THE HR CHAMELEON

In this *My HR Career* exclusive, guest contributor **LAURENCE SMITH** interviews a former colleague renowned for adapting his HR career to the fast-changing business environment. **OMMAR BUTT** has recently relocated to Singapore with NXP Semiconductors

I first met Ommar Butt when he was European Head of Compensation and Benefits for LG Electronics and based in the UK. He is now Director of HR – Mergers and Acquisitions for NXP Semiconductors. He has held roles in Talent Acquisition, as an HR generalist, and has worked on wide-ranging HR topics including culture, performance management, and employee value propositions.

I jokingly call him the "HR Chameleon" because of his wide breadth of roles and responsibilities, all in an upwardly progressing career. He recently relocated from Holland to Singapore with NXP, and it was a great opportunity to interview him and find out some of the thinking behind his very adaptive career.

Ommar, you seem to be the ultimate HR Chameleon, reinventing yourself as the firm or market changes. To what do you ascribe your talent for constant reinvention?

I'm not sure this is a *talent* as such. I can honestly say it just happened this way. There is a set of guiding principles, however, that I rely on whenever facing career-related decisions. All from different friends; these principles continue to resonate with me to this day:

● Never be afraid to take risks – especially if you suspect you may regret not taking them. *(From an American Senior Vice President of HR)*

● Forget about planning for the future, focus on having fun now. *(From a Dutch HR Director)*

● A career is give and take. Always be ready to give. *(From an Indian Vice President of Finance)*

● Focus on maximising your options, or at least keeping as many open for as long as possible. *(From a Dutch HR Business Partner)*

What would your advice be to people considering a career in HR, or still at an early stage: specialise, generalise, or be a "chameleon"?

Never listen to anybody that has a directive answer ready for you. Guiding principles and reasoning are fine but there is no correct path other than the one you think, and feel is right for you. Listen carefully to what others care to share, but always follow your heart.

When starting out, I'd stress that having a great manager is more important than picking your first role in HR. So:

● Try to unearth examples of your future manager being a great manager by asking team members during interviews.

● Ask your future manager about the careers of their past reports. Did they help facilitate anything? Do they light up with pride whilst sharing their stories?

Basically, try to find out whether someone will be facilitative to your growth or not.

What role have you found the most rewarding, and what made it so?

Designing and managing the workforce reduction process during a recent merger integration. Seldom do you have an HR role with such a defined and direct operational expenditure and earnings impact.

More interestingly, we also had to get creative with HR technology and co-create a solution that worked for many stakeholders.

As two large entities merge it's often impractical to move to a single HR system on Day One. So, for an interim period, the new combined company ran two HR systems. We needed to ensure that company-wide forecasting and reporting was possible at a granular level.

With the help of two Java programmers, we co-created a forecasting and reporting bridge between Workday and SAP. We coded modules that enabled headcount forecasting and reporting, provided deltas between forecast and actuals, and also between actuals and target. In addition, we built a severance tracker that tracked planned and actual leave dates, as well as cost and timing impacts, and linked those back to the forecasting and reporting.

So, two things made this interesting: the clear line of sight to financial impact, and the ability to co-create digital HR solutions with other functions.

That sounds a bit "high-tech". Do you consider yourself a digital native, and do you think it's important for HR practitioners to be digitally-savvy?

I'm not sure I know what a digital native is exactly - as the generational lines in the workforce blur and technologies change so fast.

I was programming in BASIC in 1990 as a hobby. And before becoming lazy, I was always running one or another Linux distribution, but mostly SuSe as at the time in Germany ADSL connectivity was supported well by SuSe. Coincidentally the logo for SuSe Linux is a chameleon – no joke!

I don't think HR practitioners need to be hardcore geeks; but I do think there is a lot of value in programmatic thinking as it guides process design and thinking.

What characteristics do you think make you adaptable and effective across so many different environments?

I'm going to chalk it down to circumstance. My mother is Maltese; my father Pakistani. I was born and grew up in London, and later Amsterdam. I lived and worked in Germany, Holland, and the UK and am now in Singapore.

