

# HR

For people-focused business leaders

September/October 2024

## Waking a sleeping giant

Wall Street English's Tessa Boshoff outlines how she helped unleash the organisation's full potential

## Dial down the AI hype

Separating hot air from reality about AI

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For people-focused business leaders

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Tessa Boshoff, VP of HR at education provider Wall Street English, on her business transformation journey



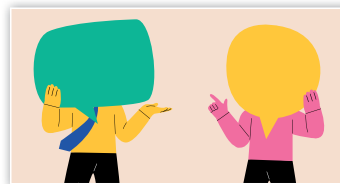
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# HR

For people-focused business leaders

# Editor's letter



## Our mission statement

HR magazine is for people-focused, forward-thinking business leaders who want insight into and examples of business-contextualised HR in order to develop high-performing organisations. As the leading individually requested magazine for senior HR professionals, we are aspirational, accessible and opinionated. Whether in print, online or face-to-face, we are the hub through which the senior HR community can connect with each other. We promise to always view HR from a business perspective, give access to leaders and leading thinking, and always tell you what you need to know, not what you expect to hear.

“If you're tired of London, you're tired of life,” the capital's devotees sometimes say. To me, the expression is a challenge to get out and discover new favourites within the city, learning afresh to appreciate its many quirks and qualities. This can be a lifelong task, much like the learning that all HR professionals need to continue doing, to stay engaged and effective.

It's all too easy to moan about HR, and dwell on individual and organisational failings. It's much harder, though essential, to identify and rectify gaps in our own knowledge or skills.

When I interviewed Collinson's chief people officer, Bertie Tonks, for our HR Most Influential resource, he explained that he'd once worked with a CFO hell-bent on self development. “The CFO said: I've read all the self-help books, and been to business schools around the world. None of it works.”

Tonks' response was: “Well, where do you think the problem is? As the saying goes: When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.”

Are business leaders ready to look in that mirror, reflect on where they need to grow, and then actively learn how to plug that gap? Is there enough energy in their tanks for the lifelong task of self and professional improvement?

Wherever you are on that journey, the talented team I am privileged to work with has created a gorgeous animated resource that we hope will fuel your continuous development journey, inspiring a renewed desire for learning. It's packed with insights from this year's HR Most Influential listees, and is accessible online, at [bit.ly/HRMost24](http://bit.ly/HRMost24).

Within the pages of this latest magazine, the education continues as our reporter Honey Wyatt rounds up advice on how to boost HR's reputation, and in so doing combat the negativity that's often hurled HR's way. I hope you'll learn much from these pages, and from each other, to propel your professional success.



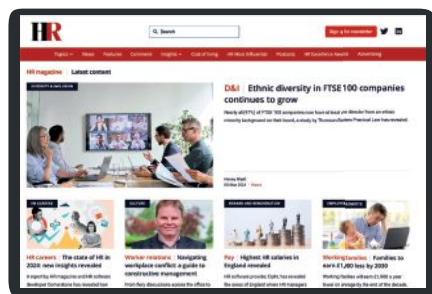
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“  
**How regularly do business leaders reflect on where they need to grow?**  
”

**Charissa King**  
Editor, HR magazine

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# HR

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# HR Most Influential



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# Top 5 most read

# The *HR* news briefing:

## Government plans right to request four-day work week

**The UK government has announced plans to give full-time workers the right to request a four-day work week**, the *Telegraph* reported. The legislation, set to be introduced in the autumn,

would tighten current flexible working legislation, part of which would allow employees to request compressed hours: meaning that full-time workers on a five-day pattern could work the same amount of hours in four days.

According to Ronni Zehavi, CEO of HR software HiBob, enhancing flexible working could help employers appeal to younger generations.

He said: “Embracing the shift towards a four-day work week is an opportunity for forward-thinking companies to align with the evolving needs of today’s workforce, especially as Gen Z re-writes the workplace rulebook.

“Generation transformation’ is not just asking for work/life balance; they are demanding it. Flexibility is no longer a perk but a requisite; they’re not willing to do more for less.

“Employers who are quick to recognise and adapt to this new reality will set themselves apart.”



**1**  
**Government plans right to request four-day work week**

Flexible working legislation to be tightened

**2**  
**Next loses equal pay tribunal after basing pay on market rates**  
Retailer loses six-year legal battle

**3**  
**Sky Sports pundit ordered to pay £700k in “disguised employee” case**  
Worker should have been ‘inside’ IR35

**4**  
**Employment law changes: What HR needs to know**  
Plans affecting working hours, tribunal claims and harassment law

**5**  
**Police officer found guilty of work avoidance tactics**  
Man slept while faking work

## Next loses equal pay tribunal after paying ‘market rates’

**Retailer Next has lost a six-year equal pay claim, after a tribunal ruled that it should not have relied on market rates when deciding on employees’ pay.** The tribunal found that the retailer paid warehouse workers, who were mostly men, more than shop workers, who were mostly women.

Representatives of Next relied on the argument that it did so as the market rates for warehouse workers were higher than for retail workers, BBC News reported. However the tribunal rejected this as justification for the pay difference.

The decision showed that benchmarking salaries against the market rate could be sex discrimination, explained Emma Satyamurti, joint head of



employment and discrimination at Leigh Day, the firm representing Next shop workers. “The market rate will often reflect historic attitudes to ‘men’s and

‘women’s’ work, particularly in sectors where there is gender segregation between different workforces (retail and warehouse in the present case),” she said.



# what September/October means for you

## Sky Sports pundit ordered to pay £700k in IR35 loss

**Sky Sports pundit Stuart Barnes was a “disguised employee” and should have been classed as working inside of IR35 legislation,** a tribunal has ruled, ordering him to pay £700,000 to HMRC.

The former rugby player lost his six-year tribunal after HMRC ruled that he should have been classed as an employee due to his arrangements with Sky Sports.

Seb Maley, CEO of IR35 compliance firm Qdos, said: “Barnes was deemed to have

been wrongly working outside of IR35 for a number of reasons, including not having the right to provide a substitute, which is one of the hallmarks of an inside IR35 engagement. Looked at differently, this is reflective of an employment relationship.

“There was also the exclusivity that Sky held over Barnes. Again, this is much more akin to an employment relationship as opposed to self-employment.”

A first-tier tribunal previously decided that Barnes had been rightly classified under IR35 as a freelancer, however HMRC was able to successfully appeal the case as its representatives argued that the tribunal had not considered relevant factors in Barnes’ working arrangements at Sky.



## Murder suspect unfairly dismissed over reputation risk, tribunal rules



**A care assistant who was charged with murder was unfairly dismissed, a tribunal found.** Her employer had not properly investigated whether the charges would cause damage to its reputation.

Jacqueline Difolco was arrested and charged with murder, along with two other defendants, in October 2022. The *Daily Record* newspaper reported the incident, which prompted employer concerns about a breakdown of trust and confidence, and potential reputational damage. Difolco was dismissed but the tribunal ruled this was unfair as the company did not properly investigate whether the charges could reasonably cause reputational damage to the organisation.

Pam Loch, founder of the law firm Loch Associates, commented: “This case highlights the necessity of undertaking a fair and reasonable disciplinary process, even when there are ongoing criminal proceedings. Employers should avoid jumping to conclusions, especially in the absence of supporting evidence, and they should pause before assuming that there is an automatic risk to reputation.”

## Our pick of HR online

### It's time to transform the HR business partner role

Analyst Josh Bersin explores how to equip HR business partners for success.



### How should HR respond to UK riots?

Consultant Shakil Butt suggests practical steps that employers can take to respond to violent behaviour and racist sentiment.

### HR must be ready for the 'big shift'

Sylvain Grande, chief product officer for PayFit, examines how HR can prepare for mandatory payrolling benefits.



## The ‘Office Siren’ trend: Gen Z’s answer to dress codes?



### TikTok’s latest fashion trend, ‘Office Siren’, revives the late 1990s and early 2000s’ power dressing with a sexy twist.

Featuring tight-fitting pencil skirts and tailored blazers, paired with statement glasses, the trend has sparked a surge in interest, with some videos garnering millions of views on TikTok.

The posters’ tendency towards the provocative, however, has prompted suggestions that ‘office siren’ trendees would get sent home by HR. One such video, posted by @Ronhiree, garnered comments such as: “The way I’d be fired if I wore this to the office” and “As someone who works in HR, do not wear this.”

Carolyn Walker, global HR director at Tenth Revolution Group, said: “I think the changes we’ve seen since the onset of the pandemic are going to be lasting ones, including the move away from strict ideas of what was considered to be professional attire.” She described this as particularly relevant for younger workers: “It’s important not to be reductive when we talk about different generations, but we know that as a broad trend, members of Gen Z are inclined towards more comfortable or casual office attire.”

Dress codes must be enforced with sensitivity, according to executive coach Denise Conroy, CEO of consultancy They. She said: “Dress codes typically mandate how women look. If dress codes police men, it’s usually men in the global majority. We should care about outcomes, not outfits.”

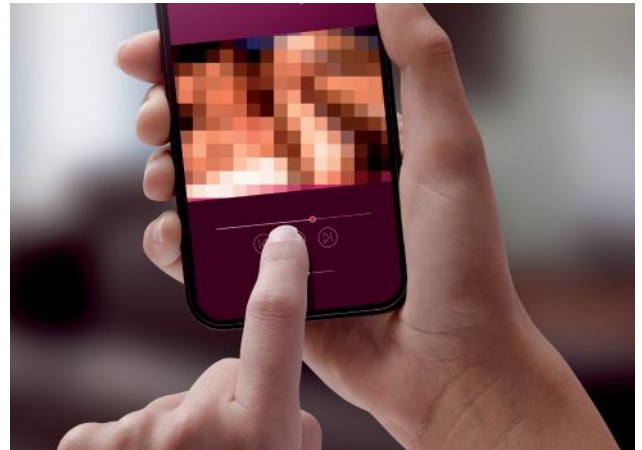
## Consultant who bragged about sex life loses tribunal

### A recruitment consultant has lost her claims at a tribunal

after it found she had bragged about the number of times her partner had made her “squirt” during sex. The consultant also allegedly showed colleagues pictures and videos of her having sex.

Charlotte Tilley made claims of wrongful constructive dismissal, sex discrimination and victimisation, and deduction of wages. She resigned from her workplace after a disciplinary investigation was launched into colleagues’ claims that she had made inappropriate comments about her sex life at work.

Tilley told the tribunal that she had been treated differently to how a man would have been treated



in the same position. She claimed that her comments were made to deter colleagues from asking intrusive questions about her sex life.

Kash Dosanjh, senior associate at law firm Wright Hassall, said: “Employers have a duty to ensure that there are measures in place to prevent harassment at

work. This can extend to conversations at work of a sexual nature, as this has the ability to cause offence to other colleagues. If there have been complaints of inappropriate sexual conversations in the workplace, employers need to carry out a thorough investigation into the complaints.”

## Police officer found guilty of work avoidance tactics

### A Leicestershire police officer was found to have committed gross misconduct

after an investigation revealed that he was using work avoidance tactics while working from home. The officer used his watch to hold down a key on his laptop to give colleagues the impression he was

working. The officer then went to sleep with the sound of his computer up, so that he could answer any calls he received.

An internal hearing found that the officer used these tactics for most of the working day, on more than 30 occasions.

At the hearing, chief constable Rob Nixon

described the officer’s conduct as “deliberate, dishonest, repeated and persistent”.

Ian Moore, managing director at HR consultancy Lodge Court, said: “The use of work avoidance tactics shows a lack of engagement and motivation. It suggests dissatisfaction with job roles, poor management practices, and potentially high levels of stress or burnout.”





## Two thirds of neurodivergent employees ‘mask’

**Neurodivergent staff are at risk of falling off HR’s radar, according to new research.** A majority hide their condition from colleagues, and many feel unable to ask for adjustments at work.



A study by diversity consultancy Pearn Kandola revealed that nearly two thirds (63%) of neurodivergent workers hid their condition

from colleagues. Four in 10 (42%) felt uncomfortable asking for reasonable workplace adjustments.

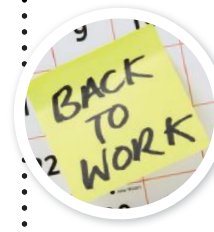
“Where employees are unable or unwilling to reach out for help, or share details of disabilities or other conditions, it can present a difficult situation for employers,” said Marianna Zajac, Pearn Kandola research psychologist and co-author of the Neurodiversity at Work report. “How do you tackle an issue if you’re not aware of it, or its true extent?”

## In numbers

**63%** of neurodivergent workers hid their condition from colleagues  
(Pearn Kandola)



**11%** of people over 50 in the UK have returned to work after retiring  
(Legal & General)



## When does DEI in recruitment become discriminatory?

**We asked employment lawyers how to ensure that companies wanting to recruit candidates from minority groups – ensuring diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) – do not unintentionally discriminate.** Recruiters should be mindful that all candidates are treated fairly, while attempting to be inclusive, said Michael Redston, employment law associate solicitor at Aaron and Partners.



“When taking positive action in recruitment, employers should ensure that adverts emphasise that anyone can apply, but that individuals with particular protected characteristics are being encouraged on the basis they are underrepresented,” he commented. “Generally, excluding or discouraging an individual with a protected characteristic from applying for a

role would amount to discrimination under the Equality Act 2010.

“Recruiters may also be cautious about public image and accusations of ‘reverse discrimination’, being perceived to be unjustly prioritising candidates as a ‘diversity hire’. It is therefore important that the communications and messaging in the advert are clear and supportive of all applicants.”

Rolls-Royce offered employees **£700** worth of shares in the company



## Employer denies street cleaner crowdfunded holiday

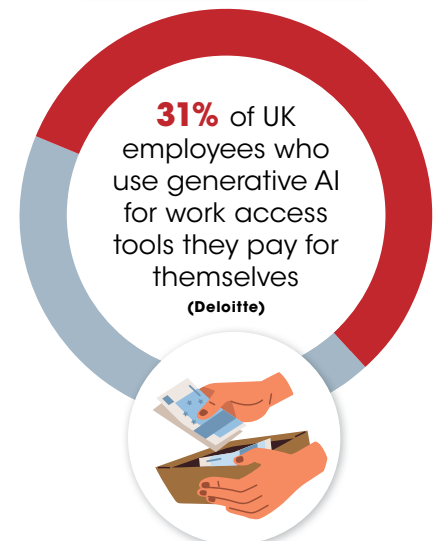
**Leaders of the waste management company Veolia banned a street cleaner from accessing a £3,000 holiday fund** raised by the local community, stating that staff are prohibited from accepting “gifts or incentives”. More than 200 people in the London borough of Bromley fundraised £3,000 as a sign of appreciation for their street cleaner Paul Spiers, who has reportedly worked in the borough for seven years.



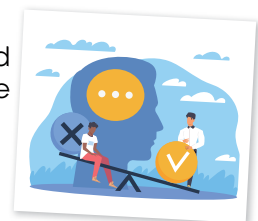
Jo Moseley, employment law associate at Irwin Mitchell, explained that employers have a legal obligation to prevent employees accepting bribes. She said: “Many employers have policies in place which limit or prevent staff from receiving gifts or payments from people outside their organisation, to prevent

potential conflict of interests arising. “The Bribery Act 2010 modernised the UK’s anti-corruption legislation and applies to both the public and private sectors.

It includes offences such as bribing another person, soliciting or accepting a bribe, and failing to prevent bribery. Public authorities must have adequate procedures in place to prevent bribery, and most will have guidelines regarding the hospitality that their employees may legitimately accept.”



**37%** of younger workers (aged 16 to 34) have experienced bias during the recruitment process  
(Applied)



# Civil unrest: How to lead people

The summer's street violence tested HR leaders' crisis management skills. But how effective was their response?

The flames and fighting of this summer's civil unrest have died down as the justice system deals with hundreds of public order offences. HR leaders, meanwhile, were tasked with addressing immediate employer and staff concerns. This work will continue for the foreseeable future. Given that unrest could erupt again, now is the time to reflect on effective organisational crisis management responses and what improvements can be made.

On 29 July, three children were stabbed to death at a dance class in the Merseyside town of Southport. False online claims that the suspect was an asylum seeker and incitements to publicly protest against immigration spread quickly.

Between 30 July and 5 August, violence broke out across 21 towns and cities in England, including an attempt to burn down a hotel housing asylum seekers in Rochester. Almost 800 charges were made in relation to those events.

## Fighting back

For employers, an immediate response was crucial, along with determining long-term strategies to help prevent further unrest. This included reviewing social media policies, and dealing with employees who were involved in the protests.

"The first reaction of responsible business leaders is to protect the health and safety of their employees," says Keith Budden, managing director of the training provider Ensurity. "This could have been through physical measures, such as boarding up premises, or organisational measures, such as allowing staff to travel home safely before major protest erupts."

According to HR consultant Lucas Botzen, the most effective leaders during the riots were those who were better able to create



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workplace environments of trust and stability. "Some business leaders were prepared, immediately taking steps to ensure safety and effectively communicating the facts with their people," he says. "Others were caught on the back foot and were slower to respond, which tends to lead to mistrust and heightened anxiety among employees."

