



Wisconsin Center for
Education Research
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

Current State Assessment of Human Resources

REPORT OF FINDINGS
June 22, 2021

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

THE ORGANIZATION

Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER or the Center) was established in August of 1964 by a signed agreement between the U.S. Office of Education and the University of Wisconsin and its School of Education. As one of the first education research centers in the world, the Center is an incubator for advances in education policy and practice. It provides services and resources for UW–Madison researchers, graduate students and their collaborators, as well as educators, funders and communities locally and around the world. Today, WCER receives about \$60 million in grant funds and service fees annually. It manages submissions, awards, staff, facilities and also revenues earned for fee-based services among its 140 educational projects. It employs approximately 500 people and provides products and services to educators globally.

WCER's mission is to improve educational outcomes for diverse student populations, impact education practice positively and foster collaborations among academic disciplines and practitioners. The values that the work and people of WCER strive to uphold are:

- Innovation and Excellence
- Equitable Education
- Affirming and Increasing Diversity
- Healthy Workplace
- Partnering Across Differences

(Above information adapted from WCER's website.)

THE PROJECT REQUEST

The Director and Deputy Director of WCER met with Jim Gray, former employee of UW-Madison and current consultant, to discuss his interest and ability to assess the HR services in WCER, with the goal to identify how human resource services could be **streamlined** and **strengthened**. Jim

was offered a fixed-term terminal appointment from April to June 2021. This report describes the methodology used to assess HR services, key interview responses, overall findings, and key recommendations.

REPORT CONTENT

This report is divided into two sections:

Section 1: Findings: A finding is a major conclusion based on the data collected. Findings integrate and synthesize the information collected, overlay these with interviewer/consultant observations and interpretations, and highlight critical issues that set the stage for recommendations.

Section 2: Preliminary Recommendations: Preliminary recommendations help focus the review and discussion of the report and assist with decision-making that will inform next steps.

METHODOLOGY

To complete the assessment, two key tasks were completed:

1. Relevant information about WCER and its HR services was reviewed
2. Fourteen individual representing HR staff, partners, and stakeholders participated in the assessment. Twelve participated in Interviews that lasted between 45-60 minutes. Two individuals responded to in writing because of scheduling conflicts.

Key interview questions included, but were not limited to:

FOR THE HR STAFF

- With whom do you interact to perform your current job; how would you describe these interactions?
- What three or four words would you use to describe what it is like to work in WCER HR?
- What do you like most and least about your job?
- What HR related skills and talents do you have that are not currently being fully utilized?
- What career goals do you have for yourself as you think about the next 3-5 years?
- What do you see as strengths and weaknesses of the Human Resource services in WCER?

FOR THE DIRECTOR OF WCER HR

- How would you describe what it is like to work in WCER as the Director of HR?
- How has WCER HR changed in the past five years?
- What do you see as strengths and weaknesses of the Human Resource services in WCER?
- What vision/hopes do you have for HR services during the next 3 years?
- What challenges do you believe WCER HR will face in the next 3 years?
- What can be done to strengthen WCER HR?

FOR PARTNERS AND STAKEHOLDERS OF WCER HR

(Note: Some questions were not relevant for some individuals given their organizational role.)

- How do you interact with WCER HR? How would you describe the quality of these interactions?
- What do you see as strengths and weaknesses of the Human Resource services in WCER?
- What do you see as opportunities not addressed currently by WCER HR?
- In what ways does the WCER HR team need to grow and develop to keep pace with the Division and institutional challenges?
- What can be done to strengthen HR in WCER?

FOR THE ASSISTANT DEAN FOR HUMAN RESOURCES, SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

- What is the role of the WCER HR Team? How do you see their role vis-à-vis the SOE HR team? To what extent is the relationship working? How might it be enhanced, improved, or expanded?
- What do you see as key strengths and weaknesses of the Human Resource Services in WCER?
- Is there a role of the Division HR office to support the growth and capacity of the WCER HR team? If so, what might this support look like?
- What challenges do you believe WCER HR will face in the next 3 years? What can be done to strengthen WCER HR?

SECTION 1: KEY FINDINGS

Findings are major conclusions based on the data collected from individual interviews, written responses to interview questions, and documents reviewed. They integrate and synthesize the information collected, overlay these with interviewer/consultant observations and interpretations, and highlight critical issues that set the state for recommendations.

1. HR Team members are viewed individually as personable, helpful, and committed.

Almost all the individuals who participated in the assessment were very positive when they described the personality and commitment of HR team members. Partners and external stakeholders noted that their interactions with team members are excellent and focused on customer service and supporting employees. These attributes are consistent with how HR team members describe themselves.

