

IS YOUR HR DEPARTMENT OBSOLETE? REDEFINING PEOPLE OPERATIONS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Received : 20 September 2025

Published : 13 December 2025

Revised : 10 October 2025

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.54443/morfaiv6i1.4690>

Accepted : 13 November 2025

Link Publish : <https://radjapublika.com/index.php/MORFAI/article/view/4690>

Abstract

This article examines the critical imperative for organizations to transform their traditional Human Resources (HR) function into a strategic, modern People Operations model. The background establishes that in a knowledge-based economy where human capital is the primary driver of value, administrative and reactive HR practices create a strategic liability. The objective is to provide a diagnostic framework and a practical roadmap for this essential evolution. The methodology involves a synthesis of contemporary management literature, organizational case studies, and analysis of emerging best practices in talent strategy and employee experience. The results detail the four foundational pillars of a modern People function—Strategic Partnership, Employee Experience as a Product, Data-Driven Decisions, and Culture Cultivation—and a six-step transformation roadmap. The discussion argues that this shift moves HR from a cost center to a core competitive advantage. The conclusion asserts that redefining people operations is not a choice but a strategic necessity for organizational resilience and growth.

Keywords: *People Operations, HR Transformation, Strategic Human Resources, Employee Experience, Talent Strategy*

INTRODUCTION

The field of Human Resources emerged in the early 20th century from personnel administration, rooted in the principles of scientific management and industrial efficiency. Its primary functions were transactional: payroll, compliance, labor relations, and record-keeping (SUNGIDA, 2024). This model operated effectively in a stable, industrial economy characterized by hierarchical structures and long-term employment. For decades, the HR department was viewed as an administrative necessity cost center responsible for hiring, firing, and ensuring the company did not violate labor laws. Its role was largely sold from core business strategy, operating as a support function rather than a value driver (Westover, 2025).

The dawn of the digital age and the rise of the knowledge economy began to expose the limitations of this traditional model. As competitive advantage shifted from physical capital and processes to innovation, intellectual property, and agility, the quality, engagement, and capabilities of the workforce became the paramount strategic differentiator (Kostenko, 2021). Concepts like "the war for talent" entered the business lexicon, highlighting that attracting and retaining skilled individuals was a primary business challenge. Simultaneously, workforce expectations evolved, with employees seeking meaningful work, development, flexibility, and a positive experience, not just a paycheck and benefits (Westover, 2025).

This confluence of factors created a fundamental disconnect. While the business landscape and talent market underwent radical transformation, many HR departments remained entrenched in their administrative heritage. They continue to be measured by efficiency metrics like time-to-fill and cost-per-hire, rather than impact metrics like quality-of-hire, innovation density, or workforce readiness for future challenges (Azeez et al., 2024). This gap between the strategic importance of people and the operational reality of the HR function forms the core tension of the modern enterprise, setting the stage for necessary and profound reinvention (Imperatori et al., 2020).

The central problem is that a traditional, administrative HR model is now obsolete and acts as an active drag on organizational performance. It fails to meet the strategic needs of the business by operating in a reactive, compliance-focused silo, disconnected from product roadmaps, go-to-market strategies, and cultural evolution (Latifat et al., 2023). When HR is perceived and functions as the "policy police" or a bureaucratic bottleneck, it cannot contribute to solving the most critical business problems related to talent scarcity, skills gaps, and employee engagement. This misalignment means business leaders often bypass HR to get things done, further marginalizing the function (Sushma & Sarala, 2024). Furthermore, this obsolete model catastrophically fails to meet the needs of the modern employee. Designed for administrative control rather than user-centric experience, it creates friction in every touchpoint—from cumbersome recruitment processes and opaque internal mobility systems to dreaded annual performance reviews (Kostenko, 2021). This poor employee experience directly undermines the very talent goals the organization seeks to achieve, leading to disengagement, unnecessary attrition, and a damaged employer brand. Consequently, the organization is left with a people function that is a cost center, a source of frustration, and incapable of executing the talent strategy required to compete, thereby creating a significant strategic vulnerability (SUNGIDA, 2024). The objective of this article is to provide a clear, actionable framework for leaders to consciously transform their Human Resources function into a strategic, value-creating People Operations engine. It aims to diagnose the symptoms of obsolescence, define the core pillars of a modern people's function, and outline a concrete roadmap for achieving this transformation. The goal is to empower executives and HR leaders to shift the paradigm from managing human resources as administrative overhead to optimizing human potential as the organization's most critical strategic asset.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Evolution from Personnel to Strategic Partner

