

## FROM ADMINISTRATIVE TO STRATEGIC: THE EVOLUTION OF THE HR FUNCTION

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### Abstract

This paper synthesizes existing literature to trace and analyze the evolution of the Human Resources function from its administrative origins to its contemporary role as a strategic partner. It delineates the historical stages of this transformation, highlighting the paradigm shift from viewing employees as a cost to be controlled to recognizing them as human capital to be invested in. The paper identifies technology, changing business models, and academic thought as the primary enablers of this change. It also examines the persistent barriers—such as perceptual legacies and critical skill gaps—that hinder this evolution. The conclusion underscores that for HR to be an indispensable driver of competitive advantage, it must fully embrace its strategic potential, requiring a continuous redefinition of its competencies and value proposition.

**Keywords:** *Human Resource Management, HR Evolution, Strategic HR, HR Transformation, Human Capital*

### INTRODUCTION

The Human Resources (HR) function has undergone a radical transformation over the past century, evolving from a peripheral administrative unit into a potential core component of strategic organizational leadership. This journey represents a fundamental paradigm shift in how the workforce is perceived and managed (Imperatori et al., 2020). Initially rooted in the personnel management model of the early 20th century, the HR department's primary mandate was custodial, focused on payroll, compliance with labor laws, and maintaining basic employee records. Its role was largely reactive and bureaucratic, operating under the principles of scientific management where employees were viewed as resources to be administered, much like raw materials or equipment (МОСКАЛЕНКО & РАДЧУК, 2025). The late 20th century marked the beginning of a significant transition, spurred by factors such as globalization, technological advancement, and the emergence of knowledge-based economies. As competitive dynamics intensified, forward-thinking organizations began to recognize that their human capital—the skills, knowledge, and experience of their employees—could be a primary source of sustainable competitive advantage (Ajitha, 2024). This new perspective catalyzed the transition from "personnel administration" to "human resource management," with an expanded focus on areas like training, compensation, and employee relations. The influential work of thinkers like Dave Ulrich in the 1990s further propelled this shift by championing the concept of HR as a strategic partner, change agent, and employee champion, rather than merely an administrative function (Westover, 2025b).

Today, the evolution continues toward a fully integrated strategic role. Modern HR is increasingly characterized by its use of data analytics to inform talent decisions, its focus on shaping corporate culture and employee experience, and its critical role in managing change and driving innovation (SUNGIDA, 2024). The function is now expected to align human capital strategy directly with overarching business goals, ensuring that the organization has the right talent, capabilities, and culture to execute its strategy. This evolution from a technical, process-oriented past to a strategic, value-adding future forms the critical context for understanding the current state and potential of the HR profession (Westover, 2025a). Despite the well-documented theoretical evolution and the clear call for HR to adopt a strategic partnership role, a significant gap persists between this advocated ideal and the operational reality within many contemporary organizations (Sushma & Sarala, 2024). Numerous HR departments continue to be perceived primarily as administrative cost centers, burdened by transactional tasks and struggling to gain a seat at the strategic decision-making table. This discrepancy raises critical questions about the successful implementation of the strategic HR model and the factors that continue to hinder its full actualization, even as the business case for it grows stronger (Petitti & Younger, 2023).

This gap presents a critical problem for both organizational leaders and HR practitioners. For organizations, the failure to leverage HR strategically can lead to a failure in attracting and retaining top talent, poor alignment between human capital and business objectives, and a diminished capacity to adapt to market changes (Fahed-Sreih, 2018). For the HR profession, this disconnect creates a crisis of credibility and effectiveness, where its potential to contribute to organizational success remains unfulfilled. Therefore, a comprehensive synthesis and analysis are needed to systematically examine the trajectory of this evolution, identify the persistent barriers preventing its completion, and clarify the pathway for HR to fully transcend its administrative heritage and realize its strategic potential (Efron, 2018).

