



## HUMAN RESOURCE DEPARTMENT STRATEGIC ROLE IN LITHUANIAN ENTERPRISES

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**Abstract.** The goal of this article is to analyse the strategic role of human resource departments in Lithuanian enterprises, to identify the factors which influence this role and its impact on organisational performance. For this purpose the scientific works of foreign and Lithuanian authors were studied and the research was conducted. The research used methodology via questionnaire with mixed (open and closed-end) questions survey. The authors analyse the findings of the research conducted in 2012, the respondents of which were 160 senior managers, human resource departments' managers and professionals in 92 Lithuanian firms. The research revealed that strategic role of human resource management depends not only on human resource managers' involvement at board level, organizational culture but also on firm's size, managers' competencies, etc. The research allowed discovering that mostly big organisations have a strategic approach to human resource management. In the small organisations human resource strategic initiatives have been seen as irrelevant. The authors also found that the alignment between the organisational and human resource strategy is an important factor impacting the organisational performance and success.

**Keywords:** human resource department, human resource strategy, strategic role, competencies, resources.

**JEL classification:** M14, M19, P2.

### 1. Introduction

In the face of increasing international competition, organisations had to focus on the value of investment in human resource as a major source of competitive advantage (Diskienė *et al.* 2010; Česnyienė *et al.* 2013). Human resource management (HRM) is recognised as a critical dimension of strategic management (Arthur 1992; Huselid 1995; Beer, Ross 2002; Guest *et al.* 2003; Bakanauskiene *et al.* 2008; Sparrow, Scullion 2010; Torrington *et al.* 2010; Kazlauskaitė, Buciuniene 2010; Caldwell 2011; Baley 2011; Harrison 2011; Darwish, Singh 2013). These authors noted that the transition from personnel management to HRM reflects this emerging organisation-wide commitment to human capital development. The change, however, has activated considerable discussion within the academic literature about the successful strategic positioning of, and responsibility for, HRM (Beer, Ross 2002; Guest, King 2004; Amone 2005; Sequeira, Ferreira-Lopes 2013). The strategic role of HR department effectively encourages everyone in the organisation to

take responsibility for HRM, not just the human resource department. This ensures that HR department is given a much more central position in any decisions that are made at the strategic or operational level, and reminds decision makers that an investment in people is a key organisational priority (Korsakienė *et al.* 2010; Laužikas, Dailydaitė 2013; Laužikas, Mokšėckienė 2013; Vereskun 2013; Korsakienė, Smaliukienė 2014).

In the Lithuanian enterprises the transformation of traditional personnel management to strategic HRM has hardly been researched. Therefore, it is imperative to analyse the shift of the personnel management function to HRM, the changes of the status of human resource department, its role in the process of strategy building and the participation in making other important decisions. Research was conducted among 160 participants – managers and professionals of HR departments in 92 Lithuanian companies – in order to discover their viewpoints on this issue. The research pursued wider objectives than those covered in the present article. The research covered such acute HR management issues as HR departments partic-

ipation in the process of defining organisational strategy, on what issues (strategic or operational) does HR department spend its time, what competences HR professionals need today, etc.

The research allowed discovering that mostly big organisations HR departments have a strategic approach to HRM. In the small organisations HR strategic initiatives have been seen as irrelevant. The research also reveals that implementation of the strategic HRM requires sufficient competences and has impact on organisational performance.

## 2. Factors impacting the strategic role of human resource department

It is necessary to step back in time in order to examine and outline the major developments in thinking about HRM. The origins of HRM, as a defined school of thought, are usually traced back to 1970s and the development of “human capital theory”. It was more appropriate to view on human resources as assets as opposed to just cost. This view remained in the literature throughout the 1970s, but began to gain more widespread support in the early 1980s. Throughout the 1980s there were a number of variations along the theme of “strategic role” (Ulrich 1997) and discussions within the academic literature about the successful strategic positioning of HR department (Beer, Ross 2002; Kelly *et al.* 2006; Stavrou-Costea 2006; Gennard 2007; Maxwell, Farguharson 2008; Jarvalt, Randma-Liiv 2010). This ensures that HR department is given a much more central position in any decisions that are made at the strategic or operational level.

Othman (2009) gave three main reasons for recognition of the importance of strategic role of HRM. First, such role provides a broader range of solutions for solving complex organisational problems. Second, it ensures that all resources – human, technical and financial, are given due consideration in setting organizational goals and assessing implementation capabilities. Finally, it diminishes subordination of strategic considerations to human resource preferences and the neglect of human resources as a vital source of organisational competence and organisational advantage.

