

**SAMPLE  
CHAPTER**

Foreword by Davis Smith,  
Founder, Chairman, and CEO Emeritus, Cotopaxi

# MAKING HR MATTER



WHAT CEOS WANT AND  
HOW TO DELIVER IT

**DAVID ALSOP AND TED FORBES**

## **PRAISE FOR MAKING HR MATTER**

“David and Ted demonstrate through insightful ideas and specific actions how HR is increasingly relevant in today’s changing business world. Their personal experiences will help others have a more positive impact through relevant HR.”

—**DAVE ULRICH**, Rensis Likert Professor Emeritus,  
University of Michigan; Partner, The RBL Group

“Finally—a book to hand to any HR leader seeking to elevate their strategic voice and drive meaningful impact in the C-suite. It’s a masterclass in the selfless, high-stakes work of HR—shaping culture, embracing the mission, and unlocking performance through people. It shows how, when done right, HR can be one of the most purposeful callings in business.”

—**GRACE ZUNCIC**, Managing Director, Manna Tree;  
Former Chief People and Culture Officer, Chobani

“*Making HR Matter* is a must-read manifesto for the future of Human Resources. With bold clarity and deep business insight, the authors redefine HR’s role from a reactive administrative function to a forward-leaning force of strategic impact. They present a compelling model where professionals not only understand the human element of organizations but also master the economic levers that drive growth, innovation, and profitability. Through practical strategies and real-world examples, the authors challenge outdated norms and offer a transformative road map for HR leaders ready to elevate their influence, align with executive priorities, and become true catalysts of organizational success. If you’re ready to move past ‘checking boxes’ and start making a real impact, this book shows you how.”

—**DIRK JEFFS**, CEO, Ultradent Products, Inc.

“I’ve seen firsthand how powerful the people function can be when it’s fully aligned with business strategy and performance. *Making HR Matter* captures that reality in an honest and practical way. David and Ted don’t argue that HR deserves influence—they show how to earn it. Their message is clear: Real transformation and value creation happen when HR leaders think like business leaders, shape culture intentionally, and hold themselves accountable for results. It’s a powerful reminder that a people-first approach delivers its greatest impact when it’s directly tied to performance.

Grounded in real experience and measurable business outcomes, the book offers a clear road map for shifting HR from policy-driven to performance-driven. When talent and culture align with enterprise priorities, HR becomes a true lever for profitable growth. What sets this book apart is its balance of credibility and practicality. It doesn’t just inspire; it equips. I’d recommend *Making HR Matter* not only to HR leaders, but to CEOs and executive teams who expect culture to drive measurable value. It’s a must-read for anyone who believes people are a company’s greatest competitive advantage—and wants to prove it.”

—**LISA ALTERI**, Chief Operating Officer at Charter Next Generation  
and Former Senior Vice President and  
Chief People Officer at Kraft Heinz Company

“I love the phrase *Making HR Matter* and the bold call for business leaders to demand it in their organizations. Ted Forbes and David Alsop do a masterful job outlining what it is—and providing the blueprint to achieve it. A must-read for business and HR leaders!”

—**FRED KNOWLES**, Executive Coach;  
Former CHRO for Under Armour

“David and Ted have laid out a fresh blueprint for how to change the game as an HR leader. It’s built on the radical notion that qualities like business acumen, marketing skills, and entrepreneurial drive are just as valuable to great HR leadership as traditional capabilities . . . perhaps even more so. And that the most relevant HR functions play offense (identifying breakthrough ways to increase business value through people) as much as defense (effective execution of processes and managing legal risk). *Making HR Matter* is a practical guide for how to think differently about HR, grounded in real-world examples that are highly transferable. It’s a valuable read for anyone looking to take their contributions from useful to indispensable.”

—**DOUG ROSE**, Former CHRO: Old National Bank,  
First Midwest Bank, Discover Financial Services

“I had the privilege of working closely with David Alsop during a pivotal time at Kraft Foods, where we led the largest sales unit through transformative growth. David was a rising HR leader with a sharp instinct for aligning people strategy to business outcomes, balanced with humility, making him a natural leader and incredible partner. Our partnership delivered real results as we balanced high accountability with deep engagement. *Making HR Matter* stands out as a must-read book because it’s not theoretical—it’s forged from lived experience, the kind that drives performance, learning, and culture together. This book brings forward the kind of HR thinking every business leader wishes for but seldom sees.”

—**HOWARD FRIEDMAN**, CEO, Utz Brands;  
Former President and CEO, Post Consumer Brands;  
Former EVP and President, Kraft Heinz Meat and Dairy

“Too often, HR is considered merely a necessary function rather than a strategic partner. *Making HR Matter* shows you how to change that mindset using creative analysis and insight that the organization will actually use to grow the business.”

—**STEVE ARNESON**, Former SVP Leadership, Capital One

“Companies have changed massively over the past thirty years, becoming much more complex, much more dynamic, and ever more rapidly changing. This presents the question, ‘Where can we find an appropriate and matching HR framework that adapts rapidly?’ Future HR people absolutely have to be businesspeople. David and Ted shine a light on the way forward with *Making HR Matter*.”

—**WOLF DIETER GOGOLL**, Professor, Hannover University  
of Applied Sciences and Arts; Former Head  
of Corporate OD and HRD at Continental AG

“This is a book I want every aspiring HR professional I ever work with to consume—and every C-suite leader too. Through sharing the years of their experience, David and Ted set out a route for HR to transform its contribution from one of policing, policies, and risk-mitigation to one of growth, leadership, and bottom-line value-add. The tools and guidance presented in *Making HR Matter* will challenge all HR leaders to ask themselves if they are truly adding value, or whether they have succumbed to the traditional expectations of an irrelevant department. *Making HR Matter* offers every current and aspiring HR leader insight to transform the way in which they can add value to their organisations, and in return to their own career and personal development.”

