

Organizational Consultation XIII: The Human Resource Bank—Source of Information and Use

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We continue our description of the human resource bank and its use as a consultative strategy for more fully releasing human capital. Specifically, we identify the primary sources of information for the human resource bank and the way this information and the bank can be used for the release of human capital.

Sources of HR Bank Information

Many sources of information are available regarding the SKAs of employees, whether the organization is small or large, rich or poor, proprietary or nonprofit. Traditionally, this information has been accumulated in a file folder (paper-based or digital) that remained inaccessible in an HR office. With the advances made over the past two decades in computer technology, it is now quite easy to gather information in a computer file and to code this information so that it can be readily accessed. Given that it is now easy to categorize and store information about employees, a key question must be asked: What type of information is appropriate to collect? Following is a partial list of the potential sources of appropriate information for a Human Resource Bank.

Job Application

When a person applies for a job, she typically must submit a resume or vita that describes her past job assignments, her education and training, and her personal assessment of competencies acquired in these jobs and through participation in these educational and training programs. One or two people typically interview each of the final applicants for the job. References are often checked to ensure that the finalists have accurately portrayed past job experience, as well as current skills and attitudes.

This is all appropriate information for a HR Bank. The information contained in a resume and job interview is readily stored on a computer. Many organizations are now requesting that resumes be submitted electronically, thus making it easy to store this information. The information contained in the documents of those applicants who have been hired by the organization is transferred to the HR bank.

Job History

Once the new employee has settled into her job, documents can readily be collected regarding the nature of the work she is doing, as well as any special assignments she has been given. Special assignments are becoming very

common in many contemporary organizations. Twenty First Century organizations are bustling with short-term individual and group assignments. Employees are asked to join project teams, problem-solving groups, self-destructing task forces and inter-departmental quality assurance teams. Information regarding the functions being served by employees through these special assignments can be documented and placed in the Human Resource Bank.

An employee might have been asked to prepare a budget, though she had previously been involved only in marketing. The task force to which she has been assigned may be asked to review the current work schedules of a specific production unit, though she herself may have always worked in research and development. The new skills, knowledge and aptitudes acquired through these assignments should be noted, for they might prove to be of value in future assignments. This is especially the case when a blending of two skill-sets or knowledge-sets is desired. In the first example used above, the blending of experiences in budgeting and marketing might be of unique value to the organization in the future. Similarly, the blending of knowledge regarding production work schedules and research-and-development procedures that was illustrated in the second example could prove to be of considerable use to the organization in confronting unanticipated problems associated with the introduction of a new product line.

Training, Education, Certification and Degree Records

It is remarkable to note how rarely the expensive education or training of employees is fully used by contemporary organizations. It is not unusual for an employee to obtain the equivalent of seven masters degrees while working over a lifetime with a single organization; yet, how often does any organization acknowledge and fully use the knowledge an employee has acquired in these seven programs? How often are the aptitudes acquired by an employee directly applied by the organization to its ongoing problems and challenges during the many years of this person's employment?

It is not only a lost opportunity for the organization. This failure to make use of knowledge, skills and aptitudes acquired through formal education or training programs also tends to be a source of demoralization for the employee who has contributed much of his own time and effort to this training or educational opportunity. The employee may be given time off for the education or training. Tuition for the education or training program may be reimbursed. Nevertheless, the employee must take time away from the job. This time must inevitably be made up in order to complete the education or training program. The employee usually must do homework, which takes time away for family, and must take risks in the application of newly acquired SKAs. What about the

certification or degree the employee has earned? How has the organization acknowledged and made use of the SKAs that has been assessed in the awarding of this certificate or degree?

It seems foolish for an organization to neglect the recording of this accomplishment in some type of Human Resource Bank. In an appreciative organization that makes use of an HR Bank, an employee is asked to submit a copy of the certificate or degree that was awarded for completion of a specific education or training program. In addition, an employee may be asked to submit course descriptions, lists of competencies that are being acquired and assessed in the program, and any evaluations that have been submitted by course instructors. Given that the Human Resource Bank is appreciative in nature, it is not necessary, nor even desirable, for an employee to submit course descriptions or evaluations for those skill, knowledge or aptitude areas in which they have been only marginally successful.

