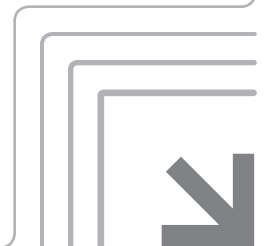


# Greek HRM: Building the Critical Competencies



**ALLAN FREED, JUSTIN HYATT, ANTONIS PAPACHRISTOU, AND NANCY PAPALEXANDRIS**

This article discusses results of the 2012 global Human Resources Competency Study (HRCS), led by The RBL Group and the Ross School of Business, University of Michigan. Over the past 25 years, this on-going research project has provided the most global, comprehensive, and empirical identification of the competencies expected of HR professionals, and the impact of these competencies on both individual HR professional effectiveness and business performance. HRCS findings have influenced thousands of HR departments, from global giants to smaller organisations in every continent. This article points out a number of the key findings of the research and identifies implications of the study findings for HR talent planning, assessment, and development.



# Greek HRM: Building the Critical Competencies



Allan Freed, Justin Hyatt, Antonis Papachristou, and Nancy Papalexandris

## THE GREEK CONTEXT

Some analysts say that the economic crises facing Greece could become the worst recession in modern world history (Thompson 2012). This catastrophe has social, political and economic impact throughout Europe and the rest of the world. However, it has the greatest impact on the people and companies within Greece itself.

### Business Climate

Consumers have shrinking disposable income and they spend it far more carefully. Sales in all sectors have dropped the last 3 years from 10-50% (depending on the sector). Companies find it very difficult to finance operations as banks and foreign investors are lending much more conservatively to reduce their financial risk. Importing goods is becoming more difficult, as the producers demand more solid guarantees. Companies that survive are forced to reduce cost by laying off employees and reducing spending. This perpetuates the vicious cycle, increasing unemployment further. Unemployment has risen to record high of 21%, which translates to 1 million unemployed. Austerity measures place additional pressure on individuals and companies, as the government decrease spending and raise fees. The already thick bureaucracy further stifles small businesses and strains even large corporations. On top of this, the results of the last elections did not produce a government, which forces the country to another round of elections, creating more political, social and economic instability.

### Implications for the HR Profession

As a result of the business environment, HR Professionals must handle all these changes and are called on to increase productivity while reducing costs. Some are forced to change structures, cut benefits, dismiss employees and change contracts to more flexible employment (FT to PT, fewer days of work etc.). While coping with this intense workload, HR departments themselves are under scrutiny as companies are weighing the value of training, employee events and the overall HR function. Layoffs and budget cuts are common. Individual HR professionals must also handle their own insecurity professionally and personally.

## HRCS INTRODUCTION

HR creates value by increasing the performance and agility of the talent (human capital) and culture (organization capability) of the organization. Delivering this value defines the required skills and competencies expected of an effective HR professional. Since 1987, we have chronicled what it means to be an effective HR professional through five waves of global surveys of HR competence. In 2012, The RBL Group, together with the Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, and HR professional association partners, completed a sixth round of the global HR Competency Study, or HRCS.

The research is important to HR professionals because it empirically describes what it means to be an effective HR professional. In short, it is a mirror that allows HR professionals to identify strengths and necessary behavioral adjustments where performance is not up to par. In a world of increasing change, complexity, and competitiveness, there has never been a greater need to help HR professionals identify what it means to contribute more fully, effectively, and insightfully.

### A Comprehensive Review

Working with HR professional and educational organizations in Australia, China, India, Latin America, Middle East, Turkey, Northern Europe, and South Africa, and through our extensive networks in North America and Central Europe, we have collected data in this round of HRCS from over 20,000 individuals. To define potential competencies for HR professionals, we relied on focus groups, theory, research including prior rounds of HRCS, and experience to identify what effective HR professionals must know and do. This work resulted in testing 139 specific behavioral competency descriptions.