NETWORKING FOR HR

Laurence Smith and Ommar Butt are the organising team behind the new HR Drinks monthly networking event. Held in Singapore monthly, and launching in other Asian cities soon, the invitation-only networking sessions aim to bring the professional HR community together to share best practice advice, case studies, or just a story or two.

For more information, or to register your interest, visit www.hrdrinks.com.
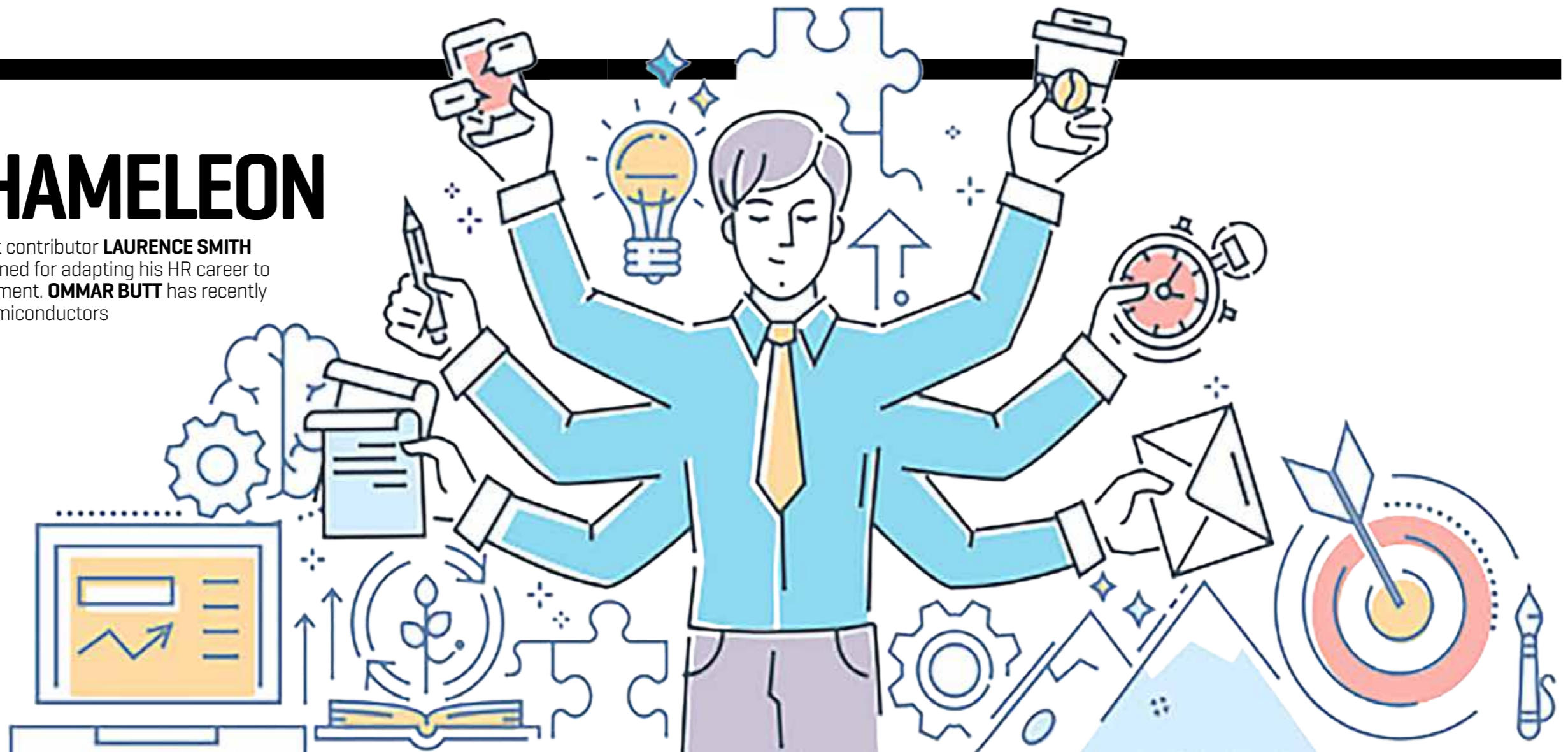
We have constantly found ourselves relocating, adapting, making mistakes, and learning new cultures and languages.

