



Human Resources
Professionals
Association

OOTR 2017 Summer webinar series

The big debate: Business partner v. professional role

June 15, 2017

Discussion with commentary

MM: HRPA - Could we get a headcount of how many attendees for this event? I'm curious!

MM: This isn't as uplifting as I expected yet!

LA: very helpful info. to explain differences in various definitions

TS: How do you close this gap between values and practice?

That is coming later in the webinar. CIPD has argued that the best way to do this is to strengthen identification with the profession.

SD: In the absence of an organization employing an HR Professional, is the HR person still a "stand alone" professional (i.e. like a doctor or lawyer)? What is HR's role without an "employer"?

SD: One of the difficulties I see is that HR Professionals don't serve "the public"; they serve organizations. If there was a role for HR Professionals to serve the public directly (i.e. like lawyers and doctors etc.), then I think it's much easier to be a true profession.

What does it mean to 'serve organizations'? Does that mean serving shareholders (owners)? Senior management? Employees? This is the gist of the 'shareholder primacy v. stakeholder primacy model' distinction. Our legislation implicitly embed a stakeholder primacy model.

The rationale for the regulation of HR is the triangle model (like public accountants). The rationale for regulating HR professionals is not to protect employers and clients from incompetent or unethical HR professionals but to protect employees from unfair Human Resources practices. (The rationale for regulating public accountants is not to protect client organizations but to protect investors and potential investors (aka. the public).

KO: Well said SD!

LN: I agree SD

FN: Well said, but question: How does that logic apply to Accountants / CPAs? what is their service to the public good?

Although CPAs serve their clients and organizations that are bound to standards of practice and ethics which stress independence and integrity.

SD: Accountants/CPA's help people prepare taxes, create and execute financial plans etc.

The reason accountants are regulated is that there is a public interest in doing so. Professionals are positions of trust. In other words, they are in positions of power or authority such that they could bring about harm to the public if they were incompetent or unethical.

This is very important for HR to figure out. If there is no significant risk of harm to the public stemming from the practice of HR, then HR should not be regulated and the Ontario Legislature has made a big mistake.

MM: Also Lawyers and Doctors are not completely in isolation, they have firms and practices, or at least clients/ patients, who would serve as employers in this case

NP: I think they have more options to work independently. Which is somewhat different than HR Professionals.

It is the risk of harm to the public that is the determining factors as to whether a profession is regulated or not.

LN: Yes.. very true SD.. we need accountants and cpa's...there are still a wide body that don't believe there is a need for HR...and the ethics issue is one that is still very tricky

Indeed, we have some work to do.

PC: I think another reason is that it is somewhat difficult for most people to clarify the differences and make meaningful discussion

LK: If an individual finds that they are facing that tension and duality in their roles, i.e. the business partner role does not agree with their professional role, is there an outlet within the HRP they can go to, to discuss this, if an individual is unsure of which strategy to follow to a) keep their job and b) remain consistent with the regulations of the HRP?

Indeed, many professions maintain 'ethics hotlines for exactly this purpose. HRP has not done this (although the idea of doing so has been discussed). Informally, the Registrar does field these kinds of calls.

SD: I'm thinking that even if an HR Professional has a private practice, their clients are organizations, not individuals

You need to differentiate 'client' from 'stakeholders.' In regulating HR professionals, the Ontario Legislature wanted HR professionals to consider all stakeholders and not to engage or condone unfair employment practices because our clients and employers would like us to do so.

KM: very true SD

NS: My biggest frustration is that many executives still believe that anyone can be an HR Director or VP although they do not have their HR designation or qualifications. When will that mentality change?

It is changing, but these things take time.

FN: an HR professional can serve the public for more value than preparing someone's taxes... so why is it so hard to see HR as a profession if we think that lawyers and accountants are? HR professional can set-up private practice the same as any doctor lawyer or accountant...

This discussion is important. How does public (society) decide that a given skilled occupation is a profession whereas another skilled occupation is not? What criteria does the public use to make that determination? Personally, I think this has less to do with competence and more to do with a principled stance.

MM: But does the number of people being served at a given time really matter, a lawyers professionalism isn't changed if they serve one client or 20

SC: I agree with NS. Somehow there needs to be more awareness to senior leadership on the value of a true HR professional.