Performance Records

Most organizations require some sort of periodic evaluation of each employee's performance. These performance appraisals are done in large part to ensure high quality work and to determine appropriate compensation for an employee. They can also serve as valuable sources of information for a Human Resource Bank. At the end of each performance appraisal, the reviewer and employee might be asked to complete a brief section of the performance review document that is to be used exclusively for the Human Resource Bank. Information that is gathered for the performance appraisal should be separated from that collected for the HR Bank. In this brief, and usually concluding, section of the performance appraisal document, the reviewer and person being reviewed are to identify specific skills, aptitudes or domains of knowledge that are noteworthy regarding the person being reviewed. What are his most notable and distinctive competencies? What SKAs does he manifest that would not usually be expected of someone in this job? Where has he been particularly successful both in his formal job and in special assignments he has undertaken?

In many instances, this HR Bank section of the performance appraisal document includes a checklist of SKAs or a listing of competencies that are directly and specifically aligned with the core intentions of this employee's department or the intentions of the overall organization. In other cases, this section of the performance appraisal form is open-ended; the reviewer and person being reviewed are asked several questions that provoke reflection regarding distinctive strengths and competencies (for example, "What does this person offer that is clearly needed in this organization?" "What does this person do or know that might be of great value to other members of this organization?" "What has this person done or what does this person know that is surprising given his/her current job responsibilities?").

New Job Assignment

In most cases, an employee isn't simply hired into one job to which she is assigned for her entire career. The one job/one career model may have been fairly common during the first half of the Twentieth Century, but it certainly is not common today. Men and women rarely devote their entire career to a single job, unless they are professionals, such as accountants, engineers or lawyers, or work in highly skilled and specialized fields, such as airline piloting, fire fighting or law enforcement. More often, successful employees move from job to job inside one company or they move from company to company. Thus, the process of applying for a job is not a one-time affair. Resumes are submitted repeatedly and job interviews have become a rather common place event in the lives of most contemporary employees.

Given this state of affairs, the Human Resource Bank can be frequently updated with additional information that is collected during repeated resume updating and interviewing for new jobs. In this case, if the person applying for the job is already an employee in the organization, the new resume and interview data can be entered in the HR Bank, even if the employee does not get the new job. The entry of this information in the HR Bank may help to cushion the blow if the employee doesn't get the new assignment.

Inventory of Talent

This final source of information for a Human Resource Bank is the most formal and time consuming. It requires the generation of new data rather than the accumulation and classification of data that have already been generated in the organization. While this survey process does require time and money, it can save an organization many dollars, in the long run, if properly conducted and if the data generated from the survey are extensively used. There is yet another benefit associated with this data source. It is highly appreciative in nature. *The Inventory of Talent leads to the acknowledgment and honoring of distinctive strengths and competencies in the organization, which itself helps to improve morale and the retention of the best and brightest in the organization.*

Typically, the process of building an Inventory of Talent begins with the identification of key SKAs that are needed in the organization. The inventory might be more future-oriented, identifying SKAs that will probably be needed in the near future, given changing conditions inside and surrounding the organization. It is often particularly valuable for an organization to use this inventory to prepare for the future, since resumes, job interviews and performance appraisals usually provide ample information about the current needs of the organization, but rarely enough information about anticipated needs.

It is often appropriate to focus on critical incidents when identifying items for this inventory. If an organization is particularly interested in the achievement of quality, it is often valuable to focus on the SKAs that are needed when the organization is faced with unusual or particularly demanding situations. Quality of service and performance is not determined by the manner in which the organization runs during the 80% of the time when everything is functioning in the usual manner. Quality is determined by how well the organization operates when faced with a critical incident. The skills, knowledge and aptitudes that are needed to meet challenges associated with these critical incidents are often among those least acknowledged or appreciated in the organization. They usually are not captured in either job interviews or resumes, and usually are absent from most performance reviews. A formal survey is often needed to identify these significant SKAs.

Designing the Talent Inventory

The Inventory of Talent usually includes at least twenty or thirty items and may include as many as eighty items. Each SKA is briefly described. For example, the list might include the following:

Skill: Using Power Point. Ability to prepare graphically interesting presentations using computer software.

Skill: Speaking French. Ability to communicate easily in French; restricted to informal conversations; no need for command of technical language.

Knowledge: Singapore Operations. First-hand experience in working with the staff and local distributors associated with this production facility.

Knowledge: AB 435 Requirements. Fully conversant with the implications of this Assembly Bill for the marketing and promotional strategies employed by our company.

