



The State of HR 2026

**An annual trends and
insights report by HRCI**

The largest-ever HRCI survey shows HR professionals are optimistic about the future of their field—and investigates the serious challenges that lie ahead.

The State of HR Is Strong

Welcome to HRCI's first-ever *State of HR* report, a deep dive into the most important aspects of our profession based on the most qualified source we can find—you.

To facilitate a successful 2026, we asked thousands of HR professionals worldwide to share how they feel about their jobs, career paths, and the issues that impact us all.

The result of the survey—the largest in HRCI's over 50-year history—is a report packed with important perspectives about everything from stress levels and workloads to remote work and workplace violence. You'll find insight into what drives satisfaction on HR teams, how the happiest HR professionals have engineered their roles, and a great deal more.

The 2026 *State of HR* report explains how your colleagues feel about the world of work right now and the biggest challenges they see on the horizon. As you'll see, many in the profession are greeting 2026 with tangible optimism.

The state of HR is strong.



Amy Dufrane, Ed.D., SPHR, CAE
CEO, HRCI



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The State of HR



HR Professionals Are Optimistic, Despite Tough Times

In 2026, HR teams are facing a number of career-defining challenges. Around the world, workforces are also confronted with uncertain economic conditions, changing policy climates, career-altering technological advancements, and continual pressure to deliver value. Stateside, concerns about polarizing opinions, changing regulations on diversity initiatives, and concerns over workplace safety are top of mind.

Despite what many might consider stormy seas, however, the human resources community has been able to maintain its sense of purpose and direction.

In late 2025, HRCI conducted its largest-ever survey, in which 4,583 respondents worldwide answered questions about the state of the HR profession.

As we enter 2026, here are the general sentiments:

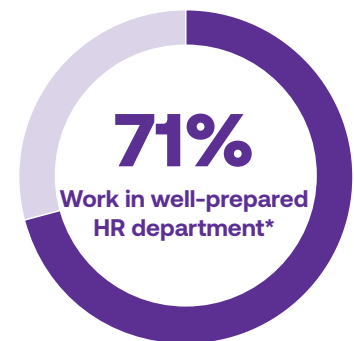
→ **HR professionals are passionate about what they do.**

A large majority (76%) enjoy working in HR—30% “immensely.”



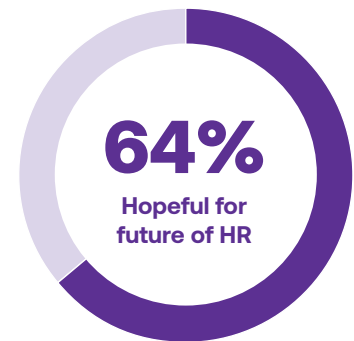
→ **HR professionals are confident in their departments.**

A majority (71%) say their department is prepared to handle its workload. This is generally true across different areas of HR, with the notable exception of implementing technology (see The Preparation Gap in Technology).



→ **HR professionals are hopeful about their field.**

Almost two-thirds (64%) say they are “extremely” or “very” hopeful about the future of HR, and 72% are likely to recommend it to others as a career path. This was largely consistent across career levels, meaning that even those who have been in the field for many years still see HR as fulfilling.



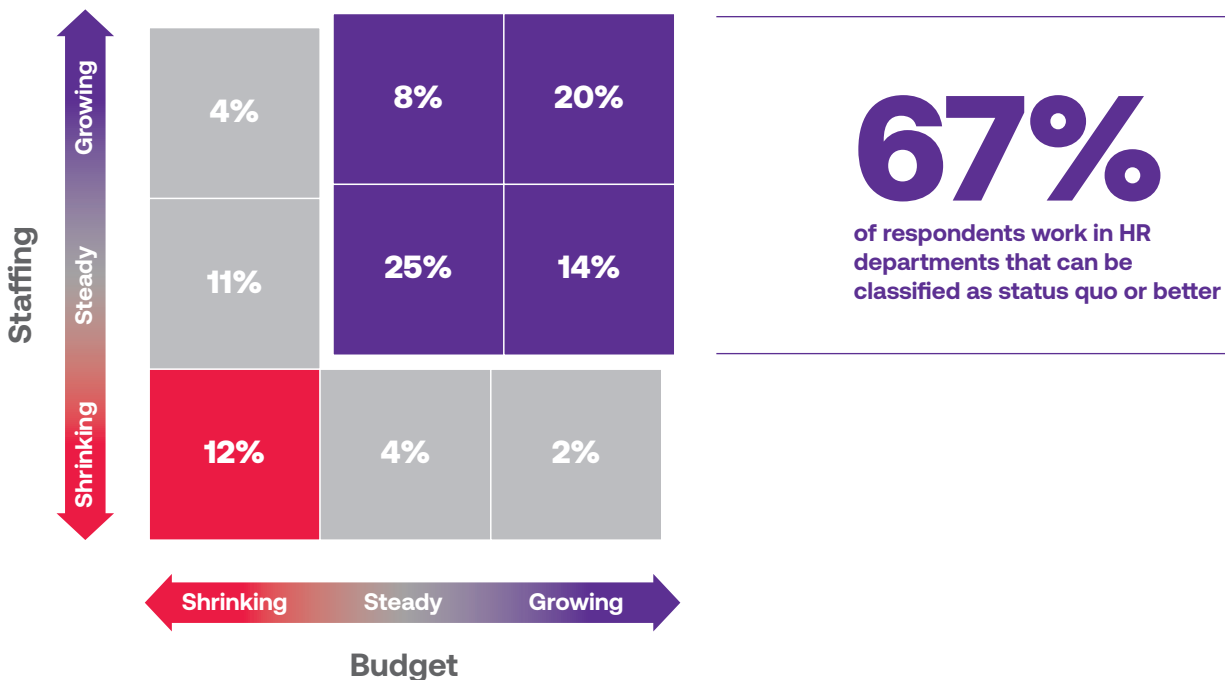
“The state of HR is strong,” said Dr. Amy Dufrane, CEO of HRCI. “As a group, HR professionals are optimistic and resilient. They understand that people *are* performance, and that how we cultivate our people is how we cultivate success. It does not surprise me to see that today’s HR professionals are looking past adversity and focused on getting the job done.”



Companies Continue to Invest in HR

For many HR professionals, there is reason for optimism. While HR teams are certainly experiencing challenges, they report being essentially healthy. To define this further, we asked respondents whether two key metrics—staffing and budgets—are rising, falling, or static, and to compare their 2025 experiences with their 2026 expectations.

One-fifth (20%) say they are experiencing growth in both staffing levels and department budgets, with no reported or anticipated declines in either. These “on-the-rise” departments outpace the proportion (12%) of those who report the same metrics are declining.



More generally, about two-thirds of respondents work in HR departments that can be classified as “status quo” or better, meaning budgets and staffing levels either rose or stayed the same last year and the same is expected in 2026.

“The HR world appears to be faring extremely well,” said Kathy Claytor, president of HRCI’s Board of Directors. “Every profession experiences cycles. But it’s very encouraging to see so many companies continuing to invest in HR departments during times of change.”



