



The HRBP in 2025

Overview

HR business leaders are well-versed in managing business changes for their employee segments, but today, change is occurring at an increasing pace. Reacting to and anticipating changes within the business — let alone for their own role — has become a challenge for HRBPs.

One of the biggest drivers of change today is digitalization. As we look forward to 2025, it's safe to say digitalization will dramatically shape the HRBP role. Our qualitative and quantitative analysis yields four predictions for the role that HRBPs can start preparing for now.

Key Findings

- Digitalization is the No. 1 priority in 2018 for heads of HR and HRBPs.
- Business leaders expect digitalization to improve the business's performance, cost savings and overall competitiveness.
- Employees expect digitalization to improve their day-to-day experience at work through relevant and personalized support, transparency, and fast solutions.
- The HR function must improve employees' experience in a way that also drives performance.
- The HRBP role will change in four fundamental ways by 2025:
 - Technology accelerates the shift to strategic partner.
 - HRBPs are stewards of the employee experience.
 - HRBPs are product design experts.
 - Careers in HR become "careers with (some) HR."

Digitalization Is Driving Change to the HRBP Role

Managing uncertainty and change has always been an expectation for HRBPs; however, many have shared with us that recent changes to their roles and organizations have felt even more significant than usual given the increasing emphasis on digitalization.

Digitalization: Deploying technologies and practices to enhance the existing business model (via products, channels and operations) or to create new business or operating models.

Digitalization is a critical priority for executive teams and HR leaders alike. Of 600 business leaders we recently surveyed, 67% shared that if their organizations do not become significantly more digitalized by 2020, they will no longer be competitive. [1] Heads of HR and HRBPs agree: digitalizing HR is their No. 1 priority for the year ahead.[2][3]

Digitalization Means Different Things to Different Stakeholders

Digitalization means different things to different parts of an organization. For leaders, digitalization is about improving business performance and remaining competitive in the market. Leaders are turning to digitalization to achieve key outcomes in support of those goals, such as:

- Improving customer engagement.
- Automating processes to improve efficiency.
- Using data to make better decisions.

Employees, on the other hand, are expecting an improved day-to-day experience at work that is influenced by their experience as consumers outside of work. Outside of work, employees wake up to the alarm they set on their smart phone, preorder coffee for fast pick-up at their brick-and-mortar retail chain and step into a room already warmed from their programmable thermostat. Their consumer experience is technology-enabled, connected, transparent, personalized, interactive and fast. Employees seek that same experience in the organization.

For example, 77% of employees expect easier options for completing routine tasks compared to three years ago, while 69% of employees expect more personalization in communication from their organization.[4]

In the digital age of increased expectations from both leaders and employees, HRBPs are asking what digitalization means for them. What must they do differently to drive business objectives and meet employees' needs? Our research answers these questions and addresses HRBPs' uncertainty over the future of their roles.

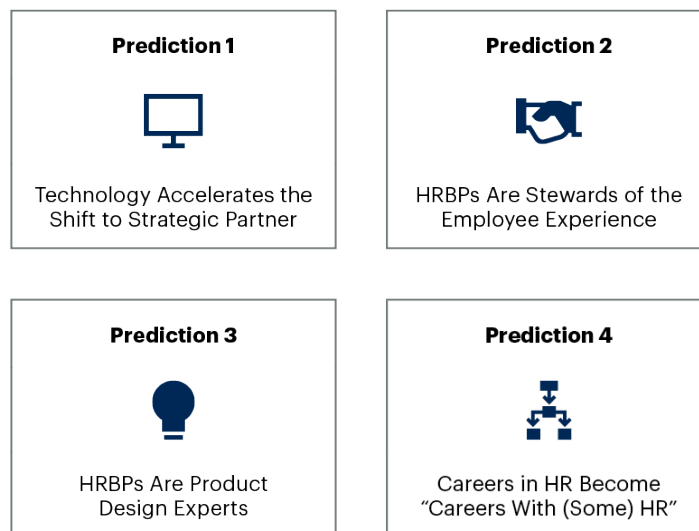
4 Predictions for the HRBP Role in 2025

Starting from these questions and drawing on feedback from over 400 HRBPs, 150 heads of HR and nearly 6,000 employees, we developed four predictions (see Figure 1):

1. Technology accelerates the shift to strategic partner.
2. HRBPs are stewards of the employee experience.
3. HRBPs are product design experts.
4. Careers in HR become "careers with (some) HR."

