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Survey report
October 2026

HR pulse report 2026

Inside the people profession

The CIPD is the professional body for HR, learning and development, and the wider people profession, established by Royal Charter to promote and develop the art and science of people management for the public benefit. When people management is done well, organisations perform better. Productivity improves. People have greater opportunity to develop, progress and participate. And stronger organisations contribute to greater prosperity and better economic and social outcomes.

Our role is to set the standard for professional people practice, help our members reach it, and make the profession's impact impossible to ignore.

With more than 160,000 members globally, we are an independent, practitioner-focused and evidence-led voice for the people profession. We are advocates for what it achieves, trusted advisers to our members, and amplifiers of their work. We help people professionals build the capability, credibility and confidence to solve organisational problems, design better workplaces and drive performance and growth.

Talking Talent is a coaching-led consultancy that targets what's really holding talent back. Not surface fixes. Not cosmetic change. The structural, behavioural and cultural patterns that can sabotage performance. We coach leaders to lead more effectively. We support working parents, carers and returning talent so skills aren't lost and potential isn't left behind. And we understand that whole-person wellbeing, the blur between life and work and everything people carry with them, isn't a distraction from performance. It's central to it. Through individual and group coaching, we turn insight into action. No jargon. No theatre. Just sharp thinking, honest conversations and behavioural change that sticks.

We should talk about that.

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Survey report

HR pulse report 2026: Inside the people profession

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Foreword from the CIPD

There is nothing particularly revolutionary about saying that people and skills drive performance. The more striking point is that many employers do not consistently behave as if it is true.

The UK has not experienced a sustained period of strong growth since before the global financial crisis. Sluggish productivity, reduced access to capital, a fundamental gap around skills, supply chain disruption, trade and tariff instability, technological advances – every one of the challenges facing our economy has a clear and distinct people component.

I believe there is a clear moral imperative in helping create the conditions where workplaces are productive and growing, and in turn creating strong economic outcomes that sustain employment and fund public services.

At their very best, people functions do just that – driving performance, productivity and better outcomes for everyone. They understand the business model, the market, the product or service and the operating realities that sit behind strategy.

These are not secondary organisational questions. Increasingly, they determine whether strategy can be delivered at all, and the profession should be in those conversations before decisions are made, not handed the consequences afterwards.

However, influence is not owed to the profession because its remit is important. If people professionals cannot explain their contribution in the language of performance, productivity, risk, capability and growth, they should not be surprised when others struggle to see it.

The data from this survey highlights the critical focus areas for our profession, with improving organisational performance and developing people management capability as joint top priorities for people teams. We also know that building stronger leadership capability is a key area of focus- particularly as we enter a new era of work, integrating AI and human capability.

Strategic workforce planning, skills forecasting and change readiness also feature strongly. These are not peripheral concerns, but core conditions through which organisations can build the capability, culture and capacity to deliver their long-term goals. The gap between the demands and current capability is particularly striking: workforce planning and organisational design are critical to business performance, yet relatively few respondents identify these as specialist skillsets. We also need to recognise that capability cannot be built without investment and this research shows clear associations between investment and outcomes.

This report is therefore both a snapshot and a call to action – for the profession and for the CIPD. It shows a profession with the potential for real influence and purpose, but also one that must sharpen its ability to deliver its strategic contribution and articulate its value. I see the role of the CIPD at the heart of that – advocating, advising and amplifying the work being done now and in future.

In short, making the contribution of this profession impossible to ignore.

Neil Carberry
Chief Executive, CIPD

Foreword from Talking Talent

The role of HR has never been more important, or more complex. People teams are helping organisations absorb AI, respond to change around the world and keep pace with what employees expect from work, at a time when many feel less certain about their careers.

This research shows how far the profession has come. Most people professionals say their work is aligned with business strategy and that leaders consult them on decisions affecting the workforce. Their priorities reflect that standing. Improving organisational performance, supporting line managers, and building leadership capability top the list, followed closely by workforce planning and readiness for change.

Built on connection

What I notice most is how much of that agenda rests on human connection. Line managers are where strategy meets the everyday experience of work. They're the ones who explain a change and notice when someone on their team is struggling, so it makes sense that nine in ten people teams count supporting them as a priority. Leadership capability depends on connection too. Strong leaders set the direction, but people follow them because of the trust they build along the way.

Room to grow

The report is also honest about where the profession is stretched. Workforce planning and organisational design are high on the agenda, yet relatively few respondents hold specialist skills in either. Many teams lack clear ways to measure their impact, which makes it harder to prove the value most believe senior leaders already recognise.

The findings on AI tell a similar story. Adoption inside people functions is at an early stage; only 38% say AI is a core part of their people strategy, and junior professionals are the least sure what it means for their role. One of the report's suggestions is that more experienced colleagues model how they use these tools. Confidence with new technology, in other words, often grows through people learning from each other.

Junior professionals feel the gap elsewhere too. They're the least confident about developing their expertise and finding mentoring and peer support, and over a third of respondents don't think it's easy to get into the profession at all.

Those further along carry a different weight. Most people professionals say they frequently deal with emotional demands and cognitive overload. Seven in ten feel their employer supports their wellbeing, but only six in ten feel supported with the pressures particular to HR. The people who look after everyone else need looking after too.

Where HR leads

In a period this uncertain, organisations need to connect the people agenda with the strategy agenda. That depends on strong relationships across the business, between leaders and their teams, and between colleagues at every level. HR has a critical part to play in building them.

I'm proud that Talking Talent has supported the CIPD in producing this report, and I hope it helps people professionals take that work forward in their own organisations.

Dr Mary-Clare Race
CEO, Talking Talent

Introduction

The *HR pulse report 2026* is the CIPD's new annual snapshot of the people profession as it stands today. This report explores the latest trends within the profession, including key priorities, internal reputation of people teams, strategic practices, artificial intelligence (AI) adoption, career progression and development, and common pressures experienced by people professionals.

The data within this report provides a benchmark for the profession, based on the perspectives of 883 UK people professionals. The data is weighted by age, gender, sector and organisational size within sector, to be representative of the people profession workforce in the UK. It highlights the latest views of both CIPD members and non-members across several key areas of people practices and the working lives of people professionals.

The findings from this report reflect current priorities, challenges and opportunities. We also outline the practical support available to CIPD members to help them in their day-to-day roles. Also included are reflective points for people teams and professionals to consider some key takeaways and apply in the context of their organisation and professional practice.

The insights from this report directly inform future content, guidance and practical tools created by the CIPD. We hope that the insights provided in this report also enable people professionals to reflect on their own practice and development.

Key findings

The HR pulse survey gathers insights from people professionals on key priorities, challenges and trends faced by the profession. Findings from the 2026 HR pulse survey highlight the priority areas for people teams surveyed, with both organisational performance and people management cited as the top priority areas:[1]

Organisational performance: 91% of respondents say improving organisational performance is a priority for their people function.

People management: 91% say supporting line managers' people management capability is a priority.

Leadership capability: 82% of respondents say developing leadership capability is a core priority for their people team.

Workforce planning and skills forecasting: 78% say workforce planning to build future talent pipelines is a key priority.

Change ready: 77% say improving change-readiness is imperative for their people function.

The data from the survey also highlighted core challenges and opportunities of the profession:

- **Stronger metrics are needed to demonstrate impact:** People professionals believe that their people teams are largely seen as collaborative, valuable and impactful by the wider business. However, fewer have clear success measures in place, making it challenging to demonstrate how the people function contributes to business outcomes.
- **Strategic alignment of people functions:** 77% of respondents agree their people teams' initiatives are aligned to the business strategy and 70% believe that leadership regularly consults with the people function when making strategic decisions that affect the workforce. However, people professionals were less likely to agree that their people function identifies future skill needs in the next 1–2 years to remain competitive (61%) and that AI integration was a core part of their people strategy (38%).
- **HR investment and CIPD membership are associated with people functions who report having strategic practices in place:** The data showed links between increased HR investment (ie HR budget and headcount) and respondents who were more likely to agree that their people function: links HR initiatives to business goals (89%); is consulted with on business strategy (84%); and designs its processes with a focus on productivity (79%), see Figure 5. CIPD members are also more likely to believe that their people function has various self-reported strategic practices in place, compared with non-members (see Figure 4).

[1] The percentages reflect the proportion of respondents who rated each area as a high to medium priority for their people function.