Challenges in 2026

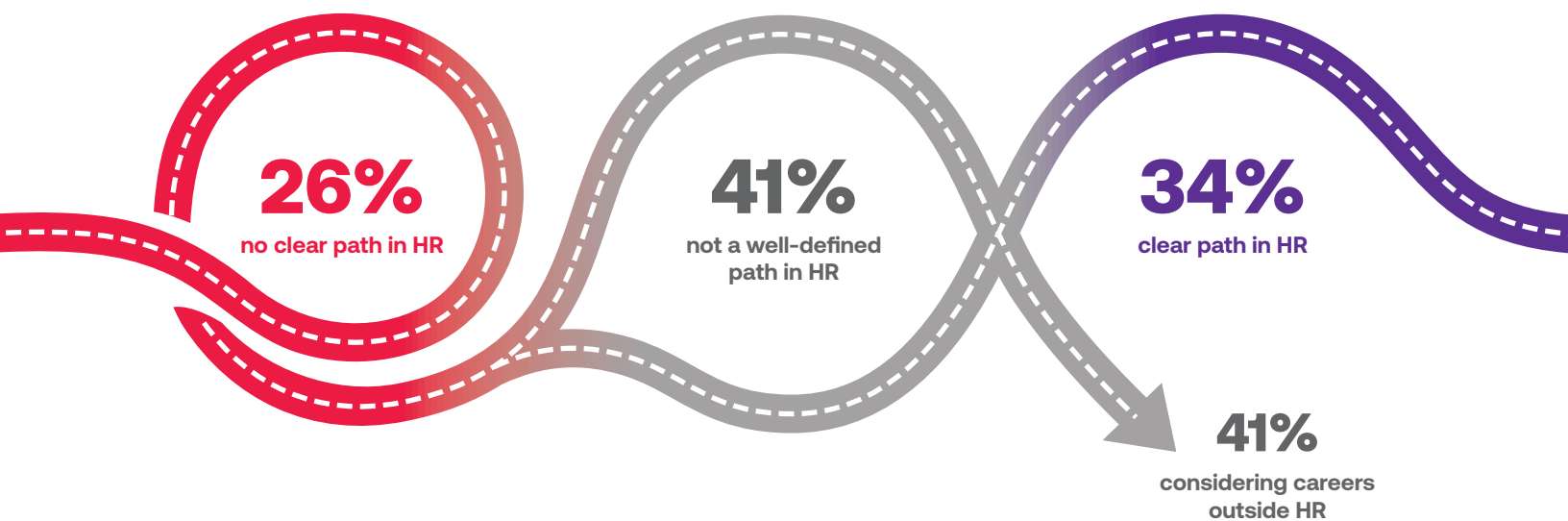
We also queried survey respondents about key challenges in the year ahead. Many of these involve personal aspects of HR work, such as career opportunities, workload, and stress levels.

Here are what HR professionals report being most concerned about in the coming year:

Career paths are murky.

Perhaps the most extreme indicator emerged around career direction, or a lack thereof. More than a quarter (26%) say they have no clear career path, and 41% agreed that “there’s a sense of a career path but it’s not well-defined.” Alarming, when asked directly, 41% said they are considering careers outside HR.

Fifty-five percent said they have looked for another job in the last year. A well-defined career path matters to employees seeking stability and organizations seeking strong retention. HR professionals who do not see a clear path are far more likely to have sought other employment, and are much more open to leaving HR altogether.





58%

say the range of responsibilities has increased in the past year

50%

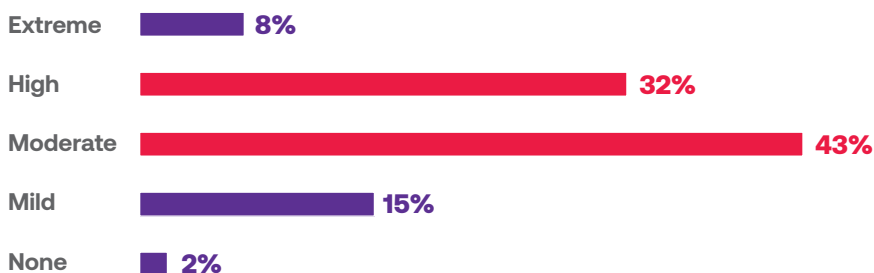
expect it to grow in 2026

Workloads are increasing.

A majority (58%) say their department's range of responsibilities has increased in the past year, and fully half (50%) expect it to grow in 2026. While growing responsibilities can be a positive development for an individual or a department, it is notable that half of respondents (50%) report that they currently handle functions outside of HR.

Anxiety is high.

HR professionals are optimistic about their work, but stress levels are higher than might be expected. Forty percent report "high" or "extreme" stress levels, and 43% say their stress is moderate. Only 15% indicate mild on-the-job stress, and 2% say they experience none at all.



HR: Working *in* the business, or working *on* the business?

In roles that balance both process and outcomes, it can be difficult to maintain a strategic outlook. Scott Cawood, CEO of WorldatWork, encourages HR professionals to avoid unnecessary administrative tasks, particularly as they advance in their careers.

“Think about the amount of time you spend working in the business versus working on the business,” says Cawood. “If you only work in the business, your value can never truly be understood.”

While HR undoubtedly walks a line between operations and strategy, many see their role as purely operational.

Twenty-eight percent say their job is mostly administrative or operational, with limited strategic input. Another 5% say it is purely administrative. Only one in 10 considers themselves an “essential strategic leader.”

As might be expected, people employed in the highest-level HR positions, senior director or above, are much more likely to describe the HR function at their company as strategic in nature. Still, fewer than half (43%) think of their department as strongly strategic.

HR department “strong strategic contributor” or “essential strategic leader”



Varied opinions on leadership.

Despite overall optimism, the data shows an undercurrent of discontent with corporate leadership. Nearly half (47%) say company leadership is “moderately effective” or worse—possibly reflecting the way HR professionals feel their work is valued by corporate chiefs.

More than a third (35%) say HR is “valued only a little,” “not too valued,” or “not valued at all.”

As one respondent explained:

“The job of an HR professional has changed...to manage everything—compliance, technology, culture, mental health, and retention—with limited resources. We’re no longer just processing paperwork; we’re problem-solvers, mediators, and the bridge between leadership and employees. Expectations have grown, but support and recognition haven’t kept pace.”

Dufrane says the collective profession has work to do, a role not unlike what HR teams do to care for the employees they help manage. She encourages human resources professionals to consider themselves “consultants” rather than task managers, approaching organizational challenges from their expert lens on “what’s best for our people.”

“Everyone deserves a well-defined career path and a vision for the future, ideally not one filled with ever-increasing workloads and stress. Sometimes, we may need to self-advocate to ensure a clear career trajectory not only for employees, but for ourselves and our teams. When we co-create supportive cultures, we invest in the longevity of our profession.”

—Dr. Amy Dufrane, CEO, HRCI

The Correlation Between Strategic Contribution and How HR Is Valued

It’s not clear if a strategic approach to HR leads to greater organizational respect, or if organizations that value HR encourage a more strategic function. Either way, the relationship between these two concepts was hard to miss when we looked at the data. HR professionals who describe the role of their department as strategic are far more likely to report being valued by senior leadership.

