

What's new in HR? 8 observations from the 2019 SHRM Conference

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Nothing is better than the Society of Human Resource Management ([SHRM](#)) [annual conference](#) for getting immersed in the world of HR. Almost 20,000 HR professionals, consultants and vendors gather in celebration of all things HR. It is a bit like [Comic Con](#) but instead of tracks dedicated to things like anime, comics and gaming the focus is on diversity, hiring, employment law and other things that consume the attention of HR practitioners. Like Comic Con, there are also people in costume including someone in the SHRM vendor showroom dressed as a giant eyeball with legs. I have no idea what they were selling, but they did catch my attention. And there are few conferences that rival SHRM when it comes to collecting free pens, stress balls, USB chargers, playing cards and other logo swag.

In addition to the massive vendor floor, the conference features several keynote speakers and scores of smaller sessions. It is worth noting that a small session at SHRM has the same size audience that one might find in a keynote session for other HR conferences. There is no way one person can take in everything at SHRM, but here are a few observations I made while wandering through the labyrinth like Las Vegas Convention Center.

- **Inclusion means everyone.** A strong theme in the opening keynote and throughout the conference focused on expanding company outreach beyond traditional diversity categories of women and minorities to include other disenfranchised groups such as people with criminal records, disabilities, veterans, and older workers. The inclusion of older workers is a marked change from past HR conferences that talked a lot about Millennials and Digital Natives but paid little attention to the needs and concerns of Baby Boomer and Generation X workers.
- **Technology is everywhere and nowhere.** All the large vendors and most smaller vendors were selling some form of technology solution. Yet few conference sessions talked about use of technology in a substantive way. Many mentioned the impact of technology, but they rarely talked in detail about how the technology was being used. An optimistic view is HR professionals have become so comfortable with technology that it no longer warrants discussion. A pessimistic view might be that many HR professionals have yet to fully embrace the degree to which modern HR is dependent on being technologically adept.
- **Wellness is something of a “bright shiny object” within HR.** There was a stage in the showroom dedicated specifically to wellness, although there were no stages dedicated to other HR areas such as staffing or compensation. What this says to me is HR currently views wellbeing as something of a novelty. It tends to be treated as an extension of benefits management, or something done separately from the rest of HR's core areas. This is unfortunate. Supporting employee wellbeing is not about buying specialized apps. It is about rethinking how companies design jobs, manage employees, and reward leaders to ensure the culture of the company supports employee mental, physical, and financial health.
- **The performance management revolution is over, and now the real work begins.** Unlike previous conferences, the tone of the sessions on performance management did not involve attention seeking language about “killing”, “blowing up”, “eliminating” ratings or anything else. It was about building and developing more effective processes. It feels like we have gone through the storm of

the performance management revolution and come out on the other side with an understanding of what we need to do differently. Now the real work begins – doing it.

- **Compliance matters.** People often criticize the field of HR as being too focused on non-strategic, administrative issues. But given the mass of complex and convoluted labor and employment regulations this field has to deal with, it is somewhat amazing HR professionals are able to find time to be strategic at all. And the pace of regulatory change is only increasing. This means what was okay last year may not be okay now. Business leaders who complain about HR as being too bureaucratic should actually be thanking HR for protecting them and their company from legal action and public scandal. It is hard to be strategic if you are stuck in court.
- **Staffing is about designing the right jobs, not just finding the right candidates.** The traditional staffing model involves a three-step process: 1. Define the job. 2. Define the qualifications necessary to perform this job. 3. Find and select candidates who have the right qualifications to perform the job. This model is starting to be turned on its head due to the difficulty of finding skilled talent. The new model might be described as: 1. Identify people with skills and qualifications you want to bring into the company. 2. Create jobs that these people would be interested in doing. 3. Convince these people to accept these jobs. This approach can also include allowing existing employees to redesign or “craft” their own jobs. Many highly skilled people do not want to work in a job created by a company, they want to work in a job they created themselves.
- **External workers – the next frontier for HR.** There is growing awareness in the HR community toward the importance of external workers as companies increasingly relying on free-lance and contractor employees to perform core business operations. The cost of these contractors often represents a significant portion of a company’s total workforce spend. And many of these people are performing critical roles. It is common for contractors to perform external customer facing roles where they are viewed as company representatives, even though they are not actually on the company payroll. Yet many companies manage contractors through procurement or finance as though they were boxes of office supplies. Many HR departments remain reluctant to take a leadership role in ensuring external workers are hired, onboarded, developed and managed in a manner that supports the company’s values and business strategies. But this is likely to change.
- **Compensation is poised for significant change.** Some companies are exploring much different ways to compensate and reward employees. This includes creating customized pay structures tailored to individual employee preferences, providing real-time and continuous pay, and enabling employees to decide whether they would like to be compensated monetarily or receive benefits such as housing, transportation or other services. Currently, most companies still use pretty traditional pay processes. But due to advances in compensation and benefits technology it doesn’t have to stay that way, nor should it.

Those are some of the more significant impressions I had while attending SHRM. In addition to these broad trends, I saw scores of more focused solutions, ideas and concepts ranging from highly creative to highly questionable. A motto for many SHRM vendors might be “no niche is too small for a solution”. And a motto for many SHRM presenters might be “you can never have too many HR books”. And in case you are wondering, the SHRM conference did have an official motto: “Creating better workplaces.”