Idris Arshad, head of people for the charity Asthma + Lung UK, advises that in a crisis HR leaders should involve all leaders, offer easily accessible information on how people can look after their wellbeing, and clearly communicate the advice, such as work from home. He also suggested encouraging staff to take the best course of action for their safety, rather than directly tell them what to do.

During the riots, reputational risk was a major consideration for organisations, especially if employees were publicly exposed as rioters. Organisations that took a public stance on diversity may have found themselves at odds with employees who hold anti-immigration views.

Flames fuelled by fake news: the rioting led to more than 1,000 arrests

**“**  
**In times of uncertainty, business leaders can be an important voice of hope**  
**”**

"A business should be clear in its mission, vision and values, and be authentic in its communication," says Rachel Doherty, founder of Inspired Business Consultancy.

"Some organisations may choose to be public with their views because it aligns with their values. Others may choose not to be public but provide internal support and resources to staff who may be affected.

"In relation to staff being identified as rioters, clear policies should be in place. These should outline the potential for disciplinary action, up to and including dismissal for bringing the company into disrepute and/or engaging in activities that would call into question a breach of contract."

Kate Palmer, employment services director for the HR consultancy Peninsula, says that in the immediate aftermath of the riots, employees who didn't turn up for work because they had been arrested will likely be treated as having an unauthorised absence. "How that progresses will depend on when they get in contact, and their circumstances," she continues.

# during a crisis

And what lessons can be learned? **GEORGIA LEWIS** reports

“If an employee is involved in rioting it can be a very complicated situation. Employers will need to navigate this carefully,” adds Palmer. “It’s likely that having an employee who’s been arrested for potentially racially motivated violence will present challenges among colleagues.”

## Diversity of views

Employers may also have to deal with conflict between employees who hold different political views, and support anyone who has been affected by the events: “Having a policy makes sure that employees know the expected workplace behaviours when it comes to political talk,” says Palmer.

But what about political talk on social media? A poll of 507 employers in August by employment law consultancy WorkNest showed that 45.8% of respondents took formal action against an employee because of their social media use, or considered doing so. Further, 35.1% felt that staff didn’t understand company expectations around social media use very well, or at all, and 25.1% felt their employer had no social media policy. The role of social media in the riots may spur greater action in this area.

Botzen describes the role that employers can, and should, play when it comes to influencing or monitoring staff social media activity as complex, especially as employer actions perceived as censorship may stir resentment among employees. Through platforms such as X, Facebook and Telegram, deliberate disinformation about the Southport murder suspect led to a series of anti-immigration riots. However, there are limits to how employers can ensure that employees use social media responsibly.

Sarah Kerr, HR technical consultant for the HR tech firm AdviserPlus, says: “There can be a grey area in knowing

what can and cannot be done if an employee is expressing views in a personal capacity, especially during their own time and on a personal device. The fear of overstepping boundaries often leaves employers uncertain about how to intervene, but it’s crucial for organisations to have clear and robust social media policy.

“This should outline expectations for employees’ social media conduct. It should also explain what will happen if the organisation deems that social media has been misused.”

Above all, workplace training on smart, responsible social media use is widely advised. Employers “should look to educate their workforce to take a cynical view of what they read on social platforms, and not take everything they read as factual,” advises Budden.

Looking ahead, Mary Macleod, chief executive of the responsible business network Business in the Community, highlights the important role that employers can play in being a positive influence on their wider communities after this summer’s distressing events. “In times of uncertainty, business leaders can be an important voice of hope,” she says.

“We encourage employers to listen to their employees’ concerns, and take appropriate measures to ensure their safety during times of social unrest. But employers can have an important role in working with other organisations and supporting their local communities to rebuild in challenging times, to build back stronger.

“Through collaboration with other businesses, community organisations and local government, business leaders can rebuild cohesion and economic prosperity for everyone. They can also ensure that people from across the UK have pride in where they come from.” **HR**

## Key advice

We asked HR leaders about how to constructively engage with employees about diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) issues, in the wake of the riots.

“It is important to listen more, via networks and through managers. Senior leaders need to ensure appropriate, pragmatic action can be taken in response, otherwise listening takes a credibility hit.”

*Cathy Acrapulo, founder and CEO, LACE Partners*

“Lead with transparency, empathy and decisiveness. Clearly communicate with employees, stakeholders and the public, demonstrating a commitment to addressing immediate and long-term impacts. Building relationships with local communities can provide valuable insights and support.”

*Raechel Gavin, chief people officer, Sonder*

“Leverage staff networks and affinity groups, because they often have the ear of employees. Collaborate with them to build trust, and meet the needs of employees.”

*Ashanti Bentil-Dhue, founder of Competence Center for Workplace Equity*

“The more transparent and open you are with your communication strategy, the less stressful and more productive the change management process will be for everyone affected.”

*Lisa Seagroatt, managing director, HR Fit for Purpose*

“Organisations that have prioritised a people-first strategy, with strong emphasis and focus on their employee wellbeing and DEI initiatives, should be set up to successfully manage current challenges and future extreme instances, due to a more open and honest culture.”

*Sarah Kerr, HR technical consultant, AdviserPlus*

# Hot *topic*

A flight attendant tried to sue her airline after a manager explained that her hairstyle did not comply with its uniform policy. In separate case, a civil servant became the subject of debate for allegedly wearing corsets, fishnet tights and risqué outfits to work. How far can employers control what employees wear? Is limiting styles like colourful or shaven hairstyles, or tattoos, acceptable in the modern workplace?



**Mark Grimley,**  
interim HR leader,  
Sablons

The Jet2 case is about the employer's brand and the presentation of employees to their customers. The DWP case is seemingly about the appropriateness of the clothes worn to work, which were perceived to be fulfilling a fetish.

I think we are conflating two issues in these examples: the issue of identity and self-expression and the discourse about sexuality and gender in the workplace. Neither impacts someone's ability to do their role.

For most employers, there is a simple pragmatism: dress for the day you have. We are adults, after all. There are exceptions, and for good reasons, such as uniforms, safety wear and practical reasons such as scrubs in a hospital, or overalls in a garage.

If there is no good reason to do so, do we really need to tell people what to wear?



**Carolyn Walker,**  
global HR director,  
Tenth Revolution  
Group

Self-expression in workplace attire is important because it's an aspect of our personal branding. Personal branding has never been more important in the business world than it is today, and the image you project is a big part of this. It's paramount that we support our younger colleagues to get to grips with this, and explore how

they can best present themselves in a business context.

Self-expression in terms of workplace attire is also a key site of inclusion. Overly prescriptive regulations are likely to exclude or stigmatise those who come from a different cultural background.

What we'd wear for home working, or where our only meetings are virtual and with immediate colleagues, shouldn't be the same as what we'd wear for an on-site meeting with a prospective new partner, and vice versa. Applying a common sense metric and asking: 'Is this appropriate for this specific business context?' is usually a solid route away from a disproportionate focus on specific items of clothing or style.



**Felizitas Lichtenberg,**  
global head of  
diversity and  
inclusion, SumUp

While businesses may want to support individualism, they are also entitled to enforce dress codes that align with their operational needs. UK employment law allows employers to set their own dress codes, provided they do not discriminate unlawfully against employees.

For instance, employers can ban 'extreme' hairstyles. However, if by enforcing this policy it discriminates against an employee based on any of their protected characteristics, then the policy must be justifiable by business needs, such as safety or maintaining a specific corporate image.

It's important that employers reflect on the motivation behind certain dress code

**“ Cabin worker who quit her job over a row about her ‘extreme haircut’ loses £22,000 compensation bid at employment tribunal ”**  
Daily Mail, 30 July

**“ Transgender civil servant wearing ‘fetish gear’ sparks Whitehall row ”**  
The Telegraph, 4 August

policies, and whether they are products of ingrained biases relating to gender, race or religion. In the instances of companies instilling discriminatory policies, it is crucial to speak out and challenge them, ensuring that all employees are held to the same uniform standards.



**Simone Marquis,**  
managing director,  
The Unmistakeables

The nub of the issue here is related to rationale, transparency and equitability of enforcement. As we modernise and nuance our policies, rather than simply re-versioning and making tweaks to language, we should question our motivations. We should consider who the policy is serving and why we believe in it.

Also, rather than adopting vague, subjective language, like 'extreme', we should explain exactly what we mean. If this makes us quite uncomfortable and caught in the snare of our biases, we'll be forced to question whether our policies are appropriate. If we can't say it with pride, why are we doing it at all?

Finally, we want to know that standards are applied consistently. We know that women, in particular black and Muslim women, can face discrimination in relation to hair and religious wear. Other people can be branded as 'cool' or 'interesting'.

In an age of inviting self-expression, organisations need to avoid double standards. They should be forthright about their decisions to 'ban'. **HR**



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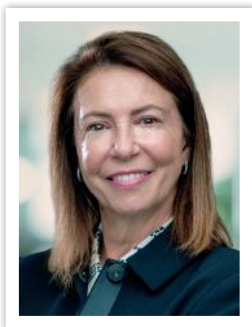
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## Jeanette Rooms, Ocorian

**Then:**  
Group head of HR,  
Kingmakers

**Now:**  
Chief people officer,  
Ocorian

Financial and legal services firm Ocorian has recruited Jeanette Rooms as its new chief people officer, appointing her to its executive committee. Joining the firm from Kingmakers, a sports and digital entertainment platform, Rooms brings more than 25 years' experience in HR leadership to the role.

### I knew Ocorian was the right place for me when...

I had the opportunity to meet some of the incredible people at Ocorian, and they shared the company's story in a way that was candid and inspiring. It wasn't just about what had been achieved, but the potential that lay ahead. Their sense of ambition resonated with me deeply, and the energy and determination was infectious.

### I decided to make the move to this company because...

During the conversations I had with the leadership team, I found myself completely aligned with their vision. They spoke in a language that I understood, filled with optimism, creativity, and the

belief that we can do and be more. There was laughter in the room, which to me signifies a healthy culture, one that doesn't take itself too seriously but knows how to focus on the serious work ahead.

### The biggest lesson I've learnt in my career has been...

There's a line from a poem called The Invitation that has stuck with me for years: "My playing small does not serve the world." I have realised that holding back from bringing my full self into work and life does nothing for the greater good. The world needs us to step into our full power, and that's a principle I carry into every role.

### The toughest point in my career has been...

Leaving Egg, where I was head of HR, from 1996 to 2000. It was heart-wrenching. It felt like I was walking away from something I had nurtured from the ground up, like leaving a child behind.

Another difficult moment was when I found myself in a culture that didn't align with my values or serve me well. It took a lot of

self-awareness and courage to recognise that, and walk away. Sometimes, the hardest part isn't staying the course; it's knowing when to step away.

### The biggest challenge in my new role will be...

Made known as I get deeper into the role. What I do know is that navigating change and aligning people around a shared vision can often be the most complex part of any transformation.

### I'm most excited about...

The opportunity to grow Ocorian and, at the same time, help the people within it grow as well.

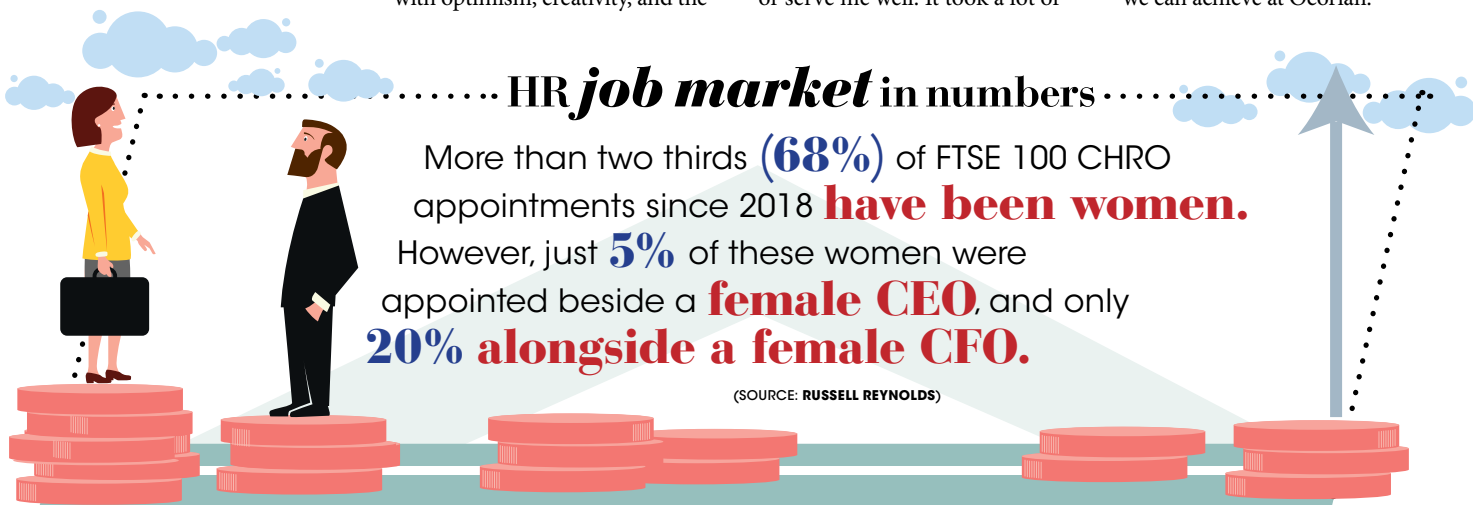
### If I achieve one thing in my new role...

It will be to help everyone here realise that playing small doesn't serve the world. I want to instil in my colleagues the confidence to embrace their talents, take risks, and push the boundaries of what they believe is possible. If we can all do that, individually and collectively, there's no limit to what we can achieve at Ocorian.

## HR job market in numbers

More than two thirds (**68%**) of FTSE 100 CHRO appointments since 2018 **have been women.** However, just **5%** of these women were appointed beside a **female CEO**, and only **20% alongside a female CFO.**

(SOURCE: RUSSELL REYNOLDS)





**Catherine Wills joins Milton Keynes University Hospital as chief people officer**

Catherine Wills has joined Milton Keynes University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust (MKUH) as chief people officer (CPO). Having moved to the Trust from Kettering General Hospital, where she was director of people, Wills brings years of experience of managing HR for both frontline and arm’s-length NHS services.

“I am extremely proud to be appointed as CPO of this brilliant organisation. MKUH has a proud history of looking after its people with sector-leading support and innovative initiatives,” Wills said.

“I look forward to continuing this legacy.

“I can’t wait to meet more of #TeamMKUH in the near future.”



**Emma Holden joins Man Group as chief people officer**

Global investment management company Man Group has announced that Emma Holden will be joining its executive committee as chief people officer. Due to take up the role in December, Holden will cap a 17-year career at fellow London finance firm Schroders, where she is currently CPO.

“I have had an amazing, long career at Schroders,” Holden said, “but now feels like the right time to move on to new opportunities and challenges. I have been highly impressed by both the people I’ve met and the culture at Man Group, and I’m excited by the opportunities that lie ahead working with this team.”



**Deliveroo appoints Laura Hagan**

Deliveroo has found a permanent chief people officer (CPO) in Laura Hagan, who is due to replace the firm’s interim CPO, Tony Murphy. Joining at a milestone moment for the company, when it delivered positive net profit and positive free cash flow in H1 2024, Hagan plans to help the delivery business further strengthen its teams.

Will Shu, Deliveroo’s CEO, said: “This Deliveroo team is the best that I have ever worked with since founding the company. I am excited to partner with Laura to continue to strengthen and develop our teams. Our people are critical to our success as we continue to innovate, expand across new verticals and deliver profitable growth.”



**Gymshark hires Sian Keane as chief people officer**

Sian Keane has joined fitness fashion retailer Gymshark after 11 years at luxury fashion company Farfetch, where for the past six years she has been chief people officer, supporting the company’s growth from 100 people to over 7,000 globally. Keane’s appointment at Gymshark signals the firm’s intention to scale sustainably, according to chief executive Ben Francis.

“It’s no secret that I want Gymshark to become a brand that outlives us all,” he said. “To achieve this, we need the very best people driving us forward and sharing this ambition – they are comfortably our most important asset.”

**In brief**



Waystone hires **Alan Burke** as chief people officer

**Josh Novelle** joins Convatec as head of people solutions and experience

Azets promotes **Damien Russell** to chief people officer

**Emma Rankine** moves to CBRE as head of people services

**HR EXCELLENCE AWARDS 2024**

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## “ What if we approached work conversations like improv scenes? ”

It's impossible not to notice polarisation, on social media and beyond. People don't just disagree, they have intractable views. Difference is seen as bad faith.

How can HR professionals – whose work involves deeply personal, emotionally charged conversations that can fracture teams and undermine the organisational effectiveness – navigate this minefield? One answer might surprise you: improv. Yes, the art form you may associate with comedians. It presents us with a mindset which is a powerful tool for fostering understanding and resolving conflicts in the workplace.

