



WHITHER STRATEGIC ORIENTATION? A STUDY OF HR PROFESSIONALS IN COMMERCIAL BANKS IN SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract

The research problem was formulated as: “With the increased emphasis on human capital as a global trend, what is the extent of strategic orientation of Human Resource Professionals in South Asia?” The objectives were to identify the personal factors as well as organizational factors that contribute to the strategic orientation of HR Professionals and to identify the interactional effects of personal and organizational factors. The scope of the research was limited to selected high-performing Commercial Banks from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. A mixed methodology involving a predominantly qualitative approach supported by a quantitative component was adapted. In-depth interviews were conducted with the Chief Executive Officer, Chief Finance Officer, and the Head of HR of each company. Quantitative questionnaires were also administered to capture additional data. The key personal factors emerged were tacit knowledge, conceptual skills, and business awareness. Leader’s recognition of HR, conducive organizational environment and performance orientation emerged as key organizational factors. Interactional effects of the above factors were also discussed highlighting Competency Deficit and Opportunity Deficit.

1. Introduction

Human Resource (HR) professionals have to contribute as members of senior management teams striving towards profitable growth. A recent survey on emerging trends in HR (Ruona *et al.*, 2003) revealed that there is much concern about HR’s absence in the “boardroom” and in organizational leadership positions. Also, the question of value addition and particularly “impact on the bottom line” has been raised (Ulrich, 1998).

In this research, HR professional is meant to be a senior person engaged in Human Resources activities as an occupation. In other words, a manager with experience and qualifications, handling the responsibilities associated with the Human Resources function of an organization (Dessler, 2003).

Wheelen and Hunger (1988) define strategic orientation as thinking and action of a person, reflecting the long term plans of the organization he/she works for. It includes the



involvement in the strategy formulation, implementation and evaluation stages of the strategic decision making process. It can also be stated as a structured process of thinking to “see the unseen”, leading to action.

Bing *et al.* (2003) in describing the challenges to the field of HR state that “the challenge to practitioners is to move beyond a silo mentality in which solutions can only be found within HRD and to embrace a perspective that organizational problems are systemic and require systemic solutions”.

Considering the region of South Asia, a scenario can be seen where paradoxically, the *best brains* and *worst poverty* are both present (Bhushan, 2000). He further states that “... the role of managerial development, as a harbinger of social and economic change can play in getting the South Asian region its rightful place in the committee of nations”. Strategic orientation of HR Professionals would be of prime importance in such an endeavour, in aligning HR strategies with organizational direction in order to reap the true benefits of regional synergies.

Considering the state of HRM in India, Budhwar (2001) comments that the pressures created by overseas operators on local operators have created a strong need for Indian HR Professionals to seriously emphasize issues related to performance. Singh (2003) studied the strategic HR orientation and firm performance in India, and highlighted a significant relationship between strategic orientation and firm performance.

In the case of Pakistan, a significant emphasis on the need of HR is evident. According to Khilji (2001), the function of HR holds a promise for employees in Pakistan and it is the way forward. Considering the state of HRM in Bangladesh, Siddiquee (2003) endorses a similar view point. According to him, despite the prevalence of a broad consensus on the strategic importance of human resource factor, the paradigm shift is yet to take place in public bureaucracies of developing countries including Bangladesh.

Nanayakkara (2003) points out that “weak work ethic, individualism, feminine and weak uncertainty avoidance, which is not a productive combination of variables for a strong organizational culture could explain some of the underdeveloped characteristics of human resource management in Sri Lanka.” According to him, the overall HRM performance was below the expectation levels and the HR strategy - business strategy link was found to be the weakest link.

The above country-specific details of the level of HR highlight the need for an in-depth study incorporating the entire region. This paper presents a part of such an endeavour, in fulfilling a research gap.



2. Research Problem

Against the background of the above discussion, the research problem is stated as follows:
“With the increased emphasis on human capital as a global trend, what is the extent of strategic orientation of Human Resource professionals in South Asia?”

3. Research Questions

In relation to the research problem, following research questions were raised:

- i) What are the personal factors that contribute to the strategic orientation of HR professionals?
- ii) What are the organizational factors that contribute to the strategic orientation of HR professionals?
- iii) What are the interactional effects of personal and organizational factors to the strategic orientation of HR professionals?

4. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were:

- i) To identify the personal factors that contribute to the strategic orientation of HR professionals in South Asia
- ii) To identify the organizational factors that contribute to the strategic orientation of HR professionals in South Asia
- iii) To identify the interactional effects of personal and organizational factors by way of exploring the trends emerging in relation to strategic orientation of HR professionals in South Asia
- iv) To recommend key strategies to organizations as well as for the HR professionals, to improve the strategic orientation of HR Professionals in South Asia

5. Literature Review

Attempt is made to briefly present the research findings of the key concepts associated. Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM), Strategic HR Responses, and Regional Realities of South Asia were the three key components in focus.



5.1 Strategic Human Resource Management

According to Schuler & Jackson (1987) Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) is, "Explicitly linking HRM with strategic management processes of the organization and to emphasize coordination and congruence among the various human resource management practices". Wright et al. (1994) defined SHRM as, "The pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable a firm to achieve its goals."

The definition of SHRM linking with business strategy has been given by Truss and Gratton (1994) as, "The linking of HRM with strategic goals and objectives in order to improve business performance and develop organization culture in order to foster innovations and flexibility."

5.2 Strategic HR responses

Gratton and Truss (1994) stated that HR's strategic role is to adapt individual HR practices (recruiting, rewarding etc.) to fit specific corporate and competitive strategies. As they further elaborate, "For any particular organizational strategy, there is purportedly a matching human resources strategy."

In response to the changes at strategic levels, the role of the HR function is dramatically changing (Schuler and Jackson, 1987; Ulrich, 1998; Armstrong, 2006). As a strategic partner, the HR Manager has to acquire the business mastery, a path that would lead him / her to greater interactions with the top team (Ulrich and Broackbank, 2005).

Ulrich (1998) reported that the highest variability in the data in relation to the strategic partner suggesting the diverse nature in strategic partnership among HR professionals. Moving beyond isolation as just HR experts, true leaders combine their expertise of HR policies and practices with knowledge of the business to lead change effectively (Rothwell, 1996).

Comparatively fewer studies on strategic aspects of HRM have been done in South Asia, mainly owing to the "infancy stage of HRM" (Budhwar, 2004). As Chanda and Shen (2007) observe, the literature available on HRM practices is largely conceptual and concludes that HRM practices can help to create sustained competitive advantage, especially when they are aligned with a firm's competitive strategy. It points out to a gap where more empirical studies are needed, particularly in the Asia-Pacific context. This research fulfils such an empirical gap.

5.3 Realities of South Asia

South Asia has a rich heritage of culture and tradition in addition to its vast population. It is in a threshold of economic expansion, amidst variety of challenges. South Asia is a "humanly rich" region, which ranks among the world's most densely-populated areas. Around 1.6 billion people live there – about one-fourth of all the people in the world. The region's population density of 305 persons per square kilometre is more than seven times the world average.

South Asia is a region with diversity in abundance. In exploring the human richness of the region, several Human Resource related implications can be seen. Encouraging organizations



to contribute more for economic growth demands attracting, nurturing and retaining key talent. Ensuring the poor are not marginalized includes equal opportunity without discrimination. Contributing towards the society in the form of corporate social responsibility may assist the deserving poor. HR has to act in all these fronts in delivering results.

Hence, the broad need is a holistic approach taking into consideration multi-faceted realities of the South Asian region. The resulting outcome will be a well-balanced economic growth with sufficient emphasis on poverty alleviation.

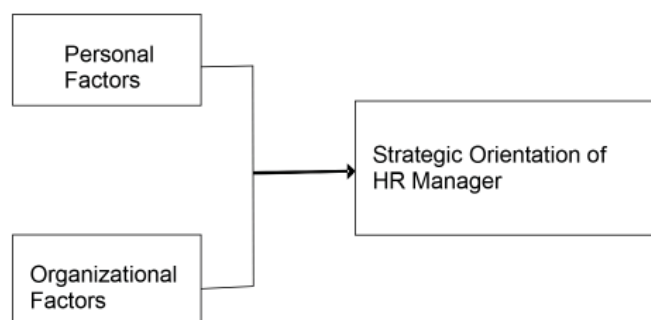
As Sinha (2002) opined, with human resource at the core of the new economy of South Asia, the gap between what can be imagined and what can be achieved will always get narrowed." In a similar line, Sheth (1990) observed that South Asian countries need dedicated professionals in government, agriculture, industry, trade and commerce, science and technology, co-operatives, public services, administration and all other forms of socially productive enterprise, where managerial expertise is also crucial input in formulation and implementation of development plans at all levels, including relevant concepts, techniques, and tools in the various areas of management.

