

# QUICK HRM: USING A BRIEF CASE STUDY TO INTRODUCE STUDENTS TO HRM

Céleste M. Grimard  
Professor, Université du Québec à Montréal  
grimard-brotheridge.celeste@uqam.ca

Michel Cossette  
Professor, HEC Montréal  
michel.cossette@hec.ca

## ABSTRACT

*Based on their own experiences, students often have an incomplete knowledge of the human resource management (HRM) process. Moreover, they may feel overwhelmed by all the terminology of HRM if it is presented in a piece meal fashion. This article describes a process for helping students understand the 'big picture' of HRM in an inductive fashion. Based on a series of debriefing questions associated with a brief case study, Roger's Tire Experts, instructors help students create an HRM map, a diagram of the areas and functions of HRM and how they are interrelated. Rather than lecturing students about the HRM process, instructors pull the required knowledge from the students themselves. As a result, students view the map as their creation and see how it is connected to a 'real' organization (Roger's Tire Experts). This map, accompanied by a discussion of the need for effective HRM in organizations, provides students with a quick and creative introduction to HRM.*

## INTRODUCTION

Many students arrive in an introductory HRM course and say "HRM? It's easy, it's intuitive, and it's common sense!" Most have held jobs or are currently working as way of supporting themselves through university (Holmes, 2008). As a result, they may be familiar with various aspects of the employment process such as job advertisements, selection interviews, and pay cheques. Since their understanding of HRM is generally limited to their experiences, they often have a fragmentary awareness of HRM. They generally don't have a comprehensive picture of the range of HRM functions, nor do they understand how these functions interconnect and contribute to broader organization success. Yet, HRM is a complex system that includes many questions that managers need to answer in order to make the most of their employees and facilitate organizational performance.

The manner in which HRM has traditionally been taught may further contribute to the perception that HRM is a disparate collection of tools and tricks. Customarily, in HRM classes, each function is discussed in a compartmentalized manner and emphasis is placed on describing techniques associated with the functions (Scarpello, 2008). "Students typically learn, for example, six kinds of selection methods, five types of performance rating scales, and four job evaluation techniques. In the absence of organizational experience, these topics seem unrelated and of limited relevance" (Dickenson, Fisher, Shaw, & Southey, 1996, p. 41). Case studies are rarely integrative and,

thus, don't provide students with a comprehensive perspective of HRM. Nonetheless, organizations expect and require graduates of HRM programs to understand how contextual factors influence the staffing process (Raphael, 2009) and HRM more broadly (Hayton, Cohen, Hume, Kaufman, & Taylor, 2005).

Surprisingly few published resources address how to introduce HRM to university students. In our literature search on this topic, we found only three relevant articles. Dickenson et al. (1996) presented the idea of a 'living case' that evolved with the discussion of individual functions and that helped their students gain competencies in HRM-related decision making. A special issue of the *Journal of Management Education* highlighted the importance of training HR specialists (Herman, 2008) and included an article that described how to use a film, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, to teach various aspects of staffing (Billsberry & Gilbert, 2008). Finally, Oțoiu and Oțoiu (2012) presented and evaluated a semester-long simulation game that they used in a master's level HRM course to facilitate learning about HRM.

This article begins to address this gap in the literature but presenting a case study based exercise that helps students understand how all the functions of HRM fit together in a coherent fashion. We begin this article by presenting the theoretical framework that underpins the case study exercise. Next, we describe a case study exercise that helps students develop a 'big picture' view of HRM and its critical role in organizational functioning. We present HRM as a coherent system of functions all integrally linked to each other. Errors in one function, starting with human resource planning, result in problems in another function. The case study is deceptively simple: it is approximately a half page in length and can easily be read during class. Yet, it contains references to all HRM functions, and it depicts what happens when managers make HRM-related decisions without careful planning. The exercise permits instructors to determine what students already know about HRM and to provide a framework that helps students *know what they know and what they don't know* (Caleon & Subramaniam, 2010).