### Conversations matter

In an era where conversations can resemble verbal sparring matches, knowing how to communicate effectively is vital. On social media you are only a click or three away from being harangued by opinions so entrenched that constructive dialogue seems impossible.

But what if, in the workplace, we approached conversations like improv scenes, where our mindset is to listen with intention, and accept the other person's words as an 'offer' – something to work with, not tear down? You can accept an offer even if don't agree with it. By doing so you acknowledge the other person's perspective and use it to move the story forward.

### Transformative listening

Listening as we do on the improv stage might sound like a gimmick but it's profoundly effective. We let the narrative unfold, adapting to what our fellow player brings to the table, knowing that they are doing the same.

In too many conversations, we are armed with our script: opinions, defences, rebuttals. Improv demands that we drop that script. Instead, we listen 'intently'.

This goes beyond nodding along or just waiting for our turn to speak. It's about being fully present and ready to not only respect but to accept there is value in whatever the other person contributes.

Imagine being in a conversation with an employee who feels aggrieved. Your natural instinct might be to jump in with solutions or (worse) to defend company policy.

But the improv mindset teaches us to pause, listen and reflect. You might say: "I can see how you'd feel that way. It wasn't our intention. Let's explore this further." This approach can defuse tension and open the door to a more meaningful dialogue.

### How to tackle polarisation

In a workplace divided by strong opinions, the first step is to acknowledge polarisation and high-running emotions. Then, employ a simple, effective framework rooted in improv principles:

#### 1. Listen first, speak second

Truly listening, without the urge to respond immediately, is the foundation of any constructive conversation.

#### 2. Accept the 'offer', even if you disagree with it

In the workplace, this might mean saying: "I understand where you're coming from," rather than immediately shutting down a viewpoint you may not share.

#### 3. Move the conversation forward

How can you build on the offer? Ask yourself: "How can we take what's been said and move towards a solution?" This might involve acknowledging uncomfortable truths or exploring new ideas that weren't initially on the table.

Traditional training often fails to prepare leaders for important conversations. 'Soft' skills that are so crucial – listening, empathy, adaptability – are frequently overlooked in favour of technical skills. But here's the kicker: those soft skills, though harder to master, are critical for navigating today's workplace dynamics.

Leaders, especially those in HR, need to embrace the idea that every conversation is a potential improv scene. You don't always know where it's going but if you're prepared to listen, accept and build, you'll find yourself better equipped to handle whatever comes your way. **HR**

.....  
**Neil Mullarkey is author of *In The Moment: Build Your Confidence, Communication and Creativity at Work* (Kogan Page, 2023)**



# WHY EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IS KEY TO ACHIEVING YOUR SUSTAINABILITY GOALS AND IMPROVING STAFF WELLBEING

energy  
saving  
trust

Many businesses have adopted an environmental, social and governance (ESG) approach as a priority to mitigate future risks, attract customers and retain talent. But how many are actively engaging employees to reduce emissions in their own lives?

At Energy Saving Trust, we've seen more companies demonstrate leadership in sustainability by supporting their employees to reduce their carbon emissions, both at work and home. While there are several reasons driving this shift, from our perspective, these are the top four:

## 1. Aligning company culture to sustainability goals

For companies with net zero targets and a Carbon Reduction Plan in place, the next step is to engage employees with this mission. This means motivating employees with the 'why' – explaining what reducing emissions means for our planet, the company and their own lives.

Demonstrating how individual behaviours and actions contribute to your organisation's ESG targets can unify your employees under a shared goal. It also shows customers, stakeholders and anyone who engages with your company that staff are ambassadors of your values.

## 2. Showing employees you care

With more than half of adults concerned about climate change, empowering employees to adopt more sustainable practices can be a powerful way to attract and retain talent.

This is a top concern for Gen Z and millennial employees. A recent Deloitte study found people in this demographic want more employee education and training to help them be more sustainable in their own lives.

Offering your employees trusted, impartial energy saving advice is an effective way to enable them to act sustainably. For employees who rent their homes, this can include advice on energy efficient appliances and behavioural changes. For homeowners, this can extend to guidance on home energy efficiency improvements.

If you're looking for a way to provide



comprehensive and up-to-date advice, consider using a digital tool. Our digital advice tool, Homewise, can help your employees make energy efficiency improvements to their homes. Employees can create personalised action plans, tailored to the specific characteristics of their home and their needs and budget.

When employees feel their personal development is valued and they're encouraged to enhance their skills and knowledge, their engagement and productivity levels tend to increase.

## 3. Financial wellbeing support

With the number of Living Wage employers doubling since 2021, supporting employees' financial wellbeing has rightly become a priority for employers who care about their workforce. With gas and electricity wholesale prices remaining high and the energy price cap increasing from October, household energy bills are forecast to stay above pre-crisis levels.

You can engage your employees during this time with advice to lower their energy bills and enhance their financial wellbeing. This includes guidance on low- and no-cost ways to reduce their energy use, selecting the best tariffs and accessing funding for home energy efficiency improvements.

## 4. Complying with environmental standards and net zero

Effective communication with staff about sustainability is an essential part of ISO14001 requirements. Many companies

also commit to showing continual improvement and staff engagement as part of their Carbon Reduction Plans and reporting (such as ESOS and SECR).

Demonstrating that staff have completed sustainability training throughout the year can help you to comply with legislation. By leveraging the reporting efficiencies of digital learning, you can make this process seamless. Our new e-learning platform and courses cover topics including saving energy at home and at work, sustainability and net zero. With bite-sized courses and questions to measure progress, you can use it to create a sustainable culture at your organisation.

Companies with staff working from home can take steps to enable them to save energy and carbon emissions in their homes. This comes under the 'Commuting' category in Scope 3 of the widely used Greenhouse Gas Protocol.

At Energy Saving Trust, we support employers to empower their people to live more sustainably with expert and impartial energy saving advice. As a profit for purpose organisation trusted by local and national governments, householders and businesses, we work with organisations of all sizes to embed sustainability into their practices

If you're looking to engage your employees with energy efficiency and sustainability training or advice, speak to us today to find out what we can do for you.

**GET IN TOUCH: visit [bit.ly/4dXOOxh](https://bit.ly/4dXOOxh)**



## “ It’s essential to understand how menopause exacerbates ADHD symptoms ”

The intersection of menopause and ADHD is an emerging area of interest. While 23% of women consider resigning due to the impact of menopause, understanding how menopause exacerbates ADHD symptoms and the resulting implications for the workplace is essential for HR.

### The impact of ADHD and menopause chemistry

Menopause lowers oestrogen levels that help regulate neurotransmitters such as dopamine, which is crucial for being able to pay attention, regulate emotion, organisational skills, and memory. For individuals with ADHD, who typically have lower dopamine levels, the reduction in oestrogen can amplify their symptoms. These symptoms might manifest as increased brain fog, memory lapses and disorganisation.

Menopause also disrupts sleep patterns; a critical concern since many individuals with ADHD already struggle with sleep. This can lead to difficulties in maintaining focus, meeting deadlines, and effectively managing everyday tasks.

Anxiety, which worsens during menopause, may cause employees to avoid taking on new projects or participating in meetings, particularly if their roles involve high levels of interaction or responsibility. As a result, they might feel overwhelmed, leading to a decrease in job satisfaction and

potentially prompting them to consider leaving the workforce.

Sadly, the stigma associated with both ADHD and menopause can deter individuals from seeking help. People fear they might be seen as incompetent, or less deserving of promotions.

### How HR can help

Awareness and proactive measures can make a significant difference in helping employees manage their symptoms while maintaining their professional responsibilities. It should start with education – for HR and managers about the effects of menopause on ADHD symptoms – in order to sensitively and effectively address the issues. This education should also extend to the wider organisation, promoting a culture where such discussions are normalised.

It’s important to encourage employees to speak openly about their experiences without fear of judgement. Regular check-ins can provide a platform for employees to share their challenges and seek help. However, it’s essential to ensure confidentiality and to offer various channels for communication, such as through an employee assistance programme (EAP) or with designated HR personnel.

Employers should have EAP support specifically tailored to menopause and ADHD. Alternatively, consider partnering with external providers specialising in these areas. Promote the

resources regularly so that employees are aware of the support available.

Workers might also require tweaks to their workload, deadlines, and the work environment. Ensuring these adjustments are personalised rather than one-size-fits-all is key to their effectiveness. With menopause disrupting sleep patterns, HR should also consider offering flexible work hours, or the option to adjust shift times for desk-free workers. This flexibility can help employees better manage their symptoms, especially when experiencing severe ADHD-related challenges.

Finally, equip managers with the tools to recognise when an employee might be struggling due to menopause or ADHD, so they know how to approach the subject sensitively. Managers can be trained to avoid making assumptions and instead engage in open-ended conversations that allow employees to express their needs.

Employees can also take proactive steps by keeping a record of their symptoms. This can help understand patterns and triggers, and provide useful information when discussing their needs, with healthcare providers or HR.

By building an environment of awareness, open communication and tailored support, HR can help employees navigate this complex phase. This not only supports the wellbeing of employees but contributes to a more inclusive and productive workplace. **HR**



Jane Bradshaw-Jones is HR business partner for AdviserPlus

# Have *your* say

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## Right to switch off: how HR can make it work, 9 September

“ Among a raft of manifesto commitments, Labour has pledged to introduce a ‘right to switch off’, putting guardrails around contacting employees after hours. How can HR implement the policy? ”  
In a mature culture, a policy is not necessary. Communication is key and the examples provided on how to be transparent about being available, along with perhaps other additional tools that support clear communication, should be sufficient. When more than that is needed and [you are implementing] a policy aiming to help you [with] policing, please start wondering if your company culture and company communication strategy are effective.

**Rishi A Battja**

Ultimately it's always down to leadership. Behaviours shape culture, and that trickles down the organisation. It's about the

messages that an organisation sends out, and how they get backed up by actions.

**Cristina Liga**

## Employees unequipped to talk about suicidal thoughts, 5 September

“ Nine in 10 employees do not know that the best way to save the life of someone considering suicide is to ask them directly whether they have a plan to end their life, according to research by social enterprise Mental Health First Aid England. ”  
I feel it's an incredibly important subject to talk about and one that a lot of people feel uncomfortable with. There's still so much stigma attached. People can sometimes be scared of saying the wrong thing, but by knowing the right things to say and listen and signpost you could save a life.

**Victoria Devaney**

## Should HR introduce savings account benefits?, 4 September



Is the plan to introduce a right to switch off necessary?

“ With employees reporting that they are increasingly concerned about their finances, we asked whether HR should offer employees saving account benefits ”  
Why not some financial education. The basics of budgeting, borrowing and investing for example?

**Dave Deruytter**

@Dave Deruytter I couldn't agree more! Financial education, knowledge and confidence building is the key.

**Katy Henrickson**

## Government plans right to request four-day work week, 2 September

“ The UK government has announced plans to give full-time workers the right to request a four-day work week, the *Telegraph* reported (30 August) ”  
This is already a flexible working pattern available for staff. I'm not sure why the focus is on a four-day week when there are a variety of patterns. If anything they should be spotlighting some of the other less-applied-for

 Follow us on X: @hrmagazine

**@onEvidenceCPD** [Re: Housing trust staffers win £95,000 in racial bias case] Antiracist training should be considered an essential component of EDI strategy.

**@MHScot** [Re: HR's mental health needs supervision] HR professionals face unique challenges, balancing complex roles with the emotional toll of supporting others. Yet, they rarely receive the mental health support afforded to other professions.



Is contentment at work enough?

patterns like job share and term time, and showcase how that can be implemented well. The upside is they are normalising a four-day week, but it won't be suitable for all roles, in all sectors. The trick is working out which roles it can work well in.

**Cheryl Samuels**

This isn't a four-day week. In a four-day week, people work 32 hours or fewer instead of 35 to 40 hours. For the same pay. Working a 'compressed week' is not a four-day week. It is just one of [a range of] flexible working options and it's disingenuous to present it as anything special. The four-day week was a call for a radical step change in our notion of what constitutes a working week. What we're seeing isn't it.

**Pavlina Wilkin**

### HR must support people experiencing baby loss out loud, 19 August

“One in four pregnancies in the UK end in miscarriage. This issue is present in our workforce. But are we having challenging conversations about it, out loud?”

This is such an important topic and one I am passionate about. Getting the right support at the right time is so important and beneficial not just for the individuals facing the

heartbreaking loss but also the company. Pregnancy loss has far-reaching repercussions that sends far-reaching waves across organisations. Handled well, the impact is minimised; handled poorly and often great employees leave companies from lack of support. Having supported companies and individuals to have these conversations has been so beneficial to everyone involved.

**Heather Reed**

### Strive for contentment at work, not happiness, 15 August

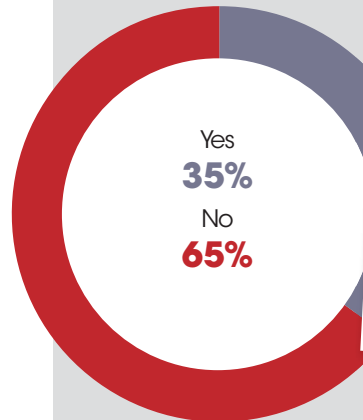
“From the pandemic to the cost of living crisis, we all have to find a way to get through unexpected and uncontrollable events that impact our wellbeing at work. For Idris Arshad, head of people at Asthma and Lung UK, the key is being content rather than trying to be happy every second of our working and personal lives.”

What we may be dealing with is leaders who are unable to create the environment in which they can make acceptable profit and keep workers happy. Hence the need to shave a bit off happy and call it contentment. Harsh? True? Somewhere in between? Worth discussion?

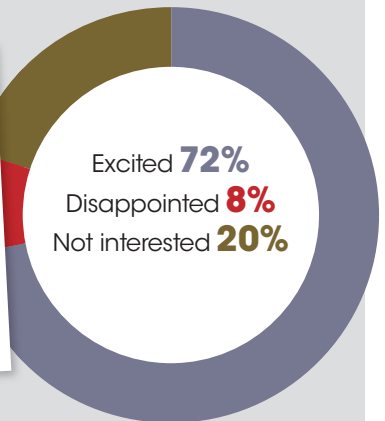
**Steven Leach**

## What we asked our followers this month

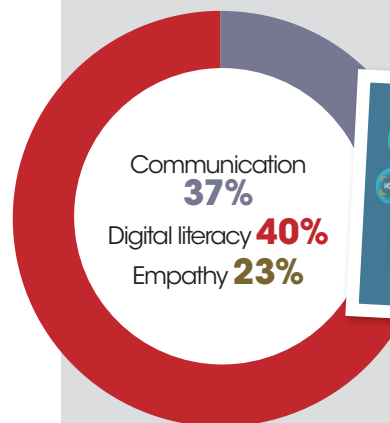
Is PwC right to monitor employees' working locations?



What do you think of the government's proposed four-day week?



What skill will the workforce of 2035 need most?



# Rules on preventing sexual harassment are changing

Companies will have enhanced obligations to prevent sexual harassment, from October when the Worker Protection Act comes into force. Here are the key considerations for HR

The implementation of the Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023 will introduce significant obligations on all employers when it comes to dealing with sexual harassment in the workplace. While employers can already be held vicariously liable for acts of sexual harassment carried out by their employees, this legislation goes further and introduces a legal obligation on all employers to take reasonable steps to prevent the sexual harassment of their employees.

Critically, this will apply to all employers, whether they have one worker or 1,000. The only variable will be what “reasonable” looks like, which will partly depend on the employer’s size.

Although there is no standalone right to bring a claim against an employer for failing to take such reasonable steps, this obligation will have real teeth. If an employee succeeds in a sexual harassment claim and the tribunal finds that the employer didn’t take reasonable steps, they can increase any compensation by up to 25%.

With awards for harassment already high, breach of this obligation is going to be financially costly. This is aside from any reputational damage that is likely to follow a successful claim, as well as a possible investigation from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) or any other organisation that the new government puts in place.

So what are the reasonable steps that an employer should take? While the EHRC’s updated guidance is due to be finalised in September, it is clear from the current draft that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. However, employers will need to avoid a generic tick-box approach to demonstrate they have taken reasonable steps.

Employers should carry out a review to identify risk in their business such as risks to lone workers, outside events or issues caused by interactions with third parties. Once that assessment has been carried out, a sexual harassment policy should be produced.

While a standalone policy is not required, given the focus of the new law, it should be

considered in order to demonstrate compliance. Simply rehashing existing harassment policies is unlikely to be enough. Something more tailored needs to be put in place.

Employers will also need to ensure that they have an effective mechanism for employees to raise concerns and complaints; it shouldn’t be limited to those complaining they have been subject to harassment.

It should be clear that employees who witness colleagues being subject to such conduct should raise that with their employer. Larger employers will have to consider whether as part of the process, an anonymous reporting platform should be put in place.

Focus will have to be given to how complaints are investigated and dealt with once they are raised. Employers should look at both an informal and formal process.

