

People & Organizational Performance Practice

Why being in HR is getting tougher—and how to break through

You're not imagining it: the past five years have taken a toll on human resources. Here's how leaders can help.



Everybody hurts, R.E.M. once famously sang. And if you're in human resources, your job is to help. But in the recent run-up of serial disruptions, HR has confronted a new and widening array of strategic and organizational-health challenges—and now, the function's own stress is showing.

On this episode of *McKinsey Talks Talent*, McKinsey leaders and talent experts [Brooke Weddle](#) and [Bryan Hancock](#) join Wendy Miller, McKinsey's chief people officer for North America, as well as global editorial director Lucia Rahilly, to discuss the dynamics that are making HR tougher than ever—as well as what leaders can do differently to begin turning morale around.

The following transcript has been edited for clarity and length.

Why stress is on the rise

Lucia Rahilly: The genesis for today's episode was a [New York Times article](#) claiming that employees feel exasperated by today's HR departments—but that HR employees also feel exasperated and in a thankless role.¹ To some degree, everyone complains at work, but the *Times* article suggests that friction and dissatisfaction have reached a new high. Do you agree, and, if so, what accounts for the change?

Wendy Miller: The past five years have been unprecedented and have brought so many new challenges, resulting in tensions being quite high. This is true for everyone in an organization, but it's more acutely painful for colleagues whose role involves caring for individuals. The people on the front line of delivering messages, enforcing rules, or explaining changes are at a point that feels like an all-time low.

Bryan Hancock: Wendy, can you provide a little of the flavor of what we've been through collectively in the past five years?

Wendy Miller: Stepping back, at a moment of unbelievable growth, we were challenged with the “[Great Resignation](#)” and so many opportunities for our colleagues to leave.² Simultaneously, the pandemic meant people were working from home. That required a whole new playbook: How do we work this way? And when we then return to the office, how do we create a culture that makes that work? That's when the wheels came off the bus for so many of us. A health crisis, an anxiety crisis, [geopolitical](#) challenges—it was clearly a lot to navigate well.

Bryan Hancock: I saw some research reporting that 35 percent of HR leaders surveyed don't believe their management team cares about their mental health. Can you help us unpack that?

Wendy Miller: It's such a disheartening thing to hear.

The programs, policies, and support for mental health and short-term disability have never been better. Yet change fatigue is so real, and I think relationships, trust, and engagement with employers are at an all-time low, so employees probably feel like people care less than they did five years ago. There's this juxtaposition of the demand for these services—the number of people stepping away and taking short-term disability—and the relationships employees have: Who do they turn to, who do they ask for help, and who do they trust?

And then, what do you do about it?

¹ David Segal, “So, human resources is making you miserable?,” *New York Times*, August 3, 2024.

² Aaron De Smet, Bonnie Dowling, Marino Mugayar-Baldocchi, and Bill Schaninger, “[‘Great Attrition’ or ‘Great Attraction’? The choice is yours,](#)” *McKinsey Quarterly*, September 8, 2021.

What it means to ‘live in friction’

Lucia Rahilly: Brooke, how does this stack up with what you’re seeing with clients?

Brooke Weddle: It definitely lines up.

Wendy, you described the new challenges HR faces, and I think all that is true. On the other hand, it’s interesting that HR is a function that is seemingly always being challenged, both internally and externally. In my experience, HR typically has lower satisfaction scores. Some of that could be being under stress, which means their perceptions of organizational health are lower. It could also be that they have higher expectations of what *good* looks like. They’re the ones thinking deeply about what drives organizational health, including the role of talent.

If I could pose a question back, I would ask, “How do we explain this constant demand on HR relative to other organizational functions?”

Wendy Miller: The HR function lives in the friction between caring for the employee and caring for the organization. HR’s role is to represent the best interests of the organizations we work for and deliver care to employees for their end-to-end life cycle at those organizations. When you live in that friction, at times, you’re underdelivering that care to employees.

At this moment—when employees’ needs are at an all-time high and organizations are struggling with costs and resetting around historical growth expectations—that gap is even wider than during less volatile times.

There’s also an assumption that the employees’ interests and the company’s interests aren’t aligned—when many times they are. I have several

tools to help people when they’re struggling. We can get a little bit caught up in the myths and expectations of people wanting too much, and that’s where the HR professional has to pull back and say, “This is what I can do, and it’s actually quite good.”

