

Why HR is Uniquely Positioned to Enable Business Success

HR Executive | Jen Colletta | February 18, 2025

A few decades ago, after following his grandfather's advice to "never say no" to opportunities, Andrew Dawson decided to transition his early experiences in talent acquisition to an HR business partner position, a role that was just emerging.

In an interview at an assessment center for an HRBP position at a large multinational company, Dawson says, he was pressed on his view on HR's strategic role.

"They told me, 'You said 'HR business partner' about 23 times, but you never really answered the question,'" he recalls. Digging into that question became core to his personal mission as his career evolved—taking him into HR leadership positions at companies including Eli Lilly, Novartis and TripAdvisor. In 2020, he became chief people officer and head of corporate affairs at ophthalmic equipment manufacturer BVI Medical.

Looking back on his diverse HR experiences, Dawson says his sense of HR's potential as a partner to the business is clear.

"Much like finance or legal, we bring a level of insight that, as a partner function, gives us a unique take on where the business is," he says. Unlike other functions, HR understands the business through its workforce, "often through a lens of an employee at different levels of maturity, in any country."

"Our ability to be able to pull those insights together concisely and give good recommendations to the business is ultimately going to be how we enable business success," he says.

Dawson recently spoke with HR Executive about how people professionals can step into the potential of HR's strategic role.

HR Executive: How can HR leaders elevate the strategic nature of their functions?

Dawson: What I've found is that healthy disagreement is a good thing. We don't have all the answers, nor should we. We often don't always have decision rights, nor should we. But what we do have is really good insights on the way an organization works, what an organization is thinking. Especially as you feed that up to the rest of the executive leadership team and the board, it's really important to be able to distill that thinking. You need to hear from the organization and be able to say, "OK, great. But, so what?"

As we work to enable the business to be successful, we use a lot of data, a lot of analytics. A score may mean X, the verbatim feedback means Y and what we're observing on the ground is that Z axis, that third pillar. You pull it all together and say, "This is what we're seeing." And

then we're able to make some suggestions and come to solutions, whether that be around organizational impact, organizational change, readiness.

If I think back to my initial role of business partnering, the focus was that HR understands the business. We speak their language. Now, it's about, how we help enable the business to be successful. No business strategy is ever going to be executed unless you've got people underneath it who can do the job, who are doing the right work to execute that strategy. Otherwise, it's going to fundamentally fail. AI can't replace that side of it.

HR Executive: What can AI do to advance HR's strategic role?

Dawson: I think AI is going to be the future. There's no question. But the question we do have to ask is, what is it going to actually do? We're trying to look at some of the use cases of AI already within BVI, and really focus on where can we add value with technology, and where it can actually help us operate better as a company—versus, how do we integrate it in our daily life?

One of the first things we've done is we use it in a world outside of HR; we looked at it from a communication standpoint. Being a global organization, in our regular town halls we communicate in English, and the main company language is English, but we're talking to people who speak French, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Japanese. One of our comms team members asked if we could look at AI as an automatic translating tool, and we found that Microsoft already has this embedded in some of its functionality within Teams.

We deployed it as a pilot last year, and we're now using it on a regular basis. You can be in another country, watching the live stream of the town hall or company meeting, and underneath is the live translation instantly in that local language. That's made a huge impact, especially on the level of engagement that we're having across the town halls themselves; it's risen exponentially. And now we're thinking about our ability to use this even within one-on-one meetings or smaller group meetings. People based around the world may find it hard to communicate sometimes, and it's not necessarily an expectation that everyone has to go learn fluent English. Being able to use this type of technology is a massive advancement for our ability to lead better, to manage teams better.

HR Executive: What questions are you asking about using AI in HR specifically?

Dawson: Like every other company, a lot of job applicants come through day in and day out. Being able to use AI as a screening tool, as a feeder for this, is going to be great. Does that eventually end up in some form of chatbot that can actually do that first pass? I'd like to make sure that it's representative of who BVI is. While AI is really helpful, the risk on the other side is that, by diminishing that person-to-person contact, especially from a candidate experience, that's the first touch point they have with the company. And if that touch point is not genuine, if it doesn't reflect who BVI is, then I would be concerned because then we're not bringing the people in the way we want.

It's the same for day-to-day queries. I have every faith in the self-service modules that we already have within our HRIS, and when something needs escalating, we want to make sure there will always be a person to speak to. That doesn't necessarily mean it's in the same country, but there will always be a human voice employees can connect with live. It's managing that balance.

As AI gets more self-serving and autonomous, it needs input. We're a regulated industry and we need to be very careful from a legislation and risk standpoint, that what we put in [to AI systems] doesn't get churned out and we're putting trade secrets out there. About 18 months ago, we started really thinking about policies around how we can use AI to support our work without putting too much sensitive information into the systems.

HR Executive: AI is just one transformation many HR leaders today are grappling with. What are the most valuable lessons on HR transformation lessons you brought with you to BVI?

Dawson: I've been involved in numerous HR transformation activities, and I think for me, it always comes down to a simple starting point: What's the foundation? Is your foundation strong enough from the core processes, the core beliefs that an organization has? Because without it, what are you trying to transform? Unless you really can understand what your starting point is, it's hard to transform or change anything.

The work we've done at BVI has been an ongoing evolution rather than transformation at this stage. It's making sure you've got that strong foundation, that strong grounding, that the policies you're going to entrust the organization with are fit for purpose. Do they help enable the business to be successful? Do they help enable the employee experience to be better than it was?

That's where you have to take a step back and say, "Well, who are we trying to serve here? Are we trying to serve HR for HR? Are we trying to serve the broader employee base?" Once you've got that, you can start to transform. The single biggest thing I've learned over the years about transformation has been the level of communication has got to be greater than you ever expect it to be.

HR Executive: How do you keep motivated through the stressors facing today's HR leaders?

Dawson: Having a healthy balance is really important. I use the world of triathlons as a great leveler for me, but I also use my family: my wife, my children.

My daughter just turned 12 on New Year's Eve. I was sitting there looking at her, looking at the baby picture, and I'm crying my eyes out. I'm thinking, in four years' time, you're going to be driving a car. In six years' time, you are probably going to be heading off to college. I've got X number of years left with you while you're still my little girl—even though I keep telling her, "You're always going to be my little girl, whether you like it or not."

What keeps me motivated is thinking about, what do we leave for this next generation? What am I going to do over these next years that is going to help create impact for my son and my

daughter—both to make the world ready for them to enter into and to make them ready to enter into this world?

The work I do now and the rest of my peers around the world are doing now—we're setting up the workforce of the future. It's a fascinating time to be in the HR profession.