

Thriving as an HR Department of One: A Small Business Guide

In many small organizations, human resources responsibilities fall to a single person—often one whose primary role lies elsewhere in the organization. Whether you're a finance manager, office administrator, or newly hired HR professional, being an "HR department of one" can feel overwhelming. This guide provides practical guidance on how to assess your organization's HR needs, set priorities, focus your efforts, and know when to seek outside support. Thriving in this role requires strategic thinking, effective time management, and a clear understanding of what matters most.

Understanding the Role

As an HR department of one, your job is not to do everything at once—it's to do the most important things well. Your mission is to support the organization's people and business needs efficiently, compliantly, and thoughtfully, even if you don't have a formal HR background.

Understanding the Landscape: Identifying Organizational Needs

1. Engage with Leadership

- ❖ **Schedule dedicated conversations:** Instead of a quick "how's it going?", proactively schedule 30-60 minute meetings with the CEO, department heads, and key managers. Make it a recurring event (e.g., monthly or quarterly) to stay aligned.
 - **Example:** "Hi [CEO's Name], I'd like to schedule some time to discuss our workforce strategy in relation to our upcoming product launch. Perhaps we could meet for 45 minutes next Tuesday?"
- ❖ **Ask targeted questions:** Go beyond general inquiries. Prepare a list of specific questions tailored to each leader's area of responsibility.
 - **Example (for the CEO):** "What are your top three strategic priorities for the next 12-18 months, and how do you see our talent contributing to those goals? What are your biggest concerns regarding our workforce's ability to execute these priorities?"
 - **Example (for a Sales Manager):** "What are the biggest challenges your team is facing in terms of performance or morale? Are there any skills gaps you've identified within your team that are hindering sales targets? What kind of support from HR would be most beneficial for your team's success?"
 - **Example (for an Operations Manager):** "Are you anticipating any changes in staffing needs due to process improvements or increased production? What are your biggest concerns around employee safety and compliance within the operations team?"
- ❖ **Review existing strategic plans and reports:** Don't just accept verbal feedback. Ask for access to company strategic plans, business development reports, financial projections, and any past employee surveys or performance reviews.
 - **Example:** "Could I review the strategic plan for the next fiscal year? Understanding the projected growth and key initiatives will help me align our HR efforts accordingly. Also, are there any past employee engagement survey results I could look at to identify recurring themes?"



2. Connect with Employees

- ❖ **Conduct informal surveys or feedback sessions:** Utilize various methods to gather employee input, keeping it brief and focused.
 - **Example (Short Online Survey):** Use a tool like SurveyMonkey or Google Forms with 3-5 targeted questions, such as “What is one thing the company could do to improve your work experience?” or “Do you feel you have the resources and support you need to succeed in your role (Yes/No/Sometimes - with an optional comment box)?”
 - **Example (Informal Group Discussions):** Organize small, informal “coffee chats” or “lunch and learns” where you can facilitate open discussions on specific topics (e.g., communication, work-life balance).
- ❖ **Be an active listener:** Pay close attention during one-on-one interactions, team meetings, and even casual conversations. Observe body language and listen for underlying concerns.
 - **Example:** An employee mentions feeling overwhelmed. Instead of just acknowledging it, ask follow-up questions like, “Can you tell me more about what’s contributing to that feeling?” or “Are there any processes or tools that could help alleviate some of that workload?”
- ❖ **Analyze exit interviews (if applicable):** Treat exit interviews as valuable data-gathering opportunities. Look for patterns and recurring reasons for employee departures.
 - **Example:** If multiple departing employees mention a lack of career development opportunities, this signals a potential need to focus on training and growth initiatives. Ensure a consistent and structured approach to exit interviews to gather comparable data.

3. Assess Current HR Practices

- ❖ **Conduct a mini-HR audit** to understand what’s already in place and what’s missing:
 - Do we have up-to-date job descriptions?
 - Are our personnel files complete and confidential?
 - Do we have a compliant employee handbook?
 - Are we complying with employment laws (postings, overtime, breaks, etc.)?
 - Is there a consistent process for hiring, onboarding, and terminations?
 - Do we have the forms we need?
- ❖ **Document existing processes:** Create a visual map or written description of how HR-related tasks are currently handled, even if it’s just you doing them.
 - **Example:** For “Hiring,” document the steps involved: where job postings go, who reviews applications, interview process (who participates, what questions are asked), background checks, offer process, and onboarding.
- ❖ **Review existing documentation:** Critically evaluate the content, accuracy, and legal compliance of all HR-related documents.
 - **Example:** For the employee handbook, check if it includes up-to-date policies on anti-discrimination, harassment, leave, and disciplinary procedures. Ensure it aligns with current federal, state, and local laws. Review job descriptions to ensure they accurately reflect the required skills, responsibilities, and reporting structure.
- ❖ **Identify gaps and inconsistencies:** Look for areas where formal processes are missing, policies contradict each other, or practices are applied unevenly.
 - **Example:** You might find that there’s no formal performance review process, or that some departments conduct informal reviews while others don’t. This inconsistency can lead to perceptions of unfairness and hinder employee development.



