



FUNCTIONAL BUSINESS

HUMAN RESOURCES

HOW CAN BUSINESS OWNERS ENSURE THEIR HR PROCESSES ARE AS EFFICIENT AND EFFECTIVE AS POSSIBLE? WE TALK TO THE EXPERTS TO FIND OUT...

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Recruitment, onboarding, training and development, performance management, reinforcing company culture... these are all essential functions of human resources (HR). Above all, it's about improving employee performance. Without a HR department – whether it's in-house or outsourced – where would we be?

Many businesses have adeptly navigated the extremely challenging mix of Covid-19 and the initial

impact of Brexit, coming out the other side stronger, agile and more resilient. Despite the success stories, however, the landscape overall for SMEs in the South East is rocky.

Firms are now having to navigate record inflation rates which, currently standing at 7%, are the highest since the 90s. The Office of National Statistics has also reported an increase in vacancies and falling unemployment figures, indicating a tightening of the labour force, increasing costs,

including wages, along with the necessity of digitalisation and environmental accountability.

To get through the current crisis, Kent HR, a team of HR consultants with the ability to support on a wide range of HR topics, recognise that companies need to be agile and willing to accept that 'one size' does not fit all. HR support consultant Ruth Epps explains: "Communication, adaptability and flexibility are the keys to overcoming any talent and retention issues."



> Ruth Epps



> Sebastian Mattern

In Ruth's eyes, employees' mental health and wellbeing has been one of the biggest HR challenges for the past few years. According to the Mental Health Foundation, one in six adults experience common mental health problems and research by Deloitte showed the cost to employers to be £56 billion in 2020-2021. "In 2022/2023, this topic will need to be at the forefront of every HR strategy," she states. "Increasingly becoming an issue of discussion regarding employees' health – both mental and physical – is the topic of menopause. Women of 'menopausal age' (45-54) make up 11% of all people in employment. Beyond that, there are increasing numbers of younger women impacted by common conditions such as endometriosis which can cause sometimes debilitating menopausal symptoms."

Ruth goes on to explain that without the implementation of policies and training on the subject matter, businesses will lose valuable staff members. "To overcome this, my advice is that it is

BE OPEN TO CHANGE, SAYS GFHR CONSULTING

Company culture has always been important, but in 2022, more so than ever. How companies look after their people is under close examination. There is a real opportunity for businesses at the moment, but you have to be willing to adapt and change.

The team at GFHR Consulting point out that it's not a case of doing something the way it always has been done; businesses have to be open to new ideas, new ways of working and increasing flexibility. "The hybrid working pattern, for example, has amazing opportunities for businesses to attract talent that can work remotely, offer the work-life balance, but still be part of a team," says managing director Gemma Farina. "It allows businesses to really adapt their working practices to employees' needs – both physically and mentally.

Gemma continues: "Your people are at the heart of your business. They're the ones driving your vision forward. Investing in them will ultimately mean success for you. With the right HR practices in place, you can really start to engage your team, grow your business and build your company's future."

GFHR Consulting provides a comprehensive and bespoke HR consultancy service for small

and medium businesses, working with clients on an ad hoc, project or retained basis. "From establishing your goals and writing policy to conducting interviews and appraisals, we can support you like an in-house HR team," says Gemma. "Our top piece of advice is to communicate! It is the biggest cause of issues we see, where communication hasn't happened. Wherever your employees are located – be it in the office or remote – they need to understand the expectations you have and how they bring value to the business.

If there are issues or you have concerns, talk about it, but equally, it's important that employees know when they are doing a good job. Create opportunities for feedback, to talk and to listen."



> Gemma Farina

crucial to engage with your workforce, listen to your employees' needs and ultimately invest heavily to ensure their needs are being met."

Based in Ashford, Kent, 20/20 HR provides its HR services on a white-label basis and offers clients ongoing tailored support. Founder, director and lead consultant Sebastian Mattern believes that the pandemic has expedited many areas of business.

The biggest thing, he says, is remote or hybrid working. "Overnight, firms were forced to come up with solutions to enable their employees to work from home. So often when faced with a challenge, they made it work and in many cases with great results. I think all of us, in one way or another and often without realising, also reassessed what is important in life at some point during the pandemic. That, together with realising that work can be done without sitting in an office, seems to have changed employees' mindset."

Sebastian explains that flexible and/or hybrid working, or even full remote working, is now one

of the most important things employees expect, not only in their existing employment but also when looking for a new role. "This creates a challenging environment for businesses, and the shortage of suitable candidates which has formed a very strong employee's job market is intensifying the situation. For now, employees are certainly in the strongest position to negotiate which I have ever known."

During the pandemic, work and personal life have merged far more than anyone could ever have anticipated, and that, in turn, has created an expectation that employers must be mindful, interested in and accommodating of employee's life outside work. "That translates into benefit expectations," says Sebastian.

He adds: "It pains me when I take calls from companies struggling with recruitment and then look at the job advert that they've been running. If your ad looks like it did in 2019, then please don't be surprised that you don't get any applications. If your list of benefits consists of 28 days of holiday

THE BENEFITS OF HR CLUBS

The last couple of years have introduced a whole host of new challenges for employers' people management and recruitment teams to tackle. From topics such as hybrid working to furlough schemes and the emergence of diversity and inclusion policies, management has been tasked with ensuring that their organisation's transition is in alignment with upcoming workplace trends.

Tunbridge Wells-based law firm Thomson Snell & Passmore hosts regular HR Clubs, which have continued to successfully take place virtually over the course of the pandemic. "Our primary intention is to provide a learning environment for HR and finance professionals responsible for HR to have a chance to network with peers, share ideas and discuss a wide range of employment and general law issues," explains head of employment Nick Hobden.

