

Taking HR to Greater Heights

An Interview with Martin Gabriel, CEO of HR Matters21.

By Alicia Teo



base of free lance professionals. Therefore you may notice the numbers of self employed workers increasing daily. To survive these uncertain times, the only thing practically left to do may be to become self-employed. But many with whom I have interacted tend to ask me this question: "What if we have no capital?" My answer is: "You might consider selling your professional services". In that regard, human resource outsourcing is one of those businesses that you may wish to embark on provided you are prepared, among other things, to conduct yourself professionally and meet the needs of the busy CEOs today.

Human Resource Management Trends

Most companies today, especially entrepreneurs or small businesses, may be unable to afford Human Resource Managers. The wisest thing then is for companies to outsource their HR responsibilities, whatever their size. Martin Gabriel said that these functions can be performed more effectively because of the knowledge HR Consultants have on HR Matters and their ability and efforts to make the results more satisfactory and help to ensure continuity of the business.

The economy's life force comprises many entrepreneurs and small businesses. They are also responsible for new innovations and jobs that account for a sizeable proportion of all employees in the economy. However, the journey of entrepreneurs is tough if not a lonely road to travel. And one is tempted to ask if the situation is changing...yet?

Today there is absolutely no job security. Many employees are engaged on a contract basis, even in Government departments. We are living in an age of corporate downsizing and a growing

It is universally acknowledged that the Human Resource (HR) Department is among one of the most critical components of employee well-being in any business irrespective of the size of the organisation. HR issues have to be dealt with much discretion and tact or it may end up in unnecessary legal tussles. Many businesses, especially the smaller ones are clueless about the various rules and regulations of the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) and therefore it would always be ideal to outsource the HR functions to the experts.

Transactions on HR with Martin Gabriel

Martin Gabriel, is one such HR entrepreneur, whose goal is to facilitate businesses and companies through HR consultancy and services and thereby support them in improving their bottom line. He does this by positioning the companies for long term growth through the design and delivery of appropriate HR Consulting and Human Capital Management Innovations. His HR consultancy service takes great pride in their passionate commitment to partner with their clients to help them achieve success in the area of human resource management. Martin and his group of experts work closely with their clients to develop performance-based solutions aimed at ensuring long-term success.

"Martin's course delivery had been lively and insightful, often referenced to his personal experiences which he shared generously."

Chorina Khoo
Country Manager & General Manager
Expeditors Singapore Pte Ltd

Martin recognises that every client is unique and demands personalised focus with appropriate solutions. Therefore, his recommendations and the solutions that he delivers are customised to the specific needs and requirements of the client. His consultants and lawyers are highly experienced and qualified professionals who have undertaken HR consultancy assignments for clients in diverse industries, from MNC's to SMEs, listed companies, trade and industry associations to government organisations. His overall objective is to serve as a one-stop, stress-free and

expert HR outsourcing and consultancy service. For instance, among the services is also that of consistently updating HR personnel and CEOs on the Employment Act not only of Singapore but also of the region since businesses are today globalising.

HRMatters21 – Trail Blazing Platform

To further promote interaction and sharing of knowledge among HR practitioners as well as to provide a forum for such exchange of knowledge/information, he has established a unique website - the **HRMatters21 internet forum**. This is a true interaction junction where not only seasoned practitioners converge but also where a newbie to the HR profession can log-on and learn more. To date a host of HR/Admin professionals, non-HR Professionals, entrepreneurs and even employers have signed up – this is where they learn from the advice posted by other HR Professionals from other organisations in answer to questions posted by those who need clarification before taking action. The subscription fee to be a member of his Forum is nominal – only \$25.00 as a one time fee and you are free to access the forum and communicate with the world of HR. In addition, members are invited for monthly HR sharing sessions at a nominal fee of \$5/- to cover light refreshments.

This forum, I strongly believe, will take HR to greater heights since it can now be easily accessed world-wide. In fact, HR professionals from overseas organisations are now posting their questions or answers onto this forum. Martin, as he had penned on his website, says, “This website is dedicated to all Human Resource practitioners in Singapore. Be updated and have your say in our exclusive club, HRMATTERS21. Our main objective is to allow HR practitioners to speak freely and network with each other. Sharing knowledge would be a WIN-WIN formula to all who participate.”