The required response from strategically orientated HR professionals in South Asia is aptly highlighted here.

6. Concept - Indicator Model

Figure 1 depicts the concept - indicator model based on the literature review.

Figure 1: Concept - Indicator Model





7. Methodology

This research adopted a mix methodology which was predominantly qualitative. Grounded theory approach as proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), and subsequently modified by Strauss and Corbin (1990) was selected as the appropriate way to understand the patterns emerging from a relatively smaller sample such as the one selected.

Additionally, Strategic Orientation Questionnaire (SOQ) adapted from Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) and Strategic Integration Questionnaire (SIQ) adapted from Chanda and Shen (2007) were used as quantitative data capturing instruments.

This research used purposive sampling, with emphasis on a sector having high strategic significance in South Asia. Banks are the pillars of modern economic development and they act as a catalyst for economic growth and development of the country (Kamal, 2007). Accordingly, selection of four leading banks, based on the country level business information such as the “top 10 business entity lists” was done. The list of specific banks chosen was further endorsed by the academics of the respective countries whom the researcher met as part of his regional study tour.

7.1 Data Collection

The organizations involved with the study were code-named on request in order to maintain anonymity. The details are as given in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Selected

Country	Commercial Bank
Bangladesh	BdBank
India	InBank
Pakistan	PkBank
Sri Lanka	LkBank

There were three respondents from each organization, viz. The CEO, head of finance (CFO) and the head of HR, resulting in 12 depth interviews, with the personal involvement of the researcher. Quantitative instruments (SOQ and SIQ) were also administered to this sample.

As the sample was relatively small, no attempt was made to use detailed inferential statistics, in association with the quantitative instruments.

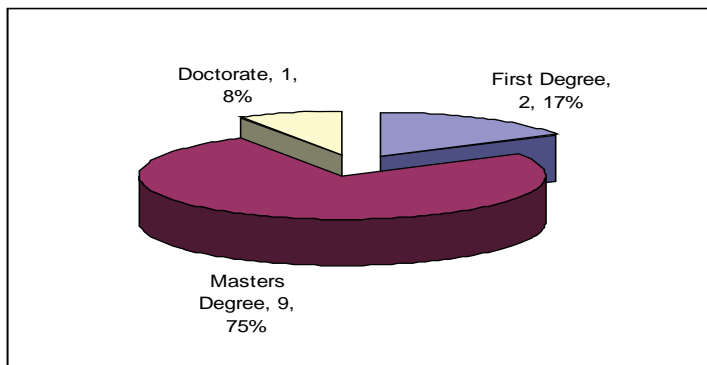
7.2 Sample Profile

The respondents included 4 HR professionals, 4 Chief Executive Officers and 4 Chief Financial Officers. It was a 100% male sample, highlighting the relatively less representation of women in senior managerial positions in South Asia.



Considering the education level of the respondents, the details shown in figure 2 can be seen.

Figure 2: Education Level of Respondents

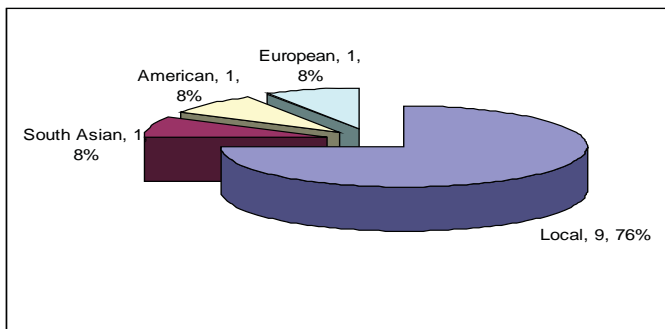


Source: Survey Data

In relation to the education level of the respondents, it is evident that all but one of them were graduates with majority possessing a postgraduate qualification, inclusive of one doctorate. This indicates the level of emphasis given by the commercial banks to education as a vital part of professionalism.

With regard to the education, further details can be seen, as depicted in figure 3.

