

Small Business In A Sea of Big People Issues



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Small Business In A Sea of Big People Issues

How can smaller businesses adopt broader HR functions to add value to their organisations? Many often feel like they're sinking, overwhelmed in a sea of people challenges but adopting a proactive HR approach, even in an SME environment can strengthen people processes, reduce risk, and boost team performance.

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AAB

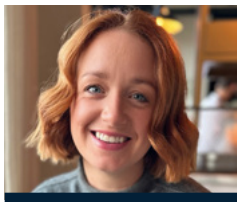
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September 2026



Welcome to the September 2026 issue of Hr NETWORK Magazine. As always at this time of year, anticipation and excitement are building for the annual Hr NETWORK National Awards Gala Dinner 2026, taking place in Glasgow this November.

Planning is well underway and, once again, we expect the event to be fully sold out well ahead of the big night at the Hilton Glasgow on Thursday 12th November.

All finalists have now been informed and will progress to the next stage of judging, which includes interviews with our expert judging panel in mid-September. The winners will, of course, be revealed at the Gala Dinner in November.

We remain committed to everyone who has taken the time to enter and come through our judging process, particularly those who have not been shortlisted this year. It may not always be visible, but we invest considerable time in speaking with and supporting entrants who have not progressed, with countless calls

and emails offering feedback, encouragement and reassurance to those who may wish to enter again next year.

We are deeply grateful to our sponsors for their unwavering support, and to the many organisations that have already secured their tables for what promises to be another exceptional evening.

A very special thank you must also go to our outstanding Judging Panel, who dedicate so much of their own time, energy and expertise to what is an incredibly important part of the Awards process.

With only a limited number of tables remaining, we encourage anyone wishing to join us with colleagues, clients and guests to contact the Awards Planning Team as soon as possible. We look forward to welcoming you to what promises to be another unforgettable evening celebrating the very best of Scotland's people and organisations.

This Issue

In this issue, Andy Moore explores the important role HR practice plays within SMEs and the support available to line managers dealing with the increasingly complex world of people management.

For many non-HR professionals, keeping pace with constantly changing employment legislation, policies and best practice can feel challenging, particularly when they find themselves dealing with difficult or unexpected people issues. The good news is that support is available, and Andy explores some of the practical ways SMEs and their managers can navigate these challenges with greater confidence.

You'll also find our regular features, including Stats and The Bookshop, alongside a wide range of Insight articles exploring some of the most topical issues in people management, workplace culture and professional development today.

As always, we hope you enjoy this issue.

Lee Turner
Publisher

Contributors: Natalie O'Hare,
Zoe Lewis, Crispin Read,
Claire Hawes, Triton Security

Women build tighter workplace friendships than men, according to new research

Researchers have found women were more likely to befriend a friend of a friend, creating larger workplace cliques and friendship groups. These 'friend of a friend' relationships were more likely to be reciprocated and with other women. Men, by contrast, tended not to form friend of a friend work friendships, which suggests they make friends with people they see they can benefit from being close to.

These findings come from research by Andrew Parker, Professor in Leadership at Durham University Business School, alongside colleagues from William and Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business and Università della Svizzera Italiana, who wanted to understand how female friendships differed compared to male friendships in the workplace.

The results showed that female workers were much more likely to create tighter connections in the workplace with other women, which suggests they focused less on what they could get out of the relationship, and more just on the friendship. Men, on the other hand, appeared to be more selective in their friendships, having specific one-to-one friendships with other men in their workplace – especially when they see that relationship as beneficial to their goals. "Creating friendships at work is vital for employee

morale, support and also productivity – with studies showing that people who have a close friendship at work are more likely to be engaged in their work, more productive and more innovative," says Professor Parker.

"However, our research shows that the impact of friendships at work differs when it comes to men and women," says Professor Parker. "In fact, our research shows that female friendships are often contributing to the stability of an organisation, whereas men's friendships are more focused on their own benefits."

The researchers say that how women and men see workplace relationships could be contributing towards the gender pay gap – with women's friendships offering less networking, resources and influence, whilst men's friendships are likely seeing them receive preferential treatment, given the intentionality of those friendships.

The researchers suggest that organisations should try to increase the opportunities that all workers have to network and improve their relationships with everyone in the company – so that everyone has an equal opportunity to build friendships with people for mutually beneficial opportunities.



Health and wellbeing more important than salary in recruitment and retention for 44% of companies

Supporting the health and wellbeing of staff is the most important factor for recruitment and retention of talent, according to new figures released by the employee benefits experts at Everywhen. Health and wellbeing support was classed as the most important factor by 44% of employers, similar to, and indeed slightly above, salary levels (43%), revealing the magnitude of the value placed on workplace health and wellbeing.

Looking in greater detail at the research, the health and wellbeing programmes offered by UK companies are seen as being more important to employee retention than to recruitment. Indeed, 39% of employers said that the way they support the health and wellbeing of employees is a key reason people stay with the company.

Moreover, employers are using health and wellbeing support strategically, with over a third (34%) stating that it helps them to recruit and retain key demographics of staff, for example, by age and gender. With the value that health and wellbeing support adds, it is a good idea for employers to actively promote what support they offer. Internal promotion will assist with retention of talent, whilst external promotion should be considered for recruitment.

Larger companies place greater emphasis on health and wellbeing to help them recruit and retain talent, whereas SMEs rely more on salary. However, as SMEs often need to compete with their larger counterparts for talent, they may have even more to gain if they look after their staff, and they may find this is a more cost-effective way to attract and retain talent than having to increase salaries.

New research reveals work experience can cut a young person's risk of becoming NEET by 80% as experts warn Britain faces a 'lost generation'

More than one million young people in the UK are currently not in education, employment or training (NEET), while almost half of teenagers say they are uncertain about their future careers. Now a major new study has found that meaningful engagement with employers before the age of 16 can dramatically improve life chances, with young people who experience high levels of employer engagement being 80% less likely to become NEET than their peers.

The report comes at a critical moment. Former Cabinet Minister Alan Milburn recently warned of a potential "lost generation" of young people, while OECD research shows

that 46% of UK teenagers are uncertain about their future career options – almost double the figure recorded in 2018 and among the highest rates in the developed world.

The report argues that while work experience and employer engagement can play a transformative role in improving young people's prospects, access to these opportunities remains deeply unequal.

New research commissioned for the report found that 81% of work experience placements are currently arranged by young people or their families, meaning access is often determined by personal networks rather than need.

The findings raise significant questions about how the Government's commitment to guarantee every secondary school pupil two weeks of work experience will be delivered fairly and effectively.

The report sets out four potential options for government, education leaders and employers to consider, ranging from targeted support for disadvantaged young people through to a more ambitious national approach that combines careers education, employer engagement and work experience within a coherent system.

Education and Employers argues that the cost of getting this wrong will far outweigh the investment required to get it right. One of the report's authors estimates that each young person who becomes NEET costs the public purse approximately £54,000 over their lifetime.



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Whyte & Mackay appoints Kirsten Hilton as Global HR Director

Whyte & Mackay has appointed experienced HR leader Kirsten Hilton as its new Global HR Director, succeeding Fiona Gibson following her distinguished and highly respected career with the premium spirits producer.

Kirsten joins Whyte & Mackay from Chivas Brothers, where she spent more than three-and-a-half years as HR Director for Operations. She also brings extensive senior HR leadership experience from the defence and aerospace sectors, having held leadership positions with Thales and Rolls-Royce.

Her appointment marks the beginning of a new chapter for Whyte & Mackay's global people strategy, with Hilton taking responsibility for leading the organisation's HR agenda and supporting the continued development of its people, culture and organisational capability across the business.

Welcoming the appointment, Whyte & Mackay CEO, Michael Sloan said: "Kirsten's blend of strategic HR expertise and deep understanding of the premium drinks sector will be invaluable as the business continues to invest in its people and drive sustainable growth.

Working closely with leadership teams across the organisation, Kirsten will help shape the company's evolving people agenda, strengthen organisational



capability and ensure colleagues continue to thrive as Whyte & Mackay builds on its position as one of Scotland's leading premium spirits businesses.

Commenting on her appointment, Kirsten Hilton said: "I'm very excited to have joined Whyte & Mackay and am looking forward to getting started. It's a privilege to join a business with such a strong reputation, brilliant brands and talented teams. I'm excited to meet colleagues across the organisation and to start working together with them to build on the company's success and to shape an exciting future."

Is the UK set for a wave of AI correction recruitment?

The UK could be on track for a wave of AI correction recruitment as employers reassess workforce decisions made in response to artificial intelligence and begin rehiring for roles where human expertise remains essential. That's according to global talent solutions and business consulting firm, Robert Half.

The trend is already emerging in North America, highlighted by high-profile examples across various industries. Robert Half research found 32% of U.S. hiring managers and 34% of Canadian hiring managers who eliminated a role primarily because of AI later rehired for the same or a similar position. The top factors influencing rehiring were that AI required more human oversight and quality control than expected, the need

for relationship management skills and institutional knowledge or context AI can't replace, and risk or compliance concerns without human expertise.

With North American workforce trends often serving as a bellwether for the UK labour market, employers on this side of the Atlantic could soon face similar correction recruitment activity as businesses refine how AI and people work together.

There are already signs this shift may be taking shape. New Robert Half research found that UK professionals spend nearly one-third (31%) of the time they use generative AI checking accuracy and refining the final deliverables, underscoring the continued importance of human judgement when implementing AI into workflows.