Aptitude: Cross Cultural Relationships. Effective in and oriented to working with people from other cultures.

Aptitude: Computer Literacy. Fearless in learning about and working with new software programs and hardware innovations.

The inventory can be structured in one of two ways. It can be designed for *self-nomination*. Each employee is given a copy of the survey and asked to identify those SKA areas in which they are particularly strong. What are the skill areas in which they are particularly proficient? In which areas are they particularly knowledgeable? Where do their talents and interests merge as an aptitude that produces highly successful performance?

This self-nomination process works very well in organizational cultures that support and promote openness regarding one's own competencies. In many cultures, however, it is considered bad form to boast about one's skills, knowledge or aptitudes. Many Asian cultures, for instance, find self-nomination to be offensive, as do many organizational cultures in the United States that encourage much subtler forms of self-promotion. Many American churches and universities, for instance, would never support a self-nominating process. One should be *called* by others rather than identifying one's own talents.

When self-nomination is inappropriate, a second process is used: *peer-nomination*. Employees are asked to nominate other people whom they have observed as particularly skillful, knowledgeable or successful in one of the areas listed in the inventory. Both the self-nomination and peer-nomination processes can be used. Survey respondents are asked to place their own name in areas where they are themselves skillful, knowledgeable or successful and then to place the names of other people in areas where they have observed their colleagues' SKAs.

Collecting Talent Information

Once the inventory is prepared, and has been pilot tested with a sample of at least 10 to 15 employees, the inventory is distributed to all members of the organization. Results are compiled and placed in the Human Resource Bank. If a peer-nomination process is used, those nominated are typically contacted to make sure they agree to have their names placed in the bank in association with this specific SKA. A verification process often accompanies the survey.

Self-nominations may be double-checked by asking those who work with the self-nominator to verify the SKA. The self-nominator may be asked to provide documentation that justifies the inclusion of her name in this SKA area of the HR Bank. While this type of quality control improves the quality of information contained in the HR Bank, it is often counterproductive, if an appreciative perspective is to be established in one's organization. Checkup of almost any magnitude conveys an attitude of mistrust and devaluing of an employee's self-assessment of skills, knowledge and aptitudes. Usually, the checkup is only done when the person who self-nominates is actually being assigned to a project or reviewed for a new job. There is no need to risk the creation of a culture of mistrust before the self-nomination information is actually being used.

In the case of peer-nominations, the verification usually can be done without the collection of additional information or double-checking. Typically, one looks for multiple nominations as a way to verify the credibility of any one nomination. If several people from different departments nominate someone regarding a particular SKA, it is likely that this person is qualified. One looks to see if someone in the same department is the only one to nominate a specific employee. The nominator may be a friend of the person being nominated or some informal agreement may have been reached regarding reciprocal nominations: "I will nominate you for this, if you will nominate me for that."

Peer nominations are likely to come from the same department, given that one's colleagues are most likely to know any one employee's work. It is important, however, to emphasize the value of nominating employees from other departments. Employees should be encouraged to consider employees from other departments with whom they have collaborated on the telephone or with whom they have worked on a task force or short-term project. Double-checking can be deferred until the point when an employee is being considered for an assignment based on the HR Bank listing.

Talent Consortia

The Inventory of Talent is often used, not just by individual organizations, but also by clusters of organizations called *consortia*. It is not very difficult for members of a consortium to establish an inter-institutional Human Resource Bank in order to pool information about talent existing in each organization and to create a mechanism for the sharing of these talents. These inter-institutional banks can serve two important functions: they can increase the cost-effect use of human resources in each organization and they can help to create a culture of appreciation throughout the consortium. There is nothing more affirming than being acknowledged, not only by ones' own colleagues, but also by colleagues from other organizations.

As in the case of the intra-institutional inventory, the inter-institutional Inventory of Talent begins with the identification of those SKAs that are most needed by the participating organizations. A survey instrument is then created and distributed to all of the institutions. Following completion of the survey, a data bank is created that contains information on skillful, knowledgeable and successful employees in each of the participating institutions. A reciprocal agreement is then reached. Typically, a referral and brokerage process is established that enables employees in one organization to be used in another organization for consultation, short-term assignment, training and so forth.

