

# GETTING MORE VALUE OUT OF THE GOVERNMENT HR DEPARTMENT



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By Patrick Ibarra

In recent years the human-resources function in both business and government has been under intense scrutiny. You've probably seen articles with titles like "Why We Love to Hate HR." As the pace and sweep of change intensify, personnel-administration professionals are coming under unprecedented pressure to be innovative, to be strategic and to implement their programs and initiatives more efficiently.

Besides being a former city manager, I'm also a former government HR director, and believe that many of HR's problems are self-inflicted. But that's no reason to simply discard it as if it were a disposable organizational function.

Traditionally, the role of human resources has been limited to administrative functions such as recruitment, payroll and benefits administration. However, with recent trends to outsource many of those processes, HR is at a critical juncture: Should it try to hang on to the past and risk becoming marginalized, or should it embrace a new and different future that requires different competencies? Either way, there is a clear and unambiguous imperative confronting the HR professional to rethink the HR function's structure, services and programs and address how it can add value to today's organizations.

Turbulence surrounds both today's workforce and workplace, and nowhere is that more true than in government at all levels. The public workforce and workplace are changing rapidly, and those of tomorrow will be very different from those of today. Employees will have markedly different needs and preferences, and workers will have different views based on their experiences, culture, ethnicity and education. Workflows and work processes will change, particularly for the knowledge workers who make up so much of government.

Yet many public-sector leaders continue to think and act as if today's organizational structures, processes, hierarchies and networks will have perpetual relevance -- or at least don't require modification any time soon. HR ought to be at the forefront of navigating this turbulence.

In his book *Human Resource Champions*, HR management educator and consultant David Ulrich speaks of a new vision for HR, "that it should be defined not by what it does, but by what it delivers -- results that enrich the organization's value to customers, investors, and employees." (Government's "investors," of course, are the taxpayers.) What exactly does this mean? It means that HR's value should be defined as the contribution it makes to organizational effectiveness and not simply by historical measures that don't gauge effectiveness, such as the employee turnover rate.

In an effort to take on a more proactive approach, HR should function as a business partner to the organization, developing systems and practices to ensure that the workforce has the needed competencies and is motivated to perform effectively. HR must not only have a seat at the table when business and organizational issues are discussed, but it must bring a credible perspective about the role it plays in helping the organization anticipate and respond to pressing issues. It's important to use terminology that is relevant to the organization's business needs and to avoid HR-speak, while being able to smoothly transition between small day-to-day issues and the larger ones involving strategies and tactics.

Can HR transform itself alone? Absolutely not. The primary responsibility for transforming the role of HR in government belongs to the jurisdiction's top administrator -- the governor, mayor, city manager or county administrator -- with the active involvement of the HR director and other departmental leaders.

When seeking a director of HR (or as the position is being referred to more frequently, a chief human capital officer), top leaders should be looking for a candidate who not only has a deep understanding of HR administration but also one with the past experience of acting as a strategic partner in the organization or the potential to do so.

What's entirely inadequate today is the old standard of either being proficient in the world of HR or being a good "people person." Governments that see their HR operation as a partner in turning the headwinds of change into tailwinds -- rather than the department that everyone loves to hate -- will have to do a lot better than that.



**Patrick Ibarra** is an "entrepreneur of ideas" and architect of innovation who takes the headwinds governments are facing about the current climate of unprecedented changes and translates them into a tailwind with practical, tactical and impactful solutions that can be used immediately. A former city manager, Patrick owns and operates The Mejorando Group consulting practice ([www.gettingbetterallthetime.com](http://www.gettingbetterallthetime.com)). Mejorando is Spanish for "getting better all the time" and Patrick's firm partners with governments helping them increase employee performance and organizational effectiveness by providing consultation, facilitation, and training. Ibarra is an author, speaker, blogger and educator who brings fresh thinking, innovation, and new ideas to help public sector organizations succeed in the 21st century.

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