



## Reimagining HR's Most Misunderstood Role: The HRBP

By Joe Gammal, Bob Schuetz and Natalie Pantaleo

### FULL DISCUSSION OF THE CASE FOR CHANGE

Matthew Mayoh is a Human Resources Director who prides himself on being able to pinpoint the salary of any role with one exception; the Human Resource Business Partner (HRBP). That's because, as Mayoh states in a February 2017 CapabilityHR.com piece, "The HRBP is now used as something of a catch-all title for people who were once known by the more appropriate titles of HR Officer, HR Advisor, HR Consultant or HR Manager, as well as for those who do the bigger picture, more strategic work."

If an HRBP title prompts a bit of head scratching for a 17-year recruitment expert, we're wondering if HRBPs, especially newly appointed ones, also find their roles blurry at times.

The role of HRBP elicits a somewhat different question for us: *What are the competencies that Chief Human Resource Officers (CHROs) ought to seek when recruiting, hiring, developing, or promoting staff to an HRBP position?*

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) identifies seven HRBP competencies:

- Business Acumen
- Communication
- Consultation
- Ethical Practice
- Global & Cultural Awareness
- Relationship Management
- HR Expertise

While these competencies certainly address overarching, general qualities expected of mid-to-senior level HR professionals, they're just that – general. What's missing are the more specific situational or contextual competencies that an HRBP needs when called upon by the Business Unit (BU) to help **better recruit, hire,**

**develop, engage, or promote the organization’s human capacity** – especially in a more strategic fashion and in a rapidly changing future. The gap between the capabilities of most HRBPs and what is being demanded of them is wide, and it’s costly.

According to [Gartner Group’s research on HRBPs](#), 82% of HRBPs are not effective at strategic activities. We believe this gap will only widen as the rates of change, complexity, and uncertainty in the business environment increase and, along with them, the challenges for managing and igniting our human capital. **However, rather than accept this disconnect, we believe there is potential to reimagine the role of the HRBP and not only close the current gap but create new opportunities for far greater meaning and far greater strategic impact on the organization and its people.**

First, a look back on the HRBP role. It’s almost impossible to complete a discussion about the HRBP role without acknowledgement that its creation lies in the seminal (at the time – early 1990s) work of David Ulrich -- professor, author, management coach, and consultant. Ulrich is best known in human resources thought leadership circles for positing a redefined HR model featuring a metaphorical “three-legged stool” -- transactional HR, HR Centers of Excellence (COEs), and HR Business Partners. In Ulrich’s model, HRBPs are viewed as integral and strategic members of BU leadership teams.

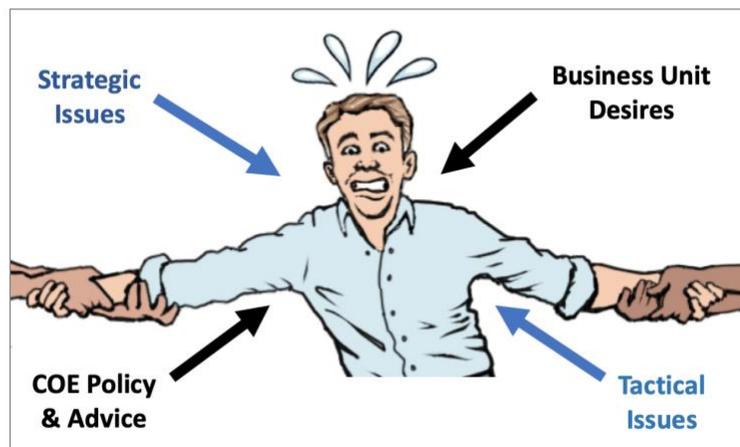
The stool was a powerful metaphor at the time, serving the purpose of introducing the HRBP as a new role. The idea of a *third leg* accomplished that. What the metaphor lacks is guidance for how the role most effectively operates contextually, especially in business today, and, even more importantly, as we move into the future.

HRBPs are often called upon to address, on one hand, a BU’s strategic, people-related issues and corporate challenges, while on the other hand also deal with tactical HR functional expectations. For example, if an HRBP walks in one morning and finds that the pricing on a job offer in the BU is being challenged, the HRBP might question whether or not to treat the challenge as a strategic disconnect or send it to the appropriate compensation COE specialist to handle it. It’s tempting to spend time focusing on this one-off tactical issue; however, doing so renders the HRBP less able to help steward the bigger challenge of creating, with key COE’s and the BU stakeholders, an overall compensation strategy to successfully compete in the emerging recruiting marketplace.

