Make the Career Change
to Human Resources

What You Need to Know
Introduction

It remains true that many entry-level Human Resources positions require a bachelor’s degree or less to get your foot in the door. A 2014 study by Gartner’s Software Advice analyzed several hundred HR job listings for people wanting a career change to human resources. It found that one-third of them strongly preferred candidates with an advanced degree.

That truth starts to answer the primary consideration potential students mull over before enrolling in a Master of Human Resources program: what can it do for my career?

The most successful HR professionals of the 21st century are more than just payroll and benefits coordinators. They know how to get a job in human resources. Technology is continually changing all industries, and a new generation of workers has ushered in a different set of standards that truly tests the human side of HR.

A master’s degree in Human Resources from a well-regarded, accredited university puts graduates in position to stand out from the rest. Best of all, such a program can be completed online, if desired, and will not interfere with your current position.

HR Roles Continually Increase

Human Resource professionals are no longer simply the people who hire and fire employees and makes sure laws are followed. There is more expectation than ever for HR professionals to be strategic business partners with CEOs, CFOs and department managers.

Although, administering benefits will always be one of the primary tasks of HR personnel for both large and mid-sized companies, these tasks have become more complicated and time-consuming for several reasons, particularly healthcare reform.

This has led many companies to start outsourcing all or part of these tasks to get everything right and streamline the process. What this can mean is increased opportunity to move in different industries. This mobility appeals to many employees in the workplace today, including those in HR.

Whether it's handling company diversity or accommodating special-needs employees, HR must be able to adapt on the fly and make critical decisions for their companies.

Human Resources in the Post-ACA World

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act – known colloquially as the ACA – created a myriad of new insurance benefits regulations. One way to start a career in human resources is developing complete knowledge of the ACA and knowledge of where to look as it changes. Become the expert a company needs.
One of the most impactful aspects of the ACA to Human Resources is the employer mandate that took effect in the latter half of 2015. All companies with 50 or more full-time employees (those who average 30+ hours per week) must offer affordable coverage to at least 95% of them or pay penalties.\(^3\)

HR has the responsibility of lowering costs to the company while simultaneously complying with the law. The ACA reinforces the benefits of wellness programs and provides tax credits to companies that offer wellness programs to employees.\(^4,5\)

The Centers for Disease Control estimates that 86% of annual healthcare spending is for chronic, preventable illness like diabetes and heart disease.\(^6\) The ACA, in response, seeks to contain healthcare costs for both employers and employees by encouraging healthier lifestyles.

Wellness programs are now more central to the HR role. A solid masters in Human Resources allows students to fully understand complicated federal legislation like the ACA or changing anti-discrimination laws. Earning an MSHR degree reinforces critical thinking skills needed to assess a company’s specific goals ahead of implementing related and relevant programs.

How to Get Into Human Resources

HR has come a long way since the National Cash Register Company established the first known human resources department in U.S. history in 1901.\(^7,8\) A major employee strike had almost doomed the company the year prior.

History tells us that management responded to that strike positively by creating a department to handle grievances, safety and other concerns. This model was adopted by other companies of the time and is still the norm more than a century later.

The global marketplace, automated recruiting, talent management systems and outsourced payroll have encouraged – almost forced – the HR profession to evolve. Most HR professionals in the 21st century have embraced additional duties as asked; yet, each company seems to offer something slightly different from all others.

One way to expand on your skills in this area is to highlight the fun side of HR. That can include coordinating company parties, theme days and charity events, and drives; a nice break from keeping up on legal updates and handling tough personnel issues.

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Stepping up as an employee advocate is now one of the more essential roles of HR, partly due to changing demographics. Millennials surpassed Generation X in 2015 to comprise the largest share of the American workforce, according to the Pew Research Center.\(^9\)
Human Resources and the Millennial Challenge

The Bureau of Labor Statistics says the median tenure of all American workers at one particular job is about 4.6 years\textsuperscript{10}. Millennials (those age 18-34) had a median tenure of 2.1 years\textsuperscript{11}. Whether it’s a perceived lack of loyalty to a single workplace, an active desire to move around, a “higher expectations” mentality, or another not-quite-accurate label used by analysts, millennials present new challenges for HR.

There are five essential qualities HR leaders must embrace. The first, and perhaps most important, is to \textit{never stop learning}. This quality is especially vital when it comes to hiring and retaining millennials. The knowledge you’ll gain from your MS in Human Resources studies provides a foundation that not only encourages continued learning, but also teaches methods to stay up-to-date on the latest news.

For instance, studies show that millennials are more entrepreneurial and open to change than Generation X\textsuperscript{12}. At the same time, millennials are less likely to be team players. It’s up to HR to provide top talent the tools and accommodations necessary to retain them as employees.

Many students in a MS in Human Resources program use the Capstone course to share their experiences with fellow students and learn real-life methods for properly handling issues that arise with a younger workforce. A happy secondary benefit of this type of course is that professional circles also grow, providing career connections who will continue sharing experiences and solutions for years.

Become the Engaging One in Human Resources

An essential quality of human resources leaders is \textbf{effective communication}.

