Rebecca Ranninger, EVP and Chief HR Officer, Symantec Corp.

No Longer “Personnel”
HR goes from an administrative to strategic function

The HR function had much different connotations when Rebecca Ranninger was charged to lead Symantec’s HR department in 1997 than it does today. “There is a reason that it is no longer called ‘personnel’ but rather ‘human resource management,’” observes Ranninger, who serves as Symantec’s executive vice president and chief human resources officer. “Back then, it was about personnel management, and was more of an administrative function. “Today, it is human capital management and it functions as a strategic, executive-table role.”

Change can also be ascribed to Symantec during Ranninger’s tenure. When she joined Symantec in 1991, the company looked much different than what it looks like today. “As an example, we had 700 employees in total, and this included the three that managed our entire European operations,” she notes. “The Internet was still on the horizon. Symantec’s business model was dramatically different. Our technology portfolio resembled nothing of what it looks like now.”

With these two transformative changes in purview, Ranninger possesses a unique perspective, recognizing the value HR can deliver back to the business. She is a member of the executive staff and manages the company’s worldwide human resources organization. It serves all employees in the areas of human resource services, compensation, benefits, organizational development, training, compliance, recruiting, staffing, and all other areas of human capital management. As the HR function at Symantec has become more strategic, Ranninger has transformed her organization into an integral steward and manager of the company’s human capital.

CIO Digest recently spoke with Ranninger about her career at Symantec, how the changes in the HR function have impacted the company, her team’s adoption of cloud technologies to address HR requirements, her leadership recommendations to CIOs, and more.

PATRICK: You joined Symantec in 1991. What was the company like and what was your role?

BECKY: Symantec is a much different place than it was in 1991. Just think about it for a second: this was before corporations had email and Internet access. Symantec was focused on a completely different business model than the one we have today. The legal department consisted of the general counsel and me. I took care of everything related to software development and international issues. The general counsel took care of sales and marketing.

PATRICK: You took over the helm of the HR department in 1997. The HR function is without a doubt much different today than it was 15 years ago. What has changed?

BECKY: HR has gone from an administrative function to a guardian of our human resources in the same way that finance manages our financial resources. The brainpower and abilities of our employees are our greatest asset and warrant careful management and stewardship. There is a reason HR is no longer called “personnel” but rather “human resource management.” It is a different function.
PATRICK: You’ve had the opportunity to work at Symantec under the direction of the company’s three CEOs—Gordon Eubanks, John Thompson, and now Enrique Salem. What’s this experience been like?

BECKY: It’s been an interesting journey. I’ve given this some thought and believe that CEOs come to companies at times when their particular set of talents is exactly what that company needs.

Gordon Eubanks was entrepreneurial and a technologist at heart. A former Navy SEAL and submarine commander, he believed that leaders should know how to do everyone’s job better than each employee. If I were to coin a motto for the company during this period, to steal from the movie “Field of Dreams,” it would be “Build the coolest technology and they will buy it.” This worked very well during Symantec’s earlier...
years. The company was rapidly growing when John Thompson stepped into the CEO role in 1997. He brought a relentless focus on the customer and on sales. Under Gordon, the company was organized into technology groups. John realigned the organization according to customer groupings such as enterprise and consumer. Enrique brought more focus on pay-for-performance and measuring results, including the introduction of Victory Plans that cascade down to individual contributors.

All of these changes were exactly what the company needed at the time, and we were lucky enough to have the right CEOs in place who were able to make these changes.

PATRICK: Your team has been very involved in adopting cloud solutions for HR. What is the rationale for moving to the cloud?

BECKY: We’ve implemented a handful of cloud solutions over the past several years. We use Workday for human capital management, Kenexa to manage the hiring process, Globoforce for our employee recognition, and Avature for talent acquisition and management. You don’t move to the cloud simply because it is a fun thing to do. There’s a whole list of reasons for doing so. Foremost is cost. The second is that cloud solutions are less resource intensive and hopefully more reliable. All of us, including HR, have a responsibility to streamline operations as much as possible. Every dollar saved on headcount or through improved productivity can be used to develop new products and businesses and to enhance existing technologies. Finally, the reality is that the cloud is very much the direction of our business. It is really a concerted effort to have the same philosophy for customers as we do inside the company.

PATRICK: Workday has probably been your largest cloud solution to date. Why did you choose to move to Workday and what was that process like?

