

Serious Lack of Trust in HR Continues into the Coronavirus Outbreak

By James Davis, Editor, HR Daily Advisor Apr 6, 2020

Do employees trust HR? That's the question two different organizations sought answers for in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak. Each found discouraging results that should be of serious concern as HR faces the many challenges brought about by the virus. I had a chance to discuss the findings of each with a number of professionals.



Source: vector illustration / shutterstock

The first batch of research was conducted by Zenefits and is called “Human Resources: Helpful or Horrible?” The complete findings can be seen [here](#), but we’ve provided the highlights below:

- 1 in 5 workers don’t trust HR.
- More than 30% of respondents say they avoid going to HR at all for problems.
 - 38% said because an issue seemed too minor.
 - 35% said because they don’t trust HR to help.
 - 31% said they fear retaliation.
- 23% of workers say they have witnessed or experienced poor HR, hurtful management, or discrimination.
- 71% of HR say that less than 30% of complaints from the last 2 years have resulted in disciplinary action.
- 38% of employees do not feel that HR equally enforces company policies across all employees; 18% of them say managers get special treatment.

I asked Tracy Cote, Chief People Officer at Zenefits, about the findings.

HR Daily Advisor: Did you find the overall results surprising?

Cote: Disappointing but not surprising. The findings reaffirmed a lot of things I think the broader world has traditionally thought about HR for many years. Unfortunately, there is a persistent stereotype about HR among employees that it cannot be trusted and that going to the department for pretty much anything is a waste of time and sometimes a risky endeavor.

The finding that less than 30% of complaints in the past 2 years resulted in disciplinary action only solidifies that stereotype. Rather than the study revealing surprising data, it served to show HR managers, yet again, how employees feel about HR and what they truly want (and need) in an HR representative—and aren’t getting in a lot of organizations. It’s a great time for progressive HR leaders to take this feedback to heart and step up their game in light of the current business climate.

HR Daily Advisor: What do these findings say about confidence in HR to do the right thing during the coronavirus crisis?

Cote: As the trust in most HR professionals appears to be starting at a very low level based on the findings, it is safe to assume that confidence in HR is probably low even during times of crisis. If 31% of employees surveyed reported they don't trust HR because they fear retaliation, in a time when job stability has dramatically decreased, employees are likely to fear retaliation even more now than they did before.

HR Daily Advisor: What impact will low employee trust have on how HR can do its job during the outbreak?

Cote: With people being laid off all over the globe and companies of all sizes losing money due to the pandemic, it's a very tough time to be in HR, especially knowing that the employees at your company may not have faith in you. The best thing HR leaders can do right now is recognize employees need as much honesty and openness about the state of the company as you and your leadership team can realistically provide, along with support as they personally work through this very difficult time as individuals.

HR Daily Advisor: What can HR do right now to help combat low trust during this time?

Cote: Honesty and support are crucial now more than ever. Listen to your employees, and be straightforward with them regarding their concerns. No one wants platitudes right now—people need the truth. Tell them how the company is doing in the midst of the pandemic, and be proactive in answering the difficult questions that are inevitably being asked. Don't offer false reassurances, but empathize with their concerns. This is an excellent opportunity for HR professionals to step up and show employees they can be trusted and are on their team, as well as to encourage the leadership team to do the same.

Now is a great time to shore up some of your foundational HR processes, automating what you can and connecting your employees with technology so you can focus your attention on them, not manual work.

Everyone—everyone—is worried in an unusual time like this; stay on top of your messaging and communication, keep an open mind and an open door, and commit to weathering the storm together alongside your team, including all of the employees in your company.

More Results

ZenBusiness was the other organization that conducted research into HR's trustworthiness. Its report is called "Human Resources Relationships" and can be found [here](#), but we have the highlights below:

Research highlights:

- Only 55.5% of employees are comfortable confiding in HR about experiencing workplace harassment.
- 37.9% of employees would be more confident in their company's HR department if it were more transparent, and 22.7% want the department to manage conflict more proactively.
- Employees without face-to-face access to HR are seven times more likely to say the department is not approachable; as companies grow into multiple offices or become international, it may be worth advocating for regional HR representatives.
- Women are more likely than men to say they're uncomfortable discussing their salary with HR.

I spoke with several experts concerning these results, including Claire Cole, Project Manager at ZenBusiness, Stacey Engle, President of [Fierce, Inc.](#), and Rachel Ernst, VP Employee Success at [Reflektive](#).

HR Daily Advisor: Were the results of this research surprising?

Cole: We certainly found the results surprising in our office. We were particularly interested in the findings based on whether employees worked out of the same location as their HR team. With remote work on the rise and large

companies having many offices outside of headquarters, it was interesting to see how that could impact employees' relationships with and perceptions of HR.

Ernst: I wasn't surprised by the survey results. One of the main reasons HR exists is to be that safe place for employees. There are a lot of opportunities to continue to work and build trust with our people.

This is particularly difficult to do remotely. HR has to work differently and harder to build trust in a way that provides comfort to employees, to speak with them. Typically, there are not enough HR employees to be able to do this effectively across large organizations.

HR Daily Advisor: Did you find the overall results surprising?

Engle: I don't find these survey results surprising. We are consistently working with HR leaders and learning leaders to create a more transparent and strategic culture, as that is continuously an area of concern for organizations. In many cases, a company's culture is either amplified or suppressed by HR.