Figure 3: Local vs. Foreign Qualifications of Respondents



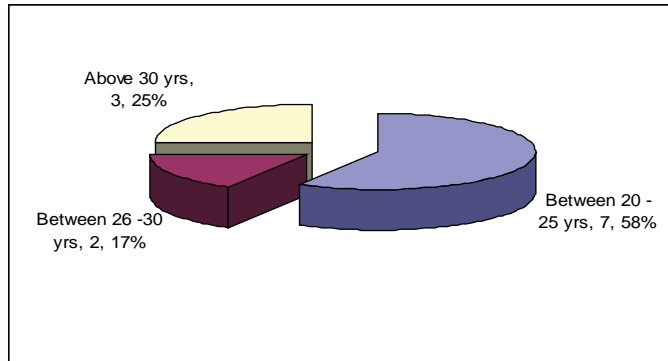
Source: Survey Data

The proportion of respondents having an overseas qualification is significantly higher compared to other sectors. This indicates the need to equip oneself with rapidly developing technology and advanced management practices (Armstrong, 2006).



In relation to the work experience of respondents, the details are as shown in figure 4.

Figure 4: Work Experience of Respondents



Source: Survey Data

According to figure 4, a large majority of the respondents are having a work experience between 20-25 years. This highlights the “relatively younger” top management representing higher dynamism in line with industry needs.

8. Analysis of Data

Qualitative findings and quantitative findings are discussed separately with subsequent assessment of their convergence.

8.1 Qualitative Findings

Based on the qualitative responses collected as a part of the in-depth interview, several aspects of the HR professional in focus were captured, as depicted in table 2.

Table 2: Key Strengths, Issues and Achievements of the HR professional as Identified by the CEO and the CFO

Key Strengths	Key Issues	Key Achievements
Experience in Bangladesh as well as Asia Pacific	Adoptability from a multinational mindset to a local bank	Revamping the performance management system
Systematic approach with specialized knowledge in HR	Less emphasis on educating functional professionals on HR	Changing the performance management system incorporating individual and team targets



Well balanced, having the right mix of strategic thinking and dedicated execution	Need to develop the entire HR team	Development of robust HR systems
Has the ability to drive multiple initiatives	Low level of inter-departmental relationships of the HR team	HR Systems development
Exceptional dedication and commitment	Need to significantly improve the HR team	Introducing a performance management system
Highly qualified in the field of HR	Less business awareness in the HR team	Establishing a performance management system
Possession of required competencies	Need to understand the complexities of the industry	Revamping the performance management system
Very competent in handling HR	Need to tackle complex issues promptly and professionally	Improving the performance management system

Source: Survey Data

According to the above table, all three columns highlight the need of personal factors and organizational factors contributing to strategic orientation of HR professionals.

In moving further, coding of the transcriptions was done resulting in more than 80 codes being generated. They were clustered and such clusters were labeled in line with the concept-indicator model. Details of such personal factors and organizational factors emerged are as shown in table 3.

Table 3: Emergence of Personal Factors

Cluster Contents (Salient items)	Cluster Label	Definition from Literature
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Involvement in regional projects - Influence of past incidents - Demonstration of tacit knowledge at work - Social networking by HR - Experience and exposure to diverse settings 	Tacit knowledge (PF1)	Knowledge gathered through experience in, and exposure to, the strategic decision making process. (Adapted from Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995)



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assessment of status of HR - Assessment of strategic challenges - Assessment of strategic role of HRM - Assessment of the HR team - Envisioning for future - Innovative solutions for strategic HR issues 	Conceptual skills (PF2)	Envisioning and analytical skills needed for strategic decision making. (Adapted from Katz, 1974)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Awareness of business needs - Awareness of company practices - Critical assessment of mgt. structure - Awareness of key org. challenges - Awareness of business achievements - Critical assessment of industry 	Business awareness (PF3)	The understanding of the nature of business one's organization is engaged in. (Adapted from Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005)

Source: Survey Data

The above table depicts the emergence of three distinct personal factors through qualitative data.

As the HR professional of BdBank stated :

“I am satisfied with my involvement in business decisions, but I need more understanding on the finer points of the banking industry. As most of the HR people in local banks perform a transactional type of a job, it is very difficult to transform the mindsets. For example, talent management is absolutely zero. I of course can introduce attracting, nurturing and sustaining key talent, because of my MNC exposure. Whether the industry is ready for such new approaches is a question. But I am very optimistic on one key aspect. When more and more foreign banks enter Bangladesh and offer innovative solutions, we can't just wait.” (Extracted from transcription related to HRM, BdBank, 03/03/07)

The above statement is a clear indication of the HR professional knowing the ground situation and the challenges that lie ahead. Such an appreciation of reality is of vital importance for the strategic orientation of HR professionals.

