

So, Human Resources Is Making You Miserable?

Get in line behind the H.R. managers themselves, who say that since the pandemic, the job has become an exasperating ordeal. “People hate us,” one said.



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By David Segal
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Show of hands: Who’s fed up with human resources?

Maybe you’re irked by the endless flow of memos and forms, many of which need to be filled out, pronto. Maybe you’re irritated by new initiatives that regularly emerge from H.R., which never seems to run out of new initiatives, not all of them necessary or especially wise, in your opinion. Or you’ve got some problem with management and you don’t trust that H.R. representatives will actually help. They sure are friendly, but they get paid by the suits. In a crunch, it’s pretty clear whose side they are on.

The H.R. department bugs a lot of employees and managers, and it seems to have more detractors than ever since the pandemic began. That’s when H.R. began to administer rules about remote work and pay transparency, programs to improve diversity, equity and inclusion and everything else that has rattled and changed the workplace in the last four years.

But if the H.R. department is bothering you, here's a fact you might find perversely consoling: You are not as aggravated or bummed out as the people who work in H.R.

That was obvious at Unleash, an annual three-day conference and expo held this year at Caesars Forum, an immense convention hall near the Las Vegas Strip. In May, the event brought together some 4,000 H.R. professionals from across the country. It was billed as a place where "global H.R. leaders come to do business and discover inspirational stories."

It was more like a place where the H.R. department came to complain.

"Everything feels like a fool's errand," said Kyle Lagunas, a former H.R. executive at General Motors who now works at Aptitude Research, an H.R. advisory company based in Boston. He had just finished a highly animated presentation about H.R. tech in front of an audience of about 50 people. Now he sat in the designated media room and ranted a bit about the maddening challenges of running H.R. during and after the tumult of the pandemic.



Kyle Lagunas, who works at an H.R. advisory company, said the pandemic transformed a difficult job into an almost impossible one. Credit...David Degner for The New York Times

"For years, we have been fighting fires with cans of gasoline," he said. "And now, here we are, after literally giving everything we could, and it's like: 'Oh, thanks for everything, but'" — and here's the G-rated version, get lost — "Don't make too much work for me. I'm not going to dot those I's and cross those T's. I'm the business, and you're H.R."

Part of the frustration is that office behavior post-Covid has become notably less civil, which means that H.R. is being called in far more often to referee disputes. Everyone at Unleash had a story about explaining basic etiquette to boorish colleagues. No, you can't microwave fish at lunch. Stop cutting your toenails on your desk.

Don't bring a gun to the office.

"That happened at the company where I used to work," said Vanessa Castillo, a longtime H.R. executive based in Florida, who was speaking over the din of a

speakeasy-themed bar in the Cosmopolitan, a hotel. She said a woman “who was processing a breakup with someone at the office,” brought the weapon. Ms. Castillo sent the employee home, then called the police, concerned that she might return in a lethal rage. The employee was laid off and cops were stationed in the parking lot for a week.

H.R. knows that employees and managers are annoyed by its memos, by its processes, by just about anything that interrupts life as it was. When an email is sent nudging everyone to take that 45-minute online course in, say, data security, H.R. can almost hear the eye rolls.

That said, don’t expect apologies. The consensus at Unleash was that most of these new ideas are designed with the goal of a more equitable workplace; like greater diversity, for instance, or standardized workplace reviews.

So get used to the memos.

Also, while you’re whining, get used to human capital management software programs. A recent Business Insider story, titled [“Everyone Hates Workday,”](#) asked why half of the Fortune 500 uses this particular piece of software — which handles benefits and recruiting and facilitates pay equity analysis — despite creating “mountains of busywork for everyone.”

It’s not the software’s fault, H.R. veterans say. It’s the fault of your company, which hasn’t configured it wisely or trained you adequately. Workday is here to stay, and one Unleash attendee had this bit of advice for its legions of haters: “Buckle up, buttercup.”

Mostly, though, the tone at Unleash was deflated and worn down. Attendees commiserated and bonded at lectures, lunches and after-hours cocktail parties. They grabbed branded freebies like stuffed ferrets from a social media screening company called Ferretly. They ate chocolate-dipped waffles, billed as vegetarian. They watched a “Shark Tank”-like competition between five H.R.-related tech start-ups, all vying for an oversized \$50,000 check.

