Featured School:
Lancaster University
Lancaster University Management School
Lancaster, United Kingdom
http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/

November, 2012
AACSB International
Centre for Performance-led Human Resources (CPHR)

Lancaster University Management School's Centre for Performance-led Human Resources (CPHR) was established to provide a European based hub for HR research. In the six years since its founding, CPHR has been successful in its goal by providing thought leadership in the area of HR through its publications, collaborations, and general research efforts. It has attracted over £1.6 million of industrial funding.

The Centre's longtime director Professor Paul Sparrow comments that CPHR was created when a number of HR directors based in the United Kingdom surveyed the landscape and felt that there was a distinct lack of European presence in the field of HR research, with the majority of publications being produced from the United States. The call was then raised to develop a center in the United Kingdom focusing on these issues, and Lancaster University became involved in the discussion early on as a potential hosting institution. From the beginning, the imperative was set that the issues that would be examined needed to be relevant, embedded in practice, and looked at within a research context. After laying out the core concepts behind the Centre and obtaining the necessary funding, Professor Sparrow was brought in to direct CPHR's operations. The first year was spent in negotiations with local HR directors regarding what really was meant by "performance-led HR," and defining the academic boundaries and goals for the center's studies.

CPHR was situated in the business school with specific considerations in mind. Structurally, the Centre could have been situated in any of the teaching departments, as Lancaster University does not have a specific HR department. However, the initial dialogue made it clear that the Centre should be separated from any specific academic area. As HR is highly multifaceted, CPHR needed to be in a position to reach across the disciplines. The business school has kept CPHR independent and thus able to maintain its cross-disciplinary focus. With the Centre's capacity to look across disciplines, and their focus on working across a variety of different kinds of institutions, their research is capable of yielding well-rounded data. This independence was the primary reason that the business school was chosen to host CPHR.

CPHR works directly with a variety of local and international companies in its research efforts. These companies are often both sponsors and members of CPHR. Professionals from these companies share insights and provide a real world look into what is going on in business HR. Alongside these professionals, the Centre identifies two to three topics each year, typically related to HR policy, upon which they produce a "white paper," or insight into the practice. These papers may be co-written with practitioners. CPHR then tests these concepts with the practitioners. As an example of this, the Centre runs several special interest groups covering topics such as engagement, organization design, health and wellbeing, HR strategy, and talent. For the talent group, CPHR brings together a multitude of "talent directors" for a sit-down meeting. In these meetings, there is a confidential discussion of what these directors are working on in terms of practice. Each conversation is recorded for internal use. These conversations are useful for the Centre as they shape and frame the questions that the research team needs to look at. Professor Sparrow considers it a "sharpening process," for testing and validating concepts, leading to a refinement of data and overall understanding.

Funding CPHR

The primary funding for the Centre comes through a subscription based model. The sponsors of CPHR are typically HR directors, who are also members. Professor Sparrow points out that the intent was to create a small "club" with an honest and detailed exchange. Initially, the Centre required a five-year agreement of sponsorship, but this has since been amended to a three-year agreement. This subscription model underpins the majority of the activities of the Centre. These financial resources are used to produce white papers and resources for the special interest groups. In addition to the subscriptions, CPHR also engages in consultative work to generate funding. The Centre is often given access to a firm's data for the purpose of analysis. CPHR is able to analyze this data and recommend practical solutions, for a nominal fee.
Research Phases and Themes

The Centre divides its research into capsules, with their initial phase of research spanning from 2007 to 2010. The primary function of their research during this time, dubbed "phase 1," had been on finding ways to increase the productivity of the workforce in the United Kingdom. To this end, CPHR undertook a host of projects focusing on performance as it relates to overall productivity. Using data acquired through first-hand research and the information provided by the collaborating firms, the Centre produced a white paper series, as well as a research book entitled, *Leading HR*. This series was co-authored by the HR directors of collaborating firms to ensure it offered results centered on real world application, more so than pure theory. This first phase was underpinned by a view that had been taken within the field of HR management, which enabled the Centre to be distinctive, and to stand out from the other centers. The primary areas investigated included strategic competence, boardroom engagement, business model change, evaluating how people improve organizational capital, and overall HR trajectories.¹

Following their initial research phase, CPHR shifted focus for phase 2, spanning from 2010 to 2011. The attention turned to questions of long-term and sustainable performance. The Centre is now entering phase 3, building upon what they have researched over the past several years. The themes identified in the initial two phases are still being investigated, but there are emerging areas of interest to CPHR's studies. Of these, innovation, customer centricity, lean management, and global integration are the primary themes being studied.²

In reference to future goals, Professor Sparrow comments that, "We've always said that the work we do needs to be cross-disciplinary, as there is a need for this in academic study. What's happening is that organizations are dealing with problems that span across the disciplines, and most HR research has not reflected this."