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

HRM is an integral part of the functioning of an organization. Put simply, HRM is about having the right people in the right place at the right time. Even in the absence of a formal human resources department, managers make decisions about how to select employees, reward them, motivate them to work, and so on. Managers who place employees at the heart of their business strategy value HR decisions as a means of

building a sustainable competitive advantage. This approach is based on the fact that human resources add value to the organization, are difficult to imitate (due to unique historical conditions, causal ambiguity, and social complexity) and difficult to substitute (see Barney, 1991).

## **STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE**

This competitive advantage strengthens organizational performance, which has several dimensions according to Kaplan and Norton (1996). According to their model, the Balanced Scorecard, the performance of an organization is based on four perspectives: 1- financial, 2- customer satisfaction and loyalty, 3- business processes such as production and service delivery, and 4- learning and development, such as an investment in technological and human capital. HRM, although part of Kaplan and Norton's (1996) fourth perspective, influences the other three perspectives to varying degrees. Based on the Balanced Scorecard model, Huselid, Becker, and Beauty (2005) argue that HRM is crucial to the success and performance of an organization, since HRM decisions affect all aspects of how the organization functions, which, in turn, affect customer reactions, which, in turn, affect the financial results of the organization (Kaplan & Norton, 1996; Huselid et al., 2005). Through its processes, HRM, therefore, contributes to the success (and failure) of an organization.

Other HRM models also postulate an indirect link between HRM and the financial performance of an organization. For example, Beer, Spector, Lawrence, Mills and Walton (1984) argue that HRM related decisions flow from a number of questions: 1) what level of influence do we want to give employees (are they involved in decision-making, and, if yes, at what stage and via what mechanisms?); (2) what type of workforce flows should be favored upon entry (recruitment, selection, integration), during employees' *stay* in the organization (performance evaluation, career management including promotions and transfers) and their exit (retirement, dismissal, outsourcing); (3) what reward and incentive systems should be implemented (direct vs. indirect compensation, fixed compensation vs variable, compensation on an individual vs collective basis); and (4) how should work be organized (jobs defined narrowly or broadly, job specialization vs job rotation, close supervision vs self-managing teams, etc.).

Depending on how managers respond to these questions, HRM decisions influence HRM outcomes, i.e., level of engagement and skills as well as congruence and cost effectiveness (Beer et al. 1984). The choice of HRM practices may promote a greater or lesser degree of employee commitment to their work and the organization. The choice of HRM practices also has an impact on the organization's ability to attract, retain and develop the knowledge and skills required, whether in the present or the future. In terms of congruence, Beer et al. (1984) posit that strong internal consistency between HRM practices aimed at managers and those oriented towards employees, as well as congruency in practices between employee groups, enhances overall organizational performance. Finally, HRM results should include aspects of economic efficiency (for example, the costs of practices in terms of their impact on wages, benefits, absenteeism, accidents at work, etc.). Choosing the right HRM practices influences the long-term well-being of individuals and organizational effectiveness.

Similarly, Dyer and Holder (1988) argue that the choices made regarding HRM practices must take into account the

notion of congruence (fit). First, external fit refers to the fact that HRM practices must be consistent with the organization's strategy and relevant to the parameters of the environment. Concerning internal congruence, these researchers posit that HRM practices must be consistent with the HRM objectives to be achieved and that the practices must have a synergistic effect between them. According to Dyer and Holder (1988), the stronger the external and internal congruence, the better the HRM strategy and the more this strategy will produce the expected results for the organization. For example, they discuss the 'inductive' HRM strategy, which is generally adopted when competition is very strong, and the organization must be distinguished by a favorable price / quality ratio (the context of the case study in this article). In this context, an important HRM focus will be merit incentive schemes (incentive compensation, earnings sharing or profit sharing). More generally, HRM strategy should aim to encourage the reliability and predictability of business and HRM processes. In short, Dyer and Holder (1998) predict that the choice of HRM practices, and hence the HRM strategy, depends on the environment of the organization. Thus, managers must review the HRM strategy when environments change and HRM practices reach their objectives.

