

The Uneasy Relationship Between HR Generalists and Staffing

What we need is the hiring manager, the HR generalist, and the staffing professional working together in an organized, aligned way.

By Ed Davis, Managing Director, Staffing, United Airlines

I'm probably going to break some dishes here and maybe even discuss a few taboo subjects that somehow never seem to reach the light of day. Despite all of our HR- and staffing-related publications, I have yet to see an article that addresses the often tense and troubled relationship that can exist between human resource generalists and the staffing department. Yet, if you get a group of staffing professionals together and raise this question, we can all easily describe some of those relationships that were either highly effective or incredibly dysfunctional. I suspect that our colleagues on the HR generalist side could also do the same. Why is that? What causes the separation that sometimes exists between staffing and generalists? Why is it we work so well with some HR Generalists and have a terrible time with others? What can we do to minimize the friction and maximize the collaboration?

Staffing as a Center of Expertise

Historically speaking, in most organizations, staffing was typically one of a handful of core competencies commonly possessed by human resource generalists. Frequently, in this “full-service model” generalists would support their internal clients in all aspects of HR which often included employee relations, training, staffing, compensation, etc. In the 1990s, this started to shift dramatically as HR (like other functions) became increasingly specialized. At many medium to large size companies, the theme of the day was (and largely still is) to create shared service organizations and centers of expertise (COE).

These COEs were created to provide specialized support that was scaleable, cost effective and capable of providing a higher level of increasingly complex functional support. At the same time, centralizing this work with functional experts

was often viewed as empowering for the HR generalist. It allowed the HR generalist to evolve their role to what was commonly referred to as a “Strategic Consultant or Strategic Partner” to the internal customer. For many (but not all) HR generalists, this ability to transform their role and put aside staffing was a plus.

Structurally, therefore, one could certainly argue that this COE model is the most popular and even the right model for most medium to large companies. Unfortunately, like most business change initiatives, the devil is indeed in the detail. So, let's examine why, what appears to make sense on the surface, often fails in practical implementation.

It's not surprising that we would have an elevated degree of frustration (and confrontation) when Staffing and HR generalists are not aligned on process, roles or accountabilities.

Role Clarity & Collaboration

In any type of COE model, it is very important to clearly define roles and responsibilities. We've all used various methods and tools to do this. Some of these include methods like: service level agreements; “RACI” charts to delineate who is “responsible, accountable, consulted and informed” for various processes; or process mapping, which is used to define activities and show “swim lanes” of accountability (see Figures 1 and 2). Still, it never seems to be quite that simple as just mapping out the roles and accountabilities. All too often, we tend to cross over those “swim lanes” and do a pretty good job of getting in each other's way. When this occurs it is to the detriment of our hiring managers. Figures 1, 2 and 3 provide examples of a RACI chart, SLA and Process Map.

One of my former bosses (an SVP of HR) once said to me that the problem in staffing is that “everyone thinks they are an expert.” This “expert syndrome” is often evidenced when either clients or HR Generalists try to micro-manage recruiting. In other instances, some generalists define their “strate-

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Scope of Services	Internal Customer Inputs	Staffing Service Commitment
Spec Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Insures headcount approval for requisition Provides basic job description Attends Spec Meeting for detail on role, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schedules spec meeting within 24 hours of requisition approval Conducts spec meeting within 48 hours of req approval Consults with hiring manager on profile, sourcing strategy, etc.
Screening Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Calibrates on resumes to insure proper profile Attends weekly update meeting with Recruiter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides 4-5 qualified candidates within 3 weeks of spec meeting Provides weekly status reports with candidate and search updates.

Figure 1: Sample Service Level Agreement

gic” role as being the broker (and deliverer) of all things HR for their internal client, and they try to set up a model where staffing works through them and does not have direct interaction with the client. These generalists may say things like “... You don’t need a specification meeting, I can tell you about the role.” Or they might say, “... This manager is really busy and they want me to handle this for them.”

Unfortunately, whether it’s an external search firm or an internal COE staffing team, it has been my experience that neither of these approaches is effective in delivering the best staffing outcomes. The fact is for the HR generalist, if they micro-manage staffing, they risk minimizing their role as a strategic consultant to their internal client. In addition, if they’re acting as the intermediary between staffing and the internal client, they are sub-optimizing the staffing process while concurrently diminishing the effectiveness of both the Staffing COE and the HR generalist. Communication always works best if it’s direct and not filtered through other parties. This is something executive search firms learned long ago and explains why they would never agree to a structure that would not allow direct contact with the hiring executive.

In the graphic in Figure 4, I’ve tried to illustrate what I call the “HR Collaboration Model.” In the first example, you see the “Broker” method with the HR partner as intermediary between staffing and the client. In the second example, you see the collaborative model with both the HR partner and the Staffing COE providing support to a hiring manager. The collaborative model works best for several reasons:

1. Inherent in this model are clearly defined roles. For the HR generalist, the collaborative model is empowering because they do not have to worry

about monitoring or delivering staffing services since this is the responsibility of the COE. Instead, the HR Partner can provide strategic support to the hiring manager in organizational design, planning, or in clearly defining the position to be filled. This in turn helps the Staffing COE ensure that we have the perspective and upfront planning that we need to efficiently recruit the right talent.