Variations of Ulrich’s model are still alive and well in many organizations where the concept of an embedded HR generalist inside of a BU serves up a broad menu of services based on their *customer’s* needs-of-the-day. Nonetheless, what arises are **two dimensions of apparent tension**; the first is in balancing the often-conflicting points of view of the COE and BU, and the second is in balancing both strategic and tactical activities.

This often leaves the HRBP “stuck in the middle” along both dimensions.

#### HRBP Role – Stuck in the Middle Along Two Dimensions of Tension



## COE vs Business Unit

Critics of Ulrich's model point to a challenge of conflict between COE and the Business Unit. As Nigel Bastow, Principal Consultant at London's Global Career Company recruitment firm writes in a LinkedIn article entitled, *Ulrich model - "To Be or Not to Be?" - That Is the Question*, "there is a real danger of the HRBP becoming 'piggy in the middle' between their customer in the business unit who wants something done in a particular fashion, and the respective COE at "corporate" who informs them that it cannot be done that way!" The COE will often take a stand based on the policy, or the "right" way, and as a result be seen as rigid. Whereas, the BU needs expediency for results and can be seen as cutting corners for a short-term gain.

## Strategic vs Tactical

Anyone perusing the HR blogs will agree this is a well-covered topic of discussion. As Vivian Mora, author of [\*Tactical HR vs Strategic HR: A Battle You Can't Win!\*](#) sees it, tactical and strategic efforts are dynamic partners; they're just not always equal partners. She writes, "For most HR leaders, the goal is to shift the balance to the share held by the strategic. However, it is a fact of corporate life that if the tactical is not taken care of appropriately, it will hold court indefinitely." In another statistic provided by Gartner, only 9 hours of an HRBP's entire work week is dedicated to strategic activities.

So, what's a better metaphor now? Is it Traffic cop? Help Desk Dispatcher? All-knowing oracle of HR? Actually, none of these works completely. The first two reduce its potential to that of only a connector, and the last not only overpromises what the HRBP can deliver but creates potential competition and conflict with the COE's.

Before exploring any new metaphor, we must first ask what's needed to cultivate the real value an HRBP can bring to everchanging environments?

## **A New Model for HRBP Engagement Success – *Facilitative Problem-Solving for the "People Side" of the Business Unit***

We believe that HRBPs need to know how to manage both strategic objectives and tactical duties as well as bridge and harness the skills of all stakeholders in the Business Unit, in the Centers of Excellence and elsewhere to solve the problems that arise whatever they may be. The model we propose has three characteristics:

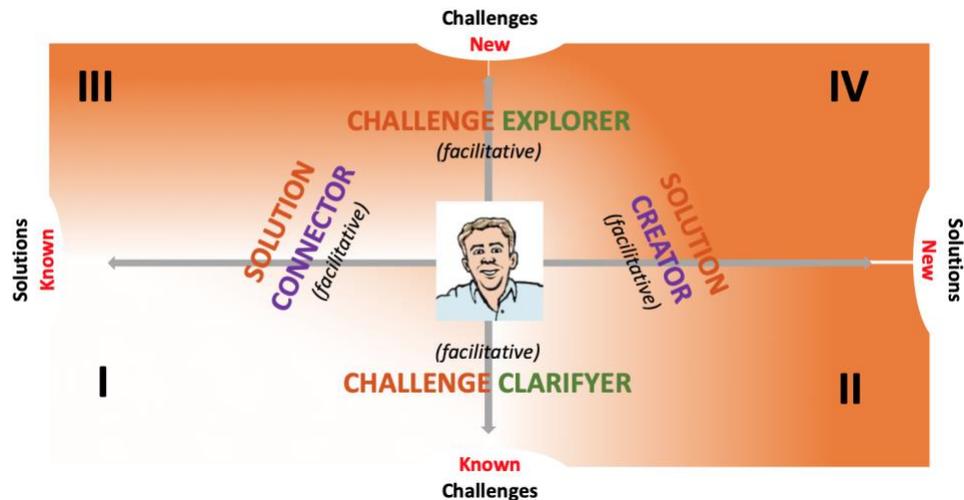
- First, the HRBP must be ready to **navigate the human dynamics** of having one foot in the business unit and one foot in HR. Some situations may pit "corporate HR/COE" policies against what the business unit believes it wants. Knowing how to bring these together in **achieving the higher-level intentions** of both is important.
- Second, while some challenges are well known with straightforward solutions, others may require a whole new approach with entirely new solutions. The HRBP must **understand how to first explore and discover** the essence of situations that are at the heart of both **employee experience and value creation**, and then guide creative and collaborative **design of new approaches to address them**.