Knowing that there are different ways to get things done in different places means you learn to appreciate the value of flexing. Later, you learn that flexing – deliberately learning new ways of doing this – is fun and you actively seek out new opportunities.

When you work with others from different backgrounds, you are able to tap their different perspectives, experiences and creativity and can collectively choose the best path forward. And that makes the solutions you co-create so much more robust and valuable.

What do you see as the biggest challenges for the HR function moving forward?

Finding HR leaders that are equipped for and comprehend the next wave of digital HR transformation. Previous HR transformations focused on minimising costs and delivering services more efficiently, through functional and process redesign. By contrast, the next wave of HR transformations will be driven by:

● HR Analytics: the abundance and availability of data and our ability to meaningfully predict outcomes based on data.

● Customer-centricity: HR will act more and more like marketing, segmenting end users and focusing on experiences.

Understanding the interaction between the two, where customer-centricity and "applification" of HR service delivery leads to more measurement points, and where HR analytics provides tools to analyse and interpret the data, is paramount. Recording as many data points as possible now, even if they aren't being used today, means you can make connections and solve questions in the future. Companies that still don't even have a basic HR data lake really need to get started now or be a laggard going forward.

What competencies, skills, behaviors and tools, will help propel HR forward?

HR needs leaders that understand this pending change and how exactly they can enable it. They must be able to articulate the business case to invest today without immediate returns.

> ## "GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND REASONING ARE FINE BUT THERE IS NO CORRECT PATH OTHER THAN THE ONE YOU THINK, AND FEEL IS RIGHT FOR YOU"

Are the digital HR challenges the same in Asia? Or do you see unique challenges and opportunities?

I think the level of digital readiness in Asia differs tremendously by country, thus the challenges for each country will also differ at different stages of digitalisation. I recently came across a data set provided by an Economist Intelligence Unit report called Connecting Capabilities which confirmed two distinct groups: the leaders in digital readiness in this region are Singapore, South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Those catching up are: Malaysia, China, Thailand, India, the Philippines and Indonesia.

A similar grouping can be observed in the World Economic Forum's Networked Readiness Index: Singapore, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan are in the lead – Malaysia and China are playing catch-up.

The digital infrastructure investments made today by governments will either propel a country's digitalisation efforts or make clear the lack of prior investment.

Similarly, where HR leaders can clearly articulate the case for a foundational digital HR architecture, a focus on the customer experience of HR service delivery as well as a continuous HR innovation culture today; these will be the HR organisations that flourish in the future.

Finally, what are you most excited about in the future of HR?

Clearly, the tremendous opportunity for innovation in HR.

I'm not sure I understand; don't we always have that?

Yes, we do, but so far, I've been disappointed with the lack of innovation in HR. I'm still

hearing the same "what and how" models being pushed over and again. These models seem to imply that HR's "why" is universal in all companies, industries and at all stages of their life-cycles.

Finance is guided by the International Financial Reporting Standards and/or locally accepted accounting principles and fiscal reporting calendars. Their 'why' is universal so it makes sense to huddle behind the most effective "what and how" models and solutions.

Marketing is generally more innovative as they work backward from their customer segments, markets, channels and geographies. They have to balance push and pull strategies, working with the product they are given.

For some inexplicable reason, HR has rallied behind a wave of standardised HR transformations. It begs the question, whether the company-specific "why" to transform had been uncovered before moving on to the "what" and "how" solutions. Perhaps the "why" was just cost – in which case HR rightfully continues to be seen as 'just another cost center'.

Given the digitalisation of business models and functions, HR now more than ever, is at a cross roads. One road provides an exciting, customer-focused HR innovation and continuous re-invention journey. The other leads to mundane transaction and process-oriented HR functions, which will be the end of HR as a business function.

Only time will tell, I for one believe HR as a function is on the verge of a truly exciting and meaningful wave of change. **hrm**

About the authors

Laurence Smith Is a board-level advisor to SmartUp. io. With 25 years of working experience in consulting and HR, his career has spanned across different industries and countries, including as Managing Director of Learning and Development for DBS Bank.

Ommar Butt is Director of HR for Mergers and Acquisitions at NXP Semiconductors. where he has worked on several large transactions, both in an Integration Management Office capacity as well as in the lead role for HR.