

Human Capital Management in the Wandering Context of Events – Challenges for the Managerial Staff

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Chapter 9

THE IMPORTANCE OF ROLE AND TASKS OF HR BUSINESS PARTNERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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9.1. Introduction

This chapter continues with the thread of the pandemic, which has already been addressed in previous chapters. Therefore, at the beginning it should be emphasized again that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought colossal changes in the way work is organized in companies all around the world. As a result, HR departments were burdened with additional responsibilities in several areas. New procedures for the health and sanitary safety of workers have been implemented, including protective measures, social distancing, and vaccinations. Office work had to be reorganized, taking into account the restrictions implemented by governments.

Moreover, there was a big shift towards remote work, which necessitated organizing ergonomic places to work at home, implementing new communication methods, and providing training for employees – namely all the topics discussed in the previous chapters. Consequently, new models of the so-called hybrid organization have been created to meet the challenges of coordinating employees both in offices and those working online.

In addition, more and more attention was being paid to the physical and psychological well-being of employees and new actions were taken in this area. The form of recruitment and onboarding of employees was changed, transferring many activities to the online sphere. There were changes implemented in development processes: enterprises abandoned traditional courses organized in classrooms but instead took advantage of the benefits of e-learning, as one of the methods mentioned in Chapter 5.

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The changes observable in the roles and responsibilities of HR departments can be attributed also to the positions of HR Business Partners. Hence, **the goal of this chapter** is to juxtapose the meaning of role and tasks of HR Business Partner in companies in two periods of time, i.e. before and during the pandemic. In order to reach this goal the author conducted her own empirical research presented later. The presentation of the research results is preceded by an explanation regarding the adopted theoretical assumptions in the field of the HR Business Partner roles and tasks, and by the description of the empirical research methodics. The research summary and final conclusions make up the last section.

9.2. Theoretical foundations for the HR Business Partner concept

The concept of HR Business Partner (HR BP) in the classic approach was proposed by Ulrich in 1997, who considered a strategic partner, change agent, administrative expert and employee advocate as the main roles of a person representing the HR function in an organization (Ulrich, 1997). In the following years, this concept was refined and expanded by, among others, the addition of a new leadership function (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005). Finally, Ulrich proposed the model with eight different roles (Ulrich, Kryscynski, Ulrich, Brockbank, and Slade, 2015) as shown below:

- a strategic positioner,
- a credible activist,
- a human capital curator,
- an analytic designer and interpreter,
- a culture and change champion,
- a technology and media navigator,
- a total rewards steward,
- a compliance manager,
- a paradox navigator.

Further changes were proposed by Timms, suggesting the need to transform the thinking about the HR BP position towards performing such roles as: relationship builder, trustee, trainer, agent provocateur, and catalyst for innovation (Timms, 2018).

According to Cewińska (2013), HR BP offers support in organizations in three areas: a strategic partner within the framework of internal services (Corporate Center, Self-Service), Shared Service centers, and centers of specialization (Center of Excellence). HR BP knows and understands the business of the company and is a partner for internal clients, becoming a kind of “face of HR for business” and “face of business for HR”, and thus constitutes a bridge between these two areas in organizations (Kawka, 2010). Being a strategic partner, operations manager, emergency advisor and employee mediator as the main task areas of HR

BP, emphasizing that the work of HR BP is heterogeneous and complex, and the package of tasks includes areas from strategic consulting, to solving individual employee problems (Gołembski, 2013). Ultimately, HR BP work includes building and analyzing human potential in an organization, planning long-term employment levels and development paths, and using and sharing available knowledge to ensure best practices in human resources management (Stosik, Głowicki, and Zarecka, 2011).

It follows from the above that the concept of HR BP is still at the stage of shaping and changing, which makes it difficult to agree on the scope of the definition for this concept. Nevertheless, it functions in organizations, although in practice its tasks are understood differently, and depend on the particular company's needs. For instance, research based on job offers published in Poland showed that employers are looking for people with very different competencies for this position. HR BPs are seen as staffing experts or HR managers, and only some of job offers mentioned tasks with reference to strategy (Piwowar-Sulej, 2017). Generally, social and personal competencies play a crucial role in the successful performance of HR BP (Staszkiwicz, 2021).

Many organizations struggle with the effective implementation of HR BP functions, thus they use the oldest simple classic Ulrich model. In order to effectively respond to external challenges and provide added value to investors, they must first consolidate HR BP's position within the company (Chudzińska, 2018). Important factors to consider are: the company's business strategy, organizational culture and the location of HR in the organizational structure, as they have the greatest impact on the shape and role of HR BP in organizations (Kopertyńska and Dernowska, 2021). Furthermore, national culture may have influence on the above-mentioned areas, which was proved in research where differences had been found in the design of the HR BP models between the UK and Germany (Wach, Wehner, and Kabst, 2021).