- **Low investment in AI training within people functions:** 75% of survey respondents have received no training to apply AI in their job role, and 22% say they have never used AI tools as part of their job. According to respondents, integrating AI to improve HR service delivery appears to be a lower priority, with only 54% citing it as a high to medium priority.
- **Confidence gap for junior people in developing their expertise:** Junior professionals are least confident in developing their expertise (54%) compared to mid-level (81%) and senior (88%) people professionals. Significantly fewer junior professionals feel they have the knowledge to access support, mentorship and peer networks within the industry (55%), compared with mid-level (73%) and senior professionals (81%).
- **Emotional and cognitive demands are frequent pressures experienced by people professionals:** People professionals say they frequently experience feeling conflicted (76%), experience high levels of emotional demands (72%) and cognitive overload (71%) within their role.

1 What are the top priorities for people teams?

Headline finding: Organisational performance and supporting people management capability are joint top priorities, with 91% citing them as a high to medium priority for their people teams.

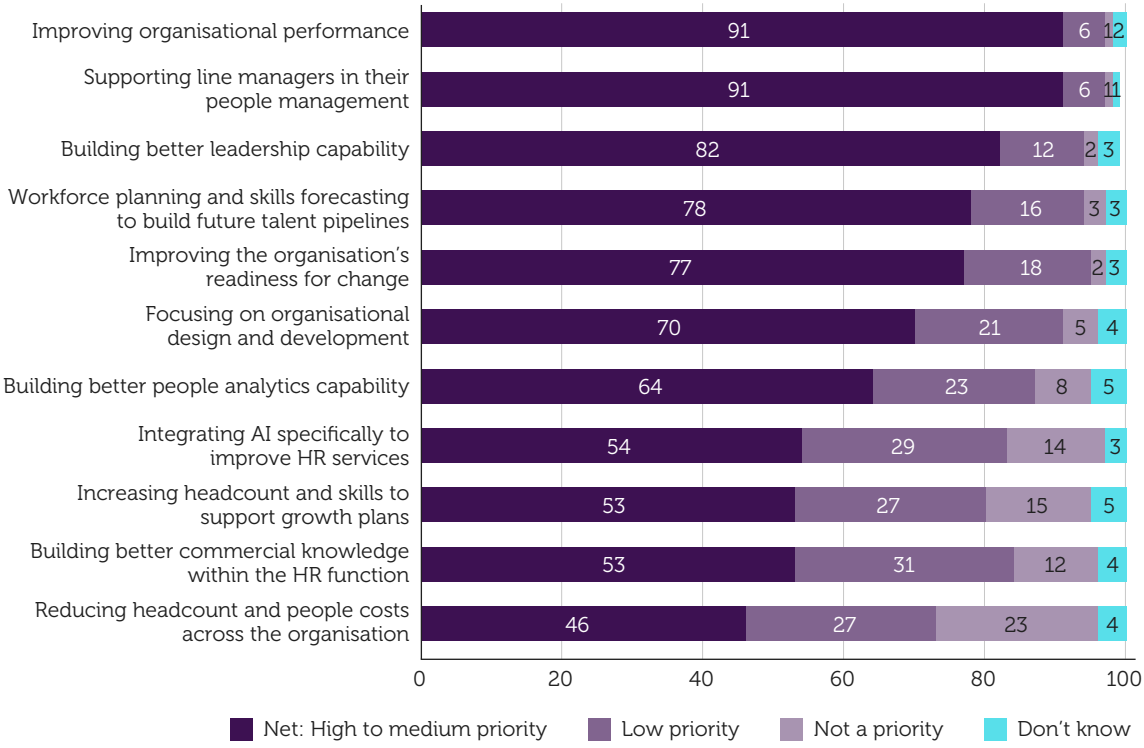
Survey respondents were asked to rate 11 different focus areas as either a high, medium or low priority, or not a priority at all. The data highlights which of these areas are most pressing for respondents at present. The top three priorities focus on areas that contribute to the operational function of the organisation. The focus is clear: minimise people risks that drag on performance, support line managers with their people management, and develop better leadership capability.

Further priorities focus on longer-term, more strategic areas, including workforce planning, being change ready and focusing on organisational design and development. These priorities highlight what is most important for people teams in response to the rapidly changing nature of work, which requires a proactive approach to workforce planning, future talent pipelines, organisational capability to navigate change, and organisational redesign.

However, the survey findings show that there is a considerable gap between demand and capability in these areas. Despite 77% citing workforce planning and skills forecasting as a top priority, only a small minority within our sample hold specialist skills in workforce planning (14%) and talent management (13%). Similarly, 70% cite organisational design and development as a prominent focus, yet only 12% of respondents noted it as their specialist skillset. This signals a potential risk in capability gaps for high-demand specialist skillsets within people functions – skillsets that are highlighted as critical for priority focus areas.

Across the sample, there were high levels of agreement on the priority areas. Irrespective of seniority level (ie across senior, middle management and junior roles), there was unanimous agreement on the top five priority areas.

Figure 1: Priority areas for people professionals in 2026 (%)



Unweighted base: n=883.

How have people priorities changed?

There are some consistent findings across the previous two versions of the survey.[2] Consistent findings show that developing better people management and leadership capability is a priority. This suggests that it remains an ongoing focus for people teams. Managing change also remains a consistent priority for the profession, signalling that change and transformation capability within the people function is critical.

Table 1: Top five priorities for people teams in 2026, 2025 and 2023

2026	2025 (different priority statements)	2023 (different priority statements)
Improving organisational performance	Supporting line managers in their people management	Supporting line managers in their people management
Supporting line managers in their people management	Working collaboratively with colleagues throughout the organisation	Working collaboratively with colleagues throughout the organisation
Building better leadership capability	Organisational development and change management skills	Organisational development and change management skills
Workforce planning and skills forecasting	Developing business leaders for the future	Developing business leaders for the future
Improving the organisation's readiness for change	Building specialist HR expertise (eg equality, diversity and inclusion; reward; learning and development)	Facilitating more flexible people operations across the business (eg hybrid working, working from anywhere)

Unweighted base: 2026: n=883; 2025: n=1,043; 2023: n=1,456.

[2] Please note survey wording has changed in 2026 and we cannot directly compare key priorities across the various surveys; however, Table 1 highlights some consistent priority areas that have surfaced since 2023.

Workforce costs across sectors

Overall, reducing headcount and people costs across the business was either a low priority or not a priority for 50% of respondents – making this the lowest priority area. However, there are some differences across sectors in relation to headcount changes. Public sector people professionals were significantly more likely to say reducing headcount was a high/medium priority (57%) compared with private (44%) and voluntary (40%) sector professionals. Private sector professionals were significantly more likely to say increasing headcount and skills to support growth plans was a high/medium priority (57%) compared with public (43%) and voluntary sector (40%) professionals.

HR investment aligns to wider organisational change

Survey responses suggest that changes to HR investment (ie budget and headcount) aligns with wider organisational people changes. For example, where the people teams have increased their HR headcount and budget, this was also reflected in wider organisational priorities around increasing headcount to meet growth plans and skill demands. Conversely, the same can be said for people teams decreasing their headcount and reducing HR budgets.

Decreases in HR budget and/or headcount was most likely to be driven by: cost savings or to improve efficiency (66%); financial pressure on the organisation (47%); or organisational change and restructuring (44%). We explore HR investment throughout this report to see how organisational spend on HR relates to other outcomes.

How does the CIPD support members to achieve their priorities?

The priorities revealed by our survey highlight the key focus areas for our profession, in terms of professional development and guidance and support. For each priority area, reflective questions are given for you to consider, with links to resources, tools and evidence reviews, exclusively for members.

Improving organisational performance

People functions can have a significant impact on organisational performance in numerous ways. Whether that's being a strategic, consultative partner to solve business problems, developing internal capability through learning and talent management, or acting as an expert adviser on employment relations issues.

Reflective points for people teams

- Consider what some of the most challenging business issues that prevent growth or detract from performance are.
- How can the people function solve these business problems?
- Who are the key stakeholders that this problem relates to and what relationship do you currently hold with them? Create a stakeholder heat map to help identify key stakeholders and interactions you should prioritise.

Resources and tools

HR strategy workshop in a box | CIPD

Top tips to ensure HR practice leads to high organisational performance

L&D tools: Building your business case – a practical pathway

Evidence reviews to support your practice

Impact of human resource management

People performance

High-performing teams

Knowledge work performance

Building people management capability

High-quality people managers drive organisational performance and productivity and are critical to enabling HR strategy and people processes. Managers are the link between the business strategy and the workforce. They enable businesses to develop stronger employee commitment, engagement and performance as well as implementing strategy and supporting employees through organisational change.