Highly rated HR professionals were nominated to participate in a 360-based survey methodology by their organizations. The individuals then filled out a self-report survey and invited both HR and non-HR associates to make assessments. In addition, the survey had two outcome variables: personal effectiveness ("Compared to other HR professionals you have known, how does this participant compare?") and measured business performance using an index of seven dimensions of business success. This is the largest global, comprehensive, and longitudinal assessment of the HR profession.

## **Six Fundamental Competency Domains**

The 2012 HRCS identifies six fundamental competency domains that HR professionals must demonstrate to impact business performance. The six competency domains are graphically represented in figure 1 and discussed below.

### *1. Strategic Positioner*

High-performing HR professionals think and act from the outside-in. They are deeply knowledgeable of and translate external business trends into internal decisions and actions. They understand the general business conditions (e.g., social, technological, economic, political, environmental, and demographic trends) that affect their industry and geography. They target and serve key customers of their organization by identifying customer segments, knowing customer expectations, and aligning organization actions to meet customer needs. They also cocreate their organizations' strategic responses to business conditions and customer expectations by helping frame and make strategic and organization choices.

### *2. Credible Activist*

Effective HR professionals are Credible Activists. Credibility comes when HR professionals do what they promise, build personal relationships of trust, and can be relied on to meet commitments. Being a trusted advisor starts with deep business knowledge and acumen. As an activist, HR professionals have a point-of-view, not only about HR activities, but about business demands. As activists, HR professionals learn how to influence others in a positive way through clear, consistent, and high-impact communications. Some call this HR with an attitude. HR professionals who are credible but not activists are admired but have little impact. Those who are activists but not credible may have good ideas, but not much attention will be given them. To be credible activists, HR professionals need to be self-aware and committed to building their professionalism.

### *3. Capability Builder*

An effective HR professional melds individual abilities into an effective and strong organization by helping to define and build critical organization capabilities. Organization is not just structure or process; it starts with capability, which is what the organization is good at and known for. HR professionals should be able to audit and invest in the creation of organizational capabilities. These capabilities outlast the behavior or performance of any individual person or system. Capabilities have been referred to as a company's culture, process, or identity. HR professionals should facilitate capability audits to determine the identity of organizations. Such capabilities include customer service, speed, quality, efficiency, innovation, and collaboration. One such emerging capability of successful

organizations is to create an organization where employees find meaning and purpose at work. HR professionals can help line managers create meaning so that the capability of the organization reflects the deeper values of the employees.

### *4. Change Champion*

As change champions, HR professionals ensure that organization actions are integrated and sustained through disciplined change processes. Strong HR professionals make an organization's internal capacity for change match or lead the external pace of change. As change champions, HR professionals help make change happen at institutional (changing patterns), initiative (making things happen), and individual (enabling personal change) levels.

To make change happen at these three levels, HR professionals play two critical roles. First, they initiate change, which means they build a case for why change matters, overcome resistance to change, engage key stakeholders in the process of change, and articulate the decisions to start change. Second, they sustain change by institutionalizing change through organizational resources, organization structure, communication and continual learning. As change champions, HR professionals partner to create organizations that are agile, flexible, responsive, and make transformation happen in ways that create sustainable value.

### *5. Human Resource Innovator and Integrator*

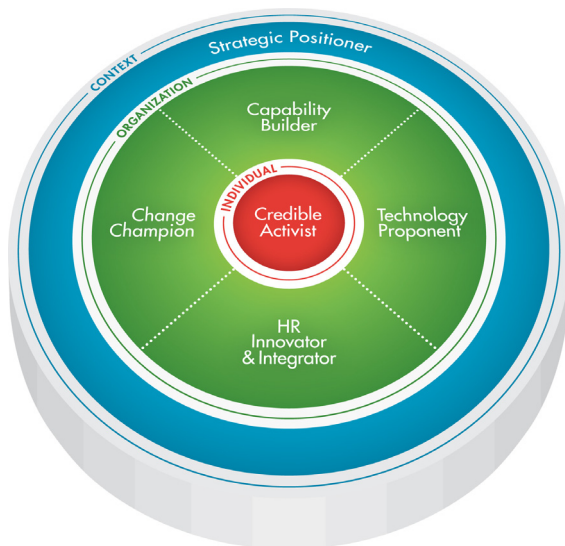
Effective HR professionals innovate and integrate HR practices into unified solutions that solve business problems. They must know the latest insights on key HR practice areas related to human capital (talent sourcing, talent development), performance accountability (appraisal, rewards), organization design (teamwork, organization development), and communication. They must also be able to turn these unique HR practice areas into integrated solutions, generally around an organization's leadership brand. These innovative and integrated HR practices impact business results by ensuring that HR practices maintain their focus over the long run and do not become seduced by HR fads or irrelevant "best practices."

