



IT'S ALL HR'S FAULT

How HR can improve its image and
boost its standing in the C-suite

in collaboration with



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“Go out on the internet and scan some of the headlines of articles talking about HR. Notice a theme? Chances are, you’ll see a number of headlines lamenting the inability of HR to have an impact... But when something goes wrong, or we encourage a manager to make a decision that makes sense, we hear the always exciting,

“HR made me do it”
or **“It’s HR’s fault.”**



Mary Faulkner
Writing for SHRM Blog

INTRODUCTION

We hate to say it, but HR has an image problem.

In short, HR professionals work in a realm that many distrust, don't understand, or simply don't like. HR are often perceived to be the reactionary enforcers, the bureaucrats and the right hand of senior leadership making and enacting 'difficult' decisions. They seem to exist only to serve the interests of the company's leaders, and ultimately prioritising the needs of the company over the employee.

This poses a real problem for hard working HR teams. HR ought to be an influential and trusted voice in the C-suite. This is because the reality of HR today is that the department is responsible for much, much more than just the hiring, firing and administration of a workforce. HR play an instrumental role in creating places people really want to work in, and where employees want to do their best – and that's a tough remit!

When allowed, HR teams can foster trust, encourage open communications, ensure fair treatment, support employee growth and development, and enhance overall job satisfaction, productivity, and employee retention—all vital for successful, thriving and harmonious work environments.

HR must touch virtually every aspect of a business to make all that work – from making the right recruitment decisions, to guiding company leadership teams to define the norms and behaviours required for ongoing strategic success. But, if employees view HR's work with distrust and scepticism, enacting workplace strategies that create thriving business cultures can become borderline impossible and put HR's new place in the C-suite in jeopardy.

Suspicion of HR can erode trust among both employees and managers, leading to resistance when HR wants

to implement new policies or deal with sensitive issues. It can also hinder effective communication, employee engagement and collaboration, making it harder for HR to address workplace challenges, resolve conflicts, and implement critical strategic initiatives.

Ultimately, a poor perception of HR creates a barrier to their ability to effectively support and improve workplace environments. So, what are the core issues behind this widespread distrust of HR, and what can be done to change them?



“Many HR departments can be seen to approach employees as little more than a resource to serve the needs of the corporate bottom line, where the needs of the leaders, departments and business are considered and prioritized over that of, and often to the detriment [of], the needs of the employees.”



Claire Brummell
HR Consultant

ABOUT THIS REPORT

To discover what's causing negative perceptions of HR, we polled HR professionals from the HR Ninjas community.



The HR Ninjas are the UK's largest free HR community where in-house HR professionals can seek help and support from an amazing group of fellow professionals. Their Facebook group alone has over 30,000 members from British businesses of all shapes and sizes, and their roles range from HR administrators to Heads of HR.

To preserve the anonymity of group members, names of participants have been changed.



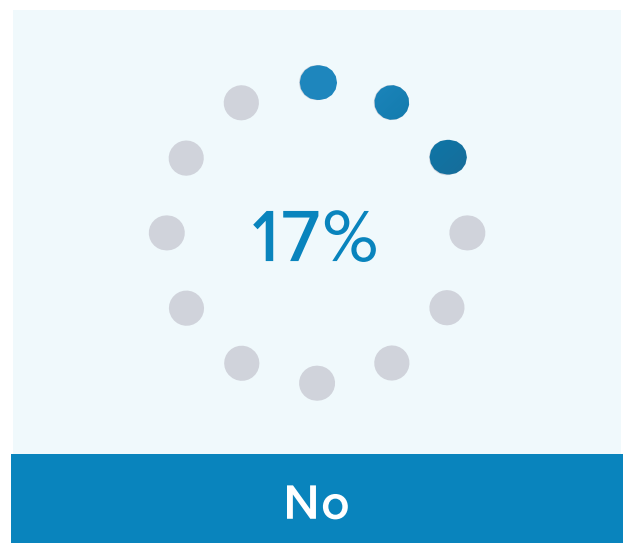
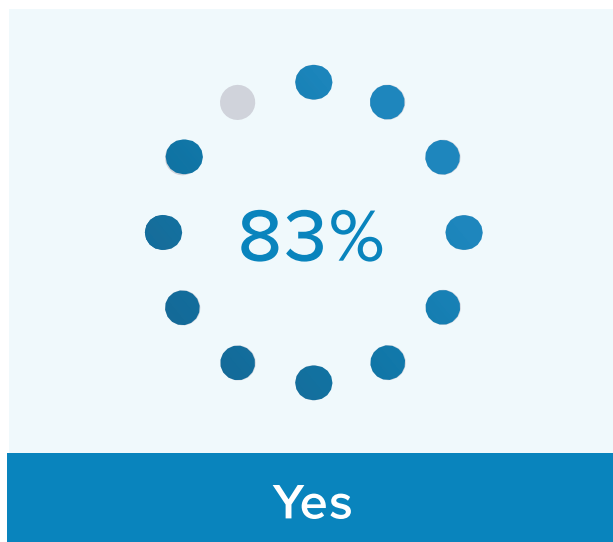
THE RESULTS



Negative perceptions of HR are commonplace

To start our report, we wanted to learn whether the often-reported negative perception of HR is accurate. Unfortunately, it does appear to be true, with 83% of HR professionals who responded to our poll confirming that in their opinion, employees have a negative perception of HR.

Do you think employees have a negative perception of HR?



Results from 480 votes

It would be very easy at this stage to say that this negative perception is engrained due to the factors mentioned in our introduction. However, comments from the HR community indicate the negative perception is often lumped upon them from other areas of an organisation they're trying to support. In turn, this can reinforce that stereotypical negative opinion which the HR profession has worked hard to remedy. For example:



"It depends on the organisation and culture. I've worked in places where HR was not appreciated by the CEO, this then filtered down. Management not always following guidance etc [sic] then leaving it to HR to fix..."



Angela
HSE Manager



"I think it's more the managers as they see us as blockers, what they don't appreciate is that we are only trying to protect them and the business."



