

HR in Canada



Ian Turnbull: A vision for HR in Canada

By David Brown

Exposed early in his career to the potential of strategic HR, Ian Turnbull is looking to make an impact as he takes over key roles in CCHRA and IHRIM.

At a dinner party New Year's Eve, Ian Turnbull found himself talking with a fellow HR professional. Unaware of who he was, she helpfully explained to him the ins and outs of human resources.

There are probably few people in Canada who need HR explained to them less than Turnbull.

In fact, there is probably no other person in the country who could influence the profession as much as Turnbull in the next couple of years.

After assuming key leadership positions in two influential associations — president-elect of the Canadian Council of Human Resources Associations (CCHRA) and president of the International Association of Human Resource Information Management (IHRIM) — Turnbull hopes he will be able to make some real changes for the profession.

Of course no one person can possibly exert his will upon something as amorphous as a profession but the associations serve as the starting point for concerted efforts to shape what the HR community says and does and how it is perceived in the rest of the business world. They are the settings for ideas grand and small to be put on the table, strategies devised and action plans hatched.

In the beginning

Early in conversation with Turnbull it becomes clear he has strongly held views on human

resources, forged over 25 years in a number of jobs in a number of sectors. He is very passionate about what he does and the potential for HR to make valuable contributions in the business world.

But when Ian Turnbull started his career in HR back in 1975, when it was still just personnel, the perception was that they were simply the people who took care of all the pesky rules that come with hiring employees. It was filling forms, pushing paper and that was about it.

After graduating from the University of Western Ontario in London with a degree in political science and psychology — “I guess there was some indication I had an interest in the workings of people,” he says — he stayed at the school to complete an MBA.

Initially he hadn’t even thought about personnel, believing as did most at the time that there wasn’t much of a chance to make an impact or climb the corporate ladder. Instead, he wanted to go into operations.

But after receiving an attractive offer from the Hudson’s Bay Company with a starting salary too good to refuse, Turnbull soon found himself an assistant personnel manager for the Calgary Region of the Bay.

Looking back now, Turnbull considers himself fortunate to have worked with the people he did and in the settings he found himself because he got to practise a style of HR that was very much years ahead of its time.

As part of a small department, Turnbull was thrown into the deep end, but he thrived on the considerable responsibilities he was given and enjoyed having his hand in everything from employee relations and training, in true generalist fashion.

He relished a degree of autonomy and independence peers in other departments did not and he was often in the offices of senior people at the company. “Very quickly I sort of figured out that this HR stuff is pretty good,” he says.

After a couple of years with the Bay, Turnbull went on to a new job with the government of Alberta’s high-profile Department of Energy and Natural Resources, where his boss, Bob Grose had a unique vision for HR that he imparted to his small team of “personnel” practitioners.

The approach was so unique that they didn’t really even have the words to articulate it, says Turnbull. It was what most people today would probably refer to as “strategic HR,” and at its very essence it was about adding value to the company. It was certainly of a grander scope than that held by other personnel departments of the day.

“I was lucky enough to see what HR could be right off the top,” he says. “Where a lot of people say they haven’t had that kind of exposure, I have.” Despite that, Turnbull is well aware that a lot of people in HR find themselves much lower down the hierarchy than they would like to be. This troubles him. “If the senior HR person isn’t a member of the core executive team, I have a real problem with that.”

His belief in the potential for HR that was shaped in his first days has stayed with him as he moved into a number of positions in a number of workplaces.

He left his job with the Department of Energy and Natural Resources and moved to British Columbia to work with Kaiser Resources as supervisor of training and development. He’d later return to Alberta to become director of labour relations for Athabasca University and staying with the public sector, he took a job with Edmonton General Hospital where he was manager of personnel services.

He found his way into the HRIS side of the business after taking a job auditing the strategic direction of HR at Canada Post. “I roasted and toasted them,” he says. “And the executive VP of HR said if this guy is so smart let him do it.”

He was hired on for a six-month special assignment as manager of compensation policy and procedures for Canada Post Corporation. Aside from developing policies and procedures for new executive compensation programs, he also recommended a new system for information management and he ended up designing the compensation, benefits and job evaluation components of the corporate HRIS.

His move into the world of HR technology was complete when he took the job of director of human resource systems for Canada Post. After one last in-house position with Noranda as manager of HR planning and systems, he made the move to consulting.