In a similar manner, organizational factors were also captured. Table 4 contains the details.

Table 4: Emergence of Organizational Factors



Cluster Contents (Salient items)	Cluster Label	Definition from Literature
Appreciation of achievements of HR Appreciation of strategic role of HR Association of Leader and HR Leader's awareness of HRD Leader's contribution in HR decisions <u>Recognition of HR capability</u>	Leader's recognition of HR (OF1)	The understanding of the CEO on the importance of HR. (Adapted from Avolio et al., 1991 and Pareek, 1997).
Assessment of HR implementation Assessment of org. performance Collective approach to performance Setting of targets as per the Balanced Scorecard Recognition of strategic HR achievements	Performance orientation (OF2)	The amount of thrust and emphasis from the organization toward the achievement of set objectives. (Adapted from Kaplan and Norton, 2001)
Assessment of friendly org culture Autonomy enjoyed by the HR Recognition of HR by the organization Supporting environment for innovation Trust in HR by the organization	Conducive organizational environment (OF3)	The organizational climate which is influential for HR Manager to be strategically oriented, with openness in sharing information and encouragement for innovation. (Adapted from Rao, 1990 and Pareek, 1997)

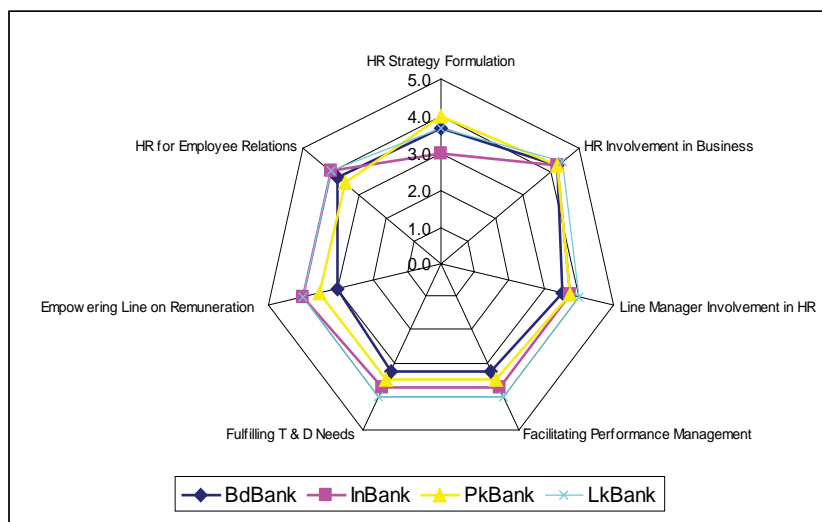
Source: Survey Data

According to the table 4, three distinct organizational factors emerge through the qualitative data captured.

8.2 Quantitative Findings

Based on the data collected using the Strategic Integration Questionnaire (SIQ) adapted from Chanda and Shen (2007), the following picture can be seen.

Figure 5: Strategic Integration of HR in Four Commercial Banks



Source: Survey Data



According to figure 5, it appears that HR strategy formulation is one dimension where there is a significant variation among the four banks. Depending on the time of commencement of strategic HR initiatives, the current state of progress may occupy varying levels. In other words, it could be a case of early starters vs. late starters.

Considering the data captured through the Strategic Orientation Questionnaire (SOQ) adapted from Ulrich and Brockbank (2005), the scenario as depicted in table 5 can be seen.