- Finally, the HRBP must simultaneously **balance time spent on future organizational strategies and objectives with time on tactical get-it-done initiatives**. It all must get done. However, an HRBP can't do it alone. He or she must know how to create leverage with those who, together, can. The HRBP is at the center of all of these dynamics.

In considering the factors above, we submit that the essential new competencies for the HRBP are those of a **“Facilitative Problem-Solver” for the people side of the business**. The HRBP as Facilitative Problem-Solver is ready to call upon these new competencies according to: (1) whether the *challenge* at hand is either well understood or requires exploration, and (2) whether the *solution* for it is either already known or must be created.

### HRBP Role as a **Facilitative Problem-Solver** for the Business Unit

Illustrated by the shading in the four quadrants of the matrix to the right, the answer to these two questions define both the degree of complexity of the situation's resolution and, importantly, the opportunity for strategic impact. They also reflect, accordingly, the roles into which the HRBP must step.

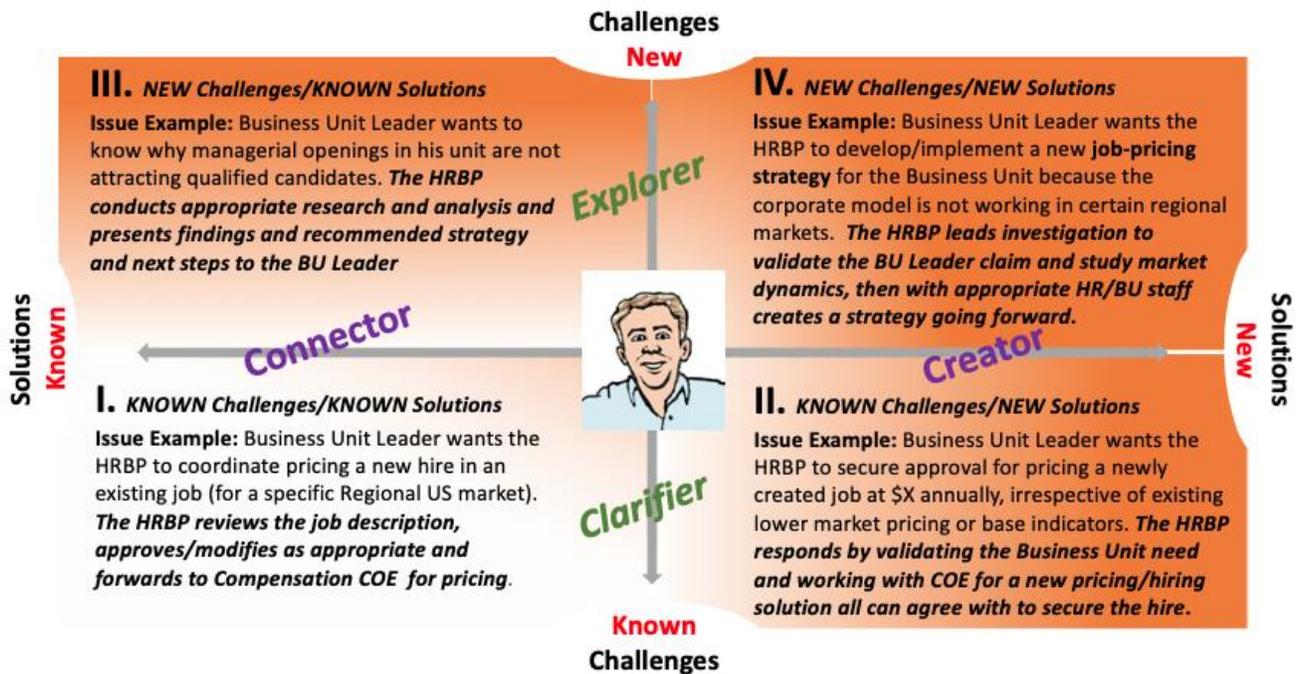


- Quad I. Known Challenges/Known Solutions – Easy Resolution**  
**Roles: Challenge Clarifier & Solution Connector** – Well known or understood challenges are presented by the BU to the HRBP. The HRBP clarifies, rearticulates, and either provides the solution directly or accesses the system of resources (COE's, etc.) to resolve them.
- Quad II. Known Challenges/New Solutions – More Difficult Resolution**  