The impact of the COVID pandemic on HR BP activities is not yet scientifically recognized. A literature review with the use of well-known databases, i.e. ProQuest, Ebsco, JSTOR, Scopus provided minor results. The importance of business partnering is mentioned in research as one of the future HR processes required from contemporary HR managers (Schultz, 2021). The evolution of the role of HR Business Partner was shown in the case study of a clothing company operating in Poland (Rosiński, Pieczka, and Stańczyk, 2021).

The articles in fact concern more broadly the role or tasks of HR departments in response to the challenges created by a turbulent environment. Firstly, it was underlined that HR plays a central role during the pandemic facing challenges such as: balancing multiple stakeholders needs, and tensions between strategic and operational roles (Collings, McMackin, Nyberg, and Wright, 2021). Many authors described the negative impact of COVID-19 on physical and mental well-being

(Davidsen and Petersen, 2021), self-rated health (Tušl, Brauchli, Kerksieck, and Bauer, 2021) and relations at work (Juchnowicz and Kinowska, 2021). Employees were worried about losing their jobs, concerned for their own health and the health of family members, felt difficulties in maintaining work-life balance and had a sense of uncertainty about the future. They also believed that mental health training programs would be able to help them reduce their stress levels and support their sense of well-being (Gigi and Pavithra, 2020). Thus, HR departments were involved in providing support in the work-life balance and well-being.

A lot of attention was also paid to remote work, which at first was enforced during the pandemic and then for some organizations stayed as “the new normal”. In fact, nowadays employers create possibilities of hybrid work which is a combination (in many different forms) of traditional and online work (Yang, Kim, and Hong, 2021). It should be stated that hybrid work has many advantages and disadvantages both for employees and employers (Fan and Moen, 2021). Nevertheless, it is increasingly stated that it will become the most popular model on the job-market (Moglia, Hopkins, and Bardoel, 2021), which results in the necessity to design a hybrid office (Fayard, Weeks, and Khan, 2021).

In conclusion, it can be stated that there is a research gap regarding the tasks, responsibilities and importance of the HR BP position during the COVID-19 pandemic, and probable changes caused by its impact. The results of the research presented in this article contribute to filling the gap.

9.3. The empirical research methodics

The main goal of the empirical research was to determine whether the meaning of role and tasks of HR Business Partner in companies during the pandemic were significantly different from those in the pre-pandemic period.

The research questions were constructed as follows:

- What was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on HR BP’s activities and responsibilities?
- What was the change in priorities on the HR BP position when comparing the period before and during the pandemic?
- What are the main roles of HR BP in the crisis situation caused by COVID-19?

The quantitative study with the use of the author’s questionnaire and CATI interview was carried out in October-November 2020. Nonprobability sampling was used to select the respondents, thus it is not allowed to transfer statistical data to the entire population, but probable trends occurring in a given community may be discussed.

Taking into consideration the fact that Polish small enterprises are still mostly unaware of the proposition value and possible services of HR BP (Matuska and Niedzielski, 2018), hence do not usually have such position in their structures, the research focused on large organizations only. The final research sample included

102 companies operating in Poland, representing 10 different industries; almost one-third of them represented industry (31%), about one tenth sales (12%), and services (10%). All the companies employed 250 or more employees, of which 64% employed up to 500 people.

The CATI interview was conducted with the representative sample groups from the selected organizations who worked as HR department managers (66%), or held positions of HR specialists (34%). Detailed descriptions of the respondents characteristics is presented in Table 9.1.

Table 9.1. Profile of the respondents

Organizations' profile	
Industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – banking – 9% – construction – 5% – energy – 7% – pharmaceuticals and health care – 9% – finance and insurance – 9% – industry – 31% – sales – 12% – services – 10% – high-tech – 1% – transport and logistics – 8%
Employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 250-500 employees – 64% – 501-1000 employees – 32% – 1001-2000 employees – 4%
Representatives' profile	
Position in the structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – director/manager of HR department – 66% – HR specialist – 34%
Experience in a given organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 1-5 years of experience – 28% – 6-10 years of experience – 66% – over 10 years of experience – 6%

Source: own study.

9.4. Empirical research findings

In order to answer the first research question of what was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on HR BP's activities and responsibilities, the respondents were asked about the overall impact of the pandemic on the activities carried out in the HR Business Partner position. For 80% companies, this impact was felt (with 15% selecting "definitely yes" and 66% "rather yes"), while only 5% said they had not felt such impact, and 14% marked the answer "hard to say". The respondents were then asked how the pandemic affected particular HR BP activities. The answers are presented in Table 9.2.

