

Human Resources Challenges on a Global Scale

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Mary Jane Peters, executive director, and Roger Eggleston, president emeritus, were at Wharton recently for the group's 7th annual conference. They talked with Knowledge@Wharton about their successes -- such as the introduction of paternity leave, a policy regarding sexual harassment, competency based assessment and flexible work practices -- as well as their major challenges, starting with the lack of qualified young people around the world to carry out the missions of AHRMIO's member organizations.

Knowledge@Wharton: Could we talk about AHRMIO [the Association for Human Resources Management in International Organizations]? What exactly is AHRMIO and how do you work with international organizations?

Eggleston: Let's talk a little bit about the history of AHRMIO. It was in 1996 when Mary Jane and I were running a conference of human resources specialists in mainly the United Nations group of organizations. We had this retreat and series of interactions with all of these people, and we said that this is the time when we should create some sort of learning institute. It would be where people who are working in human resources management, in international, not-for-profit organizations, could come together because they have some unique elements in their jobs which are not common outside the international organization arena. Just to name one: We are not subject to national legislation. So we are not impacted by matters that take place in any one country.

We said there are enough reasons to have what we called an "association" -- we dropped the name "institute." In 2000, we set up AHRMIO and it really took off, very well indeed. We have 57 member organizations now -- organizations that are members of AHRMIO. And we have over 200 individual members because we have both individual members and organizational members.

We have an annual conference, and that's why we're here at Wharton. It's our 7th Annual Conference. We have lots of developmental activities. The role of the association, in a nutshell, is to improve the professionalism of those who work in human resources management in international not-for-profit organizations.

Knowledge@Wharton: Can you give us some examples of the 57 member organizations?

Peters: Well, you have all of the United Nations family there, so you have the UN, UNICEF, UNDP, UNFPA, The World Health Organization, The International Labor Organization, The Food and Agricultural Organization -- the whole UN family, and that's about 29 entities.

In addition to that you have, I would say, all of the other leading international not-for-profit organizations. For example, The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which has its headquarters in Paris, The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, NATO is even there. We have the GAVI Alliance which carries out immunization programs throughout the world, the World Trade Organization, the World Bank...

Knowledge@Wharton: In other words, all of the big names.

Eggleston: If there is a lacuna, it's the NGOs, what we would call the non-governmental sector, but there are a few and we're hoping to get more. At this conference, we have the leaders of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent Societies, but we need a few more NGOs.

Knowledge@Wharton: It seems like quite an incredible group of organizations that you work with. In working with these groups, what have you found to be the biggest leadership and HR challenges that international organizations face?

Peters: Well, it's difficult to generalize across all 57 organizations. I can certainly address what I know best, given my past career, in terms of the United Nations family. From an historical perspective, many people who joined the organizations will soon be retiring. In some organizations, more than 50% of their professional staff will be leaving in the next three to five years. Yet I know that very few of them are doing any kind of serious succession planning.

So, this is a chance for all of your MBA students, because there will be a tremendous need to find talent. But then on the other side of that, of course, is keeping our institutional memory. For the missions of these organizations, that is vital. We cannot police the world, we do not police the world. We give knowledge to the world. And so, with all of the people marching out of the door, going to retire soon -- I think this is the biggest challenge for the leadership of the organizations.

I suspect that for many of the international organizations, that will be equally true, perhaps less so with some of the newer ones, such as the UN program on HIV Aids or the GAVI Alliance. These are very young institutions, and so the average age of their work forces tends to be much lower.

Eggleston: One of the challenges facing these organizations is that I don't think they have really appreciated that there is going to be a war for talent among the knowledge workers of the world. The UN family, and probably most of the international organizations that we are talking about, have had it easy, basically.

They had good brands, a really good brand image. People just applied to them for jobs. It was not too difficult to find good people, basically all around the world. But it will be much more difficult, and I'm not sure that they have professionalized their area of recruitment well enough to really know how to target and how to get the best people.

It's still very much, I won't say hit or miss, but they're very much... just waiting for people to apply and come on board. But you get all sorts of strange applications -- too many and not the right type.

Knowledge@Wharton: What should recruiters be looking for when they try to fill these jobs that are going to become vacant?

