



# The Small HR Team's Guide to Executive Communication



# Introduction

As an HR professional at a small to mid-sized business (SMB), you already have a clear sense of the biggest challenges your team faces at work every day.

You may even have ideas on how to solve them — the tools and technology you require, the strategic goals you should be impacting, and the decisions your organization could make to support your people. **But putting this plan into action is often a different story. How do you prove your strategic value and effectively communicate these needs to your executive team?**

Building a business case can be the most difficult aspect of demanding change. The decision makers at your organization may have communication styles that differ dramatically from those of your HR team. The overall strategic value of a new investment can be tough to understand or justify. There may be complex questions about the resources involved or how long it will take to see a return. And executives may simply be resistant to change in the first place, preferring the status quo if it appears “good enough” to the outside eye.

In this eBook, we’ve assembled actionable strategies, resources, and steps you can take to begin building your case and communicating it effectively to leadership. Read on for an overview of the obstacles you may face on the journey, a primer on executive vocabulary, statistics to help drive the business value of HR, and more.

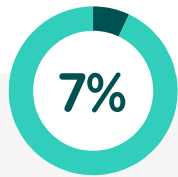


# The Challenge

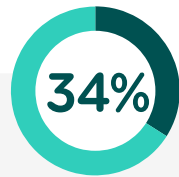
The first step in making the case for change is simply identifying concrete reasons for change. Many HR teams at SMBs are bogged down by manual processes that have not evolved to keep up with the modern pace of business. Others may be struggling to tackle compliance risks in the wake of new and changing legislation. At the same time, they may have trouble getting a seat at the table for strategic decision making.

Compared to the daily struggles of keeping your HR department running smoothly, constructing a business case for change may be a distant concern. You have limited resources and many priorities competing for your time, alongside ever-increasing external demands that affect the entire organization. Compounding this issue, leadership at your organization may have low visibility into HR operations, which can make it difficult to demonstrate the benefits of a new tech investment or the strategic value of including HR in broader business decisions.

A recent joint survey between UKG and HR.com asked HR teams at organizations with 1,500 or fewer employees to outline the scope of the most common problems:



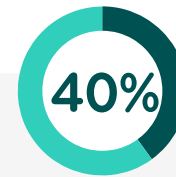
**Only 7 percent** of HR professionals say their leadership team always views HR and payroll as a strategic function.



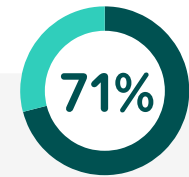
**34 percent** spend more than a quarter of their time managing regulatory compliance, which consumes 10 or more hours out of a standard 40-hour workweek.



**About half** indicate that their organizations struggle to achieve proactive analytics.



**40 percent** spend more than a quarter of their time on tasks that could be accomplished through employee self-service.



**71 percent** say it's not very easy for the leadership team to tie people data and HR results to business goals and initiatives.<sup>1</sup>

Begin the process of building your case by simply identifying the basic challenges you want your initiative to solve, and then get to work expressing them in the most straightforward language possible. In the next section, we'll take a look at tailoring this language specifically for an executive-level audience.

# Learning to Speak Executive

When it comes to locking down executive language, the most important factor is keeping your audience in mind. Communicating effectively with leadership often means speaking differently than you would when announcing an initiative internally or speaking to the workforce at large. As a result, a key tactic in making your case is identifying and using executive vocabulary — the terms, topics, and phrasing that will resonate with executives and their evaluation of high-level business goals.

The language you use when presenting your needs should have two primary goals: 1) helping executives understand the need for tools that take administrative pressure off the individual HR employee, and 2) demonstrating how HR can begin contributing more to strategic business conversations.

The simplest way to include this kind of language in your presentation is to work backwards from the outcomes that are the most important to leadership. Generally, this means those outcomes with an impact on the entire workforce, the future state of the organization, or the bottom line. Consider the following factors (and questions you can ask yourself and your team) to help build your case using executive vocabulary:



## Impact on business goals

Start with how your people processes can reinforce and add value to overall business strategy.

- ✓ Will a new tech investment help fill key positions faster and/or with better talent?
- ✓ Is your initiative aimed at increasing engagement by motivating individuals, including those outside of HR, to succeed?
- ✓ Could change support career development for the workforce by tying performance goals directly to business objectives, or assisting managers in promoting the right internal team members to foster growth?