The primary objective of this review paper is to systematically synthesize existing literature to trace, analyze, and model the evolution of the HR function from its administrative origins to its contemporary strategic aspirations. Specifically, it aims to delineate the key historical stages of this transformation, identify the primary drivers—such as technology, economic shifts, and management theory—that have propelled it forward, and articulate the defining characteristics of HR at each phase. Furthermore, the paper will critically examine the persistent challenges and barriers that hinder the full adoption of the strategic partner role and will consolidate insights into a coherent model that charts both the journey thus far and the critical competencies required for its future success.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Primary Role: The "Custodian of Records" and "Compliance Officer"

During its formative years, the personnel department—the precursor to modern HR—was fundamentally defined by its role as the "Custodian of Records." Its primary function was to maintain order and accuracy in the vast and growing paperwork associated with a industrial-era workforce. This involved meticulously managing employee files, which contained basic information such as hiring dates, job titles, hours worked and pay rates (Azeez Jason Kess-Momoh et al., 2024). The department's authority was derived from its control over this administrative information, acting as the central repository for all personnel data and ensuring that the basic mechanics of employment were documented and traceable. The role was inherently inward-looking, focused on internal record-keeping rather than external business strategy or employee development (Angga Wahyudi et al., 2023).

Complementing this custodial function was the critical role of "Compliance Officer." In an era marked by the rise of labor unions and the introduction of early labor legislation, the department served as management's agent for enforcing rules and ensuring legal adherence. Its purpose was to protect the organization from internal disruption and legal liability by administering the terms of employment contracts and collective bargaining agreements (Westerman, 2021). The personnel manager was not a strategic partner but a gatekeeper and enforcer, responsible for ensuring that company policies and, to a basic extent, public labor laws were followed. This dual identity as custodian and compliance officer firmly established the function as a bureaucratic necessity rather than a value-adding asset (Voinycha & Verzun, 2024).

### Key Focus Areas

The daily activities of the early personnel department were dominated by a set of highly transactional and procedural tasks. Foremost among these was the critical function of payroll processing and administration, which involved the manual calculation of hours, wages, and deductions to ensure employees were paid accurately and on time (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023). This was intrinsically linked to extensive employee record-keeping, a labor-intensive process that required maintaining physical files for every worker, updating them with any changes in status, and ensuring their confidentiality and availability for managerial review. The efficiency and error-free execution of these tasks were the primary measures of the department's effectiveness, as any failure directly impacted employee morale and trust (Oluwatamilore Popo-Olaniyan et al., 2022).

Beyond these core administrative duties, the department was heavily occupied with the enforcement of labor laws and basic compliance. This involved staying abreast of legal requirements regarding working hours, minimum wage, and safety standards to minimize the risk of fines or litigation (DiClaudio, 2019). In many industrialized sectors, a significant portion of the personnel role was dedicated to managing union relations and collective bargaining. This involved administering the complex terms of union contracts, handling formal grievances, and participating in negotiations. These focus areas were fundamentally about risk mitigation and maintaining a stable, compliant workforce, requiring a reactive posture that responded to union demands, employee issues, and new regulations as they arose (Omar et al., 2023).

**Characteristics: Reactive, bureaucratic, focused on efficiency of transactional tasks.**

The overarching characteristics of the personnel function in this era were deeply shaped by its primary roles and focus areas. It was fundamentally reactive, operating on a wait-and-see basis where its initiatives were triggered by external events such as a union grievance, a new government regulation, or a line manager's request for a new hire (Chinenye Gbemisola Okatta et al., 2024). The function did not proactively develop talent strategies or anticipate future workforce needs; instead, it responded to problems after they emerged. This reactivity was coupled with a highly bureaucratic nature, where strict adherence to rules, policies, and standardized procedures was paramount. Success was measured by how consistently and efficiently these predefined processes were executed, rather than by the department's contribution to business outcomes or employee growth (Tenakwah & Watson, 2025).

