

Aligning Multiple Human Resource-Related Initiatives

By Peter R. Hybert

Alignment

One of the most sought-after states in the world of strategy is alignment. It is like perfection—we never quite get there but everyone agrees that we should strive for it. It is a big enough challenge in a large organization to get a lot of people to just use the same labels for things, much less agree on where to go and how to get there. Did you ever try to get six or seven people organized to go to dinner during a business trip? Magnify that communication problem by factor of 10,000 and you see the nature of the alignment challenge.

To deal with this challenge, corporations have invented the initiative. Initiatives are most visible by their slogans or themes, but to really work there needs to be some detail underneath the slogan. (Dilbert cartoons provide plenty of examples of what can happen if there is nothing but slogan . . .). The reason for the slogan is that, besides real content, initiatives need focus. A well-targeted initiative brings our attention to a problem or opportunity worth addressing and frames what we should do about it. The slogan is a meme—sort of like the hook in a pop song—intended to get you humming whether you mean to or not.

So if you are the initiative champion, you apply all the concepts from marketing and branding that you can to promote your initiative. Unfortunately, if you are in the target audience, there can be a lot of things vying for your attention. And, due to the way humans are “hardwired” mentally, there is a limit to how many things we can pay attention to¹.

Corporations today often have active initiatives to develop competency models, define career paths, institute qualification or certification programs, manage the human capital, implement knowledge management systems, and track everything with an integrated human resource information system (HRIS).

As training and/or performance consultants, our business is human performance. We may feel that we are enjoying a real opportunity with so much attention being paid to “the people stuff” by way of HR-related initiatives.

¹ As an aside, I think people have increased their ability to deal with complexity and to “multitask” but only by shortening the duration of their focus and increasing the frequency of attention shifts. For instance, the next time you are working on your computer, take a look at all the data that is presented to you and think about how much of it you ignore most of the time. Depending on how you count it (for example, is a scroll bar one item or several?), I count more than 85 icons being displayed as I work on this Microsoft® Word document, but I’m ignoring almost all of them. We’ve all gotten used to that complexity.

The Word example shows complexity without much multitasking. My 16-year-old routinely plays computer simulation games with probably twice as many icons, and you have to attend to them frequently by rapid attention shifts. For example, imagine you start troops moving toward a target. Then, while they are moving, you start building more facilities or training additional soldiers, then while that is going on you may dash off a note to a teammate playing somewhere on the Web, then check the “bird’s eye view” map to see where the enemy is, then go back to redirect the troops, etc. That is a lot of stimulus! But, we still focus on one thing at a time—multitasking is simply quicker shifts in focus. And, though there is a lot going on in the simulation game, the goal is still very clear and straightforward.

But, you may also feel a little uneasy—that perhaps there is too much going on. Perhaps people are working at cross-purposes or redundantly. You are probably right and it is probably costing your company quite a bit in terms of energy and dollars.

Using the SPIN model described in Table 1, we can determine if the potential cost is worth the cost of the effort to avoid it.

Acronym	Definition
S: Situation	Key characteristics of your customer's environment.
P: Problems	Things that aren't working as desired (I sometimes think of the "P" as standing for "pain"—what your customer doesn't like about the situation). But, these can be "opportunities," painful if missed as well.
I: Implications	The business impact of the problems/opportunities—try to get to dollars here or an overall business impact such as loss of market share.
N: Needs Payoff	The potential value of a solution that addresses the above.

Table 1: SPIN Definition

Note: There is much more to the SPIN model than this simple acronym—for more information visit www.buthwaite.com.

The Situation

The situation was introduced above—basically, numerous human resource-related initiatives are going on within large organizations. Each one, taken separately, has a clear mission and targets an area important to the business. But, they aren't in alignment. The reason? There is no visibility across the organizations for similar initiatives until you reach the executive level. Individual champions are unlikely to spend time searching out or resolving overlaps or gaps with other initiatives because they already have enough work to do.