## Impact on culture

Talk about the direct business benefits of change for your culture.

- ✓ Does addressing your challenge help differentiate your hiring process from competitors'?
- ✓ Can you offer clearer or improved benefits to help attract top talent?
- ✓ Would a new solution help promote diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) at your organization?



## Impact on cost and risk

Any substantial change, especially an investment in new tools or solutions, carries an associated cost. Focus on the return on this investment, either by future cost reduction or mitigating risk.

- ✓ Would tools to assist with regulatory compliance help the organization avoid fines, penalties, or potential lawsuits?
- ✓ Could a new solution help detect flight risk, fatigue, and other factors contributing to costly turnover?
- ✓ Is it possible to save on lost productivity through boosted self-service, optimized scheduling, and/or other areas of workflow improvement?

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**Executive vocabulary can help you engage key decision makers on their terms and pave the way for a successful investment.**

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# The Ideal State

Why is it worth the effort to get the message right? Research has shown major benefits for the HR teams at organizations that successfully embrace HR-led change. The same HR.com survey uncovered two groups of respondents with distinct differences in results based on how they would rate their HR teams' level of focus on back-office tasks, such as managing employee records or processing forms, versus helping guide business and people strategy, such as presenting people data or continuously improving processes (with 1 being the most focus on back-office tasks and 5 being the most focus on strategy).

- Organizations who answered 4 or 5 were classified as **HR strategy experts**.
- Organizations answering 1 or 2 were classified as **HR strategy novices**.

HR strategy experts exhibited several distinct advantages enabling them to contribute to the overall success of their organizations as a whole.

These teams were:

**5x**

More than five times more likely to use HR data to make actionable recommendations

**2x**

Twice as likely to be often or always seen as strategic functions by leadership

**4x**

Four times more likely to proactively align people strategy to business strategy and goals

**3x**

Three times more likely to make it easy for leaders to tie people data to larger business goals

**5x**

Nearly five times more likely to use HR and payroll processes to set strategic direction

Getting the information you need and putting together the language needed to present it can put your team on the road to becoming HR strategy experts — to the benefit of your entire workforce.



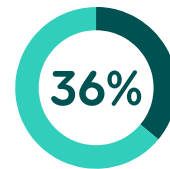
# Making the Case: The Data

Once you've defined the language and messaging style you intend to use with your leadership team, it's time to put it into practice. That means ensuring your team has the right building blocks to spark productive conversations with executives. This is where data comes into play. With the right mix of facts, perspective, and highlights of opportunity and risk, you can advocate effectively for the tools your people need to feel supported in their roles while proving the strategic value of HR to the organization.

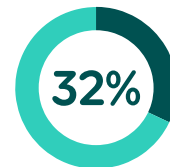
Now is the time to consider what actionable data you already have available to support your goals, and what data is currently lacking that would help to make your argument stronger. When constructed properly, your case will demonstrate that HR can influence the entire organization toward a stronger employer brand and a more people-centric culture.

First, the good news: **53 percent of the HR teams surveyed say they already measure retention and turnover.**<sup>2</sup> This is a good start for talking to executives, because it can easily be tied back to hiring budget, cost per hire, and the cost of losing key employees. Having a handle on this data empowers HR to advocate for better solutions for tracking things like flight risk and fatigue, as well as clearer paths for development and advancement. These can be tied directly to cost savings when compared against the decreased productivity, rehiring, and retraining that happens when key talent is lost.

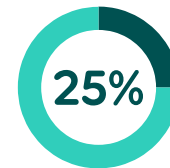
However, the research also shows major challenges in the consistency of measuring other key HR metrics that would appeal to executives:



Only **36%** measure *employee engagement/satisfaction*. This is a critical measure for proving the cultural results of change.



Only **32%** measure *time-to-hire* and/or *time-to-fill* rates. These metrics directly equate to the costs of your recruiting efforts and are important for showing progress with your hiring strategies.



**Less than 25%** measure *hiring costs, scheduled hours vs. actual hours, or training costs*. Knowing these baselines is critical for making the case for how to improve them to executives.<sup>3</sup>

All of these statistics feed into the dilemma mentioned above — the difficulties faced in tying HR's priorities to larger business goals and initiatives. To strengthen your case, start seeking out and tracking this data if you haven't done so in the past, and begin a trend analysis to help demonstrate the impact new solutions could have.