## **HRM FUNCTIONS**

HRM functions are numerous. Each consists of multiple steps, and each of these steps involves several tools. Although traditionally organized in five areas (strategic analysis, planning, staffing, development, and maintenance; see Table 1), in recent years, authors have organized HRM functions into three sets of practices: skill enhancing practices, motivation enhancing practices, and opportunity enhancing practices (Boselie, Dietz, & Boon, 2005, Huselid, 1995, Jiang, Lepak, Hu & Baer, 2012). The contents of each of the domains are discussed in the next paragraphs.

**Skills enhancing practices** are those functions associated with recruiting and selecting the workforce and those related to employee skills development (Boselie et al., 2005, Huselid, 1995, Jiang et al. 2012). The issues addressed by these functions are the attraction and retention of skilled employees. More specifically, managers need to consider how to recruit competent employees and how to convince them to apply for positions within the organization via employer branding and job advertisements. The recruitment process must be preceded by effective human resource planning, which includes a quantitative analysis of human resources and a qualitative analysis of the work to be done (Bourhis, 2013). Quantitatively, managers must determine their manpower requirements (i.e., how many positions are required to achieve business objectives) and the labor supply (how many people the organization has in-house and how many people are potentially available in the labor market). Qualitatively, jobs must be analyzed as a means of determining the nature of the tasks to be performed and the nature of the skills required by employees in order to permit them to be hired, be successful in the position, and stay in the organization (Bourhis, 2013).

When the organization succeeds in creating a pool of candidates interested in a position within the organization, it must then implement tools to properly select its employees (Boselie, et al., 2005, Huselid 1995, Jiang et al., 2012). The most widely used selection tool is undoubtedly the selection interview (Bourhis, 2013). In order to select the best employees for a position, this interview must be appropriately structured and consist of valid questions. More specifically, the questions

should identify the candidates' ability to perform well. To this end, professionals are increasingly using behavioral questions, which identify candidates' behaviors in situations that are similar to those that they may be confronted with in the context of their work. Also, other tools can be used to complement the selection interview, such as knowledge tests, task samples, simulations, etc. (Bourhis, 2013). Although recruitment and selection are important in acquiring skills, such skills also must be maintained and developed over time in response to the changing needs of the organization. Skills development addresses several questions such as "What skills should be developed?" "Which employees should be developed?" and "How should the skills be developed?" Multiple skill development strategies exist, but the main point here is that managers need to choose the right development strategies depending on the nature of the skills to be developed.

**Motivation enhancing practices** include those functions related to performance management, compensation (including direct compensation, benefits, monetary incentives and rewards), promotions and career management, as well as job security (Boselie et al., 2005, Huselid, 1995, Jiang et al., 2012). Regarding performance management, employees must have attainable goals to work towards that are linked with those of the organization. Managers must provide their employees with continuous feedback and the resources necessary for optimal performance. Compensation, whether in terms of wages or benefits, must be competitive. In some contexts, incentive compensation may be appropriate to support employee motivation and boost job performance. Managing employees' careers, whether it involves promoting employees, transferring them to other jobs, or developing them within their current jobs, is crucial for building employee motivation. Finally, although safety and security may not appear to motivate employees to the same degree, the lack of safe and secure working conditions can easily demotivate employees.

**Opportunity enhancing practices** include all functions that affect the opportunities that employees have to use their skills and their motivation to achieve organizational goals (Boselie et al., 2005, Huselid, 1995, Jiang et al. 2012). This category of practices refers to the questions previously raised concerning the organization of work: do employees work alone or in a team? Other practical issues affect the level of employee involvement in decision-making: are they consulted on elements related to their work or other types of decisions and, if so, at what stage of the decision-making process and to what extent? Leaders also need to consider the level of information sharing with employees: do we share information and, if so, with what level of detail?

