



The 10 Biggest Mistakes New HR Professionals Make

To err is human—even in human resources. Here's how new practitioners can miss the mark, according to the HR hive mind.

By Christina Folz | Jan 22, 2018

Do you remember your first job? Whether it was three years ago or three decades ago, chances are that one of your strongest recollections is of a mistake you made. You might have trusted the wrong person, made an error in judgment that affected a colleague or customer, or inadvertently taken the CEO's parking spot on your first day. (Is it your fault that you and the big boss have the same last name?)

As embarrassing as these "rookie mistakes" may be, they are critical for career development. They teach us—vividly and unforgettably—what not to do, thereby illuminating the path to a job well done and a career well crafted. Failure, as it turns out, is one of the best teachers, as long as we are willing to learn its lessons.

That's why we asked you, the HR community, to tell us via social media and e-mail the biggest mistakes you see being made by new HR practitioners. You didn't hold back. Some of you shared your own "oops" moments, while others described the blunders of the newbies in your workplaces. Take a look at these common trouble areas to gain some insight into how they might inform your own professional journey. All quotes have been sourced from LinkedIn (<https://www.linkedin.com/company/shrm/>), Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/societyforhumanresourcemanagement/>), Twitter (<https://twitter.com/hrmagshrm>) and member e-mails.

1. Not Balancing Between Employee Advocate and Company Rep

The ongoing sexual harassment scandals involving celebrities and politicians highlight the tightrope HR must walk between advocating for employees while also representing the company. When HR leaders get this balance right, everyone wins.

However, finding the proper equilibrium between serving management and workers takes confidence, diplomacy and expert communication skills, which can take years of practice—and years of getting it wrong—to cultivate.

Indeed, many people agreed with Jason Hudson, SHRM-SCP, an associate with Edwards Ragan in Kingsport, Tenn., who characterized HR's biggest rookie mistake as "being too eager to please management." A similarly popular opinion: Lora Hassani, SHRM-SCP, an HR consultant in Redlands, Calif., and president of the Inland Empire SHRM Chapter, described the worst blunder as "giving in to management pressure when you know they're in the wrong."

Many of you noted that it's also not uncommon for neophytes to err on the side of advocating for employees and forgetting that protecting the company and its interests is an important part of the job.

2. Being Too Friendly and 3. Sharing Confidential Information

That brings us to No. 2, which Carole Robinson described as “cheerleading”—in other words, trying too hard to please everyone. “HR is not about ‘liking people,’ ” commented Robinson, owner of HR consulting firm Check It Off in Granville, Ohio. “It’s about understanding people, business practices and regulatory demands, as well as developing a culture that allows the business and the staff to thrive.”

That means “your friendships [and] personal needs are secondary to your obligation to your employer,” wrote Josh Seitz, SHRM-CP, director of HR at Horizon Credit Union in Spokane Valley, Wash.

Remaining professional is also critical to recruiting efforts. Refrain from asking candidates personal questions, advised Sara Gerardo, an executive recruiter at Prime Financial Recruiting in Rockwall, Texas. “It’s tempting to want to chat and really get to know a candidate, but it’s important to stick to employment-related questions only,” she commented.

[SHRM members'-only article: HR's role when ethics and law collide. (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/member2member/pages/hr=s-role-when-ethics-and-laws-collide.aspx)]

The No. 3 mistake was sharing confidential information, and it was a biggie. Several people pointed out that handling confidential employee data—“essentially understanding who needs to know what,” as Tanasha Bethel, a leave administrator at Huntington Ingalls Industries Inc. in Newport News, Va., put it—is one of HR’s biggest responsibilities. That’s why it’s so important to get it right and why this mistake can be hard to recover from.

“It’s a lesson to be taught, learned and respected before anything else,” wrote Brian Arnesman, SHRM-SCP, senior HRIS analyst at a New Jersey-based insurance company. “Using confidential information about other employees in our own career negotiations and gripes, or even sharing with non-stakeholding HR team members, is totally unacceptable. Anyone who makes the mistake is lucky to get a second chance.”