Figure 1: 4 Predictions for the HRBP Role in 2025

4 Predictions for the HRBP Role in 2025



Source: Gartner (September 2018)

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Four fundamental ways the HRBP role will change as a result of digitalization.

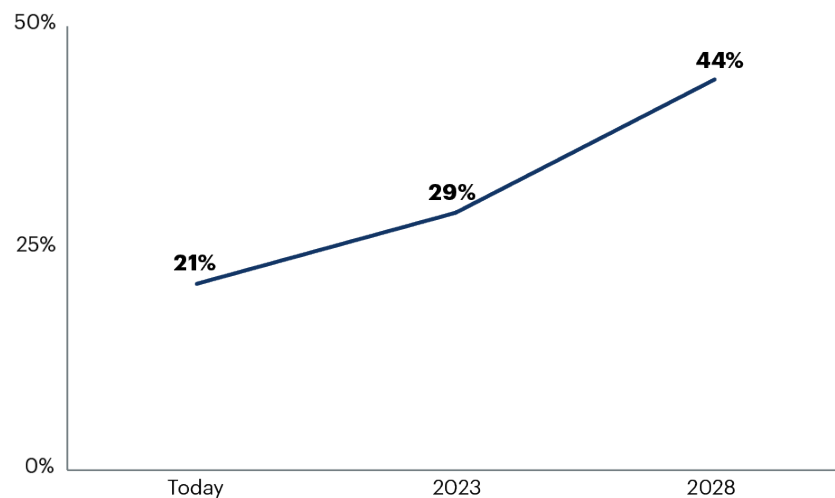
Prediction 1: Technology Accelerates the Shift to Strategic Partner

It's not surprising the digital era brings a greater focus on technology. Today's average HR function spends between 3.5% and 9.5% of its annual HR budget on technology. [5] And 88% of heads of HR shared that they believe their organizations must invest in three or more technologies or systems across the next two years to meet their objectives.[6]

HRBPs' roles have already changed due to this technology focus. For example, the proportion of HRBP job requisitions that list HRIS proficiency as a requirement has increased by 62% since 2015. Further, technology has begun to automate the transactional work HRBPs perform, with HRBPs indicating that 21% of their day-to-day job responsibilities have already been automated. Looking to the future, HRBPs expect that figure to jump to 44% by 2028 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Anticipated Percentage of Automated HRBP Responsibilities

Anticipated Percentage of Automated HRBP Responsibilities



Number of respondents = 436
Source: Gartner HRBP in 2025 Survey

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HRBPs expect the proportion of their jobs that will be automated to increase over the next 10 years.

Luckily, HRBPs today are optimistic about technology's impact on their roles. Sixty-eight percent of HRBPs agree that automation is an opportunity to prioritize strategic responsibilities.[7] We predict that the increase in automation of day-to-day responsibilities and transactional work will accelerate the shift of becoming a strategic partner that HRBPs have been working toward.

Prediction 2: HRBPs Are Stewards of the Employee Experience

In recent years, HR has been providing ever-more comprehensive support for employees. This has evolved from supporting employees across all stages of their career (from recruiting through development and career transitions) to also supporting the personal needs that affect their performance (e.g., flexible work arrangements, well-being support).

Unfortunately, despite this progress, most employees think HR is not effectively supporting them. Only 29% of employees agree HR helps them perform better, and less than half of business leaders agree HR really understands what they need and want.[4]

To better support employees in the digital age, where they expect an easier, less time-consuming and more personalized experience, HR must rebalance its focus from supporting what employees need to supporting what they experience. Instead of considering what employees need to perform better, HR must address questions such as:

- What are the most memorable or impactful experiences for employees at work?
- How are those experiences affecting employees' performance?
- How are those experiences affecting employees' perceptions of the job and the organization?