The journey of the people function begins with its origins as "Personnel Management," a role rooted in the early 20th century industrial economy. This model was fundamentally administrative and reactive, focused on transactional duties such as payroll processing, benefits administration, maintaining personnel files, and ensuring basic legal compliance with labor laws (Danchenko & Fedotova, 2024). Its purpose was to manage the workforce as a factor of production, with efficiency and cost control as primary objectives. The personnel manager was often seen as an administrator or record-keeper, operating in a silo separate from the core business operations and strategic planning of the organization. This function was viewed as a necessary cost of doing business, not as a contributor to competitive success (Sushma & Sarala, 2024).

A revolutionary shift occurred in the 1990s with the work of thought leader Dave Ulrich, who introduced the influential "HR Business Partner" model. Ulrich argued that HR must evolve beyond administration to assume four key roles: strategic partner, administrative expert, employee champion, and change agent (Barišić et al., 2021). This framework explicitly called for HR professionals to sit at the table with business leaders, aligning people's practices with organizational strategy. The model aimed to split the function, often into Centers of Excellence (COEs), Shared Services, and embedded Business Partners, with the goal of freeing up strategic capacity (Avgar, 2020). This was a pivotal intellectual breakthrough that redefined the ambition of HR, proposing that it should contribute directly to business performance and cultural transformation, not just manage employment logistics (Badriyah et al., 2024).

However, implementation of this model has been fraught with challenges. Critics like Edward Lawler and Susan Mohrman have argued that, in practice, many HR Business Partners remained mired in tactical, day-to-day operational issues and failed to achieve true strategic influence (Barišić et al., 2021). The split model sometimes created confusion and bureaucracy, and many HR professionals lacked the business acumen or data fluency to operate as credible partners. Consequently, recent scholarship argues for a move beyond the "partner" metaphor toward full integration, where talent strategy is indistinguishable from business strategy. The literature concludes that while Ulrich's model was a necessary and groundbreaking evolution, it is an insufficient response to the dynamism of the 21st century, which demands a more fundamental reinvention of the function's identity, skills, and operating model into what is now termed "People Operations (Imperatori et al., 2020)".

The Rise of Human Capital as a Primary Competitive Advantage

The theoretical imperative for transforming HR into a strategic powerhouse is grounded in the Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm, a dominant strategic management theory. Pioneered by scholars like Jay Barney, RBV posits that sustainable competitive advantage is built not on external market positioning alone, but on internal resources and capabilities that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (the VRIN criteria) (Barišić et al., 2021). According to this view, physical assets, technology, and even strategic plans can often be copied or acquired by competitors. True, enduring advantages come from resources that are deeply embedded in the organization's social fabric and are difficult to replicate (DiClaudio, 2019).

A growing body of work applies this rigorous lens to human capital. Researchers like Brian Becker and Mark Huselid have compellingly argued that a highly skilled, uniquely configured, and deeply motivated workforce meets all the VRIN criteria. The collective knowledge, skills, abilities, and collaborative capacity of an organization's people—its culture and ways of working—are immensely valuable, rare in their specific combination, extremely difficult for competitors to imitate, and cannot be easily substituted by technology alone (Latifat et al., 2023). This theoretical link elevates talent management from an operational or supportive concern to the very heart of strategic management. The central task of the executive team becomes configuring and deploying human capital in a way that competitors cannot match (Kostenko, 2021).

This theoretical foundation provides the ultimate justification for investing in a transformed People Operations model. If human capital is the primary source of competitive advantage, then the organizational function responsible for attracting, developing, motivating, and retaining that capital must be strategic, analytical, and empowered. It can no longer be a transactional cost center but must be a core strategic function, equipped with data and systems to make evidence-based decisions about the workforce (DiClaudio, 2019). The literature asserts that this function must be capable of designing the organizational architecture—the systems for performance, development, and culture—that uniquely configures human potential to execute the business strategy, thereby creating the inimitable advantage described by RBV theory (Sushma & Sarala, 2024).

Technology and Data: The New Enablers of People Strategy

For decades, the strategic aspirations of HR were hindered by technological limitations. The function was bogged down in manual processes, paper records, and disjointed systems, leaving little capacity for strategic work. The advent of integrated, cloud-based Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS), sophisticated people analytics platforms, and applications of artificial intelligence has fundamentally dismantled these technical barriers (Enderes, 2024). These technologies automate administrative tasks, integrate disparate data sources, and provide the tools necessary to analyze the workforce with a new level of sophistication and scale. This digital infrastructure is the prerequisite for the evolution of functions, transforming raw people data into a strategic asset (Latifat Omolara Ayanponle et al., 2024).