This operational model necessitated a singular focus on the efficiency of transactional tasks. The value of the personnel department was judged almost exclusively on its ability to process payroll accurately, maintain flawless records, and ensure compliance without delay. The mindset was one of administrative control and cost containment, seeking to perform these necessary functions with the smallest possible staff and budget (DiClaudio, 2019). There was little distinction between the "vital few" strategic issues and the "trivial many" operational tasks, as the function was almost entirely consumed by the latter. This characteristic cemented its identity as an administrative overhead cost—a necessary part of the organizational machinery, but not a driver of its success (Westerman, 2021).

**METHODOLOGY**

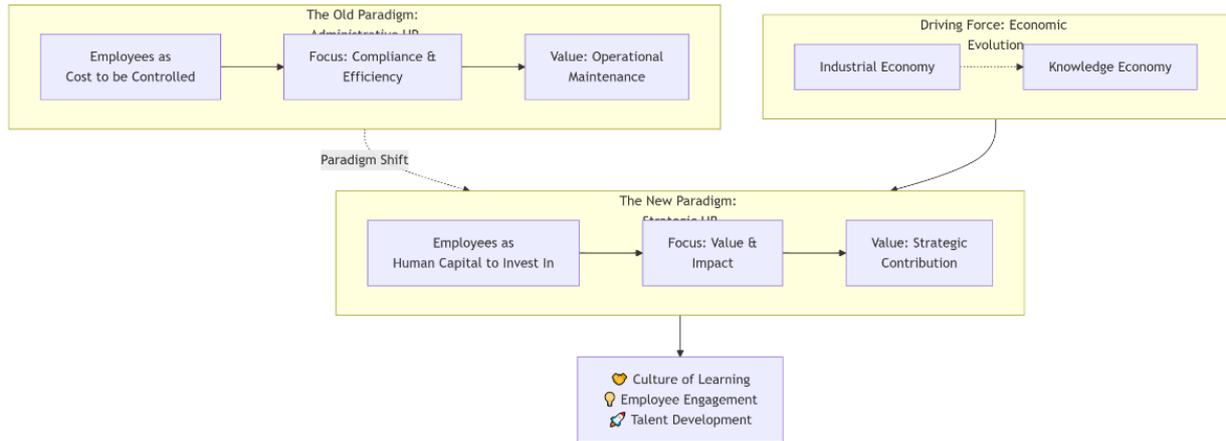
This paper employs a systematic literature review methodology to synthesize and analyze the existing body of knowledge on the evolution of the HR function. The review was conducted by identifying, evaluating, and interpreting a wide array of relevant academic publications, including peer-reviewed journal articles, seminal books, and conference proceedings. Key databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ProQuest were utilized to source literature, using a combination of keywords including "HR evolution," "strategic human resource management," "HR transformation," and "HR as a strategic partner." The scope was focused on publications that explicitly discussed the historical development, driving forces, and changing roles of the HR department.

The analytical process involved a thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, central themes, and conceptual models within the collected literature. The identified works were systematically categorized according to the stages of HR evolution they addressed—be it the administrative, transitional, or strategic partner era. This allowed for a structured synthesis of the key enablers, persistent barriers, and evolving competencies documented across studies. The methodology does not involve primary data collection but aims to provide a comprehensive and critical integrative review, constructing a coherent narrative of the HR function's journey and establishing a clear conceptual framework for understanding its progression.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION****Synthesizing the Evolutionary Model**

The journey from administrative to strategic reveals a fundamental paradigm shift in the very conception of an organization's workforce. It demonstrates a move from viewing employees as a cost to be controlled to recognizing them as human capital to be invested in. This evolution is not merely a change in activities but a transformation in value creation (Efron, 2018). The administrative model was focused on compliance and efficiency, aiming to minimize people-related risks and expenses. In contrast, the strategic model is focused on value and impact, aiming to maximize the return on investment in people by aligning human capital initiatives with core business objectives like market growth, innovation, and competitive differentiation. This synthesis shows that the function's value proposition has been fundamentally redefined from operational maintenance to strategic contribution (Sushma & Sarala, 2024).