—**IAN JOHNSTON**, CEO at Osprey Charging Network;  
Founding Chair of ChargeUK

# **MAKING HR MATTER**



**WHAT CEOS WANT  
AND HOW TO DELIVER IT**

**David Alsop and Ted Forbes**

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Weaving Influence Press  
6530 Secor Road, Suite 7  
Lambertville, MI, 48144, USA  
[weavinginfluencepress.com](http://weavinginfluencepress.com)

ISBN 979-8-90177-003-0 (print)  
ISBN 979-8-90177-004-7 (ebook)

Production Management: Weaving Influence, Inc.  
Cover and Interior Design: Rachel Royer  
Copyediting: Sydney Spencer  
Typesetting: Lori Weidert  
Proofreading: Keri Hales

*To Heather and Deborah  
Thank you for your support!*

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# FOREWORD



I first met David Alsop and Ted Forbes through Utah’s vibrant business start-up network. David had built a name in the community for his annual “DisruptHR SLC” conferences, and Ted had established himself as an HR thought leader while at Backcountry.com.

As a serial entrepreneur, I had always regarded HR as one of those “we’ll get around to it when the time is right” functions. In 2019, as Cotopaxi was growing rapidly, I started to hear employees say, “Davis, we need HR.” I was, admittedly, skeptical, but a couple of my colleagues on the executive team who had worked with Ted at Backcountry convinced me to bring him in for a conversation. What I heard in that meeting was like nothing I’d ever heard from any HR person. Here was an experienced HR leader who understood financial statements and described how to use HR as a lever for making a bottom-line impact. It was both novel and refreshing. We brought Ted in to start our first “people function.” Honestly, I wish I had done it sooner.

What we gained in making that decision is reflected in the ideas and practices that David and Ted present in *Making HR Matter*. What’s exciting about the book, to me as a CEO, is that you are reading the story of how two talented executives, working in growth ecosystems, built and delivered novel approaches to the practice of HR in ways that helped enable strong economic performance for their companies.

*Making HR Matter* is more than just a book about HR; it is a source of valuable perspectives that business leaders should take on board. HR has come a long way, but in most cases, it still has a long way to go. If you’re a C-suite leader who wants more out of your HR department, you need to read this book. David and Ted approach HR as businesspeople

first and HR people second. By taking that perspective, HR becomes a value-adding partner and a driver of bottom-line economic impact.

That perspective couldn't be more important, or relevant, to the leaders of today's companies. In an age of increasing complexity, rapid technological change, and intense pressure that C-level executives feel to balance strategy, culture, and execution, David and Ted's concept of building and delivering RelevantHR is a powerful idea. CEOs love to say, "People are our greatest asset," and that's true, but Making HR Matter walks that talk. It's a road map business leaders can and should follow.

What makes this book valuable to C-suite leaders, to line executives, and to HR leaders and practitioners is its practicality, its clarity, and David and Ted's ability to illustrate their ideas with real-life stories. They lay out a robust and grounded case for four essentials of RelevantHR that drive business results. David and Ted show how a company starts with its core values, aligns specific behaviors to them, and then builds out people systems and practices that reinforce, sustain, and grow that culture. It's a clear and concise way of thinking you can put into action immediately.

*Making HR Matter* is a practical and pragmatic approach to building value using the tools HR has at hand. You'll find new ways of thinking about the role of HR in a company and new approaches to developing talent and to building culture. You'll learn what it takes to align HR to your company's business model and how to leverage your insight and wisdom to make your advice invaluable.

If you are a business leader, I encourage you to read this book and discover how you can expect more value and impact from your HR team. If you're an HR leader, read this book and take to heart the idea that you can, and should, contribute economic value to your company's bottom line. If you're an up-and-coming manager, leader, or HR professional, use *Making HR Matter* as a guide for building a successful career.

Wherever you sit, this book will push you to think differently and to act in novel ways. That's what makes it worth reading.

—Davis Smith, Founder, Chairman, and CEO Emeritus, Cotopaxi



**A jump spark is a brief electrical arc that leaps across a gap between a battery and a gas engine to ignite combustion. Without it, the engine won't start. With it, power is released and everything moves forward.**

**Every business has a gap between human performance and business performance. Sometimes in that space, a spark is needed—quiet, transformative, and powerful enough to ignite culture and help drive the future forward.**

**This book is about discovering how to become that spark—in a place few expect it, but where it's needed most.**



# INTRODUCTION



## WHY HR DOESN'T MATTER

*“Shh! HR’s in the room!”* It’s a familiar whisper when “HR stuff” comes up in a conversation at the watercooler. Whether born of genuine frustration or delivered as a playful jab to keep the human resources (HR) department “in their place,” this reaction reflects a lingering stereotype many employees hold about HR people and their work.

In far too many companies, HR is seen as a stifling presence. It’s a sad truth that many of us—whether we are employees or executives—regard HR as the enforcer, the bearer of bad news, and the gatekeeper of a rule book that often seems detached from the realities of modern business. At one company, our chief human resources officer (CHRO) was even referred to as “Dr. No.”

What’s perhaps even more troubling is that this same sentiment can be felt at the top as well. CEOs and C-level executives often share the same frustrations. Famously, Ram Charan’s 2014 *Harvard Business Review* article, “It’s Time to Split HR,” spelled out this sentiment clearly: Most CHROs, he argued, don’t connect HR to real business needs.<sup>1</sup>

C-level executives, VPs, directors, middle managers, and many other employees in far too many companies still believe this story when it comes to HR. And unfortunately, they still have reason to believe it. The

narrative is often summed up with a dismissive statement along the lines of, “Don’t worry, it’s only HR, and they don’t really matter.”

We feel that this is a shame, but we also feel that it is a fixable problem. We’ll give you our punch line right up front: *The secret to Making HR Matter is to focus on linking HR to both business strategy and to economic outcomes.*

We’ve found what we believe is an important solution: We call it *RelevantHR*. It’s our shorthand description for HR that matters, and we hope by the end of this book you’ll see how building and delivering RelevantHR will make your HR work matter too. While we don’t claim to have all the answers, we do believe we have an important perspective to share. That’s what we offer with this book. We have developed a point of view and a set of *essentials* that are grounded in real experience. This system’s ability to deliver value and impact is proven. We’ll show you how we did it with stories drawn from our careers.