2. For Staffing, we’re given direct access to both the hiring manager (critical for staffing success) and we also can engage with the HR partner who often knows more about the business than a COE will, given the generalist’s day-to-day role in working with the business. In addition, the HR generalist is often key in helping remove organizational barriers or resolving other issues such as compensation that could derail the recruiting effort.

3. For the hiring manager, in this model, they are a key enabler of staffing while also benefiting from the support of both the HR generalist and Staffing COE.

This really is when staffing works best! I call it the “Power of 3”—an engaged hiring manager supported by a well-aligned HR generalist and Staffing professional, all with clear roles and unique expertise to support the staffing process. We’ll talk more about this later.

The Process/Service Continuum

I would suggest that part of the friction between HR generalists and Staffing occurs whenever either party takes an extreme position in what I call the “process/service continuum.” Some generalists seem to adopt a position that says, “I’ll do whatever my client needs (regardless of process) because that’s my role.” Meanwhile, their staffing counterparts can sometimes be equally inflexible by being overly process

Step	Task	Staffing	Hiring Mgr	HR Gen
1	Create Requisition	R	A	I
2	Conduct Specification Meeting	R	A	C
3	Develop & Create new positions	I	R	A

R = Responsible A = Accountable C = Consulted I = Informed

Figure 2: Sample “RACI” Chart

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driven in a way that directly or indirectly communicates “... regardless of what our shared internal client needs, we follow the process.” All of this is exacerbated when you have the COE (by definition) somewhat removed from the client and the generalist (by nature of their role) more closely aligned with the client.

Of course, neither position is right. You can’t say either “my client right or wrong” or “my process right or wrong.” If you’re a generalist, you need to know when to consult or even disagree with your internal client. If you’re a COE, knowing when to deviate from process is every bit as important as having a process in the first place!

Contracting, Structure & Communications

Like any relationship, Staffing COE and HR generalists cannot work well together without a basic foundation of “mutual trust.” In staffing, building this trust is even more critical than for other HR COEs. If you think about the nature of staffing, it is an ongoing need and, as staffing professionals, we are always in the back pocket of both our internal clients and their associated HR generalists. Whether it’s internal or external recruiting, staffing is a constant and when there are open positions, it’s usually a top priority for our hiring managers. By comparison, training is often more of an “event” that occurs when a specific need arises. Likewise, Compensation (aside from promotional increases) tends to be cyclical and is driven by pay cycles, bonus cycles, and performance review periods. Only in staffing do you have ongoing, critical, and complex business needs that necessitate the HR generalist, Staffing COE and hiring manager to work together effectively on a highly iterative basis.

Given this landscape, it’s not surprising that we would have an elevated degree of frustration (and confrontation) when Staffing and HR generalists are not aligned or don’t trust each other to deliver on business needs. The following are ideas

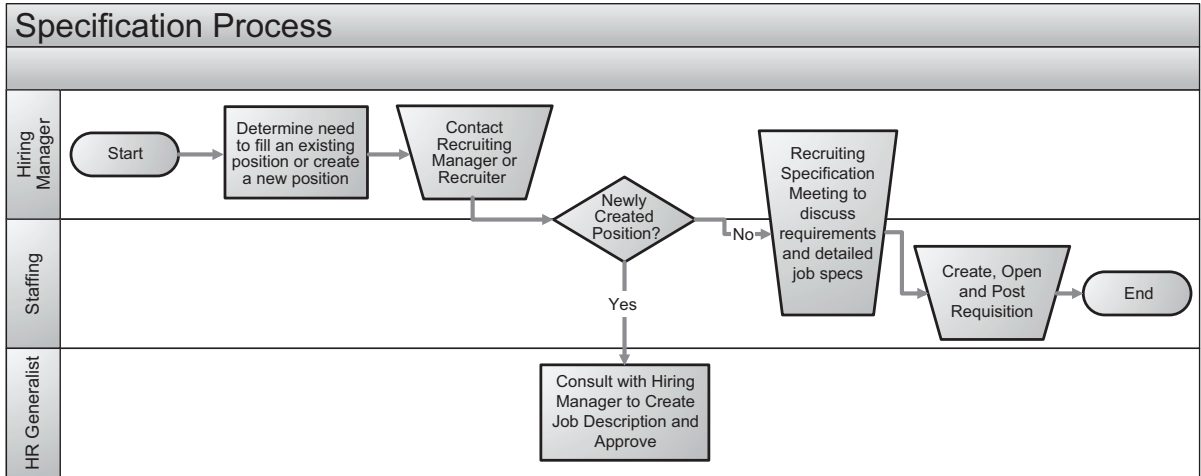


Figure 3: Sample Process Map

as to how we can better contract with our HR generalist partners, structure our staffing departments, and communicate in a way that will facilitate that trust.

Contracting

The Staffing COE can build trust with both the generalist and the hiring manager by demonstrating a high degree of service orientation, effective execution on the recruiting need, and over-communication on results (both positive and negative). In addition, COEs may never know the business as well as the HR generalist, but the more you understand the specific positions and the business the more trust that will engender too.

