



Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A Survey on the Coercion of HR Professionals

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Professionals are held to a higher standard of ethical behaviour. Indeed, that is an intrinsic part of being a professional. HR professionals could be considered an 'at risk' group. On the one hand, HR has access to all sorts of privileged and confidential information, it has its hand in many important processes such as staffing, and compensation, and performance management. It is not surprising, then, that HR professionals can find themselves 'in between a rock and a hard place' at times. An online survey of HRPAA members and Canadian HR Reporter readers was conducted in May 2008 on the topic of coercion of HR professionals in the workplace.

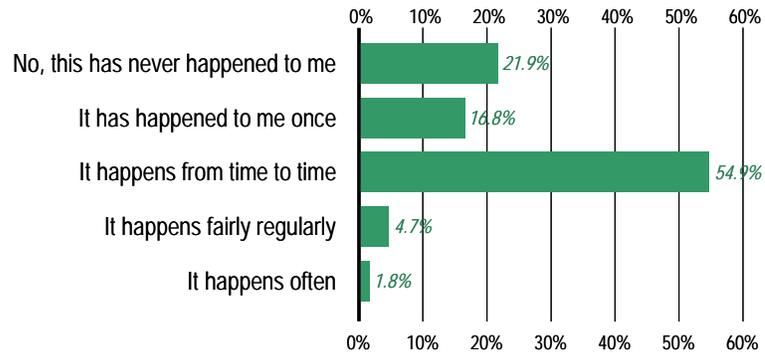
The Sample

The online survey was conducted in May 2008. There were 794 respondents representing a broad cross-section of HR professionals. Of these 794 respondents, 291 commented at greater length using the open-response option..

The Results

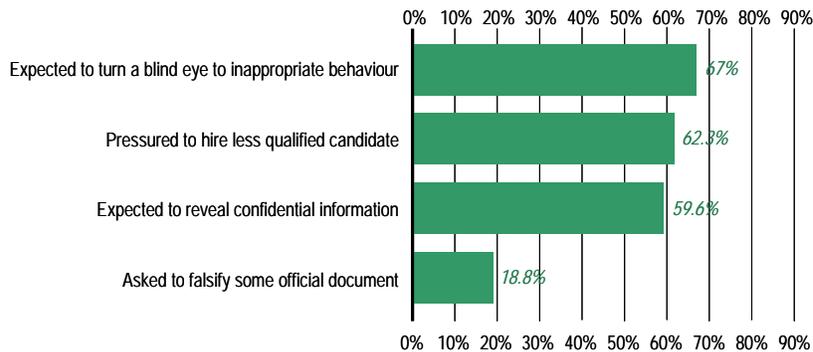
The coercion of HR professionals is a widespread issue. Indeed, 78.1% of HR professionals who responded to our survey indicated that they had felt coerced into doing something they were not comfortable with professionally, and 61.4% of HR professionals who responded to our survey reported being put in a difficult professional situation at least occasionally. Although 21.9% of respondents said that they had never been put in one of these situations, most HR professions think of these situations as 'just part of being an HR professional.'

Have you ever felt coerced into doing something you were not comfortable with professionally?



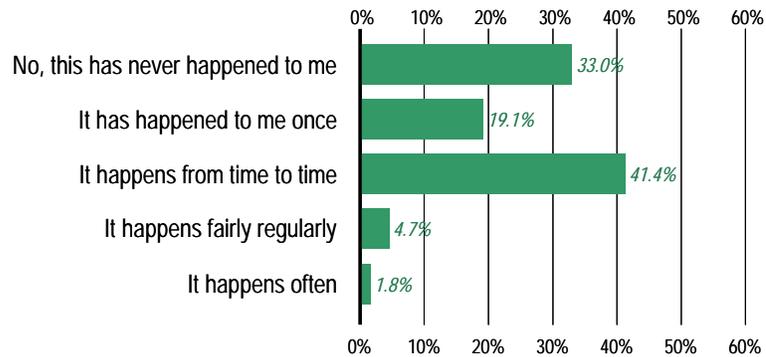
The figure below gives the most frequently occurring ethically compromising situations for HR professionals. The most frequently occurring ethically compromising situations for HR professionals are (1) having to turn a blind eye, or worse yet, having to cover up or participate in unethical business practices is the most frequently occurring ethically compromising situation, (2) being pressured to hire less competent candidates, and (3) being expected to reveal confidential information.

Most Frequently Occurring Ethically Compromising Situations for HR Professionals



Having to turn a blind eye or worse yet, having to cover up or participate in unethical business practices, is the most frequently occurring ethically compromising situation. This broad category encompasses many different situations. These situations have in common that an individual in a position of power pressures an HR professional to do something that would be unethical and/or illegal.

Expected to turn a blind eye to unethical behaviour on the part of someone in management



The comments below give examples of the kinds of situations where HR professionals have been asked to turn a blind eye.

"Have to turn a blind eye to overtime being worked but not paid"

"A former GM wanted his personnel file when he was retiring so that he could "edit" it. He shredded various documents and then gave me back the file."