As recruitment activity accelerates, employers that moved too aggressively towards AI-led workforce strategies could find themselves at a disadvantage. The challenge is no longer choosing between technology and talent, but determining the right balance between them.

UK employers having to take a more strategic approach to company car policies as tax, transparency and electrification pressures intensify

UK employers are having to rethink company car and mobility policies as rising costs, evolving tax rules, electrification and increasing expectations around reward transparency make traditional approaches harder to sustain.

According to the latest Company Car survey by WTW 44% of companies in the UK intend to review their company car policy within the next 12 months.

The research found company cars remain one of the most visible and valued elements of total rewards, but the benefit is becoming increasingly complex for employers to design, govern and justify. In the UK, where company

car tax is closely linked to vehicle emissions and electric vehicle adoption is being accelerated by government policy, organisations must balance cost control, employee expectations, sustainability goals and fairness considerations.

The UK is among the leading markets for electric company car adoption, with electric vehicles increasing from 18% of fleets in 2024 to 47% in 2026. As electrification reshapes the UK company car landscape, a third (30%) of companies reviewing their policies say they intend to introduce more environmentally friendly policies or behaviours, while 27% expect to do so by introducing more environmentally friendly cars, increasing the company car benefit budget per employee or changing the makes and models allocated.

The challenge is becoming more pressing as employers review reward structures against a backdrop of pay transparency, gender pay gap reporting and wider scrutiny of how benefits are allocated across different employee groups.

The future of corporate mobility is unlikely to be defined by a simple choice between company cars and cash allowances. Instead, employers will need more flexible frameworks that can combine company vehicles, allowances, public transport support, shared mobility, cycling schemes and broader mobility budgets, depending on business need, employee preference and local infrastructure.

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The majority of UK HR & business leaders aren't actively maintaining their brand

Almost two-thirds of business leaders (60%) don't regularly re-evaluate or refine their branding and designs, a decision that risks weakening brand relevance in a fast-changing consumer landscape with rapid shifts in digital behaviour and visual trends. New research from Adobe Acrobat surveyed 350 UK leaders to uncover how much attention they are paying to their branding and design, the approach they take when designing brand assets, and how confident they feel in their existing branding.

Despite the lack of attention they are giving to their branding, only 12% believe their designs are strong enough to remain unchanged. The biggest blockers are capability and time. One in six (15%) don't know how to re-evaluate their branding, and a further 10% say they are too busy or don't see it as a priority.

Most business leaders know their branding needs improvement but lack the practical tools and confidence to act on it, and two pain points stand out.

Almost one in five (18%) admit their biggest branding weakness is social media visuals, and another 18% say consistency across platforms is where their branding weaknesses lie, when inconsistent or outdated visuals can dilute digital performance.

Branding strengths are the same for many businesses, with as few as 5% thinking tone of voice is their biggest weakness, suggesting businesses feel more confident in their verbal identity but struggle to translate that into compelling, consistent visuals.

Many businesses recognise their weaknesses but lack the time or resources to address them, and Adobe Acrobat has shared their top tips for mastering and maintaining branding and design.



Amey brings students together for national STEM finale to inspire future female engineers

Amey marked International Women in Engineering Day by bringing together students from across the UK for the final of its We Solve It STEM initiative, aimed at inspiring girls and young women to consider careers in engineering.

The national finale, took place in Birmingham on 23 June, uniting the winners of a series of regional heats. It forms part of Amey's wider commitment to developing future skills, showcasing the breadth of opportunities for women in engineering and supporting a more diverse talent pipeline.

Students from Trinity St Edward's School in Barnsley, and Oakwood Academy in Nottingham took part in the event, working in teams to tackle a real-world design challenge.

Throughout the day, participants collaborated on the theme "a city I'd want to live in", developing innovative ideas before presenting their concepts to a panel of women in senior engineering and technical roles at Amey.

The event also featured interactive sessions with Amey's early careers team, including an AI-focused workshop and a panel discussion with female leaders from across the business, offering students valuable insight into career pathways in STEM and engineering. Reflecting on the day, Scarlett, a Year 9 pupil, said: "today has inspired me as a girl to go into a male dominated field."

Emily Davies, ESG Director for Amey, said: "It is fantastic to see young girls developing such creative and innovative ideas, it really highlights both their potential and the importance of programmes like this. Initiatives such as We Solve It play a vital role in engaging the next generation and showcasing the range of opportunities available in engineering.

"By connecting students with real role models and real-world challenges, we can help more young women see engineering as an exciting, collaborative and rewarding career path, while continuing to challenge perceptions and inspire the future talent our industry needs."

Global Hiring Reality Check: Employers Pay Up to 58 Weeks' Salary to Exit Staff, New Research Reveals

Employ Borderless has officially released its first ever comprehensive cross-border study benchmarked across 190 countries and territories. The *Termination Cost Index 2026* reveals a stark global disparity in what the law requires an employer to pay when ending an employment relationship, and statutory exit obligations too often represent a significant, unforeseen financial liability for expanding businesses.

An analysis of employment laws across 190 countries by Employ Borderless found that the global median statutory cost for ending an employment relationship stands at 15.3 weeks of salary, or roughly three and a half months' pay. While international hiring strategies predominantly focus on baseline salary and upfront on-boarding costs, the study examined mandatory statutory notice periods and minimum severance pay across global markets. It identified a wide divergence between international jurisdictions, with some nations enforcing heavy financial obligations while others set no statutory minimums at all.

The research highlights clear geographical divisions in the financial cost of redundancy. On a regional level, Asian countries recorded the highest average statutory exit costs, averaging 19.7 weeks of salary across 47 scored nations. By comparison, nine scored countries across Oceania averaged 10.8 weeks. However, Sri Lanka topped the global ranking. Employers making staff redundant in Sri Lanka face statutory exit costs equivalent to 58.5 weeks of salary. This means it is the most expensive country in the world when it comes to dismissing workers, according to Employ Borderless' new international research.

For UK businesses, HR heads, and scaling startups managing distributed, international workforces, the findings highlight stark differences in legal liabilities when reducing headcount abroad compared to managing domestic workforce adjustments, and the critical need to audit international employment structures. Relying on standard UK or US assumptions regarding redundancy policies can create major budget overruns when off-boarding staff in high-protection markets across Europe, Asia, and Latin America.

Siemens colleagues contribute 1,367 volunteering hours across 13 UK locations

Across the UK, Siemens Mobility employees worked side by side with community partners to deliver practical, hands on volunteering activities that created tangible local benefits.

Events were held nationally to encourage employees to volunteer, working with local organisations and partners Community Rail Network, The Conservation Volunteers and Samaritans.

Marko Feulner, CFO and Chair of the Board, Siemens Mobility UK & Ireland, said: "There's something special about seeing our people come together to make a difference. This Spring, over 1,300 hours were volunteered across 13 locations, but what really stands out is the

enthusiasm our people bring to it. Supporting our communities isn't something we do on the side, it's part of who we are. I'm proud of every colleague who gave their time."

In Glasgow, volunteers spent the day at Langloch Farm in Lanark, supporting Clydesdale Community Initiatives (CCI) Scotland. CCI Scotland is an independent charity that helps people facing health, disability, and social challenges to play an active role in their community."

Clydesdale Community Initiative Niall McShannon, Managing Director, said: "The Siemens team were a joy and a pleasure to work with at Langloch, we loved how they got into the spirit of 'Wonky Way' and had great fun working alongside CCI participants to create new features for our nature trail. We hope that the public will have as much fun using the playhouses as our team had making them."

Siemens Mobility is strengthening its commitment to inclusion through its partnership with JAM Card (Just A Minute), enabling people with hidden disabilities to discreetly signal when they need extra time or understanding.



Natalie O'Hare
AAB

For many organisations, the question is not whether trade unions have stronger rights under the Employment Rights Act. The real question is whether your workforce feels sufficiently heard, valued and represented without them.

Much of the discussion around the changes to the Employment Rights Act law has focused on the legal implications for employers. While compliance is important, there is a risk that organisations become so focused on the legislation that they overlook a more important question: what would make employees want greater representation in the first place?

Trade unions rarely gain momentum solely because legal rights change. More often, they gain traction when employees feel disconnected from leadership, frustrated by workplace challenges, or unconvinced that their concerns are genuinely being heard and acted upon. In many cases, increased interest in union representation is a symptom of wider organisational issues rather than the root cause itself.

For HR Directors, business owners and operational leaders, this presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Rather than viewing unionisation solely through a legal lens, organisations should use the current environment as an opportunity to assess the strength of their culture, employee engagement and employee voice.

Looking Beyond the Legislation

Many organisations without a recognised union assume that trade union activity is unlikely to affect them. However, no organisation is immune to the factors that can make employees more receptive to external representation.

Periods of organisational change, economic uncertainty, restructuring, cost pressures and increasing workloads can all contribute to employee dissatisfaction if they are not managed effectively. Likewise, concerns around pay, career progression, management capability or communication can create a perception that employees have little influence over decisions that affect them.

In these circumstances, the appeal of having an independent voice to represent collective concerns becomes stronger.

This does not necessarily mean an organisation has a poor culture. More often, issues develop gradually. Communication becomes less effective, trust in leadership starts to weaken, feedback mechanisms lose credibility, or managers become consumed by operational demands. Whilst each challenge may appear manageable in isolation, together they can create an environment where employees begin looking elsewhere for support and representation.

The Warning Signs Are Often Subtle

One of the greatest risks for employers is assuming they will see union interest developing before it becomes an issue.