The most profound impact of this technological shift is the rise of people analytics. As explored by thought leaders like Thomas Davenport, Jeanne Harris, and David Creelman, analytics move HR decision-making from intuition and anecdote to evidence and insight (Miller, 2024). Leaders can now move beyond descriptive metrics (what happened) to diagnostic (why it happened), predictive (what will happen), and even prescriptive (what should we do) analytics. This allows the function to answer critical business questions with data: predicting flight risk among top performers, identifying the traits of highest-performing hires, analyzing the network factors driving innovation, or pinpointing skills gaps that could derail a new product launch. This capability is what allows HR to speak the language of business and contribute to strategic conversations with credibility (Enderes, 2024). Furthermore, technology enables the "consumerization" of HR services. Modern HRIS platforms offer employee and manager self-service portals, mobile access, and user-friendly interfaces that shift transactional queries away from HR staff. This not only improves operational efficiency but also enhances the employee experience by providing instant access to information and services (Barišić et al., 2021). Literature, however, offers a crucial caveat:

technology is not the transformation itself. By simply buying a new HRIS platform does not make a function strategic. Technology is the essential enabler—the infrastructure that makes a strategic, scalable, and employee-centric People Operations function possible and measurable. Its value is only realized when it is deployed in service of a clear people strategy and operated by teams with the skills to leverage its full potential (E. K. (Elise) Lee et al., 2022).

Employee Experience and the Product Mindset

The most recent and human-centric evolution in the literature focuses on the concept of employee experience (EX). Drawing heavily from design thinking, service design, and product management disciplines, scholars and practitioners like Ben Whitter and others advocate for treating the employee's journey through the organization as a coherent, intentional design challenge (Borowska & Pietroń-Pyszczek, 2025). This involves mapping touchpoints from pre-hire to post-exit, identifying moments that matter, and seeking to reduce friction while amplifying value. The central idea is to apply the same rigor and user-centricity to internal "people products"—such as onboarding, performance feedback, internal mobility, and learning—that technology companies apply to their customer-facing software (Su & Rungruang, 2024).

This represents a fundamental philosophical shift in the purpose of the people function. It moves from an inward-looking, process-compliance mindset, where the goal is to create efficient, standardized, low-risk procedures for the organization's benefit, to an outward-looking, user-centric mindset. Here, the goal is to create desirable, effective, and engaging experiences for the employee that, in turn, drive organizational outcomes (Miller, 2024). The function becomes the architect of the work environment, considering physical, technological, and cultural elements that shape how work feels and gets done. This requires new skills in journey mapping, empathy research, iterative prototyping, and measuring experience through metrics like net promoter score (eNPS) and sentiment analysis (DiClaudio, 2019).

A robust body of research connects a positive, intentionally designed employee experience directly to critical business outcomes. Studies show strong correlations between EX and higher levels of engagement, increased productivity, greater innovation, stronger retention, and enhanced employer branding (Miller, 2024). This provides the empirical link that justifies the investment in EX design; it is not merely about making employees happier but about driving performance and competitive advantage. This body of work provides the philosophical and methodological foundation for what is now considered the most modern pillar of People Operations: the shift from managing human resources to designing an ecosystem where people can thrive, thereby directly enabling the execution of business strategy through a motivated and capable workforce (Enderes, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This article employs a integrative review methodology to construct a prescriptive framework for HR transformation. The process begins with a systematic analysis of contemporary academic literature from fields including strategic human resource management, organizational psychology, and change leadership. This analysis identifies converging themes, established models, and evidence-based practices that define the gap between traditional HR and a strategically integrated people function. The academic foundation is critically evaluated to distill core principles that are both theoretically sound and pragmatically applicable.

To ensure practical relevance and validate the framework, the methodology incorporates a parallel analysis of documented industry case studies, executive reports from leading consulting firms, and the published philosophies of technology-forward organizations known for innovative people practices. This practice-based evidence is synthesized with the academic literature to identify common success factors, recurring pitfalls, and the tangible components of a modern People Operations playbook. The resulting framework is designed to bridge theory and practice, providing organizational leaders with a structured, actionable pathway for assessment and transformation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Diagnosing the Symptoms of Functional Obsolescence

The synthesis of literature and practice reveals a consistent set of indicators that an HR function is obsolete. These symptoms include a primary identity as a process enforcer and policy administrator, a reactive operational mode driven by compliance and employee complaints, a noticeable absence from strategic business planning sessions, and employee feedback that characterizes HR interactions as bureaucratic and unhelpful (Chinenye Gbemisola Okatta et al., 2024). A key diagnostic is who HR reports to and what metrics they are judged by; if reporting is low in the hierarchy and metrics are purely cost- and efficiency-focused, obsolescence is likely (Azam, 2023).