Reflective points for people teams

- Recognise that people managers are a critical factor of organisational success and performance. Ensure people managers have access to the support, advice, information, development and time needed to build high-quality people management capability within your organisation.
- Involve people managers when planning and implementing new people strategies.
- Promote into management roles those who possess good people skills – for example, skills in communication, coaching/mentoring, developing good relationships, and handling and resolving conflict.

Resources and tools

The CIPD's line manager resources provide evidence-based resources to support the development of people management capabilities within organisations.

Line manager competency framework

Evidence reviews to support your practice

Effective people managers

Performance management

Performance feedback

Developing leaders

Strong senior leadership is vital for an organisation's strategic direction, purpose and vision. Research shows how different leadership styles can impact on employee and organisational outcomes. Leadership theory provides an overview of the common traits that define a good leader, but their applicability depends on the context of the organisation and its culture.

Reflective points for people teams

- Develop a clear brief on what the organisation requires of its senior leaders and challenge assumptions based on identity, cultural values and personal experiences. Having inclusive practices is an important step to avoid building a homogenous leadership cohort.
- Use suitable models to assess the effectiveness and quality of any leadership training. For example, many studies draw on Kirkpatrick's model for training evaluation, developed in *Effective people managers: An evidence review*.
- Research shows that the effects of leadership training are greater for those whose leadership skills are underdeveloped. Target development and training at less capable or inexperienced leaders, above those who already possess strong leadership qualities.

Resources and tools

Leadership resources

Report: Role of HR in selecting and developing senior leaders

Infographic: Role of HR in selecting and developing senior leaders

Workforce planning and skills forecasting

The CIPD article 'Future-focused HR: The shift from workforce planning to workforce intelligence' argues that workforce planning and intelligence is a critical business risk that is currently underdeveloped as an organisational capability for many businesses. CIPD data highlights that only 16% of organisations are planning beyond two-year cycles. Further, only 36% collect data to identify skills gaps within their organisation, while 34% use data to inform future skill requirements. Forecasting can no longer be a niche HR activity but instead must be used as a vital lever for identifying business-critical capability, addressing future talent gaps and minimising people risk.

Reflective points for people teams

- Leaders need to make future assumptions to build a concise narrative of the direction of travel for the business. What assumptions can you make with a high degree of confidence, and which assumptions are clear unknowns that need to be paused from future planning?

- Future planning doesn't happen in the people function; it's an organisational system that should operate in a dynamic way to continually review the business's position on future opportunities and risks, and the subsequent strategic trade-offs. Having leadership alignment on the business priorities, backed by evidence, provides a starting point for workforce planning and forecasting.

Resources and tools

Future-focused HR: The shift from workforce planning to workforce intelligence

L&D tools: A performance-led approach to skills and capability planning

Improving the organisation's readiness for change

The volume and pace of change in workplaces show no signs of slowing down. External pressures and technology disruption force organisations to pivot to stay ahead of competitors and thrive. People teams should provide expertise on the impact of change on the workforce and raise people risks as part of the implementation process for any new initiatives.

There are several well-established models for change that provide a robust framework to support the implementation of change. The CIPD's guide on change management outlines the most well-known models and the stages of the change management process. Whether the people function is developing a business case for change, assessing the organisation's readiness for change, identifying key decision-makers or communicating change initiatives, confidence to manage and support organisational change needs to be a foundational skill for people professionals.

Reflective points for people teams

- How is change currently managed in your organisation? What involvement and influence does the people team have in that change process? This may vary on a case-by-case basis across change projects, but it's important to acknowledge the current influence (or lack of) that the people team has on change programmes that impact the workforce.
- At what stage are the people team consulted during the change process – conception, design, implementation or post-review stage? Is there a justification for earlier involvement or an example where earlier involvement may have changed some of the people-related outcomes?

Resources and tools

Change management hub

Change management: A guide for people professionals

Tool: Are you change ready?

2 The internal reputation and strategic maturity of people teams

Headline findings: People professionals agree that their teams are widely seen as collaborative, valuable and impactful by the wider business, but fewer have clear success measures in place.

Respondents were more likely to agree that their people teams are aligned to the business strategy and consulted with as a strategic partner, but less likely to agree that their people function identifies future skill needs and that AI integration is a core part of their people strategy.

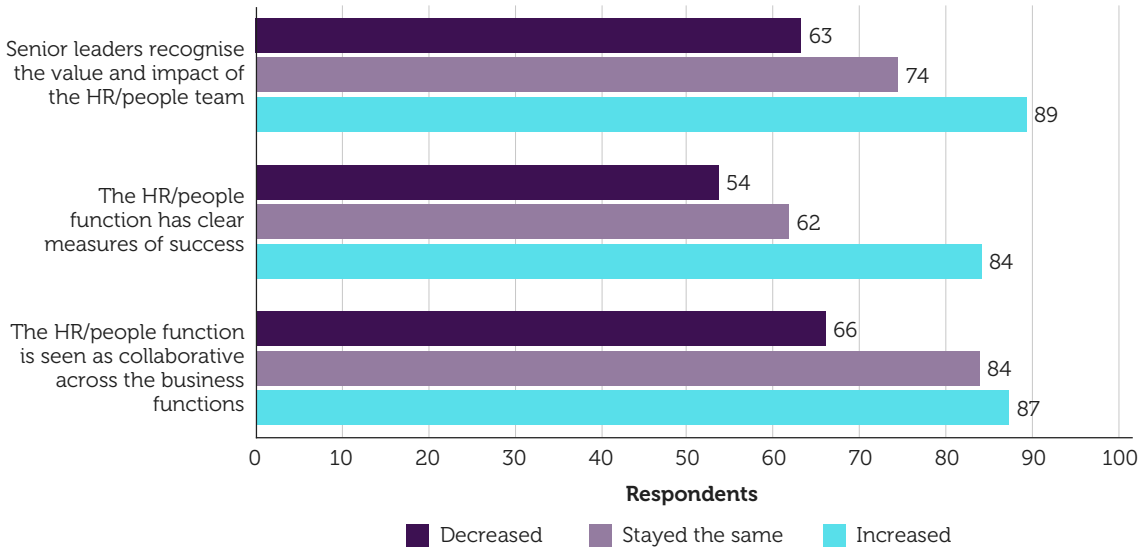
Internal perceptions of people teams

More than three-quarters of respondents (77%) agree that their HR function is recognised as being collaborative by the wider business. Some 72% of respondents also stated that they believe senior leaders recognise the value and impact of their people team.

However, fewer respondents (61%) believe the function operates with clear success measures in place, with 20% disagreeing that there are clear success measures in place, and a further 17% neither agreeing nor disagreeing about success measures within their people function. This suggests that some functions lack tangible metrics and objective measures, making it difficult to demonstrate the impact of the people function on business outcomes.

In addition, when HR investment is considered, there is a consistent and significant relationship between internal perceptions and investment changes. This is particularly evident in terms of HR budget and headcount. Where HR headcount or budget has decreased, internal perceptions are consistently less positive. On the other hand, respondents who have had increases to their HR budget and headcount were more likely to agree that their people function is recognised as being valuable and impactful, has success measures in place and is perceived as a collaborative function (Figure 2). We see the most significant differences associated with HR budget, although the same relationship is found with HR headcount as well.

Figure 2: Internal perceptions of the people function, by budget change (net agree scores) (%)



Unweighted base: n=883.

These findings suggest a clear relationship between HR investment and how the function is perceived internally. They also reinforce the importance of having clear success measures within the function to demonstrate impact. Positive perceptions are important, but reputation is harder to sustain without clear evidence of impact.

Strategic practices within people teams

People professionals working in medium and large organisations were asked six questions to capture the extent to which their people function contributes to organisational strategy, productivity and future workforce capability. Together, these questions provide a picture of the self-reported strategic practices people teams have in place.

1 Strategic alignment and influence

Measures include:

- the alignment between HR initiatives and the organisation's overall business goals and performance metrics
- whether senior leadership regularly consults with HR/the people team as a strategic partner when making critical business decisions that affect the workforce.

On average, 77% of respondents agreed that their HR initiatives are aligned to business goals, while 70% believe that leadership regularly consults with the people function when making strategic decisions that affect the workforce (see Figure 3).

2 Contribution to performance and productivity

Measures include:

- whether HR processes (such as performance management, recruitment) are designed to improve employee productivity rather than ensure compliance
- the people team provides actionable data and insights that help managers make better decisions about their people and teams.

Sixty-eight per cent of respondents believe their HR processes meaningfully contribute to productivity and performance, while 70% say they provide actionable data and insights that help managers make better decisions about their people and teams.