2. While individually personable, helpful, and committed, the HR team is seen as very busy and spend most of their time in “transaction-oriented” tasks.

Almost all respondents, including HR Team members, use “very busy” and “transaction-oriented” to describe the HR Team. Others similar words used to describe the HR team include “process-oriented and not strategic.” For most respondents, this description was not meant to be pejorative, but rather their honest assessment of the current state of WCER human resource services.

3. The structure of human resources at UW-Madison dictates the type of human resource services are provided at the local level.

UW-Madison has a “central” Office of Human Resources. Policy and its implementation are determined at this level and communicated out to schools, colleges, and divisions, who have to manage the implementation and impact of these policies. This is an important consideration when trying to understand why WCER Human Resources are “transaction-oriented.”

4. Local expectations and the degree of support provided also determine what HR services are provided at the local level.

“You get what you expect and pay for” is one simple way to understand why any business unit performs the way it does.

Traditionally human resource departments at colleges and universities have been a lower priority for assigning financial and staff resources. The net effect of this is that the type of work done in HR organizations is primarily related to hiring, compensation, and benefits management. Yet, as human resource management has become more critical to the success of organizations, many human resource departments are pulled in several directions, not completely satisfying their constituents.

Stakeholders, Partners, and the HR Team itself have clear expectations of WCER Human Resource Services that are not achievable given the current staffing and competencies of the team.

Most everyone is frustrated with the current transactional nature of WCER HR. This is because they have expectations of what is being missed or lost because of this focus. These expectations include:

- More strategic recruitment and hiring, including students and staff from groups that have been traditionally underrepresented
- Onboarding of new staff
- Training and development of employees, including supervisors and managers
- Better engagement and retention of staff
- Quicker and more efficient handling of the transactions that do occur through better use of technology
- Assistance with career growth and development of staff
- Staff outreach and information sharing about policies and practices
- Better employee relations support
- Recognition and reward programs and processes

These expectations are in line with what high performing organizations want (and get) from their HR department.

WCER needs to clearly define and communicate its expectations of HR and provide the necessary financial and human resources that will allow it to achieve those expectations.

5. The change initiatives that UW-Madison are undertaking will continue to have an impact on the performance of WCER Human Resources.

U-W Madison is undertaking (and in the middle of) of several initiatives that will have a dramatic impact on human resource services throughout campus. These include staff and students returning to campus from virtual learning and working, Title and Total Compensation Project, shift to bi-weekly payroll for all staff, and Administrative Transformation Program (ATP).

In addition to local implementation of the change that these efforts will necessitate, WCER Human Resources will also have to respond to change efforts within WCER. One of these currently in process is staff layoffs.

These changes are a key consideration in how quickly the Human Resource services in WCER can be reimagined and reinvented.

6. Any changes that would streamline and strengthened current WCER HR services will not come quickly or without considerable investment.

A key goal of this assessment was to determine how to streamline and strengthen WCER HR services. This will not come quickly or cheaply. Given the changes going on currently within the University and within WCER and given the current staffing and competencies of the HR team, it will take time and considerable resources to address the weaknesses and limitations identified in this assessment. On the other hand, there is deep commitment on the part of the HR team to be learners and to strive to meet the human resource needs of WCER.

SECTION 2: PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are **preliminary**; they are offered as directional statements for moving forward should WCER decide to do so. They should be revised, refined, and prioritized during iterative conversations with key stakeholder groups. Final recommendations must be aligned with the vision/goals and values of WCER and supported by the leadership team.

WCER is a complex institution with many strengths. Its traditions, services, clients, students, staff, and commitment to diversity amplify this complexity. WCER Human Resources also has many strengths. Staff are dedicated professionals who work hard and want to deliver effective human resources services to the Center.

As with any organization, strengths and weaknesses exist side-by-side. With some organizations, their strengths often prevent attention to weaknesses. While everyone who participated in this assessment identified and acknowledged strengths, they also identified limitations and weaknesses that if addressed, could significantly improve human resource services. The disruption created by COVID 19 created and highlighted some of the challenges of WCER HR. While there is hope that this level of disruption will not happen again (or soon!), the reality is that change will always be a constant of organizational life.

To move forward, WCER as an organization needs to answer these three strategic questions:

1. What is the overarching **people strategy** that will help achieve our organizational goals?
2. How do we connect our people strategy and human resource strategy in a way that is not confusing and does not create unreasonable expectations and pressures on the HR staff and its partners and stakeholders?
3. How do we successfully help the HR team build competency in meeting our expectations so that they can work effectively with staff and students?