### *6. Technology Proponent*

In recent years, technology has changed the way HR people think and do their administrative and strategic work. At a basic level, HR professionals need to use technology to more efficiently deliver HR administrative systems like benefits, payroll processing, healthcare costs, and other administrative services. In addition, HR professionals need to use technology to keep people connected with each other. Technology plays an increasingly important role in improving communications, doing administrative work more efficiently, and connecting

employees to customers. An emerging technology trend is using technology as a relationship-building tool through social media. Leveraging social media enables the business to position itself for future growth. HR professionals who understand technology will create improved organizational identity outside the company and improve social relationships inside the company. As technology exponents HR professionals have to access, advocate, analyze, and align technology for information, efficiency, and relationships.

**Figure 1: 2012 HR Competencies**



## KEY STRENGTH AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT FOR GREEK HR PROFESSIONALS

### Key Strength: Technology Proponent

The Greek HR profession is strong in their capability as technology proponents. In the 1990s, Greece saw a “massive increase” in the use of electronic communication. The percentage of Greek organizations that had an increased use of computer or electronic mail to communicate major issues to employees grew from 4.8 in 1996 to 43.4 in 1999. Greek technology proponents surpassed much of Europe in the rate at which they built technological competence in their companies. Greek companies saw a 66.10% increase in computer-based training in 1999 compared to an average of 42.20% in the rest of the EU. In the same year, 73.10% of Greek companies placed a high importance on employee training on computers compared to 56.30% in the rest of the EU (Chalikias 2002). This capability has one of the highest correlations with business value creation of the six. As HR professionals continue to stay abreast of the latest technology and promote

its use, Greek companies will be able to stay connected externally and internally, lower costs and increase productivity.

### Case Story—Vodafone Greece

Vodafone Greece is among the first companies that modified their HR operating model to incorporate wide use of technology for its HR operations. Following the Global Vodafone model where the structure of HR is separated in HR Business Partners, Centers of Expertise and HR Services, they are constantly moving towards a heavy self service environment. The aim is to allow employees to utilize technology in order to support their day-to-day needs in terms of HR requirements and allow CoEs and HRBPs to focus more on strategic issues and management coaching.

The heart of this self-service orientation is an ERP system that delivers HR administrative activities more efficiently. This system contains basic applications that employees access and perform themselves, separated between Employee Self Service and Manager Self Service roles. Activities like changing of personal data, handling time and attendance (leaves, changing work schedule, overtime etc.), applying to internal vacancies, and requesting certain certifications can now happen directly by the employee. At the other end, the manager can now initiate forms for requesting new positions, move employees, and have online data for his or her team (leave quotas, days they are absent, basic employee details, etc.).

Vodafone is a technology company that aims to connect its customers in a mobile world. The case could not be different for its employees. Recognizing the need to fully automate its processes, certain ERP applications are now mobile. Taking a step further, several satellite HR systems are now linked to the ERP. Vodafone just recently introduced a tool that assists managers to handle the annual reward and bonus schemes process. It also updated the annual Performance dialogue system to a simpler and more focused tool aligning the whole organization behind common objectives. Believing in the continuous learning of its population, Vodafone also introduced an online learning platform, for employees to manage their learning requirements and perform all necessary enrollments and follow ups of the available learning activities. Additionally, there is a new e-recruitment tool to assist managers and HR to handle all applications (internal and external) more effectively through a single platform around the world. This assists people from around the globe to be potential employees in any country that Vodafone operates.