So, the situation is: lots of initiatives tripping over each other. Table 2 lists some specifics:

Example	Description	Potential Issues
Competency modeling	Defining the key enabling knowledge and skill components of various jobs/roles. Usually done at a high level (little detail). Intended to be useful for selection and development.	Lots of time spent analyzing jobs looking for general capabilities and commonalities across roles/jobs. Can get bogged down in definitions and trying to link to <i>organizational</i> competencies. <i>(I have yet to find a generic capability that was a differentiator for top performance, but that is another story.)</i>
Career paths	Defining recommended or typical progression of jobs and the key experiences and training needed to progress. Intended to be used to support succession planning and to drive development.	People often take widely varying routes through their careers. Can overlap/depend upon competency models and/or qualification systems.
Human capital management	Defining key components of human assets, inventorying, and managing them.	Pretty abstract—lots of time spent defining concepts. Often suffers from an unclear purpose. Overlaps with competency models.
Knowledge management	Defining key components of the knowledge/skills embedded in the organization. May try to inventory or extract and document the human knowledge base.	Potential to become a very large-scale effort. Can have an unclear mission. Overlaps some with competency models and more with human capital management.
Integrated HRIS	A master set of databases tracking everything having to do with people.	Many users for the data with different needs and priorities. Tradeoff between what is available commercially and the organization's specific needs. Should support the other initiatives; however, since the underlying models for the data may not match the competency model or knowledge management model chosen, may generate rework or may "orphan" work already done.
Qualification or certification programs	Agreed-upon checkpoints and measurement processes to verify human capability.	Often focused on enabling knowledge (which doesn't necessarily indicate capability to perform). May have unclear mission/intent. Overlaps with most of the above.

Table 2: Issues with Multiple Initiatives

The Problem

The issues described above are mostly technical in nature; that is, professionals in each of the areas would argue that they are the result of the initiative done poorly rather than a defect in the intent. Our concern in this context is the *business impact* of having all of these initiatives with related but not exactly complementary missions. For example, the competency model could form the basis for a number of the other components. It could frame the career path (where you accumulate competencies that lead to other roles/jobs). Or, the human capital management system could establish the framework. But too often they operate as “silos” leaving gaps. For example, the large general competencies typically found in competency models don’t provide enough detail to enable selection or development of individuals. And qualification instruments should add up to something—by becoming certified you should reach some performance and/or career target. But often they are just another thing on an employee’s “to do” list.

All of this leads to redundant effort in the development and promotion of the various initiatives. It also leads to confusion in the target audience and lost time spent in meetings of initiative team members fumbling around with definitions or “mapping” outputs from one initiative to another (where they really don’t fit together). Projects have false starts/stops as executives try to reign in the redundant efforts. Ultimately, the target audience loses interest and a sense of “program du jour” develops. Then nobody invests the necessary commitment to make any of the initiatives fully successful.

The Implications

From the business’s perspective, redundancy means cost. Initiatives spinning their wheels means cost in the short term but also missed opportunity in the mid to long term. There is only so much organizational energy (represented by budget dollars) available to meet the business’s goals.

- *Excess costs:* Time spent meeting and discussing abstract concepts can add up. If an initiative team had eight members and spent four hours every week for a year in unproductive effort, that could cost as much as \$80,000 in wasted salary dollars². Worse, they could have been working on something with a return! (And this doesn’t even begin to count “pull-through” costs such as the time spent getting ready or doing follow-up from the meetings, support resource time to arrange meetings, facilities such as conference calls and meeting rooms, materials such as posters and brochures, snacks and refreshments for the meetings, etc.)
- *Missed opportunity:* Most corporations require some level of justification before starting an initiative. That means there is an expectation of return. If initiatives take too long to come to fruition (or even *never* come to fruition), that is a benefit that the corporation won’t see. To “do the math,” figure out the expected return and subtract either for delays or for falling short in meeting expectations.

² To make the math easy, I just used \$50 per hour as the fully loaded cost per employee. This may be low for many situations—typically, an employee’s fully loaded cost (including vacation, benefits, and overhead) approaches twice their salary.