Our research shows that when HR prioritizes what employees experience rather than just what employees need, performance can improve by up to 14%. By comparison, when you only provide solutions that support what employees need, performance improves by only 6%.[4][6] The potential performance improvement, coupled with employees' increasingly high expectations for the workplace, means HRBPs will need to be stewards of the employee experience. Considering their history as employee advocates and their in-depth knowledge of their client groups, HRBPs are well-positioned to play this role.

Prediction 3: HRBPs Are Product Design Experts

The employee performance and employee experience demands of the digital age will require HR to change its approach to designing products (e.g., tools, policies, practices). With the typical design approach, HR strives to create high-quality, scalable solutions that endure, solving long-term employee challenges with long-term solutions. However, this approach falls short in two ways:[4]

- Limited relevance — Less than 30% of employees agree HR understands what they need and want.
- Lack of responsiveness — Only 30% of employees agree HR’s products and services evolve to accommodate the organization’s changing needs.

To design the relevant, responsive solutions needed to support the workforce in the digital age, HR must relinquish the quest for the perfect, long-lasting solution and instead create valuable, “good enough” products that evolve easily (see Figure 3). This approach of designing HR solutions that evolve instead of endure can improve employee performance by up to 15%.[4][6] In contrast, designing HR solutions to endure has no significant impact on employee performance.

Figure 3: Comparison of Evolving vs. Enduring Solution Design Processes

Comparison of Evolving vs. Enduring Solution Design Processes



Source: Gartner (September 2018)
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HR functions should shift from designing enduring solutions to designing evolving solutions.

To create evolving solutions, HR functions must embrace a new mindset encouraging experimentation and iteration. They must rapidly test potential solutions to determine what will provide value rather than relying on pilots in the workforce. They must also create and deploy a minimally viable product (MVP) — a version of the product that is good enough and provides value to employees rather than a final, perfect version — and use employee expertise to iterate on the products over time.

An increasing number of HR functions have adopted this more iterative, agile approach to designing HR solutions. For HRBPs, it means developing expertise in product design and applying that expertise to proactively shape HR products that meet line clients’ needs. It does not mean HRBPs create all HR products themselves but rather that they partner more effectively with COEs (or other product owners) to improve evolving products.

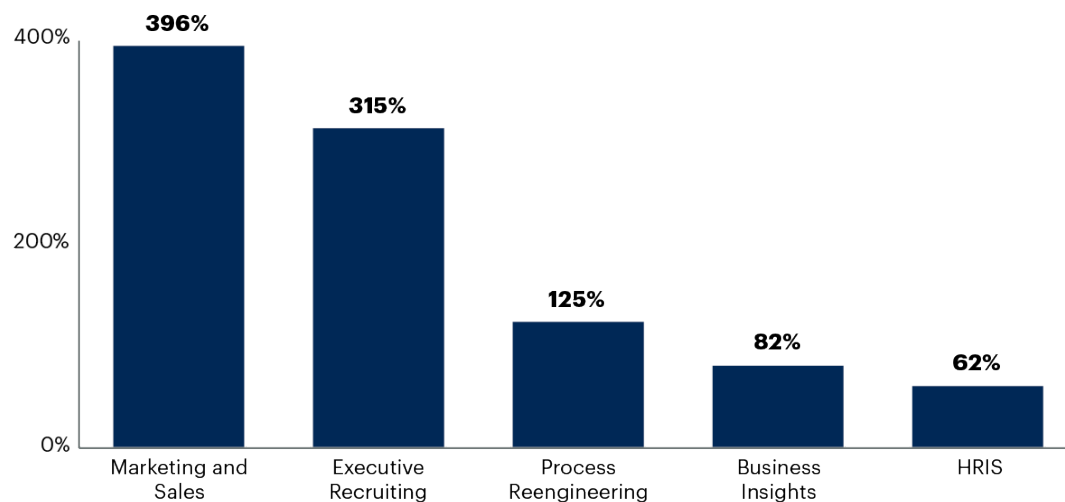
Prediction 4: Careers in HR Become “Careers With (Some) HR”

