

HR Heads Wear More Hats in the Business

People managers do some multitasking when they oversee roles like sales and finance. HR is now being seen as a strategic function as organisations struggle with talent-related issues

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Companies are asking their people managers to morph into number-crunching business heads and handle both portfolios simultaneously. As a result, when it comes to a vacancy in a business leader's role, an HR head's chances are as good as that of the finance or marketing lead.

"In today's environment, people strategies have to be integrated with business imperatives," says Harsh Goenka, chairman RPG Enterprises. HR heads need to directly impact the business outcome through innovative people practices, he adds.

Nearly three months ago, mid-tier ITeS firm Mphasis named its chief people officer R Elango as strategic business head for emerging markets where he is responsible for application services, business process outsourcing and infrastructure service in emerging geographies like India, Indonesia, Hong Kong and the Middle East. "It is like handling a company within a company," says Elango.

For Elango, this means a career spurt and the chance to be part of the CEO succession plan. "I get to eat my own medicine. This step makes me a fuller HR professional as I get a multi-dimensional perspective," says Elango, who was HR head for six years before taking over the new role.

A change in the mindset of companies in India could be why Indian firms look at HR today as a strategic function. "Indian organisations have been great at a concern for tasks but have realised that in the current context, they have to ensure concern for people, which enables them to super-achieve on tasks," says Krishna Mohan, Emami, CEO, sales, supply chain and human capital.

There was a time when most CEOs or business heads would be from sales and marketing, but around five years ago, the focus shifted to finance people. "Now HR has taken centre stage at a time when most companies are grappling with people issues including attraction and retention of talent. I see this phenomenon gathering momentum in times to come," says Executive Access MD Ronesh Puri. Adds Goenka: "People will continue to be the key differentiator of an organisation and therefore in the next decade, HR will play a pivotal role in organisation-building."

Emami's Mohan, for instance, has been playing a triple role for the past two years and believes this strategy integrates some of the important components of each function. His sales background meant he had to handle people on a regular basis and push them to perform, a role that matches an HR head's profile as well, but across functions.

Simultaneous handling of multiple verticals by the same leader not only broadens the vi-

Multiple Roles

NAME	COMPANY	TWO PROFILES
KRISHNA MOHAN	Emami	HR HEAD CEO, SALES, SUPPLY CHAIN
SACHIN RAOLE	RPG Lifesciences	HR HEAD CFO
R ELANGO	Mphasis	HR HEAD, STRATEGIC BUSINESS UNIT HEAD

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sion of each vertical but also helps the team grow in responsibility and stature, says Marico group CFO Milind Sarwate. This is because the sheer diversity of responsibilities forces the leader to delegate more.

"Every function has the potential to add value to the other. Also, in every vertical, there is a need to collaborate across functions and businesses. Such collaboration is facilitated by the empathy built by the cross-functional experience," says Sarwate, who was CFO, HR and finance head for almost two-and-a-half years till April 2012.

There is also an organisational gambit in giving a sales, marketing or finance head a people-centric role. After heading the finance

vertical for two years in RPG Lifesciences, Sachin Raole was asked to look into the HR role. A smart play on the part of the firm, since his customers remained the same. Raole, however, says he may not have been able to marry marketing and finance, which have two distinct set of customers. Finance and HR, he says, can be merged more easily.

"Both departments deal with resource management. For any investments in workforce, including compensation, finance gives the final nod and the process becomes smoother since they are under one umbrella," says Raole. He did not have any formal training in HR processes but has managed to

bring in more town halls and alter performance management since he sits on the other side of the fence as well.

"Sometimes, the board will have a transformational agenda which could include restructuring, M&A or takeover. In these cases where people issues are core, there's no one better than an HR guy," says R Suresh, MD, Stanton Chase India.

At times, though, the perspective widens considerably. Adil Shah, HR head of Essar Group, says heading the marketing and HR team for Marks & Spencer in the Middle East in the 1990s helped him improve his performance, as he was closer to his clients. It also helped him develop the next rung of leaders.

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Q. How many HR managers does it take to change a light bulb?
A. One, but it may take some time as the company would need to be aware of the possible need to consult the light bulb and its stakeholders.