



HR talent trends

What's next for our senior leaders?

Report
August 2023

CIPD

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Report

HR talent trends: What's next for our senior leaders?

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1 Foreword

The post-pandemic world continues to face significant changes and challenges. Every day we see news of mass redundancies, geopolitical tensions, escalating inflation, and industrial changes, driving mixed prospects for organisations in Asia Pacific (APAC). East-west trade relations continue to deteriorate, cost of living is rising, and employees today seek purpose-driven work and a commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion. These developments have impacted the talent landscape in the region, pushing people professionals to adapt their talent strategies to meet changing expectations.

This report reflects how externalities have impacted talent and examines how the people profession has responded in Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei. It brings to the fore the similarities and differences in practices and priorities across these countries, considering the implications for people professionals in the region. We will also explore the immediate concerns of recruitment and retention, and the strategies that have been implemented to address them.

Through our pulse survey and in-depth interviews with people professionals and senior leaders, we hope to provide a valuable snapshot of the APAC talent landscape in 2023 and provide a platform for dialogue and collaboration. Read on for insights and our recommendations to help people professionals navigate the ongoing challenges.



May Leng Kwok, Chartered FCIPD
Regional Head APAC, CIPD

2 Introduction

In the aftermath of the global pandemic, with some countries experiencing rising costs of living and political uncertainty, there are [mixed prospects for organisations in Asia-Pacific¹](#) (APAC). The region is expected to be the [fastest-growing economy leading the global digital landscape²](#), which has rapidly accelerated the digital transformation journeys of many companies. Coupled with a stronger focus on the sustainability agenda across APAC, the [digitalisation boom has driven skills gaps](#) as firms demand new capabilities to keep up with the changes.³

APAC companies have also been experiencing 'The Great Resignation' phenomenon over the last two years, with many employees choosing to switch jobs or opt for alternative career paths.⁴ Both talent retention and competition for new talent have therefore become pressing challenges – particularly in markets experiencing looming recessions. According to the CIPD's [People Profession 2022 international survey report](#), the top workforce priority for people professionals internationally was recruiting and retaining talent. In the UK, 60% of employers found that [talent was more difficult to retain](#) in 2022 compared with the previous year, while 58% cited recruitment for senior and skilled roles as the most challenging. To address recruitment issues and improve retention, organisations are offering improved remuneration packages while developing more talent in-house.

Employees have been re-evaluating what is important to them at work, with [65% in APAC](#) prioritising better work–life balance and wellbeing over salary or promotion opportunities. The CIPD's [international report](#) highlighted that demand for flexible and hybrid working was the largest driver of change across organisations. Other research found that [over half of the global workforce](#) would have considered leaving their job if there was a lack of flexibility.⁵ In the UK, employers have also been offering greater work flexibility as a recruitment strategy, with [68% of those that offer hybrid or remote working](#) reporting that it has boosted talent attraction and retention.

While dealing with the multiple challenges presented by the pandemic and shift to hybrid working, people professionals have been experiencing a negative impact on their own mental health. A survey of people professionals in the US and UK found that [98% were experiencing burnout last year](#), as a result of their teams shouldering the brunt of workplace transformations and talent shortages.⁶ Moreover, the CIPD's research found that [under a third of people professionals](#) globally said their work positively affects their mental health (31%). As the pace of change in the world of work continues to accelerate, practitioners require new skills to maintain adaptability and resilience, helping their organisations navigate transformations while understanding the people implications.

¹ Economist Intelligence Unit. (2022) [Asia outlook 2023](#).

² World Economic Forum. (2022) [3 ways to build a sustainable and digital Asia-Pacific](#).

³ Economist Impact. (2023) [Bridging the skills gap: Fuelling careers and the economy in Asia-Pacific](#).

⁴ Michael Page. (2022) Talent trends 2022: Asia Pacific Report. In [Talent trends 2022: Focus reports](#).

⁵ HR News. (2021) [More than half of employees say lack of flexibility is a deal-breaker](#).

⁶ Forbes. (2022) [98% of HR professionals are burned out, study shows](#).