With so many changes to their day-to-day roles, most HRBPs recognize that their approach to future professional development and advancement will need to change, too. Historically, honing their HR acumen and expertise has been a key way for HRBPs to differentiate themselves. This investment in more HR expertise, though, has meant few HRBPs have non-HR experience. The median HRBP only has two years of work experience outside HR, and those who do have outside experience were often in customer service or administrative roles.[3]

However, non-HR experience is emerging as increasingly important for HRBPs in the digital age. After analyzing over 71,000 HRBP job descriptions posted from 2015 to 2018, marketing and sales was the skill category with the highest percent increase in mentions for job requisitions, with a 396% increase during that time (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Hard Skills With the Highest Percent Increase in Demand for HRBPs

Hard Skills With the Highest Percent Increase in Demand for HRBPs



n = 71,329 job requisitions
Source: Gartner TalentNeuron analysis

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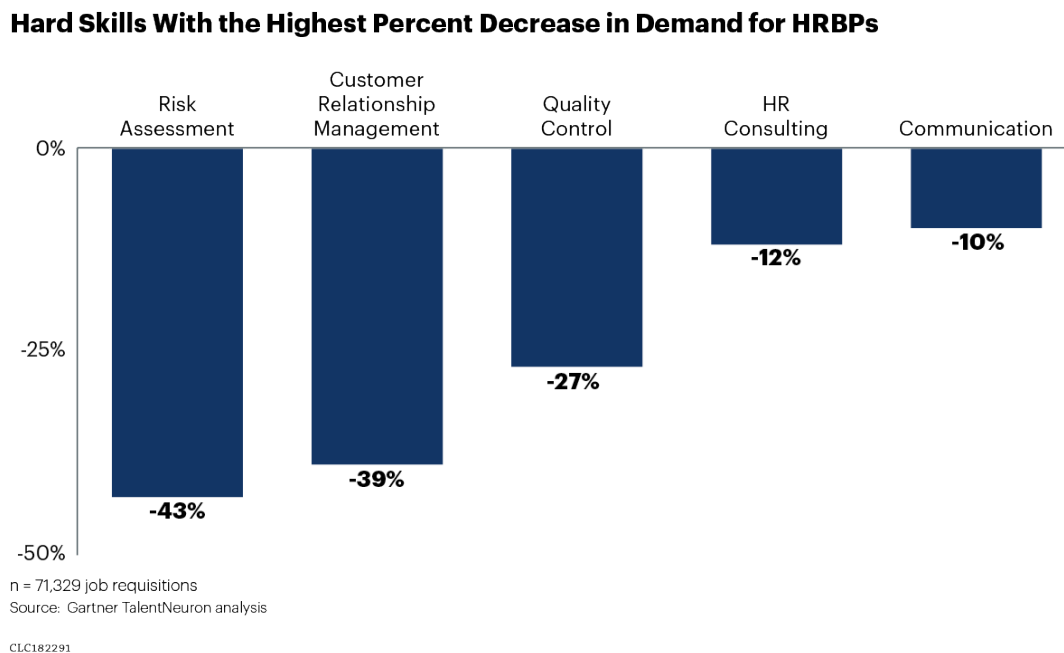
Change in the number of mentions in HRBP requisitions from 2015 through 2018 in the U.S., U.K., Mexico and Australia.

Why are HR functions increasingly looking for HRBPs with marketing and sales skills? Those functions have developed sophisticated and effective tools for understanding the customer experience, and HR is applying similar tools and skills to understand employees. Consider, for example, the importance of skills such as employer brand

management, social media listening and customer-experience-style management of the employee experience.

The data for skills that are decreasing in demand on HRBP job requisitions shows a similar trend. Risk assessment, historically an HR and employee compliance-related skill, had the highest percent decrease in HRBP requisitions in the last several years (see Figure 5). The trend is similar for customer relationship management and HR consulting skills because the HRBP-business relationship will be increasingly grounded in business insight and less in an expectation for HRBPs to respond immediately to client requests, for example.

