The Psychology of HR Relationship Building:

Trust, visibility, and respect

cezanne™

Introduction

To successfully serve and have an impact within a business, an HR team needs to cultivate strong relationships across the organisation. It's easy to forget with HR's administrative load that 'HR' is all about human relations, and that a solid foundation in relationship building should sit at the core of HR.

For some, these people skills come quite easily, for others it's more of an acquired skill set. But it's fair to say that a desire to connect with and help people should be an essential trait for HR professionals.

Interpersonal skills need to be nurtured and prized by HR teams, with training and development in relationship building offered as required. If the human resources team fails to excel at this, how can they expect the rest of the business to value this skill?

Relationship building is a complex area, and there's a lot of academic literature available for those who want to delve into the subject – we've included further reading at the end of this whitepaper.

Psychology Today lists 7 components of relationship building: trust, commitment, intimacy, respect, communication, empathy, and equality. This report primarily looks at trust, visibility, and respect.

Cezanne HR conducted a survey to understand employee sentiment about HR in relation to trust, visibility and respect, and to gain insight into how different demographics view HR. This report shares those findings, and includes practical ideas from the charity, Brook, on how HR can build strong relationships with their workforce.

TRUST

It's very difficult for HR to build meaningful relationships with employees if those employees don't trust HR to start with. Trust can be easily lost if promises to staff aren't fulfilled, if people don't feel like their HR team acts impartially, or if HR is seen as lacking in competence (for example, in protecting personal data).

How did COVID-19 impact on **trust** in HR?

Cezanne HR asked 1,000 respondents from the UK and Ireland whether they trusted their HR team more or less than they did before COVID-19, to see if/how the last 12+ months had impacted employee trust in HR.

Reassuringly, **54% of people** selected that their level of **trust was the same,** with **32%** saying they **now trusted HR more**. This is likely a testament to the hard work HR professionals have put in to helping and supporting their employees during the pandemic.

Do you trust your HR team more or less than you did before COVID-19?

32.1%	54.1%	13.8%
More	The same	Less
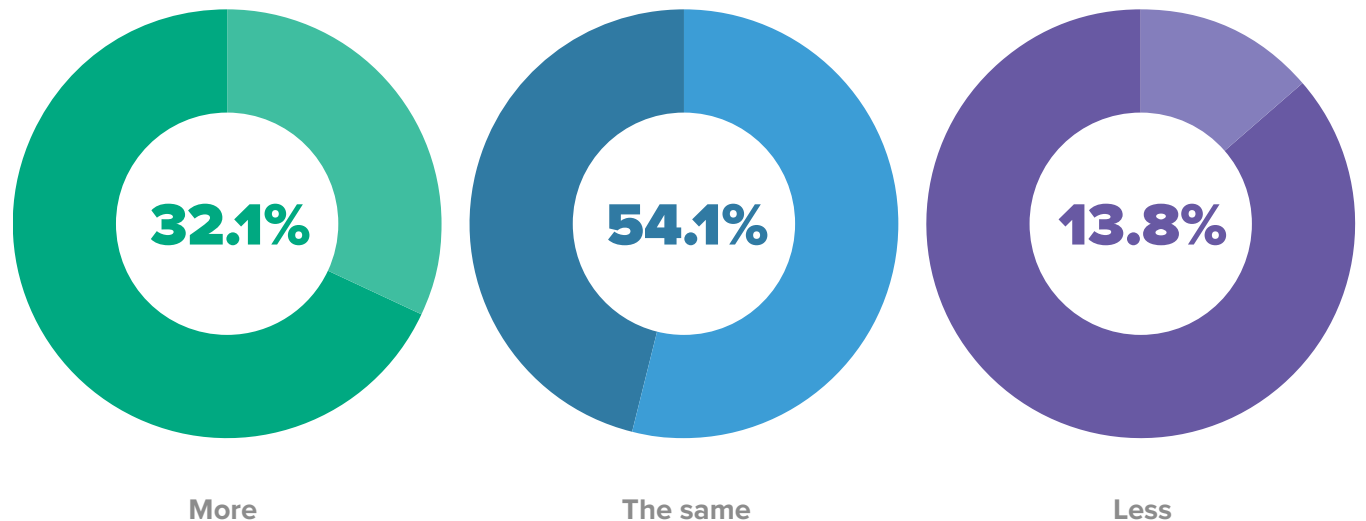
14% of people said that they **trust their HR team** less than they did before COVID-19. For HR professionals who suspect their workforce might be feeling this way, it's essential to understand why.