If you’re a CEO or C-level executive, we hope you’ll say, “This is what I am looking for in HR.” If you are a CHRO, we hope you’ll say, “This is what I need to deliver.” If you are a business leader, we hope you’ll say, “Hey, HR, give me this.” If you are growing your career in HR, we hope you’ll say, “This is the path I need to follow.”

## HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The root cause of why HR so often “doesn’t matter” is that it has, at least in many companies and organizations, become disconnected from the primary purpose of most businesses. Whether that purpose is delivering profits to investors and owners, delivering services through a non-profit model, or, in the case of a “triple-bottom-line” company, focused on delivering value to multiple stakeholder groups, HR is often seen as disconnected from an organization’s whole reason for existing.<sup>2</sup>

It is this disconnect that frustrates so many business leaders. Too often, they feel that “HR people just don’t get it.” While CEOs and other leaders are often the first to acknowledge that *people* are key to getting things done, they often see HR’s inability to connect the dots between people practices and bottom-line economic impact as inhibiting their success. So often, they just work around HR or put up with it as a “necessary evil.”

Moreover, many HR professionals are either afraid of speaking or don’t speak the language of business: numbers. When you have HR leaders who simply don’t understand their company’s business model, can’t speak credibly about how their people strategies impact those numbers, and can’t show how their HR team’s efforts create economic value, you get *irrelevant HR*.

What’s worse, this lack of business knowledge leads to low expectations of HR from an organization’s business leaders. We have often heard C-level leaders say, “I don’t want HR at this meeting because they will only get in the way.”

This narrative isn’t fun for HR professionals either. If you are one and you’re working in one of those “necessary evil” HR teams (that’s seen as irrelevant by your business’s leaders), you are probably tasked with enforcing policies, managing benefits, handling employee relations, and conducting disciplinary investigations. Your role is pretty narrowly defined. Yes, those things are important, but they are not where the greatest value can be created by HR teams.

On a narrowly defined HR team, there is little to no room for innovation or strategic thinking in your role. Your days are spent in the trenches, dealing with issues as they arise. Your work is constantly reactive and rarely proactive. One moment, you might be decoding the cryptic language of employment laws, and the next, you find yourself organizing a team-building event that’s supposed to be fun but feels more like herding cats who have had one too many espressos. And let’s not forget

the joy of explaining for the umpteenth time why “Casual Friday” doesn’t mean “Wear Pajamas to Work.”

## THE PREVAILING MODEL FOR HR IS OUTDATED

HR strategy at many organizations is often primarily focused on “protecting the company” by ticking off boxes and handling thorny employee relations problems as they come. It’s less focused on creating a culture and environment that helps the business thrive economically. Sadly, this often means the results and outcomes of HR work are seldom considered, mostly because the HR teams don’t have time to assess them from such a reactive position.

If you’re a manager, when was the last time you attended an HR-led session that you could stay awake through? And if you attended one of those sessions, how critical was the topic to running your business? When your employees walked out of an HR training session, did they feel more capable of doing their job, or did they see it as wasted time?

Too many HR leaders are seen as unimportant partners in their company’s success. Instead, they are seen as a mandatory cog in a machine that rarely ventures beyond the confines of administration and compliance—except to be an occasional event planner because no one else has time.

This old way of thinking has created some serious frustration with the HR function in general. In what has become a classic *Harvard Business Review* article, Peter Cappelli states, “The most vocal critics say that HR managers focus too much on ‘administrivia’ and lack vision and strategic insight.” And this extends from new employees all the way up to the CEO. Cappelli goes on to say, “Instead of copying what large corporations did decades ago, HR should craft company-specific (and industry-specific) policies that respond to today’s challenges.”<sup>3</sup> Consider this in light of recent research by Accenture: “Eighty-nine percent of

the 570 CEOs we recently surveyed say that the CHRO should have a central role in ensuring long-term profitable growth.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, your key internal customers want more. They want a strategic, business-oriented thought partner.

The question then becomes: How do we make this change—especially when HR is so often seen as the corporate police? The HR department is far too often found sitting in a remote back corner of the building, devoid of windows, where time seems to stand still. They are only called upon to hire, fire, dictate policy, handle payroll, or solve a dispute.

It’s hard to be strategic when those are the only times you are consulted.

## **A BRIEF HISTORY: WHERE DID “HR” COME FROM?**

When HR first emerged in the early 1900s, it wasn’t *meant* to be strategic. According to the blog *Visier*, the HR function was “created in response to a number of strikes and employee walkouts, and was charged with handling worker grievances, discharges, and safety issues, and for training supervisors on new laws, regulations, and company policies.”<sup>5</sup> The role started as an administrative job, where they were to “manage humans” (who were seen solely as fungible resources) so they could continue working to help the company meet its deliverables.

In the early twentieth century, Frederick W. Taylor, popularly known as the father of scientific management, assessed employee productivity using time and motion studies. He used a stopwatch to measure how long it would take a factory worker to complete a job on Henry Ford’s assembly line. Taylor then compiled that information and used it to set guidelines for how long it should take a worker to do a given task, and thus how many of those tasks a worker should be able to do in a day.<sup>6</sup>

Employees, in Taylor's day and age, were essentially seen as animated machines to optimize. He, and many companies that arose after his time studies were reported, approached labor from the perspective of a mechanical resource to deploy—and not much else. Companies sought to hire people who could do the work, do it to specification, and nothing more. If they couldn't accomplish tasks according to specifications, they were gone. And HR was there simply to handle the hiring, firing, pay, and policy enforcement of these workers.

But as the industrial age progressed, the scope of responsibilities under the HR umbrella began to expand. This era saw significant social and labor changes, which required a more refined approach to managing the workforce. HR departments began to take on additional responsibilities, incorporating benefits administration and labor relations alongside payroll. This was in response to the rise of labor unions and the growing needs and rights of workers, as well as a reflection of the increasing complexity of the labor market.

In the twenty-first century, our labor market looks completely different, and it's hardly appropriate (if it ever was) to treat humans as “fungible mechanized resources.” Though that mindset is thankfully rare, the opinion about what HR is and what HR does still labors under many of those old assumptions.