Employers should keep a log of issues that are raised, and how those issues have been dealt with. Employment tribunals are likely to want to know an employer’s track record and just how seriously it takes complaints.

Training will also need to be reviewed. Employment tribunals will want to see that training is regular, relevant and refreshed. While there will still be a need to train all employees, there is going to be a need for focused training for cohorts, e.g. line managers, on how to deal with complaints when they are raised.

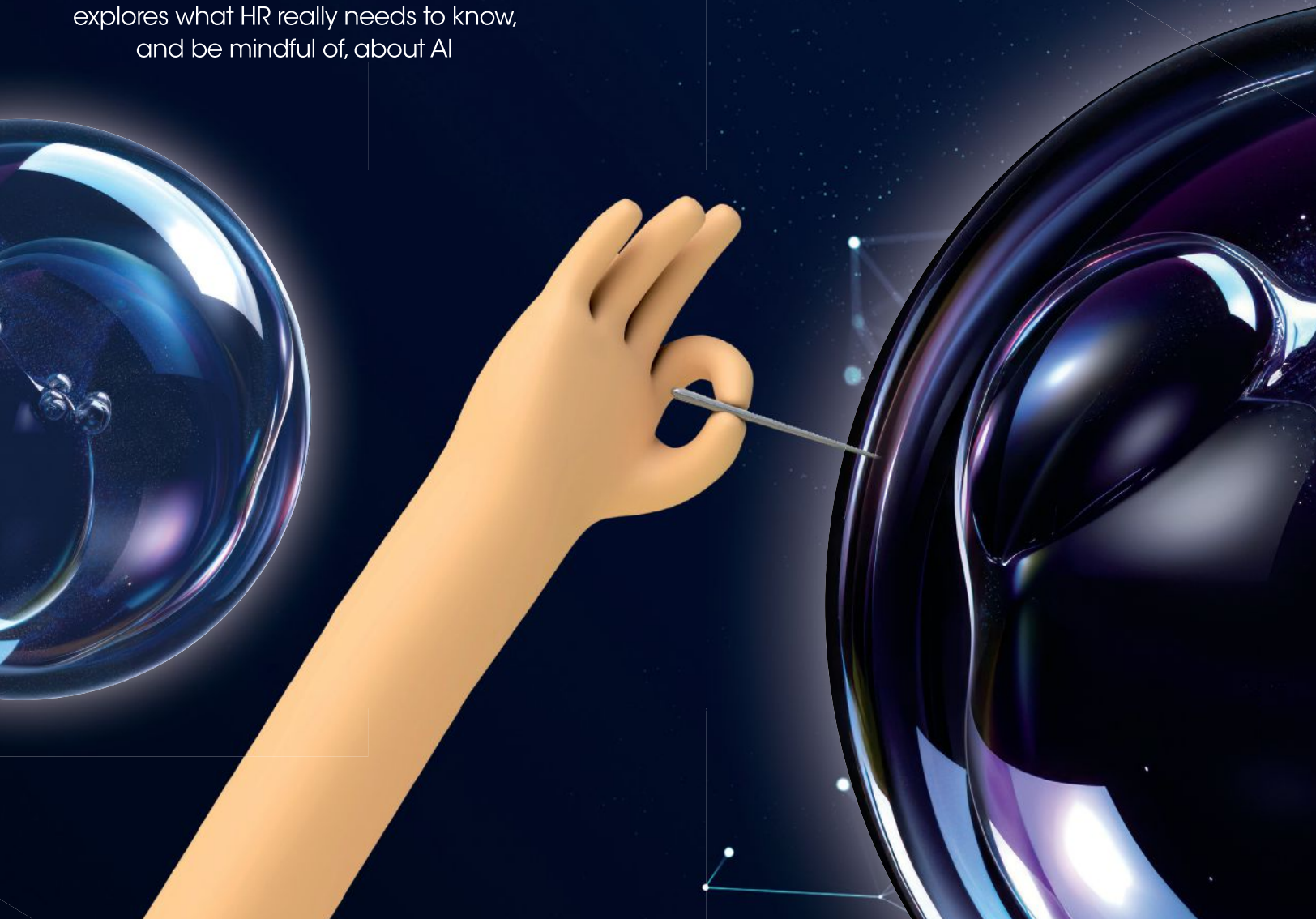
Employers should also consider how their approach to preventing sexual harassment is imposed. A top-down approach will be needed, with leaders driving a zero-tolerance stance.

**Matt Jenkin is a partner at Herrington Carmichael**



# Is the AI bubble about to BURST?

While the HR hype around AI shows no sign of slowing, the volume of its critics is increasing. **DAN CAVE** explores what HR really needs to know, and be mindful of, about AI



**H**ype around artificial intelligence (AI) has exploded over the last couple of years. The World Economic Forum believes that AI will change around half the jobs in developed nations.

Many companies use AI internally and in products. Its popularity led to a chip-making company behind much of AI development briefly becoming the world's most valuable company earlier this year.

This isn't to say that AI's rise has been inexorable. In recent months, many AI-powered firms have had billions wiped off their value.

According to an MIT university professor, AI will eventually only change 5% of work, and boost productivity by just 0.5%. Goldman Sachs researchers say that the tech will make existing

features more glitzy than useful. Where do such doubts leave HR?

### AI and HR

Many of the biggest businesses are already using AI software across the talent lifecycle. Hilton uses it for recruitment, PepsiCo for engagement and lifecycle management, and Shell uses it for learning and development.

Many in HR will recognise a version of AI being integrated into recruitment for years, initially to mitigate against unconscious bias and to streamline hiring. This integration expanded into multiple areas such as performance management, learning and development, career development and workflow optimisation.

Already, the HR tech marketplace is awash with AI offerings that promise to save time and help HR deliver strategically. What's not to like?

Truthfully, in many areas of HR it's hard to see the AI hype fading. While the financial services

company Klarna is looking at phasing out human employees to be replaced with AI, Tim Sharp, global head of talent at the pharmaceuticals company Takeda, explains that AI is used across the entirety of HR's remit: from skills development to communicating meeting outcomes to employees.

"We've got it everywhere," he says. "It's really useful. It can maximise both outputs and operating models."

### HR's belief in AI

Sharp isn't the only one who sees AI as positive and practical. More than six in 10 HR leaders want to use AI more, research by insights firm Gartner found, and many see AI as nothing but a boon.

While the world at large might be starting to doubt AI, Gartner found that 81% of HR leaders use AI to, as they perceive it, boost efficiency. More than nine in 10 report believing that AI saves costs.

Neil Sahota, CEO of the machine learning software firm ASCII Labs, cites multiple places where AI is being used for good in HR: Unilever leverages AI

tools in video interviews, aiming for more objective, unbiased assessments; Hilton uses AI chatbots to save practitioners time, and the multinational firm General Electric uses AI for continuous performance assessments. "AI is transforming the way organisations manage their workforce, offering innovative solutions that enhance efficiency, accuracy and decision-making across various HR functions," Sahota says.

Elsewhere, Jon Lester, VP of HR tech and AI for outsourcing firm IBM HR, says that AI has allowed HR to dump repetitive tasks. "HR professionals are using the extra time to learn new skills," he explains.

Shmulik Barel, VP of the software firm Workhuman, sees AI as giving HR the competitive edge in areas that have been traditionally hard to capture and measure, such as employee sentiment. He says: "AI helps HR make evidence-based decisions to support strategic goals."

For those who might be tempted to buy into catastrophic assessments of where AI might

## HR's AI doubts

While many HR professionals want to use AI more, others are more sceptical about its use. Tina Rahman, founder of the consultancy HR Habitat, doesn't want to use it when it comes to employment law and HR, cutting off contacts who kept trying to push it on her. "I was always against AI when it comes to employment law," she says.

Laura Evans, CEO of the consultancy Glass Ceilings Change Management, believes that AI should be treated with more caution, especially with regard to intellectual property and personal information. "We will not use any external AI tools to transcribe meetings, and we ask others to switch theirs off before starting a conversation," she explains.

The CIPD's director of profession, David D'Souza, reminds us that HR's needs may be different to vendors'. He says: "HR professionals should take great care when selecting a technology vendor, to ensure that the choice matches their needs and risk appetite."

take the world of work, or who are frustrated that it hasn't delivered yet, global industry analyst Josh Bersin advises looking at the examples of where AI has already helped, such as data analysis and equality, diversity and inclusion efforts: "We have so many challenges in HR that are essentially data-driven problems, and we don't have the time to parse it. AI can do this, and help us make better decisions along the way."

### AI worries

But AI doesn't come without risk. Bersin admits that AI's utility can be oversold, and that it is well known that generative AI can hallucinate (produce false, misleading or fabricated information). Vendors can get lost in the data rather than the solution HR practitioners need, he says, and, as it stands, many AI products focus on broad utility rather than acute HR problems: "The information that comes from this type of AI is likely to be B-minus level," according to Bersin.

Sahota also sees limits to AI, adding that while AI is used to mitigate bias, it can also exaggerate bias, creating ethical, and operational challenges. "AI can perpetuate implicit bias if not carefully managed," he says.

"We've seen examples of it penalising candidates from women's colleges, which shows the importance of transparency and diversity in AI training data." He adds that AI needs human oversight to maintain trust and humanity alongside its use.

Similarly, IBM's Lester believes that AI is still lacking in some key areas. Specifically, he says, it is not up to speed in aspects of organisational life that are highly regulated, adding: "AI has limitations, particularly in areas requiring human empathy and nuanced decision-making."

As professor and AI ethicist Roger Steare explains it, organisations implementing AI need to ask what it's actually delivering, and if it's benefiting humans. This is especially critical when metrics such as employees' psychological safety, happiness and engagement are central to HR's perceived performance.

Steare says: "Many people think AI is conscious or has a conscience. It doesn't. As with much technology we introduce into work, we have to ask more: is it delivering productive value, or helping people lead happier lives?"

### Getting past AI problems

Such questions – about how to manage AI effectively so that it benefits both the business and its people – will likely land with HR. So, Bersin says, HR professionals should look for vendors that can show workplace value, and that have a targeted solution.

For Lester, it's about ignoring vendors that promise the world and instead looking at those that see AI as one tool among many. "AI should be seen as a powerful tool in our toolbox that augments HR processes rather than replaces human expertise," he says.

Indeed, it's the increasing tailoring of AI that Sahota says will lead to a more mature use. "Chasing after the next big AI breakthrough, many HR professionals are focusing on incremental improvements that can deliver tangible benefits."

What does this mean for managing the technology? For Eser Rizaoglu, Gartner's senior analyst, it's about having a product owner, as with other parts of the tech stack. He says: "The key recommendation for HR leaders is to introduce an AI product owner role into the HR function who can not

## AI and HR chatbots

AI-powered chatbots are increasingly popular for businesses. They promise to streamline processes, personalise tasks and create recommendations. Many integrate into other tech stack elements, and can be managed using voice commands.

"Our solution has been particularly popular in companies with complex HR needs and global workforces," says Michelle Dawkins, senior director of solution consulting for the AI-powered HR tech provider Workday. "It enables HR professionals to dedicate more time to strategic initiatives."

Gartner research has found that employee-facing chatbots are among the top three uses of generative AI in the HR function. Such bots are now akin to digital assistants that automate tasks and answer FAQs.

only coordinate HR's approach to AI but also work with the broader organisation to ensure that AI has a positive impact on the whole workforce."

Lester adds that it's about getting the business case right, getting the right AI skills into HR (such as prompt proficiency), being mindful of drawbacks, and building out policy and ethical oversight, as well as being transparent about the data that AI uses. "For HR, the rule of 'humans in the loop' is key to ensuring that AI does not make decisions about people, and people make decisions about people," he says.

As more HR leaders build AI into their processes, the rapid pace of transformation means oversight is needed, according to Andreea Wade, VP of AI at software firm iCIMS. "It needs robust governance," she says, meaning ethical guidelines and policies that ensure AI is human-led, technically robust, private, secure, transparent and accountable.

As Stear recommends, some scepticism is probably warranted. "Scepticism is a healthy process: it's not about being a Luddite but about weighing up the pros and cons of AI for your workplace," he adds.

### Where next?

As Bersin sees it, people will veer away from utopian promises as the AI market matures. The mindset of HR leaders will shift from a focus on how AI is changing the business HR is in, and move towards how AI is improving what the business already does.

HR is only at the beginning of its AI journey, Bersin explains. If vendors and buyers make the right choices, then AI might be applied to problems that need fixing. He adds: "Of course, this means taking the usual approach to implementing anything new: having an ROI measure, and ensuring people do need it."

For now, according to Steare, HR should take a balanced view: questioning whether vendor promises are truly all that, while understanding where AI might have potential. "There are areas where AI is being used well, in conjunction with human failsafes. We can point to areas where it does lots of good.

"But there are dangers. We have to ask vendors to show the technology's processes. We have to care about the value, the ethics, safety and morality," which is never a bad thing for HR to do, anyway. **HR**



# A SURE WAY TO KICK-START PRODUCTIVITY

**Economic growth and productivity is the target of the new government. But how can we achieve that in our very different post-Covid world of work?**



**T**he goal is clear: we have to grow our economy and increase productivity. But is this achievable in our post-Covid world of work? We now have 9.4 million people who are judged to be economically inactive – an increase of one million on pre-Covid levels. A significant part of that number is driven by poor mental health. According to a survey into Gen Z by PwC, almost a quarter of this age group are struggling with mental health issues, with depression and anxiety the leading concerns. The implications for business performance and economic growth are profound.

The necessity of working from home during lockdown has become the new normal but has created huge challenges. While it might have benefits for some employees, such as cutting down on the daily commute and creating more flexibility, it can also be isolating and disconnect us from each other, no doubt exacerbating the feelings of anxiety and depression for many, and causing a loss of motivation and enthusiasm for others.

For businesses the impact is significant. Not only is mental and physical wellbeing now a critical issue for HR and taking up more of their time, but ensuring high performance and productivity is a constant battle. Maintaining an energised, motivated atmosphere in the office (the cultural glue of any organisation) is harder when many are physically absent. Fostering collaborative working is challenging in a virtual environment. Agile decision-making is a struggle when most communication is via email and all conversations have to be diarised.

And that's just 'business as usual' performance. If there is a change or transformation agenda afoot, problems are compounded. Countering the disconnect requires leaders to dial up superhuman levels of energy to motivate and inspire staff, placing those leaders under unprecedented pressure.

The status quo is not sustainable; pre-Covid ways of working are not fit-for-purpose. The hybrid version that



has emerged is creaking under the pressure. Not only is business performance and productivity suffering, but everyone's mental health is at risk.

Something has to change; we need a complete reset. We have to re-ignite our national 'mojo' and it has to be driven bottom-up. Our businesses have to be vibrant, high-performing, and productive, and to enable this our business leaders need to supercharge the way they lead, finding new ways to energise, engage and unite their people, to lift them up and out of the post-Covid 'malaise'.

The reset needs to traverse what I call the 'five Cs':

- 1. Clarity of purpose:** Leaders must have absolute clarity about their purpose, and use it as a lever of inspiration.
- 2. Communication:** Everyone across the whole organisation, but particularly the leadership, must communicate more, and not just transactionally, but on an informal and face-to-face, human level.
- 3. Collaboration:** Virtual working facilitates siloed thinking and working practices. Consciously finding ways to work more collaboratively is critical.
- 4. Cascade:** Leaders must find ways to engage and connect everyone throughout the organisation, so they all feel part of the collective effort and corporate 'purpose'.
- 5. Compassion:** Leaders must be compassionate and foster a culture of compassion. Everyone has different levels of tolerance for stress, and are responding to the post-Covid world in different ways.

Business and economic success is dependent on it. Leaders need to rethink how they can reignite inspiration and motivation, and implement and cascade a change of mindset and behaviour, whilst supporting and developing their people.

It is my experience that the one intervention that will enable them to do all this is coaching. And not just coaching for the 'top team' but for all. Blending one-on-one and group coaching, providing support for everyone from the chief executive to the newest graduate joiner, will enable businesses to fast-track change, and instigate personal, team and business-wide strategies which engage and motivate all staff – bringing everyone into the re-engagement and productivity drive. Most importantly, it can be embedded into daily life, not requiring long, protracted time 'out'.

Providing new ways to bring people together, enabling them to connect and collaborate while at the same time providing them with bespoke one-to-one coaching will foster increased energy and motivation, and boost confidence and understanding of how everyone can change, grow and develop, while igniting the tangible collective effort and energy that is key to high-performing environments.

And for the leaders themselves, who face unprecedented pressure in traversing the complexity of the modern world, they too need support: an external perspective, a thinking partnership, a 'safe' place where they can strategize about their leadership whilst nurturing their own wellbeing, enabling them to fulfil their individual potential and lead their business, and in turn our country, to success.

