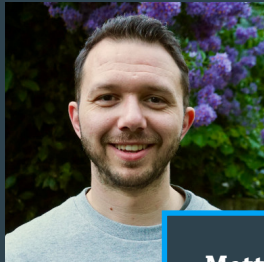
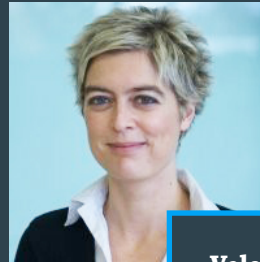
An illustration featuring a blue sky, a white cloud, and an orange ground with a fine dot pattern. A ladder is positioned vertically, extending from the ground to the cloud. The title text is centered in the blue sky area.

# How to earn a senior People role

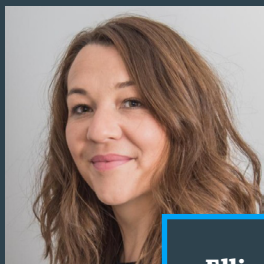
# Contributors



**Matt Hurst-Smith**  
Head of People at  
[Founders Pledge](#)



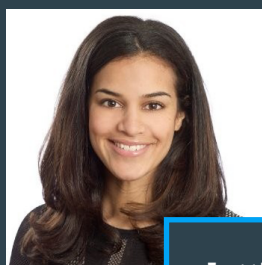
**Valerie Mann**  
Head of People at  
[Mention Me](#)



**Ellie Laycock-Heavens**  
Head of People  
at [Adzuna](#)



**Hannah Grinsted**  
Head of People  
at [Bud](#)



**Lottie Whyte**  
Head of People at  
[Hanbury Strategy](#)



# Introduction

**Knuckle down, hone your skills, get better at your job – and then advance. In theory, making career progress is simple.**

In reality, it's never that straightforward.

While every profession requires certain skills to be honed, there comes a point in any career trajectory where simple up-skilling doesn't cut it any more. At that point, to progress any further requires you to elevate your thinking beyond the scope of your current role.

This is nowhere more true than in the People sphere. Marketers can shoot for CMO roles, software developers can aim for the CTO position. Ten years ago, how many of us had heard of a Head of People?

In this profession, there is no career path laid out for you. The Head of People is the new kid on the block – nothing handed to them, and with everything to prove.

In order to progress within the People sphere, the way you think about and communicate your work must evolve, beyond the realms of your current day-to-day.

# The trap of 'Reactive HR'



**T**his three-part guide is the result of an extensive research and interview process involving a range of senior People professionals. Together, we explored the specific roadblocks you will face as your career progresses, and exactly what it takes to overcome them.

During those conversations, **one message came back time after time** – that in the People sphere, making real progress comes down to escaping the trap of 'Reactive HR'.

'Reactive HR' will look different from office to office, but at its core it is the same everywhere. Reactive HR is the stifling admin that comes hand-in-hand with just keeping a business ticking over – the back-and-forth of employee on-boarding, the fielding of bitty requests, or endless policing of a time off calendar.

One interviewee described it as the **'white noise'** of running a small business.

According to our interviewees, the trap of Reactive HR is *the* roadblock to People success.

But if Reactive HR is the trap to avoid, where are we going instead?



## → The road to People Strategy

That destination doesn't have one name – some interviewees called it 'strategic HR' or 'business-partnering', others simply 'People Strategy'.

Likewise, what it involves will differ according to the context of every business – increasing employee retention by introducing flexible working practices, or improving team engagement with a more structured process of career progression.

What was uniform, however, was the way they described it.

While Reactive HR takes place on the back foot, People Strategy is **delivered on the front**. While the former involves putting out fires in the present, the latter involves **building foundations for the future**.

Reactive HR just keeps the status quo ticking over...

...People Strategy delivers transformational change.

## → So that's where we're going. How do we get there?

We heard many different answers during this process, but by the end it was clear three distinct steps had emerged. Over the course of this series, we'll be looking at each one in turn:

1. Step back, and think big picture

2. Understand your people, and find your agenda

3. Know your business – and earn buy-in



## STEP 1

# Step back, and think big picture

**W**hen you're taking those first steps towards a proactive People Strategy, it can be hard to know where to begin.

In fact, for many of the People professionals we spoke to **that first step was often a step backwards.**

"You need to make a concerted effort to step away from the weeds so you can think bigger picture" said one HR Manager. Instead of focussing on what is in front of you on a day-to-day basis, she suggested "stepping away from the front-line so you can start to think strategically."