Valued

Operational
43%

Strategic
90%

Not Valued

Operational
18%

Strategic
2%

HR's Strategic Moment: Leading Through Transformation

As organizations navigate increasingly complex environments, the strategic role of human resources is more critical than ever.

High-performing companies distinguish themselves by cultivating talent, building future-ready pipelines, and nurturing cultures where individuals and teams adapt quickly to the ever-changing landscape. HRCI's data highlights the resilience and optimism in our field: 76% report high levels of job enjoyment, and 72% recommend HR as a career. While concerns about rising workloads persist, signals suggest that investments in HR will remain steady or increase, demonstrating that organizations value HR's contribution.

HR sits at the intersection of culture, talent, technology, and compliance, with a unique opportunity to drive business transformation. While a large majority of HR teams feel prepared for today's demands, rapid advances in artificial intelligence and digital platforms present both opportunity and urgency. HR leaders must champion technology adoption, invest in ongoing development, and establish clear strategies for implementing AI and digital solutions across the organization, not just within HR.

Notably, HR professionals engaged in strategic initiatives report higher levels of satisfaction, underscoring the value of a future-focused, transformational mindset. By taking a proactive approach, HR can strengthen its influence, lead organizational change, and deliver measurable impact on our companies.

—Shelie Gustafson, SPHR, GPHR, HRCI Board Member and Recent CHRO of a Fortune 500 Company



What's Happening at Work



What Creates an ‘HR Evangelist?’

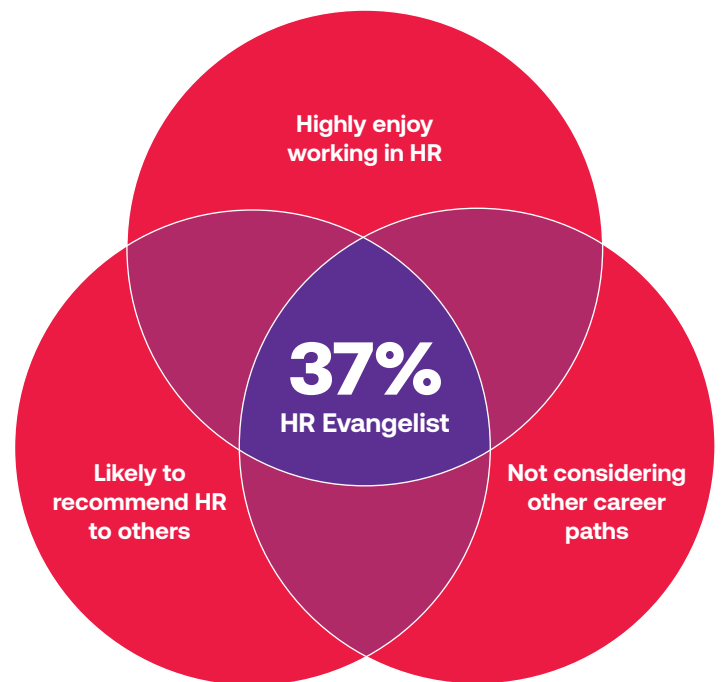
Despite challenges and uncertainty, HR professionals are extremely content in their roles. Throughout the data and comments were repeated threads of altruism and genuine care for others. More than a career, it’s clear that those in human resources consider their profession a calling.

To learn more, we focused on a group we’ll refer to as *HR evangelists*: those who not only say they are happy at work, but recommend the field to others.



Entering 2026, 37% of respondents—more than 1,600 people—qualify as HR evangelists. This designation is based on a composite metric that recognizes individuals who highly enjoy working in HR are likely to recommend HR to others, and are not considering other career paths. We studied this group’s responses to learn why they seem so happy in their jobs.

The data showed that these individuals can largely be found within certain working conditions. Those employed at certain types of companies, doing certain jobs, and doing those jobs in a certain way are happier at work than others.



Here's what we found:

→ **They feel their team is “completely prepared” for work.**

For HR professionals, preparation is very clearly one of the keys to happiness at work. The more prepared they feel, the happier they are on the job. In fact, those who describe their department as completely prepared are nearly three times more likely to be HR evangelists than those who feel minimally prepared.

→ **Their department feels secure, or is even growing.**

HR professionals who work for HR departments where budgets and staffing are rising or remaining stable are significantly more likely to be evangelists (45%) than those employed in departments showing some signs of shrinking or decline (35%).

→ **They oversee a team.**

HR professionals who manage others are significantly more likely to be evangelists than those who do not. Similarly, senior HR professionals are more enthusiastic about the field than their more junior counterparts. One-third of entry-level respondents qualify as evangelists, compared to 42% of those who are senior managers or higher.

There may be many reasons that these conditions are conducive to a happy work life. Feeling well prepared is likely associated with greater confidence in the ability to do a job well. Working in management may allow a professional to have a greater sense of purpose or security. And working for an “on-the-rise” company—with increasing budgets and staffing—almost certainly cultivates a culture of optimism more than managing scarcity.

However, Dufrane is quick to note that the relationship between preparation and satisfaction is notable for one important reason: it is something HR professionals can control without changing jobs or securing a promotion.

“Confidence is important,” she said. “We all want to feel good about our work product and abilities. That’s why professional development is so critical. It is a lever every one of us can use throughout our career to ensure we are nimble enough to respond to whatever the environment may bring.”

You're More Likely to Find Evangelists in Growing Departments



Motivated by Purpose

Another way to understand what makes HR professionals “content” is examining why they stay at their current jobs. While the data shows that about 55% of respondents looked for a job in the last year, the remaining 45% did not; for whatever reason, they were content to remain where they are.

One open-ended question asked people why they stay, providing many unique and thoughtful perspectives on why people stay in their roles. We conducted an AI analysis of those answers to identify the common threads. Here is what we found:

- Thirty-nine percent cited relationships (positive coworker interactions, supportive managers, and a collaborative, friendly environment) as the top reason for staying in their job.
- Another 27% pointed to the work itself, saying they enjoy their job responsibilities, feel challenged, find purpose in daily tasks, and engage in interesting projects.
- Interestingly, traditional retention factors were considered less impactful:
 - Compensation and benefits: 6%
 - Company culture: 4%
 - Work-life balance: 4%
 - Growth opportunities: 3%

“This was not a big surprise to those of us who have spent years in human resources,” Dufrane said. “HR professionals sincerely appreciate genuine connections and meaningful work. The idea that relationships outweigh compensation just underlines the value of a positive work environment. HR professionals spend their time trying to build that for others. It stands to reason that we would want it for ourselves.”

