

Generalists Thrive on HR Specifics

Human resources is “the set of tasks aimed at effectively managing an organization’s employees” says the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM). These tasks typically include compensation, benefits, career development, training, hiring, and today, more often than not, strategic planning.

A generalist is usually charged with doing all these things (and more). Professionally, the built-in diversity the position experiences allows the generalist many opportunities to grow in their role as the organization grows. It also challenges them on a personal level to continually learn-while-doing – often on a daily basis. The importance of strong and supportive senior management in a mentoring capacity simply cannot be denied.

This single-source professional can have a major impact on boosting the bottom line of their organization. Whether they are redesigning a benefits package, working on employee retention or stepping up recruitment efforts, they often ‘go down the hallway’ to solicit input from management and employees to test new ideas. But they also tap into a myriad of external resources such as the Internet, HR and professional networking organizations, and business consultants in order to keep on top of emerging business and HR trends.

As a result, generalists become cross-functional collaborators as they are in the best position to apply their resources and ‘education’ to provide broad-ranging counsel, support and expertise across an entire organization.

For any young generalist challenged by the privileges and responsibilities inherent with HR tasks, it takes an environment conducive to continuous learning coupled with strong mentoring or coaching that will help them – and the company - grow. Featured in this newsletter are the career stories of two young HR generalists. Each profile highlights the importance of a shepherding influence by strong, senior management and the ‘learn-while-doing’ reality of the HR generalist’s world.

Introducing Wendy Hildebrand



Wendy Hildebrand is the high-energy human resources supervisor for Pieper Electric, Inc. (Milwaukee), reporting directly to company chairman, Norm Doll (see Spring 2002 VRH Newsline publication featuring Norm Doll). She has been with the company just over four years. The workforce for PPC Partner’s Inc., parent of Pieper Electric and affiliated companies MetroPower Inc. (South Carolina, Wisconsin) and MP Systems Inc. (Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan), consists of over 900 employees – man-

agement, office, and field (bargaining and technical) personnel.

“As a generalist, I’m responsible for all major HR areas including safety, training and development, compensation and benefits, appraisals and grade establishment for non-bargaining staff, recruiting, and employee relations,” says Hildebrand. “Being exposed to such variety, I’ve had to be internally motivated to learn continuously and prioritize my time on those areas where I can have maximum impact on the business. I’m continually building my skills in areas I’m less proficient – as a generalist there are naturally areas that I need to learn about.”

Hildebrand is a big proponent of education, both professionally and personally. She oversees a wide variety of training curriculums offered by Pieper, including extensive safety, equipment operations, specific Microsoft™ programs and business-related courses. The majority of the classes are offered through the Pieper Learning Center.

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Pieper Electric

Julius Pieper brought to life the first vestiges of Pieper Electric in 1947 while employed at Milprint as a maintenance man. Working out of a Packard during his off hours, JP operated on the premise that having all the material and tools on hand in the truck would create a viable business. Pieper Electric’s first headquarters was located at a farmhouse on the corner of 76th and Appleton in Milwaukee. Over the years, the business operated out of various locations before arriving at its present location at 5070 N. 35th Street on January 1, 1962.

A pivotal event in the life of the company occurred in 1959 when JP’s oldest son, Richard, came onboard, ostensibly to organize the company affairs enough so that his father might have some time off. However, he wound up purchasing the company and staying to develop Pieper Electric. At the time, the business had eight employees doing \$250,000 a year.

Today, the parent company, PPC Partners, Inc., employs over 900 men and women, and has substantially increased its earning power.

A Message From President Jonathan E. Dehlinger, Ph.D.



Early in my career I was the sole human resource professional in a Chicago-area law firm. Like the individuals featured here, I “grew up” professionally in this generalist role learning much about the diverse responsibilities and contributions available to young business professionals. Unlike the individuals described here, I did not have the

benefit of a resource or mentor to guide the learning process. This was, perhaps, seminal in shaping the nature of professional services now offered by Vernon Roche and Hodgson, Inc. Many of our on-going business relationships involve coaching and mentoring individuals as they navigate their career path. Because many of our clients have only one or two human resource generalists to support business functions, such mentoring whether formal or informal is often a component of our working relationship.

While there is ample research to support the value of mentoring – reducing work/family conflict, for example – enlightened managers understand the “payback” that comes from investing time in developing the organization’s younger talent.