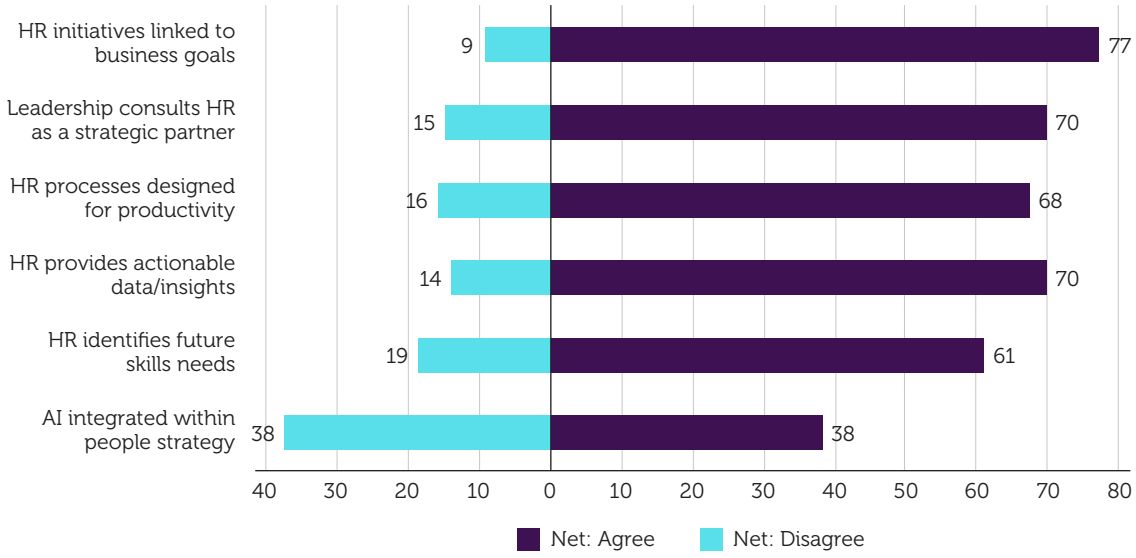
3 Future skills, capability and AI innovation

Measures include:

- whether the people team proactively identifies future skills and leadership capabilities that will be necessary in the next one to two years to remain competitive
- whether AI integration is a core element of the people strategy.

Of the three dimensions, future skills and AI innovation are the least established in organisations, with much higher levels of disagreement regarding skills and capability forecasting and AI integration within the people strategy, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Net agree/disagree responses on strategic measures across the sample (%)

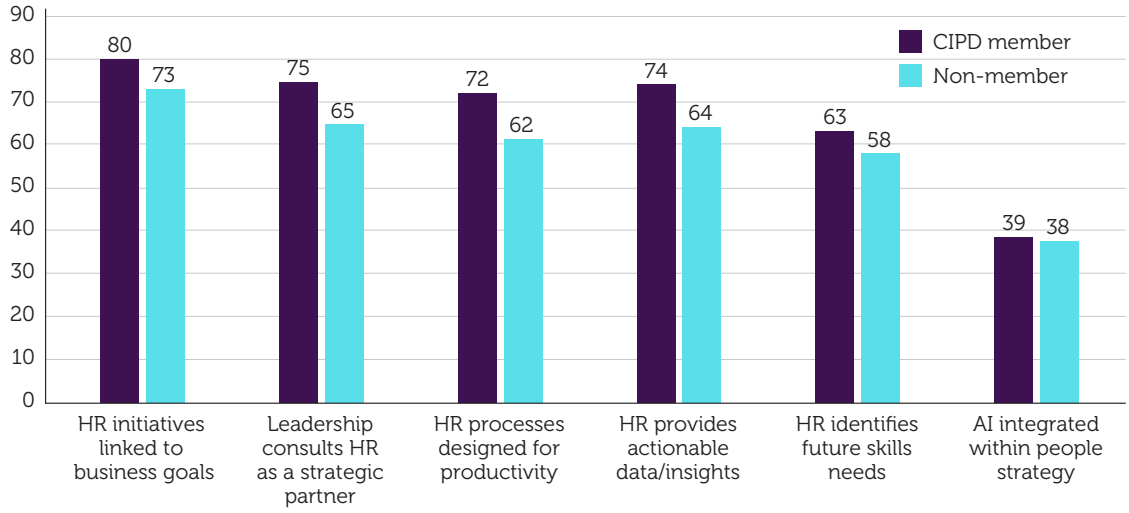


Unweighted base: n=756 (all medium/large businesses).
Note: Response options 'don't know' and 'neither agree or disagree' are not shown in this graph.

CIPD members and strategic practices

Our data found that CIPD members are more likely to agree that their people function has strategic practices in place compared with non-members. For example, CIPD members are more likely to say their function is strategically aligned to the business, designs HR processes that are focused on productivity and provides actionable data and insights to the business, among other strategic practices. Figure 4 shows the differences between CIPD members and non-members across all measures of strategic practices. These findings suggest that CIPD members are associated with people functions that seek to provide impactful, strategic contribution to the wider business.

Figure 4: Net agree scores for CIPD members and non-members on strategic practices (%)



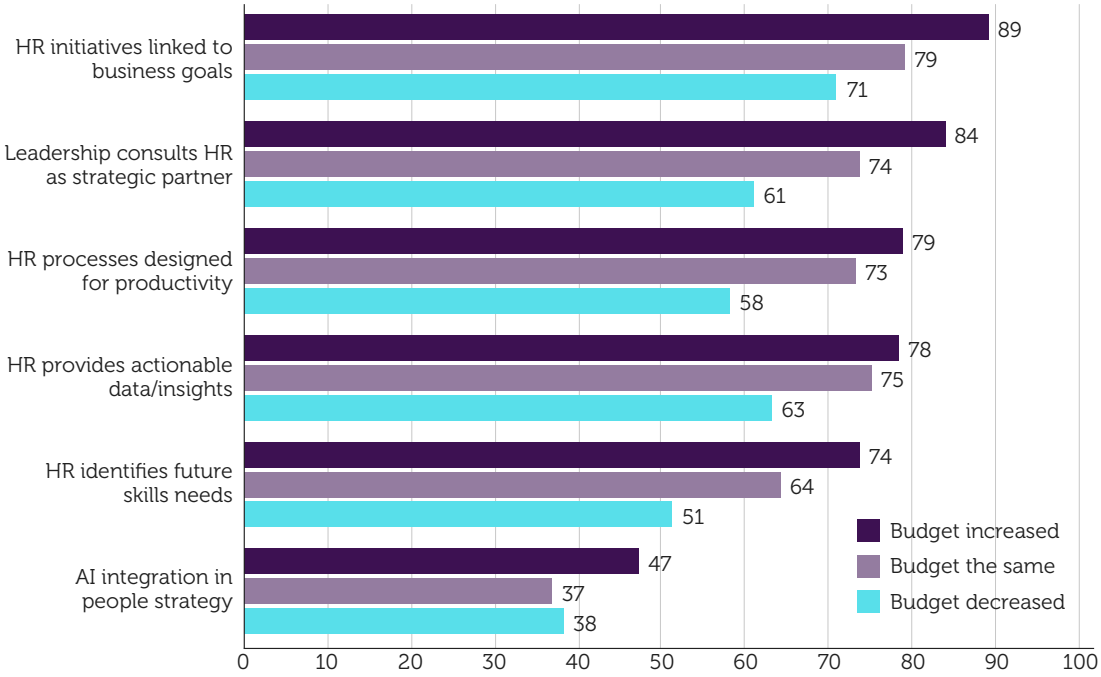
Unweighted base: CIPD members: n=426; non-members: n=330 (all medium/large businesses).

HR investment and strategic practice

To understand the relationship between strategic practices and HR investment, we considered the relationship between HR budget and HR headcount and the strategic practices in place. Figure 5 shows a positive relationship between HR budget and strategic practices.

Overall, our data shows that there is a clear link between levels of HR investment and implementation of the six measures of strategic practices. Respondents who report increased resources (in HR headcount or budget) are more likely to agree their people team has strategic practices in place. This may be because higher investment allows functions to build more strategic practices, or it may be that more strategic practices enable the function to secure higher levels of investment/commitment from the business.