Table 9.2. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the HR BP position (in %)*

Type of impact	Yes, we have felt the impact in this area	No, we have not felt the impact in this area
The scope of HR Business Partner activities has increased	40	60
The scope of responsibilities in this position has increased	63	37
There is a growing understanding of the importance of the existence of the HR BP position	43	57
The scope of HR Business Partner activities has decreased	0	100
Responsibilities have been reduced	0	100

* The respondents could select several answers.

Source: own study.

The results show that the pandemic had the greatest impact on increasing the scope of responsibilities in the position of HR Business Partner. This impact was felt by 63% of the surveyed organizations, while in 40% of the organizations, it was perceived as increasing the scope of HR Business Partner activities. Importantly, due to the emergence of new conditions in the environment, the need to act under the pressure of economic conditions which were deteriorating due to the pandemic, the understanding of the importance of having such a position, has increased in 43% of organizations.

For the second research question, which was to identify the change in priorities on the HR BP position comparing the time before and during the pandemic, the respondents were asked to set priorities to particular processes of HR BP activity in these two periods of time. The pool of processes included:

- supporting the management board,
- building relations with employees,
- implementing changes,
- conducting strategic projects,
- HR analytics.

The results presented in Figure 9.1 show that before the pandemic, building relations with employees was an important area of HR BP activities: 40% respondents indicated it as the first priority and 18% as the second priority. Nevertheless, it should be also mentioned that for 18% it was the last priority. Furthermore, implementing changes seemed to be an important process for organizations as 30% perceived it as the first priority, and 18% as the second one. However, one-third of the respondents considered it as the last priority. HR analytics was seen usually as the second (42%) or third (30%) priority. As far as the support of the Board is considered, it should be emphasized that there is a very diverse approach to this area (almost one-third considered it as the last priority) which seems to be quite different

from what transpires from the literature and the discussed models. The last process – conducting strategic projects – was indicated as the least important activity of HR BP (with 47% as the fourth priority and 24% as the fifth).

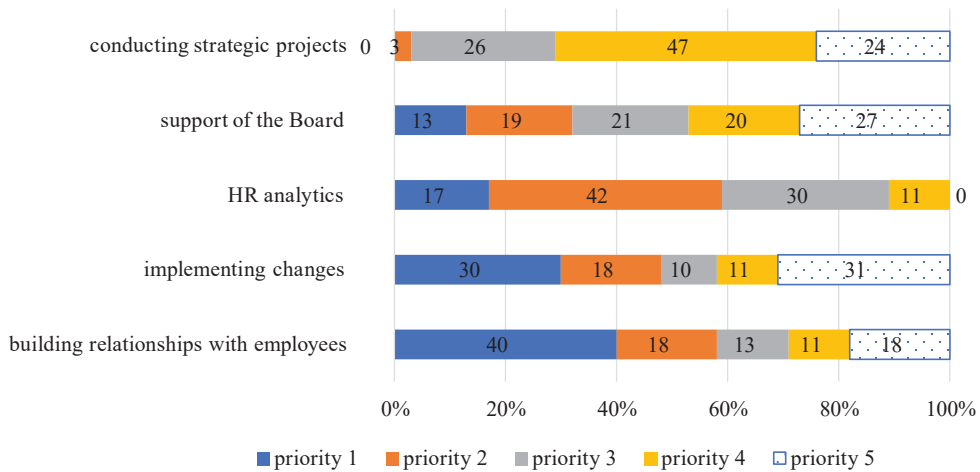


Figure 9.1. HR BP priorities before the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: own study.

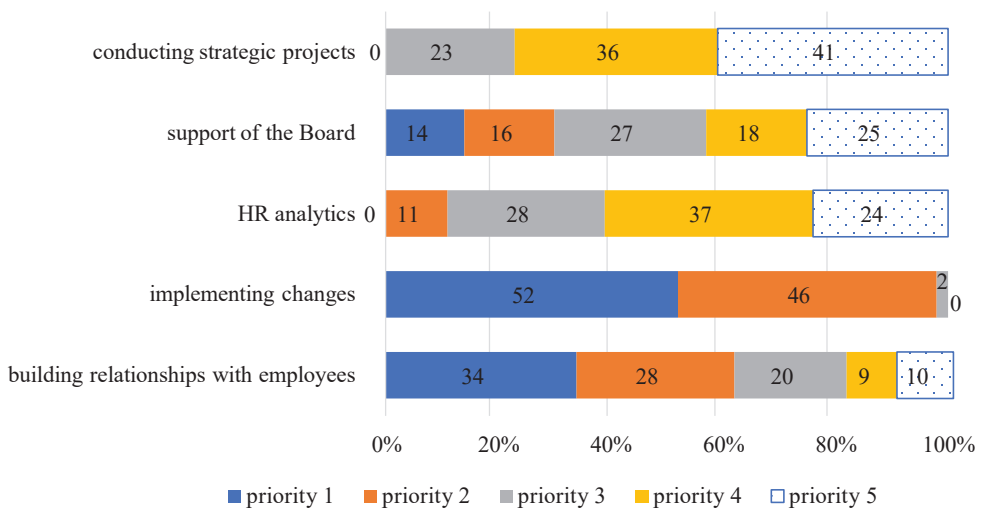


Figure 9.2. HR BP priorities during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: own study.