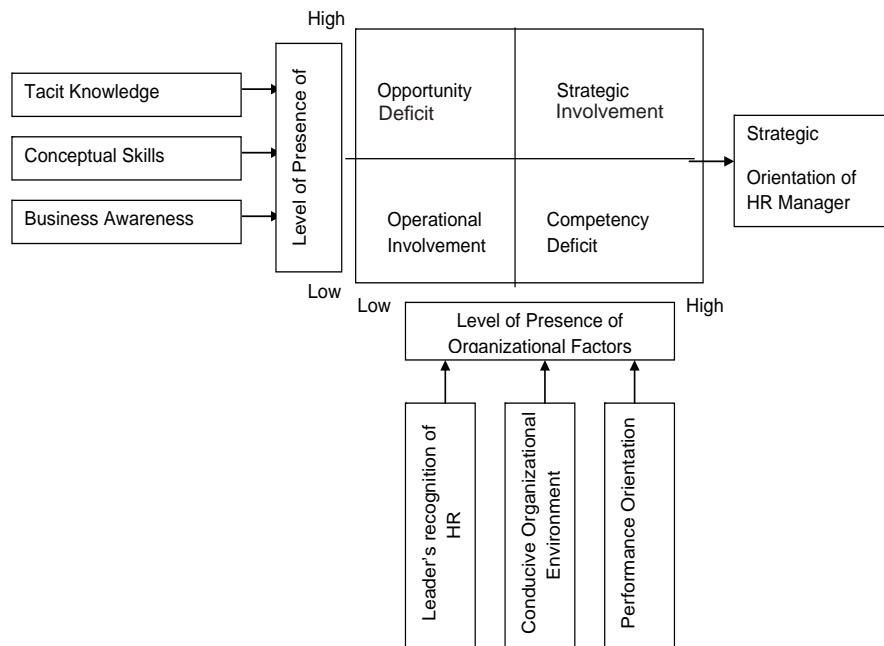
Table 5: Responses to the SOQ

	Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.
1	He/She is actively involved in developing long-term goals of the organization.	4.25	0.62
2	He/She is consulted by the MD/CEO in making key decisions on people.	4.67	0.49
3	He/She designs HR strategies in line with broad organizational strategies.	4.58	0.51
4	He/She serves in cross-functional teams tackling strategic issues.	4.17	0.39
5	He/She introduces key measurements to assess HR effectiveness.	4.25	0.62
6	He/She is conversant with the use of HR related IT systems.	4.67	0.49
7	He/She is aware of the key competitive challenges. faced by his/her organization.	4.42	0.67
8	He/She strives to optimize the people contribution in overcoming strategic challenges.	4.50	0.52
9	He/She acts as a coach in ensuring the other key senior professionals play their people management role.	4.67	0.49
10	He/She strives to improve the internal communication so that the key initiatives and results are cascaded down in an effective manner.	4.58	0.51

Source: Survey Dapta



Figure 7: The Emergent Model



Source: Survey Data

Competency Deficit refers to a scenario where the organization provides an opportunity for the HR professional to get involved in the strategic decision making process, he /she does not capitalize by moving ahead appropriately, as there are serious competency gaps in him/her. Attention has to be paid to the context, where there is a significant recognition of people as a key asset in the organization, and there is sufficient emphasis on strategic planning process. In such a case, why HR professional does not play the role of a strategic partner, in one way, could be attributed to issues with his/her competencies, that need to be systematically explored.

Opportunity Deficit refers to a scenario where the HR professional is willing and able to become a strategic partner, the organization does not provide the needed opportunity. It can be caused by not having an enabling leadership, non availability of a supportive climate, and non existence of a performance orientation in the organization. Relevant contextual aspects need to be considered in this case as well. Whilst a significant recognition of people and sufficient emphasis on strategic planning process, why there is a lack of opportunity for the HR professional to play the role of a strategic partner, demands an in-depth investigation.

Based on the emergent model, the researcher intends to propose several propositions that need further investigation through detailed studies.



P1: Greater the presence of tacit knowledge in the HR professional, lower will be the competency deficit, resulting in a higher level of strategic orientation of the HR professional.

P2: Greater the presence of conceptual skills in the HR professional, lower will be the competency deficit, resulting in a higher level of strategic orientation of the HR professional.

P3: Greater the level of business awareness of the HR professional, lower will be the competency deficit, resulting in a higher level of strategic orientation of the HR professional.

P4: Greater the leader's recognition of HR, lower will be the opportunity deficit, resulting in a higher level of strategic orientation of the HR professional.

P5: Greater the presence of a conducive organizational environment, lower will be the opportunity deficit, resulting in a higher level of strategic orientation of the HR professional.

P6: Greater the emphasis on performance orientation, lower will be the opportunity deficit, resulting in a higher level of strategic orientation of the HR professional..

