



## HR Business Partners: Are they Helping or Hurting your Efforts to be an Evidence-Based HR Function?

Over our decades of experience specializing in HR analytics, we've seen many changes. Perhaps most dramatic is the current pervasive desire to make analytics the mainstay of HR vs. an expertise-driven sub-discipline within the domain. While we applaud and agree that data and evidence impact most — if not all — that we do in HR; as with other things, bridging from current reality to this desired way of working is no small feat.

There are actually a number of strategic considerations when trying to build an HR analytics capability<sup>1</sup> within an organization, but one stands out because it can be “make or break” for success and is seldom given sufficient time and attention.

### Who can most accelerate HR analytics capability throughout your entire organization?

The initial answer for many might be having an in-house HR analytics expert. And, certainly this role is pivotal for most organizations. That said, the greatest opportunity for broad-based adoption actually may sit with an existing and more prevalent HR role: The HR business partner.

This group is:

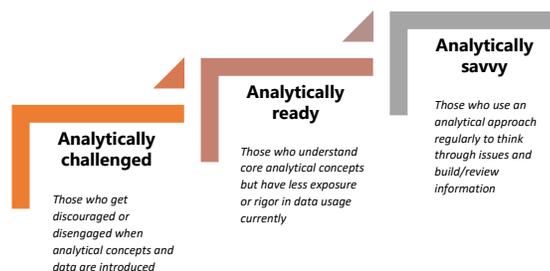
- Typically closest to the business and understands their issues, priorities and tone (or, how things really work);
- Usually most equipped to talk in terms that resonate with their internal customers; and,
- Known to be a lynchpin to drive the HR agenda forward and make it a reality.

Yet, when we ask HR leaders whether “being analytical” is even in the HR business partner job description, the answer is still more likely to be no than yes.

While few would likely argue the merits of building more analytical capability within this community, many are challenged to deliver on this need. There are several reasons for this challenge, and we'll cover a few here.

### Limitations in the current analytics capability of the HR business partner community

For most organizations, analytics capability in the HR business partner community may be quite low — as it implies knowledge of statistics, economics, industrial/organizational psychology, or some such other technical background. That said, being analytical is a much more fundamental capability. In effect, to what extent does your HR business partner community think analytically? With this broader framing in mind, you might find a somewhat even distribution between the following:



For each of these core capability levels, we may need to modify the approach and goals to be successful in building analytical capability within HR.

## What does “being analytical” really mean?

The lack of deep knowledge of analytics doesn't have to limit an HR function from being evidence-based or analytical. Outside of the sub-discipline of HR analytics<sup>2</sup> and a few other more analytically-driven areas of HR (like Rewards), most HR professionals do not need to be steeped in analytical methods. That said, regardless of the level of analytical capability, there are some core fundamentals that could be useful in raising the overall analytical mindset of the HR business partner community:



Goal  
Identification



Business leaders often describe symptoms of an HR problem rather than the root cause or most effective solution. While we don't necessarily need business leaders to be

able to make these distinctions, we do need someone to translate that business perspective into a productive, goal-oriented research agenda. Just as a person with a more severe illness might see a doctor and explain their symptoms, an HR business partner provides a similar service by effectively translating talent challenges into potential hypotheses and goals that can be researched and supported or removed from consideration.

Testing



Let's be blunt. Research design is the aspect of this work that may benefit most from an educational or experiential background

in analytics. Even so, there are core analytics that are more widely used and understood and can provide constructive, if not sufficient, insights in most research efforts. Here, we are not expecting HR business partners to be steeped deeply in more complex analytic methods, but we are hoping that they can assemble and view basic factors identifying variances — or, differences within a particular factor or across factors. One can look at variance by grouping segments (e.g., percentiles), creating standard deviations, understanding medians vs. means, etc.

