

HOW TO ADVANCE YOUR HR CAREER

Six professionals share the advice that has helped them succeed in the HR field.

Namely  HR for Humans

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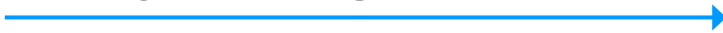
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INTRODUCTION

As your day-to-day HR responsibilities pile on, it can be hard to step back and find the time to focus on your career. How do you navigate an ever-changing HR landscape? How do you make sure to stay up-to-date with the latest industry developments? And how do you invest proactively in your own career—not just the careers of your employees?

Who better to guide you than the veteran HR professionals who have been there, done that. Whether you're just getting started or looking to make your next move up the career ladder, a little advice from a seasoned pro can go a long way. That's why we spoke with six HR experts across the industry to find out what has helped them move their careers forward.

Ready? Let's get started.



1

BE PROACTIVE

Great HR is always one step ahead.

Tip 1: Be Proactive

A proactive attitude is ideal for a candidate in any role, however it's especially important in HR. Why? You'll face a wide range of situations that require creative solutions. The more innovation and enthusiasm you bring to your role, the easier it is for leadership to trust you and know that you're doing a top-quality job.

At growing companies, many small HR teams have to start from scratch to create and implement processes that will scale effectively. In most cases, it falls on HR teams to take the lead on initiatives that build a set of cultural values designed to support the company long-term.

TAKE IT FROM STEPHANIE...

"I was the fifth full-time employee at my company, and I truly fell into HR! I was the one who noticed if the office needed to be tidied or we were running low on supplies, and I recognized that formal job training and managers were a must during our high-growth phase. When I noticed these items needed ownership, I acted on them and created a new role for myself. As the company grew, so did my role. With all that said, I didn't wait for someone to assign these responsibilities to me, I saw opportunities and acted!



To this day, I'm always working beyond my job scope to identify systems and processes that need attention and lending my expertise. Don't sit back and watch your company grow or wait for your role to unfold; look for opportunities and act. Everyone loves a positive go-getter who has the company's best interest in mind."

**- Stephanie Madsen,
Honcho of Happiness / Total Rewards Sr. Manager**

What Now?

Follow these three steps to be proactive once you identify challenges or gaps within your organization:



HOW TO BE PROACTIVE

Get Leadership Support

As you approach uncharted territory, make sure you work closely with the leadership team. Want to introduce a new performance cycle? Thinking of incentivizing employees to go paperless? Pitch ideas to your C-level execs and keep them in the loop as you implement. There's always room for innovation, but it's important to have leadership buy-in as you try new things and scale your efforts.

Ask for Feedback

Never be afraid to experiment, but always measure the effectiveness. Your ultimate goal is to increase employee engagement and retention, so it's critical to gather direct employee feedback on your new initiatives. At smaller companies, have as many in-person conversations as possible, and as you scale, check in with employees through pulse surveys.

Learn from Mistakes

When building out HR processes, you can expect a lot of trial and error. If you introduce [Summer Fridays](#) and notice a big decrease in productivity, you'll need to backtrack and rethink the perk. If your goal was to reward and incentivize your employees, there may be a better way to do so that doesn't negatively impact the business. Perhaps a summer company outing or monthly team happy hours would be a better alternative, for example.

2

LEARN THE FULL SCOPE OF HR

Time to broaden your horizons.

Tip 2: Learn the Full Scope of HR

There are a [variety of career paths](#) that HR professionals might follow as they advance their careers. From talent acquisition associate to payroll guru, it's helpful to understand each aspect of HR before settling on a specialization. HR Generalist roles are a great way to dip your toes into a variety of functions and gain insights into HR's most common challenges.

If you're on a small (or one-person) HR team, you'll most likely be asked to perform an array of tasks and be challenged to execute across disciplines. You'll likely have a hand in culture, benefits, payroll, and hiring—but as your team grows, you'll have the chance to focus on a specific function that appeals to you. Whichever function you zero in on, having generalist experience can make you well-positioned to take on a managerial role down the road.

TAKE IT FROM CAYLEIGH...

“Explore all areas of HR before deciding on one specialization—there are a lot of different areas of HR (benefits, payroll, employee development, etc.). It's nice to see all aspects before deciding to specialize in a particular area—or you may even decide to be an HR Generalist that handles a bunch of different things in the long run.



I actually started in a Marketing role in my company and felt like I needed to do something different. After long talks with the Director of HR, I realized that I wanted to be a part of the culture-building and growth of the company. So I was able to interview internally for the open HR position and was hired!”

**- Cayleigh Doyle,
HR Coordinator**

What Now?

Here are three ways to gain exposure to the full spectrum of HR duties:



HOW TO EXPAND YOUR HR EXPERTISE

Shadow Your Peers

There won't always be the perfect opportunity to try everything. Consider shadowing members of your own (or external) teams to gain exposure to different roles. Spend time with the HR Director to see if you like managing a team; learn how to process payroll from the finance team; or even talk through current benefits plans with your broker. Your colleagues won't fault you for deepening your understanding of the business, and you can learn a lot from simply watching.