In reality, the early warning signs are often the same indicators associated with declining engagement and organisational trust. This might present itself through falling engagement survey scores, reduced participation in feedback initiatives or a noticeable increase in employee turnover. In some organisations, it may be reflected in higher absence levels, growing numbers of grievances, or increased workplace conflict. In others, the warning signs can be less obvious, such as resistance to organisational change, frustration around pay or career progression opportunities, concerns about management capability, or a perception that employee feedback is gathered but rarely results in meaningful action.

Whilst any one of these indicators may not be cause for concern in isolation, patterns should not be ignored. They can highlight a workforce that feels disconnected from decision-making and less confident that concerns will be addressed internally.

For HR teams, these are not simply employee relations challenges. They may also be indicators of broader workforce sentiment that requires attention.

Saying No isn't really an option

Historically, some employers viewed union engagement as something that could simply be resisted or avoided. However, the direction of travel within employment legislation suggests that approach is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain.

The proposed reforms strengthen trade union access rights and place greater emphasis on enabling unions to engage directly with workers. For employers, the conversation is no longer about whether they agree with union involvement. In many circumstances, organisations may be required to facilitate lawful access arrangements, and failing to do so could expose them to huge financial consequences.

The more important question is not whether a union may seek access to your workforce. It is what employees would say if those conversations took place.

Organisations with strong cultures, trusted leadership teams and effective communication channels are likely to be less concerned by increased union access because employees already feel their voices are heard internally. Where employees trust leadership and believe concerns are addressed fairly, external representation may be seen as less necessary.

By contrast, organisations that have struggled to maintain engagement, communication or trust may find employees more receptive to alternative forms of representation.

The Employee Voice Has Never Been More Important

The strongest protection against employee dissatisfaction is not a policy, procedure or legal defence. It is creating a workplace where employees genuinely feel listened to.

Employees want transparency and visibility from leadership. They want managers who can have constructive conversations and address concerns consistently. Most importantly, they want confidence that raising issues will result in meaningful action.

Many organisations communicate regularly with employees. Far fewer create genuine opportunities for employees to influence decisions and shape change.

HR leaders should take a step back and consider some fundamental questions about the employee experience within their organisation. Do employees trust the leadership team and understand the decisions being made? Do managers have the skills, confidence and support to engage effectively with their people and address concerns appropriately? Are employees comfortable speaking up when something is wrong, and do they believe those concerns will be taken seriously? When feedback is gathered, is it acted upon and communicated transparently? Most importantly, do employees feel their views genuinely matter and that they have a meaningful voice within the organisation?

The answers to these questions often provide a clearer picture of organisational health than any policy review or compliance exercise alone.

A Good Time for a Health Check

As employment legislation evolves, organisations should be looking beyond compliance and considering the broader employee experience.

Proactive HR audits, employee engagement reviews and culture assessments can provide valuable insight into how employees feel, where risks may exist and whether there are gaps between leadership perception and workforce reality. They allow organisations to identify concerns early and take action before issues become entrenched.

The organisations best placed to navigate the changing employment landscape will not necessarily be those with the most comprehensive policies. They will be the organisations that understand their people, listen to feedback and act on what they hear.

Perhaps the most important question leaders should ask is:

If an external organisation approached your workforce tomorrow, how confident are you that your employees would feel they already have a trusted voice within your business?

If the answer is uncertain, now is the time to find out. Because while legislation may make union access easier, employee sentiment ultimately determines whether those conversations gain momentum. And that is something every organisation has the opportunity to influence long before it becomes a problem.

Small Business In A Sea of Big People Issues



How can smaller businesses adopt broader HR functions to add value to their organisations? Many often feel like they're sinking, overwhelmed in a sea of people challenges but adopting a proactive HR approach, even in an SME environment can strengthen people processes, reduce risk, and boost team performance. Andy Moore takes a closer look...

If you're a business owner or line manager reading this article, you'll know there are only a few hours in the day to dedicate to handling pure HR people practices.

With the average UK small business employing just 11 people (UK Government Business Population Estimates), many of these organisations may not have a dedicated HR function. This often includes not having formal functions in place for aspects such as recruitment, performance management, documentation, and daily people issues.

Some businesses often operate with lean teams, limited administrative support, and a strong focus on daily delivery. As a result, people management becomes a shared responsibility. Non-HR people frequently find themselves acting as the first, and sometimes the only point of contact for HR-related matters.

For organisations without a formal HR function, doing the process themselves or outsourcing can strengthen team consistency, reduce risk, and help create a more stable and supportive working environment. In smaller organisations, adopting these HR practices can enhance team performance and contribute to overall success.

Tony Guadagni, Analyst in the Gartner HR practice, says: "While managers are working harder today, 66% say their primary responsibility is managing the people on their teams above driving progress toward organisational goals and priorities."

This shift in managerial focus reflects a broader trend across the UK workforce: employees increasingly expect their managers to provide clarity, support, and development opportunities. HR provides the framework that translates business goals into people's everyday actions, from hiring the right individuals and setting clear expectations, to nurturing growth. Far from being just paperwork or policy enforcement, HR is about creating the conditions for teams to succeed, which in turn helps the wider organisation thrive.

Recruitment and on-boarding are prime examples. For teams without an HR function, getting the right fit early saves time and money later. Clear job descriptions, structured interviews, and effective introductions ensure new hires understand expectations and feel welcomed from day one. This matters even more in sectors where turnover is high: Oxford Economics says that replacing an employee costs between six to nine months of their salary, a significant burden for small businesses.



In practice, line managers must be confident in assessing candidates, understanding role requirements, and communicating organisational culture. Without HR support, these tasks can feel daunting, yet they are essential for line managers to build a stable workforce.

Beyond hiring, their role in performance management is essential. Routine feedback and structured reviews can clarify objectives, identify development opportunities, and address issues early. This on-going communication improves productivity and engagement. It's critical in small businesses where each individual's contribution has a significant impact. When organisations adopt consistent performance practices, teams benefit from clearer engagement, better alignment, and more opportunities for growth.

Amanda Chaitnarine, Senior Director, Human Resources Diagnostics, at McLean & Company, says. "Without strengthening the core drivers behind engagement, organisations risk plateauing performance instead of improving it. An HR function can move beyond measurement and focus on targeted action."



For SMEs, employee relations and compliance further highlight HR's value. With employment laws continually evolving, keeping up with regulations, working hours, equality, and health and safety can be overwhelming. An HR function, whether internal, outsourced, or hybrid, reduces risk by ensuring legal compliance and promoting fair treatment.

Outsourcing HR is becoming increasingly attractive for SMEs. Research from Sigma Consulting Group (2025) shows that outsourcing HR can reduce costs compared with hiring an in-house HR manager. Outsourced providers often offer access to specialist expertise, up-to-date legal guidance, and structured processes that managers can apply immediately.

The strategic potential of HR extends beyond individual tasks. When aligned with business objectives, HR becomes a driver for growth and innovation. Learning and development initiatives prepare the workforce for future challenges, helping teams acquire skills that match evolving customer demands or technological change.

Engagement strategies supported by HR improve retention and motivation, reducing turnover that can otherwise destabilise small teams.

The return on investment for structured HR is increasingly well documented. A Forrester Total Economic Impact study (2026) found that organisations implementing modern HR systems achieved a 152% return on investment, driven by reduced admin time, fewer compliance errors, and improved retention.

Tony Guadagni, Analyst in the Gartner HR practice, sums up: "Despite having less authority over perks and policies, many managers still say delivering a positive employee experience is their primary responsibility. They

spend an average of nine hours a week, which equates to more than 20% of their working time, addressing employees' personal and emotional concerns."

Ultimately, an HR function's greatest contribution lies in strengthening managerial capability. By providing structured processes, guidance, and insights, it builds cohesive, resilient team cultures that reflect organisational values.

Embracing HR is not about becoming an expert overnight or handling every responsibility alone. It's about knowing where to focus energy, leveraging available resources, and recognising HR as an enabler of stronger leadership and business success which ultimately keeps the ship afloat and sailing to a trouble-free horizon.

HR for non-HR people

- In small UK businesses averaging 11 employees, line managers can be the defacto HR function
- Adopting or outsourcing HR processes strengthens team stability, reduces risk, and creates a more supportive working environment.
- Recruitment discipline: clear job descriptions, structured interviews, and strong on-boarding save time and cost.
- Performance management: routine feedback and structured reviews improve clarity, engagement, and productivity.
- HR expertise (internal or outsourced) helps SMEs stay compliant with evolving employment laws, and reduce costly mistakes.
- When aligned with business goals, HR drives growth through learning, development, engagement, and modern systems that deliver ROI.

Businesses race to make AI a workplace requirement as firms struggle to build AI-ready workforces

AI is rapidly becoming a workplace expectation across the UK, but employers are taking different approaches to building the workforces needed to support it, according to new research from HiBob, the people platform helping organisations adapt and thrive in the age of AI.

A study of UK business leaders responsible for hiring AI talent found more than three-quarters (77%) expect AI proficiency to become a baseline requirement across most non-technical roles within the next two years. More than four in five (82%) are investing in AI up-skilling or reskilling, while 80% say they have a defined strategy for sourcing strong AI-skilled candidates.

Yet there is no clear blueprint for how organisations are building that capability. When it comes to attracting AI talent, no single approach has emerged as the dominant model: 35% build talent communities and nurture sequences featuring AI content, 31% use applicant tracking system tagging and 29% rely on referral campaigns.