The strategic role of human resource departments depends on various factors, varies considerably among organisations and has different impact on organisational strategy formation and implementation (Torrington, Hall 1995). Figure 1 shows a range of possible versions.

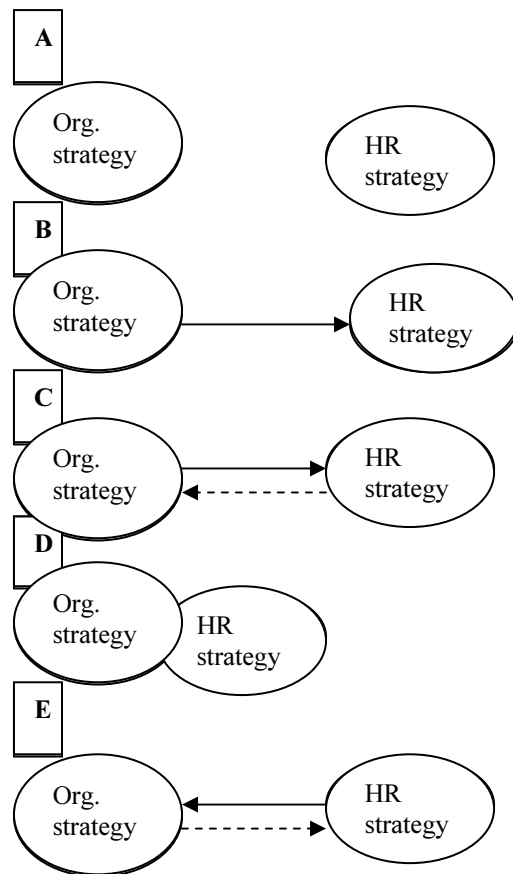


Fig. 1. The versions of relations between organisational and HR strategy (source: Torrington, Hall 1995)

In *version A* there are no relations at all, if indeed organisational and human resource strategy did exist in an explicit form in the organisation.

*Version B* represents a growing recognition the importance of people in the achievement of organisational strategy; they are seen as a key in strategy implementation.

*Version C* recognises the need for two-way communication and some debate on alternative possibilities. The debate, however, is often limited.

*Version D* represents people as the key to competitive advantage. Human resource strategy becomes critical and both strategies are developed together in an integrated way.

*Version E* places HR strategy in prime position. The argument here is that if people are the key to competitive advantage, then there is a need to build strategy on organisation’s people strengths.

What factors have impact on strategic role of human resource department and HRM function transition from personnel to human resource management?

Many researchers (Guest *et al.* 2003; Sheehan 2003; Torrington *et al.* 2008; Othman 2009; Caldwell 2011; Darwish, Singh 2013; Raudeliūnienė *et al.* 2013) had an aim to clarify

the variables that impact the strategic role of HR department. According to D. Torrington et al. (2008) these factors are: 1) the HR department role in the organisation; 2) organisational culture; 3) organisational environment.

Involvement in strategy is clearly dependent on the level of regard for HR department. There is the variety of ways to describe how this department is seen in the organisation. There is a greater likelihood of involvement in strategy when the head of human resource department is at director level on the main Board. In many companies (70%) executives with title of Director are without main Board membership (Torrington *et al.* 2008).

Organisational culture demonstrates the managers' view of the importance of people and how they should be treated, for example as a cost or an investment (Korsakienė, Gurina 2012; Drūteikiene *et al.* 2013). The third factor is environment (Kearney *et al.* 2013). In organisations placed in a more turbulent environment, the human resource department were more likely to be involved in strategy (Amone 2005). If an organisation operates in a stable and comfortable environment there is no pressure to change, whereas a turbulent environment demands that the organisation looks for new approaches and ways of doing things (Steinhaus 1990; Gibb 2001; Sanchez 2003; Wahl, Prause 2013; Prause, Hunke 2014).

These three influences are not easy to manipulate, but what HR department *can do* is look for gaps of opportunity in these areas and *use* them. In order to do this the head of HR department needs to use business and financial language; to describe the rationale for HR activities in terms of business benefits; to act as a business manager first and a human resource manager second; to offer well developed change management skills that can be used immediately.

Another researcher C. Sheehan (2003) indicates similar factors impacting the department's transition from personnel to HRM.