45%

of respondents were content to remain where they are

Why They Stay





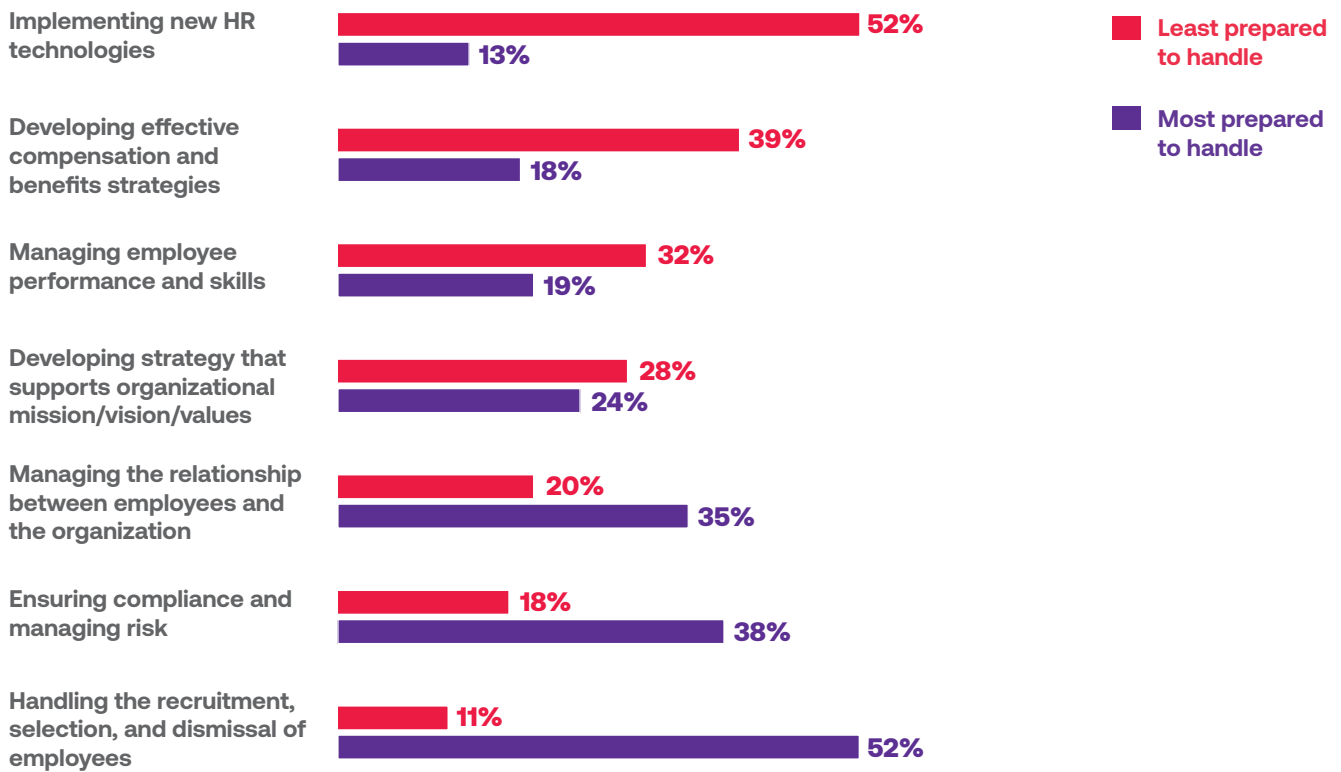
The Biggest Challenge: Technology

Of course, HR professionals also face plenty of challenges on the job, and many have concerns. We asked them to select the two aspects of HR they feel least prepared to handle, and which two they feel most prepared for. By far “implementing HR technology” stands out as a vulnerability. More than half of respondents (52%) named “implementing HR technology” as one of the areas their department is least prepared to handle. Just 13% think it is among the aspects of HR they are “most ready” to address.

Other areas where respondents said they feel “least prepared” include developing effective compensation and benefits strategies (39%), managing employee performance and skills (32%), and developing strategy that supports organizational mission/vision/values (28%).

While artificial intelligence may not be the only reason HR professionals are intimidated by technology implementation, it does pose a particular challenge in 2026, in part because the technology is very new and its impact is not yet well understood. Fewer than half of survey respondents are being trained by their companies on AI implementation and usage.

Areas HR professionals feel most and least prepared to handle



“It’s understandable that HR professionals would have some anxiety over AI,” said Chris Scandlen, chief technology officer at HRCI. “It’s a powerful and multifaceted technology that promises significant change. Part of the current narrative is also that AI will eliminate jobs, though that is far from certain because implementation is only just happening. It is natural that people would worry.”

On the whole, HR professionals do not anticipate much immediate change resulting from AI. Eighty-two percent say they have not seen jobs lost to AI in their industry; 77% do not think they will see losses next year; and 71% are “not at all concerned” about AI replacing their job.

Of note: those least concerned about AI’s impact on jobs tend to be employed in goods-producing industries that may be less quick to adopt the technology in their primary areas of function. Those same industries may also be less likely to provide AI training than companies in services-producing sectors like technology, education, and banking.

82% Have not seen jobs lost to AI



77% Do not expect jobs lost to AI in next year



71% Not at all concerned about AI replacing their job





While most do not see AI-related job cuts coming soon, most HR professionals (71%) do believe the technology will *change* their job.

In an optional question, we asked how HR professionals expected their own roles to change as a result of artificial intelligence. We received 1,718 responses, then used AI to analyze the results. About 29% said AI would generally increase productivity and efficiency; subsequent answers were varied.

For example, 6% said the impact would be felt in HR documentation and automation; 5% said it would be performance management and feedback; and 4% said it would be workflow streamlining and process optimization.

Significantly, more than half (51%) said the impact would be positive, and about 41% were uncertain. Only about 8% thought it would be negative.

As one respondent put it, “AI is a wonderful tool to help support our work and increase the speed with which we can accomplish some tasks.”



29%

say that AI would generally increase productivity and efficiency

Others were more cautious: “I believe it will make some of the things we do better and more efficient, but HR still needs the ability to determine how best to implement AI in our practices,” another respondent wrote.

Some were even fearful: “I love the job, I love my organization and the people I work with,” one respondent wrote. “I’m increasingly concerned about the impacts that AI is having on our current business model, and more broadly, how AI may negate the necessity of having an HR professional at all in the organization (or elsewhere). It feels like this might just be a short-term bubble, but I think there’s a real chance that AI might erode into the career path of professionals like myself. I often wonder what an alternative would be, especially given my age (mid-forties) and years of experience.”

People who experience organizationally sponsored AI training may better grasp its potential impact. Yet more than half (53%) of respondents say their company offers no training at all on artificial intelligence technology, while less than one-fifth describe in-house AI training as “moderate” or “extensive.”

Additionally, much of the instruction that is taking place appears to be home-grown, including lunch-and-learns (35%), in-house classes (39%), or published materials (41%). Only 10% of respondents were sent to an external class, and just 8% were offered any type of AI credential.

“Our generation has already seen massive changes in technology, so it is not surprising that many companies are already leaning into AI,” Dufrane said. “What is surprising is that those companies are not yet doing more training for their HR teams. That is something that should change in the year ahead.”

Most HR Pros Already Use AI

Whatever the feelings about AI, much of HR is regularly using it.

Survey data shows that 29% use AI daily, and that AI is a common tool for more than seven in ten HR professionals. Previous HRCI surveys in 2025 showed similar results.



HR professionals most commonly reported using AI for creating content and communications (78%), finding answers to a question (75%), and drafting meeting notes and summaries (64%). Fifty-four percent say they trust AI to provide quality answers.