Here are the stories of two early-in-career professionals, their perspectives on the role they play, where value-add contributions impact business and how enlightened managers have aided in their professional development. If there are similar stories in your organization, we would like to hear about them. Contact me directly at jon@vrhconsulting.com.

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Education played a major role in Hildebrand coming to Pieper Electric. She opted to pursue her Masters immediately upon completion of her undergraduate studies. “It was a personal goal I set for myself. I found myself in classes with smart people who had lots of work experience and I felt more accomplished as a result of this exposure. It helped me to mature into wanting a role requiring a lot of responsibility.”

Her graduate program offered her the opportunity to complete two internships for full credit during the second year of studies.

“I had a difficult time finding my first internship in the fall of my second year but I found one. It was three months and I didn’t enjoy it much because the scope of work was too narrow. I wanted more HR exposure.”

Hildebrand learned about her second internship through an email circulated by a staff member at UWM. “I literally went through the preliminary telephone interview and my initial in-person interview with an HR consultant before I finally found out the company was Pieper Electric.”

She interned for ten months on a part-time basis reporting directly to then-president, Norm Doll. It turned out to be a “benefits crash course” (modifying the current, self-insured health care plan to fully funded.) “Norm immediately made me feel like I was a part of the company and that my knowledge and contributions were very valuable.” She was consequently offered a permanent position as human resources-administrator one-and-a-half months prior to graduation.

“It was bumpy at first but I quickly realized that I just needed to jump in and figure ‘whatever’ out. No one was going to hold my hand, per se. I started in an administrative role in an industry that I knew very little about but I grew into my current role by working with supervisors and operators at all levels of the company.”

We depend very heavily on both her professional background and on her ability to research solutions to our problems and needs.

—Norm Doll

“I learned early that it was ‘OK’ to ask lots of questions but that I had to be self-motivated and take the initiative, that it was up to me to reach out and learn what needed to be learned, to be innately curious, and to practice assertiveness. I learned the need for diplomacy and the understanding that *how* what you say impacts people – employees should always know where they stand. I also learned not to take things personally and that I can always improve on communication skills. Not surprisingly, all of this is still vitally important to me today.”

“Working in a very competitive business in a male-dominated industry, I have learned that delegation and prioritization will sustain me as my career evolves.”

Hildebrand wants to be an impact player and sees her role at Pieper evolving daily. “Norm (Doll) has never wavered in his focus on my development and continuously challenges me. It keeps things very fresh for me. Actually the entire management team has been very supportive of my efforts.”

Doll adds, “My role is that of a business mentor more than a human resources mentor. I can provide history and experiences that I’ve had in my twenty plus years. That experience balances the learning required to keep the business thriving while meeting the myriad rules and laws of human resource administration. In a company such as ours where there is only one HR professional I have to make sure that



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she gets the mentoring needed to learn the technical side of the job, which happens outside of the company. Inside the company our professional really has to learn how important it is to balance the needs of the company. I suspect it makes the job more interesting but it has to fit the person in the job.”

Hildebrand continues, “I’m continuously striving for my HR services to provide real value to the company. I’m working to take the whole position to the next level. Besides being more strategic and proactive, I want to build a support staff that works cohesively with our employees. I also want to continue working with the other trained HR professionals in our affiliated companies. As a group, we are looking at things more strategically and have raised the level of communications on many HR topics.”

She also observes a number of major business issues facing HR professionals. “Although I am relatively young in my career, it’s clear that HR is overhead so having an appreciation for what impacts the bottom line and specifically, how HR impacts the bottom line means you better know the value-add HR provides. Determining what areas are going to add to the productivity of the company, such as recruiting, developing management and diversity programs, will be a necessity.”

According to Doll, “We depend very heavily on both her professional background and on her ability to research solutions to our problems and needs. None of us have that – we are technical professionals for the most part. Additionally we tend to put recruitment and development of management talent on the back burner behind the daily demands of the business. Our industry has suffered a fate similar to that of other industries like the airline industry since 2001 causing us to have to focus on production and sales. Wendy has improved our recruitment and development activities substantially during this time period. That would not have happened without her, no question.”

“I always ask myself ‘Why not!’ which supports continuous learning,” says Hildebrand. “My ultimate career goal is to be in a management position of authority with a strong support staff – all of us being constantly challenged.”