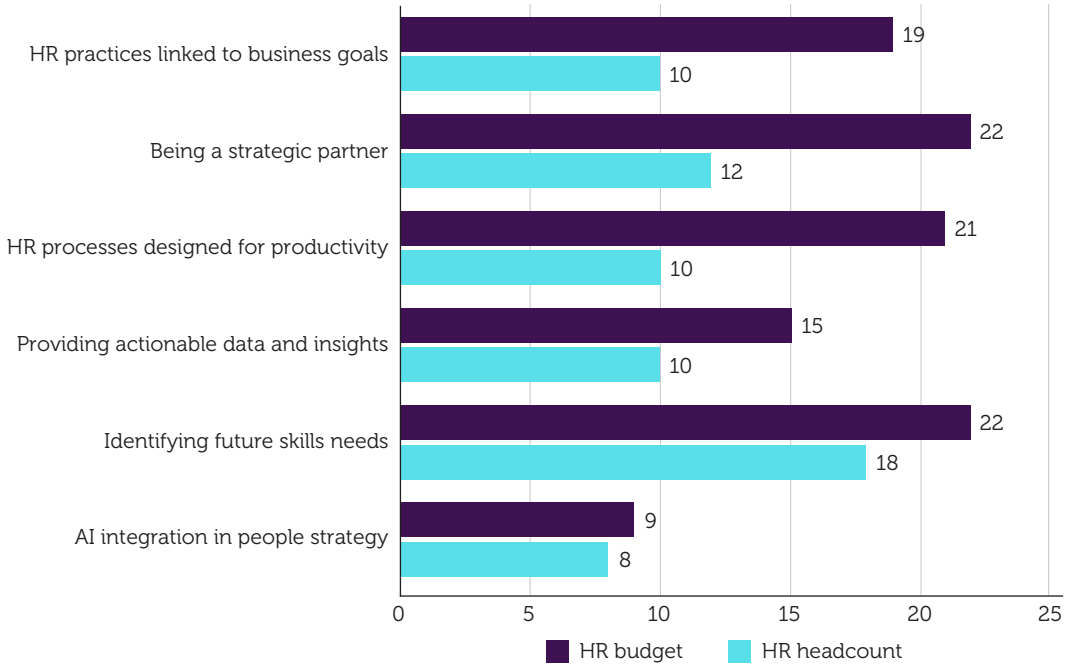
Figure 5: Net agree scores on strategic practices, by budget changes (%)



Unweighted base: n=756 (all medium/large businesses).

The differences in reported strategic practices between respondents with increased HR budgets versus those with decreased budgets are shown in Figure 6. The differences are more pronounced for HR budget, specifically for future skills identification (+22 percentage points), HR as a strategic partner (+22 percentage points) and HR processes being focused on improving productivity (+21 percentage points). We see the same relationship between HR headcount changes and strategic practices; however, these are less pronounced than HR budget. These findings suggest that there are significant differences in self-reported strategic practices for respondents with increased HR resource versus those with reduced HR resource.

Figure 6: Percentage gap between people teams with increased and decreased HR resources, by strategic practices (percentage point gap between increased and decreased budget/headcount)



Unweighted base: n=756 (all medium/large businesses).

The findings in this section suggest that HR resource, specifically headcount and budget, are associated with both internal perceptions of the people function and self-reported strategic practices. This emphasises the previous finding around the importance of having clear success measures that enable the people function to build credibility while also demonstrating impact and contribution to business outcomes.

Professional standards provide another way to build credibility through developing and maintaining the necessary core skills, knowledge and confidence to be an effective people professional. The CIPD Profession Map sets the international standard for people professionals to make an impact in their organisations and throughout their professional practice. CIPD members get access to the Learning Hub, a professional development and learning platform, that aligns learning directly to the CIPD Profession Map.

3 How are people teams adopting and integrating AI within the function?

Headline finding: 75% of people professionals have received no training to apply AI in their job role, and 22% say they have never used AI tools as part of their job.

Integrating AI to improve HR service delivery appears to be a lower priority for respondents: 29% say it is a low priority and 14% say it's not a priority at all. Roundtables with senior HR leaders have also revealed that, generally, AI adoption and integration across the wider business is further advanced than within the people function.

There could be several reasons for AI integration being a lower priority for people teams – for example, greater productivity gains elsewhere within the business or competing priorities with other new HR systems or technology. However, it is worth recognising the low prioritisation against other priority areas and the implications this could have on the people teams in the future.

Some respondent groups were more likely to believe AI integration in the HR function was a priority. Interestingly, respondents who stated that they had an increased HR budget (68%) were more likely to cite AI integration as a high to medium priority compared with the wider sample (54%).

Additionally, this was also seen as a higher priority area among senior people professionals compared with middle managers and junior professionals. This might be due to HR leaders being more involved in plans to integrate AI within HR services and across the function.

Respondents from large organisations were significantly more likely to note AI integration as a high to medium priority area (62%) compared with small (43%) and medium organisations (46%).

AI tools and role impact within HR

Using a subset of the *CIPD Good Work Index* (GWI) data, we segmented HR respondents to explore the use of AI within the people profession and how it impacts on their role. More details for this sample can be found in the methodology section of this report.

The GWI[3] found:

- 75% of people professionals have received no training to apply AI in their job role.
- 21% use AI tools daily in their job and a third (32%) use it weekly.
- 22% say they have never used AI tools as part of their job.

In terms of applicability, there was a split of opinion:

- 50% see potential in task automation within their role, while 37% felt there is little opportunity for this.

[3] Based on n=353 (GWI data collected between January and February 2026).

- Only a small minority (7%) felt automation is not applicable to the tasks they perform.
- 6% don't know whether AI could automate elements of their role.

Performance: For those who use AI tools within their role, the data suggests that people professionals are at the early stages of realising performance and productivity gains from the use of AI within their own work. Positively, 61% agree that task completion is faster and around half say their quality of output is higher. Marginally fewer believe their overall productivity has improved.

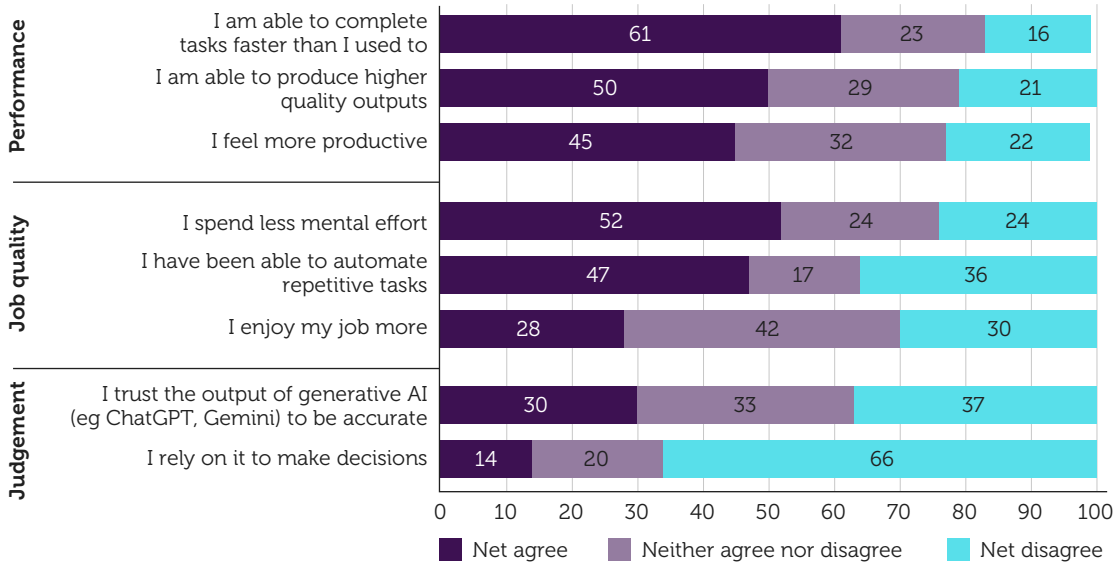
Other survey data provides further evidence that suggests outcomes are influenced by how people professionals apply their AI skills in practice, not just by access to technology alone, and stronger self-assessed capability in AI is linked with better performance outcomes.

Job quality: There is a clear divide of opinion on using AI to automate routine tasks – with nearly half saying they have used automation to reduce repetitive tasks, while 36% haven't. This is unlikely to be down to individuals' willingness, but is more likely a signal of the range of access and investment in AI tools, level of integration and overall culture of AI usage within the organisation.

In terms of employee outcomes, more than half say they use less mental effort as a result of using AI, suggesting AI provides some cognitive relief for many. Finally, a large minority are ambivalent towards AI impacting their enjoyment of the role, suggesting AI does not appear to impact overall role satisfaction.