“I moved to a lot of different companies and it took me a long time to understand why,” he says. “It was because I was doing a lot of (internal) consulting and I realized it was better if I function as a consultant.

“I’m more of an implementation guy,” he says. He enjoys working on projects and solving problems but once they’re done, things change. “The pressure goes down and my interest level goes down and I start to look for something more challenging.”

Need for change

As a consultant, Turnbull gets an inside look at a large number of organizations and he is amazed

that some of the old-school habits persist in some departments today.

He sounds more than slightly frustrated by the reluctance to adapt to a working world that is being revolutionized by technology and he uses words like bureaucratic and academic pejoratively for needless HR transactional activities that become burdensome on the front lines and always he comes back to the term “value-added.” If HR is not trying to add value to the company, he believes they probably don’t deserve the respect they’ve been demanding.

Now as head of two large HR associations, Turnbull believes he is in a position to improve the way HR is practised in this country.

His tenure as head at IHRIM, already begun, will run one year with another year after that as past-president, and while he doesn’t assume the president position at CCHRA until later this year, as chair of the National Standards Steering Committee, Turnbull will oversee the critical final stage of the development of national standards for the professional designation Certified Human Resources Professional (CHRP), before taking over for current president Dennis Low at about the time the national standards will begin to roll out across the country in 2002.

Getting national standards is seen by many as the essential requirement for HR in its struggle to gain respect and legitimacy of professional status in the business community.

On top of this, at a time when the business world hurtles through the growing pains of explosive technological advances, Turnbull will also be working to expand and improve HR’s understanding and utilization of technology through his stewardship at IHRIM.

He believes one of the greatest problems HR departments face today is the potentially overwhelming amounts of information falling upon them.

There probably is not an HR person out there who would say they don’t need to know more about the basic tools of information management, he says.

“That’s really important to me and it used to drive me crazy how difficult it was to do things, with so much paper, and with no value added going from desk to desk to desk. The beauty of computerization is that it eliminates all of that.”

But neither does he champion technology for the sake of technology.

Simply installing new software will do very little to improve business performance, he says. “You have to modify the business processes. Because if you don’t, what you’re doing wrong is still wrong, you’re just doing it faster.”

It isn't about automating everything but taking a real hard look at an organization's processes and figuring out what can, should and must be automated.

Business process re-engineering is a misnomer, he says because in most cases the process was never engineered in the first place, it just sort of develops.

Getting it done

People who have worked with Turnbull say he will be bringing to the table not only strong opinions on HR but a reputation for a let's-get-things-done attitude that will be useful in cutting through the red-tape that so often plagues processes governed by committee, and particularly useful for the CCHRA which has, in true Canadian fashion, a fractious history typical of provincial relations.

"I've been on the board with Ian at IHRIM and I've know him for the last 14 years and I've never seen a person so dedicated to the profession," says Richard Rousseau, of the Quebec HRIS firm D.L.G.L. and a member of both IHRIM and CCHRA. He describes Turnbull as both a visionary and a doer.

"Every thing you ask him to do becomes a personal challenge that he handles with professionalism, like he would run his own business and because of that he doesn't tolerate mediocrity."

At first it appears he doesn't have a lot of patience for people who aren't as committed as he is, says Rousseau. But it is a kind of impatience that becomes a virtue when mixed in equal measures with his disarming personality.

At first people can be intimidated by what outwardly appears as a gruff demeanour, says another long-time associate, fellow HRIS consultant Al Doran. But he has a remarkable ability to involve people and first impressions are quickly replaced once people get a sense of his affable nature.

Finding the time

As a married father of two young girls just eight and 10, who is often on the road from Monday to Thursday each week, giving up another 12 to 13 weekends a year to association work is a very big deal. But he takes whatever opportunities he can to bring his family along with him. One daughter accompanied him to Chicago earlier this year and last year he flew his whole family down to Phoenix on air miles.

And the many hours spent on airplanes and late nights in hotels are also ideal times for Turnbull to spend some time writing about the world of HR.

Aside from numerous articles on the topic, and working with Doran he has also penned two books on human resource management systems — *Human Resources Management Systems: A Practical Approach*, and *Human Resources Information Management*.

All of this is time-consuming stuff to be sure, but his passion for the profession and those strongly held opinions forged from 25 years on the job push him to at least try to make a difference for human resources.

“If you don’t like something, you either shut up or do something about it and I’m not very good at shutting up,” he says.