Not surprisingly, this old mindset alienates and disenfranchises the workforce and colors the reputation HR has today. So, to change this view of HR, we have to level up the playing field—which means leaving behind those outdated norms, getting beyond basic tactical work, and becoming an HR professional who is consistently active in creating economic impact and a high-quality, high-performing culture for the company.

## WHAT YOUR CEO WANTS IS *RELEVANCE*

What if your HR team could be about anticipation, innovation, and strategic influence? What if HR's skillset grew to include foreseeing and preventing problems instead of just handling them when they happen? What if your HR team measured its success not by the number of training sessions or tasks completed but by the positive economic impact it makes on your company's income statement? What if your HR team catalyzed engagement, growth, and productivity for your company's people?

We have both worked with multiple CEOs and have found that what they really want is an HR department that, just like other business functions, delivers positive business impact. What CEOs really want is a team of professionals who understand the business model and the competitive landscape, and who can *speak to the numbers*. What they really want is an HR thought partner who thinks *business first, HR second*.

By developing a business-oriented HR mindset, we believe it's completely possible to meet those expectations.

With this book, we want to introduce you to RelevantHR. In this perspective, HR professionals are not just benefits and compliance experts; they are business-oriented people experts. They understand and can talk about the economics that drive the company's business model, *and* they know the tools and levers that HR can deploy in support of that model. It's this combination that gives them both the credibility and perspective to contribute significantly to the company's bottom line.

In the dictionary, relevance is defined as "having a significant and demonstrable bearing on the matter at hand." To be relevant in the context of HR means having a significant and demonstrable impact on the matters that are crucial to the organization. We believe the "old model" of HR is largely irrelevant today.

Irrelevant HR is mostly, if not entirely, detached from the company's economic goals. Irrelevant HR is bound by a narrow focus on administrative tasks, measures itself by activity rather than outcomes, and fails to address the broader, strategic needs of the business. When HR teams are seen as irrelevant, their advice is overlooked, their potential to drive change is underutilized, and their capacity to influence organizational culture and employee engagement is undervalued.

Nearly every HR professional has experienced this perception of irrelevance, or something like it, in real time. You might have heard phrases like “I shouldn't be talking to you,” or “HR is here, I must be getting fired.” You have possibly even heard words like the ones we shared at the beginning of this introduction: “Oh no, here comes HR!”

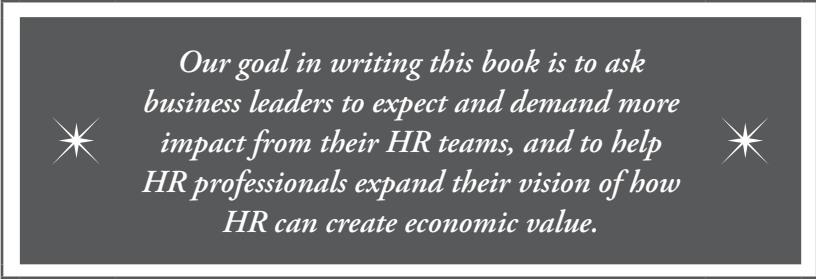
It won't be this way if you become highly relevant to your organization. Business leaders will *want* HR to have that proverbial “seat at the table” because of their impact on the bottom line. Employees will welcome the HR team's advice and perspectives. And as a *practitioner* of RelevantHR, you will be able to have the impact you dreamed of in your career.

## **WE WILL SHOW YOU HOW WE'VE MADE HR MATTER**

Don't get us wrong, there are amazing HR professionals and people strategies out there, but in our experience, they are relatively few and far between. We believe that the trap of low expectations frequently prevents relevance from taking hold. This book is meant to show you how to put irrelevance behind you.

We think you can become (or understand how to find) a forward-thinking, business-savvy HR leader who supports the C-suite and company leadership while understanding how to create financial impact and evolve the culture of your organization for the better.

We will share the strategies, mindsets, and essential elements that have worked for us in creating RelevantHR. But we request something of you in return: Be adaptable, and approach these ideas with curiosity.



*Our goal in writing this book is to ask business leaders to expect and demand more impact from their HR teams, and to help HR professionals expand their vision of how HR can create economic value.*

As a business leader, you'll get the most from your HR team by demanding both excellence and financial impact. To be an exceptional and influential HR leader, you will need to continually learn, evolve, and improve your skills and your knowledge of business.

So, as you read *Making HR Matter*, we ask that you do so with an open mind and break away from the notion that HR is a rigid model with only one way of doing things. We both have been accused (with great pleasure) of being “nontraditional HR people.” Our perspective has been shaped by being, admittedly, somewhat iconoclastic; yet the business leaders we've worked with have consistently told us that our approach is what is needed in HR. We'll share this approach with you here, grounded in our respective experiences as HR leaders. David has had two decades in HR at Kraft-Heinz and Ultradent, where he is now CHRO. Ted has been in HR just slightly longer, with stints at Capital One and United Airlines, and as CHRO at Backcountry.com and Cotopaxi.

Whether you're an executive seeking a more strategic HR partnership or an HR leader striving to increase your impact, this book reveals the powerful intersection where human strategy and business strategy converge, igniting the potential for extraordinary growth.

A unique symbol appears on the cover and throughout the chapters of this book: the jump spark. You might be asking yourself, “What is a jump spark, and what does it have to do with making HR matter?”

A jump spark occurs when electrical voltage becomes strong enough to leap across a gap between two conductors. In much the same way, when HR becomes truly relevant to the business, it creates the conditions for a powerful connection. HR becomes the spark that bridges the gap between people and profit, igniting levels of business performance that would not otherwise be possible. It is our aim and our belief that this book will guide you to create that converging spark with your HR function. Although creating that spark may take some effort, we know the journey is worth it.