Judgement: The majority of people professionals surveyed show scepticism towards relying on AI for decision-making. Additionally, respondents are divided on the trustworthiness of AI outputs, with 37% questioning the accuracy of outputs. Both findings highlight the importance of training to create quality outputs from AI tools, governance around its usage, and having quality assurance checks in place. Further real-life examples can be found on the CIPD's Community forum on AI in the workplace, which features regular discussions on the use of AI for judgement – for example in policy creation and candidate use within an interview.

Figure 7: The impact of AI on performance, job quality and judgement (%)

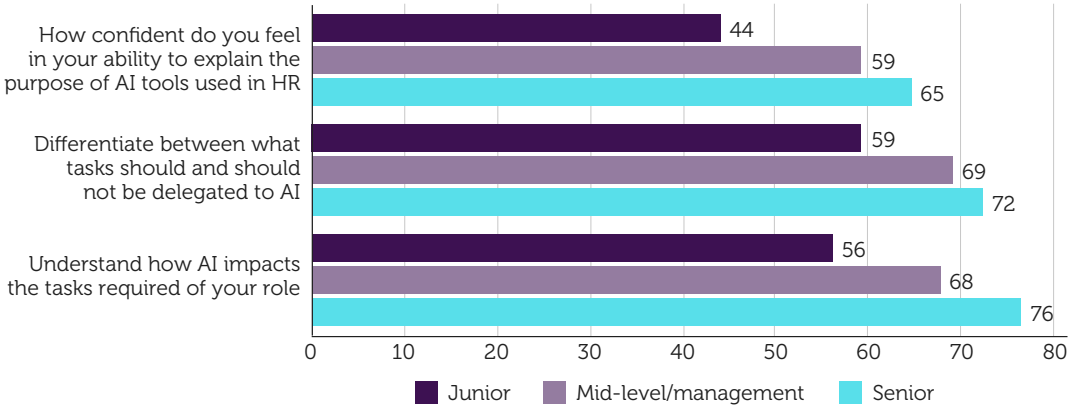


Unweighted base (all who use AI tools or systems in their job): n=268.
Excludes 'don't know' and missing responses (GWI 2026 data).

In the HR pulse survey, while the majority (67%) felt they understand how AI impacts their role as a people professional, there were some observed differences across seniority levels and tenure within the profession. Confidence and understanding on the use of AI within HR varied significantly between seniority levels – with junior respondents least likely to have a good understanding of the impact of AI on their role and confidence around the purpose of AI tools (see Figure 8).

This may be due to wider domain knowledge and people experience having a positive effect on confidence and understanding in how to apply AI tools effectively within HR roles and tasks. Another possible explanation may be around the governance of how AI tools should be used. Those in more senior and managerial positions are more likely to be involved in decisions around governance, meaning they would have higher levels of awareness on acceptable AI use. Therefore, role-modelling example use cases of AI within the HR function could help to build confidence and understanding across people teams, specifically for those in more junior roles.

Figure 8: Confidence and understanding around AI use in HR, by seniority level (%)



Net scores: Confidence (very/somewhat confident); Understanding (a great deal/some extent).
Unweighted base: junior: n=255; mid-level: n=392; senior: n=171.

We found that CIPD members said they have a greater understanding of the impact of AI on the tasks undertaken as part of their job role (73% for CIPD members versus 59% for non-members). There were also significant differences for people teams experiencing changes to their HR budget. Those with increased budget were more likely to say they have a good understanding of the impact of AI on their role, compared with those who have reduced HR budget (82% versus 60%).

While we're unable to assess the quality of those decisions about how AI is applied in practice, these findings suggest that confidence in decisions to apply AI within the people function vary across people professionals. Having example use cases and standard AI practices in the people function could help build understanding and confidence across different employee groups.

Interestingly, only 9% of respondents whose people teams had reduced budgets and headcounts said this was a result of automation or increasing use of HR technology. This suggests that, on the whole, reductions are not attributed to increasing levels of automation and AI use within the function – which speaks to the idea that currently AI is displacing (not replacing) jobs within the people function.

Further insights, guidance and case studies on the impact of AI in the workplace can be found on the CIPD website.

4 Career progression and personal development

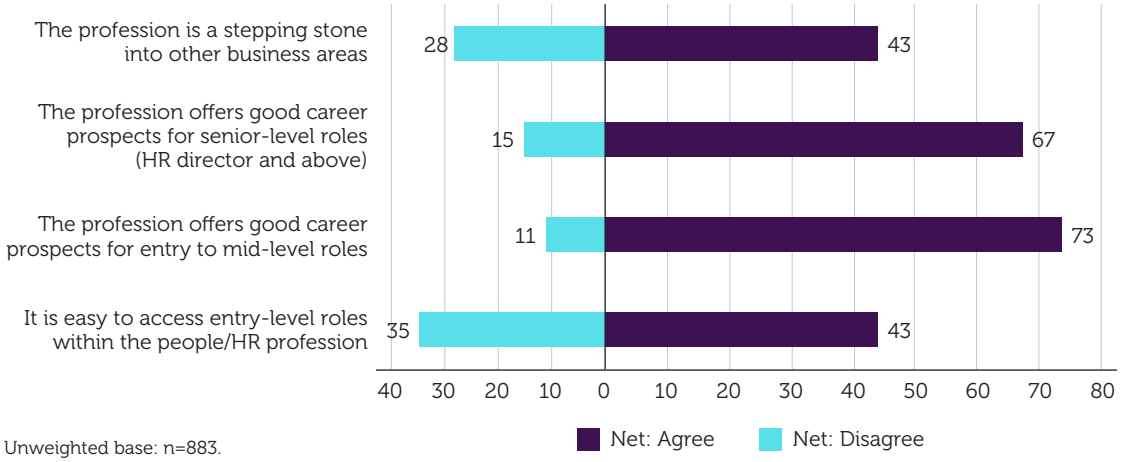
Headline finding: There are mixed views around access to entry-level roles within the people profession and lower confidence levels among junior professionals around developing their people expertise and experience within HR, compared with mid-level and senior professionals.

Entry and progression within the profession

Mixed perspectives on career progression

- The majority believe a career within the profession offers good career prospects for mid-level (73%) and senior-level (67%) roles.
- There is less optimism and more negative views around entry into the profession. Over a third (35%) of respondents disagree that access into the profession is easy, and there were no observed differences across seniority level and tenure within the profession.
- Respondents were also sceptical about the opportunities to step into a role outside of the function into other business areas. Only 43% believe that the people profession could provide opportunities for progression outside of the function.

Figure 9: Net agree/disagree scores for career perceptions (%)



Unweighted base: n=883.

Professional development

Differences across seniority level

- Only half of junior professionals feel confident to develop their people expertise and experience within HR.
- Respondents are most optimistic around career prospects at the mid-career level, where nearly three-quarters agreed that the profession offers good opportunities at this level. Senior and mid-level respondents were significantly more positive than junior respondents (82%, 76% and 63% respectively).

Junior professionals are least confident in developing their expertise and accessing professional support. Significantly fewer junior professionals feel confident and have the knowledge to access support, mentoring and peer networks, compared with mid-level and senior professionals (see Figure 10). These findings highlight the support needed at an early career stage, where professional networks are less established and opportunities for career development may be fewer.

Figure 10: Access to professional support and development, by seniority level (%)

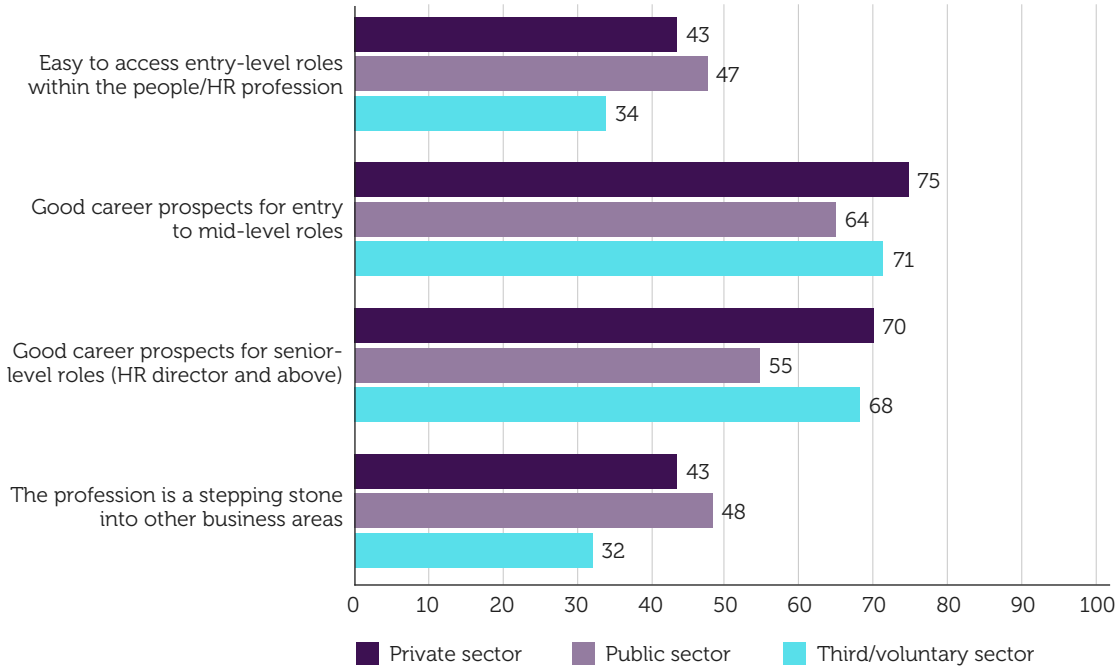
Unweighted base: senior: n=171; mid-level: n=392; junior: n=255.

