Building HR from Scratch
A Strategic Roadmap for the HR Department of One

Congratulations! You've been hired as the first HR professional at your organization - which means you're about to do some very exciting things! This isn't about implementing every best practice from the Fortune 500 playbooks - but it IS about creating a foundation that's compliant, scalable, and works for your organization's reality.

This guide is designed to give you a framework for your first year as it breaks down what to tackle first, what can wait, and how to prioritize when everything feels urgent.

helping organizations make their people strategy, real, practical and human

First Things First: How You Show Up Matters

Here's perhaps the most important thing to remember - how you approach your work in the first 90 days will shape your credibility, influence, and effectiveness for years to come. Before you dive into compliance audits and policy rewrites, take a moment to define how you'll show up as an HR professional.

What is your individual philosophy about what HR does? Who do you serve? What's your purpose? These aren't fluffy questions - they're strategic ones; your answers will guide every decision you make, from how you structure policies to how you manage conflict.

Some HR professionals see themselves as compliance officers, while others position themselves as employee advocates. Still others view HR as a business partner focused on enabling strategy. There's no single right answer, but clarity is essential, because if you don't know why you're practicing HR the way you do, nobody else will either.

Things to Ponder

- What do you believe is HR's core purpose in this organization?
- Who are your primary stakeholders - employees, managers, leadership, or all of the above?
- How do you want people in your organization (employees, leaders, other stakeholders) to describe HR six months from now?
- What are your personal non-negotiables - the values or principles you won't compromise on?

Write these down. These are all elements of your HR philosophy; your North Star when priorities compete, budgets shrink, or leadership pushes back on your recommendations. Your philosophy isn't static - it will evolve - but having one grounds you in purpose.

Physical Presence Matters

Here's a tactical question that reveals a lot about how you'll practice HR: Do you keep your door open or closed?

If you're tucked away in an office with the door shut, you're signaling that HR is separate from the day-to-day work of the organization. If you're walking the manufacturing floor, sitting in the break room, or popping into the restaurant kitchen to say hello, you're signaling that HR is present, accessible, and engaged.

Visibility builds trust and proximity creates opportunity. You can't understand the employee experience from behind a desk; you need to see how work happens, where the friction points are, what people are talking about, and what's not getting said in formal meetings.

Ways to Be Present

- Plan to walk through the work environment floor daily – various departments in your office building, the manufacturing floor, the kitchen at your hotel - wherever work happens
- Eat lunch in the break room - not at your desk
- Attend shift handoffs or stand-up meetings to observe team dynamics
- Keep your office door open when you're not in a confidential conversation
- Show up at company events – not just when you have to 'host,' but to participate

When people see you as part of the team rather than the person who only shows up when something's wrong, they're more likely to come to you early with concerns, ideas, and feedback.

Build Relationships Intentionally (first 90 days)

You can't be effective in HR without relationships; policies don't work without buy-in, change doesn't happen without trust., and trust doesn't happen without genuine human connection.

In your first three months, prioritize relationship-building as much as you prioritize the HR tasks and compliance work! These connections will determine how quickly you can move, how much influence you have, and whether people see HR as helpful or as an obstacle.

Relationship-Building Actions (Months 1-3)

- Schedule 1:1 meetings with all department heads: Ask about their challenges, what's working, what's frustrating them, and what they need from HR
- Attend each department's team meeting: Introduce yourself, explain what HR does (and doesn't do), and invite questions
- Have informal coffee chats with employees across levels: Not formal interviews - just conversations to understand their experience
- Shadow employees in different roles: Spend a few hours experiencing what they do - customer service, production line, sales calls
- Make yourself approachable: Respond quickly to emails, say yes to informal drop-ins, be present and engaged
- Get involved in the business: Ask to join cross-functional projects, operational reviews, or strategy sessions

The goal isn't to be everyone's best friend. It's to be seen as a real person who understands the work, respects the challenges, and genuinely wants to help the organization succeed.

You don't need to be overly formal, emotionally detached, or perpetually 'on message.' You're allowed to have a personality. You're allowed to laugh. You're allowed to admit when you don't know something. People connect with authenticity; that doesn't mean oversharing or getting too casual - it means being genuine, approachable, and human.

And when you invest in relationships early, everything else gets easier. Managers are more likely to come to you before making a bad decision, employees feel comfortable raising concerns, and leaders see you as a strategic partner, not just a policy enforcer.