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# COMMS to the RESCUE

How can HR leaders build a better reputation for the function, and educate their organisations about what HR is, and does? **HONEY WYATT** consults both HR and internal communications professionals, to assess the approaches, and their impact

**H**R has a reputation problem. For as long as the HR brand has existed, its mere utterance has sent shudders through employees worldwide. It's an unfortunate truth that HR's reputation has not improved with the increase of responsibilities of the role – so much so that some HR teams have rebranded to become 'people teams' to escape the association.

"There is a perception of the old style of HR," says Simon

Daly, employee experience strategy director for experience management platform Qualtrics. "We have to think about it differently. It's about how you move the needle on the perception of HR as a brand."

Internal communication teams can create shared understanding and meaning at an organisation, according to Shalini Gupta, senior internal communications manager at professional services firm Arup. So how can HR work better with

the comms specialists, to improve its reputation?

### Roots of the problem

HR professionals' responsibilities have increased in recent years, and not just due to the profession moving away from mostly administrative work. HR has been tasked with keeping up with increased demands from both employees and employers.

HR often takes a reputational hit after other departments'

wrongdoings, too. Around two thirds (62%) of HR professionals report facing increasing pressure to mediate a disconnect between employees and the C-suite, a survey conducted in June by the Octopus Money team revealed. This led to 57% of HR professionals wanting to look for a new job in the next year.

Headlines about leaders wanting to keep employees captive, move their offices across states, or enforce mass redundancies to

## Bupa's digital approach

Leaders of health insurer and healthcare provider Bupa created a digital platform in 2021, to ensure employees understood its values and culture. As a company with around 100,000 global employees – more than half of which are in customer-facing roles that had limited access to a computer – cascading messages to frontline staff was difficult.

Until 2021, Bupa had relied on intranets, emails and newsletters to communicate with employees, but found they were one-way, and didn't allow employees to feed back how messages were received. When its new CEO, Iñaki Ereño, was appointed in 2021, leaders worked with intranet platform Workvivo to create a digital communication platform that would allow employees around the world to connect and collaborate.

The platform was based on Ereño's vision of the company as an elephant – a large animal that is part of a herd – and the company values of being brave, caring and responsible. The idea was to encourage employees to feel part of something much bigger, Jo Hudson, group director of internal communications explains: "Today, with Workvivo our employees can connect internationally, and share inspiring moments and photos each day. It has really strengthened our global culture. On Workvivo we have specific tags for our three values, which people use to share stories of innovation, as well as to praise colleagues."

The result is a workforce with an engagement rate of 83%, and the company ranking in the top 10% of its engagement survey partner, Glint's, ranking. "Our global engagement survey score continues to trend upward each year, evidencing the trust we've built in our culture of listening and responding," Hudson reflects.

"Workvivo allows our HR and internal communications teams to do a lot more 'active listening' outside traditional engagement surveys, respond more quickly to our people's needs and get our people's support in creating the culture we want to foster at Bupa."

save money, can also reflect badly on HR. Poor leadership can "really upend the work of HR and comms," says Caroline Cubbon-King, communications consultant at All Things IC.

When this behaviour translates to tone-deaf social media posts, or companies failing to take a stand against injustices, that can worsen employees' perception of HR, Daly explains.

He says: "People want to work for an organisation that they feel an association with."

Daly added that the demands on organisations are increasing, and with them the demands on HR teams: "The volume and pace of change are having the biggest effect, and causing the biggest demands, on HR as a team. Connecting with employees, being involved, and how you communicate, is all critically important."

Despite HR's hard work, two thirds (63%) of employees do not think that HR adds anything to their experience, Octopus Money's research found. Further, employees perceive HR as the least productive department in their organisation, according to a survey commissioned by HR software developer Ciph in January.

### Influences on HR's reputation

Anastasiya Saraeva, professor of reputation and responsibility at Henley Business School, believes that employees' perception can be changed, as long as it is identified and understood. "If we want to change the perception of HR, first we need to know what triggers it," Saraeva says. This will vary for each organisation.

Part of the disconnect between what HR does and how it is perceived could be due to people not understanding what HR is responsible for, and why its practitioners behave in a way that might annoy people, Saraeva suggests. She adds that what employees do know of HR's role, they often do not like.

As Stephanie Kelly, CPO at Iris Software Group, explains, HR is often responsible for making the less-pleasant decisions, to the detriment of its reputation. She says: "As part of a much broader web of

responsibilities, HR professionals must conduct redundancies, mediate poor performance and manage disciplinarys on behalf of the employer. The nature of these duties can foster unease towards HR.

"There are outdated perceptions of HR too: that they're the enforcers of systems and processes for productivity. If you see HR as a department focused solely on making you work harder, you might not have a positive view of them. However, if you perceive HR as a team dedicated to improving the workplace and helping you reach your full potential, you're more likely to appreciate their role."

Cubbon-King adds: "A high proportion of employees expect their employer to comment on big issues happening in the world. Generally, organisations aren't particularly equipped to deal with issues management, and it's so easy to get it wrong, particularly as workforce expectations will often be vastly different."

Communications can also impact how employees perceive HR on a daily basis, Cubbon-King continues. "HR messages are often the ones that employees are really interested in, but HR teams have a significant amount of information to communicate, from recruitment, through the whole employee lifecycle."

When HR doesn't collaborate with comms, information can come across as overbearing. She says: "HR is really prevalent and often doesn't work closely enough with internal comms teams, so HR professionals can get a bad reputation for seeming to bombard employees with information."

At the other end of the spectrum, HR can accrue a bad reputation when it is not seen as present enough within an organisation. Kelly says: "Negative perceptions thrive in an information vacuum where company decisions are shrouded from employees, or where HR doesn't hold a broader relationship with the workforce.

"It's important that HR and internal comms come together to identify and bridge any gaps, to prevent creating uneasy perceptions of HR." Communication is a two-way street, after all, so "if HR leaders want to communicate, they need to start listening", Saraeva notes.

**“If we want to change the perception of HR, first we need to know what triggers it”**

**Look in the mirror**

Luckily, people working in internal comms and HR sit on a bank of information that reveals how an organisation feels about

HR. They use employee surveys, employee subreddits, intranets and, of course, they speak directly with employees.

Listening to employees means looking at their experiences on a daily basis, and throughout their lifecycle at the organisation.

“Employee listening shouldn’t just be limited or confined to an annual engagement survey with a limited amount of topics,” Daly explains, “it should encompass day-to-day life, or the overall experience for an employee’s time at work. That absolutely includes elements like HR and communications.

“Frequent listening connected with action can help lots of different parts of the business. It can be the catalyst for driving change, by being at the forefront of new information.”

Once HR has a feel for how staff regard their department, they should decide how they want to be perceived. “Often, you think about projecting your brand externally through brand identity, slogans that describe what you stand for, and the narratives you build. But it’s just as important, if not more so, internally,” explains Simon Butt-Bethlenny, brand and reputation manager at the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health.

Creating an HR brand can help employees feel connected with the function, he continues: “If you build your brand, you’re building something that’s coherent and cohesive. You’re enabling colleagues to become brand ambassadors.”

Idris Arshad, head of people at charity Asthma and Lung UK, recommends that HR teams connect their brand with the company values. He says: “Usually mission and vision exercises are set aside for organisations, but they work very well for HR professionals to set out their vision.

“Mapping out how to get there is a fantastic exercise to identify purpose. It should be aligned to the organisation’s mission, vision and values. It doesn’t happen in five minutes, but it is a great way to start an away-day. It is vital for developing the identity for HR. Then it is about living that message and sticking to it consistently.”

**Working with internal comms teams**

Once HR knows its own brand, it’s much easier to build a business case that can be taken to the internal comms team in a quest for improving HR’s reputation, explains Sharn Kleiss, employee experience strategy lead at professional services firm Gallagher: “Comms can help HR get the pitch right on what they feel they’re there to do, and frame the message so that it lands with employees.”

However, “internal comms people are definitely not a saviour for HR’s reputation”, warns Gupta. Wanting a better reputation shouldn’t be merely a PR stunt for the HR function; it should be linked to wider business outcomes.

Gallagher’s *State of the Sector 2023/24* report, drawn from a survey of 2,300 global internal communicators, revealed that these teams respond best to strategic engagement. Kleiss, who oversaw the report, advises: “If HR wants to better connect with employees, there’s data to say that if you engage the communications team on a strategic level, they will give you the support to increase employee understanding.”

For Gupta, the best outcome involves working as a partnership

to find shared values that can contribute to employees’ experiences. “Our role in internal comms is to drive trust in senior leaders and managers, together with HR, to ensure the reputation of the organisation and the leaders, and to further improve or enhance the trust,” Gupta explains.

“The more we work together and understand our common objectives, the greater the impact will be to the business’ bottom line. Engaged employees equals better productivity, which equals better business outcomes.”

These objectives can be used to build a communications strategy that can improve HR’s organisational presence. One way that internal comms and HR can align is to create effective HR communications for the whole of a worker’s employment.

Says Gupta: “Really focus on how we are ensuring effective communication throughout the employee lifecycle. If we work together, that will be reflected in policies and everything else.”

**The personal touch**

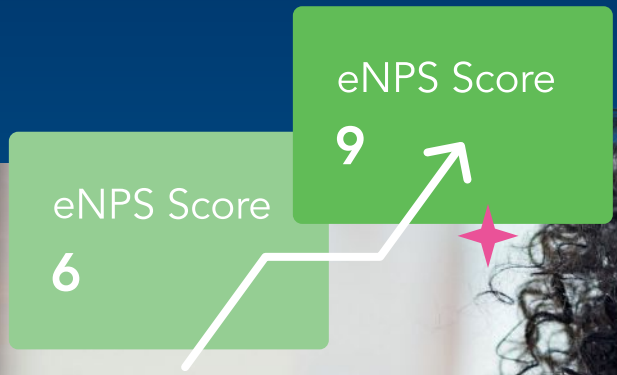
An HR brand cannot be communicated effectively without knowing how employees like to be communicated with, Daly says. “Understand from employees how they like to absorb information. Some people like on-demand listening, some people like video. There are different mediums out there,” he adds.

Personalised HR comms can play a part in engaging employees too. When employees understand how they can personally contribute to a business strategy, their belief in it boosts by 35 percentage points, according to a report from The Institute of Internal Communication published in June.

Employee data, notes Cubbon-King, can inform how HR can communicate its brand most effectively. Data-informed insights into learning, language and accessibility needs can be used

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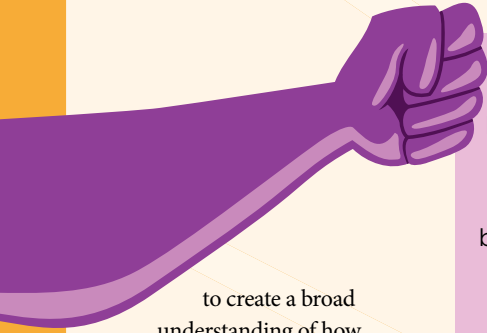
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## How video can help

For Chris Black, head of content and communications at production company Vizrt, video plays an essential part in humanising HR. “The HR voice needs to be a consistent part of communications throughout the board of the entire organisation. It needs to be not only a voice, but a humanised voice,” he says.

“This is where video comes in. It’s one thing to read an email; you don’t hear the tone or anything like that, but when you see that person talking, you understand exactly what they mean by their tone.”

As a global company with 700 employees in more than 40 countries, the Vizrt team uses video to give HR a presence among its remote workers – from onboarding, to town halls and learning tools. Black says: “There are a lot of processes that HR creates for helping employees along with their journey through the organisation. Being able to take those different processes and break them up into video chunks that can be consumed when the employee sees fit, is really helpful.”

“The one process that has worked for us quite well is using learning tools. We create video snippets, place them in learning tools and use a combination of the learning platform with video and quizzes. We have a live interaction at the beginning and the end of that process so that people understand why they’re doing it.”

to create a broad understanding of how people absorb information.

Tailored communications can help engage employees and ensure they feel listened to, Daly adds. “We live in this world of hyper personalisation,” he says. “Everything you do and look at, you want to feel like it’s tailored just for you. You want to feel like you matter.

“That happens internally within organisations as well, and the only way to do that is to genuinely listen to people and their views. Play that back in a way that resonates with them.”

Internal comms teams may also have data on how employees are feeling at any given moment. HR can take advantage of these insights to ensure that they don’t cross over with other news announcements when implementing policies, according to Kleiss.

One thing that communicators do well is know what employees want, need and feel, she says: “Simply ask comms: ‘What’s in the pipeline? What’s coming up? How are people feeling at the moment?’ and comms will have a good read on it.

“If you’re dropping information about anti-bribery training five minutes after something’s out in the news about bribery – or if the CEO’s bonus has just been announced, and then there’s a message about a pay freeze – talking to comms should help you mitigate the impact.”

### Fail to plan, plan to fail

With all of these insights under their belts, HR and internal comms can start to build a strategy that

will raise the profile of HR. “At the heart of effective communications is trust, transparency and a genuine human connection,” Gupta explains. This should be the lens through which HR communicates its values.

Taking a proactive approach to communicating values, rather than reactive one, is significantly more impactful at getting employees on the side of HR, Kleiss explains. “An alliance with internal comms can help HR work in a much more proactive, planned way, with the emphasis on: ‘We are listening; we are here to support you,’” she says.

To maximise HR’s time to have that open dialogue with employees, creating an employee hub could ensure that employees are constantly connected to the information they need at all times, Cubbon-King suggests. She says: “Think about the employee lifecycle, and key moments that happen in a business every day. Create a central point for information, resources and

templates, because then you could be signposting people consistently to the same information for a lot of those day-to-day queries.

“In the end, those inquiries will drop off, giving HR time to work with employees and line managers to find out whether that information was helpful, and review it accordingly.”

### Stakeholders

HR and internal comms professionals are crucial to creating a supportive company culture. But leaders and line managers must be involved too, says Cubbon-King. “If there’s a broken link, the culture will be negatively impacted in some way.”

As employees’ first port of call, line managers can also be crucial in assisting with day-to-day queries. “The most trusted source of information, generally, is a line manager. It’s not the intranet, it’s not usually a platform, it’s a human,” Cubbon-King observes.

Managers can make or

break an employee’s experience at a company. Nearly half (43%) of employees reported that their managers have negatively affected their mental health, research published last March by HR and workforce management company UKG shows. Gallagher’s report, however, highlighted that just 11% of managers were trained to communicate change effectively. Not having this training can prevent information ever reaching employees, Kleiss explains.

“When communications go out, people are asked to: ‘Speak to your manager for more information.’ Often, nobody has pre-emptively communicated with managers that there will be a communication directing people to them.”

Preparation doesn’t necessarily have to require a lot of extra work – it can mean as simple as providing managers with a list of FAQs, or a PowerPoint deck when big changes are being introduced, Cubbon-King explains. “Managers are often ready and waiting, and there’s a tumbleweed moment where nothing happens,” she says.

“That audience is critical, because if they don’t get it right, people don’t feel supported, or haven’t got the information or tools they need to do their jobs. That’s when people start looking for new roles or feel dissatisfied.”

Senior leaders can also play a part in sharing the value HR brings to an organisation with employees. According to Octopus Money’s analysis, C-suite professionals have a better perception of HR than employees. Over two thirds (65%) of C-suite professionals thought HR contributed positively to employee experience. Leaders should be heavily leveraged in HR’s reputation makeover, Cubbon-King recommends.

“It can make lives a lot easier if you’ve got an inspirational, open leadership team that is willing to stand up, answer questions, be open and transparent, and set the

tone from the top.”

This can be as simple as asking the CEO to lead a town hall, or sending out a weekly email. “Our weekly CEO email has become a vital channel for sharing HR initiatives, celebrating employee achievements and highlighting company successes,” Kelly explains.

HR can also help by equipping leaders and managers with the skills to communicate effectively, Gupta explains, before sharing an anecdote from when she collaborated with HR leaders while working at Arup: “The HR team wanted to build leader capability and internal comms wanted to set them up for success, so they modelled the right behaviours,” she recalls.


“Having a good communication strategy was at the core. Right from the start, we worked with HR and agreed on audit questions together.” This set the teams up for future collaboration.

Gupta also advises HR to engage with employee advocacy groups, which can communicate HR’s role. “Make sure you include the representatives of employee advocacy groups or focus groups from different employee segments, so that HR and comms efforts are effective.”

Kelly agrees: “At Iris, we create safe spaces through belonging groups, where employees can discuss issues openly without fear of reprisal. All our communications emphasise diverse cultures and values, acknowledging both employees’ personal lives and the cognitive diversity within our workforce.”

### Rolling out a reactive comms strategy

Leaders must consider how HR is perceived when considering how to navigate reactive communications, as workforce expectations will differ vastly, Cubbon-King comments. Getting stakeholder groups to go back to company values can



**“An alliance with internal comms can help HR work in a much more proactive, planned way”**

help with deciding how to react to political turmoil, company backlash or unforeseen circumstances, she adds.

When reputation is damaged, falling back on transparent and open communication can help regain employees’ trust, according to Arshad. “The HR brand is always there, whether you are consciously working on it or not. Being honest about what HR is doing and why, always helps when reputation is damaged. Listening to what is said without being defensive is key.