Prisha
HR Manager



"I think it's more that senior management have a negative perception rather than EE themselves. My experience is pretty positive with EEs as I give them time but the SLT see HR as giving no value & a waste of money (sadly)."



Kwame
HSE Manager



"Yes, absolutely in my current organisation. Unfortunately some managers hide behind HR, so we're seen as the people who make redundancies."



Abigail
HR Manager

To those in HR, having such a negative perception reinforced and even encouraged by the very people they're there to support must be incredibly disheartening. HR is a career many choose because they want to work with people and positively impact their working lives. But, this must be very difficult if you're viewed with near pantomime villain levels of distrust and cynicism.

So, what can HR do to improve their reputation in the eyes of managers, senior leaders and in-turn the wider workforce? Here are some key actions to consider...

Be the strategic partner

Position your HR team as a key strategic partner rather than just a support function. Actively engage in discussions and planning related to business strategy, workforce planning, and talent development. Most importantly, demonstrate how HR can contribute to achieving company goals. [This article](#) delves deep into the key metrics your HR teams should be measuring and why.

Build better relationships

Look to nurture strong relationships with managers and senior leaders within your business. Take the time to understand their concerns, needs and what can be done to better support their objectives. Being empathetic and responsive can go a long way in building trust and turning around negative perceptions. You can read more about how you can [support managers in building better workplace satisfaction and engagement here](#).

Encourage feedback

Asking for regular feedback from your managers and senior leaders can help prevent any issues simmering away. Regularly seeking input and acting on any suggestions you receive can also help HR teams adapt and improve their services.

Engage in effective communications

HR need to control their own narratives to banish unfair and unwarranted reputations. Clear and regular communications – such as announcing initiatives, policies, and updates to managers and senior leaders - helps to avoid misunderstandings and builds trust with a wider workforce. In addition, make shared announcements about your initiatives that include its key stakeholders – not just from HR. This will highlight the fact you have the backing and support from your organisation's senior leaders.

Be transparent

Being transparent about HR processes and policies can remove potentially damaging differences in understanding and reduces resistance to policy or procedural changes. Always explain the “why” behind HR decisions and policies to managers and leaders.

Understand the business

Lastly, and if you haven't already, every HR professional should have a thorough understanding of their organisation's business goals and challenges. This will help HR departments to align their workforce initiatives and recommendations with the company's over-arching strategic objectives.

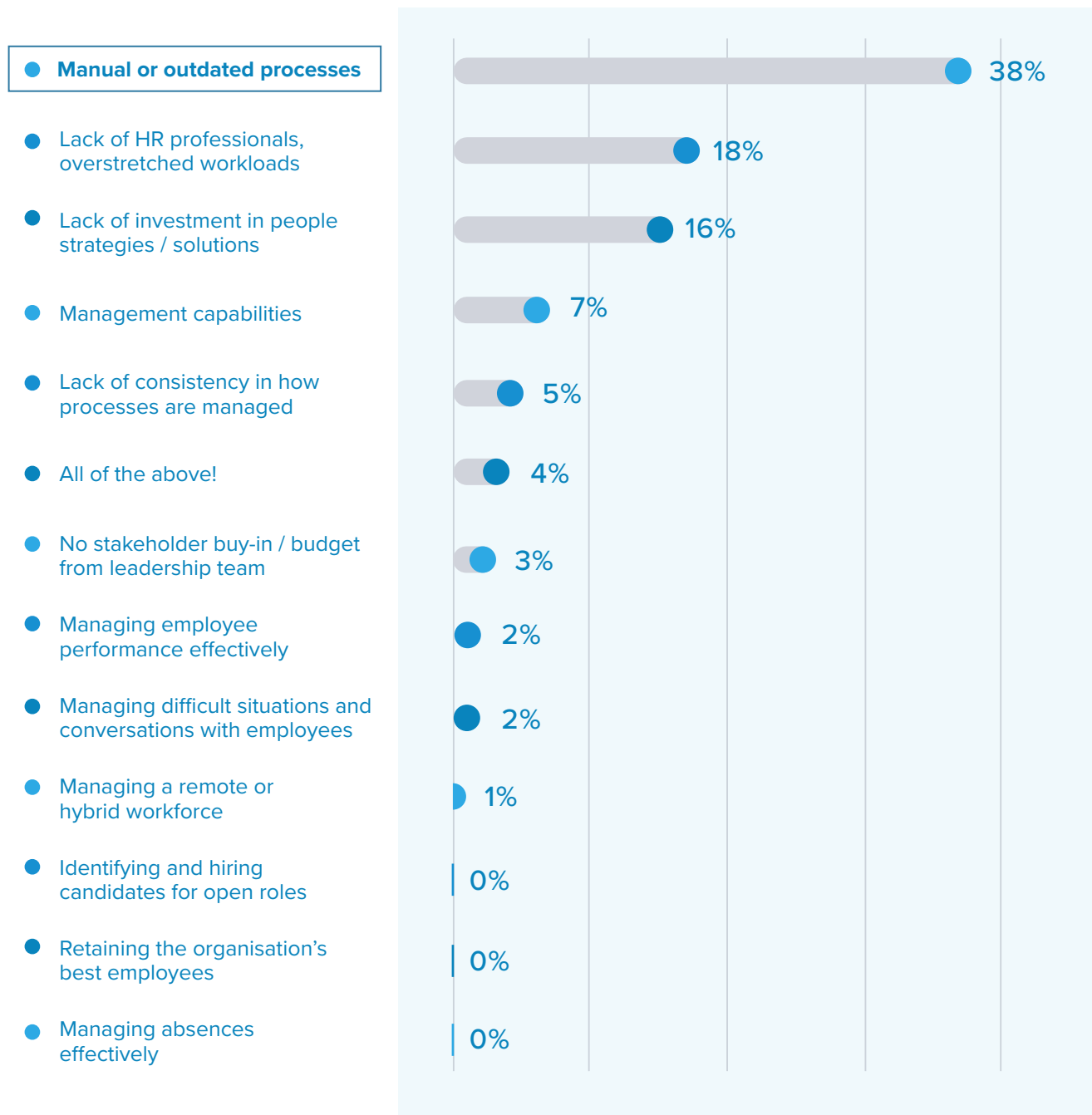
Manual processes and overstretched workloads are the biggest barriers to HR success

When we asked the HR community what the biggest barrier to success was, by far the largest issue was manual or outdated processes (38%), followed by a lack of HR professionals leading to overstretched workloads (18%), and a lack of investment in people strategies / solutions (16%).