Most HR-related initiatives attempt to put together people, skills/capabilities, and business process needs—in other words, get enough people to the right job/role in time to meet demand. And, because business needs and individuals change, it is a constantly moving target. These HR-related initiatives are key to staying competitive in recruiting/retention as well as delivering products and services. If they don't happen, your company is at a disadvantage against competitors that are able to make it happen.

From the human performance perspective, we are in business to deliver useful development solutions to our audience base. “Useful” means effective (when we are finished, our target audience can do what we planned for them to do...they learn what we planned for them to learn) but also necessary or beneficial to the performer and their enterprise. If they have a career path, training should support it. If they are trying to develop a specific set of capabilities, training should support it. Reworking the support materials to accommodate the labels from new initiatives (or new spins on old initiatives) drains resources from more important efforts. It is like continually redecorating your living room when you should be fixing the leaky roof.

The Needs Payoff

All of the above implications have serious potential impacts on the bottom line. To address each of them, we recommend an integrated approach to defining and managing capability based on the foundation of a detailed performance analysis. An integrated approach will address the intent of many of the initiatives above, or at least provide data in a format that can be used within those initiatives. But by starting with the intent to build an integrated system, you can engineer out potential gaps and redundancies.

With an integrated model, you can also start anywhere and go anywhere. It is more efficient to work “top-down,” but if you have to start with one job/role and then expand, you can do it without having wasted earlier effort. As one example, we started with a set of job analysis data and designed a performance-based qualification system and then used the same data to design a curriculum architecture. In another company, we used the same analysis process (different data, obviously) to populate an HRIS with qualification items.

There are a number of key features to the approach that address the issues above—three are detailed below.

Analysis Data

The initial analysis of the work and related capabilities (e.g., skills, knowledge, traits) is critical to establishing a framework³ for thinking about the role/job/process (depending on your focus). Our analysis methodology documents performance requirements and enabling knowledge and skill. It is at the detail level so it can support later design and development of training and qualification requirements. It can support specific selection tool development. But, it can be “rolled up” if needed to identify larger competencies⁴.

³ It is surprising how many organizations have all kinds of detail on tasks, procedures, processes, roles, outputs, etc. but don't ever explicitly define the actual work a given role is expected to do.

⁴ It would be interesting to examine whether competencies really deliver much benefit, but that is a subject for another time/place.

Design Before Development

Many organizations do not really do design at all but jump directly from an identified need to development. However, if analysis simply yields requirements, the design process is needed to synthesize those requirements and create the vision and specifications for the solution(s). This is the point in time when individual organizations (e.g., HR, Training, etc.) can clarify the mission for individual solution components, who will be responsible for creating each, who will review and provide input, etc.

Integrated Data Platform

By keeping an eye on the overall system, the data from one process can be reused in the next as it is further detailed or repurposed. Performance analysis data can feed curriculum design, qualification system design, or selection tool development. Organizations can work together to “divide and conquer” the work of building the various solutions. Because they are working from a single list of requirements and/or set of design specs, the individual efforts will be integrated and mutually supporting. But all these users need to rely on (and be able to access and use) the same source data. That means the organization of the data platform is critical as well as any user interface.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it is all about human performance. For a business to serve its customers, it must produce outputs through its business processes. To operate the business processes, people need to know the performance requirements and have the enabling knowledge, skills, attributes and values, as well as the right environmental support to do their jobs. The initiatives mentioned above are related to this need but most often provide an incomplete solution.

PRH Consulting team members have been analyzing human performance for more than 20 years. We have learned that initiatives come and go but that the root need, to define and enable performance, remains. We employ an integrated approach to avoid redundant or overlapping efforts and to minimize time spent agonizing over abstract concepts. This approach supports both “top down” and “bottom up” development HR-related solutions. Rather than program of the month, consider how the business can benefit from targeted, performance-based solutions that can build on each other over time.

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