Figure 5: Hard Skills With the Highest Percent Decrease in Demand for HRBPs



Change in the number of mentions in HRBP requisitions from 2015 through 2018 in the U.S., U.K., Mexico and Australia.

These changes in demand for certain HRBP skills make sense considering how business leaders' and employees' needs and expectations are changing. With leaders expecting increased performance and the workforce expecting more timely and personally relevant support, HRBPs require a sharper understanding of rapidly changing business needs and strategies and of the workforce.

The implication for HRBPs is that careers will look different than they have in the past, with increasing emphasis on skills and experiences typically developed outside HR. HRBPs shouldn't abandon skills and experiences traditionally valued by HR functions, but they should diversify their development to ensure their success in the future.

HRBPs can start today by exploring development opportunities outside HR, whether through a job change or one-off projects.

How to Make It a Reality: Technology Accelerates the Shift to Strategic Partner

HRBPs have been anticipating the shift from a more tactical to a more strategic role for years, and recent developments in HR technology — as well as organizations' increasing implementation of that technology — bring that future closer than ever. However, technology is merely a catalyst, not the main driver, for this shift. To realize the advantages automation can give HRBPs requires planning for the future now.

First, HRBPs can **anticipate what work they perform today will soon be eliminated** through automation by considering, for example, the work they manage that is repeatable and predictable. This type of transactional work is typically automated first and might include activities such as updating dashboards, generating reports or responding to common queries. Anticipating work that will soon be automated is important because it allows HRBPs to identify where they can disinvest and spend less time.

Second, HRBPs can **anticipate how technology will aid their strategic work** in the future. Typically, technology can best assist projects that involve planning for many potential scenarios and require significant data analysis. Technology can also help with strategic work where HRBPs can evaluate decision quality over time — where technology could “learn” over time.

Succession planning is one activity that meets both criteria and could therefore be augmented by technology in the future. With better data, HRBPs can not only identify more pipeline candidates — whom they might not have considered before — but also track and update the characteristics of a successful appointee for a role.

HRBPs today can anticipate how the strategic work they will continue to perform might change in the future and should consider specifically how it will make their strategic work easier and faster. They should also how that strategic work will become increasingly sophisticated.

Finally, HRBPs must **consider how they can show the impact of their strategic work** on the business. This is particularly important as HRBPs spend more of their time on strategic work, which, coincidentally, is less tangible and therefore harder to evaluate.

For example, compare managing the formal performance management process to creating a strategic workforce plan. The formal performance management process has clear timelines, processes and outcomes; at the end of the process, all employees have been reviewed and accompanying changes to pay and role have been made. For strategic workforce planning, however, the work can occur at any time and may need to be updated at any time as business needs and realities change. The outcome, while critical, is broad and harder to pinpoint.

HRBPs must therefore think differently about how they can demonstrate the impact of the strategic work they perform. Rather than relying on work completion, they must ask themselves, for example:

- What data can I use to show how my work connects to the goals, KPIs and outcomes my stakeholders care about?
- How did the work I performed this year impact business goals?
- What decisions was I able to influence as a result of my work?
- How would the outcome be different if I had I not performed this strategic work effectively?

These questions and others like them allow HRBPs to show the overall impact of their performance on talent and business outcomes.

How to Make It a Reality: HRBPs Are Stewards of the Employee Experience

As the employee experience becomes an HR and business priority, HRBPs can embrace their role as stewards of that experience now by:

- Identifying what experiences employees value most.
- Helping organizations eliminate low-value work for employees.

To identify what experiences employees value most, HRBPs should apply techniques that organizations use to understand external customers, such as creating employee personas and journey maps. More HR functions are adopting these techniques because they provide more insight on employees' perspective — for example, their personal motivations — than traditional employee surveys and focus groups. They also help HR understand the outside influences on employee experience, providing a more holistic perspective. HRBPs then use those techniques to share feedback with senior business leaders and create strategies for improvement.