The discussion of these symptoms' centers on their root cause: a fundamental misalignment between the function's design and the organization's strategic needs. When HR is structured and measured as a cost center, its natural optimization is toward cost reduction and risk mitigation, not value creation. This creates a vicious cycle where business leaders, frustrated by a lack of strategic support, marginalize HR further, perpetuating its administrative focus (Azam, 2023). The presence of these symptoms is not merely an HR problem but a critical business risk, signaling that the organization is failing to optimize its most important asset (Latifat Omolara Ayanponle et al., 2024).

Furthermore, this diagnosis must be contextual. Obsolescence is not defined by a lack of modern technology alone but by mindset and influence. A function can have a new HRIS platform yet remain obsolete if its leaders are not engaged in strategic dialogue (Zhang & Chen, 2024). Conversely, a function with legacy systems but a deep, trusted partnership with the CEO on talent strategy is more modern in the ways that matter most. The diagnostic, therefore, assesses influence, mindset, and outcomes more than the superficial adoption of new tools (Kostenko, 2021).

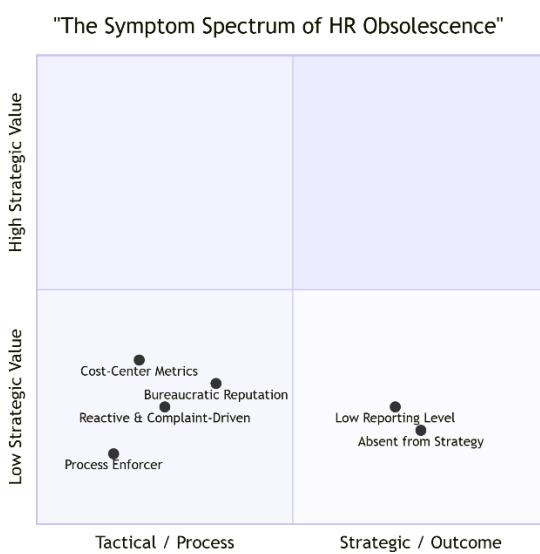


Figure 1. The Symptom Spectrum of HR Obsolescence

The chart as presented in Figure 1 effectively visualizes the diagnostic framework by mapping common symptoms along two critical axes: Tactical/Process versus Strategic/Outcome, and Low versus High Strategic Value. The clustering of all symptoms—Process Enforcer, Bureaucratic Reputation, Cost-Center Metrics, Absent from Strategy, and Low Reporting Level—in the bottom-left and bottom-right quadrants vividly illustrates their collective association with low strategic value. Notably, symptoms like "Absent from Strategy" and "Low Reporting Level" are positioned toward the Strategic/Outcome end of the horizontal axis, indicating they are strategic failures in themselves, yet they still reside at the bottom of the vertical axis, confirming they deliver no strategic value. This spatial representation makes it immediately clear that an obsolete function is defined by its displacement from the high-value, strategic-outcome upper quadrants, and that a cluster of symptoms in the lower half of the chart is a strong indicator of a function that is a bureaucratic liability rather than a strategic asset.