These results shouldn't really come as a surprise and can be linked to that negative perception of HR. If HR are burdened by manual or outdated processes, it becomes difficult to focus on value-adding activities that are more visible to the wider workforce, more rewarding – for everyone – and strategic.

Also, if HR professionals are spending most of their time carrying out manual, labour-intensive admin tasks, HR teams will struggle to remove the outdated view of just being another cost centre within a business. This, in-turn, makes it difficult to convince senior leaders to invest in more people-orientated and strategic HR initiatives.

What is the biggest barrier to success for modern HR teams?



Results from 581 votes

Perhaps the simplest way to banish outdated and manual HR processes is to use powerful HR software solutions. HR software platforms are proven to streamline and automate virtually all manual HR processes, reducing administrative burdens and errors. HR software can also centralise data, enhance efficiencies and empower HR teams to focus on strategic more important workplace initiatives.

You can learn more about how HR software platforms with powerful automation tools can banish manual and outdated processes [here](#).

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“HR spend much of their time doing ‘what’s important’ but unfortunately it often isn’t ‘what’s visible’. And if you add in the additional challenges we’ve already talked about in terms of old outdated systems slowing us down, you can see why we spend a lot of time on important work that often goes unnoticed by the business. If we want the function to be viewed as strategic by the C-suite we need to be better at putting measures in place for the critical work that we do.

Perception IS reality!”



Lizzie Henson

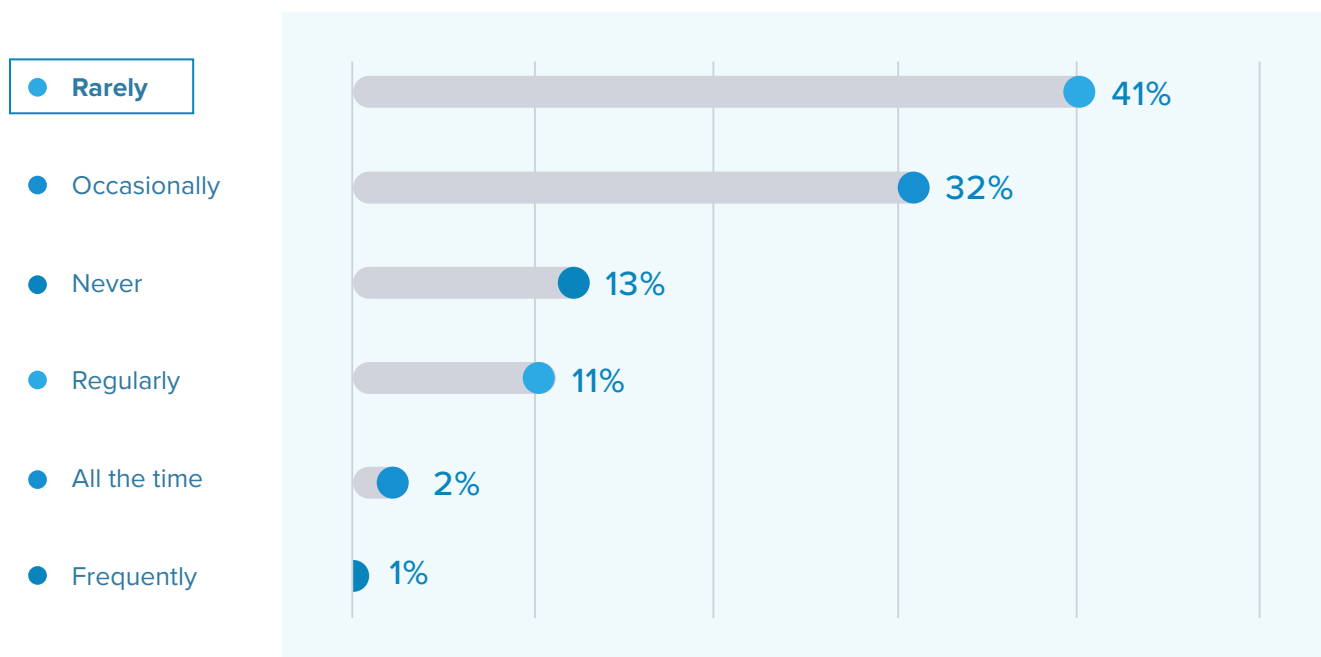
Owner & Founder of the HR Ninjas community

HR professionals rarely receive recognition for their efforts

Despite the growing influence HR teams have with modern businesses, it seems many HR professionals don't feel they're recognised for their contributions.

41% of poll respondents said they rarely received recognition for their work, with 13% never having received any recognition at all! Disappointingly, only 11% of respondents said they regularly received recognition for their work.

How often does your HR team get recognition for the work you do?



Results from 1,243 votes

Recognition is, of course, a huge part of positive company cultures. If your own HR team rarely receives recognition for its' efforts, it may be because it's struggling to prove its worth to senior leaders and the wider business. So, how can you solve this problem?

A great place to start is by proactively communicating your contributions to the wider organisation. For instance, you should highlight your team's role in successful talent acquisition, ongoing employee development, or fostering a positive work environment. These are all vital to business success, but are wholly down to the work HR does... so don't let it go unnoticed!

Additionally, you should leverage key data and metrics to showcase the impact of your initiatives on key performance indicators and regularly collaborate with senior leadership to align HR strategies with the overall business objectives.

Lastly, create a feedback loop from managers and employees: ask them what you're doing right, what can be improved or what they think could be done better. Close the loop by responding to and acting upon the feedback you receive. This will help continuously improve your HR processes and build that all-important element of trust.