A quick employee poll to clarify whether trust in HR has risen or fallen is a good place to start. If a fall is confirmed, a combination of quantitative and qualitative research is needed to inform solutions to turn things around.

A loss of trust is not something that should be ignored as it will only make HR's job harder down the track. COVID-19 has bred mistrust in lots of ways – HR should make people feel safe, and avoid being yet another authority that people no longer trust.

Taking a lead *and* **building/keeping trust**

It would be simplistic to say that COVID-19 has only affected people and their health, as the knock-on effects are clearly much wider (the economy, including supply lines, technology, travel, etc.). But, a large part of managing the pandemic is managing people, and HR should naturally be at the forefront of this.
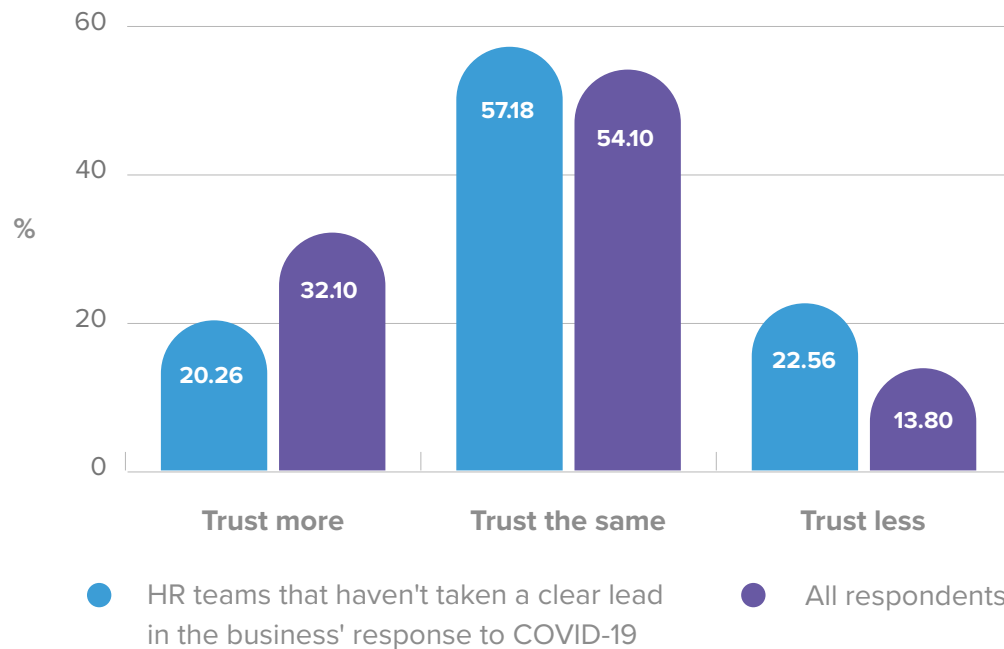
The survey asked if employees felt their HR team had taken a leadership role in response to the pandemic: **61%** of people said yes, **22%** were unsure, and **17%** said **no.**

Has your HR team taken the lead in your business' response to COVID-19?

