

Higher Education Human Resources Leader Aligns People and Institutional Goals

The Interview

We spoke with El pagnier “EK” Hudson, Senior Vice President of HR at Florida International University in Miami, Florida. FIU has been designated a Carnegie Very High Research Institution, the only public university in South Florida to achieve this distinction. It is also the No. 29 university in the nation and fourth-ranked public university, according to America’s Best Colleges 2024 rankings published by the *Wall Street Journal*. This institution of higher education boasts of over 300 academic associations, honor and professional societies, cultural organizations and interest groups, as well as a student body of 58,000.

With over 30 years of leadership experience in public-sector Human Resources, Hudson has reimaged and transformed FIU’s HR Team over the past several years. She oversees various areas including Talent Acquisition, Talent Development and Employee Relations, and is passionate about HR’s power and influence to chart strategic direction that impacts faculty, staff and students.

Current State

According to Hudson, the alignment between HR goals and the organization’s overall strategies plays a significant role. Throughout her career, she has intentionally positioned people’s goals to be in sync with the university’s initiatives.

“So that’s just been my personal practice — to ensure people goals and organizational goals line up. We always review the university’s strategic plan to identify the areas where our HR efforts support,” She also highlighted the crucial role of HR in certain strategic areas, such as assuring financial stewardship. “That’s people, that’s salaries, that is equity, that is operations.” This also serves to reinforce the notion that HR has a key role within the organizational structure.

Regarding the importance of data and analytics, Hudson emphasizes “We use analytics to see what we’re doing. How we’re doing. At the beginning, there was a great deal of hesitation and now it really is infused in everything that we do. Data analytics has become a culture. Data does indeed tell the story.”

Challenges

Many HR professionals are striving to become true business partners by understanding the business impact of their decisions. However, the challenge lies in transforming HR professionals, who are often non-business experts, into someone who comprehends the inner workings of a company and its revenue generation.

Working with a broad business strategy, fast growth complicates this transformation. For business leaders, this highlights the importance of aligning HR professionals with the organization's strategic objectives and fostering a more business-savvy HR function to drive success.

To help overcome these challenges, Hudson organizes an all-HR retreat focused on connecting the people and organizational strategies. It is a key tactic to ensure everyone on her team providing direction is clear and knowledgeable about the direction in which each team is heading. The entire HR team came together and various business leaders from Jazwares (a Florida-based toy manufacturer) presented their roles, functions, departments and most critical business needs. This experience provided a deep understanding of everything it takes to get a toy from idea to the shelf. "Everyone was able to understand how the business works, how things fit together and what success looks like to different stakeholders. It was eye-opening for everyone involved," Hudson said.

Complexities

Health and well-being have emerged as a required — not a preferred — part of the employee experience. "If our people are not well, physically and mentally, they are not going to optimize the skills they bring and therefore their work performance," Hudson said. Essentially, the well-being of employees directly impacts their productivity and performance, which in turn affects the organization's ability to achieve its goals.

Talent Management strategies and practices are more critical than ever. The pace of change is fast, and HR needs to adapt to this. It also means acknowledging the diversity of the workforce and the changing expectations of employees. There is often a critical gap in every HR team's capability.

Insights

1. **Align and Sync with Goals** — Alignment in HR means having people goals that are congruent with the organization’s strategy. Even in the world of higher education, change is taking place fast and furiously. “We’ve got to quickly optimize talent, build succession and benches earlier so we can maintain engagement or recreate our business model to rapid replacement because people are simply not staying as long as they used to,” Hudson said.
2. **Put Health and Well-being in Front** — Health and well-being should be an integral part of the strategic framework of HR, not just a peripheral benefit, but as a core aspect of the organization’s strategy. Focus and resources must be dedicated to expanding and strengthening this component of the employee experience. “People still need — and want — psychological safety. They still need to feel like they belong. They still need esteem,” Hudson said.
3. **Look Ahead** — Explore how top leadership can create synergy and integration among the different areas in HR. This can most certainly be facilitated by technology. Gaps in capability due to rapid and ongoing change should be identified and addressed in part by upskilling the team members. Along with nearly all other organizations today, exploring opportunities for automation based on the emergence of generative AI is also warranted.

- Matt Pittman, Principal HCM Analyst, Brandon Hall Group™

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