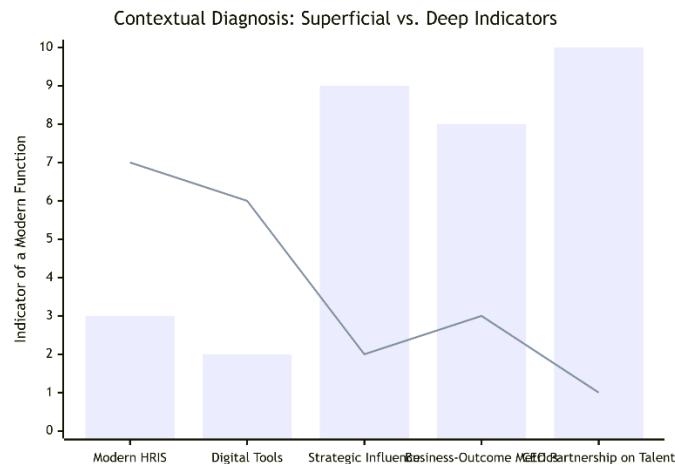


Figure 2. Contextual Diagnosis: Influence vs. Technology

The chart as presented in Figure 2 powerfully corrects a common misdiagnosis by visually distinguishing between the mere adoption of technology and the genuine acquisition of strategic influence. The stark divergence between the two data series, "Modern HRIS" and "Digital Tools" score low as true indicators of a modern function but high on the superficial line—demonstrates that new software alone is a misleading sign of progress. In contrast, the towering bars for "CEO Partnership on Talent," "Strategic Influence," and "Business-Outcome Metrics" establish that the authentic markers of a transformed People Operations function are relational, political, and results-based. The chart's core argument is that obsolescence is a condition of mindset and organizational position, not of technological vintage; a department can have all the latest tools but remain utterly obsolete if it lacks a seat at the strategic table and is not measured by its impact on the business.

The Four Pillars of Modern People Operations

The analysis crystallizes into four foundational pillars required for a transformed function. First, Strategic, Embedded Partnership requires the Head of People to be a peer to other C-suite leaders, with talent strategy woven into business planning. Second, Employee Experience as a Product mandate adopting a user-centric, design-thinking approach to every process, from onboarding to exit (E. K. Lee et al., 2019). Third, Data-Driven Decision Making involves building capability in people analytics to move from anecdote to insight, predicting and solving people-related business problems. Fourth, Cultivator of Culture & Capability charges the function with intentionally shaping a productive culture and building systems for continuous learning and internal mobility (Badriyah et al., 2024). Discussing these pillars reveals their interdependence. A data-driven approach (Pillar 3) provides the evidence needed to build a compelling business case for strategic initiatives and to measure the impact of EX investments (Pillar 2). A deep focus on culture and capability (Pillar 4) is what fulfills the promise of a strategic partnership (Pillar 1), moving beyond planning to execution (Irwan, 2024). The shift is holistic; adopting one pillar in isolation, such as buying an analytics tool without strategic partnership, leads to localized improvement but not transformation (Borowska & Pietroń-Pyszczek, 2025). This model represents a complete identity shift. The primary customer expands from the employee to include the business leader and the organization itself. The core activity shifts from administering processes to designing systems and experiences (E. K. (Elise) Lee et al., 2022). The value proposition shifts from cost avoidance and compliance to driving productivity, innovation, and growth. The pillars provide a target state that is inherently aligned with the needs of a 21st-century organization, making the function a source of competitive advantage (Kay & Skarlicki, 2020).

Table 1. The Four Pillars of a Modern People Operations Function: From Administration to Strategic Advantage

Pillar	Core Mandate	Key Activities	Primary Outcome
Strategic, Embedded Partnership	Integrate talent strategy directly into core business strategy and planning.	Head of People operates as a C-suite peer; workforce planning aligned with product/market roadmaps; talent metrics tied to business KPIs.	HR shifts from a support function to a co-architect of business execution and growth.
Employee Experience (EX) as a Product	Design every people process with a user-centric (employee) mindset, prioritizing engagement and efficiency.	Map employee journeys; apply design thinking to onboarding, feedback, mobility; implement intuitive self-service tech.	Reduced friction, increased engagement, and a stronger employer brand that attracts and retains top talent.
Data-Driven Decision Making	Move from intuition and anecdote to evidence-based insights and predictive analytics for people decisions.	Build people analytics capability; use data to diagnose attrition, predict hiring success, identify skills gaps, and measure intervention ROI.	Credible, strategic influence; proactive solution to people-related business problems; optimized talent investments.
Cultivator of Culture & Capability	Intentionally shape the organizational ecosystem and build the workforce skills required for future strategy.	Define and operationalize cultural values; create systems for continuous learning, mentorship, and internal talent mobility.	A resilient, adaptive, and high-performing culture with the right skills in place to execute evolving business goals.

The table as presented in Table 1 successfully distills a complex transformation into a clear, actionable framework by defining not just abstract concepts but their corresponding mandates, activities, and measurable outcomes. It illustrates the holistic and interdependent nature of the shift: Strategic Partnership provides the direction, EX as a Product defines the user-centric method, Data-Driven Decisions supply the evidence-based fuel, and Cultivator of Culture & Capability ensures sustainable execution. By moving from left to right—from the core mandate to the tangible outcome—the table demonstrates how each pillar logically transitions from philosophy to practice, collectively mapping the journey from an administrative cost center focused on process compliance to a value-creating strategic engine that drives productivity, innovation, and competitive advantage through people.

