

CASE STUDY

Developing a leading Human Resource Business Partnering Programme at the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council

Background

The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) is the UK's principal public funder of research and training in the non-clinical life sciences. As one of the UK's seven Research Councils, BBSRC invests over £400M of public money each year in cutting-edge research and training across a remit that spans from agriculture and food through to basic biomedical science. BBSRC supports researchers working in UK universities and research institutes and in five BBSRC-sponsored Institutes.

BBSRC directly employs approximately 2,000 staff. Staff are based at a range of locations, including the BBSRC Office in Swindon, where functions such as policy, communications, peer review and grant administration are located, and in Research Institutes, where scientists in the institutes are supported by scientific and core services staff.

The challenge

BBSRC is undergoing significant changes, most notably with the establishment of a Shared Services Centre in Swindon. This centre is designed to handle a number of shared functions across all of the Research Councils including the multiple institutes that make up BBSRC, including HR, Finance and IS/IT and Procurement. With much of the day-to-day aspects of HR operations thus moving to Swindon, the opportunity to up-skill individual HR leaders at each institute presented itself.

Jan Juillerat, Interim Director Human Resources and Corporate Services, BBSRC explains: "Historically, each institute had its own local, autonomous HR function with dedicated staff but it became clear that moving to a Shared Services model across all the Research Councils would bring benefits in terms of cost, consistency and focus. Perhaps most importantly, we felt that the Shared Services model would also free the local Head of HR to add more strategic value to the organisation by removing the need to handle tactical, low-level HR responsibilities. In short, we wanted to transition the local staff from Head of HR functions to HR Business Partners according to the classic Ulrich model."

"The planning for transition to Shared Services had focussed on the operational changes but we knew that the behavioural changes would be key to the success of this new way of working for HR teams."

In order to do this, BBSRC worked with Roffey Park to design a programme that would equip those involved with the skills and confidence they needed to make the scheme a success.

"We have worked with Roffey for some time now on a leadership and management programme that has produced excellent results so it was a natural partner for this next phase of our organisational development," continues Jan. "The Roffey Park team are familiar with our unique culture as well as our organisational and strategic objectives; what's more, they have a great grasp of the HRBP model, having successfully helped other organisations make the transition!"



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The programme

Jan worked with the Roffey Park programme director to develop an ongoing process that would gradually support the individual Heads of HR to develop knowledge, skills and credibility to become fully fledged business partners. Although, initially this was not as straightforward as it might have seemed.

“At the outset, we did face a few objections from the HR teams. Firstly, some were unhappy that a portion of their daily responsibilities were being ‘outsourced’ to the Shared Services Centre and needed reassurance that their role was actually becoming strategically much more important,” comments Jan. “Secondly, our HR teams are hugely experienced and naturally challenging; they are all committed to supporting their institutes and we needed to remember that makes it difficult for them to redefine how they work. It’s also definitely not a ‘one size fits all’ culture at BBSRC and we needed to be fully aware of that while designing the programme.

“The most important thing for me was that the Heads of HR should identify for themselves how they each wanted to work as a Business Partner and what that would mean for the institute or office that they support.”

Roffey Park worked with BBSRC to design a comprehensive programme that kicked off in June 2008. Involving the Heads of HR and the HR managers, participants attended a series of eight workshops over the course of eighteen months. Beginning with a traditional introduction to the HRBP model, subsequent sessions were then tailored according to the needs, skills and priorities identified by the group. The development process moved from being led by Roffey to a facilitated group-led programme.

“For me, the great thing about the HRBP programme is that it is organic – meaning that we take a lot of input from participants and let that help shape the course of the

programme. It is not prescriptive in any way, which is just as well because that would be a complete turn-off for our experienced and independent-minded participants,” adds Jan. “Roffey Park have created a programme tailored to the objectives and culture of our organisation that is helping us unlock the potential of the HR teams.

The Results

Despite still being in the early stages of transition, the HRBP programme is already showing positive results: “Across the organisation, we can now say we are one committed HR team, rather than a collection of independent individuals with separate agendas and objectives. We’re choosing to engage together and meet regularly to discuss our common issues,” explains Jan. “We now have a clear understanding of how we can get added value from shared services and how we can exploit the change in structure rather than fear it. Our HR teams have the confidence and credibility to work within the executive teams to steer, shape and advise – leading as business partners in a proactive, rather than reactive fashion. Participants have identified the value of the time and space the programme offered to use the tools and techniques on live issues in peer discussion and sharing their expertise. We are well equipped to deal with this transition and the continual change of organisational life.”

Roffey Park has been critical to the successful design and deployment of the programme: “The Roffey Park team are more than just facilitators; their understanding of the HRBP field is exceptional and the partnering approach taken by them makes them much more than an external provider,” concludes Jan. “They have become an extension of the BBSRC team in many ways and their flexibility, experience and knowledge are invaluable. They and have made the entire process go smoothly, keeping our business objectives front and centre, but also incorporating the individual needs of the participants.”