*One of the factors* is the role of the people working within the human resource area itself. M. Beer and J. Ross (2002) have stated that those people working within the HR department must clearly understand how HRM is different from the older-style personnel management approach and be prepared to support the necessary changes. P. Sparrow and H. Scullion (2010) argued that many of those involved in HR function continue to fail to understand the demands of their new role and lack confidence in their ability to be strategic business partners.

*Another factor* is that HR department requires broad support from areas elsewhere in the organisation.

The researches (Dan-Shang, Chi-Lih 2008; Darwish, Singh 2013; Lloyd-Walker 2013) indicated that business should combine its competitiveness and HRM strategy to increase firm's performance. There are few studies which explore the impact on organizational performance. F. Cai and M. Wang (2008) found the impact on labour productivity. While the others researchers measured turnover, absenteeism, profits (Sheehan 2003; Baley 2011)

Authors of this article examine how "strategic" are the HR departments in Lithuanian enterprises. The research was conducted in 92 Lithuanian enterprises in 2012.

### 3. Research results and analysis

A qualitative analysis based on the questionnaire (with open-ended questions) method was conducted in 2012. The respondents of the research represented 92 enterprises such as AB 'RIMI Lietuva', AB 'Achema', AB 'Lietuvos geležinkeliai', AB 'Stumbras', etc. The research was based on random selection and snowball principles, i.e. the researchers first focussed on the enterprises in which their former study peers or ex-colleagues worked. Later these respondents recommended other companies and so on. The questionnaires were answered by heads of HR departments, managers and professionals. 160 valid questionnaires were returned. Open-ended questions prevailed in questionnaire. Such questions were designed to encourage respondents to give full and meaningful answers, to demonstrate their knowledge and competence.

From the viewpoint of the sphere of activity, the enterprises were spread as follows: 13% (20 enterprises) were engaged in production, 23.4% (36) were engaged in trade, 39.6% (61) were in service industries, and 24% (37) carried out mixed activity. According to size, 27.8% were small enterprises (up to 50 employees), 26.6% were medium (50-250 employees), and 45.6% fell under the category of large enterprises (over 250 employees).

Since a strategic role of human resource department is determined by its place in the enterprise's organizational structure, therefore respondents first had to answer the question, who is HR department accountable to in the enterprise. Research showed that HR departments in Lithuanian enterprises are most often subordinate to the head of the enterprise (this was confirmed by 92.3% of respondents). Such department's position in the organisational structure, on one hand, shows its strategic importance in the enterprise. However, on the other hand, the research revealed that such

hierarchical subordination defines the relations of “decision maker and subordinate department”, which limits the strategic role of the department in the enterprise.

As we know, the strategic role of HR department is associated with its participation in the development and implementation of organizational strategy, as well as other important decision making processes. Performed research has showed that HRM strategy is present in 32.4% of researched enterprises and 67.6% of enterprises either do not have it or it is under development. The rest 20% of respondents did not answer this question (did not agree to disclose the content of HRM strategy), stating that this is a trade secret. The analysis of the respondents' opinions points to the fact that part of them (26.5%) presented textbook concepts of strategy, rather than their own opinion (for example: “strategy should correspond to goals of the enterprise”, “strategy is reflected by concrete actions aimed at achieving enterprise's goals”, “strategy is a general direction of working with people in order to ensure long-term enterprise's performance”) or viewed HR strategy and HR policies as synonymous (60%) (for example: “Human resource policy should correspond to external conditions and internal needs”).

More detailed responses suggest that HRM strategy was confused with HRM system in an organization or functions of HR department. Typical example of such response would be:

*Human resource strategy can be defined as main human resource management factors, which help create required competence and behaviour of an employee, needed for implementation of general organizational strategy (development of human resource strategy, employee selection, training, career planning, performance management, individual human resource management counseling).*

Only 13.5% of respondents seem to understand the concept of human resource management strategy and its relation with organizational strategy. For example:

*Aspiration for high qualification, loyal and reliable employees to become the strength of the enterprise and the enterprise itself to become an attractive employer, with values such as responsibility, respect and professionalism...*

Since 53.7% of respondents did not have a clear understanding of what HRM strategy is and what role it plays in the organization, it is difficult to generalize conclusions. Nevertheless, we can say, that researched enterprises feature A and B (Fig. 1) versions of strategy dependencies: A – in small enterprises and B – in medium and large enterprises.