To Address AI, Move from Apprehension to Curiosity

In 1958, when the best computer was a billion times less powerful and one hundred thousand times pricier than today's average laptop, E. Wight Bakke wrote an article, "The Human Resources Function," that some say is the origin story for modern HR practice.

Since Bakke wrote this, computing technology has exploded, but the article's emphasis that HR teams must help companies understand and embrace technological and systems changes is more relevant than ever.

Generative AI is the most recent step in technology's swift advance. The best way for HR folks to help their organization understand and embrace Gen AI, is to start with your own work first. Get a feel for the basic concepts of the underpinning technology of Generative AI. Learn about different tooling options to help you in your daily job. Then start using them. The only secret is to begin.

You, the HR pro, are in the unique position of needing to figure out Gen AI not only for yourself, but for the rest of the organization: how to encourage all employees to learn, try, and adapt to Gen AI. HR teams need to have conviction on how to create a Gen AI culture across the organization through education programs, usage policies, and workforce redesign.

Regular change is hard. Anticipating and adapting to Gen AI impacts is herculean. You will need to get in the right frame of mind. Focus on the things in your control, practice shifting your mindset from apprehension to curiosity, and build your confidence by creating value with Gen AI every day. Write your own chapter in Bakke's HR origin story.

—Chris Scandlen, Chief Technology Officer, HRCI



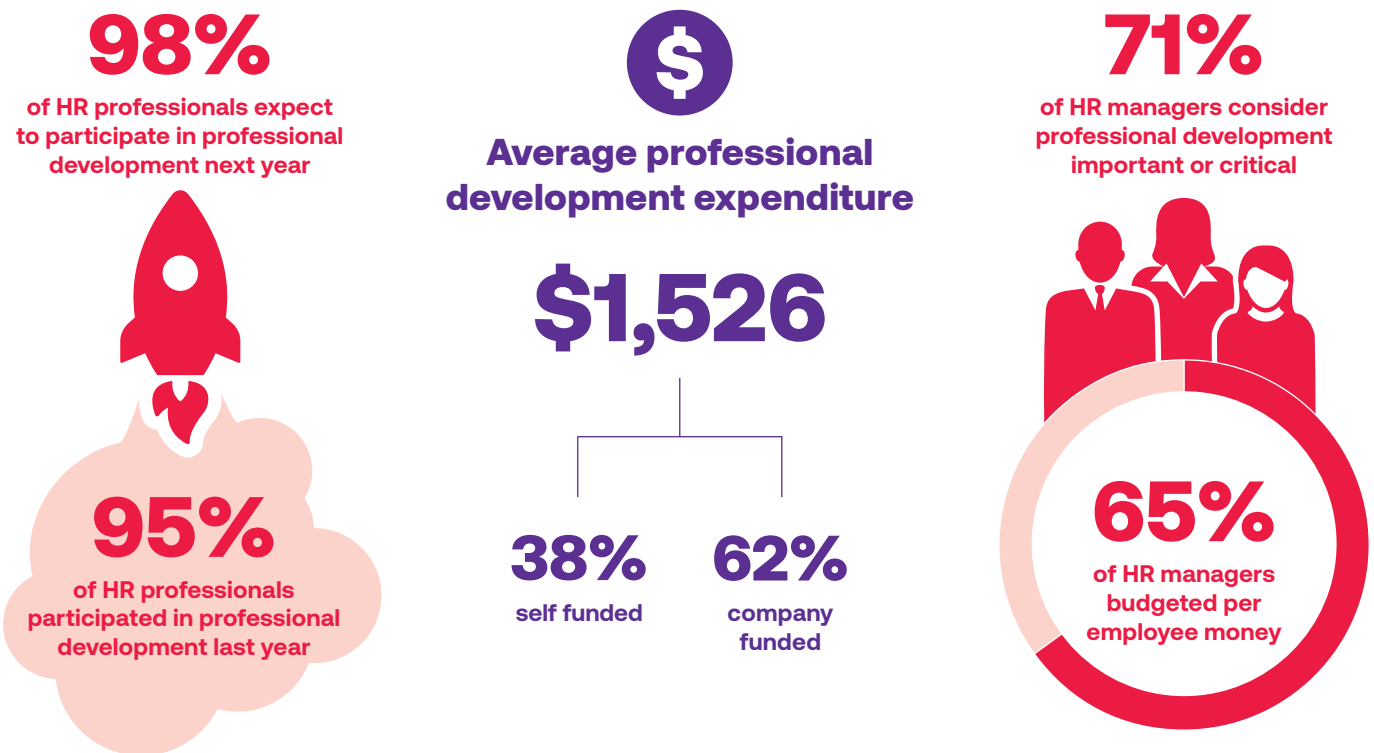
Professional Development

HR Professionals Are Lifelong Learners

Almost 80% of HR professionals agree with the statement, “I am well prepared to carry out my job.” A large majority (72%) say the pace of change is challenging but they are managing.

About 30% agree to at least some extent with the statement, “I do not have enough resources to complete my work in a high-quality way.” Seven percent say the pace of change is “too much.”

Being prepared for the job and truly enjoying HR work are linked, so it is encouraging to see that HR professionals are eager to engage in professional development and learning activities. Ninety-five percent report having participated in some form of professional development in the past year, and 98% plan to do so in the year ahead. One in four HR managers said professional development is a critical priority in 2026, and 46% said it was “very important.”



The average total spend on professional development in 2025 was \$1,526, with \$585 (32%) out of pocket. In 2026, average total spend is expected to fall slightly to \$1,464. Two-thirds of managers said they budget for professional development, averaging \$1,274 per employee for 2026.

“The human resources community loves to learn,” Dr. Dufrane said. “People who want to develop professional skills have many options, from informal videos and webinars to online communities and formal certification.”

How We Learn

When it comes to professional development, HR professionals heavily favor online instruction.



HR professionals expect this to remain true in the coming year as well, with one exception: more interest in conferences. Fully half (50%) say they are interested in conferences in the coming year, up from 42% in the past year.

Where Professionals Will Focus

What topics will HR professionals focus on learning in the next year? The answer lies in where they feel confident and where they think there is work to be done.

For example, recruiting, hiring, and termination are areas where many respondents feel confident. Only 11% reported feeling least prepared, and only 13% listed those areas as top priorities in the year ahead.

Areas of focus for HR professionals





28%

said they are least prepared to develop company-aligned strategy, even though...

51%

completed strategy-related training last year.

By contrast, developing strategy that aligns with company interests is an area where HR professionals feel less confident. Twenty-eight percent count it as an area where they are least prepared, and more than half (51%) completed strategy training in 2025. Accordingly, 37% count it as a top priority for professional development this year.

There are also topics that appear to be consistent year-over-year. While only 18% say they are unprepared regarding compliance and risk, almost two-thirds (65%) trained on it last year, and more than one-third (35%) count it as a top priority moving forward.

Managing employee relations is similar. Twenty percent named it as a weak spot, and 58% did training on it in the last year. Twenty-nine percent will make it a priority for professional development in 2026.