Banking the Skills, Knowledge and Aptitudes

What type of skills, knowledge and aptitudes is a Human Resource Bank likely to identify and use? The content of an HR Bank will obviously vary widely from organization to organization; however, HR banks often focus on managerial SKAs that are directly related to such functions as supervision and delegation, team facilitation and leadership, budgeting, performance review and program planning. The HR Bank might instead focus on generic skills, knowledge or aptitudes in such areas as writing, speaking, bilingual fluency, problem-solving, teaching, and expertise in the use of specific computer software programs. In other cases, the HR Bank is designed around much more specific and technical areas of expertise. It may be based on SKAs regarding production, marketing, sales, finance or personnel selection.

In very large organizations, the HR Bank may be established to identify and store information about highly specialized SKAs. These SKAs might rarely be needed in an organization; however, they can be of great value if a unique occasion arose when this SKA was needed. We might not need someone with skill in speaking Finnish, but who knows. We may never need to know about the application of Platonic philosophy to our organization, but one can never be sure. Our organization may never need someone who is excited about anthropology, but there is always the possibility that interest in this discipline could be of value. Such is the potential value of a specialized HR Bank. It is meant for that critical moment when we immediately need to know what resources we have in our organization. It would be very expensive or time consuming to look for this specialized resource outside our organization, or to begin a search from scratch inside an organization.

Aptitudes are usually more difficult to assess than are either skills or knowledge. Yet, aptitudes often play a key role in determining the success or failure of a project—especially if this project requires persistence and a long-term commitment of energy. For example, if a new project is filled with many unknowns, then the HR bank might contain information about an employee's aptitude regarding new challenges or new learning. What does this person find to be most exciting about his current job or about special assignments he has taken? Where is he most open to new learning and challenges? When is he likely to work long hours? When does he feel most loyal to the company? Under what conditions will a strong work ethic prevail?

This type of information about aptitudes is appreciative and is often gathered only after an initial decision is made to make use of the skills or knowledge of an employee. An appreciative analysis can serve as a guide for

those who must identify or create an environment in which this employee is likely to thrive. In what type of setting will this employee's skills and knowledge be complimented and amplified by high levels of motivation and commitment? This is the key question to ask in identifying aptitudes.

As in the case of the other domains in which information is collected regarding an employee, it is essential that the employee review anything about aptitude prior to this information being placed in the HR Bank. In fact, the best source of information about aptitudes often comes from the employee himself. From an appreciative perspective, it is often most informative to ask the employee himself about what is inspiring for him and about how he is most likely to become committed to a project. When in doubt, as they say, try honesty! When in doubt about an employee's motivation and work ethic, try asking her!

Using a Human Resource Bank

The assembled collection of information regarding the skills, knowledge and aptitudes held by employees in an organization can be used in many different ways. This information can be employed in the assignment of employees to short-term tasks or project groups, in the appointment of employees to new jobs, and in the selection of employees for teaching, consulting, coaching or mentoring assignments.

Information from the Human Resource Bank can meet yet another set of needs in the organization. That which is *not found* in the HR Bank may be just as revealing as that which *is found* in the Bank. The Bank can be used to identify the absence of skills and knowledge in the organization. This negative information provides guidance to members of the HR staff regarding new areas for training and education. The HR Bank also may reveal the absence of specific work-related aptitudes. This negative information points, in turn, to the need for organizational initiatives that increase employee motivation and improve organizational climate.

Short Term Assignments

The most obvious use of the information contained in the HR Bank is the identification of employees who have the skills, knowledge or aptitudes that are needed to complete a short-term task. The Alpha Corporation, for instance, might be looking for someone who is fluent in French as well as knowledgeable about strategic planning and partnerships. This employee would join a corporate team for a two-day meeting regarding the potential formation of an international consortium. Alternatively, the leaders at Alpha may be assembling a task force on improved management information systems. It needs someone on this team with background in marketing, as well as expertise in financial software programs. Alpha might need another person on the team

who is not only knowledgeable about financial software programs, but also has some experience in working with computer-based simulations.

A Human Resource Bank at Alpha could provide the information required in each of these instances. If no one in the organization fills the bill, then the leaders of Alpha know that they need to look outside the organization for consultation. If they have sufficient time, they might instead provide education or training to several Alpha employees, so that they might become skillful or knowledgeable in the requisite areas. The alternative strategy is to proceed without this valued skill or knowledge. However, much is lost when no one on the Alpha team can speak French, and the meeting is being held in France or a majority of the participants are French-speaking. Alpha could hire a translator, but this is a poor substitute for a fluent member of the team who knows the business and can speak first-hand rather than through a translator. Alternatively, Alpha could hire someone with the needed skills or knowledge. This is often a costly decision, given that the needs are usually short-term. What does Alpha do with this person after the need no longer exists? What about the startup phase and learning curve as this new Alpha employee becomes acquainted with his new job and organization?