The performed research revealed, that 43.7% of respondents who answered positively to previous question work in large or medium size enterprises and actively participate in the development and implementation process of HRM strategy. However, the majority (56.3%) play a passive role. In other words, participate only in the process of strategy implementation. These are the respondents employed in small enterprises. Presented data shows that strategic role of HR departments in Lithuanian enterprises is not sufficient. Therefore, most often their managers and specialists are not perceived as strategic business partners.

The analysis of HRM strategy development process and its factors performed by enterprise's professionals during this process, revealed, that the following factors were mentioned most often in the questionnaire: identification of critical HR problems (25.7%), detailed analysis of enterprise's employees (17.8%) and development of action plan (16.3%). The broader use of enterprise's strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis for this purpose is missing. These responses exposed an overall lack of HRM competences among respondents and particularly in strategy development process. This could be explained by the fact that only 16.9% of managers and professionals had a specialized, human resource management education, 4.5% had a degree in psychology and 31.2% had a degree in management, whereas, 5.2% of respondents had a degree in law, 11.7% were specialists in engineering and 24.7% of respondents were economists. Conclusively, only around 17% of respondents had an appropriate education for this function, it can be one of the reasons for the belittlement of this department. Furthermore, the majority (64.3%) of managers in Lithuania's enterprises who participated in this research did not find significant the type of education a particular human resource professional possessed. This could also be one of the factors diminishing strategic role of this department.

In the process of revealing the role of HR department in the decision making process, respondents had to indicate whether the activities of their unit are strictly regulated or they can make decisions independently.

Results of the research show that activities of HR department are sufficiently regulated. Therefore, there is little independence in decision making process. Majority of respondents (92.9%) confirmed that they either have to consult their senior manager when deciding strategic questions or predetermined rules explain how to act in a particular case (examples of the responses are: “training plans”, “selection of valuation system criteria”,

“preparation of motivation system” and other strategic questions). Independent decisions are often made in respect to inessential questions (for instance: “managing staff documentation”).

Data analysis in respect to the size of the enterprise and sphere of activity did not reveal significant differences in responses.

An important aspect when researching strategic role of HR department is the effectiveness of HR department and benefit to the enterprise. Research shows that high rankings prevailed (average of 3.92 out of 5) when describing the effectiveness of the HR department. This can be explained by the bias of evaluation, since respondents' evaluated effectiveness of their own department. Meanwhile, the opinion of the highest level managers was different; they did not see the strategic importance of HR department.

This was partially confirmed by answers to the question regarding the strategically important initiatives proposed by HR department in the last 3–5 years. Results show that only 21.1% of respondents have submitted such initiatives (examples are: “proposed employee valuation system, performed employee satisfaction surveys”, “prepared program of rationalization stages and cost-cutting”, “employee firing function taken over from direct managers”), 28.9% have submitted partially important initiatives (such as: “supervision of training programs”, “cultivation of positive microclimate”, “implementation of ethics”). Yet 50.0% of respondents initiated suggestions, which were limited to the nature of daily activities (for instance: “purposeful information to the manager”, “expansion of employee recruiting”, “system improvement”), there were also answers, which showed complete absence of initiatives, such as:

*During the last years enterprise was affected by economic crisis and could not initiate any initiatives... There were no initiatives during the last few years... No initiatives were presented...*

Thus, only in a half of questioned enterprises (mainly large), HR departments/professionals proposed strategically important suggestions; solved problems vital to the entire enterprise. On one hand, these results confirm that senior managers limit the participation of HR departments in introducing important initiatives, on the other hand, HR professionals are not proactive enough, which according the research could be due to the lack of competences.

The above mentioned statement, that senior managers do not see HR department as strategically important, is strengthened by the responses to the questions: “How do you reason the benefit of HR department/professional to the head of the enterprise?” Human resource professionals either do not have such arguments – 59.8% (examples: “managers know it themselves“, “there is no need for such arguments”, “no arguments are needed”), or activities of this department are not assessed at all in the enterprise, this was indicated by 15.5% of respondents. Such answers were most often selected by HR professionals who do not occupy managerial positions in the HR department.

As much as 19.6% of respondents were not able to present professional arguments to base the benefit of such department or professional's activities, while proclaiming that “the main argument is that the enterprise exists only because people work there” or “main argument is the growth results”. And only 20.7% of respondents were able to identify tangible financial indicators of their department or its input in achieving department's goals. Often those were the respondents of large enterprises, who occupy HR managers' positions (responses did not depend on the sphere of activities of the enterprise). The main findings of the research are summarized in Table 1.