That might sound abstract at first, but in reality this is a concrete step that you can take right now.

Try not to see this as a last resort, reserved for when you are in desperate need of some headspace.

Instead, **be assertive about formalising that protected time** for deep work. Something Charlie's own Operations Team has found effective is to carve out one morning per month as their '10% Time' – a chance to get off comms and out of the office to concentrate on the bigger picture.



It's very easy for people to feel **trapped** in admin and reactive requests. Don't be afraid to block out time in your calendar for thinking and say **no** to more requests or meetings.

**Matt Hurst-Smith**  
Head of People at [Founders Pledge](#)





Sometimes you are so in the weeds that you will always work to other people's priorities. Step back and ask yourself 'what does the business really need?'

Valerie Mann

Head of People at [Mention Me](#)

### → Treat the cause, not the symptom

One point that every interviewee agreed on was that if you're struggling to keep your head above water due to day-to-day tasks, **it is almost certainly a sign of deeper, structural issues.**

Instead of focussing on the symptoms, they advised going to treat the problem at the cause.

*"It's important to try and see these problems at a macro level... If you are always dealing with problems in the micro then that's where your work will stay."*

*"Sometimes you are so in the weeds that you will always work to other people's priorities. Step back and ask yourself 'what does the business really need?'."*

Valerie Mann, Head of People at [Mention Me](#).

### → Oversee, rather than supervise

One message we heard time after time was the importance of proactively removing yourself from as many day-to-day tasks as you can. The danger, they said, was that because HR touches so many parts of the business, **you are structurally encouraged to become the 'gatekeeper' of every operational process.**

If you're going to successfully remove yourself from those processes, there are two principles to bear in mind.

### → Automation is your ally

One of the best examples of this is tracking time off. In many companies – particularly SMEs – time off is processed manually. Often, requests will be made via email and then bookings tracked in a spreadsheet by a single 'gatekeeper' (usually somebody in an HR role).

Automated time off software allows that person to totally remove themselves from the time off process – giving them more than some much-needed breathing room.

With the right time off software, team members can visualise the company's time off and see exactly when everyone is off.

The more of your role that you can automate, **the more space you have to concentrate on the work that makes a real impact** at your company.

### Use Charlie to oversee time off with a single glance

#### Wednesday, 23 May

##### Pending request

Lydia Day – 4 days holiday

##### On holiday

Emily Kilbane – 1 day holiday

Alex Ballhatchet – 5 days parental leave

### Intelligent notifications mean your time off process runs itself

Time Off request

THIS REQUEST

1 day

15 MARCH

THIS YEAR'S TIME OFF

25

DAYS LEFT

THIS REQUEST OVERLAPS WITH

Emily Kilbane

HOLIDAY - 15 MARCH

Alex Ballhatchet

PARENTAL LEAVE - 12 MARCH - 16 MARCH

### → Drive for 'self-service HR'

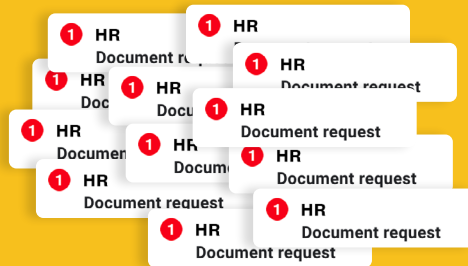
If a process cannot be automated, then **'self-service'** is the next best thing.

Let's take the example of on-boarding new hires. In the traditional model, on-boarding takes place via a **back-and-forth email thread** where you try and gather all the information you need to legally bring someone into your business. Once you have all their information, you need to input it manually into your records.