Peters: Well, I'm going to have to address one issue which is even written in the charter of the United Nations as well as the constitutions of most organizations -- the need for universality, what we would call geographic distribution. I think that our organizations have handled diversity from a nationality perspective very well.

However, for the future, this will become a far greater challenge because, as Roger said, while the brand was good for the first 60 years, now the same diversity is needed by a lot of other organizations, development aid agencies and the private sector. They want as diverse a workplace as we do. So, we are really all competing for the same talent among the knowledge workers. All of these groups have higher-level educational qualifications.

In many cases, these organizations would not take someone with less than a Master's Degree. Some of our economists or lawyers have PhDs from leading world institutions. They will be required to be linguistically flexible. They will have to be geographically mobile in most instances, and that is a challenge for all global employers, given the growing importance of dual careers.

That has been a challenge for the organizations up to now, especially vis-à-vis women, and I would say as far as gender balance, that's where the organizations have done less well than in terms of geography. But dual careers for the younger male will also be just as important. The world has changed.

Eggleston: We're going to have to think out of the box. Years ago, when I began my career in the World Health Organization, we did not employ spouses -- we called them "wives" in those days -- never mind partners. The organization was not allowed to employ the spouse of an employee. That of course has all changed, we've wiped all those silly rules away. But we're going to have to get with it as far as dual careers are concerned.

One of the things that we're just going to have to do is to team up with other people who have the same problem in the world. There are international corporations of all varieties and they all are facing the same problem. We have an enormous international workforce. We've really got an opportunity to team up with other corporations and organizations which are doing similar things.

Knowledge@Wharton: What would be the attraction of your organizations to someone who could probably make more money in the private sector?

Peters: There was some research recently produced by a group called The Future Work Forum. I'm seeing, at least from the research, some very surprising and lovely trends -- and that is that the younger generation is interested in international careers, they are interested in being mobile and in getting intrinsic worth from their job.

They're interested in doing good for the world. Well, if there are ever any organizations where you can do good... And, I'm happy to see, too, that MBA students are more and more interested. You know, in the past sometimes they just wanted to go out into the financial sector. I'm being approached by more and more MBA students in terms of how to work for a UN-type humanitarian organization.

These organizations are difficult to work for in some cases. I don't want to minimize this. If you work for the High Commission for Refugees, or for UNICEF, or for the World Food Program, you have to expect to be constantly mobile. And you may never work in your home country. You may sometimes be in places where your family can't be there because they're so dangerous. But I think that there is a growing number of people in our world who recognize the importance for the world, for their own families, of the missions of these organizations and are very attracted to them.

Knowledge@Wharton: Do you find that within the international organizations with which you work that there is recognition of the seriousness of this war for talent, or are they in denial?

Eggleston: I don't think that the large majority of organizations appreciate that this war for talent is coming. It's very difficult to talk to people, for example, in organizations and say that "There is going to be a war for talent." And they say, "No, no, no, we've got 20,000 applications from Bangladesh." Or, "We've got 2,000 applications." I mean, with every job, there are lots of people from India who will apply. No disrespect, but you know it happens -- it's the reality.

The bigger problem is sifting through those applications. But that's what I was trying to point to. The organizations haven't understood really what they're looking for. They're just receiving a lot of applications. So no, I don't think they've yet come to grips as much as they ought to with the need for understanding what the next workforce really will look like. It was very

easy in 1945 and 1955 and 1965. There were bright, bushy tailed young people rushing to join the United Nations system and all of the international organizations. But it isn't like that now, and it certainly will not be like that in the future.

Peters: Also, as far as pay trends that we see happening in the world, the organizations would admit, in most cases, that in western industrialized countries, it's gotten harder to recruit. Now what we see in terms of pay trends in Asia, in particular, but also in all of what are called the BRIC countries [Brazil, Russia, India and China], is that pay is rising so fast.

I know someone who worked for one of the international financial institutions and wanted to leave their headquarters in North America to return home to Brazil because pay was better in Brazil. There is a constraint to being a constant ex-patriot, and being away from your own professional, social and family ties back home. So sometimes people will not be attracted or will go back and we will not be able to retain that talent unless we address certain issues seriously.

Knowledge@Wharton: We've been talking in somewhat general terms, which is good. But can you give us specific examples, without naming names, of good and bad leadership in international organizations?