Sector differences

There were mixed opinions around entry into the profession, where there were the highest levels of disagreement (see Figure 11). Over a third of the sample (35%) believe there are barriers to accessing entry-level roles. This was particularly significant among voluntary sector respondents, where nearly half disagree that entry-level roles are easily accessible (48%, compared with the sample average of 35%), while public sector respondents were most likely to hold positive views around entry into the profession. The large spread of results suggests a mixed experience, particularly across different sectors, around gaining entry-level roles within the profession.

However, public sector professionals were least likely to have a positive viewpoint on progression between mid-level and senior roles. Additionally, public sector respondents were more likely to agree that the profession is a stepping stone into other business areas. This suggests that there may be fewer opportunities or more barriers for career progression within the public sector compared with private and voluntary sectors and, as a result these professionals may look at opportunities outside of the people function.

Figure 11: Views on career progression, by sector (net agree scores) (%)



Unweighted base: private: n= 672; public: n=125; voluntary n=86.

Career support for CIPD members

Our survey findings indicate that there are clear differences between sectors and seniority level when it comes to perceptions around progressing a career within the people profession. A key part of career progression is about taking ownership of your learning through continuing professional development (CPD). CIPD members are required to maintain their CPD and can record their learning experiences through the Learning Hub. Our CPD cycle includes four stages: identify and plan, learn, reflect and record, and apply and share.

Whatever career stage you're at, the CIPD provides career information and guidance to help you gain access to the profession, progress, transition or manage a career break:

- Explore our Career Support Toolkit to help you progress in your career in the people profession.
- Use the CV360 Tool to optimise your CV and boost your chances of getting to the interview stage.
- The CIPD member-to-member mentoring programme provides a platform for experienced professionals to mentor and to support other CIPD members. Other mentoring opportunities are available through the CIPD Trust.

5 HR pressures and employer support

Headline finding: Between 71% and 76% of people professionals frequently experience feeling conflicted, high levels of emotional demands and cognitive overload within their role.

Common HR pressures

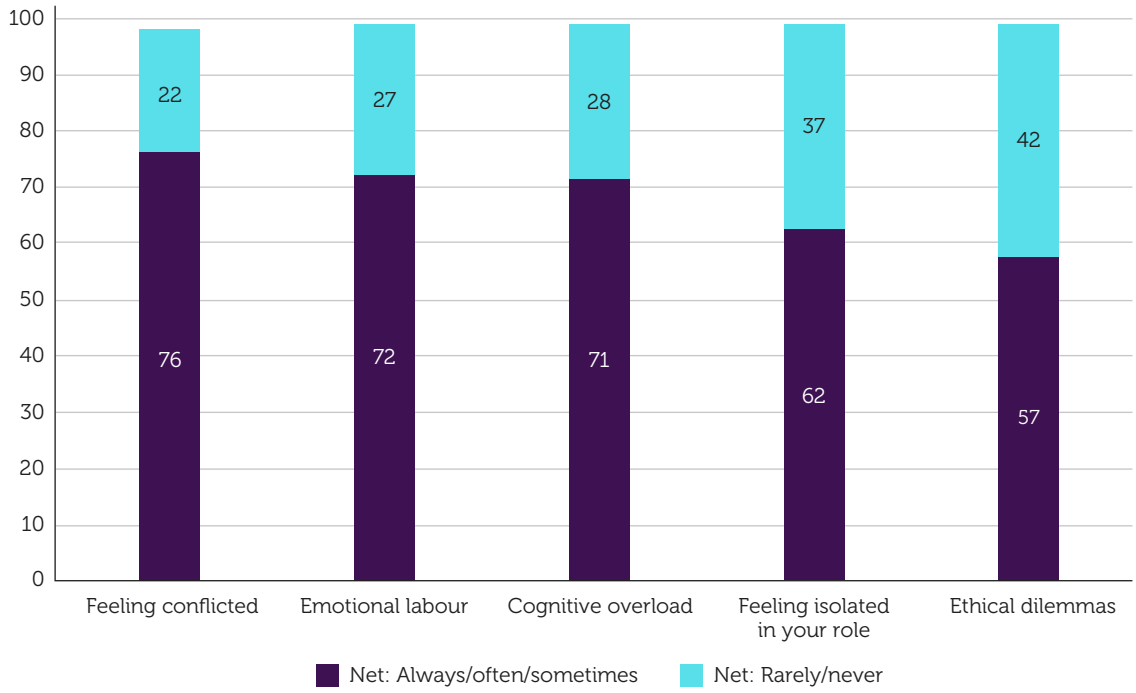
In previous surveys, around a third of people professionals said their mental health was negatively impacted by their work (for comparison data between 2022 and 2023, see the CIPD's *People profession 2023: UK and Ireland survey report)*. This has been a consistent finding over several years of data and is supported by the *CIPD Good Work Index* data in 2026. Thirty per cent of people professionals say their mental health is negatively impacted by their work, while 24% say their physical health is negatively impacted – a consistent finding on the impact of work on health for people professionals. Other external research supports these findings showing the impact that work can have on some people professionals' own wellbeing.

What is less understood is the impact of the unique pressures on those working in HR. People professionals are at the forefront of social issues that reach the workplace, dealing with difficult decisions that impact upon the workforce and their employment. With that comes a duty of care, a heavy sense of responsibility, and having to manage conflict and ethical dilemmas, all of which can have an impact on wellbeing and mental health.

We asked respondents how often they experience common pressures within their role. The findings demonstrate that emotional demands (eg supporting distressed colleagues, mediating conflict), cognitive overload (eg decision fatigue, crisis-driven activity) and feeling conflicted (eg caught between competing expectations) are frequently experienced by the majority of respondents (see Figure 12). Given the consistently high proportion of respondents reporting feeling conflicted and experiencing emotional labour and cognitive overload, this suggests that these psychological pressures are a reality for many people professionals.

We also find senior people professionals report significantly higher levels of emotional labour – 82% say they experience it on a frequent basis (compared with 71% at mid-level and 69% at junior level). This is likely a reflection of the higher stakes and potential impact of decision-making at a more senior level.

Figure 12: Frequency of common pressures in HR (%)



Unweighted base: n=883.

Analysis of the GWI 2026 data also found that a considerable proportion of respondents say they frequently (always/often) feel under excessive pressure (28%) and exhausted at work (21%). Taken together, these findings highlight that there are common challenges and pressures that come with working within the people profession which can have a prominent impact on the individual – disproportionately so for some employee groups. While this may emphasise the difficult realities of such roles, it also highlights the need for resources, peer support and professional advice that enables people professionals to manage and navigate some of these more unique pressures.

Dealing with ethical dilemmas

The findings from this survey found that the experience of ethical dilemmas varies across seniority levels, with mid-level professionals reporting the highest exposure to ethical tensions (60%, compared with 49% at senior level). One possible interpretation of this is that mid-level managers are most involved in the day-to-day operations and decision-making throughout the organisation. They may also feel more under pressure to compromise their principles to align with business needs. The organisational culture and capability of people managers will also impact whether professionals feel able to challenge unethical practice in a psychologically safe environment.

The CIPD's definition of ethical practice is the application of ethical values to organisational behaviour. It applies in all aspects of organisational conduct, including corporate governance, employment practices, sales techniques, stakeholder relations, accounting practices, and issues of product and corporate responsibility. It is the discretionary decisions that organisations and the people

who work for them make and being transparent with all stakeholders about those decisions. Previous CIPD research explores eight perspectives to consider for ethical decision-making: fairness, merit, markets, democracy, wellbeing, rights and duties, character, and handing down.