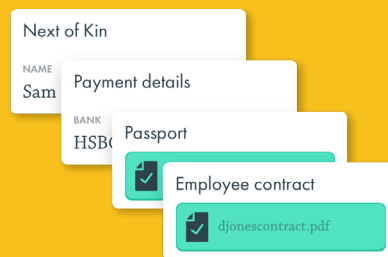
With the right HR software, you can run an on-boarding process that is essentially 'set and forget' – one click, and the new hire is prompted to upload their employee information themselves.

*"The more HR processes that you can design to be 'self-service' the more time and space you have."* Valerie Mann, Head of People at [Mention Me](#).

Say goodbye to endless requests for employee documents...



...and hello to 'self serve HR'



The more HR processes that you can design to be 'self-service' the more time and space you have.

**Valerie Mann**  
Head of People at [Mention Me](#)





→ Remember – value is impact

The final part of this puzzle is to remember one thing: becoming a senior player in any profession comes down to **making an impact** and **communicating it** to the rest of the business.

*“My first question when I got in the door was ‘where does this business want to go? Where are you trying to get to?’”*

*“I think if I came in to my job interview and said ‘yeah, I’m going to do loads of admin for you’, then I probably wouldn’t have got the job – I was brought in to make strategic changes for the business. So make a conscious decision not to get bogged down on HR admin... If you’re not careful, you can get sucked in, and you’ll never make the difference.”*  
Lottie Whyte, Head of People at [Hanbury Strategy](#).

This point isn’t so much an actionable task to take away and implement – it’s a change in mindset. In the next two parts of this series, we’re going to explore what it takes to start doing transformational People work – work that **really moves the needle** at your company.

But that work isn’t possible unless you’re willing to be **the standard bearer for the People function** at your business – the one with vision, the initiative and the drive to deliver real, tangible impact.

*“An HR department is actually well placed from a strategic point of view, because it works as a link from all departments... You are strategically positioned at the centre of the business to make big changes that affect everyone, not just one person at a time.”* Valerie Mann, Head of People at Mention Me.



**My first question when I got in the door was ‘where does this business want to go? Where are you trying to get to?’**

**Lottie Whyte**  
Head of People at [Hanbury Strategy](#)



## STEP 2

# Understand your people, and find your agenda



**I**n the first step of this series, we talked about escaping the trap of ‘Reactive HR’ and moving towards a more long-sighted People Strategy. This was the crucial shift required for professional progress – the ability to rise above the ‘white noise’ of running a small business and deliver the changes that make a real difference.

But knowing exactly where to turn your new focus is not always obvious.

According to the People and HR professionals we interviewed, plotting that route forward often meant going back to first principles. **What had drawn them to a career in People in the first place?**

For many, the answer lay in a desire to help others to do great work.

*“I see my role at Adzuna as being to create an environment where people can do amazing work. That’s how I create the biggest benefits for the company.”*  
Ellie Laycock-Heavens, Head of People at [Adzuna](#).

We heard this sentiment echoed time and time again during our research – it’s a mission statement that serves as a useful **‘north star’**

for professionals in this role. Once you have that end goal in mind, your path is much clearer.

But even still – helping others *‘do great work’* is a wide, wide remit.

Where do you even begin?

### → First – find your agenda

Before you can deliver the change your company needs, you need to know what change is required.

*“If you want to create a ‘great place to work’, then you need to really understand who you have working at your business. You can’t create the conditions for people to produce amazing work without first understanding them as people. Use a generic, one-size-fits-all approach and you’ll get generic performance.”* Ellie Laycock-Heavens, Head of People at [Adzuna](#).

Before you can begin your work, **you need an agenda** – and this process starts with talking to your team.

*“The first thing I did when I joined my company was to have an off-the-record chat with everyone in the organisation. If you run a startup or a company of up to 40-ish people, then take advantage of that – there’s no excuse for not knowing*

*exactly what is going on.”* Lottie Whyte, Head of People at [Hanbury Strategy](#).

The first step in this process is to put in place a system of regular one-to-ones – the best cadence will depend on the size of your company but once a month is a good place to start.

Remember – these conversations are exploratory, not prescriptive. Use open-ended questions and you’ll be surprised by what you uncover.

→ **‘What is holding you back at work?’**

→ **‘What would make your day-to-day life easier?’**

It can be natural for people to feel nervous when discussing work or their colleagues, so start these conversations from a basis of confidentiality. Remind them that you are ultimately here to help them make progress – not trip them up.