Aims of this report

Following the CIPD's [People Profession 2022 international survey report](#) and [Resourcing and talent planning 2022 survey report](#), this report shares the views of people professionals in Asia. It explores current talent trends and career development within the people profession, to provide practical guidance for organisations in shaping their talent strategies for HR.

Based on initial insights from our APAC pulse survey on people professionals' career development, we ran focus groups with managers, directors and senior leaders in the profession in Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei to gain a deeper understanding of the factors affecting their talent retention and development. The views of 100 people professionals in total are captured in this report.

Some details on the findings

- We refer to the 'people profession' throughout this report, which refers to a range of people-related roles, such as human resources (HR), learning and development (L&D), organisational development (OD), employee relations and other HR specialisms. It does not include people managers.
- The pulse survey was conducted online between December 2022 and January 2023 with a sample of 71 people professionals.
- Three focus groups were conducted online between March and April 2023 with 29 people professionals, ranging from managers and directors to senior leaders.

3 Findings

Impact of the economic climate on talent

Remote working draws a wider talent pool

In the current economic climate, factors including geopolitical tensions, inflation, industry change and hybrid working are having a differential impact on sectors. Some organisations are now experiencing relative stability, with the return to travel having a positive impact and attrition levels normalising. Economic shifts (including the Ukraine war and US–China relations) are expected to impact long-term growth, driving a need for workforce planning and reskilling. While there are limited global mobility opportunities in some companies due to geopolitical risk, remote working has created a wider talent pool.

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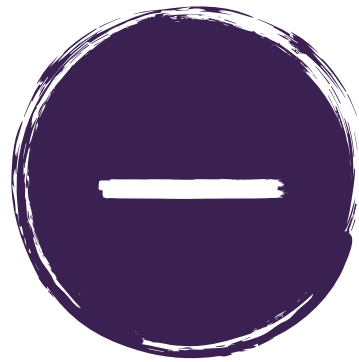
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Figure 1: Just under half of respondents said their organisation felt a negative impact of the current economic climate



51% felt a positive impact



49% felt a negative impact

Talent retention challenges amid job cuts

Some companies are experiencing talent retention issues with employees taking advantage of more competitive offerings externally, having been unable to change jobs as freely during the pandemic. With large-scale job cuts in many sectors, maintaining the motivation of remaining staff and attracting new talent is a challenge. Traditional attraction and retention strategies (such as increasing remuneration and job security) are not currently viable in some sectors, requiring more creative long-term solutions. People leaders are implementing practices such as career development frameworks and more frequent individual career conversations, as well as enhancing the employee value proposition with more flexible working.

“There’s a bit of nervousness in that [when people see] opportunities to move out of the sector where it’s less challenging and less competitive, they’ll probably jump at the opportunity. How do we [the people function] convince people that this is where they should be?”

Mohammad Yazdi Yahya, Chief Human Resources and Administration Officer, Progresif Brunei

However, people teams are facing a tension around delivering these solutions in a climate of higher cost-consciousness. This is a particular challenge in Brunei, where the increase in oil price is encouraging employees to seek better opportunities in other countries, while international assignments are limited in a country of its size. Meanwhile, the relatively low unemployment rates in Singapore and Malaysia are likely to be adding to recruitment challenges.

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“Culturally, people of Brunei are known to sort of prioritise stability. They don't typically take risks or jump ship, but over the past three years, we've seen employees say, 'COVID has made me realise there's more to life than just work.' So quite a number of [people], at senior levels as well, decided to just resign and focus a lot more on their personal life. That presented a whole different challenge for us because then it no longer becomes a remuneration issue, but it's more of trying to understand and [achieve] work–life balance.”

Manager, banking industry, Brunei

Improving the employee experience

People professionals' priorities across markets have shifted towards strengthening the employee experience, with a re-evaluation of strategies to support and retain staff. The impact of the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis has driven a focus on wellbeing and prioritising mental health (a topic that is still taboo in parts of the region, including Brunei and Malaysia). Some companies have redesigned their remuneration offerings to provide more financial support, although in Singapore this may not cover the extreme increase in property rental prices.

“Inflation has hit us [hard] as HR, in the sense that it's really making us question how we continue to protect our employees when the cost of living is going up exponentially... [It's] made us question how we can continue to make our employees feel engaged and motivated to continue to work without having them worry about their basic wellbeing needs.”