Once these questions are addressed, then the foundation for an effective HR department can be created.

PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS AND DISCUSSION

1. **Thank those who were invited to participate in this assessment and share a summary of this report, focusing on findings and recommendations, with relevant individuals and stakeholder groups.**

Section I and Section II of this report should be summarized and shared with key stakeholder groups. This will enhance transparency and build momentum for any changes that might be pursued.

2. **Define a “desired-state” vision of for HR Services in WCER. Then develop, embed, and communicate this vision to the organization, with appropriate timelines for moving toward that vision.**

An understanding of “brand” is a useful way to understand the disconnect between an organization perception of itself and how customers, partners, and stakeholders view it.

A “brand” is the functional and emotional benefits provided by a product or service which create a distinctive position in the minds of **customers, employees, partners, and stakeholders. Every organization and its organizational units have a brand.** Branding is how organizations tell internal and external customers what to expect; brands are demonstrated through the organization’s **competencies, standards, and style.**

Competencies are the knowledge, skills, and talents staff members use to deliver effective services. **Standards** are the values staff members hold and demonstrate as they deliver effective services. **Style** is the overall personality demonstrated by staff members when effective services are delivered. Effective brands have consistency between what is communicated about the brand and what is delivered by the brand.

WCER's human resource department's current brand based on the interviews can be displayed this way:

Competencies (Knowledge, skills, and talents)	Standards (Rules and values that guide behavior)	Style (Overall personality demonstrate)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical knowledge of WCER and UW-Madison personnel human resource policies • Ability to process basic HR functions (hiring, benefits) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative • Dedicated • Hard working • Focus on customer service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personable • Calming • Busy • Respectful

The “desired brand” might look like this based on this assessment:

Competencies (Knowledge, skills, and talents)	Standards (Rules and values that guide behavior)	Style (Overall personality demonstrate)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic HR thinking and execution • Technological savvy • HR generalist • Process improvers • Change managers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer-focused • Responds quickly • Collaborative • Empowered to respond 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate effective interpersonal skills • Professional • Caring • Respectful

A recommendation from the Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity Report is to “invest in HR’s capacity for the department to move from transactional silos to a strategic HR function.” While this recommendation is in line with what progressive, high performing organizations expect of their HR function, this vision cannot be achieved unless there is a plan and commitment of resources to move in this direction. Human resource services can only be as effective as the organization in which they operate wants them to be.

This interviewer/consultant recommends that the organization convenes a group of individuals

representing the HR Team, key partners, and stakeholders, and WCER Leadership to engage in a process to define a “desired state” for WCER human resource department.

3. Develop a realistic “roll out” plan for moving from the current state to the desired state. Keep in mind broader campus initiatives that will impact HR services in the short-medium term.

Once the desired state vision has been developed, a realistic roll-out plan for achieving it is needed to keep in check the expectations and demands placed on the human resource team. Given the campus initiatives that are currently underway, a realistic work plan for transitioning to a desired state might look like this:

Task	Time Frame
Review results of HR Assessment Report; engage in conversations about it.	July -August 2021
Convene a group HR team members, partners, stakeholders, and leadership to define a “desired state” for WCER’s Human Resource Function.	August – September 2021
Communicate the desired state and engage the organization in conversation about it.	October 2021
Conduct a “stop, refine, reinvent” assessment of the activities that support and strengthen the changes desired in human resources.	November- December 2021
Develop a specific plan for transitioning the HR function. Think about competencies needed, how to secure those competencies (build or buy), and other related issues.	January – March 2022

Note: the above chart outlines some of the key tasks needed to develop a plan for transitioning to the desired state. It does not project the length of time it will take to actually “arrive” at the desired state. Given this consultant/interviewer’s experiences with similar efforts, given the size and complexity of WCER, and given the current staffing and capabilities of the HR team, it will take 2-3 years to achieve success.

4. To begin the process of streamlining WCER HR (which is a goal of this assessment), conduct a “stop, refine, reinvent” assessment of the activities that support and strengthen the changes desired in human resources.

There are likely many HR processes that can be done better, faster, less expensive, or eliminated. Many organizations have undertaken process improvement efforts, (UW-Madison being one) and the results have been effective and impressive.