Case in Point: Moments That Matter (Cisco)

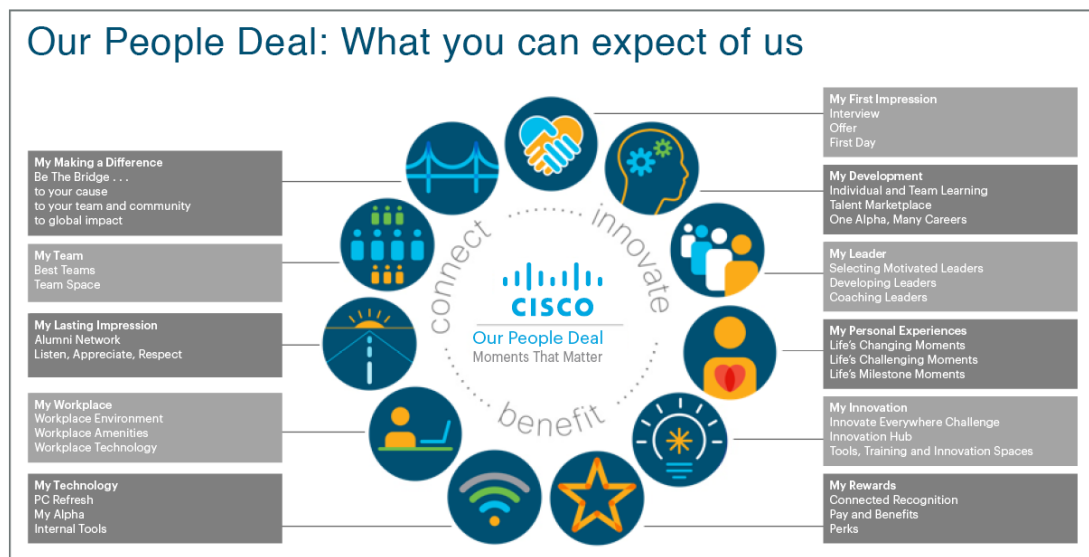


Cisco sought to improve the employee experience by identifying the moments that truly matter to employees. Rather than defining employee milestones based solely on organizational processes and assumptions, Cisco asked employees to define milestones from their own experience. The team used what it learned to create a framework of 16 moments critical to the employee experience, then scaled the conversation to global focus groups to discuss which moments mattered most.

With feedback from the focus groups, the team captured the employee experience from the employee perspective – and realized its assumptions had been wrong. For example, while the team considered the interview, offer and first day on the job to be different experiences, employees considered these moments to be tightly interrelated as one experience – their first impression. Ultimately, Cisco created a list of 11 key moments that accurately define the employee experience at Cisco (see Figure 6). To learn more, see the full case study, “Cisco’s People Deal.”

Figure 6: Cisco’s Employee-Validated List of Moments That Matter

Cisco’s Employee-Validated List of Moments That Matter



Source: Cisco

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Cisco’s list of 11 key moments that define the true employee experience.

HRBPs can effectively understand the moments that matter to their employee segments even without a formal process. HRBPs can start by interviewing a handful

employees in their segments to understand those employees' current experience and validate that understanding. Then, HRBPs can share employees' feedback with business leaders and identify ways to improve the employee experience.

HRBPs can start by identifying one to three moments for which their business units have the biggest gaps between ideal and reality or the moments that matter most to their units. By starting small today, HRBPs can truly be experts at stewarding the employee experience by 2025.

HRBPs can also be stewards of the employee experience by helping identify and eliminate low-value work. These sources of drag or "time waste" include activities such as expense reporting and lengthy or cumbersome performance review processes. HRBPs in particular are well-suited to help their client groups minimize sources of drag originating in HR and can set time reduction goals for their client groups.

