

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Rooted in People

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Labor represents the single largest cost category in the horticulture industry—surpassing inputs, equipment, trucking and even the plants themselves. Given this reality, doesn't your highest cost deserve an accomplished professional leading it?

Just as successful operations rely on head growers to nurture plants, logistics managers to coordinate shipping, production planners to manage inputs and accountants to safeguard financials, a strategic HR professional

is essential to optimize your most valuable asset: your people.

Understanding the scope of Human Resources

Human Resources encompasses a diverse collection of disciplines that impact everyone connected to your business—from employees and management to vendors, clients, customers and consultants. The function touches every aspect of the employee experience and plays a critical role in organizational success.

So why do horticulture companies need a true HR professional? The answer lies in six core areas where skilled HR leadership drives measurable business results.

1. Talent acquisition and retention. This stands as the most pressing challenge facing horticulture businesses today. The agriculture industry has the oldest average workforce of any sector, leading to unprecedented retirement rates. Meanwhile, we're failing to attract new talent at a pace sufficient to backfill these positions.

The reality: As the green industry's labor participation rate continues to decline, HR professionals face an impossible task—they cannot recruit people who simply don't exist in the available talent pool.

The strategic response: Finding and convincing top talent to join your organization requires sophisticated recruitment strategies, compelling employer branding and competitive positioning in an increasingly difficult market.

But acquisition is only half the equation. Retention demands equal attention. Today's employees don't join companies solely for a specific role—they seek opportunities for both personal and professional growth. They want increased responsibility, meaningful contribution to organizational success, community engagement opportunities and income growth that supports their financial goals.

2. Total rewards strategy. Closely tied to hiring and retention, compensation and benefits strategy has become the

second most time-consuming issue for HR professionals today. As the talent gap widens, astute HR leaders are examining pay equity and pay parity while conducting comprehensive benefits analysis. This goes far beyond traditional healthcare and retirement packages. Modern total rewards programs include wellness initiatives, professional development funding and lifestyle perks that genuinely improve employees' daily lives.

The challenge: With five generations now working side by side—each placing different values on various benefits—many businesses discover their total rewards programs are misaligned with what top talent actually wants and needs. Forward-thinking HR professionals continuously reassess and adjust their total rewards mix to meet evolving organizational goals and employee expectations.

3. Performance management and development. The horticulture industry operates at an increasingly rapid pace, demanding more sophisticated training and development programs than ever before. Performance management and employee development are intrinsically linked—you must accurately assess performance to identify where training is needed most.

Addressing the skills gap: Many progressive growers with dedicated HR leadership have developed in-house grower education programs, recognizing that finding a turnkey grower in today's market is virtually impossible. This investment pays dividends during recruitment. One of the top questions from candidates interviewing today is: "What programs and investments will you make in my career development?"

HR professionals design and implement performance management systems alongside training programs that help employees grow, align with company goals and maintain motivation through their career journey.

4. Culture and engagement. Companies successfully combating turnover share a common trait: they've defined and executed a clear strategy for treating employees better than their competition. This includes fostering a strong, positive culture that demonstrates genuine care and support, developing active social causes that resonate with employees, and articulating clear career paths supported by robust learning and development programs.

A critical distinction: Retention and engagement are not synonymous. Retention doesn't automatically translate to productivity, but engagement drives both higher productivity and improved retention. Strong HR leaders intentionally build positive workplace cultures that boost morale, leading to measurable improvements in both productivity and retention metrics.

5. HR compliance and risk management. Compliance may not be glamorous, but every business and employee must contend with it. The HR compliance landscape is evolving at a dizzying pace, with new laws, court decisions, agency interpretations and regulatory changes emerging constantly. From OSHA and PPACA to ADA, EEOC, FMLA and countless local, state and federal labor regulations, the compliance burden has never been heavier or more complex.

The protection: HR professionals ensure your company complies with labor laws, safety regulations and ethical standards, protecting the organization from costly legal issues and potentially devastating reputational damage.

6. Crisis and change management. Every business eventually faces crises or significant change, whether mergers, restructuring, layoffs or global disruptions. During these challenging transitions, HR professionals serve as the crucial bridge, guiding communication, supporting affected employees and maintaining organizational stability.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a stark reminder of how critical Human Resources becomes during times of uncertainty. HR teams navigated unprecedented complexities, keeping businesses operational while protecting employee safety and well-being.