### Analytically challenged

- **Strategy:** This group may require the greatest degree of *change management* support based on their prior (often negative) exposure to analytics, but they may have the most to gain by being paired with those who are analytically ready or even savvy—as one-on-one peer support has been an effective approach to manage these stakeholders
- **Example:** A global pharmaceutical company took a two-pronged approach to address its challenges in HR analytics by implementing both a new user-friendly technology to support basic HR analytics and strong change management efforts to drive usage

### Analytically ready

- **Strategy:** *Analytics education* can help these people apply more consistent approaches and interpretation of data to harness their underlying analytical nature—e.g., nurturing their natural capability
- **Example:** One financial services organization has implemented an education program targeting the HR business partner, teaching them how to conduct and interpret research for their business, exploring evidence-based problem-solving and basic statistical techniques

### Analytically savvy

- **Strategy:** Partnering these people with core HR analytics team/experts (internally or externally) can be an effective way to both engage this stakeholder group and enhance their capability through *on-the-job learning*
- **Example:** This model has been used effectively by one global consumer products company (that has been leading the way in HR analytics) to embed an evidence-based mindset across HR; while voluntary, these partnerships have extended the core analytics team's reach well into their organization and has been a proven differentiator

### Diagnosis



Interestingly, HR business partners frequently leave testing and diagnosis to “the experts.” While that model can be beneficial

for testing, it is not equally true for diagnosis. Yes, it is generally the case that analytical experts know how to evaluate and interpret the output from analytical studies, but they typically are not as close to the business as HR business partners, by functional design. This — albeit intentional — detachment could lead to missed links in the analysis or misunderstood output and interpretation. HR business partners can be great resources in identifying these missed or misunderstood elements.

### Making Case for Change



It is not surprising that so many articles and books are popping up that focus on data visualization and storytelling at a time when

we are trying to be more analytical. Even with the most powerful evidence, we are repeatedly challenged to drive change without a compelling way to convey key messages to target stakeholders to influence their behavior. As the representative that regularly drives HR processes throughout the organization, HR business partners tend to be powerful storytellers and this skillset can be leveraged to cut through the analytical “clutter” and to focus on what's needed to support effective decision-making.

## Why should HR business partners care?

Perhaps, rather than focus on what HR business partners can do to be more analytical (if not already so), we should ask the

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question: Why should HR business partners care about analytics? After all, the role of the HR business partner is intense and rarely over-staffed. And, with so many HR functions either moving to, or already existing in, a strategic partnership orientation for the role of the HR business partner, one could debate the relative relevance or importance of analytics within that role's design.

In fact, analytics are well worth the time of the HR business partner and many already recognize and leverage data to inform their

leadership decision-making process. Just as change is the blessing or bane for sustained business success, analytics or, more aptly, evidence is a key pillar of driving change. HR business partners are known change agents for organizations and, as such, analytics (and being analytical) are essential tools to help them drive and deliver change within their organizations. What better way to align leaders than to show them the facts and consequences of their actions?

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For reference, we are using the term “capability” in this article generally to represent the combination of knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviors that are associated with the particular capability being discussed.

<sup>2</sup> While HR functions are using different naming conventions for this work, we are using the term “HR analytics” as a general reference to the area within HR that is focused on specific statistical studies (vs. ongoing reporting or other HR-related activities).

## About the Authors

Helen Friedman is the CEO of Merit Analytics Group LLC, which she founded as a women-owned business in 2017 after more than 30 years of working in HR consulting. Her goal for the organization was to make talent analytics accessible to all HR professionals — focusing on core skill-building and opportunities to embed evidence as a foundation for effective HR management through a knowledge-transfer-centered support model. Her prior tenure has included global leadership for talent analytics consulting and technology services, where she focused on developing intellectual capital, leading the largest and most complex client engagements and tailoring technology solutions to meet unique client needs. Her work in the field of talent analytics spans all major industries and work areas, including workforce planning and optimization, talent-related dashboards, labor market analysis, and predictive/prescriptive analytics. She is an established thought leader who has spoken regularly at national conferences and has published extensively with credits in well-known media outlets, including *The New York Times* and the *Journal of Organizational Excellence*. She can be reached at [admin@meritanalyticsgroup.com](mailto:admin@meritanalyticsgroup.com).

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