You'll still need to know your compliance stuff cold. You'll still need systems and processes. But those things only work when people trust the person behind them. And trust starts with how you show up - open, engaged, and genuinely interested in helping the organization thrive.

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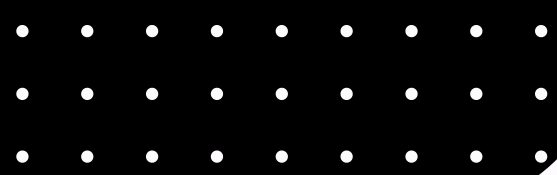
Remember...
Compliance and core infrastructure aren't glamorous, but they're non-negotiable. Only after these are solid can you focus on strategy.

Your first quarter (30 - 90 days) is about stabilizing the basics and identifying risk. You're not redesigning culture or implementing enterprise-level performance systems yet - you're making sure the organization can operate legally, consistently, and without catastrophic surprises.

Compliance: The Non-Negotiable Checklist

This is where you start. Conduct a compliance review to identify gaps and pay particular attention to high-risk areas first. Start withL

- Audit wage and hour compliance: Verify minimum wage, overtime rules, FLSA classifications (exempt vs. non-exempt) and exempt pay minimums
- Confirm required postings: Federal and state labor law posters must be displayed and current
- Review I-9 compliance: Ensure all I-9s are completed correctly and stored securely
- Establish record retention protocols: Know what to keep, for how long, and where (personnel files, benefits docs, performance records)
- Create an offboarding process: Final paychecks, benefits continuation (COBRA), equipment return, exit interviews
- Review or develop templates to have on hand: workplace injuries, harassment complaints, leave requests (FMLA, ADA), sudden departures
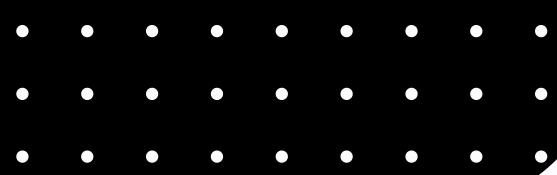
Employee Handbook: Make It Clear, Make It Compliant

If the organization doesn't have a handbook, create one. If it does, audit it. Your handbook should cover policies, expectations, and procedures in language that employees will actually read - not legalese that puts people to sleep.

Essential Sections
- Equal employment opportunity, anti-harassment, and anti-discrimination policies
- Attendance, punctuality, and time-off policies
- Code of conduct, confidentiality, and technology use
- Complaint procedures and reporting mechanisms
- At-will employment disclaimer (if applicable in your state)

Leverage Technology: Automate the Admin

You cannot manually manage payroll, benefits, and employee data in spreadsheets and expect to scale. If the organization does not yet have one, invest in an integrated HRIS/Payroll system that automates administrative tasks and frees you up for higher-level work.

Key Features to Prioritize
- Payroll integration and tax compliance
- Benefits enrollment and tracking
- Time and attendance tracking
- Employee self-service portal
- Document storage and e-signatures

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Months 3 to 6: Building Scalable Systems

With compliance under control, you can shift focus to building infrastructure that supports growth. This phase is about refining processes, establishing frameworks, and training managers to do their jobs well.

Recruitment Strategy: Attraction, Selection, Onboarding

Your hiring process should be efficient, fair, and legally compliant. Streamline workflows, leverage technology, and train hiring managers to make better decisions.

Key Actions
- Audit employer brand and recruitment messaging
- Standardize job descriptions and interview guides
- Develop decision matrices and clear hiring criteria
- Implement an Applicant Tracking System (ATS) or sourcing tools
- Train hiring managers on interviewing, evaluation, and unconscious bias
- Create a structured onboarding process (Day 1, Week 1, Month 1)

Compensation & Benefits: Get Clear on Philosophy

Compensation doesn't have to be complex, but it does need to be intentional. Define your philosophy, benchmark against the market, and create transparency around pay decisions.

Key Actions
- Develop and communicate your compensation philosophy
- Create a basic matrix of job titles, grades, and salary ranges
- Define criteria for transfers, promotions, and salary adjustments
- Review benefits against market data; ensure ACA/ERISA compliance
- Manage open enrollment efficiently; coordinate with brokers or carriers

Months 3 to 6: Building Scalable Systems

Performance Management: Keep It Simple, Keep It Effective

Avoid over-engineering performance systems. Establish a manageable review cycle (annual or semi-annual) and supplement with frequent, informal check-ins for continuous feedback.