**Roles: Challenge Clarifier & Solution Creator** – Known challenges are presented by the BU to the HRBP; The HRBP clarifies, rearticulates, and works with stakeholders to creatively & collaboratively design and develop NEW solutions to resolve them.
- Quad III. New Challenges/Known Solutions – More Difficult Resolution**  
**Roles: Challenge Explorer & Solution Connector** – Helping discover or tease-out the real problems and reframe them so that the BU can see people challenges clearly with new eyes and from a human-centered perspective; The HRBP provides the solution or accesses the system of resources to resolve them.
- Quad IV. New Challenges/New Solutions – Complex Resolution**  
**Roles: Challenge Explorer & Solution Creator** – Helping uncover the real problems and reframe them so that the BU can see the people challenges clearly with new eyes and from a human-centered perspective; The HRBP works with stakeholders to creatively & collaboratively develop NEW solutions for them.

Today, most of an HRBP's time is spent putting out fires in Quadrant I. Our ambition is to enable a shift to Quad II and III, and most especially IV. In these lie the greatest potential for strategic impact.

Let's look at some situational scenarios using the topic of "compensation" to illustrate these roles.

## HRBP Challenge Scenarios: Compensation Example



### New Competencies and Training in Facilitative Problem-Solving to Support HRBPs

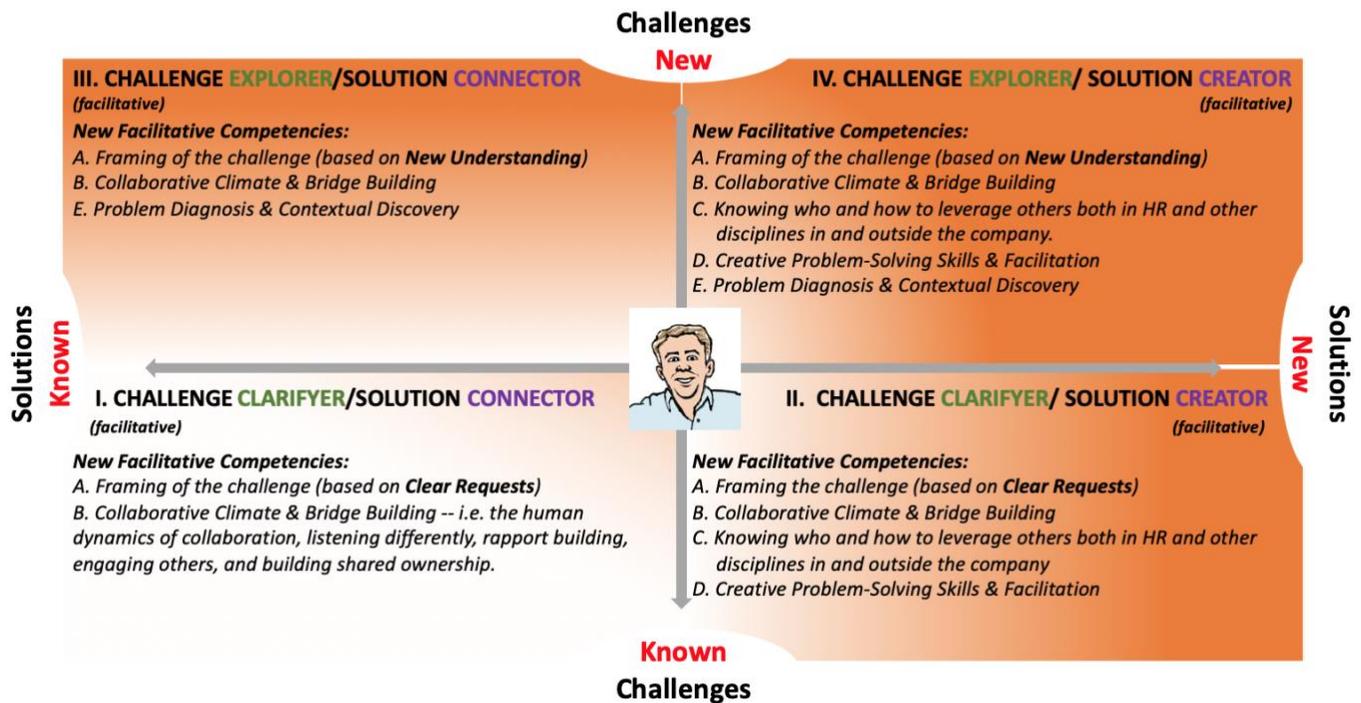
As we continue to consider examples across this matrix of needs, it becomes apparent that the essential underlying challenge facing HRBPs is: *knowing how to harness the expertise of others to quickly resolve tactical needs, while also providing energy, focus, and guidance to collaboratively create new solutions to the more strategic people-challenges facing the BU and larger organization.*