The HR generalist can build trust with the COE by helping them learn the business, helping them build key internal client relationships, and helping them remove roadblocks that impede their ability to execute on the search assignment. In addition, the simple act of empowering and trusting the COE to deliver in itself begins to create a bond of trust.

Structure

The key to structure is to embed your recruiters into the business or function as much as your organization will allow. This means that if your recruiting department is structured functionally or by business unit make sure they are aligned through process with the COE, but in their day-to-day work ensure that they are strongly embedded with the function or business they support. Wherever possible, I prefer to have my recruiting team member’s work in close geographic proximity to the internal client. In addition, I want

A NEW MODEL

them to attend my staff meetings but also attend the meetings of their internal client or HR generalist. This serves several purposes. It helps them become an extension of both the client and the HR generalists' team. It also builds their knowledge of the business, builds relationships with the client groups, and it builds the long-term trust that comes only through time, familiarity and shared experience. Finally, also make sure your structure is flexible enough to accommodate peaks in recruiting needs. This means you have other internal recruiters to deploy or use contractors and/or RPOs to ensure that you provide consistent service when staffing requirements spike.

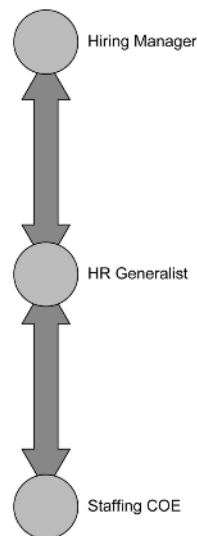
Communications

Ultimately, the HR generalist is the person who most directly and holistically owns the internal client relationship. This means that if the Staffing COE is going to interact frequently with the internal client (as we do), we must also be highly sensitive to over communicating with the HR generalist on any issues or problems that arise. In addition, its incumbent upon us to keep the HR generalist well informed of key recruiting results.

In a similar fashion, the HR generalist needs to keep their recruiting counterpart advised of any significant business developments that could impact our work and help us engage with the business so we can keep abreast of the business strategy and direction. Probably the biggest complaint I have heard from HR generalists is that recruiters don't know enough about the business. In these situations, the HR generalist can often provide the solution to this issue by facilitating the Staffing person's attendance at key meetings or conferences where they can learn and keep abreast of the business.

Finally, to build long-term trust, communications need to occur regularly and when problems occur they need to be quickly elevated and discussed. From this perspective, the Staffing COE should ensure that there is a structure for both regular reports, regularly scheduled meetings, and an environment where candid communication occurs between

Broker Method



Collaboration Model

Figure 4: HR Collaboration Model

staffing, the hiring executive and the HR generalist. This is also why the initial intake meeting with the hiring executive is critical. It helps lay the foundation for credibility, defined mutual expectations, and planning on any problems that are likely to occur.

The Power of “3”

I've come to believe that the fundamental reason Human Resources exists can be summarized in one word ... talent. Everything we do really is about recruiting, retaining, or developing talent. Whether it's our total reward system, our training infrastructure, or our organization development processes they're really here (and, as a function, we're really here) to help our companies succeed through talent.

I've written a lot in this article about the differences between staffing and generalists but, of course, to our internal clients, we are all Human Resources. They don't have the perspective of separation or functional silos that we sometimes hold. If staffing fails, then HR is failing; if the HR generalist does a bad job delivering for their internal client then the chances are the entire HR function will not enjoy a good reputation. We succeed or we fail as a team, yet all too often we throw each other under the bus to our collective detriment.

When we work together as a team, the upside, however, is equally promising. Like most business issues, most staffing issues are usually not one-dimensional. Anytime I've encoun-

A NEW MODEL

tered a significant staffing-related problem, there is almost always a combination of factors involved. These problems might include external factors (compensation or availability of talent), internal factors (unaligned leadership, poor training or issues of pay equity), or process factors (unclear hiring profile, deficient sourcing strategy or poor selection methods). The fact is that usually staffing alone cannot solve these problems. We really do need an engaged hiring manager and a strong HR generalist partner to help us overcome the everyday problems and systemic issues we face

in staffing. Without this teamwork, staffing is a very frustrating profession with little chance of success. On the other hand, with this teamwork and collaboration there are very few (if any) staffing obstacles that cannot be overcome.

That really is the “Power of 3.” It is the hiring manager, the HR generalist, and the staffing professional working together in an organized, aligned way to succeed in recruiting the best talent. It is the type of teamwork that can make us a lot more effective and, while we’re doing it, we can have a lot more fun along the way.



Ed Davis has been a leader in the staffing field for more than 25 years. Davis is currently managing director of staffing with United Airlines. Prior to joining United, Davis was vice president of staffing with ConAgra Foods and R.R. Donnelley. Throughout his career, Davis has created enterprise-wide recruiting processes, systems, and organizations at large corporations. He is a frequent guest speaker at industry conferences and he was recognized as “Staffing Professional of the Year” by the Staffing Management Association of Chicago in 2006.

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