The same pattern is reflected in learning and development. Around one in three organisations provide funded AI learning (33%), protected time for employees to practise with AI (33%) or prompt and workflow libraries (31%). This suggests employers are experimenting with a range of approaches rather than following a common model.

This comes as AI capability starts to influence workforce decisions. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of organisations use AI skills when making promotion decisions, 61% factor them into performance reviews and 31% consider them when determining pay. Meanwhile, 97% say they would pay at least a 10% salary premium for at least one AI capability, underlining growing competition for AI-ready talent.

Believing the next wave of workforce transformation will not be driven by more tools, but by better organisational intelligence, HiBob's AI Skills Framework gives leaders a practical way to define the AI capabilities needed for different roles, providing the language and evidence to shape job expectations, guide employee development, and align talent decisions with business needs.

HiBob's AI Skills Assessment Guide builds on this framework with a structured approach to evaluating AI skills during hiring, helping organisations identify the candidates best equipped for the roles they need to fill.

"Too many organisations are still trying to manage a changing workforce with disconnected systems and fragmented skills data," said Ronni Zehavi, CEO and Co-founder of HiBob. "That is the wrong model for the AI era. The winners in the AI era will be the organisations that can define a shared language of skills, identify where capability truly sits, and pivot talent to where it creates the most value. That is the system we are enabling today."

Zehavi concludes: "Skills are no longer just a people topic. They are central to how organisations adapt, grow, and compete. With the AI Skills Framework, the AI Skills Assessment Guide, and HiBob's Skills and Jobs Catalogues, we are helping organisations move from abstract AI ambition to a more connected, practical, and actionable view of workforce capability."

Together, these thought leadership resources and platform capabilities help organisations move beyond fragmented AI experimentation toward a more structured approach to workforce transformation. HiBob sees skills as more than an HR process. It sees them as a strategic layer of organisational intelligence, one that connects data across hiring, performance, learning and planning, and turns that insight into action.

In a business environment shaped by constant change, skills are becoming essential workforce infrastructure, helping leaders build resilience, improve decision-making, and create the organisational intelligence needed for sustained performance.



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By Teresa Flannigan

The Hr NETWORK National Awards 2026 will celebrate 19 years of RECOGNISING, ACKNOWLEDGING and REWARDING the champions of the Scottish HR profession this year.

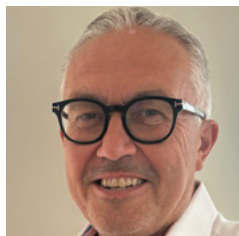
The Judging panel will conduct the final stage interviews in mid-September, after which, they will then choose their winner for each category and the winners will be announced at the hugely anticipated awards gala dinner in Glasgow in November.

The 19th annual awards gala dinner, anticipated to attract almost 700+ top HR & people industry professionals, will see the presentation of 16 Awards for a range of people, project and organisational categories and will take place at the hugely impressive Hilton, Glasgow on Thursday 12th November 2026.



Judging Panel

Neil Barrel



Neil is a certified Executive Coach with over 35 years experience in HR leadership roles in multinationals and professional services firms. Most recently, he held the position of Director of People & Property Services at Three UK, prior to completion of their merger with Vodafone. He previously worked with RBS in both the UK and the US,

delivering a number of transformation programmes, and was the Managing Director for Towers Perrin's European outsourcing business, where he was accountable for services to 70 clients. Neil is able to call upon considerable experience in strategic and operational aspects of HR, enabling him to objectively link strategies to achievable business outcomes.

Susan DeFazio



Susan is a recognised expert in strategic workforce planning, business growth and organisational effectiveness with 20+ years global experience. With a passion for empowering internal capabilities by making 'the how' possible for leaders and practitioners, as the founder of Be Future Ready Today, she acts as an advisor, coach,

speaker, organisational health and strategic workforce planning expert. She is passionate about simplifying the world of work. Susan is a partner with The Human Capital Institute to deliver a well established and proven strategic framework that allows learners to advance their careers and prepare them to lead the future of HR. Prior to running her own consultancy, Susan led and developed a Global Consulting Practice which was designed to help companies build strategic capabilities for workforce planning, transformation, business analytics and differentiated people practices.

John Ferguson



John is Founder and Managing Partner of John Ferguson Leadership Ltd a results-based leadership company with particular emphasis at Executive and Board levels. John is recognised as a specialist in strategy facilitation and enabling high performing teams. With over 25 years leadership development background, John is

recognised for his wealth of international experience and practical insights to support clients to optimise their leadership and achieve their commercial organisational objectives for today and tomorrow. John is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Bankers, a Chartered Member of the Institute of Directors and Deputy Chair of a community service organisation.

Allison Forrest



With over 20 years in senior HR leadership, Allison has led people strategies that transform culture, build capability, and drive performance across sectors from SMEs to global organisations. Her achievements include board-level leadership, global transformation projects, and recognition from the Scottish

Hr NETWORK Awards, CIPD, and Strathclyde University. A Non-Executive Director and IoD member, she offers strong governance and strategic challenge. Passionate about leadership development, she has coached executives worldwide and advanced the HR profession in Scotland. Now, Allison supports organisations on a fractional HR basis while caring for her parents, enjoying family, friends, and travel in her spare time.

Andrew Penker



Andrew is the founder of XSectorMentor.com, a mentor training company providing CPD certified courses that train people managers to have purposeful conversations at work, and enable their colleagues to become better versions of themselves. Mentor support sessions also engage

mentors to network and develop their skills to ensure there is a continuity and sustainability of developmental conversations at work. Their unique mentor resource platform is Cyber Essentials certified and allows companies to start and scale mentor programmes with ease. Andrew provides independent HR Consultancy services delivering strategic projects, change initiatives, organisational design, communication, and team development. He is a Chartered Fellow of the CIPD, a Member of the Institute of Leadership, and holds a Masters in HR Management, Certificate in People Analytics (Wharton), and is a certified Coach (AoEC), and accredited Mentor (EMCC). Andrew is a trustee with the Enchanted Forest, an award-winning immersive art experience in the Highlands of Scotland.

Katy Tagimuri



Katy is an Executive Human Resources Director, having built her career in complex, large-scale organisations in Policing, Local Government and Financial Services. Her career has focused on effecting and leading organisational and cultural change, undertaken in demanding regulatory contexts and under significant scrutiny –

particularly in her last two roles as Human Resources Director at Police Scotland and Service Director Human Resources at the City of Edinburgh Council. Additionally, she had held Non-Executive Director roles in a Youth & Children's charity, a Scottish National Health Board, and a Local Government Pension organisation. She currently volunteers for the UK's only employment charity dedicated to helping women with convictions to find work and career opportunities.

Award Category Sponsorship

A few sponsorship categories are still available, offering excellent benefits in the lead-up to, during, and after the Hr NETWORK Awards Gala Dinner, which will take place at the impressive Hilton Glasgow on Thursday, 12th November 2026.

Benefits of sponsoring a category:

By sponsoring an award category, you are directly supporting the HR community in Scotland. Hr NETWORK has been committed to supporting HR professionals and those closely associated with this vibrant and energetic community for almost 22 years. Sponsoring an award category will enable you to:

1. Promote your employer brand or products & services directly to the HR and business community across Scotland.
2. Enjoy rich content media coverage within Hr NETWORK magazine.
3. Showcase your brand throughout the year and at the Awards Gala Dinner.
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5. Stand out from your competitors by showcasing your company's commitment to supporting HR and business professionals across Scotland.
6. Build on your organisations' credibility by supporting events which specifically support HR and business professionals across Scotland.
7. Entertain your key clients in a professional and credible environment.
8. Opportunity to present your sponsored category in the presence of almost 700 HR and people professionals.



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Health & Wellbeing Award of the Year

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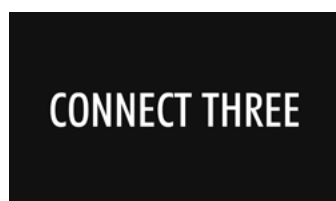
For further information please contact the Awards Planning Team on Tel: 0131 625 3267 or email: awards@hrnetworkscotland.co.uk



Award categories and their sponsors

Learning & Development Award of the Year

sponsored by:



Connect Three is an award-winning leadership and development consultancy transforming how organisations lead, grow and perform. They partner with ambitious businesses across all industries to build inspiring leaders, thriving cultures and sustainable impact through consultancy, coaching and practical learning experiences. Working with SME's to large global businesses, they're the trusted global partner for market-leading organisations. They work as an extension of your team, dig deeper to uncover every hidden gem and look at the bigger picture in a holistic stance to design multi-layer learning programmes aligned to your people and culture strategy. Connect Three care about making a difference to people and business. In fact, they've legally committed to put people over profit as a certified B Corp.

For further information please visit:
www.connectthree.co.uk

HR Assistant/Officer of the Year

sponsored by:



Travel is so much more than moving from one place to another. It's about discovery, excitement, adventure, meeting new people, experiencing new cultures and breaking from the norm. It's about journeys and destinations that make your eyes light up and neurons fire. At **Skyscanner**, they fully embrace the joy of travel and strive to bring this ethos of discovery, community, and culture into what they do every day. In how they operate as a company, how they treat their people and how they deliver for their travellers. Skyscanner is The Real Deal. Their people are The Real Deal. Sponsoring

the HR Assistant/officer of the year category is a pleasure as having an awesome people team encapsulates everything they stand for at Skyscanner by recognising emerging talent.