The responses from contributors on his website are first reviewed for any possible editing that may be required before they are posted and emailed to

the members. This step is necessary to weed out irresponsible posts that may border on forum “behaviour” that may not be welcomed by other members such as use of abusive, hostile or vulgar words. Martin offers “Premier Membership” also at a monthly retainer of \$275.00 or \$375.00 for a minimum duration of six months depending on the extent of consultancy. During these six months employers can consult him on any issues relating to HR. The six



months duration can also be renewed if his services were still needed.

The HRmatters21 community was founded on 5th Of May 2001 with just over 15 Members. By early 2005, it had attracted over 1,500 Members in Singapore and about 800 Members in Malaysia and is still growing. Martin knew that this was his calling and decided to strike it out on his own as a HR entrepreneur, serving the HR community with his experience and skills. Supported by a practising lawyer, Mr. Dilip Kumar, the HRmatters21 consultancy and training services began its journey to success. The forum acted as a catalyst, in promoting Martin’s profile and to create awareness of the services that were offered. He envisioned his role as supporting HR Consultants and CEO functions. From then on, the course for the future was set!

Career History

Martin’s 3 years experience with the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) as Inspector to enforce the Employment of Foreign Workers Act has provided him with the experience on labour regulations and the inspiration to embark on an HR career after leaving the Government service. His total of 16 years of experience in HR more than qualifies him to be the Chairman and

“Well balanced forum, coordinated by a HR Champions in Singapore, Seek help and you shall get one!”

Danarajah S.
Grp SHS Manager
Human Resource & Development
Southern Steel Berhad, Penang, Malaysia

founder of HRMatters21, the online HR interest group which provides a vibrant forum where HR issues are addressed. Martin is also the Chairman of HRMatters21 Committee that is involved in the development of Human Resources in Singapore.

Martin holds a Bachelor of Commerce degree with double majors from the University of Tasmania and a Diploma in Human Resource Management. With adding his vast years of experience in Human Resources, Martin now is eminently qualified to provide consultancy services to numerous organisations in Singapore. Some of his areas of expertise include employment regulations, drafting of employment

contracts and formulating HR policies. Martin was on 93.8's live broadcast, where he was invited to deliver his advice on crisis management. He was also interviewed on Gold 90.5, where he shared tips on interviewing skills.

Martin's experience has also forged him forward to conduct training programmes for companies. His experience includes developing analysis on training needs for resorts in Indonesia. To date over 900 HR personnel as well as CEOs to managers and executives from non-HR functions have attended his training programmes.

Martin on Entrepreneurship and HR

Martin embarked on the path of entrepreneurship through the internet forum stoked by the desire to strike a work-life balance that would afford him more time with his 3 young children. It is the only medium that enabled him to work from practically anywhere in the world and also found the business investment affordable with the enabling technology for this business growing at a super jet speed rate. He observed that the HR profession needed to re-look at how the differences in today's HR management and that of the traditional methods had to be managed and how they need to be applied if you have a growing business.

A growing business certainly cannot do without HR even from day one, said Martin. A business does not need to be established before it begins on its path of HR management, he added. His contention is that there are **three definitive roles** for HR in any growing business, and elaborated as follows:

(i) First, HR needs to identify the multiplying effect using resources to the fullest potential or using technology with limited manpower. All people have to do is to speak through the forum. Customers today are smarter, better read and more exposed. Therefore, we have to be ahead of our competitors.

(ii) The second is strategic planning - an emerging role in HR - A major review of global human-resource

development shows that HR managers have been participating increasingly in the strategic planning process and this testament suggests that the strategic planner is an emerging role in HR. In short, strategic planning determines where an organisation is going in the years to come, how it is going to get there and how it will know it will ever get there or not.