Taking these actions can further solidify your value within an organisation, and demonstrate the value you provide.

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“I can go into our HR software platform and within minutes, I can get a greater understanding of what’s going on with a person. This means I can have better conversations with them and can help them create better solutions: **helping them feel better about what might be going on and how we can help.**”



Jamie McKeenan
HR Manager

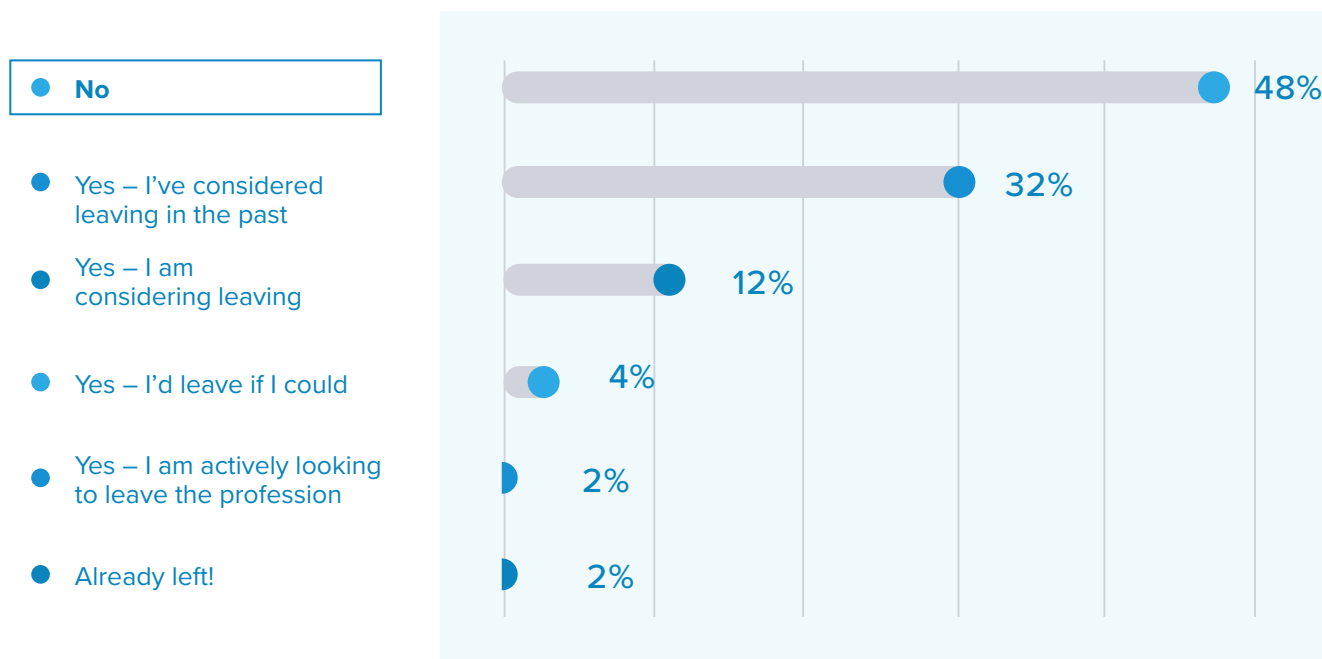
If placing recognition at the heart of your company culture is on your list of HR priorities, take a look at [this article](#) which explains how to setup simple – yet highly effective – peer-to-peer recognition schemes.

Over half of people professionals have considered leaving the profession

With the profession suffering an engrained image crisis and lack of recognition, it perhaps comes as no surprise that a large number of people professionals have thought about leaving or have left the world of HR.

When we asked the HR Ninjas community whether they'd considered quitting the profession, 48% of them said they hadn't. However, 32% said they've considered quitting in the past, 12% said they're currently considering leaving, and 4% would leave if they could.

Have you ever considered quitting the HR profession?



Results from 416 votes

The fact that over half of HR professionals express a desire to leave the profession is a cause for concern for several reasons.

First and foremost, HR plays a pivotal role in managing its most important component – its people. When a significant portion of HR professionals want to exit the field, it can lead to a shortage of experienced and knowledgeable HR practitioners, potentially leaving organisations vulnerable to workforce-related challenges. This shortage can in-turn hinder an organisation's ability to attract and retain top talent, manage employee relations effectively, and implement crucial HR policies and practices.

The potentially high attrition rate among HR

professionals also seem to confirm underlying issues within the profession itself. It could reflect general dissatisfaction with the role, workloads, or working conditions – all of which may have a ripple effect on an organisation's overall workplace culture.

For senior leaders, including those heading up HR teams, addressing this concern is essential. HR professionals are not only responsible for managing virtually every aspect of a workforce, but also for setting the tone for the workplace environment, employee engagement, and organisational well-being. Consequently, finding ways to improve job satisfaction and retention within the HR field is crucial to ensuring the continued success and stability of organisations.

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“HR Professionals frequently have unmanageable workloads and burnout is something that we see a lot in our community group. Most HR Ninjas are purpose-led and love to provide value to the organisations and workforces that we support. We have to ‘get out of the weeds’ in order to do the proactive, value-creating work that we love. **This means better systems, better line managers and better support from the exec!”**