The Preparation Gap in Technology

Half of those surveyed name implementing tech as an area they are least prepared to handle. Yet, only about a third (32%) chose it as a key learning or professional development topic for 2026. In fact, almost four in 10 (38%) put it among their lowest two learning priorities. This could represent a disconnect—a type of preparation gap—in the year ahead.

Scandlen, HRCI's chief technology officer, says this could be attributed to many reasons. HR professionals may be waiting to see which systems or technologies their companies adopt or which take hold in the broader industry. In the case of specific systems, some professionals will have to wait for training as part of a company-wide implementation. Educational opportunities are also likely to increase in the next year as training around AI and other technologies becomes more common.

“Technology can be a bit more nebulous than some other types of learning, because it’s constantly changing,” Scandlen said. “But options are certain to increase as the newer technologies continue to solidify. We should see a great deal of growth in training over the next 12 months.”

Professional Development Must Include Enterprise AI

For many HR professionals, the first encounter with artificial intelligence is personal. They draft content or summarize information, activities that are empowering. But these moments are not what senior leaders envision when they talk about AI.

Executives are looking for enterprise impact. They want faster hiring, scalable service, stronger workforce insights, and consistent experiences across roles and regions—outcomes that go beyond individual experimentation. That means we have work to do.

Enterprise AI is about systems, and these systems introduce new questions about reliability, fairness, accountability, and trust. That shift requires a new type of professional development for HR teams. Our work is no longer about becoming technologists but about building the capability to steer technological decisions. We must be able to guide where AI exists, how it operates and how it should—and should not—be used in decisions that affect people.

Professional development in HR must include technology and AI governance. We have to understand how models behave, what risks matter most, and when human judgment should remain in place. We must be able to collaborate as equals with IT, legal, corporate leadership, and other departments.

In the end, building quality systems is far more important than building them fast. Rapid deployment is meaningless if the outcomes fail us. Proper governance will not slow innovation. It will enable it to happen.

—Jen Phillips Kirkwood, HR and AI Governance Expert and Executive Fellow at the World Economic Forum



Current Trends in HR

HRCI



Work Ahead on Workplace Conflict and Mental Health

Are today's companies prepared to keep employees safe? In an era of both global workplaces and increased access to information, polarizing opinions have made headlines with greater frequency.

We questioned survey respondents about conflict in the workplace, and their answers suggest many organizations still have work ahead.



24%

say the idea of violence happening in their office “never crosses their mind.”

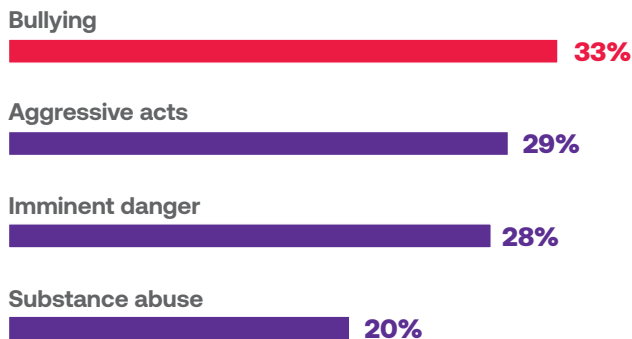
As we have discussed, HR professionals are passionate about their work. However, a surprising number have observed conflict or dangerous behavior in the office.

- Four in 10 respondents have witnessed some form of aggressive or criminal behavior, such as verbal altercations, threatening situations, literal threats, damage to company property, physical altercations, or the presence of weapons.
- Acts of bullying are most commonly cited (33%), but more than a quarter (28%) report experiencing more extreme danger (threats, physical altercations, or the presence of weapons).
- One-fifth of HR professionals say they have witnessed substance abuse at their organization.

While fear should not drive company culture, experts say safety should always be a priority.

“Every company needs to prepare for problems and have a plan to keep employees safe,” Dr. Dufrane said. “That applies to natural disasters and is equally true for violent incidents. No organization can be prepared for every outcome. But there should be discussions and basic scenario planning.”

Violence, aggression, and criminality in the workplace



Managing a Polarized Workplace

Political differences in the office continue to be a workplace issue that weighs heavily on HR.

For example, almost half of survey respondents have experienced issues relating to polarized viewpoints at work. More than a third (35%) have witnessed or heard a political argument at work. Almost one in six (14%) have seen an employee leave due to political tension or have seen those tensions impact client relations (16%). Nearly one in 10 (9%) say political tensions have impacted their ability to hire.

In a separate question, 22% said the atmosphere has made HR work harder to a great or moderate extent. Another 34% said it has to a smaller extent.

Significantly, large numbers of HR professionals say their organizations are not prepared to handle charged political discussions: 37% say they are only somewhat prepared, and 29% say they are minimally prepared or not prepared at all. Interestingly, the numbers were similar inside and outside the United States.

The Tragedy of Workplace Shootings

Gun violence of any kind is traumatic, and of the 223 active shooter incidents in the U.S. between 2020 and 2024, 44% occurred in commercial settings such as offices, malls, bars, restaurants, or stores, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. In 2023 alone, there were 458 workplace murders in the U.S., an average of nine a week. While shootings receive significant attention in news coverage, they are far rarer than other types of workplace violence or criminal activity.

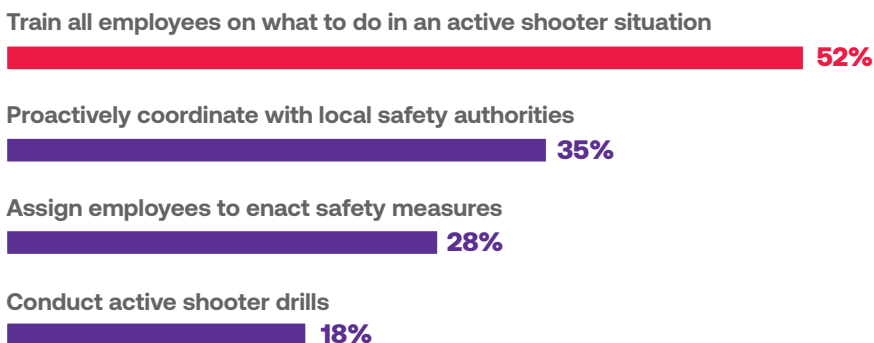
Even so, protocol for such events is not universal.

- Twenty-nine percent of respondents said their organization has no active shooter plan in place, and about half of those working for organizations doing something concrete to address the issue said their training was fair, poor, or very poor.
- Only about half (52%) train all employees on what to do in an active shooter situation, the most frequent step taken by organizations. More elaborate efforts, such as coordinating proactively with police or conducting active shooter drills, are far less common.

HR Professionals Feel Safe at Work

Of course, the vast majority of offices will not experience a workplace shooting. In fact, almost all survey respondents (97%) say they feel safe at work, and about one-quarter (24%) say the idea of violence happening in their office “never crosses their mind.”

Steps taken to prepare for an active shooter



Mental Health Is a Vital Investment

In a world where a majority of HR professionals say workloads are increasing and almost half say stress levels are high, we must adjust how we think about mental health in the workplace.