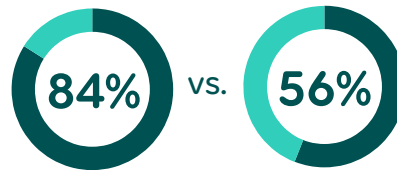
# Making the Case: Embracing Business Strategy

The final complement to the right language and the right data is the right expertise. There are two major avenues that HR professionals can pursue here: getting proactive about business strategy and forging key alliances with other stakeholders throughout the organization.

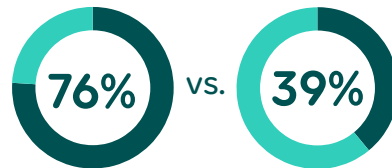
First, take an honest look at how your HR department interfaces with broader business strategy. The key here is to know rather than to be told. As it stands, nearly one in three HR professionals say they currently wait to be told about business strategy.<sup>4</sup> HR professionals have a much higher chance of making the case for change when they can confidently speak to broader organizational goals and define how they can contribute to them. Is your organization anticipating new or changing priorities in business strategy before they happen and participating in the conversations that drive them?

Research from Human Capital Institute (HCI) and UKG shows a distinct difference here between high-performing organizations (HPOs) — those scoring the highest on measures including employee engagement, diversity and inclusion, internal mobility, quality of hire, retention, customer satisfaction, regulatory compliance, talent attraction, profitability, and more — and others.

For HR professionals at these HPOs:



A full **84%** felt very or extremely confident in explaining their organization's vision, business strategy, and goals to employees vs. **56%** at other organizations.



**Seventy-six percent** felt very or extremely confident that they know how their talent strategy drives the strategic goals of their organization vs. only **39%** at others.



Meanwhile, **73%** felt very or extremely confident explaining their organization's top three strategic priorities vs. only **36%** at others.<sup>5</sup>

To make headway on tackling business strategy, make sure you're having proactive conversations with leaders and managers. When you uncover executive priorities, ensure you communicate them throughout the team, including down to individual contributors at the front lines. Finally, actively work to fill any gaps in your knowledge by interviewing and spending time with executives whenever possible — any face time is an opportunity to understand their vision and start contributing your ideas.



# Making the Case: Finding Your Allies

Next, consider how to make key alliances and work collaboratively to build your case for change:



## With payroll

HR can work together with payroll professionals to settle on common goals and needs that lead to measurable improvements for both departments while increasing HR's alignment with the strategic goals of the broader organization.

- Improve data integrity by creating a joint set of data standards, including important information about data formats as well as auditing procedures, and consider the tools and technology that could support these standards. This can help ensure consistency and accuracy while reducing the need for manual error correction.
- Create shared key performance indicators (KPIs) to align both teams around unified, measurable objectives that new solutions could impact. For example, tracking late or missing timecard information can benefit payroll by reducing processing errors, while helping HR be proactive for compliance reporting.



## With managers

Communicate to people leaders not just about what's going on in the day-to-day but also why it's happening. Discussing the underlying reasons behind successes, challenges, and opportunities will help you align your business case directly with the needs of your leaders.

- Demonstrate daily impact. One of the easiest ways to form alliances with managers is by illustrating how the tools you're advocating for would help make their day-to-day tasks easier.
- Highlight career development. If the changes you're seeking would provide more opportunities for training, coaching, development, and succession, put that information at the "top of the page" for managers.
- Think about actionable data. A new investment likely means new sources of people data and more of it than ever. Make it clear that managers will have better insights into their people, from advanced metrics on engagement and flight risk to easier scheduling and budgeting.



## With other stakeholders

Consider which other areas of the organization have challenges that could be addressed by your new investment in HR technology. Does your IT team field a large quantity of requests from employees because of issues with your current HR solution? Are there salespeople or customer support employees who are struggling with a lack of self-service or wasting time with manual processes that could be automated with the right solution?

Ultimately, no matter where you're trying to forge an alliance, make sure you've identified the ideas you want to bring to the table and feel confident about presenting your needs. Know your timing — don't start the conversation the moment you have the concept ready, but instead think about the best possible time to initiate, such as ahead of budget planning cycles or during a time when leaders don't have too many competing priorities.