61%	21.9%	17.1%
Yes	Unsure	No
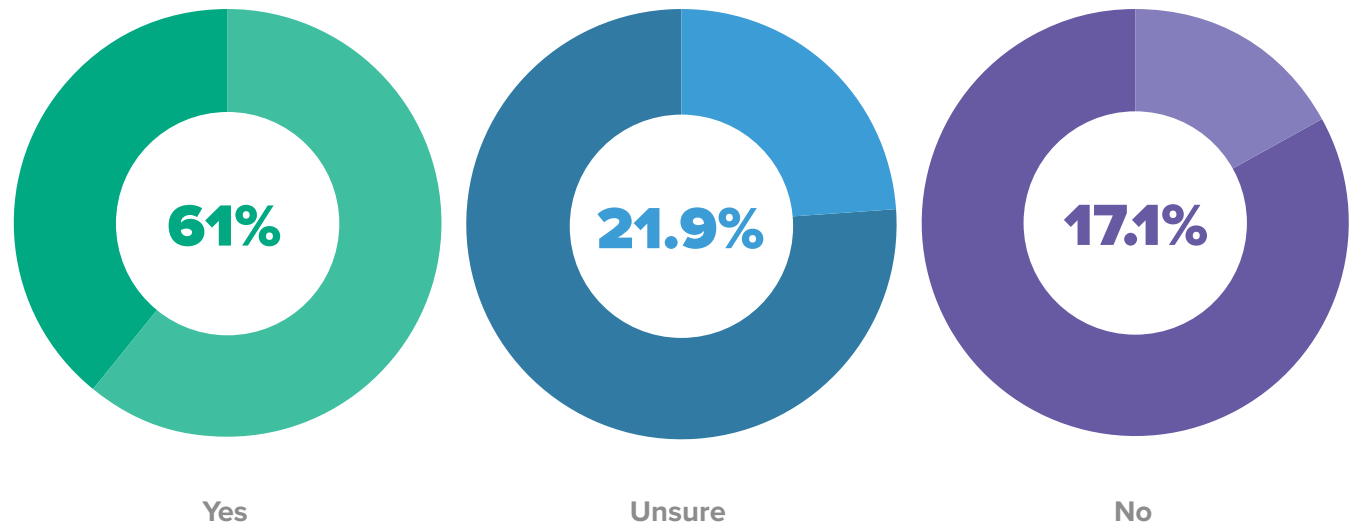
For the **39%** who were **unsure or** said **no** to their HR team taking a lead during COVID-19, their trust in HR went down since the pandemic started. Clearly, there is a link between being willing to step up and take responsibility and holding the workforce's trust.

How leadership has affected trust in HR teams since COVID-19

%

	Trust more	Trust the same	Trust less
HR teams that haven't taken a clear lead	20.26	57.18	22.56
All respondents	32.10	54.10	13.80