In quieter settings, attendees lamented the low pay, the churn and the increasing workload. One discussed a work-induced mental breakdown. There was a lot of fretting about artificial intelligence, which seems poised to take jobs on the recruitment side of their business. (A number of vendors at the expo were selling software designed for that very purpose.)

Many H.R. executives have left the field in recent years, or they are looking for better offers. In 2022, LinkedIn found that [H.R. had the highest turnover rate](#) of any job it tracked.

“Everybody hates us,” said Hebba Youssef, the chief people officer at Workweek who has a podcast and a newsletter for H.R. professionals called [“I Hate it Here.”](#) Recent posts have included “Why Does Working in H.R. Feel So Lonely?” and “Everybody Hates Their Jobs Right?”



Ms. Youssef has a podcast and newsletter for H.R. professionals, many of whom are feeling deflated and worn down. Credit...Alyssa Schukar for The New York Times

Ms. Youssef especially bemoaned the mistrust employees feel toward H.R. It's dispiriting, she said, because most people go into the field to be helpful.

“People in H.R. tend to be very compassionate, very empathetic,” she said. “But a lot of employees look at us as inherently evil.”

Let's 'Humanize' the Company

The H.R. department was born more than a century ago, and it had an unlikely father. John Henry Patterson was the founder of the National Cash Register Company of Dayton, Ohio, which pioneered mass production of a newfangled money tabulating machine. Mr. Patterson had a Monopoly Man mustache and a ruthless streak. He was so fond of predatory pricing that in 1912, he was convicted of violations of the Sherman Antitrust Act and sentenced to a year in prison. (His conviction was overturned on appeal.)

He took a warmer approach to his 5,400 employees. Eventually. After customers in England returned \$50,000 worth of faulty machines to the Dayton factory, he had a revelation. Mr. Patterson concluded that his workers didn't care about the quality of the company's products because they assumed that he didn't care about them.

He changed tactics overnight, according to his [1922 obituary in The New York Times](#). He moved his desk to the factory floor and took other measures to “humanize” the company, as The Times put it. National Cash Register offered benefits like day care and lunchtime entertainment at the company cafeteria.

“It was initially known as ‘welfare work’ because it was employers demonstrating an interest in the welfare of workers,” said Gary Hoover, executive director of the

American Business History Center in Tyler, Texas. After World War II, when the model of lifetime employment became the norm, the job was to ensure that workers stuck around.

“That starts to fade in the 1980-1981 recession,” said Peter Cappelli, a professor of management at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. “Companies were facing an existential threat from Japan, which was building better cars, better steel. Executives started laying off people and, in downsizing mode, you don’t care too much about keeping employees happy.”

By then, “personnel department” had been rebranded as “human resources.”

“The idea was to stop thinking of employees as people that needed to be taken care of,” said Professor Cappelli. “People became resources, assets like any other, like machinery. The priority wasn’t to help people. It was to help the business.”

The question of the H.R. department’s priorities and purpose has festered ever since. When the #MeToo reckoning began, many wondered why H.R. hadn’t forestalled many of the worst misdeeds with timely, forceful interventions. Critics contend that the department’s first mission has long been the quiet and smooth operation of a company, and before the epidemic of sexual harassment became a national scandal, that often meant quashing conflicts.



Vanessa Castillo once had to de-escalate a situation in which an employee brought a gun to the office. Credit...Octavio Jones for The New York Times

More recently, H.R. has been in charge of dealing with the fallout of epochal events. When offices closed down because of Covid, H.R. administered remote work rules, which kept evolving as back-to-work dates were repeatedly pushed into the future. Tens of millions of U.S. workers quit their jobs starting in 2021 in what became known as the Great Resignation. H.R. found replacements. When diversity, equity and inclusion programs were mandated by upper management in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, which brought renewed efforts to address racial disparities, H.R. had yet another mission.

Some of these missions have since changed, yet again. Tiffany Lee worked in the recruitment department of Zoom, the teleconferencing company, which she joined in

October 2020, as remote work was taking off and the software soared in popularity. Zoom was one of many companies that launched a D.E.I. initiative after the summer of racial justice protests, and Ms. Lee was part of the team in H.R. that pitched it to potential hires.

