

Got people skills?

Try a job in human resources. No matter what your skill set, there's likely to be a match for you somewhere in HR

By Caroline Cadwell and Richard Berman

In the process of finding a job, almost everyone's first point of contact with a company is its human resources department. Resumes are sent to their attention, interviews are scheduled through them, and a large part of the hiring process — from the first call to the offer letter — is managed by them. And after being on a first-name basis with everyone in the HR department for months, most employees have almost no interaction with them until it's time for the perfunctory exit interview. Unless of course, there's a problem such as a conflict with a supervisor or colleague, issues of harassment or improper conduct in the workplace or a smaller-than-hoped-for raise or bonus.

In fact, human resources professionals play a vital role in how well (or poorly) a company functions, even if most of their work is behind the scenes. They perform an almost unfathomably large range of tasks, including managing diversity initiatives, resolving interpersonal work-related conflicts and managing compensation and benefits issues. As a result, HR jobs can be some of the most challenging and diverse in the corporate world.

"One of the reasons the profession is so exciting is because it's so varied. You can be a generalist, which means you handle every aspect of the employee relationship from designing discipline systems to analyzing future needs based on where the company wants to go with recruitment and hiring," says Danika Davis, CEO of the Northern California HR Association, a professional organization composed of 3,500 HR professionals.

Even though most of us think of HR experts only when it comes to hiring and 401(k) contributions, HR is not all staring at resumes and dealing with the dotting of i's and crossing of t's on employee benefits paperwork. "One of the things an HR specialist spends their time on is converting the

strategy of an organization into action through people," says Davis.

Many HR positions involve large amounts of interaction with employees and managers throughout a company in order to determine what the skills of the current workforce are, and to determine which skills are needed in the future to manage growth. HR also involves doing a lot of industry research in order to take advantage of any trends or changes in a given industry so that the company can run as efficiently as possible. For example, if a company is losing employees and potential new hires to a competitor, it's up to the human resources group to figure out why it's not able to be as competitive. The answer may be as simple as a salary discrepancy, but other issues such as commute times, work culture and perks might also be factors that must be addressed.

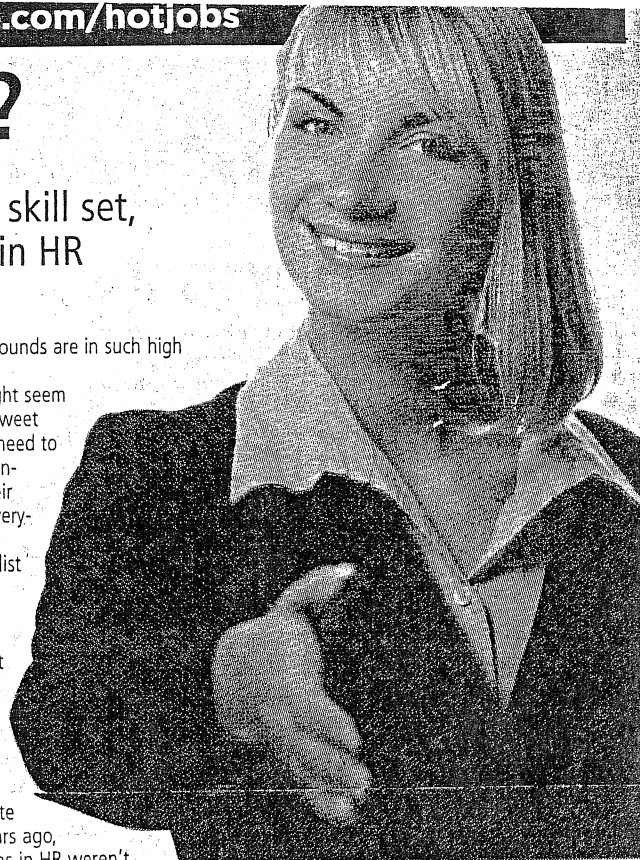
One of the mandates of any HR team is to evaluate and analyze current situations in order to keep the company running as best it can with few wasted resources. HR specialists have roles in functional areas such as benefits, diversity, compensation, recruiting and organizational development. "Watching the want ads in the HR community, you'll notice more and more jobs are looking for people who have an organizational development background," says Michele Hanson, senior director of talent management at Kelly Services, a national staffing agency for both temporary and permanent placements.

Organizational development, which Hanson says is one of the most important roles that HR groups play today, is based on "talent management, looking at jobs and figuring out what skill sets people need to move around in jobs and how to develop those skill sets, job analysis, workforce planning and analysis — really looking at the whole of the organization and what is needed in the workforce. Change management initiatives are in that arena, and so at the pace companies are changing these days that's why people with organizational devel-

opment backgrounds are in such high demand."

In what might seem like a blast of sweet irony, HR pros need to apply for (and interview for) their jobs just like everyone else. While there is no set list of skills that guarantees employment, a mix of the right work and academic experience is key to getting hired. "Historically, and as late as 10 to 15 years ago, degree programs in HR weren't available, so you didn't have folks in college saying 'I'm going into human resources,'" says Davis. "Most often, you came from other disciplines in the organization and you gravitated toward HR either because of a desire or skill." Today, many universities offer undergraduate and graduate-level programs in HR, and there are also part-time and online certificate programs for people who want to build their human resources skills.

In addition to having the right academic pedigree, analysis, strategy and strong people skills are important in human resources. Even today, it is more common for someone to enter HR mid-career from another functional area because the skills needed to perform the job are best cultivated with experience. While many employers now seek applicants who hold degrees in human resources, the experience of working in other positions in a company gives a greater understanding of what those jobs are like, and that empathy can be particularly valuable when evaluating job structure and performing other duties in HR.



HR is really an umbrella that covers many different jobs within a company, and as such there are jobs for people with just about any personality type or skill set. For those who enjoy meeting new people, an ideal job might be in campus recruiting. These positions can involve quite a bit of travel, and typically require back-to-back meetings with eager young applicants at school-sponsored job fairs. For people who enjoy number crunching, working on the benefits side of the fence can be a good career option. In short, no matter what kind of abilities one may possess, there's a good chance that there's a good match in an HR department.

"I think what's most important about someone going into HR today is not so much the traditional HR background but having good business skills is just as important as the HR knowledge of employment laws," says Hanson. "Having that knowledge is helpful, but the laws are ever changing so what's more important in our field is being a good business partner."