The findings discussed so far are in line with research conducted by Hoque and Moon (2001) who established that: "The growing number of specialists using the HR title are well qualified, are more likely to be involved in strategic decision making processes and are most likely to be found in on workplaces within which sophisticated methods and techniques have been adopted".

Further, the findings arrived at a South Asian setting is of significance due to variety of reasons. As Khatri (1999) observes, conducting strategic HRM studies in other parts of the world, for example Asia, would help to meet the shortage of empirical work in the field in those parts of the world and also serve as a vehicle for comparative studies.

10. Limitations of the Study

As the research was based on a predominantly qualitative approach with exploratory nature, inability to predict the strategic orientation of HR professionals of other organizations in South Asia, based on the findings of this research, could be stated as a limitation.

Accordingly, selection of a larger sample with organizations representing all the major industries will be useful for a better understanding of the strategic orientation of HR professionals in South Asia.

Impact of national culture on the firm performance was not considered in this study. Differences emerged from the data in relation to four Commercial Banks could have been analyzed with inferences to cultural dimensions such as those recommended by Hofstede (1991).



11. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the research, following recommendations can be made, for the organizations.

11.1 Strategic Involvement of HR

It needs to be ensured that the HR professional is involved in the strategic decision making process of the organization. This may translated into several key actions such as:

- i) Encouraging the HR professionals involvement in cross functional teams tackling strategic issues
- ii) Presence in top team in providing people related information on issues and implications of decisions.
- iii) Coaching element of HR professional where he/she acts as the internal consultant in advising the line professionals on HR matters, with the premise that “all managers should be people managers with HR awareness”.
- iv) Regular meetings between the CEO and the HR professional, in discussing key people matters affecting the business.

11.2 Strategic Alignment of HR

It also needs to be ensured that that HR policies and practices are aligned to the organizational strategic direction, and are reflective of organization’s long term goals.

This should be practically approached as:

- i) HR professional is well updated on the strategic direction of the organizations, with regular reference to organizational documents, meeting minutes and discussions.
- ii) Devise a checklist for HR initiatives to ascertain the strategic alignment, and apply it in case of every new HR initiative.
- iii) Cultivate the practice of connecting the HR actions with the broad organizational objectives, especially with the HR professional leading by example in grooming the HR team.

11.3 Strategic Contribution of HR

It needs to be ensured that HR function, and particularly the Head of HR is accountable for people- related strategic matters and thus should achieve agreed targets. Quantification of targets with appropriate matrix will be a perquisite for this.



In executing the key tasks, the following practical actions need attention:

- i) Appropriate usage of strategic results tracking tool such as Balanced Scorecard, with emphasis on people related parameters.
- ii) More focused HR scorecard, representing HR strategies, objectives, initiatives and action plans should be in place.
- iii) Regular review of strategic contribution of HR team and communicating the results to all concerned should be given priority. Such reviews may also act as “course correction” opportunities.

Considering the HR professional as an individual, the following recommendations can be made based on the findings of the research.

11.4 Upgrading Competencies of HR Professionals

HR professional cannot survive in an increasingly changing business environment without regularly enhancing his/her knowledge and skills with desired attitude.

Some possible actions are:

- i) Be in touch with current research done on HR, with understanding and applications where relevant and possible
- ii) Embark on development programs such as short courses on diverse aspects, not only in HR but also in relation to business as a whole.
- iii) Think and act with more business sense, with greater understanding on business, by way of being in touch with the rest of the organization as well as the outside world

11.5 Exploring Opportunities for HR Professionals

Professional networking by means of active membership in organizations related to HR is becoming increasingly important.

Some possible practical actions in this direction are:

- i) Becoming a member of already existing HR body, such as Institute of Human Resource Management
- ii) Form new bodies to establish greater cooperation related to common issues, despite organizations competing with each other. All HR Professionals in banks getting together in one forum to discuss common people issues is one such example.



- iii) Facilitating activities involving more than one organization in line with CSR initiatives, with a clear understanding of the community needs.

12. Conclusion

As an overall conclusion of this study, it can be stated that the strategic orientation of the HR professionals selected from a purposive sample of four high performing Commercial Banks in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka showed a satisfactory level of strategic orientation, confirming the findings of related studies done earlier.

It is expected that the findings will contribute to the broadening of the existing knowledge on the HR Professionals in South Asia, with academic, managerial, and societal implications.

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