But by late last year, a D.E.I. backlash was in full swing. Zoom and other companies — Meta and Alphabet included — scaled back their programs. For Zoom, that meant dismantling much of its internal team. Ms. Lee and others were laid off.

“There just wasn’t any value put on the work that I was doing,” she said.

(A spokeswoman for Zoom said in a statement that the company remains committed to D.E.I.: “We continue to partner with leading external experts to help inform our D.E.I. programs and ensure we are utilizing best practices.”)

Other jobs in the H.R. portfolio have not changed so much as multiplied. There are now so many workplace grievances that companies are calling in outside counsel to investigate more and more internal complaints, producing a robust source of billable hours at law firms.

One of those firms is Ogletree Deakins, which has offices in 32 states. After the start of the pandemic, so many corporate clients hired the firm to conduct internal investigations that in 2021 it created a dedicated practice group. Since then, the group has doubled its head count to 50 lawyers, from 25.

Many are looking into complaints by low-level H.R. employees against ones at higher levels.

Yes, the H.R. department wants help investigating itself.

“Let’s say you’ve got employees who are complaining that there are systemic inequities, that there’s unconscious bias, that harassment is running rampant,” said Monique Gougisha Doucette, an Ogletree partner in the investigations department. “You typically go to H.R., but if your H.R. well is tainted from the top, then you can’t do anything about it. Because you think the H.R. function is ultimately a sham.”

Nobody at Unleash described H.R. in those terms, but many struggle with the divided allegiances that are built into the department’s design. They also bristle at the invisibility of their best work. When H.R. lays off employees word gets around. When H.R. prevents layoffs, nobody knows.

“It’s a thankless job,” said Mr. Lagunas, of Aptitude. “That’s why we come to conferences like this.”

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/03/business/human-resources-professionals-workplace.html>

How many people have I heard lambaste HR: “Worst waste of skin on the planet!” When my sympathies have been aroused in defense of “good people just trying to do a job caught in the middle” HR has then turned on me proving its detractors right. It is a talented and special person who can manage an HR career honorably. It makes one wonder about people who slide into such roles easily and play out a career in them.

Someone pointed out the bitter meaning of changing “Personnel” (People) to “Human Resources” (just another kind of “resource” like dirt or ore to be mined and discarded).

How people who never really venture out of their offices or ever “got dirty” at work are supposed to speak credibly and dictate to people in the workplace doing the grunt work dealing with the unpleasant realities, defies rationalization. At least a Safety officer or Superintendent or supervisor should have experience on the ground in that workplace and thereby have the credibility to take the lead in establishing and enforcing standards—with the people above them in the hierarchy still holding them accountable, and without imposing nonsense just to make themselves and the corporation look good or “progressive” to the ignorant or indifferent investor.

“Investors,” and all that have come with it, have become the curse of our world. No matter a venture’s virtues, the more profits it makes for investors (contributing nothing else), the better it is. It might be the best idea to have ever come along, but if other lesser initiatives yield more dividends, all investment will flow to them. That is why government was invented, to do these things the wealthy will not, but Government has been so undermined and derided that most people think it cannot do anything competently anymore (*if it ever could* is the feeling we have been left with).

I remember an ambitious, good-hearted young teacher being recruited to become Director of a very challenging school division. He was in no way prepared for such a role, but for political, public image, local-boy-making-good-example reasons was destined to get it now. To counter his obvious gaping inexperience, in the interview he held up the Division policy manual assuring the (flummoxed) Board he would “always know what to do.” Perhaps just what a Board wanted to hear, but anyone with a stake in the school workplace could only groan, shake their head, and worry about what was to come. I do not know how badly bent-out of shape my friend became, but I believe that after decades he is still in the role, and I’m sure he is much wiser.

You cannot reduce everything to “policy” and “rules” that anyone can come from outside and impose competently. People don’t fit those categories so easily, and it is the inhuman corporate fallacy to insist that they can and/or must be governed so. If a beginner teacher asked me about “classroom rules,” my response was “make very good rules, but absolutely no more than necessary. It is living, breathing children you teach, and much as they need rules, they have spirits not to be squelched.”

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