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СУЧАСНІ HR-СТРАТЕГІЇ ТА ІНСТРУМЕНТАРІЙ УПРАВЛІННЯ ПЕРСОНАЛОМ

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THE ULRICH HR MODEL: THEORETICAL EVOLUTION, PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS ACROSS INDUSTRIES, AND IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

At a time when HR departments were widely regarded as bureaucratic cost centres preoccupied with payroll, compliance and recruitment, Ulrich proposed a fundamentally different vision where HR professionals could and should function as creators of measurable business value. Drawing on data from thousands of HR professionals and line managers, Ulrich published Human Resource Champions: The Next Agenda for Adding Value and Delivering Results (Harvard Business School Press, 1997), which laid out a four-role typology for the HR function. One contrast ranged from strategic priorities down to operational realities; the other separated process-driven work from people-centred engagement. The resulting blocks defined four roles: Strategic Partner (aligning HR and business strategy), Change Agent (facilitating organisational transformation), Administrative Expert (reengineering processes for efficiency), and Employee Champion (representing employee interests and building commitment).

In The HR Value Proposition Ulrich extended the framework in two important respects. First, the original four roles were expanded to five: the Employee Champion role was split into Employee Advocate and Human Capital Developer. A new fifth role, HR Leader, was added to account for the need to manage the HR function itself. Second, the book shifted the model's philosophical centre of gravity from internal competence to external value – this meant HR had to understand customers, investors, and competitive dynamics, not only internal processes. Alongside this conceptual evolution, a structural model for HR service delivery began to crystallise around five elements: Service Centres, Centres of Expertise, Corporate HR, Embedded HR, and Operational HR. By the early 2010s, a widely adopted structural interpretation of

Ulrich's ideas had divided the HR function into three organisational components: Shared Services, Centres of Excellence and HR Business Partners. Ulrich himself has noted that this structural interpretation was not his direct creation but rather an adaptation of his conceptual work by practitioners and consultants [1; 2].

MHP is Ukraine's largest agro-industrial holding, a vertically integrated enterprise employing over 30,000 people in twelve Ukrainian regions, with international operations in the Balkans, the Netherlands, and the Middle East. Listed on the London Stock Exchange, the company reported revenue of $3 billion in 2024 [3]. Public corporate documents and professional databases confirm that MHP employs a dedicated pool of HR Business Partners. 2024 Annual Report identifies "Empowered Human Capital" as one of five strategic pillars, and the company has adopted OKR methodology for performance management – indicating a strategic orientation of the HR function that corresponds to the Strategic Partner role. Specialist functions such as corporate psychologists, personal development experts, and occupational safety professionals suggest the presence of expertise streams functionally matching the Centres of Excellence. The existence of HRBPs, a more strategic role for HR, and specialised people-related functions all point to an operating model that closely resembles the three-pillar structure.

IBM's HR transformation represents one of the most extensively documented applications of the Ulrich model in the technology industry. The company restructured its HR function around three objectives: operational excellence through process simplification, data-driven talent decisions, and managerial empowerment through technology. IBM's Shared Services capability is today based on AskHR, an AI-powered virtual agent. Centres of Excellence operate across talent acquisition, people analytics, learning, diversity and inclusion, and ethical AI governance for HR applications. HR Business Partners focus on strategic workforce planning and organisational design. Also, IBM redesigned its performance management system, replacing annual reviews with continuous feedback. The company reports a 40% reduction in HR operational costs over four years as a direct outcome of the restructured model [4].

Unilever provides perhaps the most explicit large-scale example of the Ulrich three-pillar model. The company's own careers portal describes its HR architecture as "three functions working together as One HR": People Experience (shared services managing the employee lifecycle), Expertise (centres of excellence designing global best practices in talent, reward, learning, people analytics, equity, diversity and inclusion, and wellbeing), and HR Business Partners (strategic partners supporting leaders at local, regional, and global levels). The reported outcomes are substantial: over €1 billion in operational cost savings over a decade and an employer-of-choice status in 28 countries [5].

The three-pillar structure suits large, complex organisations well: shared services standardise routine delivery, HRBPs stay close to the business, and Centres of Excellence build genuine depth in areas like talent management and analytics.

That said, the model has real weaknesses. The HRBP role in particular has proven difficult to get right. As the push toward strategic partnering grew stronger, the employee advocacy side of the job is seen by many practitioners as less valuable or even out of place. This tension has never been fully resolved, with HRBPs often finding themselves caught between strategic expectations and the day-to-day operational demands of line managers. Beyond the role itself, the model simply does not translate well to smaller organisations that lack the headcount or budget to sustain three separate functions. And even in large organisations, splitting HR into distinct pillars can make it harder for senior leaders to see how HR adds value as a whole. Ulrich himself acknowledged the problem, identifying over thirty factors that can get in the way of successful implementation. The Ulrich model remains the most influential framework in HR management today, and for good reason – it has evolved genuinely over time, moving from defining internal HR roles to thinking about value from the outside in. Companies like MHP, IBM, and Unilever show that its core logic holds across very different industries and contexts. But the model is not without problems. The HRBP role remains ambiguous, employee advocacy has been quietly sidelined, and poor implementation can leave HR feeling fragmented and hard to understand. The answer, though, is not to replace the model – it is to keep adapting it. That means combining it with agile ways of working, making better use of people analytics, and putting employee experience back at the centre of what HR is actually for.

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