Do we have the right balance between the interests of employers and the interest of employees?: Commentary

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As with a number of previous survey topics, the question here was inspired by a comment to a previous survey. The comment suggested that the essential duty of HR professionals was towards their employer above all. Now one of the pillars of professionalism is ‘independence.’ The idea is that professionals, to a fair degree, define the standards that apply to their work both individually and as a profession. Whether employers respect that independence is another matter, however, and previous surveys have indicated that this is a difficult issue for many HR professionals (Have you ever felt coerced?, Canadian HR Reporter, June 2008, and Should we get tougher with discipline? Canadian HR Reporter, October 2009). One aspect of professional independence is to have the latitude to balance the interests of the employers that hire or engage us with those of employees. The idea behind this survey was to find out where we stand as HR professionals.

95.6% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that HR professionals have duties (responsibilities) that go beyond simply serving the interests of those who employ us as employers or clients; 95.4% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that HR professionals have a duty to protect the interests of employees as well as those of their employers; and 89.3% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that HR professionals are bound to maintain a certain service standards independent of employer or client standards. Clearly, HR professionals believe that they should have a fair degree of ‘professional independence.’

In the responses to these questions, there were no statistically significant differences between respondents with different amounts of experience in HR, and there were no statistically significant differences between respondents with different designation status.

On the other hand, 41.7% of respondents were of the opinion that HR professionals didn’t quite have the balance right, with 36.9% being of the opinion that HR professionals lean too much in the direction of serving the interests of employers, and 4.8% being of the opinion that HR professionals lean too much in the direction of protecting the interests of employees.
There are statistically significant differences between respondents with different levels of seniority: 44.6% of respondents in entry-level positions and 44.5% of respondents in more senior individual contributor roles were of the opinion that HR professionals lean too much in the direction of serving the interests of employers; this proportion dropped to 40.0% for respondents at a supervisory level, to 36.4% for respondents at a middle management level, and to 23.4% for respondents at an executive level. In short, the more senior the respondent, the less likely they were to think that HR professionals lean too much in the direction of serving the interests of employers. One can speculate as to the reasons for this. It could be that HR professionals with more seniority identify with or understand better the perspective of employers such that what appears to lean too much in the direction of serving the interests of employers to a more junior HR professional appears more balanced to a more senior HR professional. Incidentally, 33.3% of respondents who are self-employed consultants were of the opinion that HR professionals lean too much in the direction of serving the interests of employers; which is comparable to the response of respondents at in middle management roles (the opinions of HR professionals in independent practice are often very similar to those in middle management positions).

96.0% of respondents felt that it was either quite important or very important for HR professionals to get this balance right. Indeed, many respondents noted that getting this balance right was part and parcel of what it meant to be a Human Resources professional.

A good number of respondents indicated that getting the balance right was something that was more difficult in practice than it was in theory, and that the balance was often ‘awkward.’ Many respondents noted that when one’s job is on the line, it is not always easy to do the right thing. It is clear that despite the apparent agreement at some level, there are still quite different positions when it gets into the specifics of day-to-day situations.

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