# WE HAVE MET THE ENEMY



In one of the more iconic *Pogo* comic strips created by Walt Kelly, Pogo the possum and his alligator friend Albert gaze upon their swamp, now tarnished with trash and litter, and come to realize that the source of their environmental problems is, in fact, the residents themselves. It is in that moment where Pogo utters the memorable line: “We have met the enemy and he is us.”<sup>7</sup>

In many ways, HR professionals can be their own adversaries as well. We are often the very reason we remain stuck in outdated models that hinder our relevance to business performance. Just as Pogo identified himself as part of the problem in his environment, HR leaders need to recognize that some of their traditional practices, policies, and perspectives may be hindering progress rather than fostering it. As we have suggested already, irrelevant HR creates a negative self-reinforcing cycle. It creates low expectations of HR, which in turn reinforces the view that HR adds no value. It is a vicious cycle. And that is a huge problem for business leaders and HR teams alike.

As we know, the only way to fix a problem is to recognize that you have one to begin with. This is why we want to start by sharing six myths that we have found contribute strongly to the “HR doesn’t matter” way of thinking. By perpetuating these myths, either consciously or subconsciously, HR professionals can, like Pogo, unintentionally become their own enemy, holding themselves back from driving business success.

## MYTH 1: WE ARE THE PERSONNEL DEPARTMENT

When the HR function is considered to be the personnel department and nothing more, it confines those professionals to a narrow administrative role. Sadly, many HR professionals are okay with this perception and don't want to actively try to change it. This further perpetuates the impression that HR is irrelevant.

Ted once interviewed for a CHRO role with the president of a well-known resort property. During the interview Ted asked, "What are one or two things you want your next HR leader to change?" The president looked at Ted and said, "I don't want this person to change anything. Everything is working just the way it's supposed to." The leader of the resort had built a highly successful business that was broadly recognized as one of the best in the industry. In his opinion, nothing needed to be changed, and no innovation was required in the role. Honestly, we don't blame him. If you looked at the outside metrics, the guests loved the product so much that they were essentially an annuity, returning year after year. The president didn't want to rock the boat. He just wanted someone to hire people, look after compensation and payroll, and make sure there were no employee relations or labor compliance issues.

From his perspective, as long as the guests were happy and the business metrics were positive, the HR function didn't need to evolve or contribute beyond its traditional scope. Some years later, though, the resort was sold, and the new owners saw many things that could be improved. It took an energetic new leader to overcome decades of inertia and see that HR could do a lot more for the company if it was more than just the "personnel department."

## MYTH 2: CERTIFICATIONS AND DEGREES MAKE US GOOD AT HR

The "bragging wall" trap is real. You know these—they are the walls in an office covered with certificates and diplomas and awards and photos;

all are hard earned and absolutely deserve recognition for the effort that went into them. But do they make you good at your job? We are skeptical. While the intent behind acquiring these honors and recognitions is to bolster expertise and credibility, we've seen a risk that collecting them can push HR professionals to tick boxes instead of driving impactful change. Here's what we mean.

In our view, many popular HR certification and degree programs overemphasize the tactical, nonbusiness-driven parts of HR and underemphasize the economic point of view. These credentials often inadvertently narrow our focus by making us concentrate more on meeting the criteria set by certifying entities versus addressing the unique needs and challenges of our organizations. And in our effort to gain recognition and credibility through these certifications, we may unintentionally solidify the same perceptions of irrelevance we are trying to change.

The challenge, then, is for HR professionals to strike a balance by pursuing professional development and certification *and* ensuring what we learn complements (rather than overshadows) the ultimate goal of being effective, strategic business partners.

We see it this way: If you are young in your career and getting your SHRM, CPHR, or HRCI certifications, it tells us you want to learn your craft, and we are glad to see that. But we caution that earning those credentials alone will never build the business acumen you need to stand out as a RelevantHR leader. Certifications from entities like SHRM, HRCI, and CPHR are useful for introducing newcomers to the basics of HR, especially for those starting in entry-level, administrative, or policy-centric roles. They provide a structured understanding of HR principles and practices, offering a platform from which to launch a successful career. Unfortunately, business acumen is only a small slice of many of those HR certification programs, and we see that as a glaring omission.

Many HR certification programs don't teach you much more than the basics of HR, which won't help you become a trusted advisor and an impactful HR leader. These programs are well-intentioned and provide a foundational understanding of HR, but that is all. Relying on them alone

to help you become a RelevantHR leader is like teaching you the ABCs and then expecting you to write the next great novel. Sure, you will know the difference between a W-2 and a 1099 form, and you will know your PIPs from your FLSAs, but when it comes to the real world of business, you will likely find yourself underprepared.

We take a similar position when it comes to earning a degree in HR. While common degrees for HR careers, such as a BA in human resources, labor relations, psychology, or employment law, provide essential foundational knowledge, they often fall short in equipping HR professionals with the insights needed to be a RelevantHR practitioner in today's business world. HR degrees are useful, and you'll learn a lot in the process about the fundamentals; however, we think that those degrees alone are not enough. If you do pursue an HR degree, we would encourage you to pursue a double major, with the other half being a business degree.

We believe studies in marketing, finance, technology, statistics, and accounting are crucial for HR professionals who aim to be relevant and impactful. If you are a bright, enthusiastic new HR professional stepping into your first job but you lack an understanding of how the business makes money, how it solves problems in the marketplace, generates margins, evaluates risk, and measures success with the profit and loss statement, you are missing a critical piece of the puzzle.

Some of the most highly regarded HR people today didn't get HR degrees. Laszlo Bock, known for his time at Google, started out as a McKinsey & Company consultant with a BA in international relations and an MBA; Donna Morris, CHRO at Walmart, started her career in customer service and operations at Adobe and has a bachelor's degree in political science; Susan Peters of GE began her career in marketing and product management and has a BA in English literature and an MS in industrial and labor relations. Each of these leaders has a broad educational background and first built a foundation in business, allowing them to have huge influence on their companies. We have nothing at all against HR degrees; our point here is that to be a business-first leader

in HR, it helps a great deal to have a business background or training in business disciplines.

David started his postcollege career in sales, yet had a desire to try his hand at HR. He had no education or training in the area, so he studied and was certified with SHRM, which established a baseline HR knowledge and showed his desire to master his chosen profession.