Experiment with New Initiatives

If your role doesn't touch on an aspect of HR that interests you, work on initiatives that give you exposure to those areas. For example, if your main focus is recruiting, but you're interested in employee engagement, dedicate some time to a cultural initiative. Suggest a wellness, charity, or social activity and help bring it to life. If it's successful, you may get to spend more time on similar projects in the future.

Understand Long-term Opportunities

Is your ultimate goal to manage others? Work with the CEO to fill leadership roles? Or be the go-to resource for people analytics? Each role has distinct responsibilities that require a diverse skillset. As you explore different opportunities at the ground level, be sure to keep your long-term path in mind and consider what experiences will be most valuable to you down the road.

3

CONSIDER CERTIFICATION

Certification from A to Z, PHR to SHRM-CP

Tip 3: Consider Certification

While many HR professionals at small and mid-sized companies “fell” into HR, it’s important that your growing HR experience is reflected on your resume in order to advance your career. If you started as office admin for a five-person company and developed into an all-encompassing recruiting, payroll, and benefits role, you want your credentials to reflect your on-the-job expertise.

This might mean going back to school for an [MBA in an HR-related field](#)—or it might mean getting an industry certification, like a Professional in Human Resources (PHR) or Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) certification. With a certification in your back pocket, it can be much easier to show your qualifications and advance your career.

TAKE IT FROM DANIELLE...

“I started at the lowest rung in HR as an assistant in a distribution center. The only reason I was even able to get that job was because I dressed professionally for the interview and, compared to everyone else who applied, I was the best bet. Since then, I’ve been taking advantage of every single opportunity to advance my skills, including SHRM certification.

If your superiors know that you are serious about building skills and see that you are engaged, you will get more opportunities to advance your career.”



- **Danielle Siddoway,**
HR Generalist

What Now?

Consider these three approaches as you take steps toward HR certification:



HOW TO GET CERTIFIED

Consult Your Mentors

Whether your ultimate goal is to be a director or a specialist, someone has done it before, so learn which certifications helped them the most in their journey. Some professionals may have found that higher education was crucial, whereas others might think industry certifications were just as useful for their career advancement.

Do Your Research

What's the difference between PHR, SPHR, SHRM-CP, or an MBA? What can each do for you? Which will provide the best ongoing resources and opportunities? Each has its advantages and there's no wrong decision, but make sure to identify the certification that best aligns with your experience and career goals by putting in the time to research.

Get Involved in HR Communities

Whatever route you choose, you will be among like-minded peers who can help you further develop your skillset. If you pursue a Master's, make real connections with your classmates. If you go for your SHRM certification, utilize the organization's online resources and attend conferences to get involved with their network.

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GO OUTSIDE THE HR BUBBLE

Open your eyes to the larger organization.

Tip 4: Go Outside the HR Bubble

It can be easy to fall into the trap of HR tunnel vision. You can actually make a greater HR impact if you have a well-rounded understanding of your company's business and its people. Spend time walking around the office, getting to know employees, or pursuing mentorships with leaders outside of the HR space to help broaden your perspective.

TAKE IT FROM LESHAWN...

"I had a passion for people and organizational development, which helped me kickstart my career in HR. I was fortunate to work for an organization that took chances and believed in giving opportunities for growth and development, so the transition from Sales to HR was fairly easy.

Once I was in the function I truly wanted to be in, it was up to me to educate myself on the body of knowledge, look for mentors to help with progression and be open for any opportunity that presented itself. Every opportunity, whether small or large, can stretch your capabilities. Do not be afraid to take on tasks that may not seem to have a high level of impact because in the long run, it might lead to productive future discussions with your mentor.



Work with the competence and experience of those who are more senior and also those who are not in the HR function. It is good to have mentors who are in the business to give better insight on how to influence and increase performance. But don't be afraid to take a leap outside of HR. Then come back with new skills and a new perspective to become an even sharper HR professional."

- LeShawn Johnson Vega,
HR Manager

What Now?

There are countless resources outside of the HR bubble. Below are a few ways to start taking advantage of them.



GETTING OUTSIDE THE BUBBLE

Take a Walk

Set aside time daily or weekly to step outside of your department and walk around your office. Chat with employees in common spaces, invite them to grab a coffee, learn what they did over the weekend, find out what projects they're working on right now. This puts the human in human resources and not only gives you a better understanding of your employees, but gives them a better understanding of you (and gives a face to the HR department!).

Cultivate a Range of Mentors

HR mentors are great in terms of best practices, troubleshooting, and career advancement, but it's also important to have mentors outside of the HR space who can broaden your perspective and expand your toolset. Leaders in other departments can help you better understand business practices and inspire creative solutions.