Manager, banking industry, Singapore

Employee expectations have become centred around personal needs and work–life balance, while hybrid working has raised challenges for maintaining engagement and connectivity with team members. People teams are also tasked with finding solutions that cater for the needs of different workforce segments across geographies and life stages, with the younger generation expecting more transparency, while the older generation may seek more opportunities for lifelong learning. Current strategies include employee listening, embedding transparency through continuous conversations with line managers, and highlighting opportunities for involvement in sustainability initiatives to connect with people's sense of purpose.

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Shifting the focus to talent retention within the people profession

Defining the role of people teams

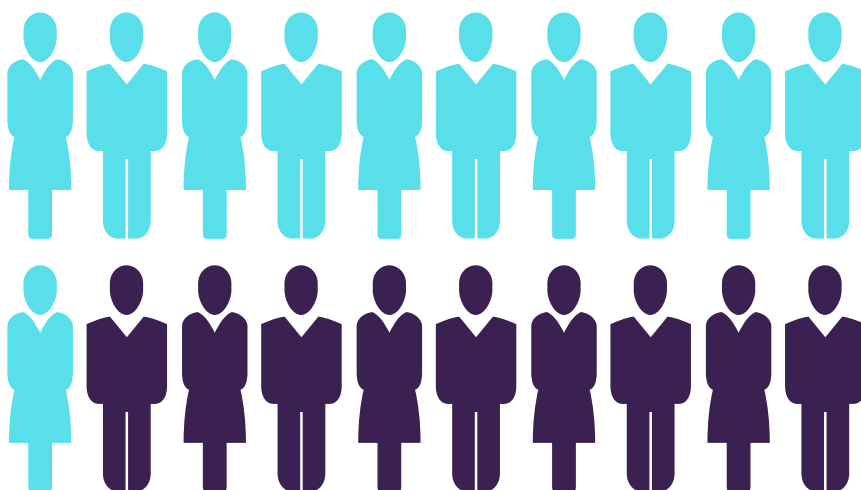
As a result of being on the front line to support and protect staff during the pandemic, and managing the shift to hybrid working, burnout has become a prevalent issue within people teams across markets. There is a sense among some senior leaders that their team has managed to deal with talent retention pressures this year, but the changing business demands and employee expectations in a hybrid work environment are raising concerns about HR's ability to sustain this. As a result, companies are seeing their HR people becoming so fatigued that they are opting to work for smaller organisations.

"My department is doing a lot more than two years ago. We are quite understaffed, and the volume of work is too big. And unfortunately, there are a lot more operational HR matters that we need to handle, and that takes away time and effort that we could use to be more strategic."

Manager, banking industry, Brunei

This has raised the need for people professionals to draw boundaries between the commitments of their role and their own wellbeing, while having the skills to respond effectively to rapid changes. Feelings of being overwhelmed and pressure from the business to take on more with fewer resources are driving job dissatisfaction and resignation among some practitioners.

Figure 2: Only 54% of respondents were satisfied in their current job role



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"[Based on our survey] within the HR function, results on wellbeing and engagement are one of the lowest we have seen... So we have definitely got confirmation of what we were thinking about in terms of HR being overloaded and struggling with their wellbeing. And we also have seen requests for investing in their development... One of our challenges is how to grow talent and also ensure that they feel there are significant opportunities."

Joanna Bilewicz, VP HR & Comms APAC & MEA, Electrolux

Companies are implementing strategies to promote better work–life balance, including providing staff guidelines on running meetings efficiently and managing their energy levels throughout the day. To build HR's agility in responding to changes in the evolving environment, leaders are revising the structure of their people function and streamlining activities according to where the business is heading.

With the pressures of the current environment, some companies are experiencing difficulties in attracting people to work in HR, since the role is perceived as too challenging. There may also be a lack of awareness of the skills and expertise required to work in the profession, driving candidates to choose other fields that are more clearly defined. While practitioners should always try to base their decisions on [evidence-based practice](#) rather than relying on intuition alone, the nature of the people function is that there is often no formula, or right or wrong answer, since the nuances of each situation are different. This creates both a challenge and opportunity for HR talent attraction and retention. However, some senior leaders note that attrition can provide an opportunity to refresh the people team with the new skills they need for the future, and shift the mindset from HR as a back-end support function.