4. Forgetting that Your Employees Are Humans

HR professionals are certainly not alone in their increased reliance on technology and data to do their jobs. Yet no one has figured out how to automate empathy and critical thinking—two cornerstones of being a successful HR leader. So, while learning to leverage new tools is important, skilled practitioners never forget what the “H” in HR stands for.

“The biggest mistake I see ... is not digging deeper to understand the employees they support and treating them like numbers on a spreadsheet or just a resource,” commented Mandy Kurfurst, an HR manager at One Community Health in Hood River, Ore. “They miss the human aspect of what they are doing. You can be objective while still knowing your people. Get up, walk around, be present with the people you support. It goes a long way toward breaking the negative stereotype we are labeled with.”

Suggestions for developing the human touch included thinking of HR as a customer service role, in which managers and employees are your customers, and embracing an open-door policy as much as possible. “Allow the staff that you support to ask questions and don’t just shove them off to your [online] portal,” suggested Sandra Rojo, SHRM-CP, an HR representative at HORIBA Instruments Inc. in Irvine, Calif.

5. Believing HR Is One-Size-Fits-All

SHRM's new CEO Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/1217/pages/meet-new-shrm-ceo-qa-with-johnny-c-taylor.aspx), has described HR as both an art and a science. While practicing the profession requires in-depth knowledge—and there are some hard-and-fast rules to follow—the “right” solution to a problem can often vary depending on the situation, organization, industry, the business’s goals and the people your company serves.

“You need to understand your organization very well using your business acumen,” wrote Salman Alsuhail, an HR consultant and trainer in Dammam, Saudi Arabia. “Then see what fits and what works.” As many of you pointed out, there are rarely textbook answers in the real working world.

Yet new professionals often fall into the trap of thinking there should be a black-and-white answer to everything—when in fact there is a lot of gray in the workplace. Or, as Ivette Dupuis, SHRM-SCP, put it, her biggest mistake was “failure to recognize that HR is more than simply knowing the right answer. Over my 20-year career, I’ve learned the difference between imparting knowledge and influencing change or inspiring others.” Dupuis is an HR consultant and adjunct instructor in the Orlando/Tampa area.

6. Having a Know-It-All Attitude

It’s hard to admit when you aren’t quite grasping something—or a lot of things—and sometimes rookies hide what they don’t know by pretending they have all the answers. Indeed, many of you agreed that a frequent amateur error was, as Natalie Stuller Harding, SHRM-SCP, stated, “being afraid to say, ‘I don’t know. Let me look into that and get back to you.’ ”

That fear may stem in part from a lack of perspective that comes with experience; those who have been in the work world for a while usually understand that learning on the fly is part of the deal. So it’s important to let novices know that “no one is expected to know everything all the time,” wrote Harding, who is director of people operations at FormFire in the Cleveland area. “Better to take the time to research than to give advice that could put the company in a position of liability.”

Talking to others is also key. “You have to remain humble and not be afraid to ask questions,” said Ericka S. Browning, a Detroit-based HR practitioner. “Don’t always automatically assume. Really take the time to learn and nurture your craft.”

7. Failing to Take the Position Seriously

Like being a know-it-all, the tendency to oversimplify complex issues often arises from not knowing enough, which can be a real blind spot for those starting out in any endeavor. We don’t know what we don’t know, as the saying goes. As a result, people can sometimes suggest Band-Aid solutions to problems more akin to gushing wounds.

For example, “you can’t successfully recruit and retain employees if you don’t understand what their role is and what impact they have on the organization,” wrote Jessica Taylor, SHRM-CP, an HR generalist at ITW Deltar Components in Lakeville, Conn. “The further you dig to understand your business and its pain points, the better you can support the organization.”

That may be why “new HR professionals tend to not be as proactive in solving complex employee relations issues,” commented Jonathan Flickinger, J.D., chief human capital officer at Quality Life Services in the Pittsburgh area. “They sometimes let [the problem] go, and it can spiral out of control quickly—affecting culture, legal liability and/or employee morale.”