SD: I agree, MM, I don't think the number of clients matters. I think it's more who those clients are that is the issue

Clients and stakeholders.

FN: I wonder what discussions Accountants have on these sorts of meetings, to debate what their professional role is relative to the organization vs. society...??

Oh yes. The financial scandals of Enron and Tyco led to much soul searching among accountants. As a result, there has been a renewed emphasis on ethics in accounting.

JB: Accountants face the same dilemma when faced with a conflict

SD: I think HR Professionals don't often discuss this topic, because we are unsure of what it really means to be an HR Professional - it's an entirely new idea for many people.

Yes, we have reached that point in our development!

JB: Important to note that most accountants are also employees.

Also, many do not realize that accounting is regulated but not licensed. Only about 5% of accountants have a public accounting license.

CMN: If incompetent people are the most confident, does this not reflect poorly on our profession?

Type in 'Dunning-Kruger' in your search bar and you will get more on the topic. For further discussion.

TS: when can we have a follow up to this as it clearly is leaving us with more questions than answers? sorry no disrespect meant but there is clearly more to discuss on this. Thank you!

No offense taken. Yes, I will develop more material on the topic, likely for the Fall webinar series. One idea would be to have discussion groups at the Annual Conference, sessions that would be moderated discussions but no formal presentations.

SC: I have been in the uncomfortable position of standing up to management regarding an issue with an employee. I think our role is to educate senior leadership on the options which means this is our recommendation no protect the liabilities with the company and do the right thing ethically. However, it is my experience that senior management makes the final decision.

Same for lawyers, by the way. They give their opinions but the client has the choice to take or disregard the advice.

PM: I agree with TS, seems that we need a future follow up

MD: It will more time to convince leaders that HR profession is as important as Lawyers.

SD: Another challenge that I've experienced is that if the organization's "people" processes and tools are not 100%, then errors that occur erode and HR Professionals ability to gain credibility (i.e. senior management doesn't believe HR should be "at the table" if the HR data isn't correct)

SC: meant recommendation to protect the liabilities of the company

TS: I think we can all relate SC. What if they make an unethical decision which was not suggested by HR/ do we quit? the unethical decision will still be made

This is a big topic that we need to have serious conversations about.

NS 2: I have also experienced the same frustration SC. In the end, the executive makes the final call...

JG: I agree SC

JB: HR professionals can serve the "public interest" through implementing anti-discrimination laws etc.

LR: Are there any plans to try and implement the CHRP designation applicable national across all of Canada?

There are always backchannel discussions.

LS: but can we really say "I won't go there"?

I am personally aware of a number of HR professionals who have done just that.

JB: the role of the HR professional is to give really good advice to senior management....to keep them out of trouble.

SD: Good question LS! I'm concerned that Ontario's designations don't align with the rest of the country

GH: I agree with SD and LR

LR: It would definitely help to solidify the profession more!

LS: we can tell them they're breaking the law or not following best practice, but ultimately, I agree with the discussion here that the decision makers have the final say.

LS: and we're not the decision makers, in most cases.

JB: I agree that the management folks have the final say but it is up to the professionals to guide them. They have individual and often legal implications if they don't take good advice.

AP: I do not see it as a conflict, unless you work for an unethical organization...

Years ago, I conducted a Pulse survey in conjunction with Canadian HR Reporter which asked the question *'Have you ever been coerced?'* At some point in their career, the majority of HR professionals had.

LR: Agree AP

TS: I agree the decision makers have the final say, my question would be what happens if the decision is unethical? what then? I agree the responsibility of the decision is not ours but what does our system of values say when we know the decision is unethical? and if we choose to leave, the unethical decision is still made

The standard is that, as professionals, we need to do what is in our power to do to see to it that unethical decisions are not made. Sometime we have little influence over the decision, sometimes we have a lot of influence over the decision. Our accountability as professionals is proportional to the amount of influence we could have had over the decision.

JB: it does seem that there are a few "unethical" organizations.

SC: Sometimes it is a bit of negotiation to do the right thing

That is where skill come into play.

SD: I definitely think this topic deserves more attention!

Yes.

AL: I would like an additional session to discuss further

Will do.

JS: great sidebar discussions! thank you

I am glad to see that the webinar has struck a chord. There will definitely be some follow-up.