In that regard, Martin said that HR leaders must continue to balance the demands of several different roles: business partner, internal consultant, operational and administrative expert and both employee and employer advocate. Strategic planning is one role HR managers cannot afford to avoid. It is important that HR plans are in alignment with the overall business plan. With today's highly competitive world, it is more desirable for companies to look for strategic partners to fit this role as it has been proven to be more effective for strategic partners



to conduct their strategic planning to support company's objectives as viewers from the outside. I recall an instance when I was working on a corporate profile for a large corporation that is also a venture capitalist and the CEO advised me to write his vision and mission statement, according to my perception even though his activities in the investment company are not

familiar to me. He wanted me to view it as an external strategic partner to formulate his profile, and after doing it, I realised how important that is.

(iii) The third is the war for talent - Without the right talent on board, businesses will struggle to prosper. Competition for talent is getting fiercer each day; a great number of the workforce is getting older and more mobile while those trained in critical skills are in short supply. With the birth rate dropping, talent is getting scarcer. To attract talents, companies need to have a winning recruiting strategy that must be continually refined.

Martin explained that a HR professional needs to understand the different phases an adult employee goes through in his work life, and that each phase carries different motivating factors. Through one's work life, an employee's priority does not stay stagnant, but faces different priorities as he goes

through the various stages of ageing. Such phases in life affect most of us, and a seasoned HR practitioner must know and understand these various stages, so that the organisation can tweak its compensation and benefits to understand and even cater to the employee's various needs at different stages of his life. In short, knowing the 'wants' and 'needs' of employees

is basically knowing what motivates them; for an explanatory review of these thoughts check out Martin's views on the HRmatters21 website.

Companies should also give preeminence to exit interviews. In demonstrating how valuable information are sometimes wasted when Managers simply file away the material obtained from the exit interview, Martin proposed that an honest exit interview obtained from a staff goes a long way in helping the organisation find the right replacement in it's recruitment exercise and also to realise the push factor which resulted in high attrition and performance. He cited an example of a printing company that had a particularly high attrition rate for its machine operator position. During the exit interview, many outgoing employees had explained that their performance was seen as below satisfactory due to the fact that the machine they operated was old and often broke down. Apart from buying a new machine, Martin advised the HR Manager, that such information be used when recruiting a replacement, so that the new candidate are able to understand better the challenges that lay ahead should they accept the offer.

His clients range from SMEs to MNCs. Martin also takes a helicopter view of the companies' situation and formulates those policies that meet the company's objectives. Owing to his focus and experience he has won many contracts from SMEs and MNCs. To-date there is a huge and growing demand for his HR matters services. Most SMEs also view his background at MOM favourably and use it as one of the main criteria for engagement of his services.

Vision for Tomorrow

HR professionals also need to learn the regulations of overseas countries particularly China, Vietnam, India and Malaysia and so on. Therefore, increasingly Martin is conducting courses on the Employment Acts for those with China and Malaysia for

starters. He stressed that we have to exit from our HR culture in Singapore and align ourselves to the corporate cultures of the companies in overseas countries. His wish is to expand members' involvement in these sharing events. Also in his pipeline are plans to launch courses in Malaysia and expand the range of programmes in Singapore to include training programmes that HR Managers could recommend for their Management and staff or their training departments to consider.

What is his USP?

His forum is the biggest and most vibrant. He has Senior HR people online and a team of experts and lawyers who are conversant and active in managing this forum. Information is obtainable speedily and this forum is truly very informative. The Committee gives reliable consultancy in both HR and legal matters. He drafts contracts and gives legal advice on termination, training, and HR counseling for HR people who are uncertain of their career and helps chart their career course.

Work-life balance – how effective has it been in companies?

Martin understands that regular exercise helps him sleep better. As he said, good exercise totally shuts down your body when asleep, and a good deep sleep results in a fresh alert mind the next morning. This increases his productivity. He usually sets aside the afternoon for appointments with clients, and he adds better service by visiting the offices of his clients rather than them paying him a visit. On weekends, Martin enjoys the simple things in life and spends his time with his family. Martin added "In a hustle and hurry world like Singapore, we have

to play multiple roles and it can really be quite taxing if we do not manage it carefully. In the corporate world, I am Chairman, HR Professional, Consultant, and Trainer, but my other role which is equally if not more important is one of being a loving husband and



"Martin is very passionate with providing every assistance/advice he can for the HR fraternity. His HRmatters21 forum is a very good example of fostering knowledge sharing among its members...it is indeed a very good forum for HR professionals to share and exchange HR related matters. Martin should be commended for this effort "

M K Liew
Sr HR Manager
Lilly Singapore Centre for Drug
Discovery

also a responsible father to my three children. Such responsibilities require careful planning, so that each segment of my life would never be neglected". To de-stress from the hectic work in the corporate world, Martin immerses himself in music and theatrical works by attending music events and world renowned plays, like "Phantom of the Opera" which was recently playing at the theatres and the live concert by Sir Cliff Richard.

