



---

**Column Title:** HR Report  
**Publication:** Eastern PA Business Journal  
**Issue:** October 27, 2008

## **Does the "Human" in Human Resources Still Exist?**

When exactly did we start to lose the human side of the human resources equation?

You know, the time when we had the opportunity to sit with employees and learn about them as people? We could help them with their personal struggles, we could lend an ear?

What triggered the disconnect....or were we ever really "connected" at all?

Do you recall the late 80's when the title of "Personnel Department" transformed to "Human Resources" because these were not just persons....they became humans! Following that transition was the introduction to team building, leadership initiatives, and so on. So with all of this warmth being spread around you would think we'd be one big happy family.

Can we blame it on the intrusion of technology, the impossible pace we require of ourselves, or our ever increasing workload? When exactly did we start to look the other way when it comes to compassion and empathy in the workplace?

Let's start by defining the "human" in human resources. It is the emotional element of HR. The empathetic approach to dealing with employees as living people vs. machines that we control and maneuver to produce our goods and services.

Where does HR come in? As you will see from my research below, we have an epidemic of HR professionals becoming desensitized. Focusing on the objectives of HR Administration, policies and processes and forgetting about the human side of their job responsibilities. But let's not be too quick to solely blame HR. Some are forced into this direction for many reasons. And, to set the story straight, it is certainly NOT ALL HR reps. Please read on.

For the past 18+ months I have been researching this very subject. It all started when I was hiring additional staff for my own human resources organization. In

this field of work, other than having extensive HR expertise and credentials, the next most important attribute we were seeking was the ability to connect to the cultures of the organizations that we serve. To blend in and offer a compassionate sense of support vs. being a dictator of policies. After receiving literally hundreds of resumes, some very highly credentialed, we would throw up our arms in exasperation trying to locate a few that offered this unique combination of “human” & human resources experience. Let me clarify... it is not that the candidates were not pleasant people. They were. Just that their approach to HR was direct, authoritative, well-meaning, but not sincerely compassionate.

This is when I began my search as to why? What am I missing? Was it always this way or has something changed?

I started asking around and eventually ended up conducting dozens of interviews with HR representatives from both large and small companies, from the private sector to public, medical facilities to academia. You name it, I talked to them. If the title of HR was involved I asked the question. What is happening to the “human” in human resources? I will share with you some of the feedback that I received:

#### Not so human:

1. The most popular answer was that their organization truly embraces this human concept. “You should see the rich benefits that we offer!”
2. “Human??” “Maybe if the employees acted like they cared it would make it easier to treat them like they think they deserve.”
3. One HR director from a national company was actually demoted by email.

The answer that had the most impact was from a very large organization in the banking field. This company offers an 800 number with an array of HR department choices. This “human” experience begins with the associate analyzing his/her own situation to determine which HR department can solve his problem. Just picture it: “Do you need human capital support or benefits administration? FMLA leave or PTO? Employee relations or a grievance issue?” The associate chooses an option. This electronic voice offers an array of additional choices. The associate can’t continue until he chooses one. He chooses. Finally a live person. Or is it? The person on the other line is indifferent, cold, very possibly a non- HR call center associate. He tells his problem. He has the wrong department and is transferred. He is put on hold. He listens to a recorded message about how much his company cares about him. Can you feel the warmth?

#### Very human:

And some that I talked to were very impressive. A hospital that does not offer an office to the HR reps at the locations that they serve. When these reps are

visiting their locations, which are on most days, they are spending their time on the “floor” with their associates. That feels pretty human to me.

A privately held company that offers an extra day off each week during the month of August if the employees can meet 5 days worth of production in 4 days. That is 4-8hour days...not 4-10 hour days. They not only meet the production they exceed it. They are rewarded with 40 hours of pay for 32 hours of work. That is pretty unique and offers a true human element to it.

On the defense of HR representatives everywhere, there are an abundance of “grey” areas when it comes to HR regulations. An HR representative, no matter what level of degree, is typically not an attorney. In this case we must protect our companies and sometimes this means that we can’t ask too much or know too much about the personal side of our employees. Enter HIPAA. (health insurance portability & accountability act).

I get this. But I also know that it is possible to adhere to these regulations in a manner that is compassionate and human. Are these HR representatives working for the cause, the cause being the people, or working for the issues? One might ask what is the cause?

Let me close with an example that might hit home during this time of economic struggle.

Example: Johnny needs to borrow from his 401k.

Do we share the evils of borrowing from the 401k?

Process his paperwork and move ahead?

Do we dare ask why?

And if we ask why, do we do anything about it?

Do we sit Johnny down and find out what is happening in his life?

Do we take some time to allow Johnny to vent?

Do we simply take time to listen?

Do we help to find some alternative solutions for him? Or are we simply too busy?

And if we are too busy...too busy for what cause?

If you have any “human” in human resources stories to share with me please forward them to me at [Tina@hirevisiongroup.com](mailto:Tina@hirevisiongroup.com). I will send you an “I am the human in human resources” rubber bracelet and with permission I might include your stories in a future publication.

**Copyright 2008 Tina I. Hamilton**