Prioritize: Focus on What Matters Most

Given the constraint of being the “HR department of one,” it’s crucial to focus on the essentials that protect the organization and support its people. Here’s a suggested order of priorities with expanded examples:

High Priorities – Foundational and Compliance

1. **Compliance and Risk Management:** This protects the organization from legal and financial liability.
 - ❖ Wage and hour laws (especially classification of employees and overtime rules):
 - **Example:** Carefully review job duties for each position to determine if they meet the legal criteria for exempt (salaried, not eligible for overtime) or non-exempt (hourly or salaried, eligible for overtime) status under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). Document the rationale for each classification.
 - **Example:** Implement a clear policy on how overtime is authorized, tracked, and paid, ensuring compliance with state and federal regulations. Train managers on these rules.
 - **Example:** Regularly audit employee time records for accuracy and ensure that non-exempt employees are being paid correctly for all hours worked, including overtime.
 - ❖ Harassment and discrimination prevention:
 - **Example:** Develop and implement a clear, comprehensive anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policy that outlines prohibited conduct, reporting procedures, and investigation processes.
 - **Example:** Conduct regular training for all employees (and managers) on recognizing and preventing harassment and discrimination, fostering an inclusive workplace. Document who has completed the training.
 - **Example:** Establish a clear and safe process for employees to report incidents of harassment or discrimination, and ensure that all complaints are taken seriously and investigated thoroughly and impartially.
 - ❖ I-9 documentation and new hire paperwork:
 - **Example:** Implement a systematic process for completing and retaining I-9 forms for all new hires within the legally required timeframe, ensuring proper verification of identity and employment eligibility. Stay updated on any changes to I-9 requirements.
 - **Example:** Develop a standardized new hire paperwork packet that includes all legally required forms (e.g., W-4, state tax forms) and essential company information. Ensure these forms are completed accurately and stored securely.
 - ❖ Leave administration:
 - **Example:** Understand and correctly administer various types of leave, such as Paid Family and Medical Leave, Oregon Family Leave Act (OFLA) and Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and other applicable sick and leave laws.
 - **Example:** Develop clear guidelines and procedures for employees to request leave, and train managers on their responsibilities in the leave administration process. Maintain accurate records of all leave taken.



- ❖ Proper timekeeping and recordkeeping:
 - **Example:** Implement a reliable system for tracking employee work hours (e.g., time clocks, digital timekeeping software), ensuring accuracy and compliance with wage and hour laws.
 - **Example:** Establish and maintain organized and secure personnel files for each employee, containing essential documents such as hiring paperwork, performance reviews, disciplinary actions, and termination records, adhering to legal retention requirements.

2. Foundational HR Infrastructure: Put basic systems and processes in place.

- ❖ Develop a compliant and easy to understand employee handbook:
 - **Example:** Create a comprehensive employee handbook that outlines company policies, procedures, employee conduct, benefits, and employee rights and responsibilities. Ensure it complies with all applicable federal, state, and local laws.
 - **Example:** Use clear, concise language and avoid legal jargon. Organize the handbook logically with a table of contents for easy navigation. Have it reviewed by legal counsel.
 - **Example:** Implement a process for distributing the handbook to all employees (upon hire and for updates) and obtaining signed acknowledgments of receipt.
- ❖ Create or update job descriptions:
 - **Example:** Develop clear and concise job descriptions that accurately outline the essential duties, responsibilities, behavioral competencies, required skills, and reporting structure for each position. Use consistent formatting and include necessary disclaimers (e.g., “other duties as assigned”).
 - **Example:** Regularly review and update job descriptions to reflect changes in job duties or organizational structure. This is crucial for accurate hiring, performance management, and compensation.
- ❖ Set up onboarding and separation checklists:
 - **Example (Onboarding Checklist):** Create a detailed checklist of tasks to be completed during the new hire onboarding process, including paperwork, system access, introductions, initial training, and check-in meetings. Assign responsibility for each task.
 - **Example (Separation Checklist):** Develop a checklist for employee departures, including resignation acceptance, exit interview scheduling, final paycheck processing, benefits information, return of company property, and system access termination.
- ❖ Ensure consistent personnel file management:
 - **Example:** Establish a standardized system for organizing and maintaining employee personnel files, whether physical or digital. Ensure that only authorized personnel have access and that files are stored securely and confidentially.
 - **Example:** Define what documents should be included in each personnel file and establish a process for adding and removing documents appropriately, adhering to legal record retention guidelines.