Once you know the problems you face, then you have an agenda.

Lottie Whyte

Head of People at [Hanbury Strategy](#)

### → And let your agenda find you

Remember – these one to one conversations are the beginning of a process, not the end. The end goal is to incubate a culture where team members are **happy to bring you their challenges**, rather than you needing to seek them out.

Your role becomes much simpler when this information finds its way to you naturally.

### → Data is your ally

Talking to your staff is only the beginning. One to one chats will teach you a lot about your people, but it won't tell you everything. There are a few reasons for this:

### → Anonymous feedback is honest feedback

There will always be feedback that people will prefer to give anonymously – no matter how open you are to difficult conversations.'

*"A recent staff survey told us that 30% of our employees feel they don't have a good work/life balance. This was really surprising, and we want to unpack it further. We didn't think we had a culture of presenteeism at all, so this wasn't expected."* Anonymous HR Manager, 50 team members.

### → You need the full picture

One to one conversations are incredibly valuable for the insight they give into your team's day to day

life. But they are also an inherently 'narrow' source of data, that **doesn't always present the big picture** on a particular issue.

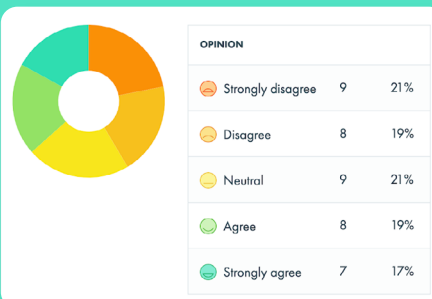
Using data allows you to view People issues in the macro, rather than just the micro.

### → Numbers cut through the noise

People issues are never black and white – and the subjective nature of the challenges you identify can be a real roadblock. Data gives you a way to **cut through any debate** with cold, hard numbers.

*"In order to have good conversations with the executive team you need to have data. Everyone has opinions on People issues– but to cut through the perceptions you need numbers. The better your analytics, the easier it is to think of real solutions and make strategically useful decisions."* Valerie Mann, Head of People at Mention Me.

### With Polls, you get the full picture





### → The best metrics for an HR dashboard

So, we know that good People Strategy begins with understanding the problems that your team faces – and we know that the best way to get a handle of those problems is with data. But what metrics do we include on our HR dashboard? Which numbers can we trust?

### → Employee churn/ employee turnover

This is perhaps the most widely known metric in the world of HR, and for good reason – it serves as a great indicator of the ‘health’ of a company’s workforce. Is employee turnover trending upwards over time? If so, that’s a strong sign that you haven’t created a work environment that people feel they can thrive in.

### → Revenue per employee

This is an important number for obvious reasons. Look at your company revenue over the financial year, and track it against your current headcount - how does that number stack up against previous years?

If it’s going down, then that could be an indication that something isn’t right.

### → Holidays taken / untaken

If you want your team to do great work, then regular and timely holidays are an important component of that. Having a clear overview of your team’s time off allows you to identify a team member who might be at risk of burning out.

### → Sick days and illness

A pattern of repeated absences can often indicate that all isn’t right with a team member. It might be a sign they are pushing themselves too hard, that things aren’t going well at home – or even an issue with their mental health. Whatever it is, having a clear overview of sick days taken gives you the chance to ask that question and offer support if it is needed.



Peakon gives us access to a huge amount of data about our team, and helps open up lines of communication between team members and managers.

**Hannah Grinsted**  
Head of People at [Bud](#)





## → ENPS (Employee Net Promoter Score)

A 'Net Promoter Score' is a metric traditionally used to measure customer loyalty. It asks customers to rate their likelihood to recommend a product or service to a friend out of ten.

An Employee Net Promoter Score takes the same principle and applies it to the question of employee engagement. To run an ENPS survey, you simply need to ask your employees this question:

"How likely are you to recommend this company to a friend as a place to work?"

There are a variety of software options out there that can run this for you, but even a DIY Typeform could do the trick.

The beauty of an ENPS survey is its simplicity – it gives you a single number that you can track clearly over time, and the brevity of the survey means that it tends to yield a high response rate.