Case in Point: "1 Million Employee Hours Back" (Coca-Cola European Partners)

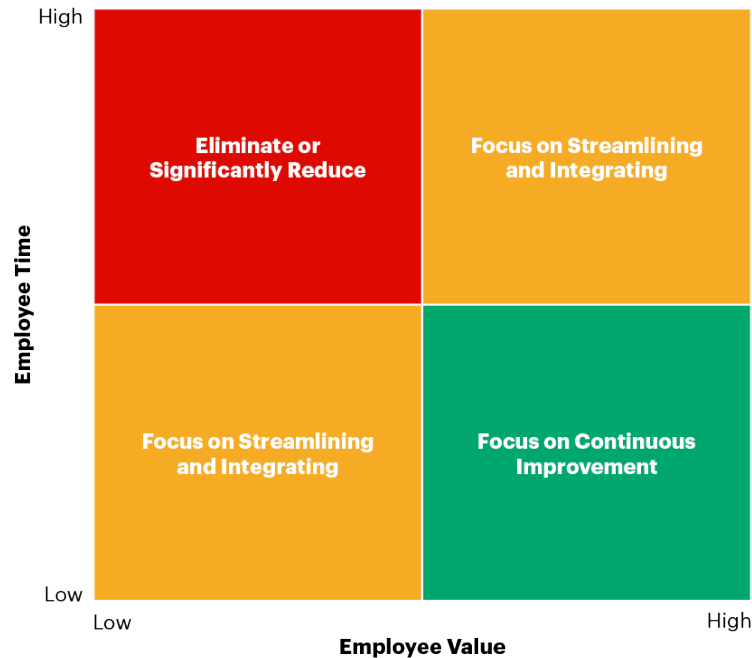


Coca-Cola European Partners recognized that its core corporate functions, including HR, collectively placed too many competing demands on employees' time, which negatively impacted the employee experience. In response, the HR leadership team applied guidelines for productive employee time spend to identify sources of time waste related to HR activities.

During their investment planning discussions, HR leaders focus on applying employees' — not HR's — understanding of what time is valuable. The discussions help leaders agree on how to prioritize employee experiences to address in the HR strategic plan, particularly which items should be high priority for HR in the coming year (see Figure 7). For example, HR has streamlined succession planning to focus only on critical roles and eliminated the nine-box for identifying high-potential employees. To learn more, see the full case study, "[1 Million Employee Hours Back \(Coca-Cola European Partners\)](#)."

Figure 7: Coca-Cola European Partners' Investment Planning Discussion Template

Coca-Cola European Partners' Investment Planning Discussion Template



Source: Adapted from Coca-Cola European Partners

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New investment planning discussions focus on applying employees' understanding of what time is valuable.

How to Make It a Reality: HRBPs Are Product Design Experts

Improving process efficiencies shouldn't happen only on the consumer (or employee) side. HR can also develop more agile approaches, and HRBPs who develop expertise in product design are poised to proactively shape HR products.

The first step in becoming a product design expert by 2025 is to shift the mindset to design evolving, "good enough" solutions by:

- Getting used to the idea of ongoing experimentation, as solutions will be expected to change too fast to make them perfect on the first try.
- Embracing the idea of failing fast and moving on.
- Setting guardrails for when to kill a product.

With the right mindset, HRBPs can play an active role in the evolving HR solution design process.

Case in Point: Employee-Powered HR Design (Vistaprint)



Vistaprint applies an end-to-end product management approach to the design of HR's Performance and Feedback product. The aim is to put employees at the center of HR's work in the same way the organization puts external customers at the center of its work.

HR selects a product owner and creates a cross-functional product team to give employees ownership over product design and implementation. The product team identifies problems the product will solve and creates hypotheses about employees' needs and potential solutions that, if proven true, would provide value to employees. HRBPs provide critical context to ensure the problems addressed will successfully meet their clients' needs. The product team returns to these hypotheses over time to assess whether any beliefs about the product have changed.

After establishing hypotheses, the product owner builds and releases an initial MVP – a partially designed HR solution released faster to test the features that are most valuable to employees. The product team evaluates the MVP using key questions: Is it feasible? Would it be valuable? Is it usable? Would employees consider it delightful? HRBPs can be the voice of the employee to assess the MVP's value and readiness to be released, making sure these four principles are fulfilled.