For further information please visit: www.skyscanner.net

HR Business/People Partner of the Year

sponsored by:



Right Management helps organisations make their talent their ultimate competitive advantage by building the capabilities needed to up-skill, adapt and transform their workforce. With over 40 years' experience and global expertise spanning more than 75 countries, they know how to help you unlock the value of your most important asset - your workforce. Their assessment, coaching, leadership, career development, change and outplacement programmes will accelerate performance and future-proof your talent.

For further information, please visit: www.right.com

Employee Engagement Award of the Year

sponsored by:



Multrees Investor Services was incorporated in the UK in 2010. Multrees exists solely as a provider of outsourced services to wealth managers. In their most successful client relationships, their client partners consider their team as part of their own operation. The background and heritage of their firm is in understanding and supporting the high-quality services requirements of the unique industry they operate within. Their view remains as it was when they formed as a business, namely that the UK wealth management sector requires stronger support from dedicated partner firms that can supply scalability and client outcome driven solutions across the full breadth of the consumer journey. Currently they have 130 members of staff located between Edinburgh, Glasgow, and London.

For further information, please visit: www.multrees.com

HR Manager/Advisor of the Year

sponsored by:



At **AAB**, they don't believe in one-size-fits-all solutions. They will work closely with you to truly understand your business inside out, and together, they will craft innovative, commercially driven strategies spanning Employment, Pay and People. Their strategic and outsourced services across HR, H&S, Learning & Organisational Development, Whistleblowing, Payroll and Corporate Benefits are personalised and designed to fit your current needs and future aspirations. They don't just give you "off the shelf" solutions, their team of experts will seamlessly integrate as an extended part of your team whether you're just starting out or are well-established. They will provide creative interventions and flexible, hands-on support every step of the way.

For further information, please visit: www.aab.uk

Organisational Development Award of the Year

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Founded in 1983, **Alvarez & Marsal** is a leading global professional services firm. Renowned for its leadership, action and results, Alvarez & Marsal provides advisory, business performance improvement and turnaround management services, delivering practical solutions to address clients' unique challenges. With a world-wide network of experienced operators, world-class consultants, former regulators and industry authorities, Alvarez & Marsal helps corporates, boards, private equity firms, law firms and government agencies drive transformation, mitigate risk and unlock value at every stage of growth. Their People Services Team brings together deep expertise across four keys areas; People, Reward & Performance (PRP), Executive Reward, Employment Tax and Equity Reward. They help organisations design and deliver reward strategies, performance frameworks and people solutions that align workforce capability with business ambition. Combining data-driven insight with practical and technical experience, their specialists enable clients to attract, retain and motivate talent, unlocking value and accelerating business performance through their people.

For further information, please visit:

www.alvarezandmarsal.com/expertise/emea-tax/people-reward-performance-services

Best Employer/Workplace of the Year

sponsored by:



International Beverage is a premium spirits company, bringing together a family of brands with a strong commitment and respect for their people. A Great Place to Work, which is fundamental to their culture, their vision and overall business ethos. Their people truly define who they are, with their pride and passion shaping their journey and success. An inclusive workplace demonstrating the power of diversity and celebrating the benefits of cross-cultural teams that make their business thrive. It is this culture, which drives equity, diversity and inclusion is fundamental to their success. Committed to the long-term investment in their brands – they are always looking ahead, remaining focused and evolving, whilst staying true to who they are.

For further information, please visit:

www.interbevgroup.com



HR Technology Award of the Year

sponsored by:



Be-Group brings together three specialist organisations delivering excellence across recruitment and consultancy. Be-IT Resourcing Ltd is Scotland's leading IT recruitment consultancy, trusted by top tech employers and talent. Be-IT Projects provides high-impact consultancy across technology, transformation, and professional services. Be-Resourcing focuses on Financial and Professional Services recruitment, led by Scotland's most experienced recruiters, with deep sector expertise and a sharp eye for quality. Our team has spent decades delivering top-tier talent and career-defining opportunities across countless appointments, campaigns, and projects. United by a commitment to innovation and results, the Be-Group empowers organisations to grow, adapt, and succeed in a fast-changing digital landscape.

For further information, please visit: www.be-it.co.uk



HR Team of the Year

sponsored by:



The **CIPD** has been championing better work and working lives for over 100 years. It helps organisations thrive by focusing on their people, supporting our economies and societies. It's the professional body for HR, L&D, OD and all people professionals – experts in people, work and change. With over 160,000 members globally – and a growing community using its research, insights and learning – it gives trusted advice and offers independent thought leadership. It's a leading voice in the call for good work that creates value for everyone.

For further information, please visit: www.cipd.co.uk



HR Director of the Year

sponsored by:



LHH helps individuals, teams, and organisations find and prepare for what's next in the world of work. We support client's needs throughout the talent journey, from recruitment to career transitions and leadership development. We empower organisations to expand their capabilities and workers to build brighter futures.

For further information please visit: lhh.com/uk/en

Outstanding Contribution to Scottish HR or Lifetime Achievement Award of the Year

The winner of this award and all other awards will be announced at the annual Hr NETWORK Awards Gala Dinner taking place at the Hilton Glasgow Thursday on 12th November 2026.

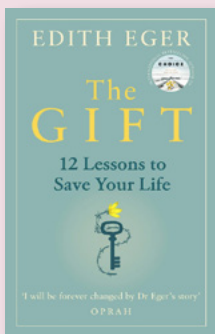
Table sales for this year's awards gala dinner are already at an all-time high. To ensure that last year's sponsors and table hosts can attend again, those wishing to host a table of 10 are strongly advised to secure their tables as soon as possible to avoid disappointment.

If you have any enquiries in relation to sponsorship or becoming a table host at the Gala Dinner, please contact: Tel: 0131 625 3267 or email: awards@hrnetworkscotland.co.uk

MY *Three* FAVOURITE BOOKS



In this issue, we've asked our great friend and big Hr NETWORK Magazine supporter **Lesley McGeoch**, Head of Employee Relations at Natwest Group to list her three favourite books:



The Gift

By Edith Eger

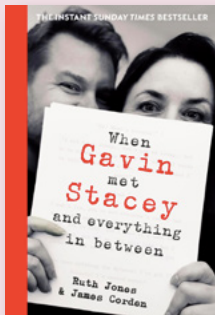
Each moment in Auschwitz was hell on earth. It was also my best classroom. Subjected to loss, torture, starvation and the constant threat of death, I discovered tools for survival and freedom that I continue to use every day. In her darkest moments, celebrated therapist and Holocaust survivor Dr Edith Eger discovered that the most damaging prison was the one in her mind. She realized that, in the end, it's not what happens to us that matters most - it's what we choose to do with it. We all face suffering - sadness, loss, despair, fear, anxiety, failure. But we also have a choice; to give in and give up in the face of trauma or difficulties, or to live every moment as a gift. In this empowering book, Dr Edith Eger, provides a hands-on guide that gently encourages us to change the imprisoning thoughts and destructive behaviours that may be holding us back. From a truly inspiring voice, these lessons will help you to see your darkest moments as your greatest teachers, and find freedom through the strength that lies within.



Read Your Mind

By Oz Pearlman

A powerful, modern twist on How to Win Friends and Influence People that blends the intrigue of mindreading with practical strategies for success. Drawing on over thirty years of experience captivating audiences and accruing psychological insights, renowned mind reader Oz Pearlman reveals the ingenious secrets and techniques that have propelled his extraordinary career to teach you how to unlock your full potential. You'll build confidence, sharpen your memory, connect more authentically with others, and eliminate your fears - all through simple, easy-to-master strategies that can be learned in minutes and applied for a lifetime. Read Your Mind helps you turn your focus inwards, teaching you how to identify and overcome the mental blocks that hold you back, building habits that stick.



Gavin & Stacey and Everything in Between

By Ruth Jones and James Corden

When Gavin Met Stacey and Everything in Between is the story of how Ruth and James turned their little show about ordinary life into a full-on cultural phenomenon. As they recount the highs and lows they faced along the way, Ruth and James explore the journey of their real-life friendship, the making of the show and the relationship between Nessa and Smithy that had the nation glued to their screens.

Full of revelations and anecdotes to working scripts and never-before-seen photographs including:

- The story behind Nessa's iconic look
- The original treatment for the show
- And maybe pictures from that fishing trip...

This one-of-a kind memoir takes you behind the scenes of one of the most iconic and beloved shows in British television history. Here are the details of what's occurred every step of the way, from initial pitch to final day of filming, and all the love that followed.



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*Build Together, Grow
Together, Thrive Together*





The traits employers are looking for the most:

WOULD YOU GET
HIRED ACCORDING
TO THIS REPORT?

A new study analysing 5,000 job postings has revealed the traits and skills employers value most in employees, with high levels of communication, teamwork and empathy topping the list.

The research, conducted by Human Success Platform Zensai, assessed 5,000 of the latest job postings collected from Glassdoor across all occupations, with no keyword or category filter applied. Of the postings collected, 4,997 (99.9%) contained usable description text to obtain the most desirable skills in employees. Each listing's description text was scanned against a curated selection of traits, skills and behaviours, to determine what employers are seeking the most in their new hires and what they value among their own workforce.

The study found that communication was requested in 56.7% of listings, ahead of teamwork and collaboration (45.3%), a positive attitude (30%), leadership skills (26.2%) and empathy and compassion (25.4%).