Eggleston: Certainly good leadership, and I suppose by implication bad leadership, yes. I think for me good leadership is leadership that has real integrity, real impartiality and can stand up under pressure to governmental influences. That is very difficult in an international political arena.

But I will give you one example which I witnessed, well even more than one, if you'd like. I worked for somebody in The World Health Organization. He's called Leo Caprio. He's dead and I don't think he would mind at all if I told you. I remember very well, this was that year when cholera broke out in Naples, in the 1970s. It's a famous case.

The Italian government denied that there was cholera but press reports were beginning to appear and we had information from the WHO that there was cholera. This is of course is serious for tourists and tourism and the whole economic spectrum. Leo Caprio said one Friday afternoon, I remember it very well, he talked to a group of us, and he said, "I am going to declare that there is cholera in Italy on Monday morning, or on Sunday night, if the Italian government doesn't do that, and I have told them so."

[He did this] despite the votes he would lose in his election as the chief [and the fact that] he would not be a popular person in Italy. Of course what happened was that the Italian government declared over the weekend that Naples had cholera. That [I think] is a good leader. There are fewer and fewer of those in my experience these days. There are more and more who are seeking the glamour and the hubris.

We have a hubris syndrome in leadership and in government. And we're seeing it in international government, if you like. I think the leaders of the countries that are best known to some of us are full of hubris. This is a serious problem for the future of the world, and it's certainly a serious problem for the organizations.

You don't feel that there is that commitment to the cause of the organization. There is a commitment to 'Me, I and how good and clever I am and how my story can be spun by spin doctors.'

Peters: I think that a clarification perhaps would be useful, because I know my own mother often didn't understand this. She would often say, "Well, are you representing our government in that organization?" I would say, "No, Mother, I'm an international civil servant." And that is at the heart of these organizations. We are there to serve the world community.

Yet we live in a political community around these organizations. There's always bound to be tension. You see it being played out every day in the UN General Assembly or in the UN Security Council. But this exists in all of these organizations, and the only moral authority these organizations can have vis-à-vis the world citizens is the extent to which the staff members are politically neutral, impartial and independent -- not taking instructions from any member country.

Eggleston: That is written into the constitutions of the organizations -- that the staff should be impartial and have integrity and so on. It was that [lack of impartiality] of course that brought down the League of Nations. If you look at the history of why the League of Nations did not succeed, it was because staff from the civil services were brought in from their member states -- and they represented their member states -- and that failed as a model. Our model has been working and, I pray, will continue to work. We must be very careful to make sure that we enshrine this impartiality and integrity into the staff that come in the near future.

Knowledge@Wharton: Roger, you mention integrity as a key component of leadership, and that's of course absolutely and universally true. But, based on what you just described as the nature of these organizations, what do you think are the qualities that a leader needs to succeed in these kinds of organizations? And how would they compare, for example, to the kind of qualities you might need to succeed in business or in a company?

Eggleston: That's a tough question, but I don't think that there's any difference. I don't think that leadership is divisible by functional area. I'm sure that the dean of an academic institution or the president of an academic institution and the CEO of a major corporation and the secretary general or director general of an international organization -- I'm sure the qualities that are required will be very much the same. It has something to do with being true to oneself.

Peters: I agree with Roger. We can look at Enron, for example, and at the economic and social impact of that company's failure which ... was due to issues of the values of the leadership.

I would say that in these international organizations, the repercussions for the world at large are far greater. It's humanity that is at stake. When we fail to do something about what's happening in Darfur quickly, if we cannot convince governments to deal with a problem as far as HIV AIDS, refugee issues -- when leadership fails there -- we fail the world community at large.

Knowledge@Wharton: Can you make any generalizations about either continents versus developing countries, or specific countries versus others, that are more receptive to these messages, to your efforts, etc.?

Peters: No, I think that it's general across all regions of the world.... There will be some people who have more of a professional calling, vocation, idealism, than others. But, that would be true in any society.

Eggleston: If you want a country that is doing the most about integrity, in its national civil service, it's probably South Africa. At the moment, for me, South Africa would be the example of where an awful lot is going on to bring integrity into the national civil service.

Knowledge@Wharton: We talked about the challenge that international organizations face and the fact that they're not always fully aware of the seriousness of the problems. What possible solutions would you suggest that might address those issues?

