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A MODEL AND PROCESS FOR THE CERTIFIED ASSESSMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES SYSTEMS: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

The National Academy of Public Administration (the Academy) recently unveiled an innovative model for improving human resources systems at one of the nation's most prestigious and respected public universities, the University of California (the University). In a presentation at the July 2007 Board of Regents meeting, the Academy and the University of California reported on the success of their partnership in which they designed and tested an assessment and assurance system for the University's human resources operations.

At that meeting, Client Executive Randolph Scott underscored the University's need for high quality human resources (HR) policies and programs to support its world class academic and research operations. With support from the Academy, the University is accountable to the Board of Regents for ensuring that HR policy is applied appropriately and consistently throughout the ten campuses, five medical centers and two national laboratories that comprise the University system. To satisfy these needs, University leadership sought validated HR standards to measure and assess performance against standards, identify any remedial actions that may be required, and certify compliance.

No off-the-shelf HR standards or existing assessment models matched the University of California's requirements. Despite recent advances, "human resources" remains a relatively ill-defined practice, with little overall consensus on a universal set of standards against which HR can be measured. Moreover, while there are programs to certify individual HR professionals on the basis of their credentials or expertise, no program exists to certify HR systems as a whole. As a result, the University turned to the National Academy of Public Administration for assistance.

The Certified Assessment of Human Resources Systems (CAHRS) was developed to ensure that University human resources operations exhibit the same level of excellence that the University enjoys in its primary mission areas of education, medical care and research. Unlike the finance and information technology functions within an organization, there are no nationally recognized standards to which HR systems must adhere. The CAHRS model, with HR Standards that have been validated by the larger HR community, addresses a critical gap. Indeed, HR professionals involved in the design and test of CAHRS are beginning to ask whether it might provide a path off the high-risk list for government-wide strategic human capital.

The CAHRS model and process consists of five components:

- **Validated HR Standards** against which HR performance can be measured;
- **Readiness Review** to prepare an organization for Self-Assessment;
- **Self-Assessment** to formally compare HR operations to the Standards;
- **Peer Review** to ensure the integrity of the Self-Assessment by producing an independent expert Opinion on the extent to which the Standards have been met; and
- **Certification** which occurs when the Peer Review Opinion attests or certifies that an organization has successfully met all the Standards.



Figure 1

The Academy researched standards and measures suggested by the US Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), Malcolm Baldrige Award criteria and the Saratoga Institute. Input was obtained from University stakeholders, Academy Panel members and other Academy experts, academics, representatives of HR professional associations, such as the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) and the International Public Management Association for Human Resources (IPMA-HR). The Academy also consulted with practitioners and HR professionals from federal and state agencies, including the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) and the Commonwealth of Virginia, and non-profit organizations such as the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration and the Partnership for Public Service. Once identified, Standards were refined, validated and piloted through a year-long collaborative process.

The Standards balance both strategic and operational dimensions. They recognize that service delivery remains the threshold issue for establishing HR credibility. At the same time, they draw heavily from a strategic human resources management model that suggests the evolving role of the HR office is “to support the strategic mission of the organization by serving as full members of the management team and linking personnel and HR policy to agency mission, goals and policy.”¹ Throughout the development process, the study team met with University and other public sector managers to identify management challenges as they arose, and ensure appropriate alignment of HR Standards throughout the process. The resulting cross-cutting and functional Standards are the outcome of a rigorous effort to fully define the elements, attributes and indicators of performance of the complex and diverse HR practice within centralized and decentralized environments.

The *System-wide Management Standard* (see Figure 2) describes the elements, success attributes and indicators that comprise roles, responsibilities, policies and activities of the corporate level HR function. The *HR Strategic Management Standard* introduces the components of modern, strategic HR practices, which focuses senior leadership attention on managing important people resources associated with high performance organizations. The *Assurance and HR Operations Management Standard* describes the elements, success attributes and indicators for the HR role in compliance and the management of HR operations. The remaining Standards describe the elements, success attributes and indicators of basic HR service delivery, the threshold issue for establishing HR credibility. These functions include *Employment and Talent Management*, *Total Compensation and Benefits*, *Training and Development*, and *Work*

¹ Ban, Carolyn, “The Changing Role of the Human Resources Office”, Handbook of Human Resources Management in Government, Jossey-Bass, p.19.

Environment and Employee/Labor Relations. These four Standards are designed to enable specific outcomes measured by Location specific metrics.

