

# Why More People Want to Work in HR Now

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As human resources has evolved into a more strategic role, the field is becoming more attractive to all kinds of workers. But will that improve its reputation?



[Source image: Expect Best/Pexels]

When Jennifer Kim decided to pursue a career in human resources some 15 years ago, it was a surprising choice for a driven college graduate. “It was not where ambitious people went,” says Kim, who worked in internal HR roles before starting her own firm, Workflow, to help advise startups on people operations. “The stereotype was that HR was for people [who] graduated college with a liberal arts degree and were like: ‘Now what?’ So back when I entered this field—as someone who deliberately wanted to be in HR—it was actually quite rare.”

Kim had gravitated to HR after working in career services during college. “I found the work to be very meaningful and important,” she says, “And I wanted to experience the other side of it.” But as a young professional, Kim found that any reference to her line of work was often met with disdain, or that people tended to project their own negative experiences with HR onto her.

The HR department has historically been a tough sell for a variety of reasons, from the nature of the work to its reputation as a mouthpiece for company leadership. A theme emerges when you ask HR professionals how they ended up in their jobs. “The joke between most HR or recruiting people is that everyone just falls into it—and that’s my story as well,” says Nolan Church, the former head of people at Carta who now runs Continuum, an on-demand executive recruiting platform. “A friend of a friend connected me to my [former] Google manager, who was in recruiting. I didn’t even know recruiting was a function, or a job to be done. Once I

learned a little bit more about it, I was like, wow, this is amazing, and then I realized that the majority of people in recruiting and HR suck. So, it was a really big opportunity for me to stand out.”

In recent years, however, HR’s reputation has undergone a rebranding of sorts. Even the term HR feels dated; in today’s parlance, it may be better known as “employee experience” or “people operations.” The scope of the work has also evolved beyond its origins in compliance—in part because of the example set by companies like Google, which ushered in a more data-driven approach to HR that emphasized attracting and retaining the best talent. During the pandemic, the role of HR took on new importance when managers were called on to oversee return to office plans and matters of public health. Their priorities also came into clearer focus as the pandemic highlighted the importance of mental health support in the workplace and put pressure on companies to make concrete commitments to DEI.

For many HR professionals today, the appeal lies in a people-facing role that enables them to dabble in a number of different business functions and help employees grow professionally. “I went into HR because I really wanted to be able to help people,” says Amber Clayton, who oversees the Knowledge Center at the Society for Human Resource Management. “I think many people who get into HR have that passion for being able to help people [grow professionally] and also wanting to help organizations be successful.” It’s possible they may have been exposed to HR through college courses or a certification program, but in many instances “HR just kind of falls into their lap,” Clayton says—particularly if they work at a smaller organization that doesn’t have an official HR department.

Some people in the space came to the realization over time that HR was the best place for their particular skill set or passions. Jolen Anderson, the global head of HR at the bank BNY Mellon, spent years working as a lawyer—both at a law firm and in-house at Visa—before she made the jump to HR. “When you’re an attorney, by the time something gets to your desk, it has to be fixed,” she says. “I found over time, the advice that I was giving started to lean out of strictly being legal advice. At the same time, I had a passion around DEI, and I was sort of leading the charge for the firm within my space, so I was doing people-esque things.” Eventually, she became Visa’s first chief diversity officer and officially transitioned into the HR world; Anderson now calls herself “an attorney by training and HR professional by passion.”

Amy Rossi, the chief people officer of cybersecurity startup Expel, found her way to HR by way of account management and then learning and development at companies like AOL. “Spending time outside of the people team was really important because it’s given me a foundation in business units and how businesses grow,” she says. In fact, earlier in her career, Rossi was opposed to taking on a leadership position in HR, due to traditional perceptions of the job. “I said I would never be a head of HR,” she adds. “I did not want that role and all of the baggage that comes with that. [HR] was initially all about process, legal things, protecting the company and being on the side of the company. There’s a balance in this work, obviously—we are here to grow the company. But we are [also] here to ensure an incredible employee experience.”

There are, however, growing pains as the demands on HR professionals have shifted. While the ability to have tough conversations and manage conflict is still crucial—and a skill that might catalyze a career in HR—many companies now expect that their HR managers also have the

business acumen to take a more strategic approach to the job. "If you don't understand the business levers, or the strategy, or how it actually impacts the people, you're going to be an HR person that builds things that nobody needs, nobody wants, and nobody can use," says Brigette McInnis-Day, chief people officer at enterprise software company UiPath. "I think that's the big shift. What we're seeing now is more analytical, understanding the business, and having a people strategy 100% linked to a business strategy."

It's not a coincidence that some workers find themselves frustrated or disillusioned with their colleagues in the HR department; after all, many companies and HR professionals are still adjusting to the new exigencies of the job. "There [are] just very few people that have actually been trained in the new world of people operations—only 15 years worth of talent that has actually seen it done this way," Church says.

But HR teams also tend to have fewer resources than they need, and when economic conditions change for the worse, it is usually one of the first departments impacted. The work can be hard to quantify and measure, especially in the short term, and Church argues that over the last many years, many HR professionals—particularly in the tech industry—were more focused on attracting and retaining employees with shiny perks and benefits that weren't always tied to business outcomes.

"There's a reckoning going on right now," he says. "Companies still know that they need to hire [in] people operations and recruiting. It's just the expectation for those jobs has gone up significantly. Now the expectation is that these people understand the business [and] that they're designing programs that are in service of the business, not just hiring and retaining people at all costs, which is where we were for a long time."

Historically, it has also been more difficult to attract the best talent to HR, particularly at the executive level. But as the work changes, HR is becoming more and more of a draw for not only new entrants to the labor force, but also workers across disciplines. A recent analysis of LinkedIn data found that of the 25 "fastest growing roles" over the last five years, 20% were in HR departments. New roles in HR are often more specialized than in past years, reflecting a more pointed investment in areas like DEI and employee experience. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of HR specialists and managers is projected to grow by more than 7% over the next eight years.

There has been a marked increase in interest from people who wouldn't have previously considered entering HR but now see it as a real opportunity to do important work, say experts. "The caliber of talent that is interested in this space is different," Kim says, noting that when she got into HR, people were more likely to apply for such a role because they were desperate for a job. In the last few years, however, McInnis-Day has lured colleagues to HR from other parts of the business, while Kim has fielded inquiries about HR from MBA graduates, sales people, and even software engineers.

"I think [HR] still has a lot of catching up to do, in terms of what we purport to do and what is happening on the ground," she says. "But because of the talent that is entering the space, wanting to be a part of this problem solving, I am really much more optimistic."