All these systems free up the time of both, employees and HR people assisting capability building towards what Vodafone really requires to serve its customers while at the same time

transforming its people into a more agile workforce that experiences first what customers require from the company.

### **Improvement Opportunity #1: Strategic Positioner**

In the past, Greek HR professionals have excelled at operational functions. They have begun the critical shift to develop as strategic positioners and internalise the values of external stakeholders. “[Greek] HRM is moving away from its administrative to a more strategically oriented role” (Chalikias 2002). One way Greek HR professionals have engaged particularly well in cooperation with management is regarding employee training and career development. According to data gathered as part of the Cranet survey, those Greek companies where primary responsibility for major policy decisions regarding training and development were shared between line management and the HR department, there was a 17.5% increase in employee training during the 1990s whereas companies that left the decision making to only line management or only the HR department saw decreases in training and professional development (Chalikias 2002). It is clear that strategic collaboration between HR professionals and management drives real results in Greece.

There is still much room for growth as Strategic Positioners among Greek HR professionals. In past years there has been a trend in countries in southeastern Europe that shows a decrease in the number of companies where the head of HR is on the board of directors (Apospori 2005). Another study comparing Greek firms with MNC subsidiaries in Greece reported that “HR planning was found to be less tightly linked with corporate planning in Greek firms than in MNC subsidiaries” (Harzing 2004). Greek HR professionals must strengthen their competency as strategic positioners. As they internalize their understanding of the business context and stakeholder expectations, they will be able to add value by contributing to business strategy that drives critical results.

#### *Case Story—Titan Group*

In TITAN Group of companies, the HR division plays an active role not only in company operations but also in its strategy formulation. This is declared in the strategy statement of the group where HR is one of the four pillars of strategy at the same level of importance as the other three business pillars. Every business decision is decided on the basis of these four pillars.

Furthermore this is evident from all the practices and processes designed and implemented by HR in order to secure the success of business plans. HR professionals also participate in formulating decisions about the group’s structure and its general business strategy.

TITAN group secures its success and sustainability through its strategic planning and HR practices, namely succession plans for all major job positions and talent management practices which lead to excellent staffing of the group’s operations.

HR practices are implemented with great support by top managers including TITAN’s CEO and by all members of the Board of Directors, showing the integration of HR with the company’s strategy and operations.

### **Improvement Opportunity #2: Credible Activist**

Greece has a strong, cohesive culture. As national culture and societal context manifest themselves in human behaviour and interaction, they can strongly influence group dynamics, organizational values and managerial relations (Harzing 2004). Compared with other business functions, HR is highly affected by the cultural context of the local community. The tight family networks and structured leadership hierarchies in Greece are prominent parts of business culture, especially in small and family-owned businesses. This affects a large share of the HR profession as 99% of Greek companies have fewer than 200 employees (Chalikias 2002). Due to culture that respects hierarchy and experience, as well as the current job insecurity, HR professionals have been reticent to take risks and set themselves apart as activists. Now, more than ever, Greek HR professionals need to build up their credibility. As they fulfill promises, build personal relationships of trust, and continually keep commitments, they will build the ethos necessary to be trusted and respected as they proactively seek to impact others and the business. Despite the conservative climate, HR professionals must continue to grow as activists, but should reinforce that capability with increased credibility.

#### *Case Story—Athenian Brewery*

At Athenian Brewery the HR team acts as the strategic interface with line management and actively develops and implements HR strategies that contribute to the development and accomplishment of the company strategy and optimize business performance. The team is structured with dedicated HR business partners who proactively coach, support and challenge business leaders in addressing HR implications of business decisions. Also, they strive to enhance their ability to assess, shape and develop the company’s change management capability, in order to create the desired work environment that engages employees and supports business objectives. HR professionals strive to understand and integrate the context of cultural and organizational change based on long-term internal and external developments. HR professionals are able to advance these impactful measures because they have built up their credibility by bringing value to the company and its employees.