Lizzie Henson

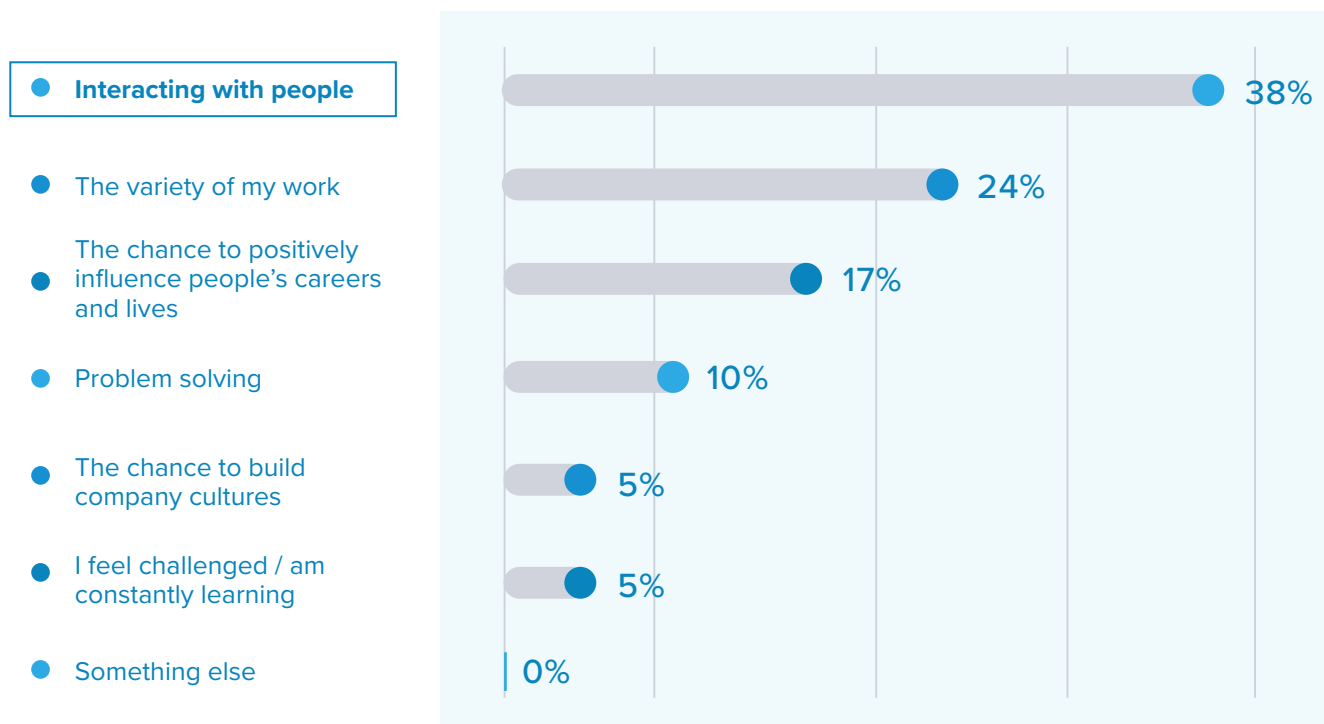
Owner & Founder of the HR Ninjas community

Interacting with people is the main reason people practitioners work in HR

Despite employees' views of HR, many people professionals genuinely enjoy their roles because they get to work closely with those individuals. This was confirmed by our survey, which asked our respondents what they liked most about working in the human resources profession.

By far and away the most popular answer was the chance to interact with people (38%), whilst the variety of work came second (24%) and the chance to positively influence people's careers and lives was third (17%).

What do you like most about working in HR?



Results from 264 votes

HR practitioners have a unique opportunity to impact the lives of employees in various ways, from recruitment and onboarding to career development and even conflict resolution.

That interpersonal dimension of HR work can be deeply rewarding, but, as we mentioned earlier, it may be the case that being tied up in manual and outdated processes is holding back many HR teams from focusing on these more people-centric and rewarding activities – only adding to that negative outside perception of HR.

If HR is to truly shake off its outdated and unwarranted reputation, businesses and their senior leaders must understand that, as well as protecting the interests of a business, HR teams are perfectly placed to make a positive difference in people's lives.

HR professionals often serve as advocates for employees, helping them navigate challenges, access resources, and create pathways for personal and professional growth – all vital parts of successful workplace cultures. They can't do all this, though, if they're stuck completing endless administrative tasks or not supported with the right technology.

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“As we grew, we recognised the fact that we needed more robust HR systems and procedures in place. We had so many spreadsheets containing lots of different and disjointed information. As a business, we knew this wasn’t a sustainable way of doing things. We had individual employee files that had certain elements that others didn’t... it was just a bit all over the place. A lot of the time before, I’d be scraping around spreadsheets and pulling information from here, there... all over the place! [with our HR software] **A job that took a couple of hours before now only takes me five minutes.**”