Every single trait in the top ten was behavioural rather than technical. In fact, the first hard skill, Microsoft Office/Excel proficiency, didn't appear until 18th place.

As AI use is commonplace and integrated within companies, the focus appears to be less on behaviours about learning and attention to detail but more about having the right mind-set and being able to work on projects effectively through collaboration.

Interestingly, less than 10% of job postings actually required a higher education degree, with job ads favouring a positive attitude and experience over academic success.

What employers are asking for...

Communication was named in 2,833 of the postings analysed, making it the single most in-demand trait by a wide margin, followed closely by teamwork and collaboration. Notably, "positive attitude" ranked third, appearing in 30% of listings - a sign that employers are explicitly screening for outlook and resilience, above just experience.



The top ten most requested traits, skills and behaviours

Rank	Trait / Skill	Category	Share of Postings	Number of Postings
1	Communication	Behaviour	56.7%	2,833
2	Teamwork and Collaboration	Behaviour	45.3%	2,264
3	Positive attitude	Behaviour	30.0%	1,498
4	Leadership	Behaviour	26.2%	1,310
5	Empathy and Compassion	Behaviour	25.4%	1,272
6	Time management	Behaviour	25.2%	1,260
7	Adaptability and Flexibility	Behaviour	24.7%	1,234
8	Customer service and focus	Behaviour	24.2%	1,209
9	Integrity and Trustworthiness	Behaviour	22.1%	1,105
10	Organization	Behaviour	20.3%	1,016

Where hard skills and credentials rank

Behavioural traits dominate the overall list, however employers still name several specific hard skills and credentials. Microsoft Office/Excel proficiency was the most requested hard skill, appearing in 11.9% of listings, while a bachelor's degree was the most requested credential, named in 9.9% of postings.

Rank	Skill	Share of Postings	Number of Postings
1	Microsoft Office / Excel	11.9%	595
2	Computer literacy	8.2%	411
3	Bilingual	5.2%	262
4	Sales skills	3.4%	170
5	Data analysis	3.3%	164
6	Project management	1.4%	68

Credentials

Rank	Skill	Share of Postings	Number of Postings
1	Bachelor's degree	9.9%	495
2	Driver's license	4.9%	244

How are these skills maintained?

A study by The Association for Talent Development (ATD) and sponsored by Zensai, surveyed 277 talent development professionals and found that only 42% of organisations track whether training changes employee behaviour, and just 16% are considered proficient overall at measuring and evaluating the impact of their learning programmes. This suggests that while employers are clear on the human skills they want and value but, for many, they still can't demonstrate whether they're successfully building them within their teams.

The survey of 277 talent development professionals found that 93% of organisations collect basic participant satisfaction data after training - the familiar "smile sheet" - but only 42% go further and track whether that training changed employee behaviour on the job. In fact, just 30% rate themselves good or excellent at using learning data to make business decisions at all.

Over half of organisations (51%) cite a lack of staff and time as a major obstacle to evaluation, and 54% say it's simply too difficult to isolate training's impact on results from everything else going on in the business. Only 43% say their learning goals and business goals are even "very aligned" in the first place.

Measurement and evaluation	Share of Organisations
Organisations rated "proficient" at measurement and evaluation overall	16%
Rate their organisation excellent at using learning data to make business decisions	4%
Collect basic participant satisfaction ("smile sheet") data	93%
Track whether training actually changed employee behaviour	42%
Say business and learning goals are "very aligned"	43%
Cite lack of staff/time as a major barrier to evaluation	51%

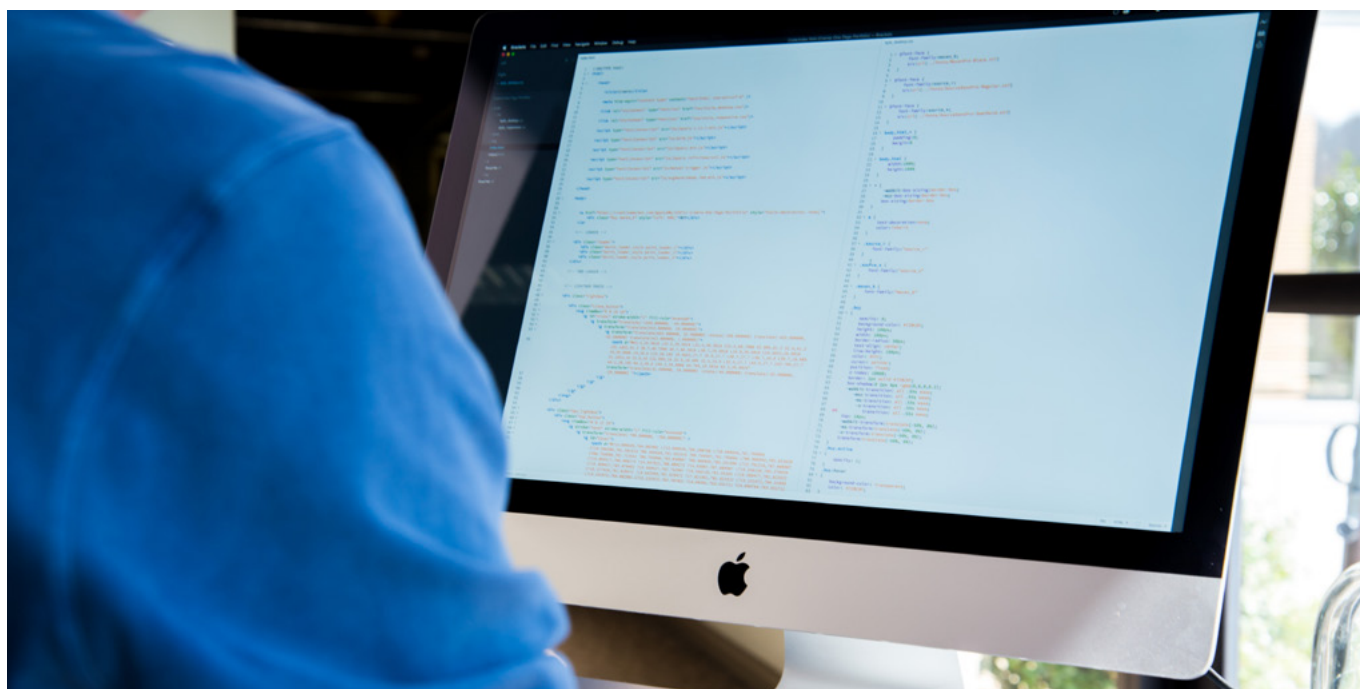
How does AI use impact this?

Many of the professionals surveyed are optimistic about where things are heading when it comes to AI. 81% of ATD respondents believe AI will have a positive impact on measuring and evaluating learning over the next two years, with 28% saying the impact will be "extremely positive." Two in three respondents expect the pressure to demonstrate the financial return on talent development to increase, and 69% believe their organisations will need more employees with data analysis skills to keep up.

Nina Carøe, Chief Human Success Officer at Zensai, commented on the findings:

"What this study shows is that employers know exactly what they want from their people which is communication, and active collaboration, however, most organisations still struggle to measure these skills and improve them when the hire has come on board. Therefore, teams and business owners need to be conscious of using data and reporting to ensure that the skills, behaviours and values that they care about and benefit their businesses are being maintained and having an impact."

The study was conducted by Zensai, a platform trusted by millions of users in 60+ countries. Zensai helps organizations unlock their people's potential through AI-powered experiences delivered in the flow of work across Microsoft 365



SMALL BUSINESSES HAVE MORE INFLUENCE THAN THEY THINK!

By Zoe Lewis, AgileSource Ltd



Small businesses are often encouraged to put social impact on hold until they have a bigger team, stronger revenue, a formal CSR programme or someone dedicated to leading the work. Yet this overlooks one of the greatest strengths SMEs have, which is the ability to move quickly, speak personally and bring trusted networks around causes that deserve attention.

This is especially true across the technology ecosystem, where smaller suppliers, consultancies and specialist recruitment firms often sit at the centre of valuable professional networks. They may not have the scale of enterprise vendors, but they have direct relationships with clients, partners, candidates and communities, giving them the reach to mobilise support quickly when there is a clear reason to act.

Action for Children's Boycott Your Bed campaign shows what can happen when smaller organisations stop waiting for scale and start using the influence they already have. The campaign reflects a belief that business relationships should create opportunity, confidence and positive outcomes beyond the workplace.

Action for Children works to give vulnerable children and young people the safety, support and stability they need, raising a simple question for business leaders. If an organisation already has the relationships, reach and credibility to bring people together, why wait until it is larger before using them for good?

The scale of child poverty in the UK should make every business uncomfortable. Four million children are growing up in poverty, including children going to school hungry, tired or cold, young people living through situations no child should have to face, and families trying to cope without the stability and support they need.

Figures of that size can become abstract, but the issue reaches communities across the UK, often in ways that remain unseen. Hearing directly from young people makes it impossible to treat hardship as a statistic alone, especially when so many are talented, thoughtful and full of potential but need support, stability and adults who are prepared to listen and act.

Raising money helps Action for Children continue its work with vulnerable children, young people and families, while the campaign keeps child poverty in the conversation by challenging the idea that hardship is happening somewhere else and bringing it back to the communities that businesses operate in, the people they employ, and the wider society they help shape.

AgileSource may be a micro-SME, but last year its Boycott Your Bed team brought together 25 sleepers, raised more than £10,000 and became one of the top three fundraising teams. This year, the internal team has grown to three people, all of whom are taking part, while the wider AgileSource network is encouraging others to join.