"At a former job, I would often be asked to headhunt people away from other organizations and lure them with promises of big commissions that only few achieved."

"Business leader was pressuring her staff to work overtime without compensation."

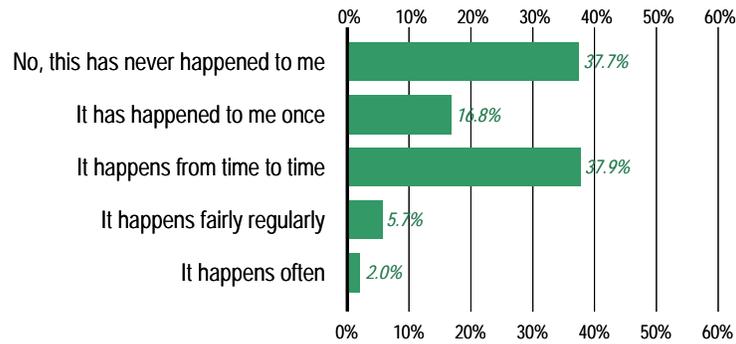
"CEOs who say one thing to their management team and get buy in, then turn around and confidentially do the exact opposite and expect you to expedite it without comment or recourse."

"Coerced into changing numbers on salary survey data (to be lower) to justify corporate salary decisions."

"Being asked to advise employees of a resignation of a 19 year employee that was actually a wrongful dismissal."

The next most frequently occurring had to do with the hiring of less-qualified candidates. Actually, both hiring and terminations are often cited trouble spots here. A typical situation is one in which an individual with power and influence wants a preferred candidate to be hired which is not qualified or substantially less qualified for the position; alternately, an individual with power and influence wants someone to be terminated for inappropriate reasons sometimes to make room for a preferred candidate. In both cases, the HR professional is expected to make it happen.

Pressured into hiring a less-qualified candidate over a more qualified one



The comments below give a sense of the situations where HR professionals

"A frequent case is that of managers who feel that an employee should be fired without due process"

"After completing a sexual harassment complaint against an individual in a critical and unique position in the organization, I was told to terminate the complainant although the allegations were in fact proven."

"Hiring a candidate known by the president when that person was clearly not the most qualified candidate."

"Being asked to literally tear someone to shreds in a performance evaluation, in order to clear a path for that individual to be (unjustly, in my view) fired, and subsequently replaced with someone not as qualified or appropriate."

"Forced to hire relatives of senior management when they failed normal hiring requirements."

"Having to terminate an employee, only because the hiring manager did not "like" them based on knowing that person for one day."

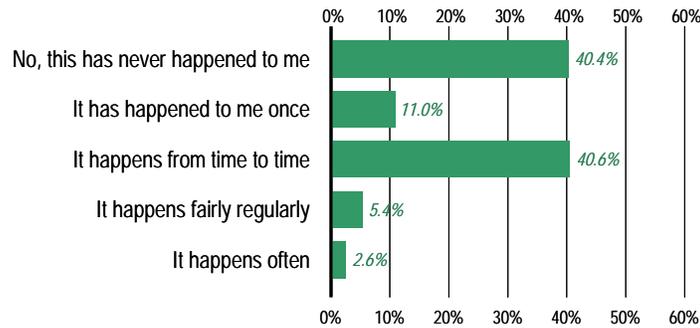
"Hire an unqualified person. Terminate someone for no reason. Break policy to accommodate senior management's request."

"HR is often asked to circumvent hiring policies to fast track employees often a relation or contact or some one of interest to senior management; We are often asked to execute terminations that are highly questionable, often done based on personal reasons by management than purely based on professional criteria."

"I was specifically told to exclude certain nationalities from the selection process by one of the owners."

The third most frequent problem area is when HR professionals had to do with revealing confidential information.

Have you ever been asked or expected to reveal confidential information?



"Asked to reveal confidential information regarding an employee's absence."

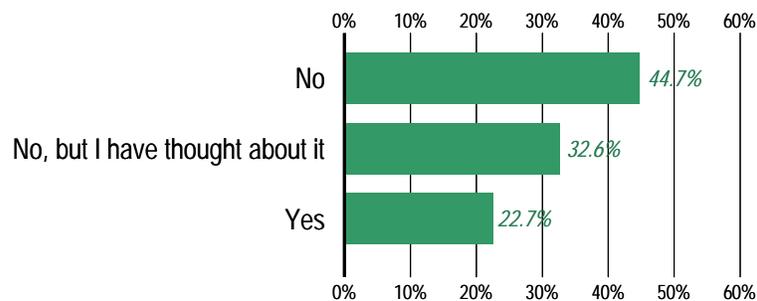
"Get pressured to reveal why an employee(s) is off work (what is their medical condition)"

"Usually dealing with requests for additional information (confidential information) regarding disability claims of employees. Information pertaining to recruiting; i.e. who applied, salary, etc."