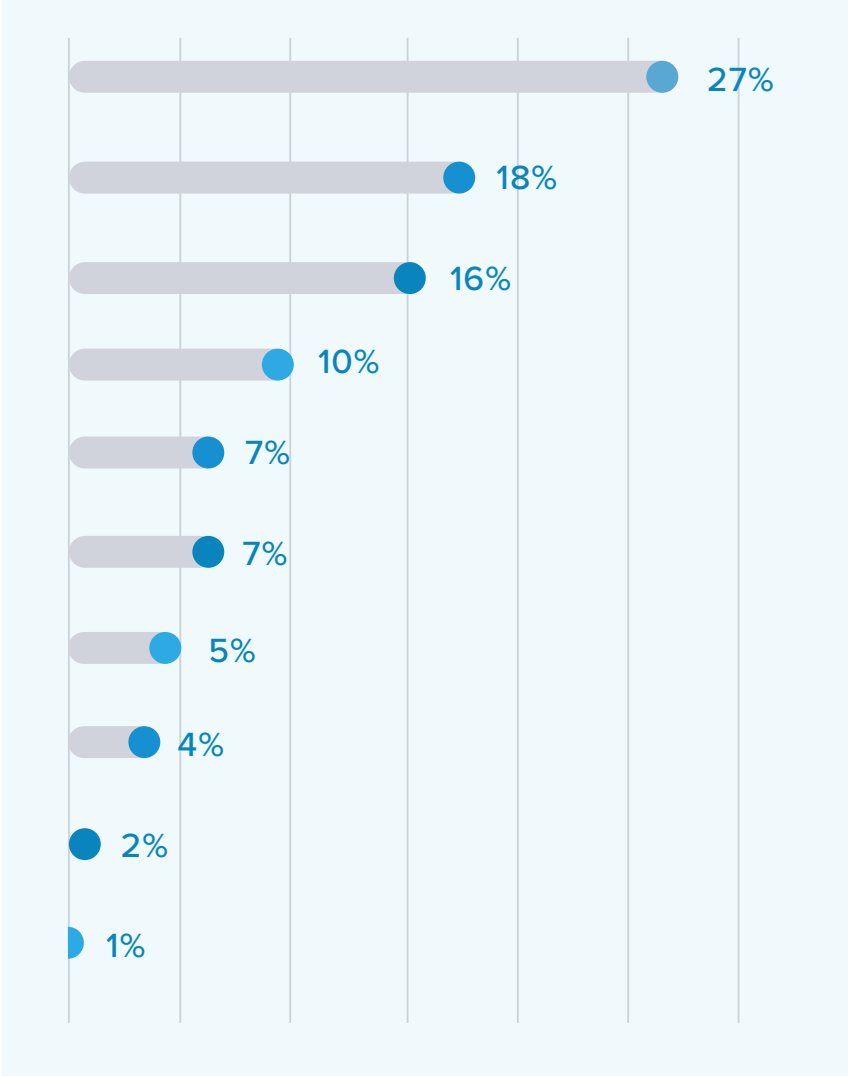
Jamie McKeenan
HR Manager

Manual and disjointed processes are the biggest cause of dissatisfaction for people practitioners

When we asked the Ninjas community what they disliked most about working in HR, manual or disjointed processes were the biggest cause of dissatisfaction (27%). A distrust or lack of respect from employees and managers came second (18%), whilst ‘Clearing up the mess’ of others was third (16%).

What don't you like most about working in HR?

- Manual or disjointed HR processes
- Distrust / lack of respect from employees and managers
- Clear up the mess
- Repetitive / unrewarding duties
- Having to manage difficult situations / employees
- Incompetent managers who refuse to learn
- Lack of modern HR technology
- No control over management
- Called to look at blocked / dirty toilets
- Expectation to be strategic without that capacity to do that [sic]



Results from 853 votes

Manual and disjointed are clearly an ongoing theme in the lives of HR professionals – as we've clearly seen so far in this report: spoiling the working experience of people professionals, but also preventing them from being more strategic, value-adding and people-focused. Luckily, HR can address manual or disjointed processes through several strategies, including:

Conduct process mapping & analysis

Start by mapping out your company's existing HR processes to identify bottlenecks, redundancies, and inefficiencies. Understanding the current state of your team's processes is crucial before implementing any remedial actions.

Centralising HR data

Relying on paper-based or disjointed processes can make record keeping incredibly difficult. So, look to create a centralised database or digital repository for employee records and information. This ensures that all HR staff access the same, up-to-date data, and reduces potential data entry and retrieval issues – brilliant for more strategic reporting.

Consider employee self-service

Allowing employees to manage their own HR-related tasks, such as updating personal information, viewing payslips, and requesting time off, can reduce administrative burdens on HR and empower employees to manage their own data. You can [read more about how to get employee on board with self-service HR here](#).

Investigate automation

As mentioned earlier, HR software solutions can automate many manual and repetitive processes – including those associated with absences, performance management, onboarding and reporting - but also bring much needed consistency, too. Automation reduces errors, saves time, and increases efficiency – all ideal for HR teams wanting to focus on more strategic activities. You can [read more about the processes that can be automated by HR software here](#).

Standardising processes and procedures

Develop standardised procedures for common HR tasks – such as reporting unplanned absences. This makes it easier for HR professionals and managers to follow consistent processes, and for employees to fully understand HR policies and procedures.

Strive for continuous improvement

Regularly review and update your company's HR processes to keep them aligned with changing business needs and evolving best practices. For example, if your business has shifted to a hybrid working model, are your processes still fit and proper for the challenges you and your employees may face?

It's also worth noting that a few of the answers to this question centre around a sense of distrust and lack of respect – having to 'deal with blocked toilets' perhaps a prime example of that!

Building trust and gaining respect within an organisation are no simple tasks. They require the prioritising of fairness, transparency, effective communications, and the promotion of a positive workplace culture that values employees' well-being and growth.

Those efforts – when combined - can lead to a more harmonious, engaging and productive work environment, and also ones where HR has that all important trust and respect needed to function as a strategic partner.

If you want to learn more about trust building, just [follow this link to read and download our report The Psychology of HR Relationship Building: Trust, visibility, and respect](#).

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“Too often we see job titles being created like ‘Head of HR and PA to MD’ or ‘HR & Office Manager’, and we need to be pushing back on these practices. **HR is not a general administrative role and we should not be picking-up all of those responsibilities that nobody else wants!** If you find yourself in this situation head on over to the HR Ninjas Jobs board because it’s not okay!”



