



## SPOTLIGHT



### Key Takeaways:

- HR professionals eager to climb the career ladder need to concentrate on their own career development, especially improving their digital and analytical skills.
- Professionals and their teams also need to integrate themselves into the business, align their strategy with that of the business or organisation and develop skills and practices required by the business.
- Surveys and experience show that many HR teams could improve on both counts. Rapid changes in technology, both in the HR field and businesses overall, mean professionals need to upgrade themselves by learning continuously.

## Technology, analytical skills and business savvy critical in mastering the HR ‘T’

**ERIK VAN VULPEN**  
Founder & Director, Academy to Innovate HR (AIHR)

Human Resources professionals traditionally concentrate on career development – the development of other people’s careers. But Erik van Vulpen - Founder & Leader in HR Upskilling, HR Innovation & Digital HR at the Academy to Innovative HR (AIHR) - believes HR professionals also need to turn their attention to their own careers.

Describing HR professionals’ development as a “T”, Van Vulpen explained, “At AIHR, we emphasise the concept of the T-shaped HR professional, which is about combining deep expertise in a specific HR domain with a broad understanding as core skills. The vertical part of the ‘T’ represents mastery in

one’s HR specialisation, like compensation, talent acquisition or HR analytics.”

Conversely the horizontal stroke represents the ability to connect across disciplines calling for an understanding of the business, digital agility, people advocacy, data literacy and the ability to deliver results.

“These core competencies are critically important,” Van Vulpen said. This connecting and understanding role was not confined to work within the HR department. It was also necessary to communicate with business stakeholders and build up the influence they needed to drive a positive transformation.

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HR professionals seeking to future-proof their careers should be curious and learn continuously. This means staying up to date both on trends in their broad industries and expectations within their specific workforces.

Another sure career builder is to stand out by taking up challenges. Van Vulpen said an AIHR survey showed that less than 10% of HR professionals listed working with data and technology as their favourite activities. But the small number who do master these skills will notice a profound long-term impact on their careers.

Strong digital and analytic skills are also critical when presenting HR to top managements and framing it as a business-critical investment, not a discretionary expense.

“For instance, if the company aims to become more data-driven, showcasing how upskilling HR in analytics can lead to better workforce planning, reduced turnover, or enhanced decision-making will resonate with leadership,” Van Vulpen said.

A company seeking to adopt data-driven workforce development would find skilled HR professionals essential. Failing in such a

drive could derail workforce planning and lead to top talent leaving the firm in search of opportunities elsewhere.

In addition to digital skills, an HR team that fully understands the broad business of the firm is bound to win seats at the top table.

“When HR teams deeply understand the business, they can craft strategies that directly address organisational challenges, optimise workforce productivity, and align talent initiatives with revenue-driving goals. Business-savvy HR professionals are better equipped to collaborate with other functions, anticipate market trends, and make informed decisions that impact the bottom line,” Van Vulpen said.

Giving a specific example, he recalled the experience of a 4,500-strong research and development group in Canada, an engineering organisation. The HR team fulfilled its basic functions, but struggled to effectively communicate with its data-oriented business stakeholders, measure impact, and support business goals.

New leadership transformed the HR team by boosting data literacy, business acumen and business partnering skills. This brought the HR team confidence and credibility when they presented data-backed insights, such as identifying turnover trends tied to specific managers. This rebuilt trust and positioned HR as a strategic partner.

Despite the advantages of taking a technology-driven, whole-business approach, Van Vulpen noted that many HR professionals fell short in these areas.

An AIHR survey, presented at the HKIHRM’s annual conference, found that HR professionals enjoyed implementing processes to create a memorable employee experience four times more than analysing data to uncover people insights and solve problems. Similarly, translating business

need into HR interventions won 20 times more enthusiasm than leveraging technology to drive business impact.

“To me this shows a disconnect between the activities that we should prioritise day-to-day versus what most HR professionals want to engage in. These areas would be my starting point when I’m thinking about how to differentiate my own career and stay competitive.”

HR leaders needed to develop a strategy in line with the overall strategy of their business or organisation, and their teams’ ability to deliver.

Such transformations could go wrong, however. One HR team leader who had been urged to be more data-driven installed dashboarding and similar tools, but adoption was low since team members did not understand the processes.

“This shows that strategy and technology is not enough. Only by managing HR careers to be aligned with the capabilities that the organisation needs to deliver on their strategy, can HR leaders support organisational goals and success,” Van Vulpen said.

He emphasised that businesses themselves were becoming more data-centric and digitally driven, while HR departments were integrating more and more into businesses as a whole. Both these developments called for professionals to continuously upgrade their digital and analytical skills and learning the business inside out.

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