When David was trying to expand his HR career, many professionals told him to get a master's degree in HR; almost no one suggested that he pursue an MBA. But the positions he wanted to get would be determined by business leaders, not HR leaders. Guess what knowledge they wanted to make sure he understood? That's right, they wanted to know if he understood business and could help their bottom line. So that is what David did. He graduated with an MBA, and his career accelerated because of his newfound ability to relate to the business and its leaders.

Ted, who never had plans to go into HR, earned a BA in classics, then went to business school and got an MBA. He went to work consulting on joint ventures, alliances, and merger integration and leadership. During the recession of 2001, he found himself unemployed and needing a job. The CHRO of a Capital One, who was a professional contact, offered him a chance to interview there. After successfully clearing the hiring process, he went to meet with his contact to find out his assignment. The CHRO said, "I want you to work for me in HR." Ted was taken aback and said, "But I don't know anything about HR, and I don't have any training in it." The CHRO responded by saying, "That's exactly why I want you to come work for me." It turned out to be a great career path.

Don't believe the myth that a degree in HR is enough. The more business acumen you attain, the more it will help your career. If you don't learn it while getting your degree, we recommend seeking out a mentor who can help you develop a broader perspective about business as a whole. And if you're in HR now and have an opportunity to pivot over to a line function, we highly recommend that you grab it and run with it.

## MYTH 3: WE ARE CONSTRAINED BY FORCES WE CANNOT CONTROL

We want to be clear that there is plenty of blame to go around. The “vicious cycle” of low expectations is the fastest way an HR department can become complacent and remain irrelevant. Remember: Low expectations beget low performance; low performance begets low expectations, which in turn beget . . . (You see where this is going!)

It usually starts when HR is confined to a reactive administrative-only role, usually because business leaders and employees have no experience with what a RelevantHR team could do for them. HR is put in a box defined by tactical and administrative work. Due to this narrow mandate, HR is not expected to be involved in any pivotal strategic decisions, so the only work they do is tactical and administrative. As you might anticipate, this kind of HR rapidly becomes irrelevant. The cycle continues until you hear those hushed voices whispering about HR’s presence in the room, and everyone rolls their eyes when they hear about HR’s newest “important project” that often delivers little to no business value.

As we have mentioned, HR professionals themselves bear some responsibility for this situation. Historically, many in the field have not ventured beyond the comfort zone of administrative roles and tactical responsibilities. “Administrivia” tasks are taught in HR programs, they become the baseline for our jobs, and delivering bottom-line results isn’t widely encouraged in the profession. Success is defined by a day full of reacting to problems and constantly filling positions without proactively identifying solutions to prevent the turnover most organizations experience. The lack of initiative to innovate and the inability to align closely with the critical needs of the business contribute profoundly to this cycle.

But it is not all “HR’s fault.” Business leaders share part of the blame as well. Often, their expectations of HR are set low—so low, in fact, that they see HR solely as a support function, necessary to plug holes for operational smoothness but not as a strategic partner building hole-

proof organizations. This leaves HR underestimated and underutilized, reinforcing the vicious cycle. In this context, the only time most founders think about HR is when they need some benefits to make people happy, some policies to keep people in line, and some compliance to keep their company out of the “doghouse” when they really need to fire someone. We have even seen cringe-worthy moments when HR leaders proudly proclaim they have delivered more than 500 training sessions that year (which admittedly is a lot); but when you ask the CEO how the training helped make their workforce more successful, they will likely roll their eyes and tell you the training didn’t. It only distracted their employees.

During his early career in HR, David found himself within a system where his authority and capacity to innovate were constrained by his job level. Bound by ever-changing central HR strategies and limited by ever-changing CEOs, his ability to align HR initiatives with the local business he supported was constrained. His creative freedom early on was bound by headquarters’ initiatives established far away from the local business leaders, and he often didn’t have time to focus on people strategies. To find time to implement localized and business-focused HR strategies, he spent extra time checking off the boxes so he could free up time to create the best human capital initiatives for his organizations. Business leaders started taking notice, and David found himself becoming a preferred business partner to his line leaders. He began craving an opportunity to lead his own HR function.

In his role at Ultradent, David was empowered by a CEO who trusted him, and through that, has been able to design a completely new kind of HR. He now leads and oversees a functional team that has become adept at delivering outcomes the CEO and organization need and have come to expect. The culture encourages curiosity and research, and the trust from leadership means he can explore innovative ideas and present unique strategies to better the company. Many of the tried-and-true successful strategies he has implemented during his time at Ultradent would never

have even been considered in his previous role because of the massive merger and acquisition culture in place.

We believe that a clear vision for potential, coupled with high expectations, inspires high performance—high performance that drives business results and ensures HR remains relevant and indispensable. The organizations that have the best HR departments hold the function to a higher level of accountability than most and offer HR the autonomy to create people strategies that are ideal for each business level of the organization. That in turn requires those HR leaders to learn and grow to fit the needs of the business level they support. The key question you should continually ask yourself as an HR leader or professional is, “Is our work delivering tangible value to the business?”

High expectations act as a catalyst, motivating people to strive for excellence and deliver results that surpass ordinary standards. We may shy away from these lofty goals because we fear failure. But in truth, even if you don’t meet those expectations, you will come out further ahead than if you simply sat back and only tried to meet the base standards expected of you.

Don’t let yourself fall into the vicious cycle of low expectations; RelevantHR requires that you break this cycle, hold yourself accountable to delivering business results, and show your executive team how you are constantly raising the bar for HR.

## **MYTH 4: WE’RE *ENTITLED* TO A SEAT AT THE TABLE**

If you were to google “HR seat at the table,” you would see thousands of articles and talks on the subject. It has been a topic of conversation at HR conferences since we started our careers (back in the 1990s!), and it is still a popular topic of conversation today. Every HR professional wants to be recognized as a key player in business strategy discussions, and this phrase has been a way to discuss that want. Yet, despite years of

this conversation, actually getting that seat remains elusive for many of us in the profession.

If this broken record weren't quite so pathetic, we might find it humorous. In our minds, "We deserve a seat at the table" thinking reflects an entitlement mindset. This may sound harsh, but *you are not entitled to anything*.