In considering this challenge, we believe that **HRBPs would greatly benefit from becoming more effective innovative business problem-solvers as well as facilitators of such efforts.** With this potential, what new competencies would they need to achieve this?

A significant number of professional organizations already recognize the benefit of effective facilitation. Acquiring more specialized facilitative and consultative skills in innovative problem-solving will accelerate results and optimize time management by harnessing the power of diverse existing resources. With the right kind of training, HRBPs could be poised to still sit squarely in the middle; yet instead of being at the center of tension, they can act as a "bridge" between the BU, COEs, and others -- providing guidance and, when needed, new solutions that have shared ownership across the business.

Mapping back to our matrix of needs, we see the necessity for new and different competencies depending on the nature of the challenge (see “Facilitative Problem-Solver Competency Mapping”).

## New HRBP Facilitative Problem-Solver Competency Mapping



In Quadrant I, where “known challenges” can be met by “existing solutions”, an HRBP is already well trained to immediately provide the solution or connect to those in the COEs that can. It’s a place, however, where HRBPs can get drawn into spending most of their time. The goal here in Quadrant I is adding a few new competencies around problem-framing and collaboration (“A” and “B” in the matrix) that can make the resolution quicker and by the right people so that an HRBP can bring more focus to the needs in the other, higher impact, quadrants.

As we move into **Quadrant II (&IV)**, where the old solutions just aren’t good enough, new skills are required (“C” and “D” in the matrix) to help break people out of their current frames of reference, to help them think differently, creatively, and open-mindedly in order to create and implement new solutions – new solutions that with shared ownership can be successfully executed with impact in the business.

As we move into **Quadrant III (& IV)**, where the challenges are new and not yet well understood, there is a whole new set of skills required that address problem exploration (“E” in the matrix). Problem Diagnosis and Exploration, or more simply “problem-finding”, is a valuable skill that is more nuanced than what it might seem. Problems disguise themselves. The true challenges are not always what they initially appear to be, and, as they are people based, the understanding needs to be human-centered.

**Quadrant IV is the most complex** and requires the broadest sensibilities and capabilities to help people open-mindedly understand the drivers of current and future challenges, and then invent the new possible solutions they will require. It’s also in this the quadrant that the most far reaching strategic opportunities for impact lie.

While it may seem daunting to play in all quadrants, the idea of “facilitation” is that the HRBP need NOT be the expert or “solution giver” for all HR challenges. As a skilled facilitator, it’s really about engaging the right and often

surprising knowledge resources in and outside the business to create those new, better solutions. And since people embrace what they create, the solutions have a higher likelihood of success, as well.

Underlying all of this, and perhaps the true art of problem-solving facilitation, is managing the human dynamics -- the interaction and communication opportunities and disruptions that inevitably arise. We call this managing “the emotional field or climate” within people and among stakeholders in the business unit, in the COEs, across HR and the organization. Without the right creative and collaborative climate, it’s a long road. With it, we know anything is possible.

Our observed matrix of needs and competencies suggest an engagement model for HRBPs that is empowered by the art and science of facilitation, better enabling HRBPs to be transformational influencers, liaisons and leaders in a very quickly changing workplace.