HR consulting firm Towers Watson found in a 2010 study that companies with exceptional internal communications returned 47% higher profits to their shareholders versus a company deemed to have poor internal communicators\textsuperscript{13,14}. Author and international speaker Bill Quirke, in his book, Making the Connections, noted that employees who fully understand their role within a company will work towards that goal 91% of the time\textsuperscript{15}. That number drops to 23% for employees who do not fully understand their purpose.

Therefore, effectively communicating to each employee their role in reaching company’s goals is an essential role of HR. Failure to do so often results in, among other things, indifference and resentment among the team, and as the numbers above illustrate, also create an unproductive work environment.

Advanced degree skills gear graduates toward better assessments of financial and cultural implications of new products, services, operations, and more within the company before anything is fully implemented.

Whether it’s learning a new customer relationship management (CRM) system or implementing a remote-working policy, the knowledge gained will guide sound decisions made to improve both company culture and the bottom line.
Human Resources: Legal Analyst Extraordinaire

Practicing **values-based and ethical behavior** is another essential for effective human resources leaders – and humanity in general. The global marketplace, along with an increasingly diverse workforce as it pertains to ethnic background, sexual orientation, disabilities and religious belief, presents more challenges to 21st Century HR professionals.

One of the more contentious issues for HR managers nationwide when it comes to hiring is background checks. More than 100 cities and counties, along with 19 states, have enacted “ban the box” legislation to some degree as of January 2016, according to the National Employment Law Project\(^\text{16}\).

These proposed statutes either prohibit employers from asking about prior criminal histories before a job offer, or ban running background checks altogether. The reasoning behind these type of laws revolves around racial disparities in the criminal justice system when it comes to sentencing and arrests\(^\text{17}\).

African Americans and Latin Americans are far more likely to be unjustly arrested at some point in their lives because of these social disparities rather than the fact that any one group commits more or less crime. This usually hinders future employment opportunities.

The University of Scranton MS in Human Resources program contains two courses that specifically address these types of issues. In them, you will critically evaluate your own views of different people and how you arrive at decisions based on certain characteristics. You also gain a better understanding of potential legal consequences as a result of biased decision-making.

Regardless of personal views, it’s a simple matter of economics to ensure diversity on your team. A 2012 study by McKinsey & Company found that companies with diverse workforces (women, minorities and foreign nationals in executive positions) performed better financially than less diverse companies\(^\text{18}\).
Human Resource Leaders Plan Company Strategy

The ability to **think strategically and act accordingly** is the fourth essential characteristic of HR leaders. As touched on earlier, many aspects of human resources have been automated or outsourced, particularly when it comes to talent acquisition and payroll. This enables HR professionals to contribute to their organization's success in new ways.

Marketing, sales and development managers present CEOs and CFOs with ideas to increase revenues, convert leads, or some other goal. Once approved it's the responsibility of HR to partner with any involved department in fulfilling the plan — that is, if your company embraces this forward-looking arrangement.

An analysis by Harvard Business School found that only one-third of HR departments craft HR strategic plans in line with the company's overall strategy\(^\text{19}\). This unusual phenomenon presents an opportunity for HR managers who have obtained the proper training to execute better.

The MS in Human Resources program not only has courses covering strategic planning, but also risk management and labor relations. Granted, unions are becoming more of a rarity every year. One-third of American workers were part of unions in the mid-1960s. Today that number is barely 10%, according to researchers at Georgia State University\(^\text{20}\).

Having knowledge of collective bargaining and contract negotiations opens doors to new positions at larger companies that employ unionized workers. One way or another, looking after employees remains a central part of the human resources role.

Reward-Based and Technological Solutions

IT departments typically handle a company's networks and hardware issues. But, there are times when the company is underperforming or simply failing in areas that can be vastly improved by implementing a new software or other tech solution.

This brings us to the fifth and final essential characteristic of effective human resource leaders: **minding your metrics**. The responsibility falls on HR to determine if the cost is worth the potential return.

A 2013 study by the Standish Group found that less than 33% of company projects were completed on-time and within the stated budget\(^\text{21}\). Further, 44% of personnel tasked to lead new projects failed to use any sort of commercially available project management software, according to PricewaterhouseCoopers\(^\text{22}\).

Doing the job right means HR must provide detailed analysis supporting adoption of any project management system for certain departments. Whether its wasted worker-hours or poor communication between collaborators that causes projects to fail, human resources research must convince company executives to get onboard and embrace operational additions such as this.

Of course, there will be some employees who resist change, particularly if the modus operandi was completely different previously. Part of your solution will be a meaningful rewards system that encourages workers to use the new set-up.

Year-end bonus structures and pay raises can be tied directly to completion of projects within a given time and budget. HR's job is to positively correlate rewards and usage of the new system to...
motivate employees. These balancing skills are obtained and nurtured through your studies in a Human Resources master’s program.

**HR Reinforces Company Personality**

Shoe retailer Zappos is a well-regarded company, with personality that starts at the top. Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh is often quoted as a person who enjoys highlighting customer service, along with making his employees feel great about what they do.