As a result of the pandemic, there has been a change in HR BP priorities (see Figure 9.2). First place was definitely taken by implementing changes, indicated as the first priority by 52% of the respondents, and the second priority by 46%. The process of building relationships with employees dropped to the second place, but was still important for organizations (34% indicated it as the first priority, and 28% as the second priority). Third place was taken by support of the Board with 14% of indications as being the first priority, and 16% as the second priority. Finally, HR analytics was in fourth place, and conducting strategic projects was seen as the last priority.

The third research question concerned the main roles of HR BP in the crisis situation caused by COVID-19. The detailed answers are presented in Figure 9.3.

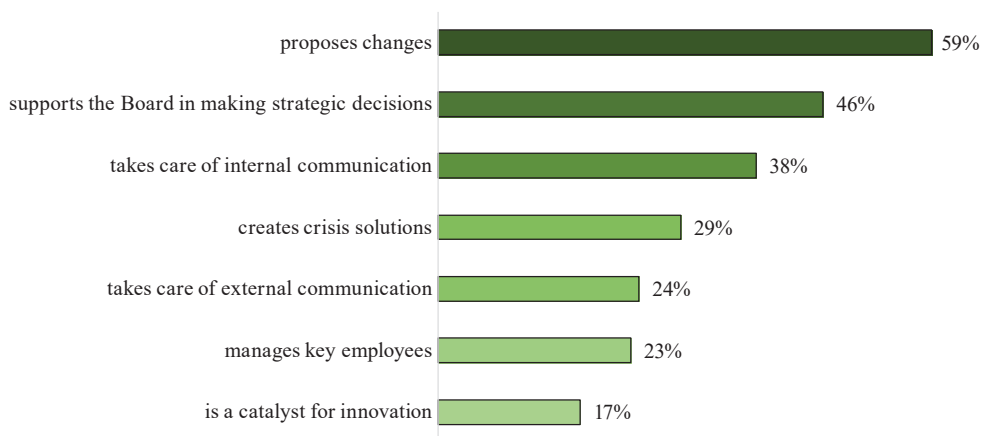


Figure 9.3. The role of HR BP in the crisis situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: own study.

The most important role for 59% of the respondents was proposing changes; next chosen (46%) was the support of the management board in making strategic decisions which is somewhat contrary to the previous question, in which the support of the board was ranked lower in the priorities. Taking care of internal communication was ranked third (38%), which seems understandable in the era of the pandemic. The relatively low position of the task concerning the creation of crisis solutions is somewhat surprising, yet the research shows that HR BPs participate in such processes only in every third organization.

9.5. Final conclusions and research summary

In light of the empirical research findings presented in the previous section, it can be confirmed that the goal has been achieved. One can conclude that the vast majority

of companies have felt the impact of the pandemic on the activities carried out in the HR Business Partner function. Taking into account the literature studies which indicate a diverse approach to the role and tasks of the person employed in this position, it can be concluded that this impact is difficult to generalize.

A recurring area in the respondents' answers was the introduction or proposal of changes, which were inevitable for almost all companies in the pandemic year 2020. Another important area was building relationships with employees and taking care of internal communication. In particular, distrust and resistance may arise when implement changes, hence proper care of these areas can be helpful in achieving strategic goals and supporting the organization in overcoming a crisis situation. However, the results do not support the Ulrich model with the strategic partner function in first place, but they are rather in compliance with Timms' roles of relationships builder and trustee.

Finally, referring to the goal of this chapter, one can also conclude that it has been attained, as the author managed to juxtapose the meaning of role and tasks of HR Business Partner in companies in two periods of time, i.e. before and during the pandemic. In short, the pandemic has increased the responsibility regarding HR Business Partners. In many companies, the understanding of the importance of the existence of such a position has increased. The role of HR Business Partner in the aspect of introducing changes has been strengthened, yet it still remains important to build relations with employees. In a crisis situation, HR BP, in addition to introducing changes, supports the management board in making strategic decisions and takes care of internal communication.

The presented research findings contribute to filling part of the research gap. The proposed areas for further analyses are: verification of the competencies necessary for the effective implementation of the HR Business Partner function (both in a situation of economic prosperity and taking into account the crisis), and extending research on tasks carried out as HR Business Partner – depending on the structure of the company and industry – onto a larger number of organizations, as well as verification of the changes in priorities in coming years.

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