"Why someone was fired from the organization, salary information, restructuring plans"

HR professionals deal with these situations in many ways. The comments reflect the whole spectrum of responses from an assertive refusal to go along to resigned acquiescence. It is clear, however, that these situations often have consequences for the HR professional and that these consequences can be dramatic as the comments below show. Although there are some stories where an assertive refusal to go along had lead to an increase in respect for the HR professional, more often than not, such situations do not bode well for the employment relationship—some HR professionals are pushed out of the organization whereas others leave the organization at the first opportunity.

Did you ever resign, or threaten to resign, because of a request to do something you were not comfortable with professionally?



"Attempt to dismiss the head of the organization for a non-business reason resulted in me stating legal and ethical discomfort which was not well received and resulted in management's sudden displeasure with me. One year later I was terminated for what was labelled 'a restructure'."

"I did not resign my position but was terminated due to the fact that I voiced my opinion on a matter that I considered extremely unethical and illegal."

"I have been asked to terminate employees without proper justification. I went against this practice and questioned authority which resulted in my own job loss."

"I have been let go twice - and I'm under 40, (with large payouts-shut up money to 'go away') because I would not turn a blind eye to unethical behaviour."

"I left my last employment (July 2007) after 18 years with a Provincial government agency because I was being asked, no, told, to do something in breach of Employment Standards, the Human Rights Code, the Collective Agreement and, most importantly, in violation of my ethics."

"I was asked to discriminate against someone when hiring. I refused to do so, attempted to convince the person of the error of their ways, was unsuccessful and quit my job."

"I was recently fired by a large company because I would not compromise my values or my integrity. It involved giving preferential treatment to a particular labour organization over another."

"I was told to destroy documents from the OLRB that were legally required to be posted. I refused and was subsequently fired."

"This company's Senior Vice President was extremely forceful in trying to push me to falsify Worker's Compensation paperwork. I refused and subsequently left the company because of the lack of honesty and integrity."

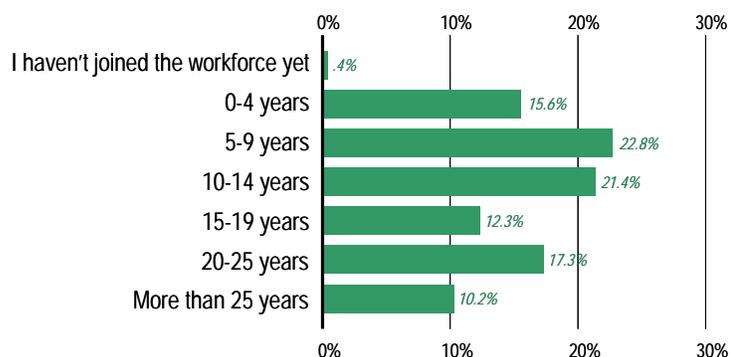
Dealing with these situations is more than a matter of moral fortitude; it is also a matter of skill and experience. Some HR professionals seemed better equipped than others to deal with these situations.

Despite their frequency and the potential impact on the career and livelihood of HR professionals, the whole issue of coercion doesn't seem to get the exposure one might expect it to have. Perhaps it is because some of these are 'no win' situations that we would rather put behind us.

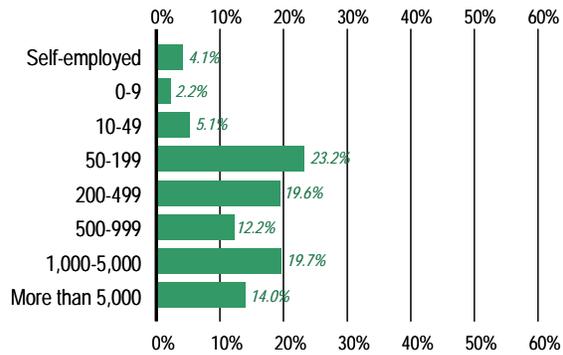
It is interesting to note that the comments rarely mentioned any form of support in handling these situations (e.g., someone to turn to for advice). It would appear that many HR professions feel that they are left to fend for themselves in these situations. Perhaps by talking about these situations, we can collectively work out and share better ways of handling these situations. We may also be better able to support HR professionals that are working through these tough situations.

Sample Characteristics

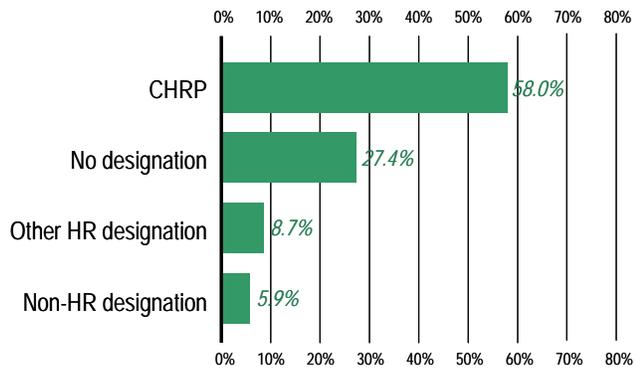
How long have you been in HR?



What size of company do you work for?



Do you hold a professional designation?



What level are you in your organization?