## → Staff engagement surveys

Data on sick days and holidays taken are important, but those numbers really only tell you if someone is in the room or not. They don't speak to how that person feels about their work, their role or their future at the business.

This is where engagement surveys come into their own. Many different types of HR software now offer features that help you to keep a finger on the pulse of your employee engagement, happiness and loyalty.

An option like Peakon, for example, allows you to collate large amounts of data to help you measure, track and assess how your people are doing at work.

*"Peakon gives us access to a huge amount of data about our team, and helps open up lines of communication between*

*team members and managers."* Hannah Grinsted, Head of People at Bud.

However, data with that much depth is potentially overwhelming for someone just get started with their HR metrics. In that case, an option like Charlie's own Polls feature might be more useful.

## → Reading the data

If you can open up a dialogue with your team and start tracking at least a few of these metrics, then you should be able to put together **a picture of the challenges your team faces at work**.

But always remember... Surveys must be acted on.

*"Engagement surveys are great – but the caveat is that if you do a survey then you have to act on it... if you don't, then morale will just plummet again and will*

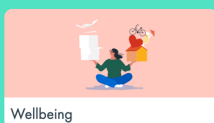
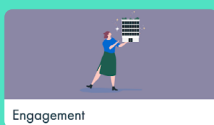
*end up lower than it was beforehand."* Matt Hurst-Smith, Head of People at Founders Pledge.

At the end of the day, it doesn't matter how many surveys you run, how many metrics you track or how many one to ones you schedule. The true value of the People function lies in not just identifying problems, but **communicating those problems** to the wider business and then **delivering solutions**.

But you can't deliver these solutions on your own. To do it, you're going to need **buy-in**.

You need buy-in from your fellow colleagues and team members. But most importantly, you're going to need buy-in from the senior leadership team.

### Charlie's research-backed poll themes mean you can get straight to work



**Engagement surveys are great – but the caveat is that if you do a survey then you have to act on it... if you don't, then morale will just plummet again and will end up lower than it was beforehand.**

**Matt Hurst-Smith**  
Head of People at Founders Pledge.



### STEP 3

# Know your business – and earn buy-in

**I**n the last step of this series, we move onto the final piece of the puzzle: earning the senior leadership buy-in you need in order to implement your People solutions.

#### → 'Human Resources' and the challenge of senior leadership buy-in

Right now, the HR and People function is in transition.

While more and more companies across the UK are realising the full value of a strategic People role, there are many workplaces that still see HR in its more traditional form – as **a transactional 'gatekeeper'** of administrative process.

Even if you've moved through the first two parts of this series and have identified the challenges you wish to tackle, not every employer will be ready to start implementing your solutions. Those solutions cost money, take up time and inevitably mean deprioritising other business objectives.

In order to take this final step in your career development you must be able to prove out – in a persuasive and compelling way – **the ultimate business value of your People initiatives.**

*"You have to demonstrate that HR is strategically valuable to the business and has an impact on your company's bottom line. Unless you can do that then no one has to take you seriously."*  
Ellie Laycock-Heavens

That process begins with **knowing your business.**



**In order to do any of this, you need to understand how your business works and what success looks like, how it makes its money, where it sits against its competitors and how well it is performing against its objectives.**

**Ellie Laycock-Heavens**  
Head of People at [Adzuna](#)



You can only deliver true value to the business if you understand it, what it needs and how it succeeds or fails. You need to understand how it makes money. So start by asking questions and learning about the business's problems so you can solve them.

**Valerie Mann**  
Head of People at [Mention Me](#)

### → Know your business – and how it thrives or fails

The reason? In order to communicate the value of People initiatives, you first need to understand **what is valuable to your business**. And that's not what is valuable to businesses in general – but to your company in particular.

*“In order to do any of this, you need to understand how your business works and what success looks like, how it makes its money, where it sits against its competitors and how well it is performing against its objectives.”*  
Ellie Laycock-Heavens

So learn about its strengths. Learn about its weaknesses. Study the direction that it is trying to move and **the challenges it faces in getting there...** and then provide exactly the solutions it needs.