Strategies to nurture talent in the profession

Raising the people profession's visibility

New ways of working have created an unprecedented opportunity to leverage the critical role and impact of people teams, which can help to boost the attraction and retention of talent within the function. The prominence of mental health, equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), and talent retention issues that emerged during the pandemic has driven more buy-in from business leaders for understanding people needs to support long-term performance. Recent trends including 'The Great Resignation' and 'Quiet Quitting', alongside the shift to hybrid working, have also created more organisational-level recognition of the strategic importance of enhancing the employee experience.

HR as a strategic partner

As a result of these trends, there is an increasing shift away from perceptions of the people profession as a support function, towards a stronger strategic partnership role with a voice in company decision-making. Conversations around HR's value have been particularly changing in Brunei, where the function is less developed compared with other markets in the region.

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Practitioners are seeking more exposure to strategies and developments in other countries, enabling them to apply insights to their own market. Malaysia is also seeing a growing need to shift the mindset around people practice so that they can focus on delivering strategic value, which can be aided by outsourcing more of the administrative HR work.

"I think we all should look at whether our own folks are ready to move to that kind of [strategic] paradigm... so that we are not seen as a support function, but as something that can help employees do their job and be more productive, but also how we can influence the business strategy."

**Dr Raslan Rashid, Director, Strategic Human Capital Management,
Khazanah Nasional Berhad**

"[Many] still think of HR as the traditional personnel administration... The mindset needs to change [around] how people see us, and the value we give is very important to building a brand. Part of this is to increase our visibility in what we do, and at the same time, for the HR team to be given the right exposure to be engaged with the businesses to understand what they do, in order [to] build and improve our value to the organisation. When we build attraction to what we do and how we do things, that will really make more people interested in the HR profession."

**Veronica Chong, Head, Group Human Resources and
Administration, Baiduri Bank**

Giving the people profession a voice

People professionals' credibility within the business can be raised by increasing their visibility and exposure across the organisation as a whole. Practitioners need to use influencing skills to communicate their impact and gain support from the top, helping the rest of the organisation understand the value that they deliver. Senior people leaders are volunteering to chair other business initiatives and join cross-departmental transformation projects to build their recognition and expertise as business leaders. For many people professionals, the ability to be involved in and impact business decisions as a trusted adviser is what motivates them to work in the profession. Strengthening recognition of HR's impact will therefore help to retain talent within the function.

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“Make sure that HR leaders are actually part of the entire business conversations. I think those are very important because when we are able to do that as enterprise leaders, we’re not performing our job as just an HR leader. We’re also helping to transform the organisation.”

**Aileen Tan, Group Chief People & Sustainability Officer,
Singtel Group**

Going beyond human resources

Connecting with the profession’s wider purpose and ability to make a difference to people’s lives gives practitioners a sense of meaning in their work. This unique aspect of the role can attract people to work in the people profession, particularly the younger generation who strongly value opportunities to contribute to the environmental, social and governance (ESG) agenda and deliver purposeful work. Companies are offering more scope for involvement in sustainability initiatives alongside job roles as part of the employee value proposition, to enhance talent attraction and retention. Adding value to the wider community while contributing to the organisation’s purpose is also important to senior people leaders’ motivation to work in the profession.

“What we do really makes a difference, really changes people’s lives, and no other corporate profession would be able to have that opportunity to change people’s lives as much as we can and must.”

**Chen Fong Tuan, Senior Executive Vice President,
Group Human Capital, Maybank**

Hunger for career development

People professionals across markets strongly value opportunities to learn and develop in their careers. Progression is also a key element of what they look for in choosing a job, which is often enabled by support from people managers and the HR leader. For senior leaders, exploring opportunities externally may be more attractive in enabling them to take the next step in their career. This is particularly the case where growth opportunities are limited in smaller organisations, or in global companies that have a small presence in APAC with a lean HR team structure. Since replacing senior staff is more expensive and finding the skillset is likely to be more competitive, this presents a key challenge around creating career opportunities internally for this talent group.