That network has included businesses such as UBDS, Sparta Global, Red Hat and Mozaic, with more than 50 sleepers expected to take part. For small businesses, influence rarely comes from headcount alone and more often comes from relationships, credibility, energy and the ability to move quickly, have personal conversations and stay close to the cause.

A large CSR team is not the only way to build momentum around a cause. When people care enough to get involved, a clear ask and regular conversations can turn small actions into something much bigger.

Spending one night without a bed only offers a glimpse of what insecurity can feel like, especially when most participants have a warm home and a bed waiting at the end of the event. That contrast gives the experience its force, creating space to reflect, making privilege visible and giving people a reason to talk about something that can otherwise be easy to avoid.

The value of the sleepout is in the conversations it creates as much as the night itself. First-hand accounts from young people bring the cause into sharper focus and give participants a clearer reason to keep talking, raising funds and encouraging others to act.

Companies are already built around networks of clients, partners, candidates, suppliers, colleagues, alumni and local communities. Those networks are usually used to win work, deliver projects and grow revenue, but they can also draw attention to causes that need more support.

For recruitment businesses, where relationships sit at the centre of the work and connecting people with opportunities is part of the day job, supporting Action for Children extends that instinct into a different context by using connection to create practical help, visibility and hope.

Participation builds a different kind of commitment because when someone signs up to sleep out, joins a team walk, buys a raffle ticket or shares the campaign with their own contacts, they become part of the effort and help carry it further than a donation alone.

For any individual or organisation considering Boycott Your Bed, starting where they are can create memories, strengthen relationships and support children who urgently need help, while giving teams a shared purpose beyond the everyday pressures of work.

SMEs already have the power to bring people with them through the relationships, energy and speed that often define smaller businesses.

For SMEs across the technology sector, influence does not begin when a business reaches a certain size. It begins when leaders choose to use the relationships they already have. AgileSource's experience shows that small businesses can start with the people around them, bring others into the effort and make that influence count now.



BRITAIN FACES A *'LOST GENERATION*

But work experience can cut a young person's risk of becoming NEET by 80%

By Claire Hawes, chief people and operations officer at Ciphr

TION,

More than one million young people in the UK are currently not in education, employment or training (NEET), while almost half of teenagers say they are uncertain about their future careers. Now a major new study has found that meaningful engagement with employers before the age of 16 can dramatically improve life chances, with young people who experience high levels of employer engagement being 80% less likely to become NEET than their peers.

Published recently by education charity Education and Employers, *Work Experience: Past, Present and Future* is the most comprehensive review to date of international evidence on employer engagement, work experience and young people's transitions from education into employment.

The report comes at a critical moment. Former Cabinet Minister Alan Milburn recently warned of a potential "lost generation" of young people, while OECD research shows that 46% of UK teenagers are uncertain about their future career options – almost double the figure recorded in 2018 and among the highest rates in the developed world.

The report argues that while work experience and employer engagement can play a transformative role in improving young people's prospects, access to these opportunities remains deeply unequal.

New research commissioned for the report found that 81% of work experience placements are currently arranged by young people or their families, meaning access is often determined by personal networks rather than need. More than three-quarters of school staff surveyed said family connections are the primary reason some young people benefit more than others.

The findings raise significant questions about how the Government's commitment to guarantee every secondary school pupil two weeks of work experience will be delivered fairly and effectively.

While schools and employers overwhelmingly support the ambition, many have serious concerns about the practical challenges involved. The report estimates that delivering the Work Experience Guarantee for under-16s alone would require around six million placement days every year.

At the same time:

- Only 58% of Key Stage 4 students currently complete any work experience.
- 94% of teachers say job shadowing would be difficult or very difficult to organise.
- 81% say workplace visits are difficult or very difficult to arrange.
- Employers cite bureaucracy, limited capacity and competing demands as significant barriers to participation.

The report warns that without substantial support and infrastructure, there is a risk the policy could inadvertently widen existing inequalities, with the best opportunities continuing to go to the most well-connected young people.

Nick Chambers, Chief Executive of Education and Employers, said: "Britain cannot afford a system where opportunity depends on who your parents know. We now have compelling evidence that encounters with employers and workplaces can change the trajectory of a young person's life. Young people who gain meaningful experience of the world of work are more confident, more informed about their futures and significantly less likely to become disengaged from education and employment. Yet access to those opportunities remains deeply unequal. The young people who stand to benefit most are often the least likely to secure high-quality placements because they lack the networks and connections that others take for granted.

"The Government's commitment to two weeks' work experience for every young person is absolutely the right ambition. But ambition alone will not deliver outcomes. Without the right infrastructure, support and coordination, there is a real danger that we end up advantaging the advantaged and disadvantaging the disadvantaged."

Researchers found that current careers information systems are often difficult for young people and parents to navigate and do not reflect how young people search for information about jobs and careers today. It calls for a modern, youth-focused national careers information service, alongside greater investment in employer engagement, work experience brokerage and targeted support for young people most at risk of becoming NEET.



The report sets out four potential options for government, education leaders and employers to consider, ranging from targeted support for disadvantaged young people through to a more ambitious national approach that combines careers education, employer engagement and work experience within a coherent system.

Education and Employers argues that the cost of getting this wrong will far outweigh the investment required to get it right. One of the report's authors estimates that each young person who becomes NEET costs the public purse approximately £54,000 over their lifetime.

“The Government’s commitment to two weeks’ work experience for every young person is absolutely the right ambition. But ambition alone will not deliver outcomes. Without the right infrastructure, support and coordination, there is a real danger that we end up advantaging the advantaged and disadvantaging the disadvantaged.”



95% of HR leaders report rising workloads as AI adds new pressure to workforce training and skills development



HR leaders and those responsible for workplace training are facing mounting pressure as artificial intelligence accelerates the pace of change across UK organisations according to a study by The Coders Guild. Here Crispin Read from The Coders

Guild discusses the survey outcomes.

The findings reveal that HR and learning and development professionals are increasingly being asked to lead workforce transformation programmes, redesign recruitment processes, implement AI governance frameworks, upskill employees and improve productivity - often without the resources, training or workforce plans needed to support them.

The research comes as 95% of HR leaders report rising workloads and 91% say their responsibilities have increased over the past year, highlighting growing concerns around pressure, change fatigue and the long-term sustainability of workforce transformation efforts.

At the same time, 78% of HR leaders expect AI to significantly change workforce skills requirements within the next three years, yet only 24% of organisations currently have a documented workforce strategy for AI.

This means three quarters of UK organisations are entering the AI era without a clear plan for preparing their workforce.

Despite 67% of HR leaders identifying AI adoption as a strategic business priority, fewer than one-third feel fully prepared to lead the organisational changes required to make AI successful.

The research suggests that many organisations are treating AI as a technology challenge when, in reality, the biggest barrier to success is workforce readiness.

The biggest myth in all of this is that everyone else has already cracked AI and you're the one falling behind. Almost nobody has cracked it. The leaders who feel furthest back are usually sitting exactly where most organisations are.

The people carrying this are already stretched. They're being asked to prepare a whole workforce for one of the biggest changes to how we work that any of us have seen, on top of recruitment, retention, compliance and everything else that lands on them in a normal week. The line I hear again and again is, 'I kept telling myself I'd learn AI when things calmed down. They never calmed down.' That's not a failing on anyone's part. It's the reality of running a busy team right now.

You don't need to become a technical expert to lead this well. You need enough understanding to make good calls, set sensible guardrails, back your people and see where AI genuinely earns its place. The whole point of handing the routine work to AI is to get more human time back, not less.

The research also highlights that more than seven in ten HR leaders (71%) expect AI to reshape recruitment processes within the next two years, while 55% of managers say they do not know how to effectively assess AI capability during recruitment.

The findings also reveal growing concern around governance and compliance.

Some 62% of HR professionals are concerned about AI governance and compliance risks, while 54% of organisations currently have no formal policy governing employee use of AI tools.

Despite being expected to lead organisational AI adoption, only 23% of HR departments have received AI-specific training themselves.

The Coders Guild warns that organisations risk creating a new workforce wellbeing challenge if investment in skills and training fails to keep pace with AI adoption. While AI is often positioned as a productivity solution, the research suggests it is also creating anxiety among leaders responsible for implementing change.

Many HR and learning professionals report feeling caught between growing boardroom expectations and limited internal capability. Without clear workforce strategies, the responsibility for closing AI skills gaps increasingly falls on already stretched HR and learning teams.

7 fire safety myths that could put business at risk



Fire safety is one of those responsibilities that often doesn't receive the attention it deserves - until something goes wrong, that is. Here, Triton Security explores the seven most common misconceptions around fire safety that businesses should

be challenging.

For many businesses, health & safety compliance has fallen into the trap of being a tick-box exercise that's centred around annual inspections, manual training exercises, and having the right paperwork in place.

However, many organisations continue to operate under out-dated assumptions. This leaves them exposed to not only enforcement action, but to unnecessary risks for employees, customers, visitors and beyond.

Myth #1: "We've passed our fire risk assessment, so everything is ok!"

While important, a fire risk assessment is only a snapshot in time. All it shows is that risks that have been considered based on the building, its usage, and the people inside it at that point in time. However, workplaces are constantly changing - whether it's day-to-day or over the course of a few weeks.

Myth #2: "Fire safety sits with one person."