A key early step in the roll-out plan should be an exercise focusing on identifying what activities can be stopped, which need to be refined, which need to be reinvented, and which can be eliminated. The mindsets of “we have always done it this way” or “that will not work here” are key barriers to successfully conducting this exercise. Ground rules should be established and communicated before the exercise and should be vigorously enforced during the exercise. This exercise must be facilitated by someone outside of WCER with knowledge and experience in process improvement methodologies. WCER’s HR team should engage in this facilitated activity first, then the team should meet with a cross-sectional and cross-functional team and engage in a similar facilitated activity.

This activity will help determine where efficiencies can be gained and what activities no longer serve their purpose. This hopefully can free up time for the human resource team to focus on the key priorities established by WCER. It will also build HR’s credibility.

5. Put “change management” on the agenda and be conscious and deliberate about implementing strategies that will enhance, not decrease trust.

UW-Madison is undergoing a number of changes. And it is likely that change will continue to be an attribute of the institution. Managing change within WCER needs to become a competency of all leaders, managers, and staff. It should become a core competency of the HR team.

The HR department has a key responsibility of building the organization’s capacity to embrace and capitalize on change. Change has a way of scaring people, often scaring them into inaction. HR’s role as a change agent is to replace resistance with resolve, planning with results, and fear of change with excitement about its possibilities.

6. Monitor the climate frequently as the organization migrates to its new vision for human resources.

In general, an organization's climate should be monitored frequently. It is most important during periods of significant change. Short pulse surveys (4-5 questions maximum) every quarter is a good way to "test" the climate of the organization during the change process. Longer climate surveys can then be taken every 12-18 months.

7. To address WCER HR challenges quicker, consider a better alignment with SOE HR.

Because change is difficult and takes an investment of time and human energy, and because of the difficulty of changing a system when you are in it, this consultant/interviewer has been thinking about a way to address WCER's HR challenges quicker. There are many structures for building a better alignment with SOE HR. Examples include integrating some functions such as staff development and employee relations; a strategic partnership where all HR functions are reviewed and who does what is determined based on who can do it best; to a full merger of HR functions.

This recommendation is the best response if the goal is to address the challenges identified in this report quickly. The potential advantages are numerous and significant, and include the following:

- a. While the current weaknesses and limitations identified in this report will not go away quickly, it will be easier to address them.
- b. It will create a new "brand identity" for HR services and increase the positive perceptions of HR. It will quickly turn what is viewed by many as a "problem area" into an opportunity that gives people a sense of hopeful optimism.
- c. It will eliminate a level of decision-making and increase the turn-around-time for addressing HR issues.
- d. It will provide an opportunity for structured and significant cross training of employees.
- e. It will provide a clearer career path for those individuals who desire it. It will likely reduce the perception that WCER HR is a first step position and eliminate the desire for people to move to other divisions to achieve their career goals as HR professionals.
- f. It will provide some stability in the delivery of HR services within a constantly changing environment.

- g. It will provide “psychic relief” for the HR team and its director who have endured a very challenging year.
- h. It will allow the current WCER Director and the team to leverage their skills and talents better. It will also allow the HR Director to address her concerns about succession planning.
- i. It will provide relief and assurance to customers, partners, and stakeholders that WCER has heard their concerns, especially those expressed in this report.

With any change comes potential challenges and resistances. These, while a certainty, must be viewed by WCER leadership as helpful information to consider when weighing the pros and cons of this recommendation. Ultimately, the decision must be viewed through the lens of what leaders believe is in the best interest of the organization, both short and long term.

CONCLUSION

The issues and challenges facing organizations today demand organizational excellence. This has never been truer for human resource departments. Learning, quality, teamwork, managing change, employee engagement, and leveraging diversity are all driven by the way organizations treat their people. These are fundamental HR issues. To state it plainly: achieving organizational excellence is a key function of HR.

The human resource department should not be defined by what it does but by what it delivers—results that enrich the organizations value to customers, stakeholders, supporters, and employees. HR can help deliver organizational excellence in several ways:

- a. Become a partner with senior leadership and line managers in strategy execution, helping to move the results of planning from the conference room to the entire organization and to customers served,
- b. Become an expert in the way work is organized and executed, and delivering administrative efficiency,
- c. Be a champion for employees, vigorously representing their concerns to leadership and working to increase employee contribution, and engagement, and
- d. Being an agent of continuous transformation, shaping processes and a culture that improve the organization's capacity for change.

The journey to the desired state for WCER's Human Resource function will take commitment, patience, and time. But the results of these will be a WCER that is better able to meet current and future challenges and be the organization that its mission and values expect it to be.

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