*“You can only deliver true value to the business if you understand it, what it needs and how it succeeds or fails. You need to understand how it makes money. So start by asking questions and learning about the business's problems so you can solve them.”* Valerie Mann

Ask yourself these questions:

- Do you fully understand your company's business model?
- Do you understand how every team in your business contributes towards that model?
- Do you know what could put your company out of business in the next 6, 12 or 18 months?
- What are your company's strategic goals over that timeframe? What does 'success' look like?

If the answers to any of those questions are unclear in your mind, then you have work to do.

### → Bed the People function into company objectives

The way you talk about and communicate your People objectives must be couched in the context of your company and its own unique journey. Once you understand the direction your business objectives, you need to demonstrate how the People function can help the business get there.

*“This doesn't work if the People agenda feels like it is coming from outside of the company. It has to match the company objectives – otherwise, the reaction can be ‘is this a company priority or is it just your priority?’.”* Hannah Grinsted, Head of People at [Bud](#).

### Here's an example.

Let's say that over the course of Part 2 you identified that your company has a problem with retention. For whatever reason, many team members tend to stay for 12-18 months, rather than stay for the long haul.

Taken on it's own, that statistic is worrying – **and yet it won't move mountains for you**. Viewed through the abstract, wide-angle lens of 'employee retention', it is hard to grasp what harm is actually being done.

The answer? Hone that broad issue down to **a single, razor-sharp point** – one that instantly speaks to the very real damage inflicted by failing to hold on to team members.

You know the business objectives – how many team members does the company need to achieve them? Are those goals jeopardised by the current rate of churn?

### → Find a sponsor

Not every business sees the People function in the same progressive light. Indeed, many people reading this will work for companies where it's full value has yet to be realised. In those environments, winning that leadership buy-in is more difficult.

If you're unsure of how to gain that initial traction, **try looking for a sponsor higher up the business** – someone already at the top table who understands the benefits of your ideas and can help you get them heard. Often that person will be the COO but don't restrict your search to that one job role.

But if you still can't seem to win the ear of those people above you – remember this:

### → Data gets you heard

We already touched on the importance of data in Part 2, but this is where it really comes into its own. Now you're flying the flag of the People function and trying to win support from across the business, data is absolutely crucial.

*"CEOs can't ignore data that is telling them they have a business problem – because to do so would mean failing in their responsibilities. They are obliged to give you their attention."* Lottie Whyte

### → ...but pay attention to your messaging

*"There were times at previous jobs where I wanted to implement something but my messaging wasn't right. For example – an employee engagement survey requires time, it requires budget. It can also be quite scary for senior leaders, who think – 'what if these results are really negative?'. The solution is better understanding the people in the business. What do senior leaders want? What are they scared of, and how can you help them fix it? What do team members want?"* Hannah Grinsted



**CEOs can't ignore data that is telling them they have a business problem – because to do so would mean failing in their responsibilities. They are obliged to give you their attention.**

**Lottie Whyte**  
Head of People at [Hanbury Strategy](#)





→ **Finally – remember to stay visible**

No matter what your profession, identifying problems and providing solutions is only part of the battle. Like it or not, progression in any career needs you to **provide visibility over your success** and communicate your impact.

*“Sometimes fixing granular problems can make you invisible... You become so tied up in the little things that it’s not obvious what work you are doing to try and make change happen – so make a point of doing visible work that people can see.”*  
Hannah Grinsted



**Sometimes fixing granular problems can make you invisible... You become so tied up in the little things that it’s not obvious what work you are doing to try and make change happen – so make a point of doing visible work that people can see.**

**Hannah Grinsted**  
Head of People at [Bud](#)

This is especially true within the HR and People sphere. Anyone in this role is usually working in a **team of one** – in that context, it can be very easy to become siloed. To stop your important work from becoming lost in the noise, search out opportunities to talk about your progress to the rest of the business.

→ **And to finish...**

Remember that seniority is never ‘given’. No one is ever going to hand you a leadership role – especially within the People sphere, where those senior roles are still in the process of forming.

So take the initiative. Create your own opportunity to progress and **build the role you want** to work in.





[charliehr.com](http://charliehr.com)