Seasoned HR leaders can help less-experienced colleagues to settle into their roles by providing insight into the things beginners might not know—and then giving them the time and space to learn. “We need to remember they are new professionals, and we cannot expect them to solve complex issues,” said Michael Smith, an HR manager with Greenstone in Sydney, Australia. “The first thing they need to learn ... is to build relationships, find a rapport with senior management, to understand how they think.”

Spending time fostering relationships and learning will pay dividends down the line. In the near term, though, “we cannot expect results from them,” Smith said. “Once they have cemented their relationships and know how to handle conversations with management, they will then be able to influence—which I don’t expect in the first year.”

8. Believing a Degree = Experience

As important as an HR education is, it’s also critical to realize that the real world is considerably more nuanced than the classroom. Failure to grasp that “has resulted in making uninformed decisions that involve people without understanding the context and having overconfidence,” said Christine E. Rowe, SHRM-SCP, an HR leader based in Washington, D.C.

“For example, I worked with a new benefits administrator (who I later found out did not want to be in benefits)... [She partnered with] a manager to terminate an employee without discussing it with me first. This caused many issues because one, she didn’t know the context and two, she gave inaccurate information.”

9. Underestimating the Importance of Compliance

It’s great when HR professionals have the luxury of time to assimilate to their roles, but for many departments of one or small teams, that’s not an option. Ready or not, many practitioners must hit the ground running.

Millennial Marlena Wesh bravely described her greatest struggle. “I find the biggest mistake I make as a new HR professional is not employee relations, but with benefits as they relate to legal infrastructure,” said Wesh, an HR generalist for Florida Credit Union in Gainesville, Fla. “Understanding the time constraints and how important [they are] under Affordable Care Act (ACA) rules and regulations is something that should not be taken lightly. I sometimes have so much to do that I forget about the legal deadlines.”

Chris, a practitioner from a New Jersey-based printing company who asked that his last name not be used, also had some difficulty wading into the weeds. “I think the biggest mistake I made was not knowing to do a full audit of what the payroll department has accomplished prior to HR starting,” he wrote. “Paired with that was not knowing which forms the government required for ACA purposes and assuming all was in order. ... I since learned ... a great deal from the communities on your SHRM site.”

[SHRM members'-only toolkit: *Coaching in a business environment* (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/coachinginabusinessenvironment.aspx)]

10. Not Thinking Beyond HR

As in many fields of endeavor, excelling in human resources means doing more than just those tasks that are listed on your job description. “You are already being paid to do the operational stuff, but the question is what ... is needed to elevate you to sit at the same table as the other business units,” wrote Ramlan Ahmad, managing director and CEO of Global Business Transformation Consulting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. “This is the question that HR professionals worldwide ... continue to struggle with.”

He says that “the biggest mistake is the assumption that if you do the operations portion of HR well, you automatically become a business partner.” Many other commenters, both within and outside the profession, agreed that this was a big trouble spot. HR practitioners are “responsible for compliance, but not at the expense of the businesses goals,” wrote Tony Benjamin, founder of HR consulting firm The Grange LLC in South Jordan, Utah.

“They need to think strategically, but they have to earn the right to be heard by gaining experience first,” he said. It’s a problem, for example, if “they can’t read a budget or a [profit and loss statement]; if they don’t understand the motivations of their management ‘partners’ and therefore only focus on compliance; or if they get so touchy-feely about employee happiness that they lose track of the important bottom-line factors.”

A good point, Tony, but let’s not throw the “touchy-feely” baby out with the business bathwater. At the end of the day, a major theme from the community is that HR professionals at all levels should hold on to their humanity—and making mistakes is integral to that, as is having empathy for yourself and others.

As amateurs grow into experts, they often realize that knowing everything isn’t an option (and never was). The best anyone can do is ask the right questions, learn from victories and defeats, and build on their strengths. “An experienced HR manager is confident, personable and creates a climate where candid expression is permissible,” wrote Donald Olson, HRM project manager at Strategix.xyz in Sarasota, Fla. “It’s OK to be yourself.”

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