## EFFECTS OF HRM FUNCTIONS

The effects of HRM functions on HRM results and organizational performance are multiple. In their meta-analysis, Jiang et al. (2012) found that the Skill Enhancing Practices and Motivation Enhancing Practices positively influence employees' levels of motivation and skill levels, thus increasing the value of an organization's human capital. For their part, Opportunity Enhancing Practices positively influence employee attitudes and motivation. The categories of practices are more closely related to achieving the goals they are intended to achieve. However, they are also related to other HRM objectives (i.e., the practices work in concert with each other to achieve multiple outcomes). Moreover, the strong correlations between the three categories of practices support the theories of Beer et al. (1984) and Dyer & Holder (1988) which suggest that HRM practices have a synergistic effect on each other. Beyond

achieving immediate HRM results, the three categories of HRM practices reduce turnover. This relationship is indirect according to Jiang et al.'s (2012) results, but it is no less important. The goal of HRM is not only to attract, but also to retain high-performing employees. Finally, their meta-analysis shows that HRM fosters the operational performance of organizations. In sum, effective HRM is important because an organization's human resources can be a source of competitive advantage; an organization's ability to implement its strategy depends on the effectiveness of HRM functions; and employee performance and organizational effectiveness depend on it.

## QUICK HRM CASE STUDY

### OBJECTIVES

This case study exercise aims to help students form a comprehensive understanding of HRM functions and their interconnections as well as the strategic value of HRM in influencing organizational performance. This case study exercise presents students with a problem situation that reflects the experiences of a small business owner (see Appendix: Case Study, Roger's Tire Experts). It is akin to a puzzle whose pieces need to be organized in order to form a coherent picture.

### PARTICIPANTS AND TIME REQUIREMENTS

This case study exercise can be used with HRM students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The latter are likely to have a more complex understanding of the issues presented in the case study. If students are asked to read and analyze the case study in advance, its debriefing in class may take anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour, depending on the approach used and the level of depth sought. It is a 'quick' case study given its length and given that the problems faced by the manager in the case study are easily observable. What is more challenging to students is determining how all the problems are interconnected as well as the causal origin of these problems.

### STUDENT PREPARATION

Two alternatives exist regarding student preparation. Given the brevity of the case study, the instructor can distribute copies of the case study in class and give students 15 minutes to read and analyze the case study *on the spot*. Alternatively, prior to the class in which the case study exercise is undertaken, the instructor can ask students to read and analyze the case study and come to class with their analyses.

### INSTRUCTIONS FOR CARRYING OUT THE CASE STUDY EXERCISE

The instructor can adopt either of the following teaching formats:

#### (A) Mock Presentation to Roger

1. Students working in small groups take on the role of the HRM consultant referenced in the case study and prepare to present their report to Roger.
2. A small group is assigned the role of Roger. This group must identify in advance the criteria that they will use to evaluate the position.
3. The HRM consultant groups present their reports.
4. The "Roger" group convenes separately to deliberate and

- select the appropriate course of action.
- The “Roger” group presents their decision and its rationale to the class.

We have successfully used this format near the end of a semester to check students’ understanding of HRM. This teaching format is appropriate when students already have a solid base of knowledge in HRM since this permits them to answer the discussion questions knowledgeably. This format is not be suitable for students who are unfamiliar with HRM; i.e., those who are starting an introductory HRM class.

**(B) Case Study Debriefing**

This approach is recommended for all students – those unfamiliar with HRM and those who have been previously exposed to it. It employs inductive teaching and learning. As suggested by Prince and Felder (2006, p. 203):

Instead of beginning with general principles and eventually getting to applications, the instruction begins with specifics—a set of observations or experimental data to interpret, a case study to analyze, or a complex real-world problem to solve. As the students attempt to analyze the data or scenario and solve the problem, they generate a need for facts, rules, procedures, and guiding principles, at which point they are either presented with the needed information or helped to discover it for themselves.

Generally, the instructor asks questions intended to solicit students’ understanding of what is taking place in the case study. The instructor ‘maps’ out the students’ answers on the white board so that, eventually, patterns and connections

become evident. This means that the instructor must keep the HRM map in mind and plan his/her use of the white board prior to writing on the board.