The Path to his Success

His greatest challenge is to get new HR people to realise quickly the importance of the HR profession..... not just to look at it as a desk job and one that concerns keeping records only. This is because that attitude is critical for the survival or further growth of their organisation's business. Corporate strategy on recruitment is his emphasis. Over the years his efficient and expert advice have convinced them that HRMatters21 is the place for HR people to consult. His earnings now come mainly from his popular workshops, corporate training and consultancy. It is at these workshops that he is able to connect and extend his services to SMEs and MNCs for his HR Advisory services. Today, HRMatters21 has brought him an income which far exceeds the payroll he used to draw as a HR employee whilst at the same time it helps him to maintain a work-life balance. CEOs do take the liberty to consult him when HR matters in their organisation need a second opinion or support.

So far no one has unsubscribed from his portal. The information given is valuable and reliable and he hopes his portal will help many people in times of need. He hopes to see more and more people rush in to be within this select group, and connect with their peers. His success is attributed to his persistence,



passion and perseverance which he has exercised for several years. His other attribute is "Networking" which he said helps him find hidden opportunities that can set you apart from your competitors. Fortunately, he has a great gift of networking which he feels is necessary to get ahead and survive in these times of uncertainty.

His vast network of partners, keep an open eye and ear for new opportunities

"Martin is driven by passion for his work in HR. His success lies in his ability to take calculated risks and collaborate with others. He is definitely a man of vision."

Khoo Swee Chiow
Adventurer, Motivational Speaker & Author.

for him. How do you find targeted individuals for your network? Martin responds pointedly as follows: focus on what you want to achieve and how people can help you; use your network partners to find suitable companies; gather key information on these companies; figure out who is the one with the power to outsource; find people connections and common areas of interest.

When I inquired as to whether Martin had experienced any down periods, he did not think so. For him, his down period is more easily manageable as the fixed cost for him is much lower contrary to our expectations. He also realised that during the down periods, more companies needed to seek him for his advice and services on HR matters.

During down periods, Martin advocated against retrenchment and favours pay cuts. It appears to be the preferred norm for CEOs to retrench first to cut costs. They are business people but they also should know that such an action carries psychological effects. HRMatters21 carries out awareness campaigns not only through seminars, consultancy services and the website. They also participate in selected exhibitions to reach out to their members and customers as well as the public. For example, at Career Choice 2005, HRMatters21

was able to generate 3000 jobs. He is overwhelmed by the numbers of people signing up for HRMatters21 and membership is still flowing.

Among the many challenges that he had faced, his greatest challenge had been to terminate a GM position. He had also once been challenged to negotiate with union members but his professionalism helped him make his day.

I can only conclude this article with extending our sincere congratulations to Martin for having such a vibrant and interactive portal that has enlightened many companies on the HR issues addressed and the professional advice that are given to each member's query. Some time ago, a friend of mine had problems with his staff who had been working with them for five years. Through HRMatters21 his case was enlightened and it was proven again that HRMatters21 could help in solving HR issues, irrespective of the company or its size or the nature of the problem.

Martin offers a broad range of consultancy and outsourcing services. Some of them are as follows: HR Outsource; Company's Policy; Develop (policy/handbook); Proof-reading (policy/handbook); Implementation; Grievance Management; Staff Counselling; Advise pertaining to Industrial Relation Matters; Consultancy; Collective Agreement; Termination, Dismissal or Retrenchment; Employment Act; Industrial Relations Act; Trade Unions Act; Employment of Foreign Workers Act; Children Development Co-Savings Act. You can practically find every thing that the small company or entrepreneur would need from a full fledged HR department.

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