Additional Offerings

Lancaster University Management School (LUMS) has leveraged the research done through CPHR, offering contributions to master's courses based upon some of the Centre's findings. With CPHR's special interest groups, there was highly specific research done in key areas related to HR, allowing the Centre to produce masters classes which are extremely practice-based in form (with all the insights and examples already having been acquired through the Centre's studies). CPHR offers masters classes in organizational design, HR strategy, leadership, employee engagement, and talent management.

When these courses were initially designed, they weren't intended to be utilized by the sponsoring businesses. The aim was to capsulate the insight from the Centre's members for distribution to outside learners. However, a number of the existing and incoming sponsor firms found the classes useful for their teams. Two very large organizations put their entire organizational development teams into these classes. These organizations wanted to utilize CPHR's independence and thought provocation as a way of addressing the issues they face within their own businesses. At this time, there are no plans for expanding these offerings into executive education, although the capacity is there with a sufficient breadth of material, according to Professor Sparrow.

Addressing the cross-disciplinary focus that CPHR was designed for, along with Professor Cary Cooper, Professor Sparrow has founded a journal entitled, *Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance*. It has an advisory board made up of a variety of academics representing a wide range of HR research centers and schools.³ The need for this journal was established based upon the findings from the initial two research phases of CPHR. While Professor Sparrow notes that there is always competition amongst other centers, he says there is an increasing understanding that there are many "The field is maturing, and getting to a stage where people can see a common purpose." - Professor Paul Sparrow

© AACSB International. All Rights Reserved.
common interests, fueling the creation of the journal. Tying together the findings from the many different HR centers can enable a more rapid ability to influence practice coming from common academics. When the journal was initially discussed, Professor Sparrow received offers of involvement from several major HR centers in the U.S., Europe, and Australia. According to Professor Sparrow, "The field is maturing, and getting to a stage where people can see a common purpose."

Both Timely and Relevant

The timeliness of the research being done is very important to CPHR. There is a need to get the research into the hands of the practitioners for implementation with relative haste, due to the nature of the rapidly changing environment. "In the world we’re living in now, organizations need there to be academically sound research, and for it to be significant, relevant, and time sensitive," comments Professor Sparrow. He continues, "It needs to be timely enough that they can choose to act upon it, which can be challenging with the lengthy validation process, along with academic approval and publication."

CPHR's focus on timely research is driven by a push to provide solutions while they are still applicable. As a demonstration of this, there was one retail organization that the Centre worked with which was studying the impact of employee attitudes on business performance. In working with them, CPHR found early on that employee attitude had a significant impact on the performance of their stores. The Chief Operating Officer, recognizing this, decided to send the organization's HR department to work with CPHR each year, focusing on HR strategy for improving attitude, and thus, performance. The Centre became a sounding board for them on areas of concern. Through this relationship, CPHR found that the age demographic of their stores also had a surprisingly significant impact on store performance. The organization began to shift resources and change their structural makeup in light of these findings. All of these discoveries and adjustments happened prior to any official publication.

In the United Kingdom, there is a new Research Excellence Framework (REF). REF will be replacing the current Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 2014. With REF, 20 percent of the evaluation will be based upon the impact on research. This impact is not limited to academic citations reflected in journals, but rather the user impact of research. Within a changing world, this impact has become a critical consideration and is one of the driving factors at the Centre. CPHR is results-driven, seeking to support businesses with timely data. One of the debates in the United Kingdom relates to this discussion of academic impact. On this, Professor Sparrow notes that, "when you have a centre operating [as CPHR does], you are able to think about impact in more useful and less traditional ways. You think about the papers being produced, and how people will adopt these ideas."

Professor Sparrow explains the center's focus on impactful research:

> We're in a world where there is more capability inside of organizations to develop their own research, with them able to access journals and other sources. They can produce knowledge as quickly as we can. If your research is going to have an impact, it needs to influence practice or policy before it gets published, or at least in parallel . . . There will be debate for the next five years about what we mean by impact. To me, that creates a positive opportunity for us as academics, to be able to demonstrate that we can not only do rigorous research, but that we can be extremely relevant.

Acknowledgements: AACSB International is grateful for the assistance of Professor Paul Sparrow, Director of the Centre for Performance-Led HR at Lancaster University Management School.
End Notes

1 Centre for Performance-Led HR. (n.d.). Retrieved 10/29/2012, from Lancaster University Management School: http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/research/centres/hr/remit/
3 Centre for Performance-Led HR. (n.d.). Retrieved 10/29/2012, from Lancaster University Management School: http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/research/centres/hr/JOE/