3. Recruitment and Retention: Help the organization hire and keep the right people.

- ❖ Streamline hiring processes (job postings, applications, interview questions, offer letters):
 - **Example (Job Postings):** Develop templates for job postings that are clear, concise, and attract qualified candidates. Utilize relevant job boards and platforms.
 - **Example (Applications):** Implement a consistent method for receiving and tracking applications (e.g., an online application system or a designated email inbox).



- **Example (Interview Questions):** Develop a set of standardized, job-related interview questions to ensure fairness and consistency in the evaluation of candidates. Avoid illegal or discriminatory questions.
- **Example (Offer Letters):** Create clear and legally compliant offer letters that outline key terms of employment, including job title, salary, benefits, and start date.
- ❖ Develop an onboarding experience that helps new hires feel welcomed and prepared:
 - **Example:** Go beyond paperwork. Assign a “buddy” to new hires, schedule introductory meetings with key team members, provide a welcome package, and plan initial training sessions covering essential job functions and company culture.
 - **Example:** Conduct regular check-ins with new hires during their first few months to address any questions or concerns and ensure they are integrating well.
- ❖ Identify why employees leave and what keeps them engaged through tools such as stay and exit interviews:
 - **Example (Exit Interviews):** Conduct structured exit interviews with departing employees to gather feedback on their reasons for leaving. Use a consistent set of questions and analyze the data for trends.
 - **Example (Stay Interviews):** Schedule informal conversations with current employees to understand what they value in their jobs, what might make them consider leaving, and what the organization can do to better support them.

4. Culture, Communication, and Employee Relations: Even small teams benefit from intentional culture work.

- ❖ Schedule regular check-ins or surveys to get feedback from employees:
 - **Example (Regular Check-ins):** Encourage managers to have regular one-on-one meetings with their direct reports to discuss performance, provide feedback, and address any concerns.
 - **Example (Surveys):** Conduct short, focused employee engagement surveys (e.g., using tools like SurveyMonkey or Google Forms) on specific topics (e.g., communication, workload, manager support) to gather anonymous feedback and identify areas for improvement.
- ❖ Coach managers on how to have difficult conversations early and document them:
 - **Example:** Provide managers with training and resources on how to address performance issues, conflict, and other sensitive topics with employees in a constructive and respectful manner.
 - **Example:** Emphasize the importance of documenting these conversations, including the date, participants, issues discussed, and any agreed-upon action steps. Provide templates for documentation.
- ❖ Promote values like inclusion, transparency, and respect:
 - **Example (Inclusion):** Organize team-building activities that encourage collaboration and understanding among diverse team members. Ensure that all employees have equal opportunities for growth and development.
 - **Example (Transparency):** Communicate openly about company goals, performance, and significant changes. Hold regular all-hands meetings or provide written updates.
 - **Example (Respect):** Model respectful behavior in all interactions. Implement and consistently enforce policies against bullying and harassment. Recognize and appreciate employee contributions.



Medium Priorities – Employee Engagement & Development

❖ Communication

- **Example:** Implement regular company-wide announcements (e.g., newsletters, email updates, Teams announcements), establish clear communication channels within teams, ensure important policy changes are communicated effectively, and provide opportunities for two-way communication (e.g., all-staff meetings; Q&A sessions).

❖ Performance Management Basics

- **Example:** Implement a simple system for setting annual goals, conducting mid-year check-ins for feedback, and holding annual performance reviews. Focus on providing constructive feedback and identifying areas for development. Even a basic system is better than none.

❖ Employee Relations

- **Example:** Be approachable and available for employees to voice concerns. Develop a basic process for addressing grievances fairly and consistently. Document all employee relations issues and resolutions. Understand when to escalate issues to leadership or seek legal counsel.