# Conclusion

Whether you're hoping to automate administrative tasks, secure more self-service for your employees, streamline compliance, drive strategic conversations, or all of the above — the journey to making a bigger impact with your HR plans starts with getting your executive team on board.

It can often be difficult for executives to see the people side of business while juggling the needs of customers and shareholders. In these cases, the role of HR is to help executives become more sensitive to these critical needs by tying people data and initiatives to tangible, positive results for the business, whenever possible. HR professionals sit at the intersection between the people that power your organization and your organization's business priorities. By making a successful case for change, HR teams at SMBs like yours can attain both valuable investment in the modern tools they need to succeed and a seat at the table where they can bring about positive change.

For a look at how investing in the right HR technology can provide tangible, demonstrable returns to your entire organization, take a look at the [UKG Value Estimator](#).



# Appendix:

## Additional Resources

To get started building your business case, your HR team must carefully assess current processes and find ways to tie what you uncover to what your executives are focused on. To help with this initiative, we've included some links that may help you develop the best possible strategy for executive communication, as well as an HR Strategy Worksheet and Checklist for Executive Communication below.

[State of the HR Function in Small to Mid-sized Businesses Report](#)

[Prioritize to Progress: Strategies to Move HR Forward in SMBs Webinar](#)

[The Great Reset: How High-Performing Organizations Build HR Business Partnerships to Thrive in the Resilience Economy](#)



# HR Strategy Worksheet

List the current top 3 strategic priorities of your organization:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

List your current top 3 HR priorities:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

How do each of your top priorities directly contribute to each of your organization's strategic priorities?

How could your priorities change to reflect the organization's strategic goals?  
How could the organization's goals change based on HR's perspective?

How are you measuring success in your HR department? How easy is it for you to get the information you need to prove success?

Rank the HR process improvements you think would make the biggest impact for you and your people:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

How would you prove the need for each of these process improvements?  
What numbers that your executive team keeps track of can you tie to your suggestions?

What key events are your executives involved in during a typical year?  
When would be the best time to approach them about your suggestions?

# Checklist for Executive Communication

Before initiating a conversation with executive leadership, ensure that you have completed the following preliminary tasks to create the best possible business case for change.

- ☐ Understand and document the HR processes you currently follow and any gaps that exist
- ☐ Understand the key elements of your organization's current business strategy
- ☐ Gather the KPIs that connect HR and payroll activities to those business goals
- ☐ Collaborate with payroll and managers to arrive at proposed changes that will benefit multiple groups in the organization
- ☐ Identify opportunities where HR could be a part of strategy conversations
- ☐ Highlight the ways your proposed changes can provide value and reduce costs
- ☐ Narrow down the proposed solutions that will have the highest impact on people and strategy
- ☐ Find an appropriate time to approach leadership with your initial pitch
- ☐ Focus not just on challenges but also on the solutions as you prepare for your conversation
- ☐ Develop clear plans to track the implementation of your suggestions, including deadlines and milestones



## References:

- <sup>1</sup> *State of the HR Function in Small to Mid-sized Businesses*, HR.com (October 27, 2021), found at [https://www.ukg.com/sites/default/files/media/files/2021-10-27\\_UKG\\_HRStrategy\\_ResearchReport\\_hrdotcom\\_.pdf](https://www.ukg.com/sites/default/files/media/files/2021-10-27_UKG_HRStrategy_ResearchReport_hrdotcom_.pdf).
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Great Reset: How High-Performing Organizations Build HR Business Partnerships to Thrive in the Resilience Economy*, HCL (September 9, 2020), found at <https://www.kronos.com/resources/great-reset-research-report?ux=ukg>.

## About UKG

At UKG (Ultimate Kronos Group), our purpose is people™. Built from a merger that created one of the largest cloud companies in the world, UKG believes organizations succeed when they focus on their people. As a leading global provider of HCM, payroll, HR service delivery, and workforce management solutions, UKG delivers award-winning Pro, Dimensions, and Ready solutions to help tens of thousands of organizations across geographies and in every industry drive better business outcomes, improve HR effectiveness, streamline the payroll process, and help make work a better, more connected experience for everyone. UKG has more than 13,000 employees around the globe and is known for an inclusive workplace culture. The company has earned numerous awards for culture, products, and services, including consecutive years on Fortune's *100 Best Companies to Work For* list. To learn more, visit [ukg.com](https://www.ukg.com).



Our purpose is people

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