While a single person or facilities manager is often awarded responsibility, truly effective fire safety relies on a collective approach. Employees will need to have a thorough understanding of evacuation procedures, visitors will need to follow all site protocols, managers will need to know how to properly respond if an incident occurs, and leadership will have the responsibility of ensuring that fire safety is always a priority.

Myth #3: "We have fire extinguishers so we're fully prepared!"

Fire extinguishers are key, but only if they're the appropriate kind, properly maintained, and people know when - and when not - to use them. If someone attempts to tackle a fire without the proper training, then it can put everyone within the building at risk.

Myth #4: "We've never had a fire, so our risk is low."

Unfortunately, past performance is not a reliable indicator of future risk. Even the most serious fire incidents can occur in a building or organisation that has never experienced one in the past, making complacency a huge risk.

Myth #5: "Fire safety is all about compliance."

Does compliance matter? Absolutely. But hitting the minimum legal requirements is the bare minimum; organisations need to aim higher. Having strong fire safety in place not only protects people and property, but also supports business continuity, safeguards reputation, and reduces disruption should - despite all efforts - an incident occur.

Myth #6: "Evacuation plans only matter in an emergency."

Whether or not your evacuation plan will be successful and effective is determined long before the fire alarm sounds. Holding regular drills, ensuring clear communication, having updated procedures, and a complete understanding of how the most vulnerable in your building will be supported are all factors that contribute to a response that's calm and effective.

Myth #7: "Fire safety doesn't need reviewing unless regulations change."

One of the biggest mistakes businesses make is assuming that their operations aren't constantly changing, because they are. Hybrid and flexible working, new tech, rising and falling occupancy levels, and building modifications can all have subtle yet significant implications when it comes to fire safety planning.

At the end of the day, good fire safety isn't about passing inspections; it's about making sure that - should the unexpected happen - everyone knows what to do, how to respond, and the systems work as they should.

Fire safety should never be viewed as a standalone compliance access, but rather a key part of responsible business management.

Hr NETWORK Breakfast Club August 2026

(Edinburgh & Glasgow)



Hr NETWORK was delighted to host the August Breakfast Club, bringing together members for our usual two early-morning gatherings, at the Kimpton Hotel in Edinburgh on Thursday 27th August, followed by the Hilton Glasgow on Friday 28th August.

With organisations represented from across all sectors, the Employers' Breakfast Club is a series of four seasonal morning insight and professional development speaker sessions held in both **Edinburgh and Glasgow**. Member organisations can choose which location is most convenient for them, ensuring the programme remains accessible to HR and people professionals across Scotland.

Welcoming members to both events, Hr NETWORK's Lee Turner highlighted one of the key reasons behind the Breakfast Club initiative: To provide the HR community with a regular opportunity to come together in a dynamic environment, share experiences and explore some of the **big topics affecting today's workplace**.

Once again, Hr NETWORK brought together three excellent and thought-provoking speakers, with each speaker attending both events to ensure consistent and equal access for members in Edinburgh and Glasgow.

First up was **Colin Lamb**, Chief Explorer and founder of award-winning leadership and culture consultancy **Connect Three**.

In his thought-provoking session, '**Why Smart Leaders Still Get Stuck: Understanding the Leadership Shift from Technical Expertise to Adaptive Leadership**', Colin explored why traditional leadership approaches can often fall short and introduced delegates to the

important distinction between technical and adaptive leadership.

Delegates were given a practical framework to help identify which leadership challenges can be addressed through existing expertise and which require leaders to think, behave and lead differently.

Also speaking was **Paul Crabb**, founder of **Atypical Creativity** and self-described Neuro-activist.

In '**Neurodiversity & Work: What Happens Next?**', Paul introduced his Six Steps of Neurodiversity in the Workplace, exploring six key workplace pinch points — from awareness and understanding through to management, communication, workflow, recruitment and meeting culture — that can create significant challenges for neurodiverse professionals.

Paul's session was thoughtful, evidence-led and honest about the areas that can be difficult to navigate. Importantly, however, it also highlighted Atypical's positive and practical approach, demonstrating that there are constructive solutions that can make a genuine difference to people and organisations.

The final session at both events, '**The Colleague Beside You: Recognising Addiction, Reducing Stigma and Supporting Recovery**', was delivered by **Lesley McGeoch**, Head of Employee Relations at **Natwest Group**.



Lesley gave an exceptionally open and honest account of living and working alongside loved ones affected by alcohol addiction.

Addiction is something many of us may believe happens to other people, somewhere else, until it touches our own lives. Lesley's session began with deeply personal stories of living alongside loved ones affected by addiction, alongside her experience of managing addiction-related issues in the workplace and the heartbreak, confusion and frustration that can accompany them.

At Thursday's Edinburgh Breakfast Club, Lesley was joined by Dr Charlie Orton, CEO of UK SMART Recovery, while Friday's Glasgow session welcomed Professor Derek Heim, one of the UK's leading experts and advisers on addiction.

Together, the speakers explored the reality of addiction in today's workplace and the important role HR professionals, managers and colleagues can play in reducing stigma, encouraging conversations and supporting people to seek help.

The sessions also introduced UK SMART Recovery, a charity transforming lives through evidence-based support, practical tools and a community built around hope and recovery.

Breakfast Club Series Two – Coming in 2027

The August events bring the first series of Hr NETWORK Breakfast Club gatherings to a close, and what a successful first series it has been.

Following the popularity of this latest initiative from Hr NETWORK, our Events Planning Team is already working on 'Series Two', with annual membership now being opened up to organisations across the wider HR and people profession.



While participation is now open to all organisations, including those providing products and services to the HR profession, the ethos of the Breakfast Club remains unchanged.

The programme has been designed to encourage peer-to-peer discussion, collaboration and meaningful networking, rather than providing a platform for direct selling. Hr NETWORK therefore asks all attendees to respect this principle, allowing genuine relationships and conversations to develop naturally rather than through sales-led approaches.

The next series of Hr NETWORK Employers' Breakfast Club events will begin in February 2027, with gatherings taking place in both Edinburgh and Glasgow on consecutive days.

BOOKINGS FOR 2027 ARE NOW UNDERWAY AND PLACES ARE AVAILABLE ON A FIRST COME FIRST SERVED BASIS.

For further information on the new series of **Breakfast Club** events taking place from February 2027 in both Edinburgh and Glasgow on two consecutive days, please visit: <https://hrnetworkjobs.com/breakfastclub/>





Hr NETWORK Magazine Inspiring People Development

Current: Hr NETWORK Magazine

Connections: : 500+

Location: Scotland, United Kingdom

About:

Hr NETWORK is 'The Hub' of Scottish HR and people development with an 'Access All Areas' pass to Scotland's most influential human resource and business professionals across all sectors in Scotland. Providing daily news, updates and regular events for the HR profession through our Magazine, National Awards, and Conference & Exhibition, as well as our recently launched exciting networking and search platform Hr MARKET, there really is no need to go anywhere else.

Hr NETWORK Events - a range of events hosted by our partners and advertisers throughout Scotland.

Specialties: Networking, Marketing & Communications, Event Management, Corporate Publishing, Public Speaking, Advertising and Sponsorship, Gala Dinners,

Recommendations:

Hr NETWORK magazine is a great publication for HR professionals and is one, which I find really informative and helpful. It is a good read. The Hr NETWORK Awards ceremony is the highlight of my year. In November, every year, we celebrate the very best of HR in Scotland. HR is often referred to as a "back office function". The Hr Network Awards, which are robustly and independently judged, proves beyond any doubt that HR is and should be at the heart of every organisation and that as a profession we make a significant and measurable contribution to the success of an organisation. Thank you Hr NETWORK.

Jacqui Jones, Director of HR, NHS Lanarkshire

Without a doubt, Hr NETWORK has been instrumental in us building a brand across Scotland. We have sponsored both the Hr NETWORK Awards and the Conference, both showcasing some of the best HR has to offer in Scotland. Lee and the team are total professionals offering a genuine non-partisan "all welcome" approach to their services and offer great value for money. These guys have become part of the Hunter Adams team and we couldn't have done it without them.

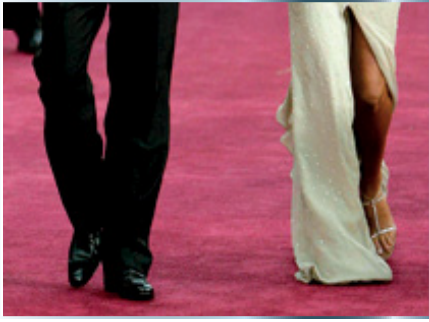
Dean Hunter, Chairman, Hunter Adams

Great Conference and Magazine, but most of all an outstanding organisation for networking and connecting with senior HR colleagues across Scotland. If you want to stay connected I can't recommend Hr NETWORK highly enough.

Greig Aitken, Head of People Strategy & Insight, Natwest Group

I have worked with Lee Turner and his team at Hr NETWORK for a number of years. Hr NETWORK has a key place in the Scottish HR industry and provides a unique platform for professionals to share information and best practice. The informative yet friendly approach that Lee takes has earned him a leading reputation within the industry. I have no hesitation to recommend Lee and Hr NETWORK to any person or business, who want to be kept informed and involved in the latest HR news and events.

Katie Drummond, Managing Director, Syme Drummond



RECOGNISE



ACKNOWLEDGE



REWARD

SAVE THE DATE!



Gala Dinner, Glasgow Hilton,
Thursday 12th November 2026

For further details contact the Awards Planning Team on
Tel: 0131 625 3267 or email: awards@hrnetworkscotland.co.uk
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