An early indicator of the potential of this model in HR can be seen in the overwhelming success within Mercer Consulting’s *HR Effectiveness Practice*. Across a ten-year period starting in the late 1990’s, over 100 HR consultants globally were trained in innovative problem-solving facilitation by Synecticsworld®, Inc. as a routine development protocol. The hit rate in successfully winning proposed engagements rose substantially as did the success of the engagements themselves. It enabled practitioners to sell and deliver projects that clients took notice of because they provided more innovative, non-traditional solutions. . . that worked.

So now, back to the question posed earlier, what could be a much better, more inspiring, and unlocking metaphor for HRBPs than “the third leg,” “piggy in the middle,” “traffic cop,” or “all-knowing oracle of HR?”

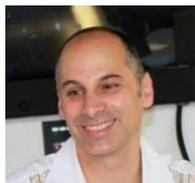
One possibility is that of a “bridge” – a facilitative problem-solving bridge. The magic is not the bridge, the magic is what the bridge enables. It creates a space for people and worlds to come together. It helps bring people from where they are today to where they wish to go – from known challenges to understanding new challenges, and from old solutions to new ones. Sometimes that destination is very clear, sometimes that destination is quite foggy, and the path to it daunting. In essence, the Mercer consultants mentioned above were fulfilling the very “bridge-building” behaviors and competencies that we believe can unlock the potential of today’s HRBP. The “bridge” of an expert facilitative problem-solver makes it easier for those in the business, those across HR, and those with outside perspective to come together and solve the biggest people-based challenges of the enterprise.

With you, we look forward to exploring this new model as well as metaphors that might help us reimagine and clarify the HRBP role and its potential for future impact.

---

---

### **Authors:**



**Joe Gammal** is Managing Partner of Synecticsworld, Inc. Joe’s work and passion are at the center of human potential -- creating breakthrough new value while inspiring and fostering more collaborative, creative, and innovative leaders, teams and organizations. He’s a seasoned innovation and creative group problem-solving facilitator, coach, speaker, and trainer working with leaders globally to create growth and meaningful change. Joe received a BS with Distinction from Worcester Polytechnic Institute and an MBA from the Amos Tuck School at Dartmouth. Prior to his close to 20 years with Synecticsworld, Joe held executive and product marketing positions helping to start and grow new businesses, teams, products, and brands (Apple, Hasbro, Arthur D. Little, IBM).



**Robert Schuetz** is currently President of RS Solutions, LLC, a firm assisting leaders in the assessment, planning and execution of change through people. He has a BS in mathematics, an MS in computer science, and an MBA from the University of Pittsburgh. Bob also formally trained on effective facilitation techniques at Synecticsworld in Cambridge, MA. and is currently a Community Partner with the firm. Prior to founding RS Solutions, LLC, Bob was a Worldwide Partner in Mercer Consulting's Human Capital business and Global Business Leader for its HR Effectiveness Practice. He has consulted in the US, South America, Canada, Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

#### **Contributing Editor:**



**Natalie Pantaleo** is a marketing-communications director who understands the essential nature, creative energy and power when positioning, meaningful content and collaboration combine. She's led departments in banking, healthcare, retail, nonprofit and education through strategic planning and many noteworthy campaigns. Throughout her career, Natalie has partnered with HR colleagues on employee engagement initiatives and performance excellence teams. As a PhD student in Industrial/Organizational Psychology, she was introduced to Synectics®, leading her to pursue creative problem-solving facilitation and to join Synecticsworld® as a Community Partner. Natalie is a published features writer.

Synecticsworld® is a leading authority on the human dynamics of creativity, innovation, and collaboration with 60 years of research, an evolving Body of Knowledge, and training programs for its proprietary and proven successful process for creating breakthrough solutions to the most challenging of problems.

**New Workshops:** For information on Synecticsworld signature programs for **Elevating the Strategic Impact of Internal Business Partners & Relationship Managers** visit <https://synecticsworld.com/training/elevating-the-strategic-impact-of-internal-business-partners-and-relationship-managers>.

To personally explore topics related to elevating the impact of HR, this article or the courses, please contact Joe Gammal at [jgammal@synecticsworld.com](mailto:jgammal@synecticsworld.com), or Bob Schuetz at [robert.j.schuetz@gmail.com](mailto:robert.j.schuetz@gmail.com).



[www.synecticsworld.com](http://www.synecticsworld.com)