CIPD support:

Ethical practice in the Profession Map

Ethical practice course on the Learning Hub

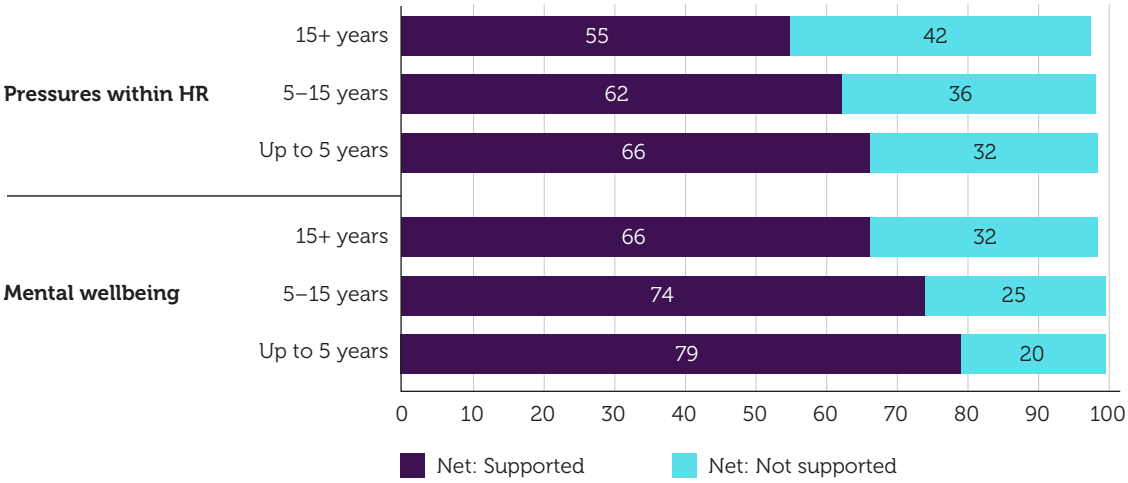
CIPD Community forum: Workplace dilemmas

Do people professionals feel supported by their employer?

On average, 72% say their employer supports their mental wellbeing. However, fewer professionals feel supported by their employer when it comes to the unique pressures associated with being a people professional (60%). Our findings show even fewer feel supported through HR pressures within certain employee groups, with clear differences across gender, tenure within the profession, and people functions undergoing financial cuts and headcount changes:

- Female people professionals are more likely to feel unsupported around the unique pressures that come with being in HR compared with their male peers (41% versus 30%).
- As professional tenure increases, professionals are more likely to feel unsupported by their employer with both the pressures associated with their role and their personal wellbeing (see Figure 13).
- Respondents in shrinking people teams (ie those with reduced HR headcount and budget) were significantly more likely to say they felt unsupported around the unique HR pressures they face within their role. For example, HR budget changes: 47% versus 20%, decreased versus increased HR budget; and HR headcount: 45% versus 27% decreased versus increased HR headcount.

Figure 13: Pressures within HR and mental wellbeing, by tenure within HR (%)



Unweighted base: 15+ years: n=339; 5–15 years: n=351; up to 5 years: n=193.

For sustainable health and wellbeing support, evidence-based tools such as the IGLOO framework can provide a practical way of promoting health and wellbeing at work. The framework identifies roles, responsibilities and resources at five different levels – individual, group, leader, organisation, and external support – and emphasises the significance of collective responsibility and the importance of systemic support. The CIPD's guide for people professionals on looking after their own mental health includes additional advice and guidance to support mental health and wellbeing within the profession.

CIPD member resources

Managing HR pressures and looking after your mental health and wellbeing

Member helplines, including a wellbeing support line

Wellbeing resources and guidance

Key takeaways

The 2026 HR pulse survey provides an in-depth snapshot of the latest trends, challenges and opportunities faced by people professionals. Several key takeaways stand out:

- The top priorities signal what people teams are most focused on: improving organisational performance, supporting people management capability, developing leaders, enabling change-readiness and workforce planning.
- There are potential gaps between some priorities and current capability: workforce planning, skills forecasting and organisational design are prominent priorities, but relatively few respondents hold these specialist skillsets. Assessing current capability is the first step in understanding where to prioritise professional development across the people team. HR leaders will need to proactively address such capability gaps to ensure their people functions can meaningfully contribute to the top priorities relevant to their organisational strategy.
- Functions with stronger investment are associated with more strategic activity and more positive internal reputations. Both findings emphasise the importance of having clear success measures and metrics that enable the people function to demonstrate impact and contribution to business outcomes.
- Some respondents noted their people function lacks clear and objective success measures. Having robust operational and strategic metrics provides critical insight for continuous improvement, credibility and the effectiveness of the people function as a value driver. If your people function has an effective performance framework in place, consider how the insights are communicated and actioned.
- Generally, AI adoption within people functions is still at an early stage. Many people professionals are using AI tools, but training, confidence and governance are not yet sufficiently embedded to support consistent, innovative and responsible use.
- Career development remains a key area of focus, particularly for those entering the profession and junior professionals who are less confident about developing expertise and accessing support. Additionally, we found differences between sectors and seniority level when it comes to progressing a career within the people profession, suggesting that career pathways and progression vary considerably across roles within the profession.
- The emotional and cognitive demands of HR work are significant. While many people professionals feel supported by their employer, support for the unique pressures of the role is less consistent. HR leaders should consider what support is needed and how HR work, within the context of their organisation, impacts on individual people professionals. Building a better understanding of which elements of the role contribute the biggest risks enables a more targeted approach for support at an organisational, leader, team and individual level.

Taken together, the findings show that people professionals believe they have a key role to play in areas that are critical to business strategy: supporting organisational performance, the development of people managers and leaders, enabling change-readiness, and planning for future talent needs. The data also reflects the perceptions of a representative sample of UK people professionals on a number of areas, highlighting some demographic differences and variables associated with the main areas covered within this report: internal reputation and strategic practices, AI use within people functions, career progression and development, and common HR pressures.

The implications of these findings also raise important questions for our profession. Which people capabilities are business-critical and how do we develop these at pace? How do we want to use AI in our HR service delivery, within individual roles, and what skills do we need to support this strategy? What performance metrics do we have across the people function and what do they say about our effectiveness and impact? How do we build support systems that enable people professionals to perform in a sustainable way?

For the CIPD, these findings reinforce our focus to demonstrate the impact professional practice can have on performance, productivity and growth, for businesses and for the economy. We do this through providing high-quality evidence, standards, practical tools, guidance and a professional community that enables members to tackle the most pressing people questions in their organisations.

Background to the survey

Methodology

The data in this report comes from an online survey conducted by YouGov and supplemented by the CIPD's research panel. The report is based on data from a sample size of 883 UK people professionals, collected between 1 May and 3 June 2026. To make the sample representative of the UK as a whole, quotas were used and subsequent weights based on Office for National Statistics figures were applied to the dataset. The sample is representative of the UK workforce in age, gender, sector, and organisational size within sector. We also make reference to previous survey data from the *HR pulse survey 2025* and the *People profession 2023: UK and Ireland survey report*.

Supplementary data has also been included from a subset of data from the ninth wave of the CIPD/YouGov *UK Working Lives* survey, which included a sample of 353 UK people professionals. This data was collected between December 2025 and February 2026. For further methodology information on this dataset, see the *CIPD Good Work Index* 2026 report.

Profile of respondents

The demographic details included below are the unweighted counts and percentages.

Table 2: Profile of respondents

Sector	Count	Percentage
Private sector	672	76
Public sector	125	14
Third/voluntary sector	86	10

Business size	Count	Percentage
Micro and small (2–49 employees)	127	14
Medium (50–249 employees)	298	34
Large (250+ employees)	459	52

Role	Count	Percentage
I work in a generalist HR role	457	52
I work in an administrative HR role (excluding those in payroll/finance only roles)	95	11
I work in a learning and development role	91	10
I work in a recruitment/resourcing role	90	10
I work in a talent management (including workforce planning) role	24	3
I work in another specialist role in HR/the people profession (OD&D, EDI, analytics, etc)	109	12
I am a consultant, consulting on HR/people practice	17	2

HR level	Count	Percentage
Chief Human Resource Officer/Chief People Officer	27	3
Director/Head of	145	16
Manager	245	28
Senior HR Business Partner	49	6
HR Business Partner	98	11
Advisor	125	14
Administrator	130	15
Consultant	29	3
Other	35	4

Membership	Count	Percentage
CIPD member	484	55
Non-member	399	45

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