



Skills Based Human Resource Management and Internal Mobility at Unilever A Case Analysis

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Abstract. Human resource management is moving from a job centered administrative function toward a skills centered system for allocating work, developing people, and retaining scarce capability. This paper examines Unilever as a case of skills based human resource management and internal mobility. The analysis focuses on how the company uses flexible work models, project based talent allocation, and employee purpose planning to respond to skill obsolescence and talent scarcity. Recent literature suggests that skills matching, digital HRM, sustainable HRM, and employee experience must be connected rather than treated as separate initiatives. Based on these perspectives, this study argues that a digital talent marketplace is not valuable merely because it improves staffing speed. Its deeper value depends on whether it creates trustworthy skills visibility, fair access to work opportunities, and a credible employment deal for employees. The case shows that internal mobility can strengthen organizational agility only when platform design is supported by managerial accountability and continuous learning routines.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, Internal Mobility, Talent Marketplace, Skills Based Organization, Employee Experience

1 Introduction

Human resource management has become a central mechanism through which firms respond to talent scarcity, technological change, and shifting employee expectations. The traditional HR model assumes that work can be organized around stable jobs, clear career ladders, and periodic training plans. That assumption is increasingly weak in large multinational firms where demand for skills changes faster than formal job descriptions. When work is decomposed into projects and capabilities, the organization needs a different HR architecture. It must know what skills employees already have, what skills the business will soon need, and how people can move across boundaries without losing security or identity.

Unilever offers a useful case for studying this transition because its HR initiatives have not been limited to remote work or digital recruitment. The company has experimented with internal project marketplaces, flexible assignment models, and employment arrangements that try to combine autonomy with security. These practices reveal

a more complicated question than whether technology can make HR more efficient. The real issue is whether a firm can redesign its internal labor market so that employees see mobility as a source of opportunity rather than as a transfer of risk.

This paper analyzes Unilever from a management perspective. It examines how skills visibility, internal mobility, and flexible employment can support business agility while also creating new governance problems. The central thesis is that skills based HRM is effective only when three conditions are present. The firm must create reliable data about employee capability, managers must release talent rather than hoard it, and employees must believe that flexible work will not weaken their long term career prospects. The case therefore treats HRM as a strategic coordination system rather than a set of isolated people practices.

2 Literature Review and Conceptual Basis

2.1 Skills Based Talent Management and Resilience

Recent HRM research has paid growing attention to the limits of fixed job structures. A skills matching perspective argues that talent management can improve strategic agility when organizations dynamically align individual skills with changing business needs[1]. This view is especially relevant for firms that face uncertain demand, rapid automation, and uneven skill shortages across functions. Related work on HRD and HRM integration shows that a skills based agenda requires more than training provision. It requires joint responsibility between the organization and employees for identifying capability gaps, building new skills, and redeploying talent across conventional boundaries[2].

Sustainable HRM extends this argument by asking whether people practices create durable value for both the organization and employees. Empirical work indicates that sustainable HRM practices can increase employee resilience and work engagement, which in turn support performance outcomes[4]. This matters for internal mobility because mobility can easily become a managerial tool for extracting flexibility from employees. A sustainable approach treats skill development as a long term employment promise. It asks whether the worker gains a stronger future position as the firm gains a more adaptable workforce. In that sense, skills based HRM is not simply a staffing technique. It is a test of whether the employment relationship can remain credible under constant change.

2.2 Digital HRM and Employee Experience

Digital HRM research shows that technology can improve HR performance, but the results depend on how employees experience the system. A study of an AI based HR ecosystem in a multinational enterprise finds that employee experience is a missing link between digital HR architecture and employee engagement[3]. Digital platforms can create faster matching, broader visibility, and more personalized development paths, yet they can also generate opacity if employees do not understand how opportunities

are recommended or why some people receive access before others. A talent marketplace therefore needs procedural clarity as much as technical accuracy.

Meta analytic evidence on digital HRM suggests positive associations with user, HRM, and firm level performance outcomes[6]. Nevertheless, HR technology does not operate in a social vacuum. Research on HRM system strength during crisis emphasizes the importance of distinctive, consistent, and consensual information from managers[5]. This insight is crucial for the Unilever case. A marketplace platform may show available work, but managers still shape whether employees receive time, encouragement, and political permission to participate. Digital HRM therefore becomes effective only when the formal platform and the informal managerial climate reinforce the same message.

3 Case Background

Unilever is a multinational consumer goods company with a wide portfolio of food, home care, beauty, and personal care brands. Its workforce operates across many markets, functions, and professional communities. Like many large firms, Unilever has faced pressure from changing consumer demand, automation, sustainability priorities, and stronger competition for digital and commercial talent. These pressures have made static workforce planning less reliable. Skills that were sufficient for a mature product line may not be enough for digital commerce, data based marketing, supply chain resilience, or new sustainability requirements.

The company responded by experimenting with a broader future of work agenda. One important component has been an internal marketplace that allows employees to take projects outside their ordinary job boundaries. The platform aims to reveal skills that are not visible in formal job titles and to connect employees with projects that can build new capability. Another component has been the U Work model, which attempts to offer flexible assignments while retaining an employment relationship. Together these initiatives suggest that Unilever is trying to replace a narrow job ladder with a more fluid internal labor market.