Lizzie Henson

Owner & Founder of the HR Ninjas community

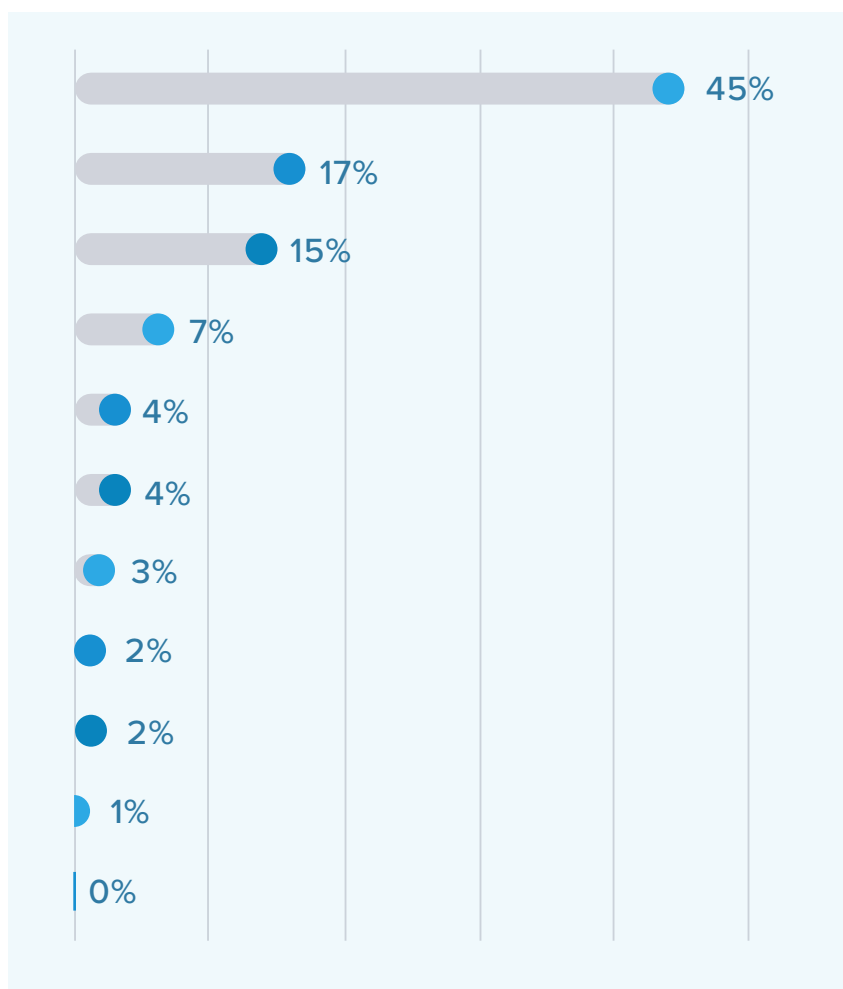
HR only interacting with employees when something's wrong is the core reason why their negative image persists

When we asked the Ninjas what the core reason behind employee's negative perception of HR was, the most popular cause was the fact that, for many, employees only really interact with HR when something's gone wrong.

What do you think is the main reason why employees have a negative perception of HR?

● Only interacting with HR when something is wrong

- Bureaucracy and red tape
- People don't understand what we really do
- A perceived alignment with management
- Perceived lack of trust
- Poor past personal experiences
- Inconsistent enforcement of rules and regulations
- Inconsistent company processes
- Something else
- Perceived lack of empathy with employees
- Lack of transparency



Results from 933 votes

Of course, HR do have to get involved with dealing with difficult situations – be it handling disciplinary issues, workplace conflicts, or compliance matters. But, if that's all an HR department is seen to do, it creates a “break-fix” dynamic that reinforces the perception of HR existing solely as a reactive entity.

If a workforce only engages with an HR team when something's wrong, they'll only ever view HR as that authority figure or enforcer we mentioned at the

beginning of this report... Not as a supportive resource for their overall wellbeing and professional growth.

That limited and mainly issue-driven relationship can erode trust between employees and HR. It can also further that outdated image of HR being an impersonal and bureaucratic department existing only to serve the needs of the business - rather than one that genuinely cares about employee needs and development.

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“The perception that we only get involved when things go wrong is created as a result of us not being brought into situations early enough. With disciplinaries for example, **HR advice tends to be sought to deal with the consequences of an event happening, rather than us being involved earlier to prevent the event from happening in the first place.** It’s no wonder that we get accused of being reactive! But the reality is if you ask HR professionals they would say that they would much rather be empowered to take a proactive approach so that they can deal with the actual underlying problems and not a reactive approach that just deals with the symptoms of the problems!”



Lizzie Henson

Owner & Founder of the HR Ninjas community

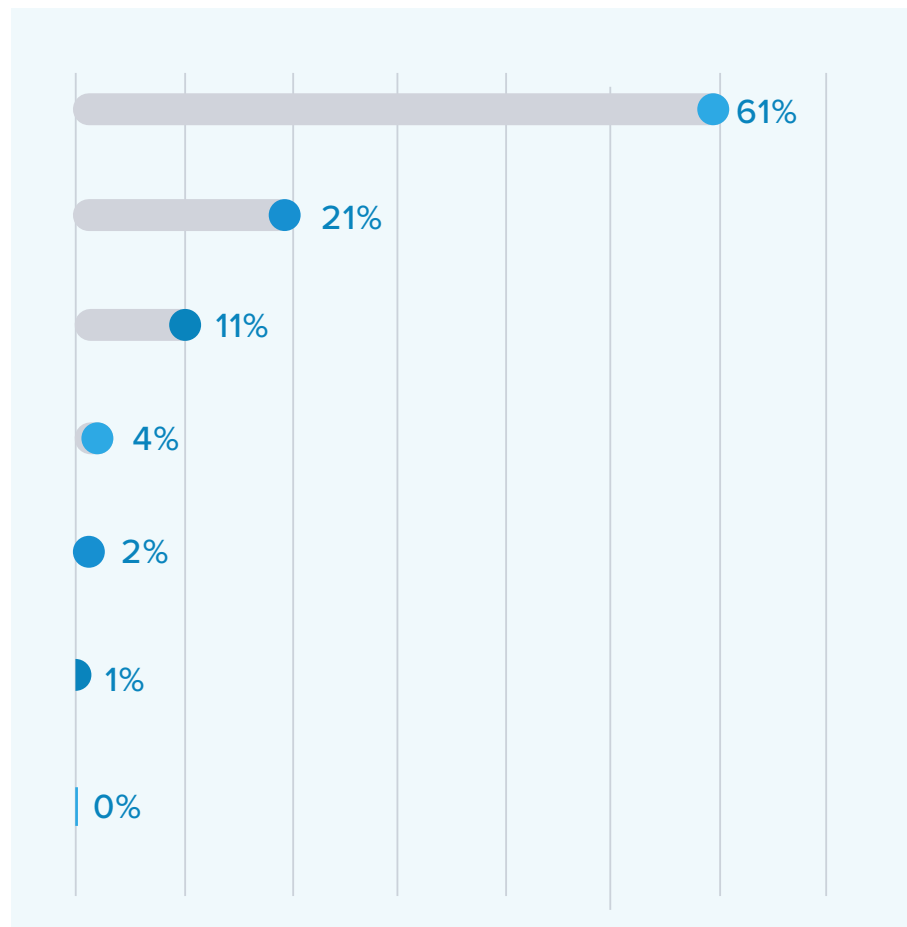
Managing processes fairly and transparently is considered the single most important thing HR can do to improve its image

Our last question to the Ninjas community was what they thought the single-most important thing HR could do to improve its image and reputation with employees. The most popular answer – by some margin – was managing processes fairly and transparently (61%). This was followed by communicating more often with employees (21%) and better supporting line managers third (11%).