As is the goal of many companies in this age of social media, Zappos has many customers who are not shy about telling others of their experience. Such internet evangelism for products is actively encouraged by Zappos, which itself has a robust and active social media presence across many platforms.

The company has a unique new employee training program; at the end of the first week everyone is offered $2,000 to quit. The goal is to keep people who want to be there.

Meanwhile, Allstate Insurance’s personality is conveyed to the public through the deep, articulate voice, and professional demeanor of Dennis Haysbert.

These companies have two very distinct personalities and it shows in their advertising – or in the case of Zappos, their lack of it. HR plays a crucial role in determining and reinforcing a company’s personality and values, and finding employees that fit a company culture, whether staid or silly.

Pre-hire personality assessments were used by 57% of U.S. companies in 2013, up from 26% in 2001, according to the Wall Street Journal. These tests have proven effective in hiring the right people for a company’s culture and personality. A 2006 study published in the Journal of Brand Management identified three dimensions of a corporate personality: heart, mind, and body. Each of those are defined by two key attributes: passionate and compassionate; creative and disciplined; and agile and collaborative, respectively.

Nobody has a better pulse on the entire company than HR since they come in contact with every employee and department at some point. They also have a seat at the table along with top-level executives when discussing company direction and initiatives.

Once a company develops a cohesive and positive personality, an HR leader encourages everyone to embrace it. Whether its placing a ping-pong table in the break room or holding food drives for the homeless, (most likely both) these activities reflect who the company is and how it wants to be perceived.
HR Has to Walk the Walk and Welcome Feedback

The value in human resources comes from the willingness to listen to all employees. HR is the neutral conflict manager between employees at all levels. They also play a major role in the day-to-day activities of every employee. An open-door policy is important, as is confidentiality.

Employees should have a means to communicate issues (harassment, discrimination, etc.) without it becoming an office distraction. They should also be able to make suggestions for company operations without repercussions. Of course, there is a fine line HR professionals must walk when dealing with certain issues.

“You have the responsibility to address potential workplace issues before they morph into something detrimental to the company.”

An employee may want to lodge a complaint against a co-worker, but request confidentiality in the conversation. But, you have the responsibility to address potential workplace issues before they morph into something detrimental to the company.

Providing employees several ways to communicate compliments, complaints, and suggestions that encourage and reinforce transparency. Some HR managers use hotlines. Others stick to traditional email and walk-in visits. Regardless of the method, make certain employees feel comfortable coming to HR employees for all work-related matters – and have an easy way of doing so.

Master in Human Resources Benefits

The value of any master’s degree is partly determined by where it comes from. U.S. News & World Report ranked the University of Scranton in the top 10 for master’s universities in the very competitive North region of the country. The University of Scranton is also regionally accredited and is one of only 28 Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States. As an added bonus, the university’s MS in HR is fully outlined by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) curriculum guidelines and templates.

The responsibilities and requirements of HR leaders continually evolve. The HR Certification Institute offers five distinct certifications: Professional in Human Resources (PHR), Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR), Human Resource Management Professional (HRMP), the Human Resource Business Professional (HRBP) and the Global Professional in Human Resources (GPHR). Two alternative certifications are offered by the Society for Human Resource: SHRM-CP and SHRM-SCP. Some certifications do require graduate work, making them great complements to your master’s degree in HR.

Professor Patrick Wright of Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations, told Workforce in 2011 that a master’s degree always wins out over an SPHR particularly with large companies when all else is equal between two candidates.

Katie Bardaro, vice president of Data Analytics at Payscale, told Forbes in 2012 that a master’s degree provides increased knowledge in ever-evolving fields like HR and sets candidates apart from other applicants.
What’s Best for Getting Hired?

The curriculum for The University of Scranton’s MHR program covers all the basics (OSHA regulations, labor relations, etc.) and all of the policy-making and accountability aspects that come with an SPHR.

Your master’s studies take things a step further to address 21st century workplace issues as laws and regulations change. For example, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission ruled in the 2012 case of Macy v. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives that Title VII of the 1964 Civil Right Act prohibits workplace discrimination against transgendered persons.

Another tough issue is handling the intricacies of concealed carry laws. About 40 states have such laws but they are not all the same. “Can I come to work armed?” is a question you could encounter.

The answer is initially yes, though in some states businesses have different allowed restrictions to ban them. But human resources, with the help of the legal department, needs to know how to write the correct policies.

Each state’s law and restrictions are different in the area of concealed carry. If a company does business in several states, this policy has to be carefully researched across the board.

These subjects, and others will arise during your Human Resources studies and employment; something you cannot expect from a certification.

A bachelor’s degree might get your foot in the door for smaller companies. But, large corporations that pay higher salaries expect you to bring both experience and credentials to the table. The decision ultimately lies with you as to career and earnings goals.

The national average salary for human resources personnel is $66,032, according to Glassdoor. Earnings positively correlate with educational level, with MS recipients earning the most. HR professionals at Ford Motor Company and The Clorox Company reported annual salaries $125,000 and up.

A Masters in Human Resources helps you stand out from the competition and puts you in position to take your career exactly where you want it to go. Put yourself in a competitive position with an online masters degree in human resources.

Answers to your Questions
Sources

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