

Do You Need an HR Generalist or HR Business Partner?

April 05, 2021

By Dom Nicastro

Many jobs won't return "en masse for years, if ever." That's according to jobs site Glassdoor and its [Workplace Trends 2021 report](#), citing the shift in workplace habits due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the jobs on the bubble? HR generalist.

The HR generalist role suffered a 37% decline in job postings, going from 5,286 open jobs in October 2019 to 3,314 open jobs in October 2020, according to figures from the job postings site.

Andrew Chamberlain, chief economist at [Glassdoor](#) and author of the report, classified HR generalist as an office and administrative role. These are jobs, he found, that bear the "brunt of job cuts in the white-collar workforce today, and that's likely to continue in 2021 and beyond as the COVID-19 recession prompts companies to invest in automation and software rather than hiring back these roles in the same numbers."

Sure, it's only one data point on one jobs site. There's still a heartbeat for these jobs on [Indeed](#) and [ZipRecruiter](#), for instance. And no one's saying the HR generalist job is done.

The Glassdoor finding does, however, question the future of the role. Is it fading or poised for a comeback with a newly adapted set of skills and competencies? Some see specialization taking precedence as people-first strategies come to the fore.

"Companies that are truly invested in the success, engagement, well being, growth and development of their teams will reflect this in how well-resourced their people teams are," said Elaine Yang, manager and human resources business partner (HRBP) at [Lever](#), a talent relationship management platform. "Instead of optimizing for HR generalists who 'do it all' we'll see companies invest in larger, more specialized HR teams to 'do it well.'"

What Is an HR Generalist?

A generalist has a broad range of HR responsibilities, including hiring, compensation and benefits, HR administration, people programs, employee relations and other areas. The specific focus areas for the generalist may vary with the size of the company, according to Yang.

Regardless of the specific focus areas, an individual who has the HR generalist title should have basic knowledge of all the HR functions performed within an organization, according to Cheryl Brown Merriwether, vice president and executive director for the [International Center for Addiction & Recovery Education \(ICARE\)](#).

For example, an HR generalist may be responsible for tasks associated with talent acquisition (recruiting, hiring and staffing) and total rewards (payroll, compensation and benefits).

Generalists should be able to perform HR administration functions (compliance with legal requirements, establishment of workplace policies and procedures and conducting HR audits), oversee employee relations and engagement (performance evaluations, discipline and labor relations) plus manage workforce development and training activities, according to Brown Merriwether.

HR generalists may work alone or as part of a team. If working as part of a small team or department of one, the generalist may outsource or co-source many of the organization's functions to a PEO (professional employer organization).

“The primary focus of an HR generalist is the establishment of internal policies, procedures and practices through which the transactional or functional HR tasks can be performed,” Brown Merriwether said. “These tasks must be carried out with integrity and efficiency to ensure compliance with state/federal employment laws, minimize corporate liability and risk, while facilitating the organization's ability to achieve specified goals and objectives.”

Emergence of the HR Business Partner

The reported decline of HR generalists reignites the long-running debate about lower level HR generalists vs. HR business partners (HRBPs) and where these roles fit into the HR scheme in the workplace.

Job cuts have fallen on lower-skilled generalist roles, and probably more at small and medium-sized businesses where they have one HR person who does it all. But larger companies often have a class of generalists called HR business partners who work more strategically with business units. The people who fill these roles tend to have more experience and are adept at working across multiple areas of business. Are those being affected?

Yes, according to Yang. But for the better. She should know; HRBP is in her title. Yang said we should anticipate seeing even more HR specializations over the next few years due to workplace changes and increased emphasis on retaining and engaging employees.

“While an HR generalist can operate at a strategic level like an HRBP would, they are more operations focused and handle the day-to-day duties while HRBPs work alongside leaders and managers to provide relevant people solutions like advising on diversity, equity and inclusion programs or shifting to a remote work environment,” Yang said. “Both of these roles will continue to increase in complexity and significance as employees and employers alike strive for higher levels of engagement and standards of employee.”

Automation Tech Could Drive the Conversation

Depending on a company's structure and their investment in automation, completely doing away with HR generalists may be necessary. Their operational focus makes the tasks they carry out an easy target for automation. But Gaylyn Sher-Jan, chief people officer at [Bright.md](#), a platform that automates healthcare operations, sees valid reasons to have both HR generalists as well as HRBPs.

“I think it would be wise for HR generalists to expand their knowledge base with additional training and determine specialty areas, such as compensation design and pay equity or talent acquisition,” she said. “In the event a company needs to downsize, they will be valuable employees who have a mix of both a generalist and a specialist. This is a time for our function to see the shifts in the ecosystem and what automation brings and then adjust to meet the market.”

But can the HR generalist keep up with the [advancements of HR automation tech](#) and outlast the urge for companies to cut people and rely more on these technologies? Companies have adopted a resource-saving approach during the past 12 months, accelerating the adoption of automation and software human resource models which fulfill many functions of an HR generalist, according to Sher-Jan.

“This unfortunate reality is not new to the human resources field, especially when we have to navigate need-based trends that tend to emerge every few years,” Sher-Jan said. “Historically, employment environments require shifts between HR business partner, or specialist and generalists, and trends are favoring the former (role).”

The pandemic may be setting a new standard in terms of how senior HR leadership thinks about who they need for a changing workforce landscape and what they should expect from their HR information systems, she said. Lower level HR generalists may not be up to date on specific issues related to employment law and compensation, how to navigate remote or hybrid work models, and comply with programs like the Affordable Care Act.

“An informed HRBP operates in a consultancy role across different departments, they understand the high level needs and goals of the company and its leadership,” Sher-Jan said. “HRBPs will also strategically advise and determine next steps, on matters of employee engagement and how to approach workforce interventions.”

Simply Adapt or Die?

HR roles — like any role in the workplace, really — should be reimaged due to new priorities, according to Yang. In this case, the functional area that teams should take care to invest in and reimagine is workplace experience.

“What does it look like to support employees in a distributed, hybrid workforce?” Yang said. “What kinds of infrastructure need to be in place so that employees, regardless of location, are equitably compensated, rewarded and reviewed? Regardless of location, level or function, employees should have a good sense of what their employers are doing to adapt.”

All HR practitioners and professionals, regardless of their title or position or certification status, are now expected and more often required, to perform as a strategic business partner who is qualified and able to add significant value to a business enterprise, regardless of size, location or industry, according to Brown Merriwether.

“HR professionals must think strategically and align HR activities — whether done in-house or outsourced — in such a way as to fulfill corporate goals and objectives,” she said. “HR strategic business partners understand the impact that political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental factors have on companies. Consequently, they work in partnership with other managers and leaders to properly assess the internal strengths and weaknesses of the enterprise, as well as external opportunities, threats and trends. They competently and confidently propose and deliver solutions to complex problems.”

As the marketplace continues to globalize and the workplace continues to diversify, the need for HR strategic business partners will continue to increase and eclipse that of the more task-focused HR generalist. These individuals will excel at consistently demonstrating value at a strategic level and earn the respect of both their peers and the executive team, she added.

“Tactical tasks will be performed by automated tools,” Brown Merriwether said, “thus freeing up time to assume the more enterprising responsibilities of the HR function.”