



Tom Haak, the director of the HR Trend Institute

**Interview:** Tom Haak, the director of the HR Trend Institute

# It is not one-size-fits all — choose your recipe

By **Tonja Blotnik**

*Between 4 and 5 of April Slovenia will turn into the center of HR excellence. Around 500 HR leaders from business and public sector will gather on the occasion of the 29<sup>th</sup> European HR Congress, titled "The Future is now - choose your recipe from around the world", supported also by The Slovenia Times. For the first time, European Association for People Management (EAPM), which connects 250,000 connected HR professionals from 31 countries, entrusted the co-organisation and hostage to of European HR Congress to Slovenia. With Slovenia, it will now be an Eastern Europe which will organize such an event for the very first time! This is an important milestone for local HR community, and a great honour for Slovenian Human Resource Association, led by Gregor Rajšp, especially if we take into consideration that EAPM. One of the keynote speakers is Tom Haak, the director of the HR Trend Institute, that follows, detects and encourages trends. Tom has an extensive experience in HR Management in multinational companies. He worked in senior HR positions at Fugro, Arcadis, Aon, KPMG and Philips Electronics. Tom has a keen interest in innovative HR, HR tech, workforce analytics and how organizations can benefit from trend shifts.*

**Q What defines a good HR professional? Are those characteristics/competencies changing over time?**

**A** It is not one-size-fits all. Let's not try to capture all the characteristics of the ideal HR professional in one person. The composition of the team, with a good level of diversity, is important. There are some characteristics though, I would expect in all HR professionals. **My top 6:**

- A business orientation, and loving the business you are working in.
- Being independent and not too submissive.
- The ability to design and implement high impact HR interventions.
- A real people focus, not too much oriented towards management.
- Able to deal with ambiguity.
- Curious and keen to learn a lot.

**Q Every year The HR Trend Institute publishes predictions of HR trends. Which did you choose for 2019?**

**A** You can find the extensive answer in my blog post "10 inspiring trends for 2019." There is one I would like to highlight. Number one is "personalization." Historically HR has focused very much on standardization and "one-size-fits-all." Making the shift to an approach where the individual's needs, wishes and capabilities are the starting point is difficult, but very important. HR can learn a lot from marketing here. All areas of HR can benefit from personalization.

**Q You are one of the keynote speakers at 29<sup>th</sup> EAPM Congress, giving the lecture "Future is now". Which will be the main takeaways for the audience? What are key messages you would like to stress in Bled?**

**A** The current trends, especially the fast technological developments, create a lot of opportunities for HR to increase its impact. Traditionally HR is rather slow and conservative. If you focus too much on the future, you often lose a lot of speed. I often see projects called "The Workforce of the Future", but maybe it is better to first focus on the workforce of today! I generally observe the following. HR interventions are not clearly related to the most burning business issues. HR wants to do too much and is not focused enough. HR does not use the power of people analytics and the implementation skills of HR can be a lot stronger. In Bled I will outline how to improve these areas, and how the impact of HR can be increased a lot, also by using current trends and innovative technology.

**Q Which questions should be "on the leader's table" every day? What are the most urgent HR issues in Europe?**

**A** The starting point should not be HR issues, but the urgent business issues that HR can help to address. Important themes for many organizations are related to questions like:

- How can we continue to grow in a sustainable way?
  - How do we accelerate our digital transformation?
  - How do we increase our capacity and productivity?
  - How do we stimulate innovation throughout the organization?
- HR managers should be very skilled in asking the right questions and determining what way HR can help to address the key issues, and focus on high-impact interventions. An example: increasing capacity, necessary for growth, is often too quickly solved with recruiting more people. There are many ways outside recruitment that can help to increase capacity. Use the potential of people better. Organize in a different way (less managers, more self-managed teams). Focus on connecting learning solutions to individual employees and connect them to the actual work.

**One generalization:** the potential of many people is under-utilized and a lot more people could be thrilled by the work they do. Using the potential to strengthen and develop the skills of people that are "future proof" is a European and, in fact, a global priority.

**Q In order to run company successfully, but also responsibly, and to have more impact with less effort, what advice would you give to managers? And what would you advise to the employees?**

**A Managers:** show a real interest in your people and help them to fulfill their potential.

**Employees:** do not make yourself too dependent on your managers. Ask "how can I improve myself, and how can I contribute to the growth of the organization?"

**Q Which organizations and companies are, in your opinion, leaders in advanced HR practices? Could you give some concrete examples of inspiring business cases?**

**A** Luckily there are many examples. Of course, there are the usual suspects, like Google, Netflix and Booking.com. As these organisations become bigger, they sometimes struggle to keep their focus on people. High ethical standards are very difficult to sustain. It is also not easy to avoid complex processes and rigid structures. When I worked at Arcadis, we launched a big program for high potentials in the world. It was called Global Shapers, and it is still running. Their key question was not "what should the high potentials learn," but "what can we learn from the high potentials?" The power of the new generations globally was used to tackle important strategic issues. Tilting the question can help in many areas, also, for example, in onboarding. Not "what do the new employees need to learn?" but "what can we learn from the new employees?" Some big companies are doing very cool things, like Deutsche, Telekom, and ING.

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**Q The slogan of EAPM congress is "#loveHR," why do you love it?**

**A** I love HR for several reasons. The domain fits very well with my interests. I am an experimental psychologist interested in people, technology, methodology and how scientific insights can be used in the workplace. For me, the HR domain gets more interesting every day. I love HR as well, as we can really make a difference in organizations, and as we can contribute to the digital transformations organizations are going through.

**Q What was the most important lesson in your life?**

**A** I would like to mention three. **One:** be persistent and never give up. **Two:** go with the flow. **Three:** think and act independently. **And overall:** make sure you have a lot of fun! Don't take yourself too seriously.

**Q What are you inspired by? Which is your favorite book, your role model, and your motto of life?**

**A** Inspiration I got a lot from Daniel Kahneman and Peter Senge. Kahneman is one of the greatest psychologists ever, and I recommend you read "Thinking Fast and Slow". Peter Senge wrote, in 1990, "The Fifth Discipline", about how to apply systems thinking in organizational life. Great insights, useful for everybody. ◀