BECKY: The decision to move our human resource capital management functions to Workday arose because our Oracle PeopleSoft HR solution was in need of an upgrade. Substantial cost and resource requirements were involved. We looked at our options and determined that the cloud was cheaper and more efficient. For the implementation, we worked closely with our business partners—specifically IT, Finance, and Legal. Legal had huge involvement because of the privacy and other issues that are involved when dealing with confidential employee information. IT played a critical role from start to finish, helping us to pinpoint technology requirements and working with us to map out the financial investments. We discussed the project for about two years, and then it took nine months from the decision to roll it out to the actual go-live date in March.
PATRICK: If you were to speak with CIOs who are working with their HR teams to implement a cloud solution, what recommendations would you give them?

BECKY: Two things come immediately to mind. First, you must sort through the issues of employee data privacy. The global nature of today’s economy coupled with different data privacy regulations between countries and regions makes this a fairly complicated issue. CIOs need to engage their legal counterparts early and often. Second, the cloud solution must deliver business value. It needs to be cost-effective. This means that the solution must be ready to use out of the box; the more customization that needs to be done, the greater the cost. And it isn’t just the up-front time required for customization but ongoing maintenance and training.

PATRICK: Your team rolled out an employee recognition program called Applause Awards several years ago. What is it about?

BECKY: We are very proud of our Applause Award program. We’re one of a handful of large enterprises with an employee recognition program that allows any employee to recognize another employee with a monetary award. The solution is cloud based. The program was designed with the intent of allowing employees to thank, recognize, and award other employees at the time when the event occurs. We permit everything from small awards of $25 to large awards of $1,000; the system is very flexible.

PATRICK: What are some of your team’s key accomplishments over the past few years?

BECKY: The HR team plays a much more strategic role today than we used to. The first would be the work we’ve done around our mergers and acquisitions. HR is what I describe as the “cultural glue” for bringing onboard the employees of the companies we acquire. We’ve instituted a number of standard operating procedures that help them integrate into the Symantec culture. This is a substantial undertaking. Over the past five years alone, we’ve helped onboard over 10,000 employees. The second is the transformation around measurements and pay-for-performance that Enrique has instituted. Having employees who try their best is great. But what really matters is results. HR has been pivotal in changing the mindset through training and performance reviews and development plans.

PATRICK: If you were to speak with a group of CIOs, what recommendations would you give them from the perspective of human resource management?

BECKY: First of all, I think CIOs have one of the hardest jobs in the world. And it gets more complex every day. This relates to my first suggestion: manage complexity by always trying to simplify. Come up with simple solutions for complex problems. Another recommendation involves communications with the general employee population. CIOs and their teams deal with incredibly multifaceted issues. However, at the end of the day, it is critical that they communicate clearly and always provide the business rationale for an IT decision. As an example, don’t simply tell employees that they cannot use a peer-to-peer sharing network but communicate why.

Patrick E. Spencer (Ph.D.) is the editor in chief and publisher for CIO Digest and senior director of Symantec’s Customer Relationship and Publishing Programs.

READING INSIGHTS

Ranninger finds the insights that she extrapolates from her book reading invigorating, regularly applying them professionally and personally. She cites three books that have had the most impact on her in recent years:

Patrick Lencioni
The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable
(San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002)

“I had one of those ‘light bulb’ moments, realizing that the team to which you owe your allegiance is the team you’re a member of and not the team you lead. So, as an example, when I am at an executive staff meeting, I do not look around the room and think about how I can maximize the benefit for HR. Rather, I look around the room and ask, ‘How do I maximize the value of HR for this group? How do I make sure that HR is doing the best that it can for the good of this overall team?’”

Jack Welch with Suzy Welch
Winning

“It is not an accident that he discusses how important it was for him when he was leading GE to have the HR executive and finance executive on his right and left hand sides. The magnitude of melding the two worlds of finance resources and human resources should not be lost on any executive.”

Michael Carroll
Awake at Work: 35 Practical Buddhist Principles for Discovering Clarity and Balance in the Midst of Work’s Chaos
(Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc.: 2004)

“Despite the title of this book, the subject matter is not religious. Its main premise is that the common hassles and anxieties of the workplace can be turned into valuable opportunities for heightened wisdom and awareness. An extension of this overarching theme is that before you get upset with your colleagues at work, you need to put yourself in their shoes.”