Why strategic HR is essential to leadership—and rare

The short answer is yes—finding a truly strategic HR professional is difficult. The kind who can lead through challenges, analyze data to inform sound decisions and guide leaders toward solutions tailored to their unique business needs is rare. While both transactional and strategic HR functions are vital, many HR practitioners are stuck in the daily grind, limiting their ability to help businesses right-size, stabilize and grow.

The misconception of HR as “just transactions.” Ask most business leaders what HR does and you’ll hear: “They hire and fire people, manage benefits, and tell us how much we can pay.”

That perception is widespread—and deeply flawed.

Yes, HR has transactional duties, but so does every department. Take Accounting: it logs debits and credits, closes books monthly, and prepares financial statements. Yet no one questions its strategic importance. HR deserves the same respect.

HR handles payroll, onboarding, open enrollment and recruitment requisitions. But if leadership sees that as the full extent of HR’s value, they’re missing the bigger picture—and possibly holding the business back.

People are the business. At its core, every business is built on people. Even a solo consultant is a person driving the business. Humans conceive ideas, execute strategies and maintain the systems—even the automated ones—that keep companies running. No matter how advanced technology becomes people remain the foundation.

The strategic side of HR: Workforce planning

Strategic HR begins with workforce planning. When a company sets a three-to-five-year strategic vision, it often requires roles and skills that don’t yet exist. Without a human capital plan, that vision is likely to fail.

Strategic HR professionals partner with executives to:

- Develop career paths that transition talent into future roles
- Benchmark compensation for emerging positions
- Create learning programs to up-skill employees for jobs that haven’t yet been defined
- Design employee relations strategies that boost engagement and retention
- Manage the human impact of organizational change

None of this is transactional. It’s strategic, intentional and aligned with long-term goals.

What makes a “true” HR professional?

A title alone doesn’t make someone strategic. A true HR professional embodies:

- Professionalism and ethical conduct
- Emotional intelligence and foresight
- Proactive, not reactive, leadership and team building
- Visionary thinking that shapes the future of the company

In the horticulture industry, where labor is the highest cost and greatest competitive advantage, professional HR leadership isn’t a luxury—it’s a strategic necessity. The question isn’t whether you can afford to invest in

Todd Downing is a Managing Partner for Best Human Capital & Advisory Group.

Bill Boonstra—Owner, Bluestone Perennials:

We resisted having an HR professional for literally decades. Boy, were we wrong! We recently staffed that position and couldn't be happier. He's not only a tremendous help to upper management, but our entry and mid-level managers also really enjoy the support. HR is intimately involved in hiring, firing, training, payroll, benefits, compliance, workman's comp, safety, job descriptions, procedures—the list goes on. He's added a level of consistency and professionalism across our entire organization. Now, we couldn't imagine not having HR on our team.

Mike Vallafskey—CEO of Dan & Jerry's Greenhouses:

Having a Human Resource “professional” presence is essential to managing a business today. Key attributes I look for are:

- Fact-based knowledge of compliance and integration into the business
- Engaging at all levels of the business with intentional planning of employee development and growth
- A business partner to the CEO/President and CFO, leading strategic change management while striving towards a sustainable, cost-effective labor cost model, while employee productivity is optimized and business systems are running effectively.

Emily Showalter—Chief of Human Resources, Willoway Nurseries:

Here are some thoughts on why horticulture industry businesses should have an HR professional on their team:

- Your employees are just as important as your customers
- HR ensures your team is fully staffed
- HR helps drive the culture you want for your business, which helps drive exceptional customer service
- Stays on top of industry trends and benchmarks for benefits and salaries, and ensures the team completes performance reviews; Employees want feedback and HR applies consistent reviews, improvement plans and career paths for employees
- Department managers, owners, etc. don't have time to focus on the above—you need HR in place and it will get done ... and you will see the ROI!

Dana Valley—Hear of HR America, Dümme Orange:

The foundational value that HR brings to any business is to ensure fairness and consistency in employment practices across the employee life cycle. This table-stakes view mitigates legal concerns for the company and helps employees understand how to navigate their own employment relationship. Where the strategic advantage of HR comes from is in the ability to understand business objectives and financial drivers, and translate those into people practices and programs. This understanding of the business strategy informs the development of and attention to the employee value proposition that attracts, retains, motivates and grows talented employees.