Job Appointments

The second use of the HR Bank centers on the process of identifying internal candidates for a job opening in the organization. While most organizations post all job openings and encourage internal candidates for most positions in the organization, a Human Resource Bank reinforces this policy by providing information regarding those employees who might be best qualified to assume this position. Typically, the job description is prepared with a list of desired SKAs. This list is then entered into the HR Bank and matched with employee profiles.

One does not want a perfect fit between the job specifications and the SKA requirements of the job (the person/job overlap). There is usually very little problem, however, in finding an employee who will be challenged by the new job, even though they already have many of the prerequisite SKAs as determined by the HR Bank analysis. Employees are particularly inclined to feel challenged and appreciated if the skill sets or knowledge, they will be applying in the new job has been available but never used in their previous assignments. The employee is also likely to be highly motivated if this skill or knowledge was acquired after this employee first came to the organization. It is usually a pleasure for an employee to actually use concepts on the job that she has acquired in a classroom or while working on a community service project.

Teaching, Consulting, Coaching and Mentoring Assignments:

There is a growing emphasis on homegrown training in contemporary organizations. Rather than hiring a full-time training staff, or bringing in high-priced external trainers and consultants, many organizations are now

asking employees to periodically step out of their regular jobs in order to provide training, consulting, coaching or mentoring services.

Alpha, for instance, might wish to join with several other organizations in creating a language academy, especially if it is about to join an international consortium. Someone from Alpha who is fluent in Mandarin and loves to teach could offer several courses in this academy. An employee in the Alpha Corporation who is fluent in French might similarly offer a course, or a foreign language course could be offered by a Beta employee who lived for many years in Italy or by a Gamma employee who recently emigrated from Russia. These instructors could readily be identified through HR Banks established in each organization or through an inter-institutional HR Bank. The language academy would cost no money, other than the allocation of time for the teachers and students. It would, however, inevitably improve the morale of both the employee-teachers and students, while preparing employees in the participating organizations for an increasingly globalized world.

A Human Resource Bank can also be used to identify experienced men and women who can serve as individual coaches or mentors to other employees. A coach typically helps another employee with a specific set of problems or issues, while a mentor is usually available for more general reflection and discussions regarding one's career and life decisions. A coach can readily be identified through a HR Bank that provides information regarding specific areas of expertise, whereas a mentor is best identified through a HR Bank that collects more general information regarding life experiences and aptitudes regarding work ethics and life values.

Identification of Training and Educational Needs

As we already noted, Human Resource Bank is valuable not only because it provides information about what *does* exist in the organization, but also because it reveals what *does not* currently exist in the organization. When the president of Alpha is looking for a fluent French speaker to join her at the international conference, she will learn as much about her organization from a failed HR Bank search as she will from a successful search. "If no one in this organization is fluent in French, and we are about to enter into an international consortium, perhaps we should pay for several of our employees to take French lessons. Or maybe we should start that inter-institutional language academy we have been talking about for several years. . . . and perhaps we should be looking for language skills when we hire our next staff member in the strategic planning department."

The HR Bank not only facilitates the identification of trainers, consultants, coaches and mentors, it also points out areas in which education and training are most needed. Why offer human resource development programs in areas where the organization already has many resources? Instead of providing training or education, why not set up coaching and mentoring projects to assist those who don't have these skills or knowledge? Why not

create teams in which the SKAs of team members are complementary? In this way, team members can learn informally from one another while ensuring that requisite SKAs are present on the team. The answer to each of these questions is dependent upon the availability of information about the human resources in the organization. This, in turn, requires a Human Resource Bank.

We offer a cautionary note regarding this final use of the HR Bank. Though the bank enables an organization to become clear about what is absent in the organization, its distinctive contributions lie in the domain of appreciation rather than the identification of deficits. *Without appreciation, the Human Resource Bank becomes just another ineffective data gathering initiative or, worse yet, another unwarranted invasion of employee privacy.* So how do we keep the appreciative perspective alive when constructing a human resource bank? The challenge, we would suggest, resides in the commitment to identification and release of human capital.