While Hildebrand is extremely career focused, she concludes that life balance is a top priority. “Putting family and faith first is a ‘lead by example’ approach practiced at Pieper.”

Introducing Lori Neils

Lori Neils has been with Phoenix Products, Inc. for nearly eight years; four years as a full-time and three-and-a-half years as the part-time HR manager. She currently works three-days per week and reports directly to CEO Scott Fredrick. Phoenix Product’s workforce is comprised of plant (union) and office (non-union) personnel for a total of 70 employees.



“My responsibilities include *everything* dealing with HR – benefits administration, recruiting, and employee relations, to name several of the major areas. I am currently working on a major initiative involving re-vamping of our whole benefits package due to the continued rise in healthcare costs.” Neils adds, “We are also looking at another re-opener for our labor agreements, so it’s been particularly busy.”

Neils worked at Banc One as a recruiter for 4-months during school before joining Richard D. Irwin (now McGraw Hill) after college working as an HR generalist. She joined Phoenix

Lori is more of a resource for me versus me being a mentor for her.

—Scott Fredrick

Products eight months later. At Phoenix Products, she continued her full-time HR generalist responsibilities as a member of the management team with direct reports. After four-years, she transitioned to a divisional business, Phoenix Healthcare products. Two-years later she approached the owners of Phoenix Products about the possibility of returning and working part-time. “I must have proven myself because I came back in a part-time, management capacity.”

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Phoenix Products

Founded in 1892 by George Wordingham, Phoenix Products Company, Inc. has evolved alongside the growth of the city of Milwaukee, where it is still headquartered at 8711 West Port Avenue. From its origins as a printing shop, Phoenix has engineered its growth in several industries, all requiring innovative approaches to projects and solutions to problems posed by customers.

Phoenix Lighting grew out of the company’s Metal Products Division in the 1950s, when a large mining equipment company asked Phoenix to design shock-resistant fixtures for use on their draglines and other heavy equipment. Success with mining lights led Phoenix’s expansion into the marine and petrochemical markets.

Phoenix is the inventor and leading manufacturer of docklite®, the industry’s best-known line of fixtures, lamp offerings and accessories for the material handling industry. The docklite® line offers extreme durability, with corrosion-resistant construction.

Technology developed for mining and marine lines enabled Phoenix to develop durable commercial and industrial lighting fixtures, including explosion-proof, hazardous location and vapor-proof fixtures, task lights and fluorescents, plus other fixture types for a host of industrial applications. Decades of expertise in designing distinctive lighting for extreme conditions reaches another milestone in the Phoenix Intrigue Series of architectural lighting products.

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“My education and experiences prepared me for the fact that HR is not in any textbook — we are dealing with people. I am the employee advocate but I also need to be tuned into what’s happening on the business side and the company’s strategic issues to be most effective at what I do.”

“I’ve learned quite a few lessons along the way – always do what you say you are going to do in order to build trust; get to know the people; always maintain an open-door policy. I did have a very good former boss who taught me a lot, both on the mechanics and the human sides of HR.”

“As a generalist, lots of variety comes with the position and no day is ever the same – I’m energized by that. It also means that I need to be resourceful. I am a member of the MRA (Management Resource Association), which meets once a month for networking and idea-sharing. I also bounce ideas off my senior management peers, tap into the Internet, and read lots of magazines and periodicals. The company relies on VRH to do candidate screening – Dr. Dehlinger provides us with a great ‘gut check.’”

“Management has been very positive and supportive. I am considered a peer even though I am part-time.”

“Lori is the HR position. She started as 2nd in command and moved quickly into a senior management position,” says CEO Fredrick. “She is fully trained and knowledgeable about the business and is on par and a colleague with all of our functional areas – marketing, production, etc. Whenever she needs to learn about something, she just goes out and gets it done. Lori is more of a resource for me versus me being a mentor for her.”

“Lori has accomplished many things for us – she is the lead person in contract negotiations and has taken recruiting to the next level. She has earned my trust and confidence as well as that of her colleagues and the ‘rank and file’ who don’t see her as a management tool but more as an employee advocate.”

A bubbly Neils concludes, “Kids change everything!” and adds, “Phoenix Products offers a great working environment – it is very flexible, receptive and understanding company about balancing work and family issues. I’m proof! From an HR perspective, companies that are flexible and supportive about this need for balance will get better employees.”

PHOENIX



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