Bryan Hancock: I see a tension at some clients where the HR role has great structural benefits, but those benefits aren’t fully utilized. When it’s time to make tough decisions, HR colleagues at these clients often say, “I wish it hadn’t gone down that way.” In other words, the structure is there, the intent is there, but then HR is tasked with executing rather than being a thought partner in navigating some difficult transitions. How much of that do you see?

Wendy Miller: Change management and [organizational change and communications](#) are such challenging things to get right. Organizations need to understand the importance of partnering with their HR colleagues and engaging them early when they’re thinking about strategic changes—or even some minor operational changes.

How do we think about the impact of these changes on our employees? How do we take the spin out of messages that our very savvy employees can see right through? How do we roll it out in an authentic way that we can believe in? The earlier you engage your HR business partners in those conversations, the better it is for the organization.

Bryan Hancock: Engaging HR early also means they’re less likely to be told to execute something they don’t believe in, which is some of what makes the job so hard for so many.

Wendy Miller: Our client impact at McKinsey is our [people mission](#). They are one and the same. We cannot deliver the impact we want to have with our clients if we don't deliver on the promise we make to our people when they join.

What HR is—and what it's not

Brooke Weddle: Some of my clients say, “We have to make sure that HR has a strategic seat at the table.” HR has gone through an evolution—if not a revolution—in building capabilities to become strategic partners. I think that works best when business leaders undergo similar capability building, raising their knowledge and abilities regarding people leadership and change leadership.

[Think about middle managers.](#) There's no way they can do what we need them to if they rely too much on HR. When it comes to capability building, we need to be thoughtful about what we put on HR versus the rest of the enterprise and ensure that people leadership is a joint capability.

Wendy Miller: Brooke, I couldn't agree with you more. I fully have a seat at the table, and I see the clients I've served having that seat, too. So find your voice and use your voice—1,000 percent.

Lucia Rahilly: Let me just play devil's advocate here. The *Times* article indicates that non-HR employees feel not only that they have more acute needs and more burnout than they did prepandemic but also that they've taken on more. Is it possible that we've already overwhelmed employees, without this additional capability building?

Wendy Miller: I think it is the demand of the workforce as we go forward to learn how to be conceptual problem solvers and think through “What information do I really need? And what am I going to do with that information?”

It's very easy to add things to the portfolio of trainings, surveys, and information gathering. It's a lot harder to stop doing things. So creating and building that muscle and challenging the status quo of, for example, a survey you've been doing for ten years is something that I think every organization needs.

Lucia Rahilly: Can you say more about the survey point? We are seeing a proliferation of surveys on well-being, engagement, and so forth.

Wendy Miller: Information for information's sake is a waste of everyone's time, and it further erodes trust. You have to tell your organization what you're doing with the information. There has to be a feedback loop.

We spend more time crafting surveys and thinking that analysis for analysis's sake gives us insight than we do asking, “What are we going to do with this data? How are we going to share this information back?” And then, even more important, “What actions are we going to take and what are we going to do differently based on this input?”

Brooke Weddle: For those very reasons, many organizations have moved away from the annual employee engagement survey. Where I see organizations doing things in a higher-impact way is finding the right fighting unit, whether an agile team or a division or a department, and getting the right cadence of pulse checks to quickly—in 30 seconds to a minute—get input. Then, they can have a deep team discussion 24 to 48 hours later that is data driven and not unstructured. That's where I think organizations are doing a really good job at using the pulsing data to affect engagement, productivity, and satisfaction: all the measures we care about for the employee base.

What it looks like to break through

Bryan Hancock: Wendy, how can HR leaders bring joy to the organization? Many of the HR leaders I work with are the funniest, happiest, most outgoing, wonderful people who get handed a bunch of compliance tasks. I see some break through and bring joy, and others who get broken down.

Wendy Miller: As an HR leader, I can bring joy if I can be my authentic self with a team that is excited to work with me and views my input as a real contribution. When we can engage in some fun, meaty problem-solving, laughter and spontaneity come from that relationship.

We can all talk about making Fridays fun in the office—and one-off events are very important and play a role. But if my day-to-day is going to be more joyful, more energetic, and more fun, then I am working with people I like and respect who like and respect me. And we're engaging on some cool topics together, making our organization a better place.