First, the instructor should ask students, “What HRM problems exist in this case study?” Students are likely to respond by making reference to HRM functions. They may not employ the precise terminology that is presented on the HRM map, but the instructor can paraphrase for the students. The instructor may choose to write the students’ answers as well as the *standard* terminology on the white board, or solely the latter. As the instructor writes the name of a function on the whiteboard, he/she should provide a brief definition of this function (see Table 1). The instructor should continue seeking answers to this question (“What else?”) until the HRM map (see Figure 1) has been fully drawn on the white board. If students have not mentioned particular functions that are depicted on the HRM map, and if they are unable to identify additional *problems*, the instructor may suggest several and add them to the board.

Once the HRM map is entirely depicted on the white board, the instructor should lead the students in a discussion of (a) the current and potential consequences of each of these problems; and (b) the potential financial cost to Roger’s Tire Experts if the same HRM practices continue to be employed. Given the tight connections between HRM and organizational success described earlier in the paper, it should be clear that Roger’s Tire Experts will not succeed unless significant changes are made to their HRM practices.

Next, the instructor should ask students to examine the map and determine where Roger went wrong. This is meant to address the following discussion question, “Besides Roger himself, what is the root cause of the problems?” Students are typically tempted to say that “Roger is the problem. Get rid of

**TABLE 1  
BRIEF DEFINITIONS OF HRM AREAS AND FUNCTIONS  
(SCHWIND, DAS, & WAGAR, 2013)**

**Strategic analysis** (determining the organization's goals and making strategic decisions)  
Strategic HR analysis - analysing and weighing HR implications of strategic options

**Planning** (translating organizational goals into statements of labor need and recommending programs to meet these needs)  
HR planning - determining the number and types of employees needed to accomplish organizational goals  
Job analysis - describing the nature of jobs and specifying their requirements

**Staffing** (attracting needed employees)  
Recruitment - attracting qualified applicants to fill vacancies  
Selection - selecting the most qualified applicants from the pool of applicants

**Development** (ensuring that employees have the knowledge and skills need to perform satisfactorily in their jobs or to advance)  
Orientation - providing new employees with information regarding their jobs, the organization, etc.  
Training - developing employees’ skills and knowledge in order to enhance their current and future performance  
Performance management - managing the combined efforts of organizational members to meet organizational goals  
Career development - a planned effort that balances an individual's career needs and the organization's workforce requirements

**Maintenance** (retaining a competent workforce)  
Compensation and benefits - managing the direct and indirect rewards that employees receive in exchange for their work  
Occupational health and safety - providing a safe and healthy workplace  
Employee and labor relations - giving employees a collective voice in decisions affecting their employment

Roger. Teach Roger about HRM.” However, these do not describe what Roger did or failed to do that may be at the origin of the poor HRM decisions. The instructor can use the Japanese iterative interrogation practice of asking *why* five times to assist in getting to the root causes. For example, if students say that Roger hired the wrong person, in response to the question *why*, they may point to problems with recruitment and, prior to that, planning. Frequently, the failure to plan strategically is at the root of ineffective HRM. In this case study, it is evident that Roger did not engage in strategic planning for the HR requirements of his new store.