What do you think is the single-most important thing HR can do to improve their image and reputation with employees?

- **Manage processes fairly and transparently**

- Communicate more often with employees
- Better support line managers
- Something else
- Actively develop and promote health and wellbeing initiatives
- Actively monitor, track and support employee engagement throughout a year
- Better support diversity, inclusion and equality initiatives



Results from 480 votes

This answer does of course make sense. Ensuring that HR processes are managed fairly and transparently is not only a fundamental ethical imperative, but also essential for fostering trust, employee satisfaction, and organisational success.

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“**Trust** – trust employees are doing what they need to do and don’t overcomplicate things for the sake of it”



Lorna
HSE Manager

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“Be willing always to do the right thing and treat people decently even if the right thing might be difficult (e.g. dismissing someone, redundancies etc...) I’ve worked in organisations where the right thing was to call the business out on how they were going to do something and **stand up and not be afraid to speak the truth.**”



Harpreet
HR Manager

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“Make sure it’s clear the role HR has to play in an organisation, make sure policies and procedures are written to hold the managers accountable to manage [sic]. **Support leaders to manage the managers** and make sure this is embedded throughout the employee lifecycle.”



Heidi
HR Manager

When HR processes are fair and transparent, employees will feel they're being treated equitably. This can bolster their confidence in both the organisation and HR. In addition, fair HR processes are a cornerstone of building a positive workplace culture and maintaining a motivated, engaged, and loyal workforce.

However, although fairness and transparency are both critical to supporting a more positive image of HR, it's important not to forget the other contributing factors mentioned here. For example, communicating often and being visible are both vitally important when looking to educate employees and managers as to what the HR department actually does.



"Visibility and presence. Don't sit in the HR office, spend times sat with teams to normalise it. Then we aren't just seen in negative situations, but can be seen as humans. Break down the 'uh oh, HR is about, best behaviour' stereotypes."



Anne, HR Manager



"There is so much positivity HR can bring to a business by being present and just pulling up a chair and talking to staff and managers with no agenda."



Felicity, HR Manager



"Actively support the business to increase employee engagement – ie. Increase appreciation / recognition and employee voice."



Mel, HR Manager

Regular communications help keep everyone informed about important developments, policies, and changes. In addition, interacting with a workforce can help make HR both visible and approachable - not just a dark and scary corner of the office that people fear to tread!

When HR professionals are visible and approachable, managers and employees are more likely to seek assistance and guidance when necessary. This visibility also allows HR to better understand the work environment and individual concerns, enabling more tailored support and initiatives to enhance the employee experience.

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“In HR I feel it’s important that we immerse ourselves fully into the businesses side of things so that we understand and are connected to the purpose and goals of our organisations. **It’s important to be visible so that colleagues see us as individual human beings and not just ‘HR’.** That’s how we build our big relationships which in turn enable us to be more proactive. Make time to learn about the commercial aspect of the businesses that you support. Do you know the top-level corporate objectives? What really matters in the boardroom? What are the KPI’s that the CEO is looking at every day? We as an industry need to be better at talking the language of business and, in my experience, those of us that do this get offered more senior positions with greater strategic business influence”



Lizzie Henson

Owner & Founder of the HR Ninjas community

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you're looking to improve the image of your organisation's HR team, we've put together a number of free helpful resources to help you do exactly that.

Free ebooks

[The psychology of HR relationship building](#)

Discover the facts on how employees perceive HR, and how you can build better relationships with your workforce

[What employees really think about company cultures](#)

This report shares detailed findings on company culture and includes practical advice and insights for HR professionals.

[How satisfied are employees in 2023?](#)

Discover the true state of employee satisfaction within British and Irish workforces, along with actionable insights.

[How to build teams that really work](#)

Discover how to build teams that really work, and put accountability at the heart of your company culture.

Online articles

[5 tips for HR to support business growth](#)

Business growth can be easy to achieve, but very difficult to sustain in the long term. Here's how HR can help support it successfully...

[How to create a culture of HR excellence](#)

Learn what you can do to push people management practices forward and create a culture of HR excellence in your business.

[6 ways HR can support line managers with workplace satisfaction and engagement](#)

With engagement levels plummeting, what can HR professionals do to support line managers improving workplace satisfaction and engagement?

[How a modern HRIS platform can drive engagement](#)

How can a modern HRIS platform cut down your admin and boost employee engagement in your workplace?

[How to manage difficult conversations – 8 top tips](#)

Difficult work conversations are an inevitable aspect of most managers' jobs. How can you handle them as diplomatically as possible?

[5 things HR can learn from the Nudge Theory](#)

Nudge theory has been used in many different disciplines, but how helpful can it be to human resources?

WHO WE ARE



Introducing Cezanne HR: software that works your way.

Cezanne HR is a HR software leader for mid-sized and growing UK and international organisations. We provide a modern, secure Cloud HR system that lets companies quickly and effectively digitise, streamline and improve human resources management.

Covering the full employee lifecycle, Cezanne HR's on-line software includes integrated modules for core HR, recruitment, onboarding, absence and performance management, pulse surveys, time tracking, career and succession planning, workforce analytics, compensation planning and managed payroll – together with an integration platform service and open APIs to leading third-party solutions.

With customers covering virtually every business sector, from financial services and legal firms to logistics and non-profits and experience reflecting decades of working with HR professionals worldwide, the Cezanne HR system is purposely designed to be exceptionally quick to deploy and easy to manage.

Cezanne HR's software offers incredible value for money without sacrificing the flexibility or depth of features required to support complex and evolving HR needs.



[Book a demo](#)

[View some of our success stories](#)