● HR teams that haven't taken a clear lead in the business' response to COVID-19
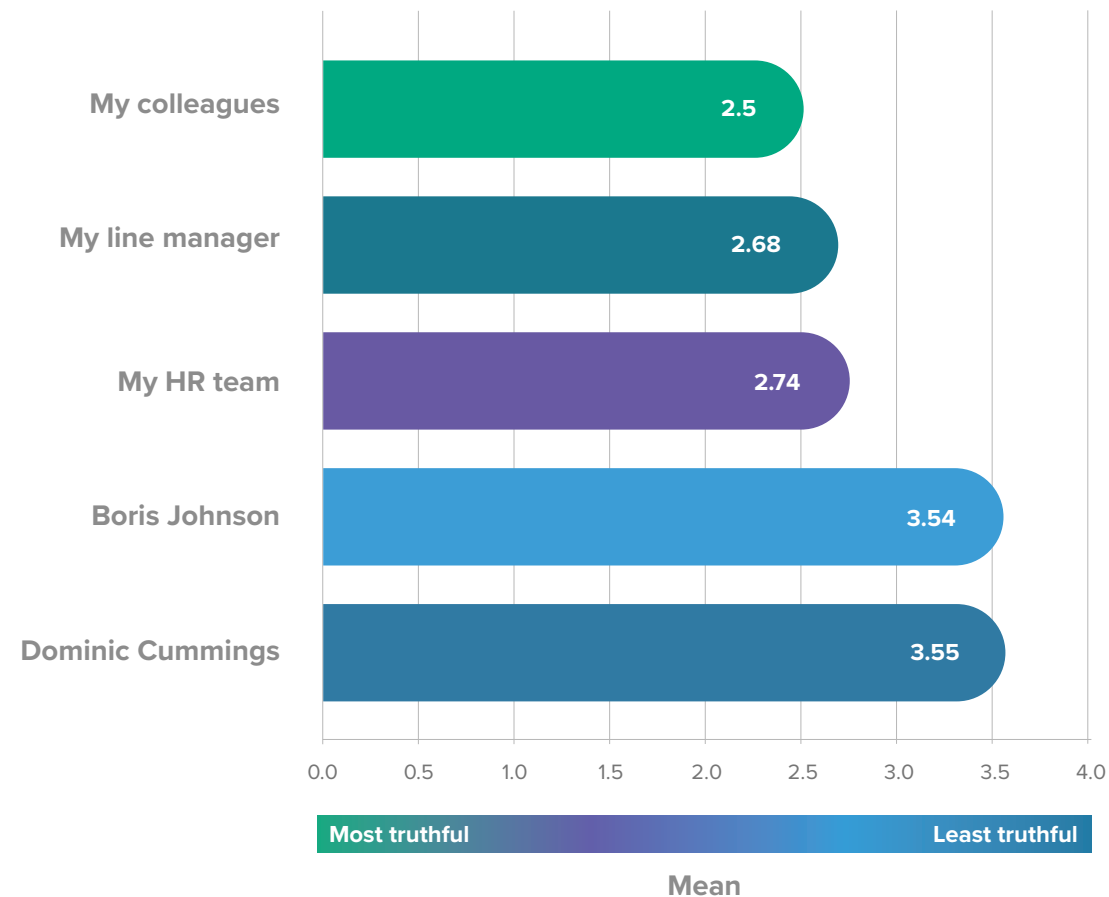
● All respondents

Who do employees trust to be the **most truthful?**

To gauge where HR sat in terms of employee perception about who is the most truthful, survey respondents were asked to rank HR against their colleagues and their line manager. Colleagues came out on top with people considering them the most truthful, followed by line managers and then the HR team.

To further compare perceptions of truthfulness, the survey also included Boris Johnson and Dominic Cummings in the options list, with Johnson beating Cummings by a very small margin.

Who do you consider the most truthful?

My colleagues	2.5
My line manager	2.68
My HR team	2.74
Boris Johnson	3.54
Dominic Cummings	3.55

Most truthful ———— Least truthful

Mean

Do employees trust HR to help with **conflict resolution?**

Despite all the hard work HR does in the background on processes like performance and absence management, conflict management is probably one of the most visible areas where HR can add value. If an employee and/or line manager has come to the point in a workplace conflict where they need help, it's vital they have trust in HR to provide that assistance.

Cezanne HR's survey asked if respondents **trusted HR to help manage a conflict** with another member of staff. **53%** said **yes**, but **almost a fifth** of people said **no.**

Would you trust HR to help you manage a conflict with another member of staff?