Key Actions

• Design a review cycle that drives growth without administrative burden
• Implement continuous feedback mechanisms (monthly or quarterly check-ins)
• Train managers on coaching employees, giving effective feedback and managing and documenting performance issues

Months 6 to 12: Strategic Integration

By mid-year, you should be transitioning from reactive firefighting to proactive strategy. This is when you start shaping culture, strengthening the environment that promotes engagement, and using data to inform decisions.

Employee Relations & Conflict Resolution

Create frameworks for addressing workplace issues before they escalate. Train managers to handle difficult conversations and document consistently.

- Have an established framework for addressing complaints, conflicts, and performance issues
- Coach managers so they can effectively lead difficult conversations with empathy and clarity
- Focus on pro-ative employee relations practices designed to prevent issues by building trust, open communication, and engagement

Employee Engagement & Culture

Engagement isn't about pizza parties - it's about creating conditions where people can do their best work. Implement feedback mechanisms and close gaps between stated values and actual behavior.

- Continuously gather feedback such as the use of short, targeted pulse surveys (quarterly or semi-annually)
- Consider what types of recognition programs align with your values and desired culture
- Work with leadership to close gaps between values on the wall and values in action
- Focus on reducing friction in workflows and increasing clarity in company communication

Months 6 to 12: Strategic Integration

Training & Development: Compliance First, Growth Second

Prioritize legally required training (anti-harassment, safety) before rolling out leadership development programs. Once compliance is covered, create Individual Development Plans (IDPs) for key staff and considr succession planning.

- Ensure all employees complete legally required training such as anti-harassment, safety, etc.
- Explore skills development in key areas required by the business such as operational enhancements or AI and technology training
- Develop training for managers on coaching, feedback, hiring, decision making, problem resolution, and other skills
- Create simple Individual Development Plans (IDPs) for managers and high-potential employees

One Year Milestone

The Strategic HR Roadmap: Planning for Growth

By the end of your first year, you should be transitioning from reactive problem-solver to strategic business partner. This means using data not just to report what happened, but to forecast what's coming and advocate for the resources needed to get there. Start tracking the metrics that matter to **your** organization which could be turnover rates, time-to-fill, cost-per-hire, employee satisfaction, absenteeism patterns .. or something else entirely! Use this data to tell compelling stories to leadership about workforce trends, capacity gaps, and the ROI of HR investments.

Build your internal ecosystem by identifying and training HR champions - team leads and managers who can extend your reach and influence across the organization. Establish a trusted relationship with an employment attorney for the complex issues that will inevitably arise, because knowing when to escalate is just as important as knowing how to handle things yourself.

At this stage, your value isn't measured by how many policies you've written or how efficiently you process paperwork. It's measured by how well you've positioned HR as a driver of business outcomes - helping leadership make smarter decisions about talent, anticipating risks before they materialize, and creating the organizational capacity needed to scale
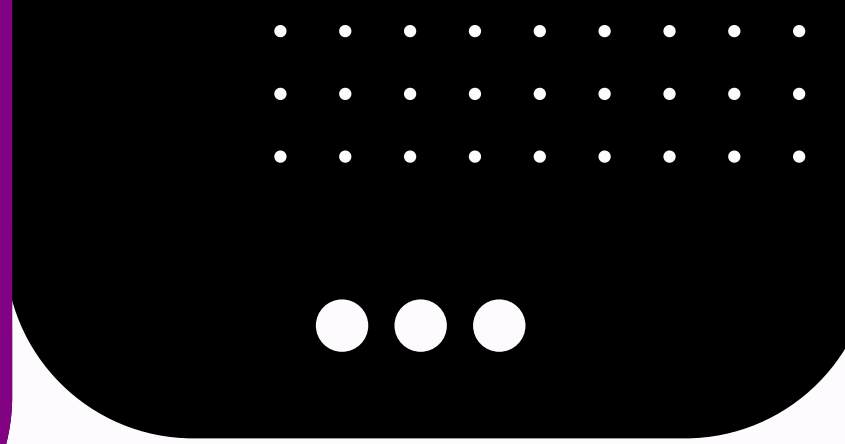
Final Thoughts

Being an HR Department of One is demanding, but it's also an incredible opportunity to shape how work happens. You won't get everything perfect. You'll make compromises. And some days, you'll wonder if you're making any impact at all.

But the work you do - clarifying expectations, resolving conflicts, building systems that treat people with dignity - has a ripple effect across the entire organization. You're not just "managing HR" - you're creating the conditions for people to do their best work. You're building something real and something important.

So stay focused, stay human, and don't forget to take care of yourself along the way!