Gain New Skills

HR is a perfect landscape for creativity. Amassing skills outside of the direct HR function can be applicable to many of your own initiatives. Tune into a webinar on marketing and apply what you learn to talent acquisition. Take a Photoshop workshop to help you better communicate internal events or explain complex benefits topic in a visually appealing way. Whatever your outside interests, there is likely a way to translate them into HR.

5

UTILIZE FREE RESOURCES

The best things in HR are free.

Tip 5: Utilize Free Resources

Thanks to the internet, you now have a world of free resources right at your fingertips. These resources can help you with everything from answering basic how-to questions to finding a network of HR professionals. There will always be paid resources, events, and certifications that you can try, but don't overlook the opportunities that are publicly available at no charge.

TAKE IT FROM SANDRA...

"I continually challenge myself to learn by attending conferences, reading blogs, and leaning on my peers for advice. I spend the first part of my morning reading up on HR trends and law changes.

Put yourself in the way of learning! Ask for projects from your managers, attend conferences, get an HR certification, ask deep questions, and connect with local HR peers to swap stories and get support."



**- Sandra Del Toro,
HR Manager**

What Now?

The best things in life are free—even in HR. There are a wealth of free HR resources available to you if you know where to look. Here's how to get started:



HOW TO LEVERAGE HR RESOURCES

Network

Making connections is free and the best way to do this is to start reaching out. Read a blog post that inspires you? Email the author. Interested in learning how other small HR teams are building company culture? Reach out on LinkedIn. Join online networks, attend local meetups, and before you know it, you'll have a whole network at hand whenever a question arises.

Learn

There are countless free ways to grow your industry knowledge. Webinars, meetups, and local roundtables are just a few ways to enhance your HR knowledge. Subscribe to [informational newsletters](#) and participate in community networks such as LinkedIn or Slack groups to stay in tune with thought leadership in the HR space. Open communities, like [HR Open Source](#) are another great medium to share ideas among a network of HR practitioners with a range of experience.

Give Back

Whether you have six months of experience or six years, you most likely have some unique insights to offer. Wrestled with a payroll issue, culture initiative, or benefits communication? Odds are someone else is up against a similar hurdle and would love to hear how you overcame the challenge. Type up a short post to share on your social and professional networks. Don't discount your own experience or thought leadership.

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HIGHLIGHT RELEVANT SKILLS

You're an HR rockstar—time to show it.

Tip 6: Highlight Relevant Skills

HR experience doesn't only come from HR roles. No matter what previous titles you've held, you may have amassed numerous skills that are applicable to a wide range of HR positions. Don't underestimate just how well your other experiences—be it in design, sales, or customer support, for example—might translate into HR qualifications.

When you're looking to make the jump to your next role, having on-the-ground experience, even with an administrative title, can make you just as qualified as someone with the "right" HR title. Work with your peers and mentors to make sure that your resume clearly reflects your HR abilities.

TAKE IT FROM ARIEL...

"Highlight any people management, coaching, mentoring or other HR-related duties that you have had in previous roles. Often times, candidates get overlooked for HR positions if they haven't had a previous HR title. I started with an internship even though I had over eight years of management experience that included many HR duties.



Go to networking events. Contacts that I have made through networking have been incredibly helpful when I've needed advice or to ask a question."

**- Ariel Lopez,
HR Manager**

What Now?

Consider these tips to help you capture the full range of your qualifications as you prepare to make a career move:



HOW TO GROW YOUR CAREER

Audit Your Job Duties

When you're ready to make the next step in your career, write down all of your job duties so that you can translate them to the requirements of the future role. For example, for someone looking to move from office admin to HR Generalist, it will be crucial to show that your office duties prepared you with experience in onboarding, payroll administration, or employee event organization, to name a few.

Ask for Help

It's almost guaranteed that someone before you has forged a path, so reach out to others who have had a similar career progression. Get a sense of what skills were useful to them when moving into a new role and what was challenging in their transitions so that you're prepared.

Aim High, but Don't be Afraid to Start Low

Aim high as you build your career in HR, but don't be afraid to accept a title that is seemingly below your experience level either. Ariel started as an intern despite having eight years of managerial experience, but now she's an HR Manager. Titles in the HR landscape can represent vastly different responsibilities depending on company size and structure. You could be an intern on a one-person HR team, doing everything from recruiting to payroll—which might give you more experience than as an HR Associate on a five person team.

7

CONCLUSION

Making sense of the journey.

CONCLUSION

Every HR person follows a unique path, and while it can sometimes feel like a lonely road, there are a wealth of networks and resources available at every stage of the journey. Whether it be blogs, conferences, social networks, or working with a mentor, the best way to advance your career is to get involved in the [HR community](#). Cultivating that support network will help you gain confidence, drive innovation at your company, and move your career forward.

The most successful HR professionals draw on their creativity and drive to help improve their work environments. There's always room for new ideas. You'll have some wins. And remember, the most successful HR pros have gotten where they are because of what they learned from [mistakes they've made, too](#).