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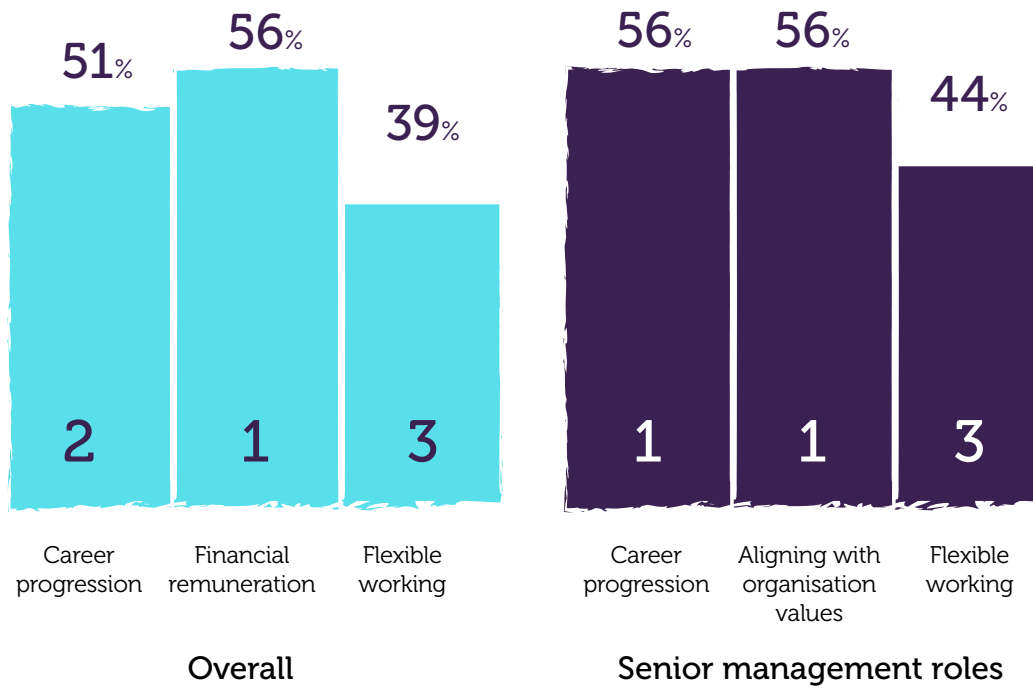
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- Seventy-five per cent of respondents were keen to advance their careers. Senior managers were the most likely to want to advance their career within another organisation. Those less senior were keen to advance their careers within their current organisation.
- Overall, the top three considerations in choosing a job in the next three years were financial remuneration (56%), career progression (51%) and flexible working (39%).

Figure 3: The top three considerations of people professionals choosing a job in the next three years varied across different levels of seniority



“As HR, we are always very good at helping others to shift their careers and we always talk to our employees. But we often neglect our own selves in terms of what our career looks like.”

Emily Soo, HRBP Lead Singapore, Standard Chartered Bank

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Increasing interest in lateral career growth

Companies can provide job mobility opportunities such as rotations across HR functions, as well as across other business departments and external secondments. Alongside professional development, gaining experience in other areas helps practitioners contribute more to business strategy by developing their understanding of the broader landscape and how the organisation creates value. This highlights the opportunity for organisations to enable alternative career pathways, rather than the traditional linear route towards an HR leadership role, which can attract people from different professional backgrounds to work in the profession. However, many companies are currently facing a challenge around enabling role mobility under cost management pressures.

“What would help me is support from the organisation to rotate within the HR function or even to be seconded outside to another organisation for one or two years, to gain external experience. I do know that there is a technical know-how gap I need to fill.”

Manager, public sector, Malaysia

With many already moving into the people profession from technical fields, more opportunities can be provided for rotations and secondments into HR to increase the diversity of expertise within the function. Bringing in talent with no previous experience can also help to increase awareness of the value of the people profession externally. Some companies are seeing more HR directors moving into CEO and other C-suite roles, which is raising the profession's brand as a critical business function and challenging perceptions of the traditional HR career path. However, there may be a barrier to attracting individuals from other fields due to a lack of understanding of the competencies required to work in the profession. Building people professionals' status and brand through increased visibility can help to tackle this challenge.