Last month, the team provided a thought-provoking session on GDPR four years on with the help of an expert in the field, looking into relevant case studies, the extent of fines/penalties and issues around data subject access requests. Other topics covered in previous HR Clubs have included bullying/harassment in the workplace and the legalities of Covid testing.

Nick says: "HR and recruitment teams are going to be busier than ever, and it is essential that they are well-supported and kept up-to-date with the evolving law and the impact this will have on their organisation. Communication is key; holding routine team meetings, keeping your workforce up to date and attending our regular HR clubs will help to encourage success and drive business performance. If you would like to attend one of our future events, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me by emailing nick.hobden@ts-p.co.uk."



> Nick Hobden

per year, a workplace pension and great opportunities for career progression, then you're not offering benefits. Similarly, "salary dependent on experience" or "competitive salary for the right candidate" just doesn't cut it anymore."

From an HR and employment law perspective, 20/20 HR has seen a large increase in tribunal claims, including statutory flexible working requests. Every employee who has worked for an employer for 26 weeks or more has the legal right to apply for flexible working," says Sebastian. "While not explicitly mentioned, this can be about remote working. Many businesses are not aware that there are just seven very specific reasons for which the application can be refused. If it is refused or not handled as set out in law, then the employee is free to file a tribunal claim, which could turn out to be very costly as with good legal advice, an employee may well link the refusal of their request to indirect discrimination."

Whilst there is a need for human resources expertise during all stages of the economic cycle, the current climate is amplifying its importance and the businesses getting it right will have a competitive advantage. Sharon Juleff, managing director, people services, Outset Group, explains: "The focus for any business now needs to be on establishing or maintaining a supportive, encouraging, compelling culture and building a reputation for being an excellent place to work and develop a career."





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To do this, it's essential to look at your employee value proposition and have a clear human resources infrastructure and plan in place that accommodates employee needs and wants, while at the same time drives the right people behaviours to support the business purpose and strategy, says Sharon. "It is important that HR develop well-written employment contracts, fair and legally sound policies and strong people practices, and of course, ensure management teams are supported and educated in key areas of policy such as diversity, gender equality and compliance," she adds. "A business also needs an efficient and compelling resourcing methodology, starting with a focus on internal development, but adopting a customer-focused perspective when searching externally to attract the best candidates and sell the opportunities to them."

Since 2002, Outset UK has been providing HR and people services across segmented businesses and sectors. "Our ethos and approach is to work closely with business owners, managers and internal HR teams, understand their specific requirements and offer tailor-made solutions for their business," says Sharon. "If the focus for a business is ensuring their HR policies, contracts and processes are relevant and consistent, or they need advice in dealing with employee issues, our experienced team of HR advisors will work with them and are only a phone call away to help. The third part of the team triangle is our employment lawyers, who work alongside businesses in a pragmatic, commercial and risk-sensitive way, helping them reach outcomes that move their organisation forward."

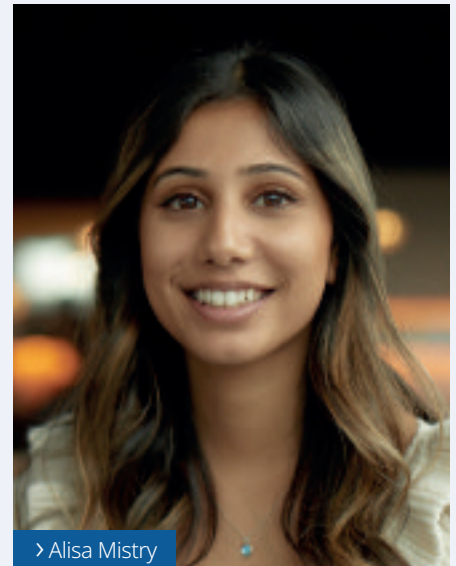
Currently, it is a very competitive recruitment market. Employers must now fight for the best talent to fill their job vacancies. Alisa Mistry, HR advice manager at Charlie HR, which offers on-demand HR advice and HR software for SMEs, urges companies to create clear job adverts, highlighting the training and development, wellbeing and flexibility on offer, on top of a competitive salary. "Ensure job ads are scanned for inclusivity," she adds. "There should be no biases and the wording used must be gender-neutral. You should also advertise as widely as possible, using recruitment agencies and referral schemes."

Once you've secured your candidate, you need to introduce them to the inner workings of the organisation. For the first few weeks, Alisa advises considering offering more office working by way of induction. A physical office space, she says, is important for those in new positions, as well as junior members of the team.

For small business owners, outsourced HR support can be very expensive. Alisa explains that CharlieHR's USP is its affordability. The team work flexibly with their clients and provide a virtual HR platform designed to make day-to-day HR operations easier. "It can track and record all your employee documents in one place and makes things



> Sharon Juleff



> Alisa Mistry

like holiday scheduling and recording easier," she points out. "CharlieHR can offer advice on legal issues and performance issues, help businesses develop and review contracts, support SMEs in creating company handbooks and review their policies. This includes forming a diversity and inclusion strategy."

From attracting the best talent to providing flexible/hybrid working and promoting mental health awareness, for UK businesses, there is a lot to consider in the area of human resources. The key takeaway – you need to adapt. If you don't, you will be left behind.



BRACHERS LLP AND KENT INVICTA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Brachers LLP, the sister company of Kent HR, has recently renewed its patronage of the Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce for a sixth year. The Chamber offers a comprehensive range of support for their membership of Kent-based businesses,

which includes HR and recruitment support under the umbrella of Quest services, on top of policy and grassroots representation, networking opportunities, business exhibitions, webinars, customs support and business growth services.