Furthermore, this evolutionary model reveals that the HR function's trajectory mirrors the broader economic shift from industrial to knowledge-based economies. In an industrial economy, the primary source of value was physical capital and manual labor, which aligned with the administrative, control-oriented personnel function (SUNGIDA, 2024). In the knowledge economy, the primary source of value is intellectual capital and innovation, which necessitates a strategic HR function capable of fostering a culture of learning, engagement, and talent development. The journey thus underscores that the role of HR is not static; it is a dynamic construct that must evolve in lockstep with the nature of work itself. The model reveals that for HR to remain relevant, it must continuously adapt its focus from the routine and transactional to the complex and human-centric (МОККАЛЕВКО & РАДЧУК, 2025).



**Figure 1.** The Evolution of HR: From Cost Center to Strategic Partner

The graph as shown in Figure 1 effectively illustrates the fundamental paradigm shift in the HR function, mapping its evolution from a traditional administrative role to a modern strategic partnership. It clearly delineates the old paradigm, where employees were viewed as a cost to be controlled and the focus was on compliance and operational maintenance, contrasting it with the new paradigm where employees are seen as human capital to be invested in, with a focus on creating value and strategic contribution. This transition is accurately portrayed as being driven by the broader economic evolution from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy. Furthermore, the graph successfully captures the outcomes of this shift, showing how the strategic HR model ultimately enables a culture of learning, employee engagement, and talent development, thereby visually summarizing the core argument that HR's value proposition has been redefined from routine maintenance to strategic, human-centric impact.

**The indispensable role of technology, changing business models, and academic thought.**

Technology stands as the most tangible enabler of this evolution, primarily by liberating HR from its administrative burdens. The advent of Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS), followed by cloud-based platforms and self-service portals, automated core transactional tasks like payroll, benefits administration, and record-keeping (Pandey & Risal, 2022). This automation created the capacity and bandwidth for HR professionals to focus on more strategic work. More recently, advanced People Analytics and AI tools have provided the means to shift from reactive reporting to predictive insights, allowing HR to make data-driven decisions about talent acquisition, retention risks, and skill gap analysis, thereby solidifying its credibility as a strategic function (Oluwatamilore Popo-Olaniyan et al., 2022).

Alongside technology, changing business models and academic thought provided the necessary intellectual and economic impetus. The rise of globalization and the intensifying "war for talent" forced executives to recognize that skilled, motivated employees are a key differentiator in a competitive market. This created a demand for a more strategic HR function (Azeez Jason Kess-Momoh et al., 2024). Concurrently, academic frameworks, most notably the Resource-Based View of the firm, provided a theoretical foundation by arguing that a firm's unique internal resources and capabilities—including its human capital—are the primary drivers of sustainable competitive advantage. Thought leaders like Dave Ulrich translated this theory into practical models, such as the "Strategic Partner" framework, giving HR a clear roadmap and a new vocabulary to articulate its value, thus enabling its transition into the strategic realm (Petitti & Younger, 2023).