Lucia Rahilly: The two talent folks I work with most closely are among my favorite people in the firm. If I don't want to do something HR-related, I can call them and say, "Why are you hurting me like this?" And we laugh about it, and then I hang up and do it. Is there anything you see the best HR leaders doing that helps to avoid that collective groan when employees open their email?

Brooke Weddle: It depends on what's being communicated. Let's say there's a new initiative around required number of days in the office. HR may have had a leadership role in figuring that out, but I would bet many other leaders were part of the decision. Perhaps it's a change in how we communicate. Maybe people have strong feelings about whether they use Zoom or Teams. Whatever

it is, sometimes HR is the messenger caught in the middle.

Bryan Hancock: Wendy, how do you see technology changing the HR business partner role going forward?

Wendy Miller: The potential impact of technology and generative AI is enormous. We are in the messy beginnings, where we are tremendously excited about the efficiencies and impact this could have. And it will change the role. Over time, the administrative side will likely become easier or more automated. However, there is still an [unbelievable need for a human element](#) that can translate even self-serve tools to help a colleague in need. My hope is that we can use this technology to help individuals, help employees, and partner with business leaders in making organizations a better place to work.

What to do differently

Lucia Rahilly: Suppose I'm an HR leader and my team feels overworked and underappreciated. Where should I start?

Wendy Miller: Stepping back to ask, "What is driving this?" is a worthwhile exercise. Certain areas have become really complicated. If you can, think about carving out one of those areas and creating a small group with deep expertise in that area.

An example might be immigration support, which has become increasingly complicated in the last few years. Within this area, some tasks are taking up an enormous amount of time from several people, so you could pull some of that out. But you need to get to the root of the problem, which takes real work, and then help people figure out solutions that are pretty tactical in nature.

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Lucia Rahilly: We've talked a lot about how vital it is for HR to build trust with other non-HR teams and stakeholders. Any final thoughts on how to do that—particularly where trust may have been eroded?

Bryan Hancock: This is where the role of HR becomes one of being a manager and a coach—so that for a difficult people issue that's particularly sensitive, teams know they can call on HR.

Wendy Miller: You can't underestimate the importance of making the time to engage on the topics people bring to your door and need help with, because tied to those topics is a person who is looking for a friend, a counselor, a thought partner. That is priority number one, especially with your business leaders who are navigating so many things. Those are your opportunities to start building trust. And you get to see the best of your organization because you see these leaders trying their best to do what's right. They're looking for help and guidance, being vulnerable. Those are magical moments you should not miss. Those are the reasons we are doing this job.

Brooke Weddle: When I work with organizations on their HR strategy, I see a couple of relevant examples of trust. One is the senior high-touch HR business partnership, which is a strategic, two-way engagement. And that, when done well, is completely trust-based. Often, though, HR has to have some foundational elements that build trust because HR manages across many different things that make day-to-day life at a company easy.

Wendy, picking up on your point of living in the tension—*that's* the tension: getting the trust right around some of that “do no harm” foundational blocking and tackling of HR. And then, really leaning into the trust, the strategic thought partnership, which can truly be magical when it

happens well and happens at scale across the organization.

Bryan Hancock: Trust is hard earned but can go away in a second. And it can go away in a second because of HR but also, unfortunately, because of business leaders. I've seen HR work hard to build trust-based relationships with broader teams only to be thrown under the bus in a big meeting, with leaders saying, “HR has forced us to do this, and I don't agree with the direction, but . . .” And then I've seen HR say, “I don't know how I can be effective now because I was just undermined by a senior leader making a thoughtless comment.”

It's important to be thoughtful in those moments. The unified voice helps build trust, but a little division amplifies quickly across teams and organizations. If leaders understood that impact, they might choose their words differently.

Lucia Rahilly: Any tactical suggestions for HR executives who find themselves in this situation, where they feel leaders may have undermined HR and the talent process?

Brooke Weddle: Data can be your friend here. There is value in asking people, “What is important? And where are there gaps?” And since we know one business leader may not agree with another, there's also value in convening people to collectively say, “If we were to hold up the mirror, what are we getting wrong?” That kind of collective engagement can help unlock a different path forward.

Bryan Hancock: We also need to build trust within HR. HR has to stick up for HR, too. And everybody has to own the full agenda. Some of these things are legally required. Or they might be cost-related. There are good reasons behind many of the core policies, and we need everybody in HR to speak up. Otherwise, you may build immediate trust but undermine trust in HR as a whole.

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