At Fierce, we work with HR leaders to really model the specifics of what the culture wants and needs. HR should embody the values and behaviors of the organization, which unfortunately is oftentimes not the case.

At the heart of this is equipping all people to have the conversations that need to be had and for HR to help facilitate these versus trying to always problem solve themselves. Now more than ever, workplaces are being challenged, and with remote work, the possibility of miscommunication and conflict is high. Without the right tools and training, issues can spiral, but with them, relationships can be enriched in tough times.

HR Daily Advisor: The research found that 55.5% of employees are comfortable confiding in HR about workplace harassment. Why do you think so few employees are comfortable confiding in HR about workplace harassment?

Engle: There are so many reasons that can come into play as to why individuals don't feel comfortable going to HR about harassment. HR teams really need to build an internal brand inside of an organization to help people tackle their toughest challenges and create an environment that is open and available to everyone in the organization.

Ultimately, HR teams need to be value-oriented and follow through. What can happen is that the people who do go to HR will find that nothing gets resolved or the situation is convoluted. Or, it becomes more about protecting the company than being a place to process and grow. If employees see change happen, more will come forward when issues arise.

HR Daily Advisor: The findings show that transparency is still an issue in the workplace, with 37.9% saying they would be more confident in their company's HR department if it were more transparent. How can HR personnel both be more transparent and help employees understand they can't share everything?

Cole: It can definitely be a difficult balancing act being transparent while not offering more information than is necessary. More proactive communication could be key to helping with this. Nearly 42% of employees said HR could appear more approachable if it communicated more proactively. In my opinion, transparency often can come down to not sharing necessary information in a timely manner.

Engle: Practicing transparency requires being open and sharing as much as possible, but ultimately, this is almost first and foremost about building trust. Trust is built through persistent identity. What we mean by that is a person shows up in conversation the same way over and over and over again. This means in team meetings, in one-on-one conversations, and in confrontation conversations. In today's remote work environment, that can be challenging, making the right training even more critical.

Ernst: Confiding in HR and the perception of transparency go hand in hand. The first step we can take is committing to ongoing open conversations with our employees.

Additionally, it is very difficult for a person to experience harassment in the workplace. Shame, embarrassment, and not wanting to make a big deal of it are typical reactions. These reactions, partnered with the fear of retaliation, are large

factors in this number being lower. Having regular education about workplace harassment is key in raising awareness about it.

At Reflektive, we conduct regular sentiment surveys, one of which includes a section on employees' level of comfort with speaking up in the organization. It's a great way to pulse-check how our company is doing with creating a safe work environment and how it can make necessary adjustments.

***HR Daily Advisor:* Face-to-face access to HR played a big role in whether respondents found HR to be approachable. Can you discuss this result and what that means, especially now that so many people are working from home?**

ZenBusiness: We certainly did have a lot of interesting findings based on whether people worked in the same location as HR. I would point again to the results based on what people reported would make HR more approachable. The top two answers were being more available (43.2%) and communicating more proactively (41.5%). Both of those can be done effectively, even when working from separate locations or remotely, especially during this time. It's all about planning and making an effort to connect across distances.

***HR Daily Advisor:* Do you consider videoconferencing to be face-to-face? What steps should employers take to make sure their employees are as well connected as possible to HR and leadership in a time when so many will be working from home?**

Engle: Videoconference is not the exact same as face-to-face, but video is key to successfully working remotely. There is a lot of research on how we react differently when we can see someone—the person's facial expressions in particular. At Fierce, we require using video as the default internally and with clients, as we know the impact seeing a person can have on the relationship.

We're lucky that technology has caught up and that it really is relatively simple to set these types of conversations up. It becomes even more critical when an entire organization is working remotely, especially when employees aren't used to it and when the change happens quickly, as we are experiencing as of late.

Ernst: Face-to-face in person is ideal. However, given many employees are working from home right now, we are making sure all of our HR team members are on camera during meetings.

During this work-from-home time, video has been one way all of our teams stay connected. We're always on video. In a recent all-hands, our head of engineering encouraged our team, if it's taking longer than a minute to send a Slack, to turn it into a Slack video call! Our team has taken that to heart.

Since transitioning to working remotely, my team has taken the lead in organizing a weekly virtual all-hands with the executives and setting up weekly "social hours" during which people can casually connect over video. Our executives and managers also have more frequent team video meetings to ensure we stay connected.

***HR Daily Advisor:* I understand there was some difference in whether women or men were more uncomfortable discussing salary with HR. To what degree was the difference, and what is going on here?**

Cole: Our results showed that 27.4% of men reported being uncomfortable discussing salary with HR compared with 33.8% of women. We did not ask follow-up questions exploring this particular angle further in this report.

***HR Daily Advisor:* Any insight into these findings? Thoughts on why there would be a difference between how men and women approach salary?**

Engle: There is a lot at play when it comes to discussing salary, which goes beyond discussing it with HR. This goes back to the idea of transparency in some ways. More and more organizations are being more transparent when it comes to what people are paid in hopes of closing the wage gap. The more this occurs, hopefully the more these numbers will lower for both genders.

Ernst: These numbers fall in line with what I've seen in the industry. My responsibility is to evaluate all candidates as objectively as possible. We look at market data and employee pay in the same or similar role. Should a candidate negotiate aggressively, I've pushed hiring managers to increase the pay of existing team members so that we minimize salary compression issues and don't reward the ability to negotiate over the ability to contribute. We strive to be competitive and fair first and foremost.