The product owner then shares the MVP to generate feedback and gives employees greater influence in evolving the product, including input on whether the product should proceed as is, be adjusted first and then proceed or be discontinued altogether. With each iteration, HRBPs can ask, "Does this product meet my clients' needs?" and "Do we need to continue to iterate?" To learn more, see the full case study, "[Employee-Powered HR Design \(Vistaprint\)](#)."

How to Make It a Reality: Careers in HR Become "Careers With (Some) HR"

Even if an HRBP has no experience outside HR today, they have time to round out their own profiles as they look to 2025. First, they can reflect on what types of experience to target by asking questions such as:

- What kinds of experiences outside HR have I had in my career so far?
- What kinds of non-HR skills and experiences would be most valuable to me?
- What opportunities exist at my organization to help me acquire those skills?

CHROs also have some recommendations. In our recent survey, over 100 heads of HR identified the three most valuable development opportunities for HRBPs:[2]

- Business or financial acumen training.
- Leadership rotation programs. (into non-HR business functions)
- Mentorships with business leaders outside HR.

In addition, HRBPs might consider working on more cross-functional projects or even moving to a job outside HR. HRBPs can discuss their ideas for development with their managers and craft a new development plan to close any skill gaps they might find.

HRBPs could even draft a sample job description for their own role in 2025. This exercise can help frame HRBPs' thinking on which elements of the job they believe will be most important and inspire more ideas for skills or experiences they'll need. HRBPs can then use that job description to guide their long-term development.

Conclusion

The outlook for the HRBP role in 2025 is bright. The digital age environment has many implications for HRBPs, including four key implications emerged for what the role might look like in the future:

- HRBPs have opportunities to use technology and automation to accelerate the long-awaited realization of their strategic partner role.
- HRBPs can steward an exciting HR and business priority — optimizing the employee experience — through customer insights techniques.
- HRBPs can become experts in a critical HR and business process — product design — in a fully digital age.
- HRBPs can develop emerging skills to achieve their long-term career goals.

Each of these 2025 realities requires HRBP investment, but that investment can start now.

Recommendations

To develop their professional competency and performance in response to the demands of the digital era, HR business leaders should:

- Identify the experiences employees value most by soliciting direct employee feedback (for example, through interviews and focus groups) and helping the organization eliminate low-value work for employees.
- Become a product design expert by designing evolving solutions rather than perfect solutions — for example, by releasing MVP solutions and seeking employee feedback during the HR solution design process.

- Create a future-focused development plan that includes non-HR skills or experiences. HRBPs can also explore opportunities to acquire the nontraditional HR skills they expect to be most valuable.

Recommended by the Authors

- [Ignition Guide to Creating Employee Personas](#)
Personas identify similar patterns of behavior that result in commonly held goals and can help HR understand what employees need and value. Use this guide to identify ways to collect information and build employee personas.
- [Digitalizing HR to Improve the Employee Experience](#)
Explore our best-practice research on how to take a consumer-centric approach to enhancing the employee experience and improving employee performance in the digital age.
- [The State of the HRBP Role and Function](#)
Our benchmarking report shares findings from our recent survey of nearly 1,200 HR business partners and HR generalists about their roles and answers frequently asked questions about the HRBP experience.

About This Research

This research draws from interviews with more than 120 HR executives and HRBPs and survey data from over 150 HR leaders, over 400 HRBPs and nearly 6,000 employees at all levels, representing 23 countries. Our surveys asked detailed questions about how organizations design and execute their digitalization strategies as well as HRBPs' current and expected experiences in the role. We also asked employees for their perspectives on their HR functions' ability to get the most out of HR products and services.

Presentation Deck

[Download presentation slides of this material.](#)

Endnotes

- [1] Gartner Digital Enterprise 2020 Survey.
- [2] Gartner 2018 Future of HR Agenda Poll.
- [3] Gartner 2018 Future of the HRBP Role Agenda Poll.
- [4] Gartner 2018 Digital Employee Experience Survey.
- [5] Gartner 2017 HR Budget and Efficiency Benchmarking Suite.
- [6] Gartner 2018 Digital Experience Benchmarking Survey.
- [7] Gartner HRBP in 2025 Survey.