Professional development

Upskilling is another critical factor in enabling career advancement in the people profession, particularly for senior leaders. Supporting continuous learning can help to increase retention in the function, since it aligns with people professionals' sense of meaning in their work and ability to have an impact through applying different areas of expertise. Academic study and HR certification are valued by practitioners as ways of enhancing their industry knowledge, personal development and professional credibility. Building their professional network is another key avenue through which practitioners are enhancing their career prospects and learning from other organisations, such as by engaging in discussion forums.

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Figure 4: Upskilling, attaining certification and networking were considered important in advancing careers



86% of respondents felt that upskilling was important in advancing their career. All respondents working in senior management roles felt it was important in advancing their career.

86% of respondents felt that attaining certification/accreditation was important in advancing their career, while 94% of respondents working in senior management roles felt it was important in advancing their career.



90% of respondents felt that networking with other people professionals was important in advancing their career. Respondents working in senior management roles were less likely than those at more junior levels to agree with this statement.

Bridging the gap for a future-ready profession

The rapidly changing business environment is presenting new ambiguities and people challenges, highlighting the need for people professionals to step up and help organisations transform for the future.

Skills for the future

To develop the next generation of people leaders, companies are implementing skill-led succession planning with more focus on individuals' long-term development. Shifting from role-led succession planning enables people teams to develop the skills needed for the future, which can be segmented across different roles.

Practitioners must demonstrate strong business acumen alongside soft skills, such as emotional intelligence, conflict resolution and teamwork, to simultaneously be trusted strategic advisers and have a deep understanding of employee needs. Following the pandemic and current mass redundancies in some industries, the importance of leading with empathy is increasingly highlighted. HR leaders in particular need to navigate and manage multiple perspectives and apply professional judgement in difficult situations. Listening skills and creativity are also required for people professionals to be aware of the contextual needs and develop innovative strategies.

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"We need to ask ourselves how [do] we make ourselves relevant, what sort of skills or input do we bring to the organisation. I do agree that business partnering should be one of them because if we understand the business then we can provide better advice. I also think people analytics will play a more important role in any organisation."

**Najib Annuar, Head of Organisation and Manpower Planning,
Bank Islam Brunei Darussalam (BIBD)**

To build organisational credibility and career advancement, practitioners must adopt a growth mindset, with a clear sense of purpose on what they stand for. Being approachable and coaching others across the business will also enable people professionals to foster an effective culture and drive transformation.

Figure 5: The top three skills perceived to support career progression in the people profession were business partnering, learning and development and organisation design and development



"When I look at the development of my function... I don't talk about skillsets, necessarily. I talk about mindset and how we as practitioners continue to evolve... I see the responsibility of the HR leadership team now is to really try and anchor and better manage those paradoxes."

**Joanna Bilewicz, VP HR & Comms
APAC & MEA, Electrolux**

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4 Conclusion and recommendations

To develop their talent and build future-fit people teams, HR leaders can focus on several areas outlined below.

Focus on wellbeing

Protecting people practitioners' mental health and wellbeing is a critical priority. While the pandemic has pushed employee health and wellbeing to the top of the business agenda over the past few years, the added pressures placed on people teams to support staff and workplace transformation have often led to a neglect of their own wellbeing. Many people professionals experience a more [negative impact of work on their mental and physical health](#), compared with the general workforce.

To address this, people leaders are focusing on developing their teams' skills in resilience and emotion management, while establishing clear boundaries between supporting the workforce and looking after their own personal needs. While people teams are often focused on the wellbeing of the rest of the organisation, they can role-model good practices, such as taking full annual leave entitlement and not working when unwell. Increasing opportunities for career progression can also help to support practitioners' sense of wellbeing, as well as providing more [flexible work options](#) such as job-sharing and flexitime. Rather than implementing a series of standalone initiatives, companies should adopt a holistic approach to support health and wellbeing. The [seven interrelated 'domains' of employee wellbeing](#) are: health, good work, values, social, personal growth, good lifestyle choices and financial wellbeing.

Figure 6: The seven key domains of wellbeing



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The people profession as a strategic partner

People teams can leverage their impact by raising visibility of HR's strategic contribution in the organisation. HR leaders are developing their teams' mindset towards being trusted business advisers, by increasing their involvement in strategic conversations, understanding [wider trends](#) and speaking up constructively with fresh ideas. For senior leaders, gaining support from the board to influence business decisions and invest in people is a key element of their sense of belonging and loyalty to the organisation.