At Athenian Brewery capability development at functional and individual levels is a key priority. In this respect, personal development plans are created and followed through making sure that both managers and employees are held accountable, with the continuous support of the HR team. Every two years, Athenian Brewery administers a Climate Survey to listen and act on their people's business and professional needs in 11 different climate dimensions such as personal development, reward & recognition, customer orientation, innovation, cooperation & teamwork, direction & alignment, etc. Transparency and consistency in all communications between management, unions and employees has built trust and credibility.

The credible activism of the HR professionals at Athenian Brewery continues to drive results. For the last two years, AB has been named the best workplace in Greece by the 'Great Places to Work Institute' awards. These successes validate the practices and methods they are implementing and highlight the relation of trust and respect that has been built within the whole organization.

## REFERENCES

- Eleni Apospori, Irene Nikandrou, Nancy Papalexandris, "Changes in HRM in Europe: A Longitudinal Comparative Study Among 18 European Countries," *Journal of European Industrial Training* 29:7 (2005).
- Wayne Brockbank, Dave Ulrich, Mike Ulrich, and Jon Younger, "HR Talent and the New HR Competencies," *Strategic HR Review* 11:4 (2012).
- John Chalikias and Nancy Papalexandris, "Changes in Training, Performance Management and Communication Issues Among Greek Firms in the 1990s: Intercountry and Intracountry Comparisons," *Journal of European Industrial Training* 26:7 (2002).
- Anne-Wil Harzing, Hafiz Mirza, and Barbara Myloni, "Have the Colours of Culture Faded Away?" *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management: CCM* 1.4:1 (2004).
- Derek Thompson, "Greece Is on Pace for the Worst Recession in Modern History," *The Atlantic* 2004 (15 February 2012, web).

# About the Authors

---



## **ALLAN FREED**

Allan Freed is a principal consultant with The RBL Group, a consulting firm focused on helping leaders and organizations deliver results and increase value. Allan's current work helps organizations identify and build capabilities required for the execution of strategy through leveraging human resources and improving leadership performance. He is permanently based in the UK and has worked with a large number of Europe's leading firms.



## **JUSTIN HYATT**

Justin manages RBL projects throughout Europe and Africa. Prior to joining The RBL Group, Justin was a Project Manager and Product Manager in the Office of Information Technologies at Brigham Young University. Justin also worked for several years at M3 Engineering where he managed a team to write and compile an equipment storage and maintenance system. He designed an aircraft landing strip for the largest mining operation in Mexico and collaborated on several other design engineering projects.



## **ANTONIS PAPACHRISTOU**

Antonis Papachristou, the Human Resources Director of Housemarket SA (KEA Franchisee for Greece, Cyprus, and Bulgaria), is an experienced HR professional with previous positions in UCB Pharma SA, Fiat Auto Hellas, Eurolease, and the companies Tefin, Unitbank, British Providence, and Inchape Insurance. In the past he was the Operations Manager in the Pouliadis Group, the largest group of companies in the IT industry in Greece. Papachristou has a master in Business Administration and minor in HR Management from the University of Kent, and he is a member of the Board of Directors of the Greek Personnel Management Association.



## **NANCY PAPALEXANDRIS**

Nancy Papalexandris is Professor of Management and founder of the MSc Programme in Human Resource Management of the Athens University of Economics and Business. She has served as Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs and Personnel of her University for the period 2001–2007 and has represented the Greek Rectors' Conference at the European University Association. She holds a bachelor's degree in Business Administration from Pierce College, a master's degree from New York University and a Ph.D. from the University of Bath in the U.K.

---

Contact us for more information  
about The RBL Group products  
and services:

**Phone** 801.616.5600

**Email** [rblmail@rbl.net](mailto:rblmail@rbl.net)

**Online** [www.rbl.net](http://www.rbl.net)

**Mail** 3521 N. University Ave., Suite 100  
Provo, UT 84604



**Copyright © The RBL Group**

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or using any information storage or retrieval system, for any purpose without the express written permission of The RBL Group.