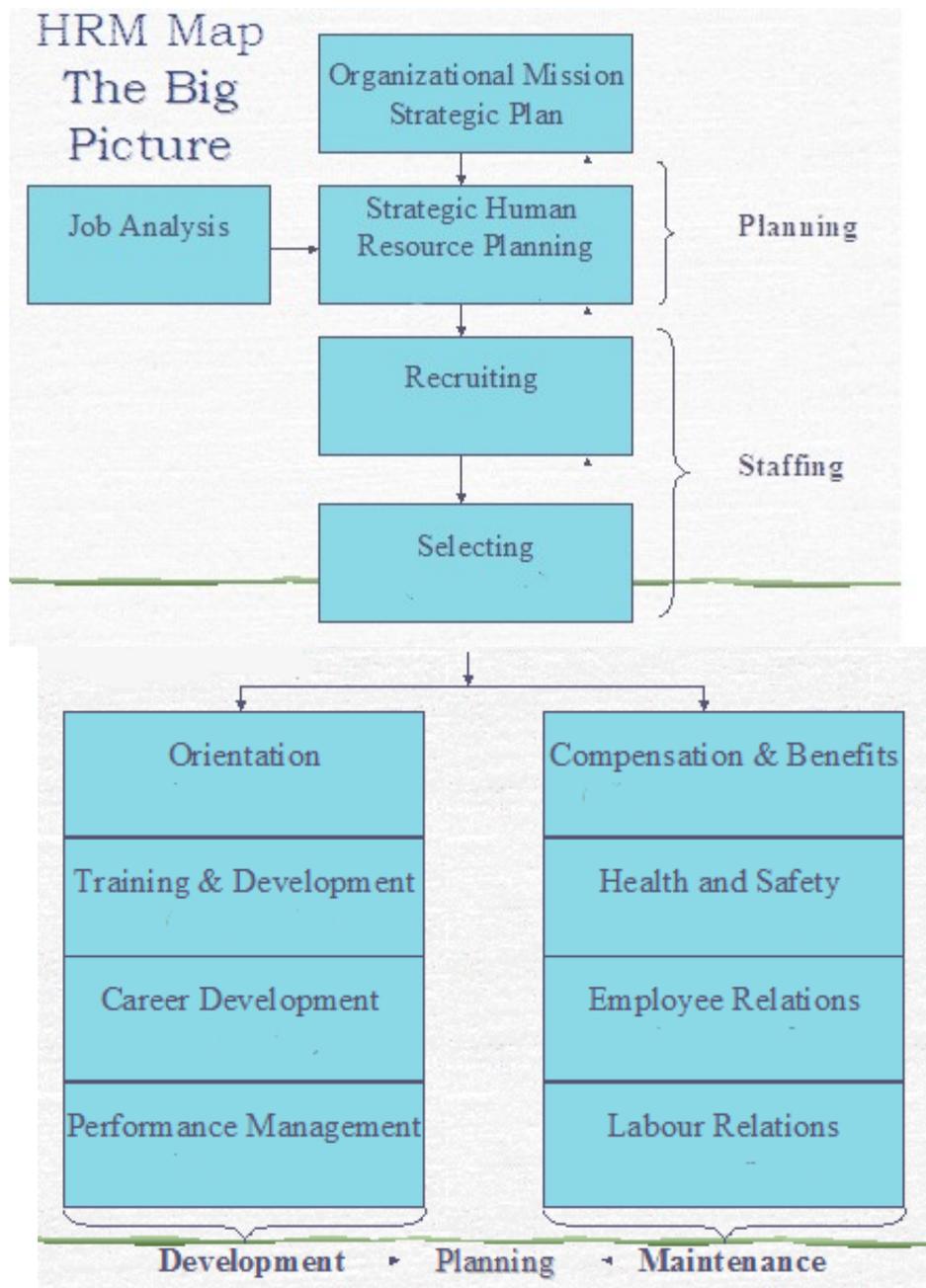
Finally, the instructor should ask students for alternatives and recommendations for addressing the problems at Roger’s Tire Experts. If the case study exercise is undertaken at the

beginning of an HRM course, it may be difficult to students to conceive of appropriate recommendations. Thus, the instructor may present alternatives or simply defer this part of the case analysis till students have acquired a clearer sense of HRM. Indeed, as the functions of HRM are addressed in the course, the instructor and students can ‘return’ to Roger’s Tire Experts and test and apply solutions to the problems.

## CONCLUSION

This article presented a quick and interactive way of introducing students to HRM. By soliciting students’ answers to a series of questions regarding a brief case study and then building the HRM map with their responses on a white board,

**FIGURE 1**  
**HRM MAP**  
(Schwind, Das, & Wagar, 2013)



the instructor helps students develop an integrative sense of how the HRM functions work together. Students from previous classes have expressed their astonishment at how the seemingly disparate pieces of the HRM puzzle come together to form a coherent model. Since this model serves as the basis for the remainder of the classes in an HRM course, it becomes etched in their minds, and they carry it with them when they become HR specialists.