To be recognised as having an important impact and align people practices to business outcomes, HR should work [collaboratively across functions](#) and build strong relationships throughout other parts of the organisation. HR business partners in particular are able to work closely with leaders across the organisation, and this exposure helps build the reputation of the people function as strategic advisers to respond to challenges and develop solutions. Rather than simply adopting the best practices of other companies or countries, people teams must find a model that is tailored to their needs and aligned with the local cultural, business strategy and organisational values.

Companies are also increasing day-to-day recognition of HR's work, such as celebrating success at the start of meetings and raising visibility to wider teams. Some have rebranded their people teams (for example, to 'colleague strategic partners'), emphasising the strategic partnership aspect of the role. Additionally, highlighting the broader purpose and impact of the profession and linking this to the [ESG](#) agenda is an avenue for attracting new talent. The majority of HR practitioners [find their work to be meaningful](#), and are able to tackle the challenges of change supported by their sense of purpose. Those in senior roles are likely to be better positioned to engage in activities that have a greater impact, and to see the impact of their work, contributing to their beliefs that the profession offers a meaningful career.

Job mobility

Enabling job mobility within and outside the function can boost practitioners' career development and skills. People professionals are looking for support from their organisation to rotate jobs within the function or be seconded to another company, to gain external experience. For example, companies are providing opportunities for practitioners to move around different functional areas, such as from organisation design and development (OD&D) into learning and development (L&D) and talent management, then either move back into their previous role or take a permanent role in a different specialism.

Among [HR practitioners globally](#), there is a general perception that the profession offers good career prospects and a meaningful career. However, HR is not always perceived to be easy to enter or as a stepping stone into other business areas. Companies are providing opportunities for people in other parts of the business to do a stint in HR, or to take on an aspect of the function alongside their role, such as supporting regional people development. Recruitment and succession planning for HR roles is also being approached from a broader future-focused view, to include individuals from other technical or business backgrounds. This is helping to enhance the diversity of expertise in the function, while increasing external awareness of the people profession's value and attracting new talent.

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Ongoing professional development

Upskilling practitioners through L&D opportunities is critical to helping them navigate the changing environment. At a global level, skills development is consistently recognised as the most important factor in [advancing a career in HR](#), followed by manager support and professional qualifications or certifications. Common L&D methods among practitioners currently include online learning, conferences and webinars, and on-the-job training. While many people professionals have been [upskilling and reskilling](#) since the pandemic to meet changing business needs, people leaders are focusing on taking a longer-term and more forward-thinking approach to [skills development](#), instead of responding reactively to demands.

Alongside traditional practitioner-led training on people skills, companies are sourcing training from diverse industries to share insights on good practices as well as technical knowledge areas (such as [systems thinking](#)). Practitioners are also enhancing their expertise in specialist areas such as business psychology and wellbeing through professional certifications and academic study. Among HR leaders, there is a preference for a [blended approach](#) to development, through both professional qualifications and informal methods, such as knowledge-sharing across peer groups and networks.

To become [future-fit](#), digital HR and enabling digital transformation will be key skills for people professionals. Other priorities for practitioners to thrive in the ever-changing environment include developing agility, taking the lead on strategic developments, building data and analytical capabilities, and championing business sustainability.

Building a professional network

Engaging with other people professionals internally and externally (across other organisations and regions) increases HR prospects for career advancement. Building relationship networks with others in the profession can provide practitioners with more support and confidence, which are often [barriers to progression](#), to pursue career ambitions. To grow their networks, practitioners can join professional communities through discussion forums, events and professional bodies.

People leaders are seeking more exposure to best practices in the wider profession (both in their own country and abroad) and opportunities to be part of conversations to contribute to the people profession's ongoing development. Companies can therefore enable opportunities for practitioners to build their professional network, to boost talent engagement and retention. Learning from peers is also a key channel through which practitioners can increase their [professional development](#). Leveraging professional networks to see approaches role-modelled by others, and seek guidance or even mentoring opportunities, can enable the people profession to further develop key capabilities.

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