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## When optimists attack ...

David Murray

*Fast Company's story "Why We Hate HR" is a classic hatchet-job; but that doesn't mean it's inaccurate*

**We were surprised when *Fast Company* magazine continued to publish after the dot-com bust and the death of the fanciful notion of the New Economy.** But like cockroaches, optimists are hard to kill, and apparently enough *FC* readers continue to believe in the magazine's premise that business should be fun, giant companies can be nimble and multimillionaire CEOs can be inspiring.

We're glad the optimists are still out there. But now they're really getting *out there*. An August *Fast Company* cover story now would have you believe that human resources can and should be a flexible, exciting and creative department that focuses on, in the words of *FC* Writer (and Deputy Editor) Keith Hammonds: "the more important strategic role of raising the reputational and intellectual capital of the company ..."

The piece is long on bombastic pronouncements like the opening lines: "Well, here's a rockin' party: a gathering of several hundred midlevel human-resources executives in Las Vegas. (Yo, Wayne Newton! How's the 401(k)?) They are here, ensconced for two days at faux-glam Caesars Palace, to confer on 'strategic HR leadership,' a conceit that sounds, to the lay observer, at once frightening and self-contradictory. If not plain laughable."

(Full disclosure—David Murray, the author of this piece, helped plan this conference for M. Lee Smith Publishing.)

We don't think anybody is scared by the conference title even if some are laughing at it. HR people are like communicators; at conferences, they like to talk big. After all, who wants to come to a conference called, "Tiny Steps for Tiny Feet: How Mid-Level Bureaucrats Can Continue Making Incremental Progress in the New Economy."

To use a conference title and a few windy pronouncements at the conference as a jump-off point for a salvo against a profession is easy—we know, we've done it ourselves—and it's also intellectually shallow.

And while Hammonds and his sources are long on criticism of HR—HR people are "not the sharpest tacks in the box," HR is more focused on efficiency than value, too focused on "administrivia" and following employment laws—they are short on recommendations for exactly how a central staff function will find the very best people from the dozens of highly specialized fields that contribute to any corporation's "reputational and intellectual capital."

Some HR people have taken umbrage at the article. A contributor to an online forum at [www.hrhero.com](http://www.hrhero.com) attacked Hammonds (and revealed a common HR attitude toward communicators) by pegging the writer as "probably a guy who struggled through numerous interviews, attempting to market a basically useless journalism degree. He blames his lot in life on the HR professionals who interviewed him in all those failed attempts. He's transferred his feelings of dismal impotence to those he revealed it to, or better yet, to those who pulled it from him while he slouched through interviews. But, it's OK. We frequently know that happens in our roles. He probably wrote a similar article about psychologists."

(And as if to prove he is an HR pro, he included this disclaimer: "This message is not intended to offend or attack. It is posted as personal opinion. If you find yourself offended or uncomfortable, e-mail me and let me know why.")

Other HR pros took the criticism more to heart. Benefits communication consultant **Dennis Ackley** agrees with *Fast Company's* conclusions to the extent that, as he says, "I think time is running out for HR reps and communicators who are not good business people."

In an e-mail to *RR*, **Ackley** continues: **Financial people deal with many laws and lawsuits. They don't hide behind them. They figure out how to work with them and get the organization moving on the defined course. HR and communication pros must do the same.**

**For example, communicators cannot take the indecipherable words the company attorney wrote about a benefit change and distribute them to employees. That's rarely the best way to demonstrate the organizations' people values. And it proves that the communicator doesn't have an important role in the business. The communicator's job is to make sure all employee communication is done well and reflects the organization's values. If poorly done communication goes out to employees, it's the communicator's fault. Period. If bad HR is done, it's the HR leader's fault. Take responsibility by showing the value you add, or resign. Your job is defined by what you influence. If you cannot influence the employee communication, you aren't really the company employee communicator.**

**[HR people and employee communicators] must figure out how to make a positive impact on the business in spite of all the crap. If they cannot, senior management, if they are any good, will get someone who can use people or communication skills to improve the ability of the work force to more productively achieve the business goals.**

Sure it's a hatchet job: But is it right in what it says about HR (and would it be right if it said some of the same things about employee communication)?