“The more aligned HR can be with the organisation, this will help repair reputation in the long

run. Visibility becomes more important too; it is not a time to hide away. Get out more: to leaders, managers, team meetings, and employee voice and resource groups.”

Be transparent about when HR isn’t able to act on employees’ demands, Daly adds. “Lots of organisations like to share the shiny new thing they’re doing. They don’t always share what they’re not doing.”

“To build trust between HR and comms, and really drive that forward, you need to balance: ‘We hear you, but that’s not something that we can do right now,’” he says. “That fundamental shift could make more organisations really thrive. It’s about honesty.”

Creating a feedback loop with employees can also help HR become more visible. Kelly adds: “Being visible across the business is key for HR professionals. Implementing feedback systems like employee surveys shows a willingness to listen and act on what’s being said. Involving staff in networks and steering groups will empower them to participate in change.”

### Measuring the impact

For Kleiss, improved employee engagement is the measure of a successful collaboration between HR and internal comms. More widely, when engagement with, and awareness of, HR increases, this can benefit the business as a whole, Kelly explains.

She says: “HR practices have been shown to improve employee retention and ultimately increase a business’ productivity and financial performance, giving them a competitive advantage.

“When the value of HR is understood, it can drive more initiatives, have stronger leadership buy-in and a broader business reach, promoting greater employee engagement and satisfaction. Employees should be able to trust that HR is there to support them, creating a culture where they can do their best work.” **HR**

## Bosch’s AI-fuelled approach

To create a direct line between HR and employees, engineering company Bosch created an AI-powered HR digital assistant, ROB. The tool allows employees to get fast, on-demand answers for HR questions, at any time.

The software can understand, and respond to, employees’ queries in all major languages, as well as signpost them to further HR support when appropriate. It frees the HR team to focus on improving employees’ experience.

The assistant was created in collaboration with HR, explains Niklas Fehrling, vice president of HR digitalisation and global HR IT at Bosch. “ROB learns from feedback, allowing us to make continuous improvements,” he continues. “It also informs the HR team about frequently asked questions, highlighting areas where more detailed explanations may be needed.”

Since introducing ROB in April 2024, employee experience and satisfaction with HR has “improved significantly”, Fehrling says. “As well as information being quicker to find, it takes some of the pressure away from the HR team and frees them up to look at other projects.”





# IN HR'S HANDS: Facing frontline workers' wellbeing crisis

Abuse and violence levied at UK workers seems to be at an all-time high.  
Could senior HR teams do more? **MEGAN TATUM** investigates

“We’ll come back at the end of your shift to deal with you.” This is one of many threats that David endured as a Co-op store manager in West Yorkshire. He’s also been sworn at, coughed over and faced physical abuse by shoplifters, one of whom threw stock at David and punched his colleague.

“On the way out, one of the women lunged at me and dug her nails into my head. That night, I had to go home and explain to my two young girls why I had a massive cut on my head,” he says.

Sadly, David’s experience as a frontline worker is not uncommon. Retail workers report some 1,300 incidents of verbal and physical abuse each day, according to the British Retail Consortium. The hospitality chain Pret made headlines in August for equipping some London staff with body-worn cameras, as a way of capturing customer abuse.

But retail is not the only sector affected. Nearly half (46%) of staff working in health and social care have experienced abuse at work, research by health recruitment specialist Florence suggests. The abuse includes being sworn at, shouted at and subject to racist comments.

Half (52%) of workers at water companies reported that the abuse they face

has also increased: trade union GMB surveyed 1,300 water workers earlier this year and found staff who had been attacked with machetes, splashed with raw sewage or left with broken jaws after being physically abused.

“Frontline workers are being made subject to abuse across just about every sector, from emergency services staff and carers through to teachers, support staff and shop assistants,” says Tracy Foster, HR consultant at UK and Ireland law firm Browne Jacobson. The factors fuelling this endemic violence differs dependent on the industry.

GMB claims that the increased abuse faced by water workers, for example, is in direct correlation to “the negligent actions of water bosses in allowing sewage dumping to rocket”. Frustrations around the cost of living crisis play a role in retail incidents, says The Retail Trust, while staff shortages and post-pandemic delays have reportedly triggered the increase within healthcare.

“Many frontline or service workers find themselves caught in a perfect storm,” believes Lesley Cooper, founder and CEO of consultancy WorkingWell. Modern stressors mean that the public increasingly lacks the ability to control themselves in uncomfortable or disappointing situations, Cooper argues,

leading people to take out their frustrations on “people who, often as a result of a long-hours culture or extended responsibilities due to downsizing, have less ability to absorb or bounce back from rudeness or unkindness”.

## Impact

The impact of rising levels of abuse – for both frontline staff and the organisations they work for – is significant. On an individual level, “it impacts mental health, a person’s sense of value and self-esteem,” says David Rice, HR expert at resources platform People Managing People.

Researchers at the University of Manchester’s Violence and Aggression Research Network (VARN) carried out a series of focus groups with victims, and found that employee morale and productivity were negatively impacted by abuse. Incidents led to extended sick leave or even early retirement from work. People living in smaller communities were fearful of coming into contact with perpetrators, leading to a far broader impact on quality of life.

Healthcare workers experience post-traumatic stress disorder at twice the rate of the general public, research led by King’s College London found. This was in part as a result of their exposure to high levels of stress dealing with patients and the public.

For employers, “the result is that people don’t want jobs where they’re forced to be in frontline positions,” adds Rice. “The work is tough. If the organisation doesn’t support you, it’s unlikely you want to be there.

“It impacts performance because disengagement is not just possible, it’s likely. People are going to look for a way out of those jobs ASAP.”

In short, it’s a powder keg. So what steps can HR teams take to intervene, before it blows up?

## How HR can help

Evidence suggests that currently, employers aren’t doing enough to support frontline workers. The trade union USDAW, for example, reported last May that 40% of retail workers affected by abuse said they felt a lack of support from management. In healthcare meanwhile, more than half (55%) of workers felt a lack of staff fuelled the problem, Florence’s research revealed, and a third (31%) of healthcare workers felt that incidents weren’t taken seriously.

Addressing this isn’t an easy task for HR teams, notes Gemma Dale, co-founder of The Work Consultancy and a former HR director. “It can be very difficult, potentially impossible, to entirely prevent all forms of abuse from happening, even when procedures

or protocols are put in place,” she points out. “Therefore, the options are to minimise the potential of them occurring, but also to support those that have been impacted by it.”

HR professionals should start with a robust health and safety risk assessment, recommends Foster. “Collecting, monitoring and analysing data can provide a full picture that helps an organisation to identify trends across particular areas, premises or roles. This can inform any bespoke mitigation measures, such as extra security in certain locations, or additional support and training for employees who work alone or at unsociable times.”

Initial assessment needs to be paired with mechanisms via which workers are encouraged and enabled to report abuse. VARN’s research, for instance, has found that many people simply accept verbal abuse, such as threats, as part of the job; they don’t think to lodge a formal report.

That needs to change, says Raechel Gavin, chief people officer at early intervention platform Sonder. “Organisations need better information from employees about the threats they face. They also need to develop workplace

cultures – in particular, ones where people feel safe to raise issues – that will engage their employees more rapidly and actively,” she says.

HR teams need to create a culture in which it’s acknowledged that any abuse is unacceptable and should be reported, agrees Foster. “Creating a workplace culture in which staff know how and where they can report any incidents and have the confidence and trust in their employer that these will be effectively and swiftly dealt with, can have a powerful impact on employees,” she says.

“This requires strong leadership. If staff don’t feel safe coming forward or have the confidence an issue they raise will be seriously addressed, not only will it deter people from doing this, but it could also have implications for attendance, recruitment and retention as it affects employee morale.”

Creating that culture can start at onboarding, suggests Liz Sebag-Montefiore, director and co-founder of HR consultancy 10Eighty. At each stage of the recruitment process, she advises, “be really transparent about

the work and the culture, and emphasise that the organisation believes in open, transparent communication. As a candidate, if I were told about the culture and that there are policies in place to prevent abuse happening at the outset, I’d feel safer that it would be addressed if I reported an incident.”

Introducing specialist training for staff that are most vulnerable to abuse is another proactive step that HR teams can take, she adds. “That could be on de-escalation techniques that allow them to recognise and remain calm in potentially abusive situations, such as active listening, recognising the difference between open and non-aggressive body language and how to communicate in clear language to avoid misunderstandings.”

It isn’t a one-and-done option though, she points out. “You can’t run a course and then expect to have no issues. It’s important to embed the learnings and create a feedback loop that encourages people to open up.”

## Interventions

Prevention is only one side of the coin, of course. So how should HR teams respond when an incident does occur?

There isn’t a one-size-fits-all response, says Dale. “People will react very differently to different situations,” she points out.

“There is a role here for an employee assistance

programme (EAP), and the provision of counselling. Depending on the severity of the incident or issue, this might be sufficient.

“In some cases, the organisation might need to provide more specialist forms of support, or additional support, over and above the typical EAP model of five to six counselling sessions.” Employees also need to be able to request what type of support would be helpful to them, she adds. This could mean changing job roles or duties for an interim period, if that’s operationally possible.

“Training line managers to identify and handle such issues is a key component in developing a culture in which there is both a proactive and responsive attitude towards supporting frontline workers receiving abuse,” adds Foster. “Occupational health and EAPs can be significant interventions here, providing counselling on issues affecting wellbeing and performance. Emergency services workers, for example, may require anything from practical support for attending a court case or inquest as a witness through to psychological support where they have experienced physical or emotional trauma.”





The bottom line is that, as abuse escalates, HR teams need to act to protect staff and support them in the aftermath of any incident that occurs. As David reminds us: “It really does weigh on our mental health. It upsets my family, and I know they’re worried about my safety. This is stuff we shouldn’t have to put up with on a daily basis.” **HR**

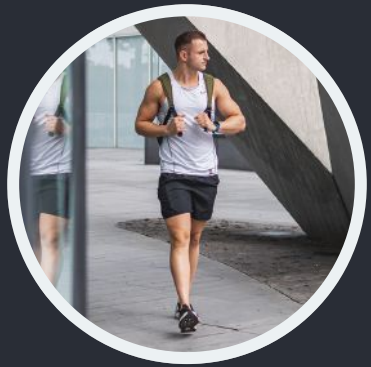


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# Make hybrid work, healthy work

With the right strategies, business leaders can ensure that hybrid workers are both healthy and happy at work, research suggests, as **GEMMA DALE** discovered



## Abstract

.....

The post-Covid-19-pandemic shift to hybrid work has led to many changes and challenges for organisations and HR professionals. One of the challenges is ensuring that hybrid work is good for employee health and wellbeing.

The combination of different forms of hybrid work arrangements, personal preferences, working styles and circumstances, and job types means that it will never be possible to say that hybrid work is completely good or bad for employee wellbeing in every situation. Assessment will always depend on a range of organisational and individual factors.

But this presents a practical challenge for organisations: how can they ensure that hybrid work is healthy?

To address this, I collaborated with colleagues at Liverpool Business School, Hannah Wilson and Matthew Tucker. We sought to identify how organisations can proactively support the health and wellbeing of hybrid workers, and mitigate any health risks. Our work began last autumn; we surveyed 412 hybrid workers in September and October 2023.

“  
**Hybrid work  
 can improve  
 physical health  
 and work/  
 life balance,  
 reduce stress  
 and anxiety**  
 ”



### What's new

Previous research has focused on the impact of remote work on employee wellbeing, but ours is one of the first to provide an in-depth understanding of employees' experiences of wellbeing while in hybrid work, and to explain how organisations and individuals can support the health of hybrid workers. Our survey was a qualitative one,

## From research to reality

Organisations need to take a multifaceted approach to support hybrid worker health. Our research found that these five actions make an impact:

1. Support employees' desire for social connection, and reduce the risk of loneliness by facilitating colleague relationships and creating opportunities for social activities. This might include in-person events but can also include fostering online collaborations too.
2. Help hybrid workers to establish a home working space that supports their ergonomic health. Where budgets allow, this could include providing suitable furniture or an equipment budget. At the very least, employers should provide guidance and training on safe and comfortable working.
3. Provide training to people managers on the importance of supporting the wellbeing of hybrid workers. Managers should be guided on the potential wellbeing challenges of hybrid work, how to spot signs of ill health, and be encouraged to discuss wellbeing regularly with hybrid team members.
4. Encourage employees to manage their working hours effectively, including building healthy digital habits, and switching off. Organisations can offer training and guidance, or even establish work/life balance policies suitable to their culture and business needs.
5. Maximise autonomy and choice around hybrid work arrangements. While hybrid work policies will vary from organisation to organisation, rigid policies, unsupportive managers and mandated attendance has the potential to negatively influence wellbeing, whereas autonomy can support it.

These steps, combined with action from hybrid workers themselves, can maximise the potential for hybrid work to be healthy work.

which means that respondents could describe their wellbeing experiences in-depth.

### Key findings Benefits and challenges

Hybrid work brings both challenges and benefits for employee wellbeing, and it is possible to experience both at the same time. For some, hybrid work can improve physical health and work/life balance, reduce stress and anxiety, and provide more time for personal and family pursuits, largely through reduced commuting. This additional saved time is of significant value for hybrid workers, and they use it in a range of different ways.

Many hybrid workers channel this time into activities that support their health such as exercise and hobbies. Some take the opportunity to get

more sleep, or make healthier food. Others use it to undertake domestic chores and 'life administration', leaving their weekends freer for more valued and life-enhancing activities.

At the same time, hybrid work can be detrimental to health. It can be isolating, and its sedentary nature can result in physical health problems such as musculoskeletal issues. Although some workers find that their work/life balance improves, others have trouble with boundaries and switching off at the end of the working day.

Hybrid work also results in what is known as work 'extensification' – a longer working day. There are several reasons for this. It can be related to difficulties in switching off, but it can also be a practical outcome of having no commute: without something to bring a

natural end to the working day, it is too easy to carry on working beyond a normal finish time.

Overall, the wellbeing benefits to hybrid work are greater than the challenges. More than a quarter of all survey respondents said that they experience no challenges at all. When challenges do exist, many employees are happy to manage them, as they so highly value the benefits.

### Joint responsibility

Our research established that making hybrid work healthy work is a joint responsibility: both individual employees and the wider organisation need to take steps to ensure that this way of working is good for wellbeing. There are, however, no silver bullets or simple solutions. Nor is there a universal healthy hybrid checklist that will work

## “Employees still value the office, so organisations need to make this time purposeful”

for every employee, or every organisation. But our research also established that, when proactive strategies are put in place, potential wellbeing challenges can be mitigated or minimised.

### Attending the office

Interestingly, many hybrid workers say that attending the office and spending time with colleagues helps to maintain their wellbeing. It is a vital part of their wellbeing, reducing the potential for feelings of loneliness and isolation.

When in the office, workers want to get the most out of that time with other people, not work independently and online. It's clear that employees still value the office, so organisations need to make this time purposeful.

### The importance of hybrid working culture

While some employees do engage with organisational wellbeing initiatives and find them useful, this is not really the support that they seek. Where hybrid work is undertaken but not truly accepted by managers,

this culture is detrimental to employee wellbeing.

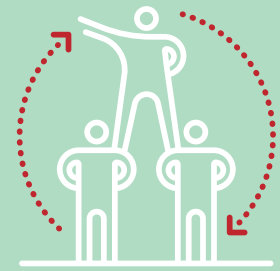
Some respondents highlighted a lack of trust in their organisations, unsupportive managers and a perceived lack of acceptability of hybrid work, despite a policy allowing it. These all had a negative impact on wellbeing.

Our research suggests that having a culture that is supportive of hybrid work is key. Hybrid workers will be able to get the maximum wellbeing benefits from hybrid work when they work in an organisation, or for a manager, that supports and welcomes it – and trusts them to work in the way that best works for them.

### Employee actions

Hybrid workers support their own wellbeing in a variety of ways. In addition to going into the office for social support, they use boundary management techniques to manage their work/life balance. These techniques including setting personal rules around work,

such as a fixed finish time or breaks, and even reminders to stop working. Often however, those who responded to our survey admitted that they know they need to do more to manage their time for their wellbeing, and can sometimes fall into bad habits. Employees also told us that their wellbeing benefits from creating a comfortable and separate home working space. **HR**



### About the author

**Gemma Dale** is a lecturer for Liverpool John Moores University, a published author and a former HR director. She teaches subjects including employment law, organisational behaviour, leadership and wellbeing at Liverpool Business School.