53.1%

Yes

29%

Unsure

17.9%

No
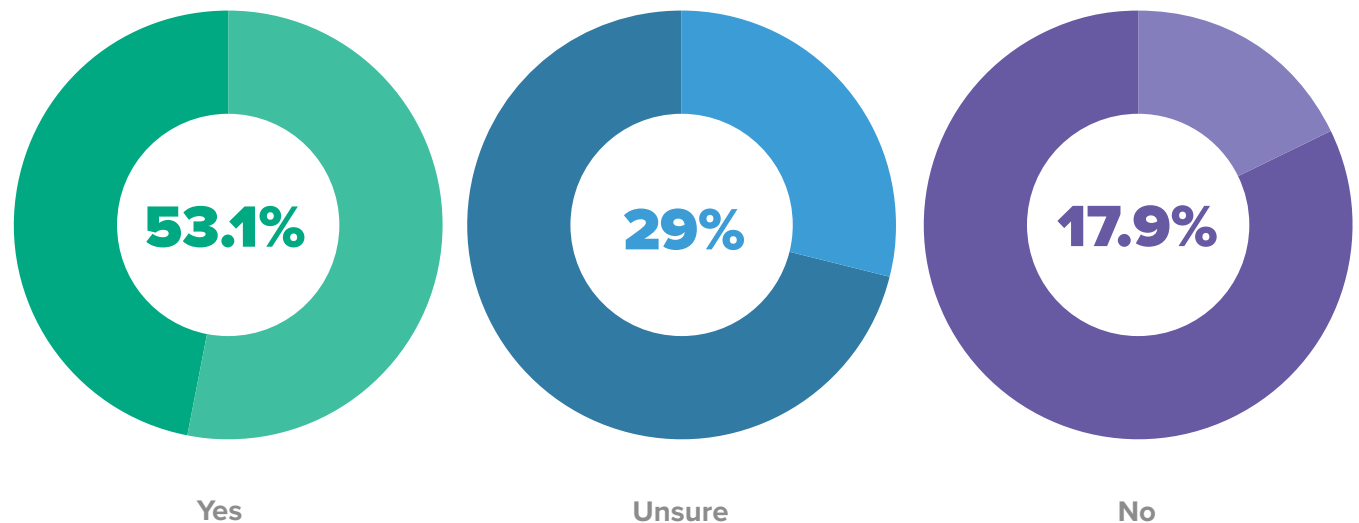
Tips for HR

In **[Workplace conflict: estimating the cost to employers,](#) published May 2021, Acas states, 'overall we estimate that the cost of workplace conflict to UK organisations is in the region of £28.5 billion, which is the equivalent of more than £1,000 for each employee. Close to 10 million people experience conflict at work each year, with more than half reporting stress, anxiety or depression as a result.'***

Improving trust in HR's ability to manage conflict is twofold, and it's a bit like the 'chicken and egg'.

Firstly, having stronger relationships between HR and employees should naturally increase the workforce's faith in HR's ability to help in times of crisis (provided those relationships are positive ones). So, when a situation does arise, employees aren't hesitant to ask for HR's help because they know their HR professionals are knowledgeable, trustworthy, and competent.

Secondly, when HR and employees go through a conflict situation together, it's an opportunity for HR to show their expertise, win trust, and build confidence in the department. This way staff feel even more comfortable approaching HR with similar future concerns.

If, however, HR doesn't do well when they're asked to help with conflict management, this can quickly erode employee faith in the HR team. Emotions are likely to already be high, and if HR doesn't perform well, memories and feelings about HR's involvement will undoubtedly be mixed up with those about the conflict itself.

Conflict management is an area where HR can win a lot of trust, or lose it very quickly. Read **[Top tips for HR to manage workforce conflict](#)** for advice on this issue.

* The full report can be found **[here](#)**.

VISIBILITY

People connect much more easily with a face than they do with an email address or a phone number. If HR wants to build relationships with the workforce, they need to 'put a face to the name' and be recognisable.

Distance bias, as described by the **NeuroLeadership Institute**, is: 'The tendency to assign greater value to those things that we perceive to be closer to us, rather than further away'.