The role of HR department undoubtedly also depends on competencies of its managers and professionals.

As it was previously mentioned, only about 17% of questioned respondents have the required educational background in human resource management field.

Research also revealed that the 42.3% of managers and professionals do not have a specialized education and have little (up to 5 years) experience. Whereas 28.2% had 5-10 working experience and 29.5% possessed more than 10 years of experience. Lack of experience could be a barrier to increase the strategic role of the department and influence managerial decisions. On the other hand, young professionals (majority of up to 40 years of age) are more flexible, open to changes; therefore gradually they are able to change department's role from administrative to strategic. The following question was raised in order to assess the competencies of managers and professionals in the HR department: “how do you perceive the level of your own competencies?”

**Table 1.** The role of HR department in Lithuanian enterprises (source: compiled on the basis of the research findings and created by the authors)

HRM strategy exists in organisation	HR department participates in organizational strategy development and implementation	Role of HR department in decision making process	Strategically important initiatives proposed by HR department	Evaluation of HR department impact on organisational performance
Yes – 32.4%	Participates in both stages – 43.7%	Decisions are strictly regulated – 26,9%	Has submitted such initiatives – 21,1%	Not evaluated –
No – 67.6%	Participates only in implementation stage – 56.3%	Decisions are made independently – 7,1%	Has submitted partially important initiatives – 28,9%	No arguments to prove the impact – 59,8%
		Regulation is combined with independence – 66,0%	Absence of such initiatives – 50,0%	Sound arguments to prove the impact – 19,6%

Data shows that most favourably valued (score of 4.24) was social competence and its components:

- communication abilities with average score of 4.43 out of 5;
- ability to learn with average of 4.39.

Rather high score was granted to professional competence – score of 4.09 and its components:

- knowledge about the organization;
- computer skills – average of 4.43;
- work experience – average of 4.08;
- knowledge of functional areas – 3.99.

Modest scores were given to strategic and managerial competencies (3.95 and 3.88 respectfully), and the lowest scores were given to their components:

- strategic thinking (average of 3.66);
- managerial skill (average of 3.68).

The difference between the actual and desired managerial and strategic competencies is 0.39 and 0.56 points respectfully. Staff of HR departments realizes that their actual competencies are insufficient and will further depart from desired level if no adequate measures are taken.

Insufficient levels of strategic and managerial competencies interfere with abilities of HR professionals to become equal business partners and initiate strategic changes in the organization. This way proving the positive impact and benefit of HR department in the enterprise would gradually change the perception of enterprise’s senior managers towards the role of HR department in the enterprise.

#### 4. Conclusions

The performed analysis has confirmed that the majority of managers realize the importance of HR in their business, but doubt its benefit and strategic role of department, which aims at the professional management of these resources.

Research shows, that studied enterprises feature A and B versions of strategy dependencies: A – in small enterprises and B – in medium and large enterprises. Research also revealed that activities of HR department in the majority of enterprises are not assessed at all, whereas some enterprises perform only a formal valuation. This circumstance adds to the belittlement of the role of HR department. Limited participation in business decision making and insufficient independence of HR departments in Lithuanian enterprises do not permit them to adequately influence the performance of the enterprise. Insufficient competencies of staff of these departments further dampen their role. Performed research revealed that according to the Lithuanian HR professionals, their personal competence is only adequate in specialised areas that are related to the concrete issues of HR management, i.e. the professional and social competence. However, the strategic and managerial competencies, (especially in the strategic thinking and change management) are inadequate.

In order to improve the role and input of HR department in an enterprise, the following is required:

- to strive that managers and professionals of HR departments would possess adequate education and broader spectrum of business knowledge, since competent employees are one of the main conditions determining the influence of such departments on the performance of the enterprise;
- to promote the participation of HR professionals not only in the implementation of an overall organizational strategy, but also in its development process. For this purpose strategic thinking and strategic management skill need to be further developed among professionals;
- to strive towards adequate positioning of this department in the organizational struc-

- ture, i.e. to create the same opportunities for HR departments to participate in decision-making process as other departments,
- to recommend to managers and professionals of HR department to prepare and apply valuation methodologies for assessing activities and influence of their departments on overall performance of the enterprise.

The mentioned guidelines should increase strategic role of HR departments and help their gradual transformation from personnel towards HRM departments.

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