovation and technology can help us overcome the workload problem which is the main problem of HR work.

P4 explained that *"HR must open their eyes to realize the competitive environment to retain valuable employees; when we have new employees, HR must know how to develop and support them to work effectively. Principles and technology are needed for HR work more than in the past."*

5) Initiative

Initiative and new ideas for improvement from each HR employee are the important factors of change. The participants agreed that they wanted to be HR professionals and must have ideas for improvement and proposals to top management to create a better working environment. This not only creates a better working standard but also lets HR personnel be involved in the change process. P8 explained that *"The Company should not be run by only leadership because the performance will be limited to leadership ability. If an individual who has a different role does the best, the ability of team will be complemented and team synergy will happen."*

This finding linked to Mercer Human Resources Consulting (2006) which showed that initiative can support transformation of HR function. The initiatives include (1) Simplified processes and reduced cost of day-to-day operations, (2) Increased expertise, particularly in the key focal areas of talent, compensation and employee engagement, and (3) Better alignment of business partners' requirements with HR service delivery, focusing on organizational talent and organizational change and development. IPMA-HR (2006) claimed that without initiative for a changing role, HR professionals will continue to spend most of their time to handle non-strategic, transaction-processing works.

6) Communication and Clear Policy

"Communication and Clear Policy" is a major significant factor for HR's changing role. All participants pointed out that communication is the main factor of change which includes communication within the working team and communication within an organization. Participants suggested that not only the management level, but all staff should know the reason and direction of the change. Talking, meeting, and any method of communication are required for the change process. P9 pointed out that *"The change always creates resistance; we must have clear communication in the objective of change. The advantage of change is the ability to serve human needs in terms of discouragement and empowerment."*

7) Degree of Top Down

Degree of top down is the main factor of the change. Participants agreed that any change will succeed if management is involved in the process. A participant suggested that the most effective policies are from the degree of top-down. Therefore, the policy of HR's changing role should come from top management who has the power to cascade the direction of change to let employees be involved in the process. Moreover, top management is the key to create a culture within an organization to maintain the change. The finding from participants linked to the statement from Ulrich (1997) who suggested that transformation would drive a passionate executive team, embraced by all employees in the company.

Direction from the parent company is one degree of top down. Participants pointed out that there are many policies and new systems which are provided by parent companies to help HR personnel to reduce routine work and also solve some problems which may happen because of too complicated working processes. Getting tools and direction from parent companies can improve the working process and let HR personnel in a selected company know how to change themselves to be HR professionals and have a world class standard of work. P2 pointed out that *"We are trying to move to new roles. This task is difficult to handle by individuals; fortunately, the organization has the function which supports the change and develops because top management knows that people issues are important in the workplace.* IPMA-HR (2006) claimed that without management support, HR transformation stands little chance of taking place.

8) Ability to Show HR Performance

Performance is significantly related to the Key Performance Indicator (KPI). The participants pointed out that HR personnel should show their performance to management to let them understand HR's role. HR's performance may convert to ROI (Return on Investment) which impacts to the budget for HR system improvement. This is the same as the statement from Lissak (2009) who explained that performance metrics which measure cost, quality and speed are critical to building a business case and providing the value of HR transformation to skeptical business leaders.

Participants agreed that KPI is the road map to help HR personnel develop their role from a daily routine administrator to be a business partner by setting their working plan to align with business needs. KPI is the tool for performance review which helps HR personnel evaluate themselves. When they know their performance, they will have clarity about their career path which is another motivation of the change role.

From the finding of obstacles to the change and factors to increase the business partner roles, the researcher created a table to show the relationship of both findings. The factors to support the change are related to the obstacle as shown in the table below.

Workload	Knowledge and Skill	Business Environment	Attitude	Employees' need	Budget
• Work delegation • Teamwork & Motivation • HR Information System (HRIS)	• Training and Development • Degree of top down	• Initiative from each HR person • Degree of top down	• Teamwork and motivation • Communication and cleared Policies • Degree of top down • Ability to show HR performance	• Communication and cleared policies • Degree of top down	• Degree of top down • Ability to show HR performance

Figure 5: Factor to support the change which related to the obstacles of change

Implication

Implication for practice 1: The results can be used as a guideline for top management or corporate planning to set the clear direction or policy to change HR role and cascade to all employees to let employees know reasons, benefits, process, and how to support for the change. Communication from top management is very important for any change to reduce conflict and misunderstanding which may occur during the changing process.

Implication for practice 2: Guideline for HR management to identify the set of competencies, job description to HR persons to develop them to be the HR strategic partner.

Implication for practice 3: Guideline for HR persons to develop their knowledge and skill to change from administration to a business partner. The HR persons should educate line managers and let them respond in people issues instead. Then, HR persons will have time to deal with business strategy.

Implication for practice 4: Guideline for line managers to learn more about HR role and responsibility since they should take care of their subordinators while the HR persons will act as an advisor and a business partner.

Recommendation

There are several recommendations for the further studies relevant to HR changing role from Administrative to Business Partner.

Firstly, this study was conducted as a qualitative research which only discovered the obstacles of the HR changing role and factors to support the change. So, the level of how important each obstacle and factor to support the change are not covered in this study. Thus, for further studies, a different direction of replacing the research purpose and methodology based on the presented research findings might discover the new findings in this field.

Secondly, in the current study, the data collected by using document review and interviewing methods. For further study, an observation case study based on the present study findings will be able to examine the obstacles of HR changing role or HR transformation.

Thirdly, the participants are HR persons in a selected company in the current study. A future study is recommended to involve top management, line management, and employees in different areas to decrease the similarities and to establish more particular factors and strategies.

Lastly, the current study focused on a selected automotive company, but for further suggestions, the relevant studies can be conducted in different companies in different location in order to gain a deeper knowledge of HR role in industry and of people who work within the industry.

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