

What Does HR Actually Do? 11 Key Responsibilities

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HR might be the most confusing department in your whole organization—everyone knows they're important, but very few employees know why.

So what does HR do?

There's a massive difference between a healthy human resources department that contributes to the growth of the organization and a distant HR that exists somewhere near the basement archives and only pops up once a year for the company holiday party.

Here's an in-depth description of what the HR department does (or what they should be doing) to meet the needs of employees. To make sure your company has an exceptional HR department, see that it's meeting these suggestions.

What is an HR department?

In simplest terms, the HR (Human Resources) department is a group who is responsible for managing the [employee life cycle](#) (i.e., recruiting, hiring, onboarding, training, and firing employees) and administering employee benefits.

What does human resources do?

Ask any employee what an HR department is, and you'll get an answer that primarily deals with the most uncomfortable aspects of work: HR violations, layoffs, and firing. But the truth is that human resources is there to support employees. It's quite literally a resource for humans.

Here are some of the tasks your HR department is busy completing every day.

1. Recruit candidates

HR needs to understand the organization's needs and make sure those needs are met when recruiting for new positions. It's not as simple as just throwing an ad up on Indeed: you'll need to analyze the market, consult stakeholders, and manage budgets.

Then, once the role is advertised, more research needs to be done to make sure that the right candidates are being attracted and presented. Recruiting is a massive—and costly—undertaking; the right candidate can revitalize an entire organization, but the wrong candidate can upend operations.

2. Hire the right employees

Human resources is in charge of arranging interviews, coordinating hiring efforts, and onboarding new employees. They're also in charge of making sure all paperwork involved with hiring someone is filled out and making sure that everything from the first day to each subsequent day is navigated successfully.

3. Process payroll

Payroll is its own beast. Every payday must have taxes calculated and hours collected. Expenses need to be reimbursed and raises and bonuses need to be added in as well. If you think it's a chore doing taxes just

once a year, imagine what it must be like to be in HR and make sure they're properly deducted every pay period.

4. Conduct disciplinary actions

This responsibility may be why HR tends to get a bad rap. When navigated inappropriately, disciplinary actions can lead to the loss of a valuable employee and can even result in litigation or a poor reputation.

But when handled appropriately, disciplinary action can result in the success of an employee.

For instance, if a company notices that a particular employee is routinely late and continues being late even after the employee has received several warnings, HR could step in and investigate the reason for the tardiness. It may be an opportunity to extend benefits such as counseling to the employee or offer additional resources to help the employee learn to be on time. Instead of taking on the cost of firing and then recruiting a replacement for that employee, it could be a learning opportunity that could enhance that employee's career.

On the other hand, sometimes disciplinary action isn't the best course to take and an employee should be let go. The best human resources departments know when an employee isn't the right fit for a company and would be happier somewhere else. Often, it's in the employee's best interest to be let go, as difficult as it seems in the moment. It's up to HR to develop a strong enough relationship with managers and employees alike to identify the cohesiveness and health of a team.

5. Update policies

Policies need to be updated (or at least examined) every year as the organization changes. It's HR's job to make official updates to policies and to suggest changes to policies when they no longer serve the company or the employees. Sometimes a policy should be updated as a reaction to an occurrence. HR should always be included in and consulted with regarding these decisions.

6. Maintain employee records

Maintaining HR records is mandated by law. These records help employers identify skill gaps to help with the hiring process and to analyze demographic data and comply with regulations. They also contain personal details and emergency contacts for each employee.

7. Conduct benefit analysis

Staying competitive is of prime importance when trying to attract the best talent. A promising recruit may choose a different company with lesser pay if the benefits are more attractive. HR should routinely investigate similar companies to see if their benefits are compatible. For instance, your organization may consider including pet insurance in its list of benefits (because let's be real: pets can have a major effect on the happiness of your employees).

How does HR support employees?

Besides the seven examples above, which are mostly operational responsibilities, HR provides less quantitative functions: It exists to help employees thrive.

After all, employees are the single biggest asset to any organization. It follows, then, that protecting their well-being is of utmost importance. Here are four ways HR helps support the emotional and career needs of employees:

1. Providing career growth

Stagnation is bad for business, and it's smart to keep your best employees with the company. HR can provide career paths to help guide each employee to a long future within the company. HR can then check in periodically to further guide employees on their career paths.

2. Offering continuing education

Sometimes the career growth mentioned above requires additional training. Your organization may provide educational assistance, and HR can help determine which classes and training programs would be best for an employee on his or her designated career path. HR can also work with managers to ensure that the employee's work schedule is flexible enough to allow the employee to attend classes.

3. Training and supporting managers

Managers aren't born. They're created. HR can help provide management guidance to managers, making sure that department and teams are as healthy and functional as possible. This may include periodically sending managers to formal trainings and retreats.

4. Supporting health and wellness

It's important to remember that employees are people. They'll need help weathering mental illness, health issues, debt, pregnancies, adoption, and myriad other life occurrences. HR can help support employees through any of these and other circumstances.

When to contact human resources

An HR department that never interacts with employees isn't doing its job. While you're developing an onboarding procedure, educate new employees on when to reach out to HR and what resources HR has to offer. The HR department should regularly schedule one-on-one interviews with employees to check in on their career progression, comfort in their roles, and any other issues the employee may be having. Considering these responsibilities, employees should feel comfortable reaching out to their HR departments in these, and similar, situations:

- When you (or a co-worker) experience harassment or discrimination from your colleagues, including your manager
- When you have questions about benefits, including company-provided health insurance, or rights guaranteed by law
- When your personal circumstances change (e.g. having a child, needing to reduce your hours, needing accommodation for a disability)
- When you have questions about advancing at the company, including opportunities to shadow other employees or participate in additional training
- When you need an objective third-party to work through a work-related issue

Building the best HR department

The human resources department heavily contributes to a company's culture: If HR is toxic, employees will be discouraged and less likely to consult HR for help, either with career-related issues or personal ones. However, if HR genuinely cares about the well-being of employees, the culture will be one of openness and growth. Oh, and want to make your employees even happier? Offer pet insurance and 6-month maternity leave.