❖ Training and Development (Targeted)

- **Example:** If there's a clear need for improved customer service skills, organize a workshop on customer service best practices. If new software is being implemented, arrange training sessions for affected employees. Focus on training that directly addresses identified skills gaps and supports business objectives. Don't forget leadership training is critical for your leaders.

Lower Priority (Initially) – More Complex Initiatives

❖ Complex Compensation Structures

- **Example:** Focus on establishing competitive salary ranges based on market data and clear job levels. Ensure compliance with pay equity laws. Delay implementing complex bonus structures or variable pay programs until the organization is more mature and you have more bandwidth.

❖ Advanced Performance Management Systems

- **Example:** Initially, a simple goal-setting and feedback process is sufficient. Later, you can explore more sophisticated systems like 360-degree feedback or competency-based assessments.

❖ Sophisticated Talent Acquisition Strategies

- **Example:** Focus on writing clear and compelling job descriptions and utilizing cost-effective recruitment channels (e.g., online job boards, employee referrals). More advanced strategies like proactive sourcing and employer branding can be explored later.

Leveraging Outside Support: Knowing When to Seek Help

❖ Legal Compliance

- **Example:** Consult an employment law attorney in any high risk situation such as a complicated termination.

❖ Payroll and Benefits Administration

- **Example:** Partner with a payroll service to handle payroll processing, tax filings, and direct deposit. Work with a benefits broker to secure competitive health insurance, retirement plans, and other benefits packages, and to ensure compliance with benefits regulations.



- ❖ **Recruitment for Specialized Roles**
 - **Example:** Partner with a recruiter if you have specialized positions like an IT Manager, or if recruitment is not something you are familiar or comfortable with.
- ❖ **HR Audits and Compliance Checks**
 - **Example:** Hire an external HR consultant to conduct a comprehensive audit of your HR practices to identify any potential compliance risks or areas for improvement.
- ❖ **Complex Investigations**
 - **Example:** If you receive a serious complaint of harassment or discrimination, consider engaging an external investigator with expertise in these matters to ensure an objective and thorough investigation.
- ❖ **Specialized Training and Development**
 - **Example:** Bring in a professional trainer to conduct leadership development workshops or specialized skills training that you don't have the expertise to deliver internally.
- ❖ **HR Technology Implementation**
 - **Example:** Consult with an HR technology specialist to help you select and implement an HRIS system that meets your organization's specific needs and budget.

Thriving in Your Role: Strategies for Success

- ❖ **Be Proactive**
 - **Example:** Anticipate potential employee relations issues by regularly checking in with managers. Proactively review and update policies before they become outdated. Identify potential training needs based on business goals.
- ❖ **Be Organized**
 - **Example:** Utilize project management tools to track HR tasks and deadlines. Create standardized templates for common HR documents. Maintain a well-organized digital filing system for employee records.
- ❖ **Communicate Effectively**
 - **Example:** Craft clear and concise email updates on HR-related news. Develop a communication plan for announcing important policy changes. Be transparent and approachable in your interactions with employees.
- ❖ **Build Relationships**
 - **Example:** Make an effort to connect with employees across different departments. Attend company social events. Be a trusted and approachable resource for both employees and managers.
- ❖ **Advocate for Employees**
 - **Example:** Ensure fair and consistent application of policies. Be a voice for employee needs and concerns with leadership. Promote a positive and inclusive work environment.
- ❖ **Document Everything**
 - **Example:** Keep detailed records of all employee relations issues, disciplinary actions, performance conversations, and policy interpretations. This protects both the employee and the organization.
- ❖ **Prioritize Self-Care**
 - **Example:** Schedule regular breaks throughout the day. Don't be afraid to say no to additional tasks if you're feeling overwhelmed. Seek support from colleagues or friends outside of work.



❖ **Seek Peer Support**

- **Example:** Join online HR communities or forums. Attend local HR networking events. Connect with other HR professionals on LinkedIn. Share challenges and learn from their experiences.

❖ **Show Your Value**

- **Example:** Track key HR metrics (e.g., turnover rate, time-to-hire, employee engagement scores) and report on your progress to leadership. Highlight how your HR initiatives have positively impacted the organization's goals.

Thriving as the HR department of one in a small organization is a challenging but incredibly rewarding endeavor. By understanding the unique needs of your organization, prioritizing effectively, leveraging external support strategically, and adopting proactive strategies, you can build a strong foundation for HR that supports both the employees and the overall success of the business. Remember that progress is often incremental, and celebrating small wins along the way will keep you motivated and effective in your vital role.