As every executive knows, morale affects many of our most important metrics. It impacts productivity, retention, and engagement, as well as things that are harder to quantify, like innovation. Yet too many organizations still approach mental health with a focus on mental illness. They offer benefits to people already in crisis.

A much more effective strategy is to shift that focus to prevention, addressing problems such as burnout, depression, and withdrawal before they have a negative impact.

We can take inspiration from how well-run companies address physical health and safety. We don't just focus on health insurance, we promote healthy habits and preventive measures. If there are hazardous work conditions, we educate people on what they are, minimize the risks as much as possible, and create protocols for ongoing management.

The same approach can be taken to workplace mental health. We have decades of research to draw upon, as well as resources like the International Organization for Standardization and the World Health Organization, which publishes [workplace mental health guidelines](#).

We also have common sense. Mental health matters, both to our people and our mission. A preventative investment in the mental and emotional well-being of our employees—including those in HR—is an investment in the success of any business.

—Dr. Alessandria Polizzi, CEO, Verdant Consulting, and Author of “The Workplace Mental Health Strategy Workbook”



Talent Acquisition in 2026

Hiring remains a primary function in HR and one of the areas where technology is developing most quickly. Yet the data shows that, while HR professionals are leaning into tech systems that streamline recruiting and interview processes, they remain cautious about fully embracing those platforms.

Personal interviews are at the heart of the hiring process, with about 60% of respondents saying they conduct two or three interviews before onboarding a candidate. Eighty-four percent say they are not yet using AI to conduct job interviews, and only about one in five report using AI for hiring and screening more broadly. Overall, 62% said technology makes hiring easier, but 25% said it has no impact. In fact, 14% said technology makes hiring more challenging.

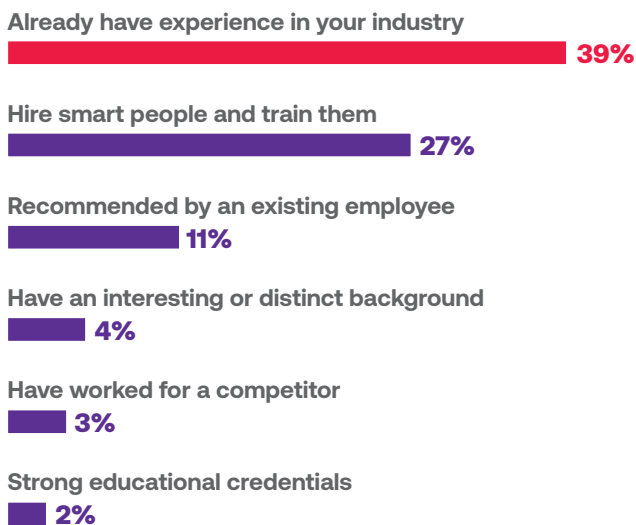
Ultimately, many HR professionals continue to rely on traditional means to identify candidates. When asked what company benefits or perks are most likely to attract talent, 41% said healthcare and similar benefits; 39% said remote work opportunities; and 37% said opportunities for advancement.

HR professionals say the largest barriers to hiring are lower-than-expected compensation (63%); candidate skill-sets (37%); and scheduling requirements (28%). Finding the right skills is challenging enough that 43% say they would consider creating a training initiative, and 26% would support creating an apprentice program.

Interestingly, responses varied on the connection between education and quality of hiring. Fifty-six percent say their company does not require a four-year degree; 58% say having such a requirement helps attract qualified candidates, but 27% say it has little impact.

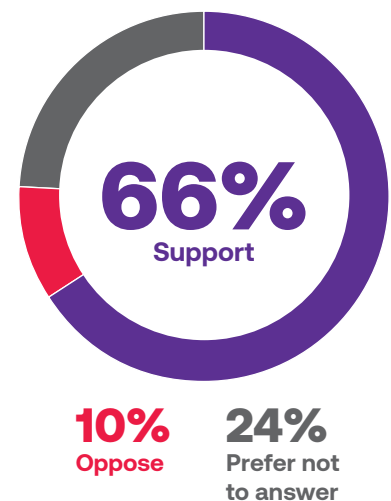
When asked to describe their hiring philosophy, 39% of HR professionals said they tend to choose people with experience in their industry. Hiring and training smart people came in second at 27%.

Hiring philosophies



Where HR Stands on DEI

Despite executive orders in the U.S. early in 2025 regarding diversity and inclusion initiatives, most HR professionals still largely believe these programs are effective.



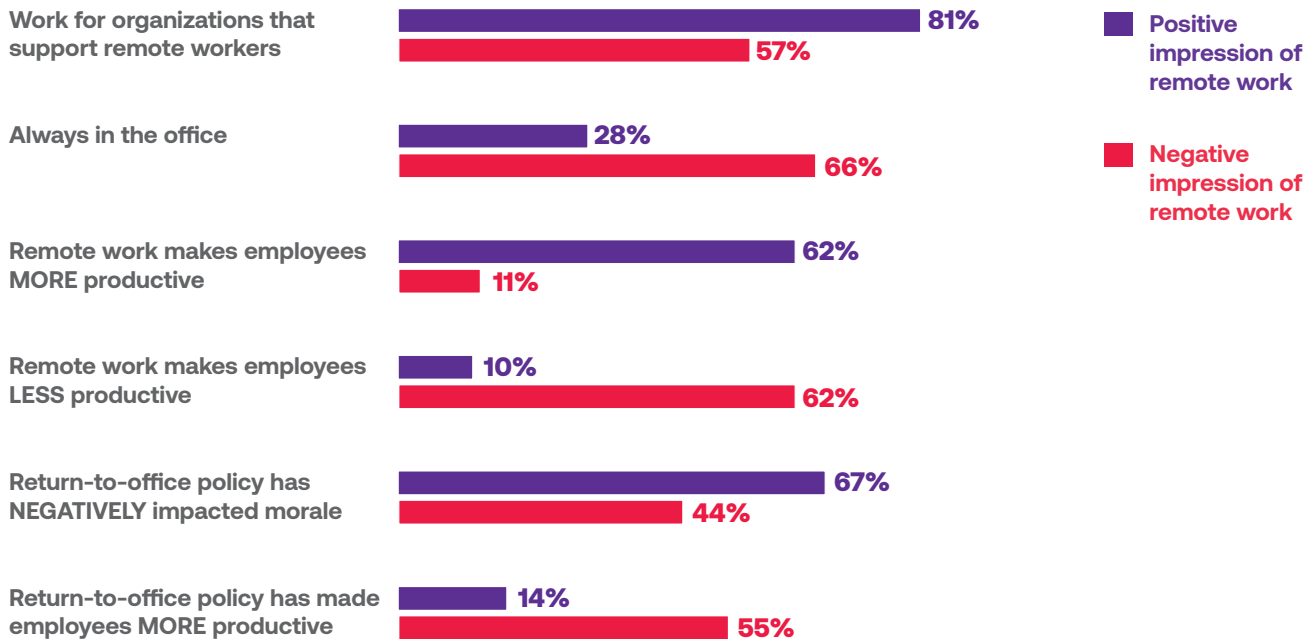
For example, 66% personally support diversity programs, and 68% believe they lead to greater workplace equality. More generally, 92% believe that a more diverse workforce can improve both decision-making and the bottom line.

