

Career Corner



Matthew Owenby

Senior Vice-President & CHRO Aflac, Inc.

Interviewed by: William Heisler, Ph.D., Professor and Editor-in-Chief, *JHRE*, Sorrell College of Business, Troy University

Matthew Owenby is the Chief HR Officer for Aflac, a Fortune 500 company headquartered in Columbus, GA that provides financial protection to more than 50 million people worldwide. When a policyholder or insured gets sick or hurt, Aflac pays cash benefits fairly, promptly, and often in one day for eligible claims, directly to the insured (unless assigned otherwise). For more than six decades, Aflac voluntary insurance policies have given policyholders the opportunity to focus on recovery, not financial stress. Perhaps, you know them better for their humorous commercials featuring the Aflac duck.

Owenby earned his bachelor's degree in human resources from Georgia State University and joined GE Power Systems as a contract recruiter following graduation in September 1998. Later in his career, he obtained a MBA degree from Mercer University, majoring in corporate finance. He has served in his present position for the past six years, having, as he puts it, held "too many other positions to count." These "other" positions included such titles as Recruiter/HR Representative, Compensation Consultant, Learning Advisor, HR Manager, HR Director, and Regional HR Director.

I asked Owenby about the value of his formal education. He conceded that it contributed to his success in the HR field. However, he went on to point out that, while some of the classes and content were dated, the overall curriculum and the way it was delivered was helpful in establishing a strong basic understanding of his chosen career path. He went on to acknowledge that his education would have been more helpful had it provided more access to professionals who were succeeding in the field of study in the real world. This would have provided additional perspectives of the HR field and a better understanding of what to expect and the challenges he would face working in the HR function.

When asked about his views on HR certification, Owenby said that he believes they are a good market signal and, just like a CPA, if you intend on being a professional HR person, you should go and get the certifications. He also supports advanced education in HR, depending on the

program. He was emphatic that program must be based in reality and have a focused, pragmatic approach to learning and teaching students real-world, situational learning.

In his current position, Owenby's time is split between developing strategies and approaches to execute existing plans and planning for the future. From his perspective, "We tend to be in a perpetual state of determining where we want to go, planning for how we get there, and executing a plan (while modifying on the run, as needed).

When asked what he sees as the most important issues or challenges facing HR today, Owenby responded "Being considered a true employee advocate while, at the same time, being considered a credible business influencer." He said that his role is a blend of the two. "We have people who are carrying the banner for the business, so I am really here to be an advocate for our employees in the context of our business strategy." "However," he goes on to say, "I do strive to understand and know the business as well or better than the business people so that I can apply the HR strategy and align it to the long-term business objectives." He points out that this is hard to do if you don't really understand the business.

Owenby believes that the nature and requirements of the HR job have changed significantly over the years since he began his career. Today, he says the position requires materially more financial and business acumen than in the past. It also requires a greater ability to use information technology and analyze data. To him, the most important competencies or KSAs that individuals need to be successful in HR are the following:

- A solid understanding of how business financials work in the context of your business
- High business acumen - knowing the business as well or better than the business leaders
- Being a subject matter expert in the basics of HR

He believes the best way to develop these attributes is by being a continuous learner (i.e., being intellectually curious). He advocates that HR professionals never stop looking for opportunities to learn and improve themselves. "Ask questions. The world is changing quickly. You must be prepared to invest in your continuing development."

What attracted Owenby to AFLAC? Owenby says he "loved the brand" and though they had a compelling opportunity that he thought he could help fulfill. He also loved the people, the culture, and the values. As he puts it, "It was a great fit for me, all the way around."

As for the HR field itself, Owenby concludes "Never lose sight of your purpose. Taking care of the employees is your main priority."

Accolades for Aflac appear to mirror the philosophy expressed by Owenby. Fortune magazine named Aflac to its list of "The 100 Best Companies to Work For", ranking Aflac 58th among the best companies in America. This is the 20th consecutive year that Aflac has made the list. Black Enterprise magazine included Aflac on its list of 50 Best Companies for Diversity for the eleventh time in its January 2018 edition and Aflac has been named to Latina Style magazine's list of the

50 best companies for Latinas to work for in the United States. Aflac has been included on this annual list for 18 years. Finally, Fortune magazine also named Aflac to its list of the “World's Most Admired Companies” for the seventeenth year in February 2018. Aflac was ranked No. 3 in the Insurance: Life and Health category.

Based on these corporate accolades, it would appear that we could all benefit from following Mr. Owenby's advice.