## APPENDIX: CASE STUDY ROGER'S TIRE EXPERTS

Roger was ecstatic. The city administration had just approved his development plan to build a mega retail store/service garage across the street from his current location. The store would contain many new product lines, and the service garage would now offer state-of-the-art computer diagnostic equipment. He had thought of everything: the financing, a marketing plan, the slick new building, and the grand opening. And now, three months before the grand opening, he has hired you to see if there are any improvements that he could possibly make to his HRM practices.

Roger's Tire Experts has no HR department or manager because Roger insists on making all HR-related decisions himself. The business currently employs 50 people and would likely need another 100 or more. The thought of hiring people makes Roger cringe. According to Roger, employees cost money and they usually didn't have a "customer service" attitude, especially "the young ones."

Roger's policy had been to hire his staff in a local hotel bar based on two criteria:

- a) They must belong to the men's club of which his is a member; and
- b) They must beat him in an arm wrestling match.

Roger uses the hotel bar to do business regularly. In fact, every Saturday, he buys the boys a beer after work and tells them what he thinks of their work. He figures that the beer will dull the impact of the performance review.

Last Monday evening, Jimmy, a farmer in the surrounding area, approached Roger in the bar and asked for a job. He met Roger's stringent criteria, and Roger happened to have an opening. Roger recently fired the service manager, Larry, for spending an hour in the only toilet stall that the store had. Although this was the first incident of this nature in Larry's five years of employment, Roger felt that he had to take a stand. Because Jimmy had a large family, Roger agreed to pay him what Larry was being paid when he was dismissed. Tuesday morning, Roger showed Jimmy where the Service Centre was, introduced him to the 10 mechanics that would be reporting to him, and then left Jimmy to himself. Jimmy, not knowing what he was supposed to do, groaned as he saw a number of customers heading his way. As he turned away from the customers, he overheard the mechanics complaining about the limited possibilities for moving up in the company.

The other day a female mechanic with five years' experience asked Roger for a job in his new store, but Roger laughed and told her, "Go home where you belong. Women

don't belong in a tire store; it's too dangerous." In fact, it is dangerous. That very day a junior mechanic (Nathan, a 14 year old boy) was seriously injured when he tried to change a muffler without stopping the car's engine and while the car was held up only with a chain tied to the track of the overhead door. The customer was in a rush, and Roger had insisted that Nathan do the work quickly (for extra cash under the table). Nathan had never done this type of work before and didn't really want to do the work (but he knew he would get fired if he didn't). While doing the work, Nathan tripped over several used tires and knocked himself out on the cans of house paint that were being stored next to the welding equipment in the garage.

"I just can't get good staff anymore; they either want to join a union, fight over whose getting paid the most, or leave," Roger grumbled, "Where has the work ethic gone?" He had overheard his Sporting Goods manager, Colette, talking to the Hardware staff about joining a union. Roger noted to himself that he must give Colette an extra poor performance evaluation next year. Also, Roger planned to tell his staff that, if they continue with this union business, he would fire them all. However, with an annual turnover rate of 66%, Roger's store had a *revolving door*.

**You are now contemplating the situation at Roger's Tire Experts.** As an experienced HR consultant you have come across this type of situation many times. It's typical for managers who are less interested in the people side of their operation to ignore it or experience difficulties. In your report to Roger, answer the following questions:

- (1) What are all the HRM problems that exist?
- (2) What are the current and potential consequences of each of these problems?
- (3) What might be the financial cost to Roger's Tire if Roger continued to use the same HR practices?
- (4) Besides Roger himself, what is the root cause of the problems?
- (5) What are the more immediate problems that need to be addressed now?
- (6) What are the options that exist for addressing all the problems? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each option?
- (7) What key solutions will you recommend to Roger and why? In what order should he implement them?

Prepare a report for Roger that provides the specific guidance that he needs to be successful.

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