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World HR congress reveals best HR strategies for the future

Delegates at the recent four-day 11th World HR Congress and Business-Connect Exposition in Singapore were treated to ingenious presentations, highly interactive sessions, discussions, debates, cross-sharing, and networking. Yvonne McNulty, who covered the event for Expatica, attributes the success of the four-day event to the quality and variety of speakers who posed some interesting challenges for the future of HR, both locally and globally.

"Change is not an event, but a process," said Professor Dave Ulrich, the management guru hailing from University of Michigan, during his presentation which rounded off the four-day HR congress, run every two years by the World Federation of Personnel Management Associations, which was hosted and organised this year by the Singapore Human Resource Institute.



An emerging issue is individual ROI

"An organisation is not a structure, but is its capabilities. [Ask] 'What do you do?' not 'what are you?'," said Professor Ulrich, who noted several important points including the revelation that leadership is not a person but a brand, something that most companies with dynamic leaders are failing to realise.

Topics covered at the event, which attracted 2000 local and foreign delegates including 400 CEOs and business leaders and represented 62 countries, ranged from those of local interest including regional best practices in HR for government and public companies, to those of international interest such as strategic HR, measuring human capital, and global leadership initiatives.

The theme, 'how can HR be more strategic?' ran throughout the conference.

Don't give up

Professor Ulrich's thorough and engaging presentation on 'whether HR can truly reinvent itself, and if so, where does it start?', provided an extensive

road map of what we know and what we can now do, focusing on areas such as strategic clarity, organisational capabilities, and the change process.

Most of Professor Ulrich's presentation was based on his new book, *The HR Value Proposition*, a must-read for HR managers tasked with building practices into their HR programmes rather than blindly following a set of principles. According to Ulrich, building practices takes time and HR managers should not be discouraged.

Innovation is not about replicating what some other company is doing, but customising it for your unique workforce.
Alan Webber, Fast Company

Using his own recent weight-loss as an example—he lost 120 pounds and went from obese to fit in little over a year— Ulrich urged HR practitioners not to give up.

"Some things are worth doing, even if it's done poorly" he said, quoting his wife who used that line to encourage him to continue doing push-ups each day in his pursuit of getting fit.

"Only practice can help you get better," he said. What's important is to make a start and change those practices that just aren't working, or change the way we think about our HR practices.

Another highly engaging keynote presenter, was Professor Wee Chow Hou of Nanyang Business School, one of Singapore's most renowned academic institutions.

Adhering to the conference theme and speaking on the topic of how to strategise HR better, Professor Wee posed that perhaps the greatest challenge to our current thinking about global HR is the shift of economic competition from nation states to cities. Using Shanghai and other cities in China as examples, he cautioned that whilst the economic shift to cities is inevitable, there are likely to be significant implications for HR in terms of hiring, deployment and retention.

One such issue is the movement of employees globally and the challenges associated with it due to visa restrictions.

"Dual passports should become the norm," he said during his presentation. Countries who truly want to compete globally will need to allow their citizens and their expats to have dual-nationality. In other words, two passports, said Professor Wee, without the need to give up their home citizenship. Only then, he insisted, will we achieve the level of flexibility required to sustain truly international operations.

Change course

A third keynote speaker, and perhaps the most alternative, was Alan Webber, founder of *Fast Company* magazine, known amongst the HR

community for articles such as 'Why we hate HR'. Speaking on the topic of innovation, his presentation put forth some unique and inspiring HR best practices.

As founder of one of the most controversial yet profitable business magazines, Webber was able to reinvent the business magazine industry single-handedly by following a set of principals and guidelines with unwavering dedication.

What's important is to make a start and change those practices that just aren't working, or change the way we think about our HR practices.
Professor Dave Ulrich

Sharing some of those principals with the audience, Webber gave a brief outline of what HR can do to also change its course. Speaking from experience, one rule is to be a part of emerging conversations, he said. Not what is already happening, but what is yet to happen, what is in the pipeline, the next big idea.

In Fast Company magazine he publishes what he calls 'faith articles' about what is coming next but might not yet quite be there.

For HR the message is the same. Innovation is not about replicating what some other company is doing, but customising it for your unique workforce. It's not about reinventing the wheel but simply seeing things in a different light and having faith in that being able to deliver value.

China as an emerging theme

Perhaps it was no surprise that China emerged as a very strong theme throughout the conference, but therein lies the advantage of hosting such an event in the Asia Pacific region.

The number of presentations on China was high but all with one goal in mind: China is undoubtedly the hottest destination on the planet for expats at the moment but there is little useful information about how to manage global mobility well in this part of the world.

Into this gap stepped a number of highly competent and quality presenters who spoke about many China issues including major causes of expat failure in the region, how to set up successful operations, intercultural issues, and retaining talent.

Frank Ribout, Vice President, Business Development for Cendant Mobility/Cartus in Asia Pacific, and Kenneth Kwek, Managing Director of Singapore, provided a very informative session on mobility challenges to China.

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Citing personal experience as a manager charged with ensuring expats in the region are coping and performing well, Ribout offered many stories of expat spouses and families who are struggling to cope with language difficulties, their partner's excessive travel, and challenges with obtaining basic amenities. Coupled with survey data from their recent China study, Ribout and Kwek provided a comprehensive overview of the current state of affairs with mobility to China.

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'The Lenovo story' was also another interesting session on China. Lenovo is China's largest computer company, which acquired IBM's personal computer business early in 2005. The session explored important HR lessons about mergers and acquisitions based on transitioning 10,000 former IBM employees in 66 countries to Lenovo.

Based on the personal experience of two senior Lenovo managers, issues of multiculturalism, nationalism and job security were explored as major challenges.

Measuring human capital

A final recurring theme of the conference was how to measure the value of employees. Many presenters provided new insights into a topic that is not new, but which continues to plague HR as the 'holy grail' of unsolvable dilemmas.

ERC provided an excellent presentation, using managers from Microsoft and Philips to drive home their major points.

Their recent internal survey of ERC clients conducted in 2006 shows that the most challenging issues for HR are in benchmarking. In the Asia Pacific region 77 percent say their biggest challenge is cost containment, followed by 62 percent who consider measuring ROI of international assignments as a challenge and 59 percent localisation.

In EMEA, 51 percent named pension portability as the greatest challenge followed by career management of assignees, and availability of spouse employment.

Retaining repatriates was also a major issue, with less than 50 percent of US companies indicating they had a formal repatriation program compared to 87 percent in Asia.

Never mind the companies' ROI what about mine?

A PricewaterhouseCoopers presentation on a similar topic focused on the findings of a joint Cranfield/PwC study in which repatriation was identified as a major problem for companies wishing to retain employees. Maria Ferraro, Associate Director, HR Services, PwC Singapore, gave an excellent overview of the issues, citing one main finding that surprised even the

researchers.

"Assignees believe they are not getting a return on investment by going on an international assignment," he said during the presentation. Essentially, they view assignments as risky to their careers because there are no post-assignment job guarantees. So they therefore negotiate hard on the financial package to compensate for the risk to their careers as a result of relocating.

What they risk, says Ferraro, is career progression and advancement. For this reason they view their individual ROI as at risk, or at times, less than break even.

It's certainly a shift in the way HR typically views expat ROI. With so much of the focus on organisational ROI and how to get value out of assignees to ultimately benefit the company, recognition of the shift to individual ROI has emerged as a very real issue.

June 2006

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