The Transformation Roadmap: From Audit to Integration

The research outlines a six-stage, non-linear roadmap for transformation. It begins with (1) a candid Audit & Acknowledge phase, using the diagnostic checklist to assess the current state. This must be followed by (2) securing an Executive Mandate and reframing the narrative around investment, not cost. The first practical action is (3) to Start with Experience, selecting one high-friction employee journey to redesign as a proof-of-concept. Concurrently, organizations must (4) Upskill the HR Team in data, product

management, and consulting, and (5) selectively Implement Enabling Technology that supports the new model. Finally, (6) Redefine Success Metrics to align with business outcomes locks in the change (Petitti & Younger, 2023). The discussion of this roadmap emphasizes that success is contingent on sequence and sponsorship. Starting with a technology implementation (Step 5) before securing executive mandate and upskilling the team (Steps 2 & 4) is a common and costly failure (Fenwick et al., 2024). The proof-of-concept (Step 3) is critical for building credibility and demonstrating tangible value early, creating momentum for broader change. Furthermore, the roadmap is iterative; insights from the EX-project should feed back into the audit, and new metrics will reveal new areas for strategic focus (Latifat Omolara Ayanponle et al., 2024). A critical thread in the discussion is the requirement to manage the internal change within the HR team itself. This transformation can be threatening, requiring new skills and mindsets. The roadmap must include clear communication, development opportunities, and, in some cases, respectful changes in personnel. Treating the HR team as the first "employee experience" to be redesigned with empathy and clarity is essential for gaining their buy-in as architects of the new function, not just subjects of the change.

Outcomes and Impacts: Measuring the Shift from Cost to Value

The results of a successful transformation manifest in tangible outcomes. Key metrics evolve: voluntary attrition decreases, especially in critical roles; internal fill rates for open positions increase; employee engagement and net promoter scores (eNPS) rise; and time-to-productivity for new hires shortens (Miller, 2024). At a business level, the function contributes to strategic goals, such as enabling a new market entry by ensuring the right talent is in place or increasing innovation output by improving team collaboration and psychological safety. The discussion of these outcomes reinforces the core thesis: this is a strategic business investment, not an HR project (Angga Wahyudi et al., 2023). The return on investment is measured in reduced talent-related risk, increased organizational agility, and enhanced ability to execute strategy. A modern People Operations function acts as an early warning system for cultural or capability gaps and as an engine for building future-ready skills. It shifts from being a cost on the income statement to an integral part of the organization's value-creation machinery (Zhang & Chen, 2024). However, the discussion also acknowledges barriers. This transformation requires significant investment in technology and talent, a long-term view from the executive team, and a willingness to dismantle legacy power structures. It may face resistance from managers accustomed to the old, transactional model of HR service. Overcoming these barriers requires persistent leadership communication that frames the journey not as a critique of the past but as an essential adaptation for the future, positioning the people as the steward of the organization's most vital capability: its human potential.

CONCLUSION

This analysis has demonstrated that the traditional administrative HR model is not merely outdated but is a strategic liability in the modern economy. The transformation to a strategic People Operations function is no longer a discretionary upgrade but an existential imperative for organizations that seek to compete on talent, innovation, and agility. The proposed framework—diagnosing obsolescence, building upon the four pillars of strategic partnership, employee experience, data-driven insight, and culture cultivation, and following a deliberate transformation roadmap—provides a clear path forward. This journey redefines the people function from a reactive administrator of policy to a proactive architect of organizational capability.

The successful execution of this transformation hinges on leadership courage and commitment. It requires CEOs and CFOs to champion the change, invest in new skills and technologies, and hold the function accountable for business outcomes, not just administrative efficiency. For HR professionals, it demands a proactive embrace of a new identity as business leaders who specialize in the human systems that drive performance. The reward for this effort is profound: a function that transitions from a perennial cost center, perpetually justifying its existence, to an indisputable source of competitive advantage and a key driver of sustainable growth.

Ultimately, the question "Is Your HR Department Obsolete?" is a proxy for a more fundamental question: "Is your organization optimized to leverage its human potential in the 21st century?" The organizations that answer this call, that boldly redefine their approach to people's operations, will be the ones that attract the best talent, adapt swiftly to change, and thrive in an increasingly complex and human-centric future. The evolution from HR to People Operations is, therefore, not just a change in name or process, but a critical strategic evolution for any organization that intends to succeed.

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