### Recommended reading

- 'What is healthy hybrid work? Exploring employee perceptions on well-being and hybrid work arrangements', *International Journal of Workplace Health Management*, 2024
- *Remote Workplace Culture*, Sean O'Meara and Cary Cooper (Kogan Page, 2022)
- *The Nowhere Office*, Julia Hobsbawm (Basic Books, 2022)
- *How to Work Remotely*, Gemma Dale (Kogan Page, 2022)





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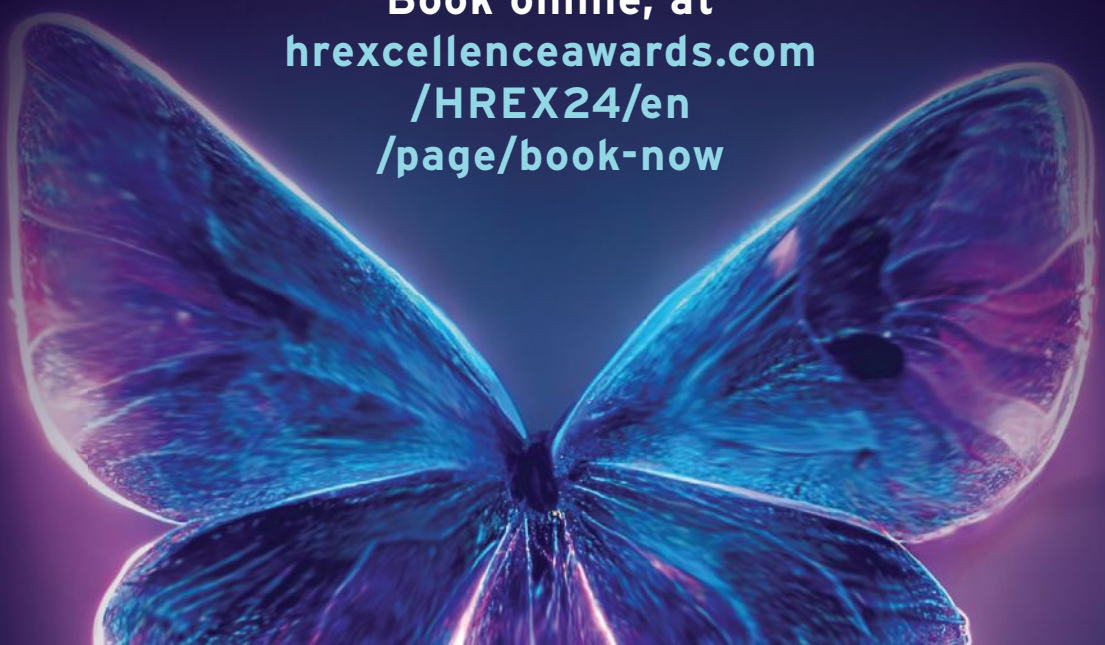
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# Knowledge is power: An education business transformed through HR

TESSA BOSHOFF, vice-president of HR at education provider Wall Street English, tells Millicent Machell how she helped a 'sleeping giant' awaken into an online learning powerhouse



**T**essa Boshoff has a talent for seeing potential. That talent reawakened when her steady rise through big retail names like the Body Shop, Starbucks and Gap was interrupted by an unexpected move in 2019, to education.

She says: “When I first joined Wall Street English five and a half years ago, I found a bit of a sleeping giant. In the retail businesses I had worked in, they had almost maxed out their runway. They were omnichannel, with so many products it felt as though anything that could be done to make the businesses successful had been tried already.

“In this business – which has one product that has been operating successfully for 50 years, though a decentralised sales force – there was so much that hadn’t been done yet. We needed the right skills, the right structure and the right skills to realise our ambitions. I feel like a kid in a candy shop! It’s

so nice to be in a business that has so much opportunity.”

The global brand operates in 35 territories, with 350 English language schools around the world, the majority of which are franchised. However, Boshoff describes her team as a close-knit one that deeply cares about the product.

“We are global and we are huge. But at the core, we’ve got 60 people in HQ who are supporting that organisation around the world. And people genuinely care,” she says. “I think it’s because of the passion people have for education and the teaching background of a lot of the people that work here.”

At the time Boshoff joined, the company had just become independent from the educational publishing and services corporation, Pearson. Pearson had a shared services structure, so Boshoff had to create an entirely new HR department for the brand as it decoupled.

“Starting a new HR department is daunting, right?” Boshoff says, “but also an exciting opportunity to do things and create something in the way that you imagine. You’re not having to take over somebody else’s work, which is nice. Daunting, difficult but rewarding is probably how I would describe that.”

There was no time for Boshoff to get comfortable in her new department though, as Covid hit a year later. As Boshoff explains, this could have been catastrophic for the company.

“We had 120,000 students studying in centres. But one of the benefits of being a small, nimble team at head office is that we could move quickly to make sure that the



## CV

**January 2019 to present**  
VP HR

Wall Street English

**March 2016 to January 2019**

Global HR director

Karen Millen

**December 2014 to March 2016**

Head of human resources

Karen Millen

**February 2010 to December 2014**

Various roles

Gap Inc

**January 2007 to November 2009**

Regional HR manager

Starbucks

**August 2005 to January 2007**

HR business partner

The Body Shop

**March 2001 to January 2005**

Various roles

Compass Group



Boshoff: "You have to constantly upskill yourself"

business could survive. Within two to three weeks of us closing the Barcelona office, we figured out a way, using some of the technology that we were playing around with at the time, to get students from studying in centres to studying online."

She adds that everyone in the business had to adapt quickly: "The teachers learned how to teach online basically overnight. The sales consultants had to learn how to sell online overnight. And one of the things I'm very proud of is that we managed to hold on to our entire team during that time. We didn't put anybody on furlough in Barcelona, which is where the head office is."

The HR team worked to support this rapid transition. "We were creating training quite quickly, to make sure that teachers knew what we were doing, and checking in with our franchise services management team, who were almost on the front line on calls for weeks.

"We also wanted to support people emotionally. We had counselling services available for anybody in Barcelona that obviously went through any trauma.

"Our CEO wrote an email to the Barcelona team every morning for the first 100 days of the pandemic. It was almost like a captain's log, with inspirational messages, stories and reasons to believe that we would get through it. It's a small thing, but it made a huge difference to the team."

The online teaching was a huge success. Boshoff believes that going through such a challenging time pushed Wall Street English to realise its true capability.

"The global online classroom, which we created as a result of the Covid pandemic, is actually very successful for us. It opened us up to other business opportunities and product ideas. Almost out of necessity, we discovered capability that we didn't have before."

Boshoff's work on organisational design has helped the company to continue its innovation and bolstered its success. "The initiative that I'm most proud of is the organisational design, which has combined functions that historically have been run separately," she explains.

"One of the structural changes I made was to put our product and technology departments together. We found a chief product and technology officer who has that entire organisation sitting under him: he sets the vision and there is synergy and symmetry in the team. He's also brought in product modern product management principles, which will enable us to diversify the product portfolio. It's a HR-led initiative, but it has a direct impact on the output of the organisation."

To ensure that her organisational changes went over smoothly, Boshoff invested in team coaching and upskilling. "Sitting underneath



Boshoff (third from left) with colleagues at a talent fair in Barcelona, March 2023

that structural change is new skill sets, so we invested in coaching to help the teams become more agile.

“From a technology perspective, we also had a product coach come in. They helped the product managers go from the role that they were performing in the past to taking on more of a holistic product role, where they own the product start to finish.”

Between the transformation of a HR function, organisational design and product changes, Boshoff’s time at Wall Street English has been tumultuous. However, this has

taught her a lot about her craft, she says: “I have learned you have to act as the conscience of the organisation, whether that’s easy or hard to do. You have to have the confidence to make tough decisions on a daily basis.

“For example, during the pandemic, I had to decide whether to put people on furlough. Can we afford to keep them? Can we not? Those are such tough decisions but you have to be confident and strong in your in your guidance. The people around you need that.

“The other thing I’ve learned through all of this is that you have to constantly upskill

yourself. You don’t have to know everything, but make sure you’re sufficiently curious to go and find out.”

Finally, she adds that bringing a sense of fun to work is invaluable, especially during periods of intense change and challenge. “Having a sense of humour in HR is a core competency post-pandemic,” she says.

“I’ve learned to have fun in those moments when we can. Even though the work might be challenging, being surrounded by professionals that you respect, and a team that uplifts each other, makes it worth it.” **HR**

## Five things I can't live without

### My husband

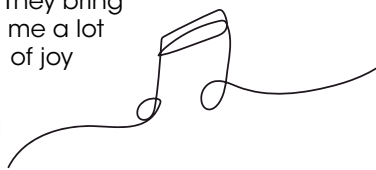
He is my support system and superfan!



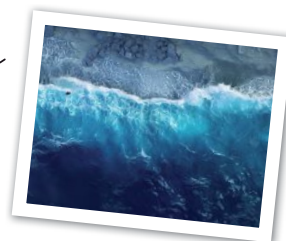
### My family

They bring me a lot of joy

**Music** Helps me with concentration and calm, I even play music in my office



### Living or being near the ocean as much as possible



**Massimo Dutti** This brand was made for me

# TOXIC WORKPLACES: HOW HR CAN HELP BY AMPLIFYING EMPLOYEE VOICES



**Prioritising employee voice can be HR's most effective tool in combatting workplace toxicity, says Rea Prouska**

**T**here has been a surge in media coverage highlighting a troubling trend in organisations: the 'toxic' workplace. According to OECD reports, toxic work environments lead to time off work due to sickness absence, lower productivity due to health problems while at work, and health-related early retirements.

The European Commission identifies toxic work cultures as a significant risk factor of poor mental health. Toxic workplaces span various sectors in the UK. For instance, firefighters at the London Fire Brigade endured abuse disguised as "banter" while the Nursing and Midwifery Council was recently condemned over its toxic culture.

So what exactly constitutes a toxic workplace? How can employee voice mitigate toxicity? And what role can HR play in addressing this issue?

## What is the toxic workplace?

The toxic workplace is an abstract term used to describe dysfunctionality in the workplace. It is often exhibited through a range of counter-productive organisational practices and poor behaviours. These may include hostile behaviours such as bullying, harassment and discrimination. They may also include poor leadership behaviours such as ineffective, abusive or unethical leadership.

The way work is organised in such workplaces leads to poor communication, unnecessarily high stress levels, excessive competition and unmanageable workloads. Work/life balance suffers, and so does health, wellbeing, morale, engagement and retention.

## How can employee voice reduce workplace toxicity?

Where employees are offered opportunities to voice their ideas or concerns in the workplace, organisational effectiveness increases, leading to higher profitability and productivity. For employees, working for an



organisation that values their voice means that they are afforded dignity and respect, according to the CIPD.

Offering voice opportunities to employees improves communication and reduces conflict within teams, while trust and respect towards leaders increases. The benefits of employee voice are so significant that recent research has found that the degree and effectiveness of organisational voice practices affect employee life not only at work but also outside of the workplace, leading to positive outcomes for life satisfaction and overall health.

## HR's role

HR can transform toxic workplaces by prioritising employee voice. With toxic behaviours often stemming from team leaders and managers, creating safe channels for direct voice (e.g. meetings, open-door policies, surveys) and indirect voice (e.g. unions) is essential.

HR can further support managers and leaders by providing training in this area, addressing the gap identified by research that shows a lack of training for people entering management positions, including training in fostering voice within teams. Effective training equips leaders with

the skills needed to listen to and act on employee feedback constructively.

Beyond traditional direct and indirect voice channels, there is a critical need to offer safe channels for whistleblowing too. A study surveying HR managers and directors from 222 UK organisations found that only 42.6% of HR professionals believed that employees felt safe to blow the whistle. The majority of organisations (83%) did not have a whistleblowing policy in place. Offering safe whistleblowing channels is crucial as it protects employees from retaliation and fosters a culture of transparency and accountability.

HR can effectively combat toxic workplaces by prioritising employee voice and establishing safe channels for both direct and indirect voice. Addressing the training gap for managers and leaders, and implementing robust whistleblowing policies are also crucial steps. By fostering a culture of open communication and accountability, HR can create a supportive work environment that enhances employee health, wellbeing, morale and engagement.

**REA PROUSKA IS A PROFESSOR AT HULT INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS SCHOOL**

# How Lloyd's boosted diverse recruitment after slave trade scrutiny

Insurance marketplace Lloyd's improved its recruitment of ethnically diverse talent after introducing its Inclusive Futures programme last November. **HONEY WYATT** reports

## The organisation

Lloyd's is a specialist insurance marketplace that dates back to the 1680s. It started as a coffee house by the river Thames and became a home for maritime intelligence. Today it works with thousands of companies worldwide, representing millions of people, providing knowledge, resources and leadership to tackle societal risks.

## The problem

Lloyd's came under scrutiny, from external campaign groups and media amid the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020, for its historic involvement in enabling the transatlantic slave trade. As a centre for maritime insurance in the 17th century, Lloyd's facilitated Britain's slave merchants to manage their risks during the height of the slave trade, throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

On 10 June 2020, Lloyd's chairman made a statement acknowledging the firm's history. He also committed to improving the company's intake of diverse talent going forward.

At that time, Lloyd's set a company-wide goal to meet a one-in-three hiring ambition for ethnically diverse groups throughout the group of businesses. "The chairman took brave action to be one of the first corporates to apologise for its role in the transatlantic slave trade," remembers Mark Lomas, head of culture. The statement laid out a series of commitments to review and improve company culture for current and future diverse employees, working in collaboration with black and minority ethnic groups.

## The method

To put the commitments into practice, Lloyd's embarked on a journey of "researching, reflecting and responding", Lomas describes,

to better understand its history and how that impacted its workforce. As part of that work, the company hired an archivist to assess its documents and map the scale of its role in the slave trade.

"Often people think of Lloyd's as an insurance company, and therefore we have this Hogwarts-like library of artefacts. It is simply not the case," he says. "The archive helped us understand what we did and didn't have."

Lloyd's also partnered with Johns Hopkins University and professional network Black Beyond Data to contextualise its role in the transatlantic slave economy through a digital humanities archive. The project team consulted an advisory board, made up of UK cultural institutions, as well as more than 200 ethnically diverse colleagues across the insurance market, to understand what the archive should look like and how to shape a meaningful response.

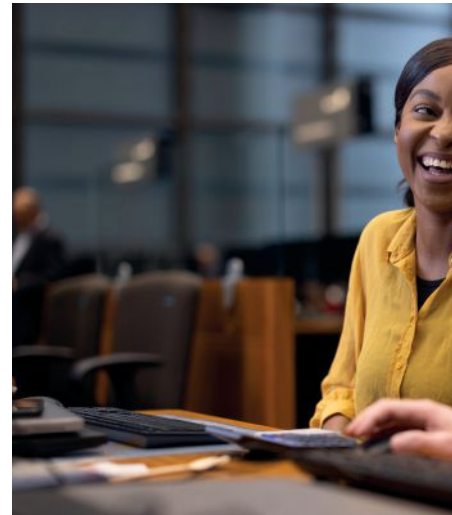
The research project ended after two years, culminating in the launch of Lloyd's multifaceted Inclusive Futures programme in November 2023. Broadly, the programme aims to "support ethnically diverse groups from the classroom to the boardroom". As part of that work, Lloyds has committed to investing in young diverse talent through a school engagement programme, to set them up for future careers at the company.

"The school engagement programme is designed to do two things," Lomas says. "To make careers in insurance far more understandable to a hugely diverse talent pool, while being very open about Lloyd's history, and to highlight the opportunities in insurance."

Bursaries are due to be provided to 200 undergraduate students over the next three years. An early-years talent pool is also going to be created over the next 10 years, as Lomas



Lloyd's works with thousands



An early-careers talent pool is another



Lloyd's can trace its history



of companies around the world



flagship initiative of Inclusive Futures



back to the late 17th century



Lomas: Inclusive Futures was a “labour of love”

explains: “The early-careers talent pool is another flagship initiative of Inclusive Futures. It will create a pre-assessed talent pool of black and ethnically diverse groups, and give first dibs on that exclusive talent to our founding partners.”

People in the middle of their careers are to be supported by a mentoring programme, Accelerate, as well as a master’s degree subsidy. Meanwhile, Lloyd’s has committed to creating succession plans for its founding partner companies – Howden, Chubb, AXA, MS Amlin, TMK Beasley, Hiscox and Arch – to feed ethnic minority talent onto its board.

“We’ll do initial succession planning and then develop that executive pipeline, literally from classroom to boardroom,” Lomas explains. “The founding partner companies will explore their succession plans and capability requirements going forward, and the board talent pool will map five areas where they need capability or lack diversity. They will then actively start building a more diverse, board-level talent pool.”

Taking a three-pronged approach to improving diversity over the next 10 years, the admin of setting up the programme was “a labour of love”, Lomas comments. “As you can imagine with a group of companies, it can be a bit complicated. But when you have partners who are absolutely dedicated to the outcome, you get over all these hurdles.”

To ensure the success of the programme, Lloyd’s created a governance group made up of delivery partners, founding partners

and Lloyd’s board members. “The governance group provides both feedback and friendly challenge,” says Lomas.

### The result

The launch of the Inclusive Futures programme has created not only a more diverse company at Lloyd’s but improved diversity among its marketplace. “The corporation has achieved the one in three hiring ambition,” Lomas says.

In the year leading up to 2023, 17% of the company’s new hires came from an ethnically diverse background. This increased to 21% in March 2024. Meanwhile, the representation of ethnic minorities in the Lloyd’s workforce increased more broadly from 11% to 13% in the same time period.