Let us clear this up right now: You get your seat at the table by becoming relevant. Complaining about being shut out or demanding that it be given won't get you there. We also note that loudly embracing trendy HR practices isn't the solution either. Moreover, a recent and troubling development is the practice of crafting an "image" of importance and then projecting it widely (see LinkedIn). In a social-media-savvy generation of HR professionals, projecting a seat at the table through curated posts and ego-driven media followings often replaces genuine value contribution within organizations.

*Posting empty ideas with bravado may boost  
your online presence, but it does not equate to  
true influence or meaningful business impact.*

So, don't buy into this myth. No one will invite you to the table if you are not valuable to the business and its aims. And they shouldn't. We are not entitled to a seat if we have not proven ourselves worthy of it by delivering value.

## **MYTH 5: WE DON'T NEED NUMBERS IN HR**

Numbers are the language of business, yet many HR professionals shy away from learning how to handle them. Some even fear them and avoid them. Please don't do this.

That said, we both will admit that we did that, too. But we quickly discovered that to be relevant in HR, you have to understand income statements, cash flow statements, balance sheets, return on investment (ROI) calculations, and how all these numbers are connected to the people who pay close attention to them.

We often suggest to talented up-and-coming HR leaders that their best friends at work should include people in the finance department. In most companies, people (or payroll) costs can be as much as one-third of the total expenses on the income statement. That means people are a *big* needle-mover for the bottom line. If your chief financial officer (CFO) knows that you, too, are watching the bottom line, you will find a powerful ally in the business. And if you show them you understand *their* finance-focused business perspective, that provides you the credibility to be seen as a valuable partner when tackling projects and challenges together.

Below are a number of general business and finance items that we believe a RelevantHR leader must be familiar with. While we acknowledge that the list is long, we also see these as important perspectives and tools for you to at least be conversant, if not fluent, in:

- ▶ **Balance sheet:** A financial statement that shows a company's assets, liabilities, and equity at a specific point in time, providing a snapshot of its financial condition.
- ▶ **Cash flow statement:** A financial report that tracks the flow of cash in and out of the business, highlighting how well the company manages its cash to fund operations and investments.
- ▶ **Income statement:** A statement that shows the company's revenue, expenses, and profits or losses over a specific period, often used to assess the company's performance.
- ▶ **Regression analysis:** A statistical method used to understand the relationship between dependent and independent variables. It's essential for HR in predicting outcomes and making informed decisions based on trends and patterns.

- ▶ **Product pricing:** A pricing process that involves a wide range of knowledge from manufacturing to sales, including cost determination, market analysis, and pricing strategies to ensure profitability.
- ▶ **Margins:** Financial metrics that measure a company's profitability, calculated as a percentage of revenue (e.g., gross margin, operating margin, and net margin).
- ▶ **Budgeting and forecasting:** The process of planning and managing a company's financial resources and predicting future revenue, expenses, and needs.
- ▶ **Cost-benefit analysis:** Evaluating the financial pros and cons of a decision by comparing the costs incurred to the benefits received.
- ▶ **Financial ratios:** Key indicators derived from financial statements, used to assess a company's performance, financial health, and profitability.
- ▶ **Return on employee investment (ROEI):** A measure of the financial return on the company's investment in its workforce.
- ▶ **Break-even analysis:** Calculates the point at which a project or investment will start generating profit.
- ▶ **Marketing and communication:** Conveys clear and compelling messages that drive business and human success through alignment, engagement, and trust.
- ▶ **Technology and systems:** Strategic use of digital tools and platforms to enhance workforce management, improve efficiency, and drive business and people success.
- ▶ **Project and process management:** Designing, implementing, and analyzing structured initiatives and workflows that drive organizational efficiency, employee experience, and business results.

You can learn a lot about these business and financial perspectives through free online courses, collaboration with experts, or leveraging AI. Better yet, you can ask your friends in the finance, marketing, and project management departments to teach you about them. We have yet to

encounter a businessperson who isn't interested in explaining how something works if you have questions and genuinely want to learn from them. Just the humble act of asking someone to show you what they do and how it works so you will be more effective at your job is incredibly powerful.

Remember, understanding numbers, marketing, and technology doesn't just add to your credibility; it also gives you the tools you need to show the value you provide and the language to couch it in. If you are a professional in the field already, you have likely heard someone say, "HR is hard to measure." And to that we say, yes, it can be if you don't know the needs of your business or understand how your role impacts the above business math. But just because it's "hard" doesn't mean it's impossible.

The idea that HR people don't need to know numbers is not only wrong; it is a career limiting perspective. Don't buy into it!

## **MYTH 6: WE DON'T NEED SCIENCE**

Brain science is poorly understood in business. Our friend and colleague, Evan LaPointe, CEO of CORE, often speaks on this, and he has said to us personally, "People who hate science go into business, and people who love science go into science." Intuition and experiential learning can lead individuals to ideal strategies and decision-making over time, but scientific understanding can accelerate everything. It's time to bring science into business and HR to accelerate success, engagement, and positive mental health in the workforce.

Drawing on the research insights shared by Evan and CORE, David has focused on developing strategies that leverage a deeper understanding of brain chemistry to drive motivation. By cultivating a strong sense of higher purpose and providing clear guidance on how individuals can contribute to it, the release of oxytocin is activated, fostering trust and long-

term happiness. Additionally, by building collaborative “Win-Together” teams, serotonin levels are elevated, further enhancing feelings of satisfaction. These neurochemical dynamics create a sustainable culture of engagement, setting it apart from the typical business focus on short-term financial incentives that primarily trigger dopamine, which alone is insufficient for sustained motivation, engagement, and satisfaction.<sup>8</sup>

## Where Are the Inspiring and Relevant Leaders in HR?

Right now, there are HR leaders in the world who, through their business acumen and people abilities, have become trusted strategists for their companies. They are always “in the room where it happens” (thanks, *Hamilton*), and they are contributing to the strategy and success of their organization.

