

Flex your strategic muscle to avoid being 'outsourced'

Issue: As outsourcing grows and gains popularity, you need to prove your value to the organization.

Benefit: Protect your job and build a reputation as a "big-picture" person.

Action: Follow the six steps outlined below to develop your strategic-thinking skills.

Your organization has probably outsourced at least one HR function. The \$64,000 question: Is your job next? Not if you have the one talent every organization needs to keep on board: the ability to think strategically.

Strategic thinking is a bit like working a jigsaw puzzle. You need to see the big picture at the same time you're figuring out how all the pieces fit together. Strong strategic thinkers are adept at solving problems and feel comfortable taking risks.

So how do you develop your strategic-thinking ability? Here are six ways to start:

1. Break out of the HR knowledge silo. While it's important to keep your technical HR knowledge up to date, expand your horizons. Take a finance or marketing class instead of signing up for yet another HR seminar on benefits administration.
2. Strengthen your understanding of strategic issues. If you're not on the distribution list for your organization's strategic plan, ask to be added. Better yet, ask to join the planning team. Read business and trade publications with an eye for trends, opportunities and challenges that affect your organization and industry.
3. Hang around with execs. Invite senior managers from operations, finance, research or marketing to lunch and ask about their toughest business challenges and how they solve them.
4. Train yourself to analyze and apply statistical information. The next time a spreadsheet from IT or finance crosses your desk, don't toss it aside. Spend some time analyzing the data and looking for useful information. Speculate about how the information affects HR, other departments and the entire organization.
5. Make ROI your middle name. Get in the habit of developing a return-on-investment analysis (ROI) that's based on solid numbers every time you pitch a new HR initiative.
6. Volunteer for tough assignments. The jobs that no one else wants to tackle can give you an opportunity to polish your problem-solving and decision-making skills. Tip: Don't settle for the first solution. Look at the problem from different perspectives until you pinpoint the answer with the greatest long-term benefits.

Bottom line: Administrative skills are easy to outsource; strategic talent isn't.