

What does HR do?

A couple of minutes into a chat with a potential new client, he asked me a question that floored me for a second: "what is it that HR does?" Having worked in the field for twenty years now, it was a bit of a reality check to hear this question. I've always sort of assumed that everyone knows what HR people do, but like any profession it's sometimes hard to look at what you do from the outside. So I'd like to take a few moments to answer that very question.

The basics

Unless you're a sole trader, you employ at least a few people – maybe dozens or even hundreds. And you owe those people a certain duty of care.

At its most basic, that means making sure that everyone knows:

- What their job entails
- How you will be monitoring their performance
- What the company rules are
- What will happen if they break the company rules or fall below expectations in performance
- What will happen if they have a complaint against someone else in the company
- What entitlements they have such as holidays, sickness etc

For most companies, this is all imparted to employees in the form of a [company handbook](#). A lot of businesses don't actually have all their rules collated anywhere, leaving managers and employees alike in a state of uncertainty when something goes wrong.

Unless there are clear guidelines in place, small matters can spiral out of hand and you could lose a good employee, or find yourself in front of an industrial tribunal. Or, you might find yourself unable to get rid of someone who is holding the company back.

A human resources consultant will sort all that out for you in the form of a company handbook. That sets the bar for everyone's behaviour – which in turn is the basic level of forming a company culture.


Not everything is plain sailing...

But even if you've got a nice big rulebook sat on a shelf, you're going to find that not everybody plays by it. Everyone you employ is (hopefully) human and comes with human frailties. Someone could start missing work too frequently, for example, and there could be many reasons for that ranging from personal issues, health problems, all the way through to skiving with intent.

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Plenty of people feel happy to manage that kind of situation themselves, but asking difficult questions is... well...*difficult*. So this is the type of thing a HR professional will do on your behalf. Although HR is sometimes seen as an ally of management (by disgruntled employees in particular) what we try to do is find a solution to this sort of situation that works for everyone. It may be that the person is suffering outside of work, or feels intimidated or harassed by a colleague so it is in everyone's interest to get to the truth and find something that works. That could range from sorting out a staged return to work, liaising with medical professionals, or disciplining the person.

Now I can see from here that you are very smart and capable (and very good looking, if I might say so) but even if you are smart and capable and willing to deal with this kind of thing on your own, you have to make sure you're operating within the letter of the law.

I mentioned earlier how people just like you can try to resolve a workplace problem only to find themselves sat in front of an industrial tribunal and ordered to pay thousands of pounds to someone they just wanted rid of.

Many companies use a solicitor to try to mitigate against that – and there's nothing wrong with that. But...

1. Solicitors are very expensive
2. Solicitors are good when you're in a legal situation, but aren't always in a place to try and resolve matters before they reach that stage.

In a way then, you might want to think of HR as a buffer between you and potentially expensive legal situations. Dot the i's and cross the t's and you significantly reduce your chance of exposure to legal action.

The nicer things

But it's not all about awful, depressing things. HR can also help you to make a happier workplace. Rules can be boring, but they can also be used to introduce a company culture that values and rewards excellence.

It could be in the form of structured bonuses paid on the achievement of certain targets. Or it could be that you have a generous holiday entitlement. Or, increasingly, things like in-office perks such as flexible working hours, or away days to build team morale.

Again, perhaps you might be thinking: "well I could do that myself!" and you could be right – but like a lot of things in business, you might consider delegating the introduction and management of these things to either someone in the business, or an external consultant (like me. Call today!)

There are loads of things that HR can do for you, and this is already well above the recommended limit for blog posts, but hopefully this gives you some idea of the scope of what a HR professional can do for your business.

By Janine Griffiths