Peters: That's another hard question. And, it's difficult to generalize across 57 international not-for-profit organizations. But, I think there is one area, and it goes back to the tension that I spoke about a moment ago. When I speak to people, I think it is really important that citizens at large not leave these organizations solely in the hands of their governments. This is because the issue of the impartiality of the institution is the most serious.

I have witnessed, in over three decades of working for UN family organizations, the pressures that come sometimes from certain member states. Even when you are trying to put in competency-based assessment, a new code of conduct for the international civil service, things that would be often times normal in a national context -- sometimes these tend to be resisted by certain governments.

For them to not be suspicious of these things and see them as normal good business practice, I think that from a management perspective, I have seen that to be a tremendous challenge. This is leaving aside all of the political issues of the problematic areas of some of the organizations -- to send peace keepers into Darfur or not to send them, for example. Those are other issues. But, on the management side, I see those issues needing to be addressed urgently.

Eggleston: Governance is a very complex and interesting subject which one really could talk about for a very long time. The governance of the United Nations and specialist organizations is made up of people who are running those organizations in terms of member state representation. They usually come from foreign ministries, or if not foreign ministries, some ministry. They are not elected officials. They are civil servants of one form or another and I don't know if they do represent 'we the people' always. I have put myself in a lot of hot water with a number of delegates in the general assembly of the United Nations because I have said to them, "I'm not sure that you really represent the people of wherever it is you are coming from," which is not a thing you should say.

A number of the older organizations, those that were born after the Second World War, had built into their constitutions a very strong international secretariat. If you look at the organizational structure of the UN, you will see that there are five pillars. There is the General Assembly, The Security Council, The Economic and Social Council and something called The Trusteeship Council.

And the fifth pillar says Secretariat. That's probably fairly equal in power. The member states do not like that, they say, "We are in charge of the organization and you will do what we say." We've had a number of discussions on that subject, about that role.

Certainly, in the newer organizations -- those that have been set up in the last 10 years or so -- you will see a very different organizational diagram. This is where the member states sort of say, "You, Secretariat, sharpen the pencils and write the reports and we'll tell you what to do." That's a different relationship, and it's happened.

Peters: But I think that it's interesting and important to note that compared to a big private sector company, imagine 180 people on your board, from 180 different countries.

Eggleston: With 180 different views.

Knowledge@Wharton: Well, given the fact that the two of you, between yourselves, have several decades of experience in this area, what would you count as your biggest successes?

Eggleston: I was thinking of that earlier. This is because there is quite a lot of cynicism, and maybe healthy cynicism in these organizations. It is sometimes difficult to keep your enthusiasm going. But I think we were fortunate to always work in areas where we felt that we were really trying to do good things. We were not subject to a lot of pressure from hierarchy about these political things and so on. So we could really introduce some changes in small and in larger areas. That was really rewarding.

These were changes like paternity leave... And then, of course, starting AHRMIO meant that we exposed people whom we were working with to a much greater array of thought about what human resources management was in the year 2000 and after, and what it really meant to be worried/concerned about the management of human resources in organizations. As for success stories -- we've had one or two.

Peters: Oh yes. I recall addressing a group of MBA students at a business school in Europe recently. I was trying to compare us, based on my experience of working in these organizations, to the private sector. I think that for a younger person, there's a lot more scope to develop yourself and your job.

We have impossible mandates -- think about peace and social justice, for example -- and very, very limited budgets. So in the private sector -- this is a generalization -- jobs tend to be much more defined and closed. Whereas, I think for a bright young person, who has good thinking, learns quickly the context in which they are working -- I think that there is tremendous scope for them to enlarge their work.

I have advised them that you get there by understanding the context, being very patient and getting there by stealth. Roger and I, together, in the HR area, used a lot of patience and stealth. And at one time, when people in these organizations wouldn't even talk about sexual harassment, for example, we managed to get through back in the early 1990s. Considering the multi-cultural setting, this was not easy -- a policy on sexual harassment in the workplace.

We managed to introduce paternity leave, which is one full month for fathers. We managed to introduce competency based assessment. We managed to do a whole range of policies that were signed off by the executive heads, including the Secretary General, for flexible work place practices. So, I think that in many respects we've had some success stories. We've had failures too, but I never saw them as failures. I've said that the time is just not right.

Eggleston: They would just say, "Mary Jane, go back to your sandbox."

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