This case does not present Unilever as a completed model that other firms can copy without adaptation. Its relevance lies in the tensions that become visible when a large firm tries to make work more flexible without abandoning responsibility for employee development. The same system that expands opportunity can also create uncertainty. Employees may gain access to projects, but they may also worry about evaluation, workload, and the value of their original role. Managers may gain a wider pool of talent, but they may resist losing capable employees to other functions. The case is therefore useful because it reveals both the promise and the fragility of skills based HRM.

4 Case Analysis

4.1 From Job Architecture to Skills Visibility

The first strategic change in the Unilever case is the movement from job architecture toward skills visibility. In a conventional HR structure, the job title carries most of the information. It tells managers where a person belongs and what career path appears legitimate. This system is simple, but it wastes hidden talent. An employee may possess language skills, digital skills, project experience, or community knowledge that is not captured by the current role. A skills based platform changes the basic unit of HR analysis. Instead of asking only where an employee sits in the hierarchy, it asks what the employee can contribute to emerging work elsewhere in the firm. This improves workforce planning and challenges the authority of traditional departments. The main risk is data quality. If skills profiles are incomplete or inflated, matching will favor employees who are already confident and visible. HR must therefore treat skills data as an organizational asset that requires standards, verification, and regular renewal.

4.2 Rebuilding Internal Mobility

The second change is the attempt to make internal mobility routine rather than exceptional. In many large companies, employees are told that careers are bound-aryless, while actual movement depends on personal networks and managerial permission. Unilever's internal project marketplace tries to narrow that gap by making short term opportunities visible across functions. Employees can test new areas without leaving the firm, managers can access capability more quickly, and the organization can redeploy talent toward urgent priorities. The deeper value is the reduction of friction in the internal labor market. Employees gain evidence of capability that may later support a career transition, while the organization learns which skills transfer across categories, geographies, and functions. Yet the system will fail if project work becomes extra labor added to normal workloads. Internal mobility must be built into capacity planning.

4.3 Balancing Flexibility and Employment Security

The third issue is the balance between flexibility and security. Many firms celebrate flexible work while shifting uncertainty onto employees. A responsible HRM model must avoid this trap. Unilever's flexible assignment approach is notable because it tries to preserve a continuing employment relationship while allowing people to work through assignments that fit changing life circumstances. This is not simple gig work. The employee remains connected to the organization and can access a degree of income stability, benefits, and institutional belonging. The company can retain experienced people who might otherwise leave because full time fixed roles no longer fit their life stage. The weakness is that such models are complex to govern across countries. Labor regulation, tax rules, social insurance systems, and local norms differ. HR must adapt the design while protecting the principle of flexibility with security.

4.4 Employee Experience as a Control Mechanism

The fourth dimension concerns employee experience. Internal mobility platforms often begin as technology projects, but their survival depends on trust. Employees will not reveal their skills, interests, or career aspirations if they fear that the information will be used against them. They will also hesitate to join temporary projects if their formal managers interpret participation as disloyalty. Unilever's purpose-oriented career planning addresses this problem by framing mobility around development rather than only business demand. This framing matters because employees need to see the platform as a place to build identity, not only as a place to supply unused capacity. Purpose language becomes empty if it is detached from evaluation and workload protection. Employees who take mobility opportunities should not be punished through slower promotion, weaker performance scores, or informal exclusion from home teams.

4.5 Managerial Resistance and Platform Governance

The fifth problem is managerial resistance. A talent marketplace can threaten the local power of line managers because it makes capable employees visible to the wider firm. Managers who are judged mainly on short-term unit performance may prefer to keep strong employees in place, even when a cross-functional project would create more enterprise value. HR cannot rely on platform access alone. It must change managerial incentives. Releasing talent should be recognized as a contribution to the firm, not treated as a departmental loss. The governance system also needs rules about project approval, employee time allocation, feedback, and conflict resolution. Without these rules, powerful managers will shape the marketplace informally. The result would reproduce the same network-based inequality that the platform was supposed to reduce.

4.6 Strategic Value and Human Limits

The final issue is whether skills-based HRM creates strategic value without reducing people to skill inventories. The strategic value is clear. A firm with better knowledge of internal skills can respond faster to disruptions, reduce unnecessary external hiring, and give employees more reasons to stay. It can also identify future capability gaps before they become operational failures. Yet a purely instrumental view would be dangerous. Employees are not bundles of isolated competencies that can be shifted endlessly between projects. They need role identity, social connection, recovery time, and a fair sense of progression. Unilever's case shows that the future of work cannot be solved by a marketplace metaphor alone. Markets allocate resources, but organizations also need community, obligation, and care. Too much market logic weakens trust. Too much bureaucracy weakens agility.

5 Conclusion and Future Research

The Unilever case offers a clear lesson for human resource management. Skills based HRM is not simply a new label for training, staffing, or digital HR. It is a redesign of the internal labor market. Its success depends on the quality of skills data, the fairness of opportunity access, the willingness of managers to share talent, and the credibility of the employment deal offered to employees. The case also shows that employee experience is not a soft supplement to strategy. It is the condition under which employees decide whether to disclose capability, accept mobility, and invest effort in new forms of work.

Future research should examine whether internal talent marketplaces produce durable career gains rather than short term project participation. Longitudinal studies could track whether employees who use such systems obtain stronger promotion outcomes, broader skill portfolios, and higher retention over several years. Comparative research should also test how flexible employment models work across different legal systems and cultures. A final research direction concerns managerial behavior. Scholars should investigate which incentive designs make managers willing to release talented employees for enterprise wide value creation. These questions will determine whether skills based HRM becomes a serious organizational capability or remains polished language for temporary flexibility.

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