Further, “the number of applicants we’ve had from ethnically diverse backgrounds has increased,” Lomas explains, and data shows that more applicants are willing to share their ethnic identity with the company than previously – 11% of applicants refused to supply their ethnic identity this year, compared with 22% last year.

Although he’s hesitant to attribute this progress to Inclusive Futures alone, Lomas states: “What really pleases me is that we can see that our efforts – in being open and transparent around Lloyd’s history, coming up with a really meaningful response, being very active as an inclusive employer, and having a top-to-bottom plan around inclusive

recruitment – are shifting the dial.”

This culture has translated to Lloyd’s market, where the number of firms that monitor ethnicity has gone from 76% in December 2022 to 99%. The proportion of ethnically diverse people within the firm’s market has gone from 9% to 13% overall. In leadership, representation has risen from 5% to 9%.

While some organisations might not have the same resources as Lloyd’s, Lomas encourages other employers that want to address their historical links to slavery to “be prepared to consult with people in your organisation, your sector and the communities around you, about what’s going to be meaningful”. He adds: “Our efforts prove that if you can operate as a collaborative unit, you can make change faster. That is exactly what Inclusive Futures is set up to do: to use collaboration strength to fast forward progress.” **HR**

### Fact file

.....  
**Number of employees  
 (in London)**

900

**Number of offices  
 worldwide**

39



**JC Townend**  
CEO UK and Ireland,  
LHH

“  
**My work helped  
win a Nobel  
Peace Prize**

# CV

**March 2018 to present**  
CEO UK and Ireland, LHH

**March 2023 to present**  
President UK and Ireland,  
The Adecco Group

**November 2016  
to March 2018**  
Managing director,  
WYG Consulting

**April 2016  
to November 2016**  
Founder and CEO,  
Cyrene Strategy Consulting

**March 2012  
to April 2016**  
Group lead and executive  
VP Europe and Asia, ICF

**April 2007  
to March 2012**  
Group lead and executive  
VP health, education and  
social programmes, ICF

# From helping jobseekers to prize-winning consultancy

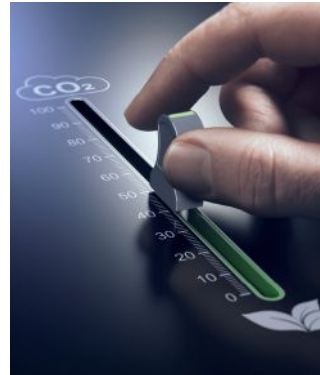
**My first job** after graduate school was training people on benefits for good jobs in the banking sector. That quickly evolved into management and organisational consulting.

**Over time, I consulted** for the government, and businesses, about housing, poverty, climate change, energy, health, education and employment. I regularly worked 60-hour weeks, sometimes 80-hour weeks. It was very hard, but the work was meaningful and thus rewarding.

**I took jobs** that I felt would improve lives, but my work kept morphing into making more millions for the corporate world. I realised those things weren't mutually exclusive, and that I worked best when combining private efficiency with a public-spirited mindset.

**The best lesson I've learned** is to proactively plan priorities and time management – in everything. Every year I sit down and re-assess my life, work goals and priorities, then I make plans to accomplish those goals. If you don't deliberately plan, you risk the year flying by without accomplishing what you wanted, or being out of alignment with your values.

**My proudest achievement** is receiving recognition from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change for my work that helped win a Nobel Peace Prize



in 2007. I spent more than a decade of my career working in collaborative business programmes to reduce climate change, at a time when it was an uphill battle for attention and credibility. We helped create a programme that has, over 20 years, reduced greenhouse gases by 4 billion tonnes of carbon equivalent – more than 10 times the UK's 2023 total emissions.

**The worst mistake I made** involved a business decision that did not align with my values. I've never done it again.

**I'm originally from the US**, and my biggest inspiration is Barack Obama. He was able to accomplish great things, and was the first president to get any kind of public healthcare system in the US. I admire people who really try, with goodwill and hope, to make the world better.

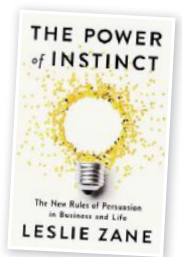
**What keeps me awake at night** is envisioning all of the positive ways that AI can make a difference to our business, and ensuring that we are taking advantage of tech developments in real time. What

should we invent and implement ourselves, and what is done better by others?

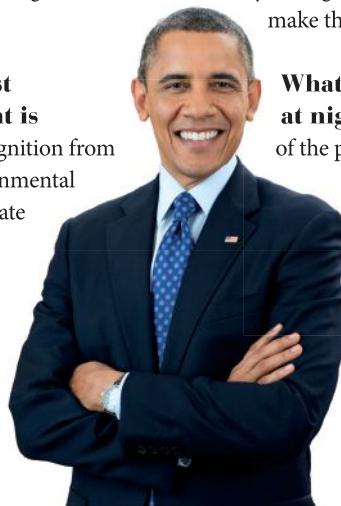
**I collaborate with my HR director** on every single part of our strategy. I lean very heavily on my HR director to be the strategic lead of our company's very precious resource.

**To advance to the C-suite level**, HR leaders need a seat at the strategy table. They need to understand how the company makes money, who the clients are, what clients value, and how their market operates. They need to have very strong financial acumen, outstanding communications skills, and strategic decision-making capabilities are a must.

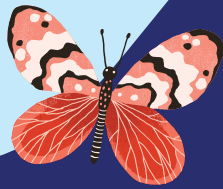
**Right now, I'm reading** *The Power of Instinct: The new rules of persuasion in business and life*, by Leslie Zane. It addresses outdated decision models and suggests that people use instinctive decision-making driven by memories and associations. I'm also reading an oldie but a goodie: *Managing the Professional Service Firm*, by David Maister.



**My top leadership tip** is to never forget the value of the discretionary effort of your people. Too many try to lead by dictum and spreadsheet, ignoring the insights and effort that a motivated and creative team can create. Work to be an effective leader with an important purpose, so your people are able to give their best to the business. **HR**



**HR** Most  
Influential



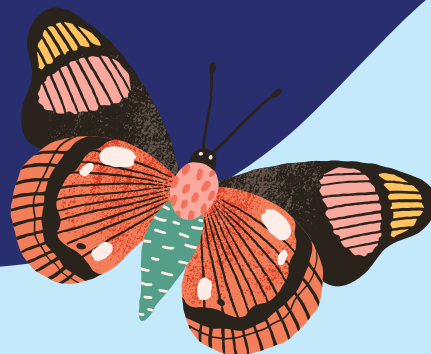
# Grow with *the best*

This year's class of HR Most Influential listees share their insights about continuous professional development, and how to cultivate career-long learning

Download and read the digital resource here

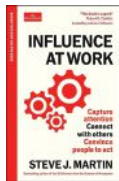


[bit.ly/HRMost24](https://bit.ly/HRMost24)





# HR books



## Influence at Work

Author: **Steve J Martin**

Publisher:

**Economist Books**

Price: **£10.99**

Just because someone has seniority, does not necessarily mean they have influence. To be influential, you have to understand the unspoken rules that govern who is listened to, and what actually gets done. Putting these rules under the spotlight, Steve Martin promises a guide to building influence, connecting with others, winning over sceptics and swaying the undecided.



## Brilliant Questions for Great Interviewers

Author: **Hugh Billot**

Publisher: **Woodbridge Publishers**

Price: **£22.99**

Drawing out the character, thoughts and motivations of an interviewee is a notoriously difficult task: getting to know someone in an hour or two is near impossible. In *Brilliant Questions for Great Interviewers*, Hugh Billot draws on his years of experience in recruitment, alongside experience as both a CEO and HR director, to help guide readers towards revealing questions that give meaningful answers.



## The Answer is a Question

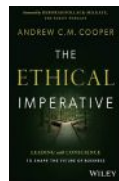
Authors: **Laura Ashley-Timms and Dominic Ashley-Timms**

Publisher: **TSO**

Price: **£14.99**

Presenting a new model for management, *The Answer is a Question* asks that leaders shift to a questions-first

approach – through the book’s four-step ‘STAR’ (situation, task, action and result) model – that claims to cultivate engaged, problem-solving employees. If employees generate solutions to their own problems, the logic goes, they will be better engaged, and managers will get a whopping 20% of their time back.



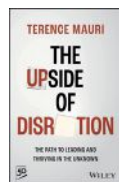
## The Ethical Imperative

Author: **Andrew CM Cooper**

Publisher: **Wiley**

Price: **£22.99**

Many books, like *The Ethical Imperative*, exist to draw attention to unscrupulous and unsustainable business practices. Many books merely raise questions, with no answers. Giving five actionable strategies to transform an organisation into a “beacon of trust and responsibility,” including techniques to create an authentic, honest social media presence, Andrew Cooper actually provides some answers.



## The Upside of Disruption

Author:

**Terence Mauri**

Publisher: **Wiley**

Price: **£22.99**

The common conception is that bold decisions are inherently risky. Too much change, too quickly, is dangerous. Terence Mauri disagrees, *In The Upside of Disruption*, he argues that the risks of standing still are greater than we anticipate, and that bold decisions are safer than we think. Turning disruption into a tailwind is key to resilience, he promises, including strategies and steps for organisations looking to take advantage of a chaotic world’s unexpected turns.

## How to get



Despite best intentions, many people inadvertently mispronounce names. This can lead to people feeling embarrassed, excluded or disrespected. **Aggie Yemurai Mutuma** offers tips for business leaders wanting to

ensure that everyone is on the same pronunciation page.

### Q: How can business leaders ensure that everyone gets their colleagues’ names right?

**A:** Names are deeply intertwined with identity; they often carry personal and cultural significance, reflecting our heritage and the hopes of our loved ones. Mispronouncing a name can feel like a diminishment of one’s identity, so getting names right is not just a matter of courtesy, it’s a vital part of fostering an inclusive and respectful workplace.

### Foster a safe and respectful working environment

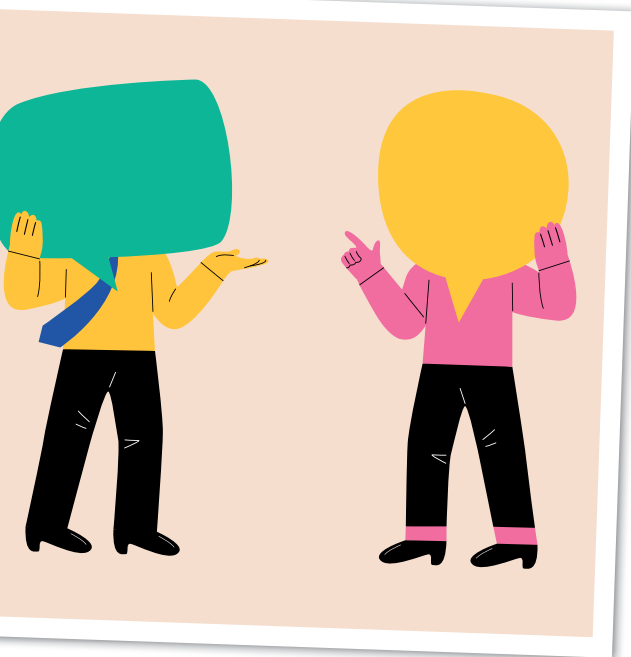
It’s important for organisations to create an environment where it is safe to ask for the correct pronunciation of a name, and where it is equally safe to correct someone when they get it wrong. It’s perfectly okay not to know how to pronounce a name initially, but the key is to take accountability by asking and then checking to ensure you’ve got it right. This practice should be encouraged and normalised within the workplace.

### Shift the perspective on pronunciation challenges

It’s important to reframe the narrative around pronunciation. The challenge is not the person’s name; the challenge lies in our pronunciation. Instead of saying: “Your name is hard to pronounce,” acknowledge that your pronunciation is wrong. This subtle shift places the responsibility on the individual to improve their pronunciation rather than implying that the name itself is problematic.



# names right



## Embrace mistakes as opportunities to learn

People are going to get names wrong at times, and that's okay. What matters is fostering a culture where individuals are comfortable. Apologising and asking for guidance ("I'm sorry, please tell me how to pronounce it,") should be seen as part of a respectful dialogue, not a source of embarrassment.

## Utilise tools and resources

Provide resources such as phonetic spellings and audio recordings of names whenever possible. These tools can be invaluable in helping colleagues learn and remember the correct pronunciations. Additionally, explaining the significance of names to all employees can deepen understanding and appreciation, enriching the organisational culture.

## Model behaviour

Leaders play a pivotal role in setting the tone for inclusion. By prioritising the correct use of names, they signal to everyone that this is an essential aspect of the company's values. Leaders should model this behaviour by making a concerted effort to learn and use names correctly, thereby encouraging others to follow suit.

**Aggie Yemurai Mutuma is CEO of Mahogany Inclusion Partners**

# HR future leader



**Name:** Robyn Le Gallais

**Job title:** HR manager

**Organisation:** Supermarket Alliance

of AI could have a significant impact on what our workforce looks like over the coming years. The battle for talent cannot be overlooked too, especially in specialist roles.

## What will become more important for HR over the next five years?

I can see the next big topics being awareness of and managing neurodiversity in the workplace, and fertility treatment support. As we create more open and inclusive environments, we must be prepared to support situations that people may have previously not shared.

## What subjects will HR still be tackling when you retire?

While most businesses understand and advocate for diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) on a surface level, real, ingrained cultural shift takes time. My fear is that a lot of poor behaviours around DEI still exist below the surface level. I hope that we will be past having conversations about how different people provide real value to businesses.

## How do you plan to change HR for the better?

I am often told "you're not like other HR people," which is both a massive personal compliment and a real shame for the profession. There are times when HR needs to be strategic, and protect the business, but there is a balance to be struck. I believe that HR professionals need to lead with compassion, and I intend to do just that.

## How did you get started in HR?

By accident! I landed my first HR administration role after working in a bar. Seven years later, I now successfully manage a multijurisdictional role. I'm forever grateful to my first manager, who took a chance on me.

## What are your main HR concerns?

It can be difficult, particularly in heavily operational businesses, to help people see how HR contributes to the profit and loss lines. AI is a big concern for many organisations, in an already tight labour market. The continued development



# How I got here...

## *Faye Longhurst*

### Regional people lead Europe, Canva

#### Regional people lead Europe, Canva

April 2023 – present

“This role has brought all of my experiences together. It’s been especially rewarding to cheer the Canva team on during peak moments like the opening of our London office last May.”

#### Leading reward partner, Canva

August 2021 – April 2023

“In this role I developed my experience in reward. Canva’s approach of leading with values gave me a strong foundation, enabling me to experiment with ideas.”

#### Global compensation specialist and partner, Cubic Corporation

November 2014 – August 2021

“This role coincided with moving to Australia. Taking my learnings from when I had first worked with Cubic, I said ‘yes’ to many opportunities and dove into the world of remuneration and benefits, culminating in my working on reward programmes across APAC, the US and EMEA. It was an incredibly rewarding (pardon the pun) challenge that deepened my understanding of market dynamics and the nuances of effective reward strategies across different regions.”

#### HR delivery advisor, QVC

September 2013 – March 2014

“Switching industry again, I took a contract with QVC and used my HR skills to support teams and roles I hadn’t experienced or worked with before. This experience offered



#### Education

University of Brighton  
Postgraduate degree  
in Personnel and  
Development  
2010 – 2012

The University of  
Birmingham  
BSc (Hons) Psychology  
2005 – 2008



**This role has brought all of my experiences together**



so many learnings: it helped me to further understand the sort of company I felt I would thrive in, as well as offering me an opportunity to pivot and flex my skill set to fit this business’ unique needs.”

#### HR advisor, Just Group PLC

April 2013 – September 2013

“It was time to try a new industry, so I accepted a brief contract with a financial services company. During my time there, I supported a TUPE administration process and created a reward strategy that aligned with the company’s objectives. This experience showed me how HR can influence and partner at a company level, contributing to strategic objectives.”

#### HR officer, Cubic Corporation

April 2009 – April 2013

“I wore many hats at Cubic, initially focusing on talent acquisition, then managing the learning and development process and advising stakeholders on a range of employee relations matters. This experience emphasised the value of actively seeking new challenges.”

#### Recruitment consultant, Antal International

September 2008 – February 2009

“This brief stint as a recruitment consultant kickstarted my career in HR. More importantly, it ignited my passion for the industry, demonstrating the vital role that HR plays in organisational success.”

## Top three career tips



1

#### Lead with values

Understanding what’s important to you is key to helping identify companies in which you can thrive.

2

#### Embrace a growth mindset

Embrace opportunities and be open to exploring different industries.

Discover what you love doing, as well as, importantly, what you don’t like.

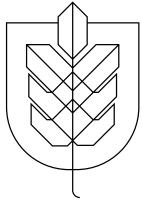


3

#### Link with the strategy

Understand how HR’s role links to and amplifies the company’s culture and strategy.





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