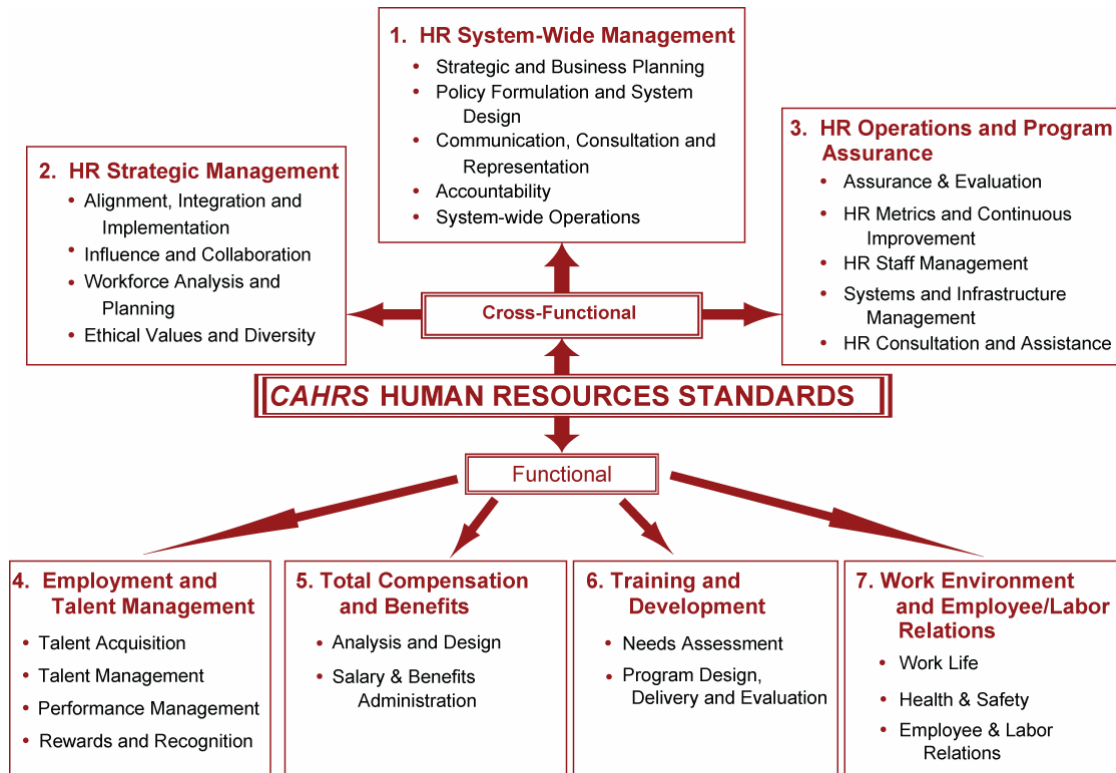


Figure 2

Several important aspects of CAHRS warrant emphasis:

- **CAHRS is a continuous improvement process.** CAHRS emphasizes remedial actions and improved performance, and it encourages corrective actions to the extent possible prior to moving forward. CAHRS is not a report card and it does not rank organizations or compare one to another. Instead, it helps an organization benchmark its own progress in achieving the quality HR operations set forth in the Standards.
- **CAHRS is flexible with benefits available at each stage.** An organization would not have to commit to the entire model in order to realize an improvement in HR performance. For example, the HR Standards alone could be very useful in guiding policy development, training, staffing and structure. Similarly, the Readiness Review and Self-Assessment can be powerful self-help activities to improve HR operations and provide enriching developmental experiences for those involved. Implementing the entire model through Peer Review and Certification offers external validation and expert advice and guidance.
- **CAHRS is designed to be transferable to organizations other than Universities.** Although there has been some customization for University use, the CAHRS Standards and process can be applied to other organizations, with relatively minor modification.

Over the course of the next year, the University of California will roll-out this model and process to additional campuses, bringing the total number of locations to twelve. The Academy plans to provide assistance and will serve as the Peer Reviewer and Certifying Body for University.

Academy Fellow, The Honorable David Walker, US Comptroller General served as a member of the Academy's University Study Panel. The Panel was chaired by Dr. Frank Thompson, Dean, Nelson A. Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, and Professor of Public Administration and Policy, Political Science and Public Health, State University of New York at Albany. Other panel members include: Dr. Edie Goldenberg; Curtis Smith; Dr. Joel Aberbach; and Dr. Jeff Pon, CHCO at the Department of Energy. Chris Mihm, Managing Director, Strategic Issues at the Government Accountability Office serves as a member of the Academy Board of Directors. The Academy/University report will be posted on the Academy's website on September 10, 2007. For more information, contact Alethea Long-Green, Director of Human Capital Programs at the National Academy of Public Administration at 202-204-3663.