HR should be mindful of this and do what they can to make distance bias work in their favour. In Brook's case study at the end of this report, Sarah explains how having her HR team spread across different offices helps with relationship building.
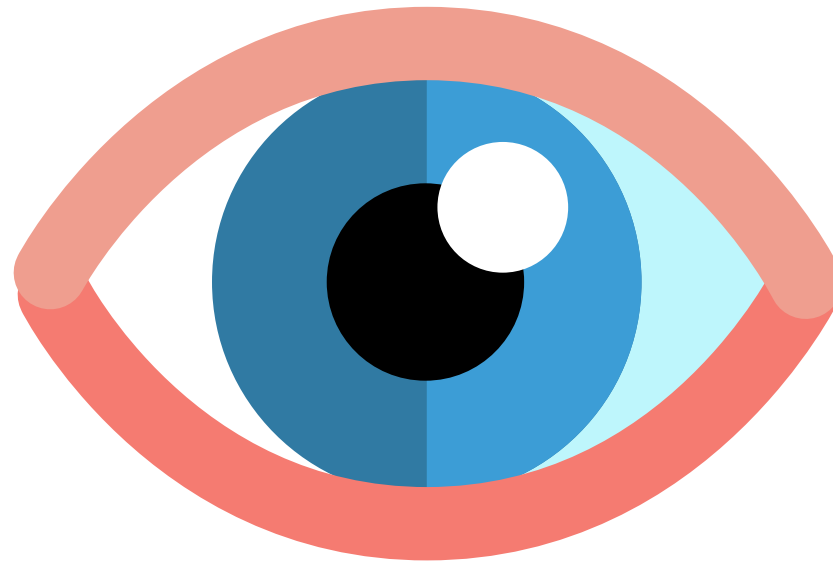
Giving HR a **human face**

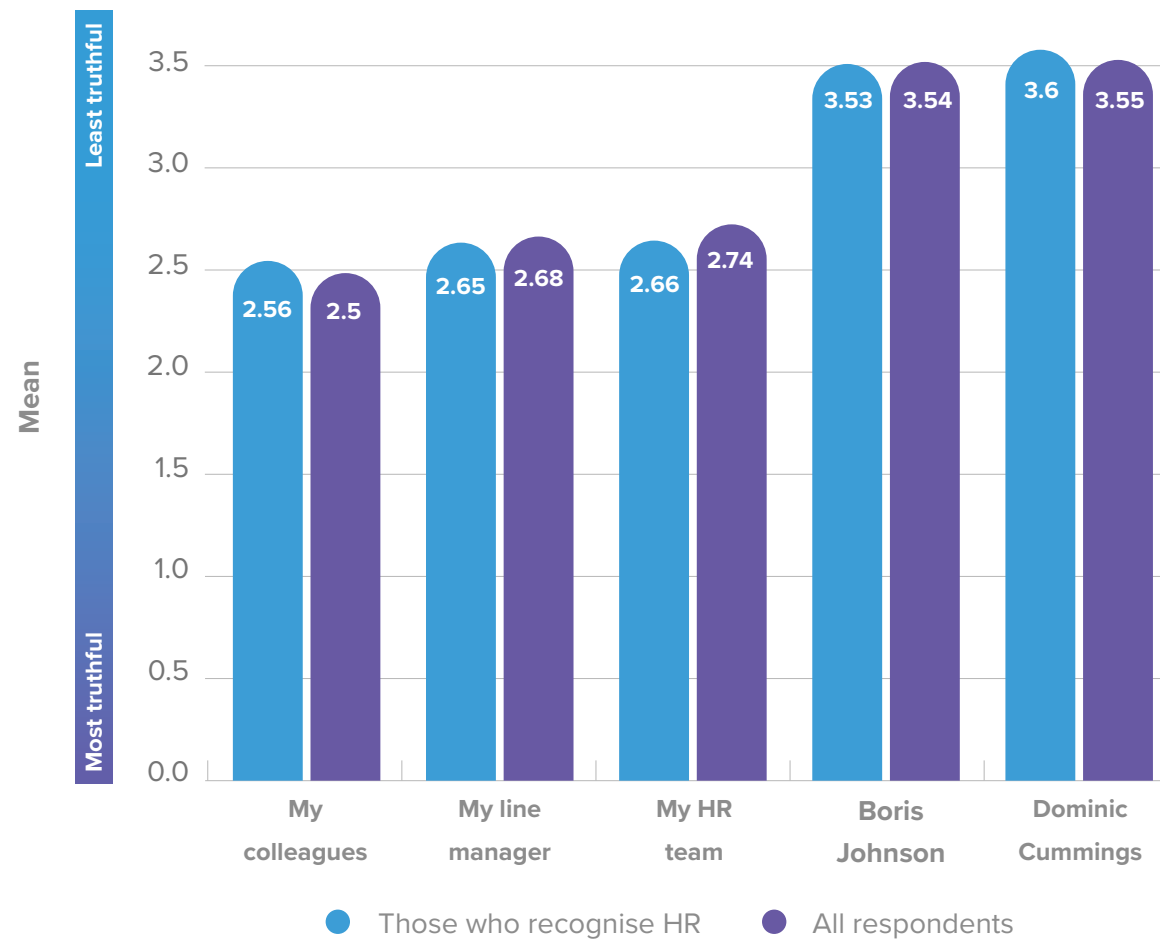When asked: 'Would you **recognise** a member of your **HR** team if you saw them?', **55%** of people said **yes, 18%** were **unsure** and **27%** said **no**. Interesting results came up when delving into how those who responded 'yes' answered other survey questions about trust and HR.