**Table 1.** Drivers of the HR Transformation from Administrative to Strategic

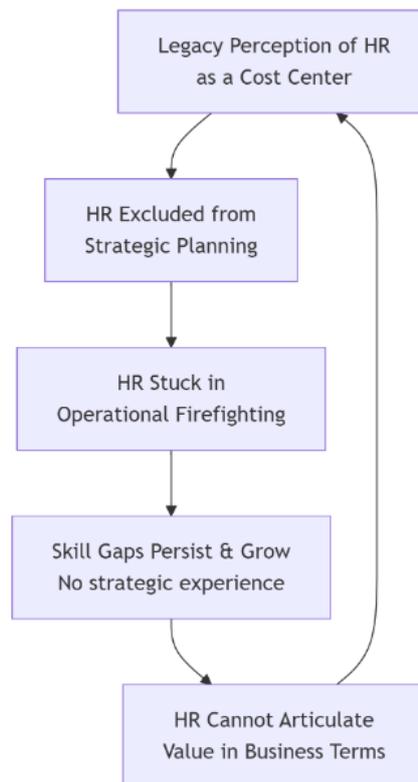
Enabler	Key Examples / Drivers	Impact on HR Function
Technology	Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS)	Liberated HR from administrative burdens by automating transactional tasks (payroll, records).
	Cloud-Based Platforms & Self-Service Portals	Created capacity for strategic work.
	People Analytics & AI Tools	Enabled a shift from reactive reporting to predictive insights, allowing data-driven talent decisions and solidifying HR's credibility.
Changing Business Models	Globalization	Forced executives to recognize human capital as a key competitive differentiator.
	The "War for Talent"	Created demand for a strategic HR function that could attract, retain, and develop skilled talent.
Academic Thought & Frameworks	Resource-Based View of the Firm	Provided a theoretical foundation, identifying human capital as a source of sustainable competitive advantage.
	Thought Leadership	Translated theory into a practical roadmap and new vocabulary, enabling HR to articulate its strategic value and guide its transformation.

The table as shown in Table 1 effectively synthesizes the three interdependent enablers of HR's strategic evolution, demonstrating that technology provided the essential operational freedom by automating administrative tasks, which in turn created the capacity for HR to address the strategic demand signal generated by changing business models like globalization and the war for talent (Westover, 2025a). This demand was validated and guided by the third enabler, academic thought, which supplied the necessary theoretical foundation and practical roadmap—from the Resource-Based View to Ulrich's models—to legitimize the focus on human capital and provide HR with the language and methods to reinvent itself as a credible, value-creating strategic partner (Pandey & Risal, 2022).

**Persistent Barriers: Why some HR departments still struggle to become strategic**

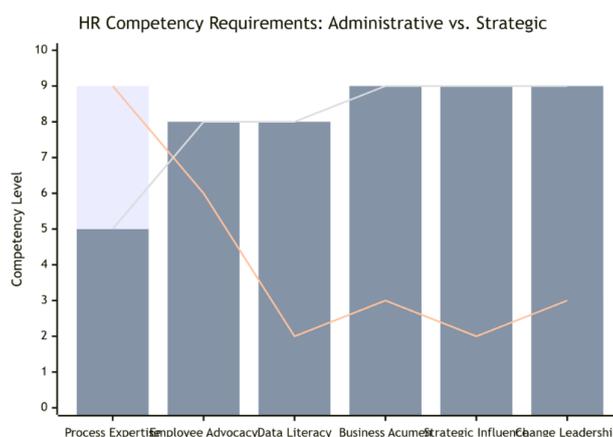
Despite the clear trajectory, a significant barrier for many HR departments is a deeply ingrained perception issue, both within the function and among senior leadership. Many executives, having experienced HR in its traditional administrative form, still perceive it as a tactical support function—a cost center rather than a strategic partner (Barisic & Pejić Bach, 2018). This legacy perception is often compounded when HR professionals themselves fail to articulate their contributions in the language of business, such as return on investment (ROI), impact on revenue, or mitigation of strategic risk. Consequently, they are not invited to strategic planning sessions, perpetuating a cycle where they remain focused on operational firefighting and are unable to demonstrate their strategic potential (Pandey & Risal, 2022).

Internally, evolution is often hampered by significant skill gaps within existing HR teams. Professionals who were hired and rewarded for their expertise in compliance, policy administration, and process management may lack the new competencies required for strategic partnership. These gaps typically exist in areas such as data analysis and interpretation, financial acumen, consulting skills, and strategic change management (Omar et al., 2023). Without targeted investment in upskilling and, in some cases, new talent acquisition, the department remains structurally incapable of delivering on the strategic agenda. This creates a frustrating paradox where the organization demands strategic HR but has a team equipped only for administrative tasks, leaving the function stuck in a transitional limbo (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023).