We encourage you to seek these leaders out and learn from them. This chapter has outlined many of the ways we as HR people tend to self-sabotage by reinforcing the myths we labor to dispel, but now that you (hopefully) recognize these problems, you can more fully grasp what a RelevantHR leader is when you see one. You can find them in big established companies that have been forced to understand the importance of HR as they worked through years of cuts, hiring, firing, and economic upheavals. You can also find them in the scrappy, energetic start-up firms that are run by the veterans of bigger battles. Either way, we strongly encourage you to look for opportunities in well-known companies that are highly regarded as demanding and fruitful places to earn your business experience.

Start by looking at places like Google, PepsiCo, Kraft Heinz, General Mills, Capital One, and Procter & Gamble, which all have respected and relevant HR functions. Companies like these are sometimes referred to as *academy companies*, meaning they are widely known and regarded as places where professionals, including HR professionals, will obtain great experience. Working with them can give you a significant leg up when it comes to establishing your career and learning how to be essential in the workplace.

## WHAT MATTERS MOST

- \* There is an old story about HR that may be holding you and your team back. The new story is about RelevantHR, which is HR that has a positive economic impact.
- \* There are a number of myths that hold HR back. Avoid them and work to dispel them.

## WHAT CEOs WANT

- \* An HR team that sees its work as a strategic partner that generates economic value for the company.
- \* An HR function and team that understands the business and the numbers behind it.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- \* What “story” are you and your HR team living? If you need to change that story, what would you need to do differently?
- \* Are any of the myths cited here true for you and your team? Why might that be?

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

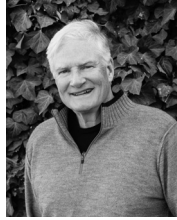


**David Alsop**



David's HR strategy is founded in finding balance between the needs of the people and the needs of the business. He is a seasoned HR executive who started his career in 2002 in companies like Kraft Foods, Nabisco, Oscar Mayer, and Ultradent Products, Inc. Currently, in 2026, he is serving as the CHRO at Ultradent Products, Inc. He is known for his skills in talent management, employment branding, and organizational development, and has a proven track record in leadership development and HR strategy transformation to meet the evolving needs of companies transitioning from the start-up phase to the next level. David believes in the strength of different perspectives and is focused on building and leading high-performance teams. He is also dedicated to keynote speaking, consulting, and influencing to advance a better human experience for all people. You can follow him on LinkedIn at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/davidalsop/> or reach him via email at [david@davidalsop.com](mailto:david@davidalsop.com).

## Ted Forbes



Ted's HR philosophy is grounded in delivering economic value through strategic and relevant HR. He is currently working as the founder of Divitius Partners, LLC, where he focuses on executive coaching, helping the leadership teams of high-growth companies evolve effectively for scale, and growing business-oriented HR leaders who can drive bottom-line impact. Before creating Divitius, Ted served as the first head of people for Cotopaxi, a "B" corporation focused on doing good and alleviating poverty. Prior to Cotopaxi, Ted was executive vice president for people at Backcountry.com. With more than 1,200 employees and more than \$1 billion in sales, Backcountry.com is widely considered one of the leading omnichannel outdoor specialty retailers in the United States and Europe. As the CHRO at both companies, Ted's teams played a key role in growing and stewarding their unique values-based cultures and served as a confidant and trusted advisor to their C-suite leaders. He has also held executive-level roles at United Airlines, the University of Virginia, and Capital One. His passion is to bring out the best in people and organizations in order to help them be more successful than they might have imagined. Ted splits his time between winters in the Wasatch Range of Utah and summers on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington. You can follow him on LinkedIn at [linkedin.com/in/tedforbesdivitiuspartners](https://www.linkedin.com/in/tedforbesdivitiuspartners) or reach him via email at [ted@divitiuspartners.com](mailto:ted@divitiuspartners.com).



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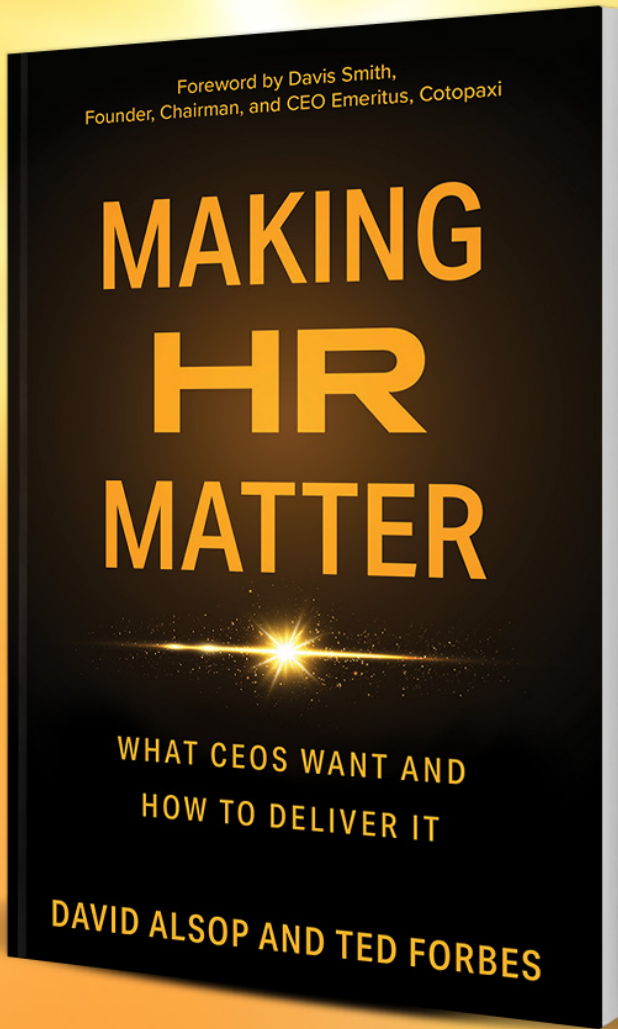
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Weaving Influence (est. 2012), has supported hundreds of authors in leveraging their online presence to achieve their desired results. Founder Becky Robinson is the author of *Reach: Create the Biggest Possible Audience for Your Message, Book, or Cause* (Berrett-Koehler, 2022) and the host of *The Book Marketing Action Podcast*.

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