Transforming the Human Resources Function into the Core of Humanistic Management: Potentials, Requirements and Obstacles

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Abstract

In urgent need of change for the sake of realizing a humanistic, rather than scientific, management philosophy (M. Minghetti, 2014) is above all the HR function as we know it from top-down chain-of-command enterprises where its representatives never achieved a seat at the strategy table. Their lack of strategic importance was well deserved because HR's orthodox notions reduced human capability to mere skills and competences, notions that ran roughshod over individuals' and teams' developmental potential alike.

The impoverishment of the conventional HR function became especially glaring once from the 1980s onward empirical research in adult development showed the multi-dimensionality and depth of human work capability, starting with M. Basseches (1984) and E. Jaques (1998), and based on their research by my own work (Laske 2005; 2008). These researchers were shining a light on a heretofore neglected dimension of living as well as work delivery, namely the shaping force of cognitive development over the lifespan not only for 'working' but for 'living to work' (what Marx referred to as 'the labor force').

The article's purpose is to contribute to a better understanding of the nature of work in the 21st century. I review the many willful and unnoticed denials that shaped the orthodox HR function, setting it in opposition to what we know today about emotional as well as cognitive adult development and its effect on work delivery, both of individuals and in teams.

I focus on the fact that in agile organizations, two contradictory tendencies exist: on one hand, collaborators become more highly vulnerable to being found out for their lack of capability and motivation; they can no longer hide within a hierarchy. On the other, collaborators are offered more support for strengthening their collaborative intelligence than ever before. I see the real challenge of humanistic management in navigating this conflictual scenario.

In conclusion, I point to the risk confronting those in humanistic management today who fail to envision and realize a more ample model of human work capability than scientific management became stuck with. I warn that by overemphasizing the beneficial impact of digital media *per se* on the future of work, humanistic management could end up in the same cul-de-sac that scientific management did because of its neglect of individuals' and teams' developmental potential unearthed by research in adult development since 1975.

The article is in three parts. In the first, I highlight possible forms of transformation of the orthodox HR function under the influence of digitalization and agile responses to it. In the second, I clarify what empirical findings from adult development foreshadow as significant built-in limitations in human work capability itself. In the third part, I attempt to formulate the still only hazily understood challenge of 'humanistic HR' embedded in a social media environment that shows itself oblivious to built-in adult-developmental differences between individuals and the resulting developmental imbalance of teams.