“Understanding how employees, customers, and shareholders feel about diversity is essential for making decisions that align with both organizational values and business goals,” said Shaun Mayo, SPHR, HRCI board member and chief people officer of the Arizona Cardinals. “Formal diversity programs work best when they align with company values.”

Where Does Work Happen?

With the advent of remote work, the increasing number of independent contractors, and advancements in artificial intelligence, the workplace is experiencing more change than it has in generations. How HR feels about these changes, and how the profession adapts, will have a major impact on the future of companies around the world.

Where HR professionals stand on remote work



Remote work is a good example. HR professionals largely support remote work, and about a third (35%) are themselves wholly or partially remote. Large majorities work for organizations that facilitate remote work (77%) and believe that it is good for an organization (83%).

Among the benefits HR professionals tout is that working outside the office creates more flexibility (79%); eliminates commutes and wasted time (73%); and promotes a healthier work-life balance (69%). Importantly, 61% say it makes employees generally happier, and 54% say it increases retention.

While respondents opposing remote work are in the minority, their opposition is staunch. These opponents are far less likely to believe that remote work increases productivity or that return-to-office policies negatively impact morale.



Contract Employees Fit Right In

HR professionals see very little difference between contract employees and those who work on staff.

The data shows HR professionals often tap contractors to fill needs within the company, and integrate them freely with workers who are on staff. Fifty-eight percent work for companies that use contractors, and one in six HR professionals are contractors themselves.

Here are some additional findings:

- 68% say there is very little performance difference between regular employees and contractors. Only 25% say regular employees perform better than contractors.
- 54% reported generally good experiences with contractors, with only a few bad experiences. 23% reported almost entirely good experiences. Only 2% reported generally negative experiences.
- 46% personally support the use of contractors, and 48% have no opposition. Only 6% oppose the use of contractors.
- 66% use contractors to acquire expertise; 56% use them to facilitate projects or support high-work periods; 33% use them to accommodate seasonal needs.
- 47% mix contractors and regular employees in a team setting; 39% give contractors access to internal technology systems; and 31% use collaborative tools designed to include contractors.

Challenges of Remote Work

Regardless of general opinions on remote work, there are still challenges to be managed and mitigated.

For example, 54% report a reduced sense of belonging; 47% say remote work reduces identification with a team or company; and 42% say it reduces collaboration.

Perhaps more importantly, novel strategies to manage these challenges appear to be in short supply, while traditional approaches are more often embraced. About two-thirds say regular meetings are most helpful; 59% say the solution is communicating across channels; and 56% advocate using collaborative technology.

Though most HR professionals see the benefits of remote work, there are signs that this post-pandemic phenomenon may have peaked or is slowing down, both in and outside the U.S.

More respondents report a decrease in remote employees in the past year (24%) than saw an increase (20%). About half say their organization has enacted a return-to-office policy in the past five years, despite the fact that a solid majority say these policies negatively impact employee morale, and almost a quarter (24%) say they negatively impact productivity.

54%

Reduced sense of belonging

47%

Reduced identification with team and/or company

42%

Less collaboration

38%

Inability to build organizational culture

38%

Less effective communication

20%

Lower productivity

There Is No Single Answer on Remote Work

The future of HR is not “remote versus office,” it is orchestrating a boundaryless workforce with intentionality.

Remote and hybrid work expand access to skills and experiences that used to be geographically out of reach, enabling teams with greater diversity of thought, background, and perspective. That’s a real competitive advantage in problem-solving and innovation.

But the same shift stretches the traditional HR operating model: employment, tax, and regulatory obligations can follow the worker, widening an organization’s legal footprint and raising the bar for compliance, policy coherence, and manager capability. Agility is becoming a defining professional competency, and not just a “nice-to-have.”

Deloitte’s Human Capital research underscores the central tension: connection is now a design problem. In [Deloitte’s 2024 research](#), 20% of workers reported concern about a lack of connection and belonging amid increased remote or hybrid work. HRCI’s survey also reflects those concerns.

Return-to-office and hybrid setups don’t simplify this—they multiply it, because HR must enable consistent culture, productivity, and risk management across multiple “work realities” all at once. That’s why there is no single answer. Each organization must calibrate its model to its strategy, workforce, and constraints. Doing that well requires a highly skilled HR function that can balance access to broader talent pools with the operational excellence to make them work.

As organizations calibrate these models, HR will increasingly be the function that makes the strategy real, aligning leaders and stakeholders, protecting margins through productivity and retention, and building the governance and capabilities required to scale culture, performance, and compliance across work realities.

—Franz Gilbert, GPHR, HRCI Board Member and Managing Director for Human Capital, Deloitte Consulting

HR Can Redefine Itself in 2026

In 2026, HR is no longer competing for relevance—it is competing for survival. The function now lives or dies by one question: can it prove, in financial terms, that people decisions drive sustainable business performance?

The protective shield that once insulated HR—culture narratives, engagement rhetoric, and ethical appeals—has collapsed. AI has made visible what was long obscured: intent is not impact. Boards and investors no longer reward activity; they demand evidence that workforce decisions move financial outcomes—especially when labor represents an organization’s largest expense. They want to know which investments increase productivity, protect margins, reduce risk, and sustain enterprise value—and which do not.

HR must answer those questions or risk becoming administrivia wrapped in software.

This pressure is intensifying as HR assumes responsibility for governing hybrid human—AI work, overseeing AI agents as workforce participants, and operating in labor markets distorted by synthetic talent and declining trust. These are not “people issues.” They are enterprise risks with material consequences for valuation, resilience, growth, and reputation.

Yet this moment also represents an unprecedented opportunity. HR has never had a clearer line of sight between workforce decisions and business outcomes. Advances in analytics, AI, and human capital reporting now make it possible to quantify productivity, retention, skill deployment, and risk with rigor once reserved for finance and operations. For the first time, HR can credibly participate in capital allocation conversations, deciding where to invest, where to divest, and where returns are demonstrably created.

In 2026, HR has the chance to redefine itself as a performance function—evidence-based, economically fluent, and central to value creation. The future of HR will not be decided by purpose statements, but by those who can translate human capability into sustained economic advantage.

—Dr. Solange Charas, Professor, Columbia University

Methodology

The *State of HR* survey was completed by 4,583 human resources professionals, who received it via email between October 15–31, 2025. A large majority of those respondents (85%) practice HR in the United States. Forty-eight percent had 15 years of experience or more, 19% had 10 to <15 years, 18% had 5 to <10 years, 11% had 2 to <5 years, and 4% had less than two years. Our sample includes 1,727 individuals who reported holding titles at director-level or above, and 1,686 people who indicated that they manage other HR Professionals.

Eighty percent identified as women; 18% identified as male; and about 2% identified as non-binary, preferred to self-describe, or chose not to identify at all. Respondents were 64% white, 16% Black, 9% Asian, and 8% Hispanic/Latino. Unless otherwise noted, the percentages in this report reflect only respondents who answered each question. All percentages are rounded, and the data have not been weighted.

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