**Figure 2.** The Vicious Cycle of Perception & Skills

Figure 2 effectively illustrates the vicious cycle that traps HR departments in an administrative role, demonstrating how perception and skills gaps become self-reinforcing barriers. The cycle begins with the legacy perception of HR as a cost center, which leads to their exclusion from strategic planning sessions. This exclusion then forces HR to remain focused on operational firefighting, which in turn prevents the development of strategic skills and experience. Without these skills, HR professionals cannot articulate their value in business terms or demonstrate strategic potential, which ultimately reinforces the initial legacy perception, thus completing and perpetuating a closed loop that is difficult to break without targeted intervention.



**Figure 3.** The HR Competency Gap: A Comparative Analysis of Administrative vs. Strategic Roles

The bar chart as shown in Figure 3 effectively visualizes the fundamental competency shift required for HR's evolution, contrasting the sharply imbalanced profile of the traditional administrative role with the robust, multi-faceted profile of the strategic partner. It clearly shows that while "Process Expertise" decreases in relative dominance, there is a dramatic and necessary surge in every other strategic competency, particularly in "Business Acumen," "Strategic Influence," and "Change Leadership," which leap from negligible to essential levels. This stark

comparison underscores that the transition is not merely an addition of new skills but a complete transformation of the HR identity, demanding a move from a deep specialization in administration to a balanced mastery of both people-centric and business-driving capabilities to close the critical skill gap.

### **The Evolving Competencies of the HR Professional: From process expert to data analyst, consultant, and change leader**

The required competencies for the HR professional have undergone a profound transformation, moving far beyond mastery of employment law and payroll systems. The modern HR business partner must now be a data analyst, capable of translating people data—such as turnover trends, engagement survey results, and productivity metrics—into actionable business intelligence that informs decision-making (Angga Wahyudi et al., 2023). Furthermore, they must act as an internal consultant, diagnosing organizational problems, co-creating solutions with business leaders, and influencing decisions through trusted relationships and a deep understanding of the business's commercial context. This shift is from enforcing policy to solving business problems with people-centric solutions (Fahed-Sreih, 2018; Petitti & Younger, 2023).

Beyond analysis and consultation, the strategic HR professional is expected to be a proactive change leader and a culture architect. This involves facilitating organizational transformation, managing the human side of mergers, restructures, and digital transformations to minimize disruption and maximize adoption (SUNGIDA, 2024). Instead of merely communicating top-down decisions, they now design and implement strategies to shape a high-performance culture, foster employee engagement, and build leadership capability throughout the organization. This evolution from a reactive process expert to a proactive data analyst, consultant, and change leader signifies that the most valuable currency in HR is no longer administrative efficiency, but strategic impact and the ability to drive behavioral and cultural change (Ajitha, 2024).

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this review has traced the definitive evolution of the HR function from its origins as an administrative, compliance-focused entity to its contemporary imperative as a strategic business partner. This journey is not merely a change in tasks but represents a fundamental paradigm shift in how organizations perceive their workforce—from a cost to be minimized to human capital to be maximized. The transformation, driven by the powerful confluence of technological automation, globalized business models, and robust academic theory, has redefined HR's value proposition from ensuring operational efficiency to driving strategic impact through talent, culture, and data-driven insight.

However, the path to full strategic integration remains incomplete for many. As analyzed, persistent barriers, namely entrenched perceptual legacies and significant internal skill gaps, create a vicious cycle that hinders progress. The journey forward, therefore, demands deliberate and concerted effort. HR leaders must proactively cultivate business acumen, data literacy, and consulting skills within their teams, while simultaneously learning to articulate their contributions in the language of business outcomes to dismantle outdated perceptions and secure a seat at the strategic table. Ultimately, the evolution of HR is a continuous process, not a finite destination. The future will demand even greater agility as trends in artificial intelligence, the gig economy, and employee experience continue to reshape the workplace. For organizations to thrive, the HR function must fully embrace its role as an architect of talent strategy and a steward of organizational culture. By completing its transition from a support function to a core strategic driver, HR will finally actualize its potential as an indispensable partner in building sustainable competitive advantage.

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