

Ten Top HR Tips – from our Real People consultants

1. **Your services are only as good as the people you employ.** You have to take the same strategic and planned approach to staff recruitment, engagement and development as you do to service development, growth and finances. Research shows that an under-performing employee will cost you eight times their salary.
2. **Don't skimp on recruitment and selection processes - however much time and money you spend on training and development, you can't develop the wrong raw material.** If you don't already have a core competencies framework, develop one. Competencies make it so much easier to recruit the right people, manage performance and develop your people. Don't over-emphasise 'past experience of' in your person specs and adverts. Use your competencies framework as the basis for recruiting bright, well-motivated people with transferable skills who will develop into the finished article. And be tough in your recruitment and selection standards, using a range of methods to test people. This is the way to the highest quality most diverse work force.
3. **Remember that the people who know best how an employee is likely to perform are those who have worked with them in the past.** Think about whether you need to tighten up your pre-employment referencing processes. Referencing practice by employers in social care is generally so slack as to be negligent. Go for at least 5 years' worth of employment history (every one the person has worked for in that time), always check the provenance of references, and don't appoint people where the referee is less than 100% favourable or has a history of poor attendance.
4. **Manage your induction and probationary processes well.** The way you inform, guide, engage and relate to staff in the early months of their employment is absolutely crucial to how engaged and effective they are going to be in the longer term. Make sure that during induction staff get to know exactly what your organisation is about, what its core values are, how all your services fit together, and what expectations you have of them – both in terms of clear work standards and goals to be achieved and their behaviour to clients, colleagues and managers. Observe performance, conduct and attendance very carefully during the probationary period, and use a structured and fair process to end the employment relationship if a mistake has been made at the recruitment and selection phase. Don't turn a blind eye to problems, or feel tempted to recommend confirmation in post where you have reservations about performance, conduct or attendance - you'll pay a heavy penalty in the longer term.
5. **Have robust performance management systems and ensure that managers implement them properly and regularly.** Inspirational leadership is 'flavour of the year' and it's true that senior managers need to be visible, approachable, and capable of inspiring staff with a passion for what they do and where the organisation is going. But too often organisational leaders think they will improve the efforts of their people if only they can somehow translate into practice some of the thinking of the big name leadership gurus. Wrong. Your staff won't give of their best unless they have clear goals and standards to achieve, and regular evidence-based feedback on progress. The most effective leaders are those who do regular appraisal and one-to-ones with their staff, and spend time supporting them plan and achieve their work and personal development goals. Unfortunately, this is an uncongenial agenda for many 'managers' who prefer to spend all their time doing the things they love doing. These people are neither managers nor leaders. They may be very good at what they do but they will never get the best out of staff.

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6. **It's vital to train managers to manage and not just plunge them in to swim as best they can.** Ensure those at the top of the organisation and in line management roles act as positive role models for good leadership and management or, if you can't make them, ensure they know the consequences of not doing so! Ensure the thing they learn best of all - other than how to recruit and select excellent staff - is how to support and coach staff to develop their skills and potential. People don't magically assume these complex skills, particularly if the line management role models they've had have been poor. Make sure that managers are held as accountable for every aspect of their own people management performance as they are for their financial and project development targets. Spare no effort in the recruitment and selection process to ensure that the person you are appointing as a manager loves managing staff – or, if it is their first management post, is someone who really wants to line manager and has the emotional intelligence potential to do so effectively.
7. **Learning & development is central to everything an organisation does, and not peripheral.** Organisational performance can only be continuously improving where the organisation has clearly identified the skills requirements of staff and finds ways of meeting them. It's not about spending money – it's about having a simple but clear process for articulating clearly what the knowledge and skills requirements are and taking a planned approach to meeting these at organisational and individual levels. On the job learning opportunities with structured coaching from line managers and peers will always be the most effective component of your learning and development strategy. Find ways of building on the job learning opportunities into the day to day fabric of what you do.
8. **Communicate with your staff and involve them.** Communication is two-way. Identify clear, simple ways of getting across key messages to staff regularly. But make sure you also have ways to listen. Good staff they will have good ideas. Build up transparent and effective ways of capturing these, and also feeding back on the progress of ideas. There's nothing more demotivating for staff (other, that is, than a line manager who can't be bothered to spend quality time appraising and coaching them) than being asked to work on producing ideas but never hearing what has become of them. And get your senior managers out of their offices and around the place engaging with employees who are doing the front line work. This, as prosaic as it may seem, is the true key to 'inspirational leadership'.
9. **Have clear and consistently applied HR policies and make sure they are followed.** In the absence of a clear code of conduct and other HR policies and processes that line managers are held accountable for managing consistently, you will have a less happy and productive workforce. The only people who ultimately benefit from the loopholes that organisations allows in the name of 'flexibility' and 'trusting staff to behave like adults' are the bullies who get everything on their own terms – they don't want to attend, they don't want to perform, and they don't want to behave acceptably to their clients and colleagues. You can't challenge them because you have no tools to do so, and when you bravely try and tackle them without the tools they go straight down the Employment Tribunal. The litigators will always go for the organisations that are weak on the application of policy and procedure because they know they can trip you up using the rope of your own well-intentioned informality. If you have staff who don't love your organisation or the job they're doing for you or can't and won't perform and behave to your standards, ensure your managers have the tools and support to tackle the issues early and effectively.
10. **Have a clear strategy for managing attendance.** If you have people in your organisation whose sickness absence is regularly running at an average of around 8 days or more a year and no action is being taken, then you have an attendance issue, regardless of how great a worker they are. Similarly if you have people who go off long term sick for months on end, you need to proactively managing the situation. Flexible working arrangements and excellent management practices will be the chief ingredients in creating a culture where people want to come to work. You also need robust systems for recording and monitoring absence and a good policy for intervention as soon as absence triggers are reached.

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