Would you recognise a member of your HR team if you saw them?

Yes	Unsure	No
55.4%	17.8%	26.8%
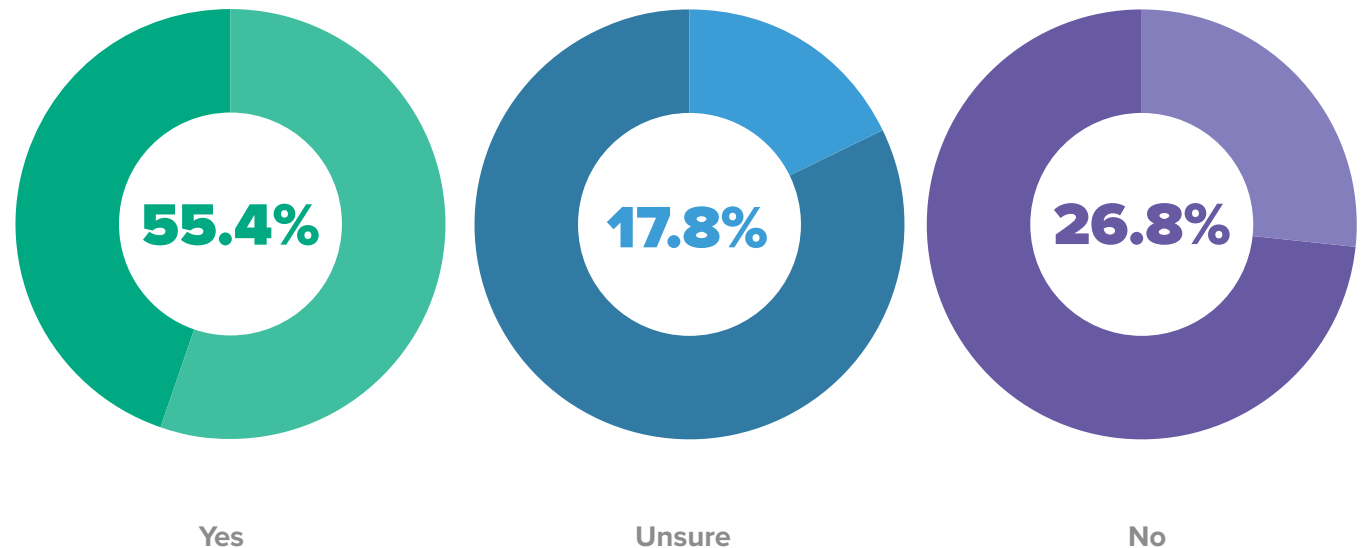
Those who would recognise HR, considered HR more truthful...

Who do you consider the most truthful?

Least truthful / Most truthful — Mean

	My colleagues	My line manager	My HR team	Boris Johnson	Dominic Cummings
Those who recognise HR	2.56	2.65	2.66	3.53	3.6
All respondents	2.5	2.68	2.74	3.54	3.55

● Those who recognise HR   ● All respondents

Those who would recognise HR, trusted them more to help manage a conflict...

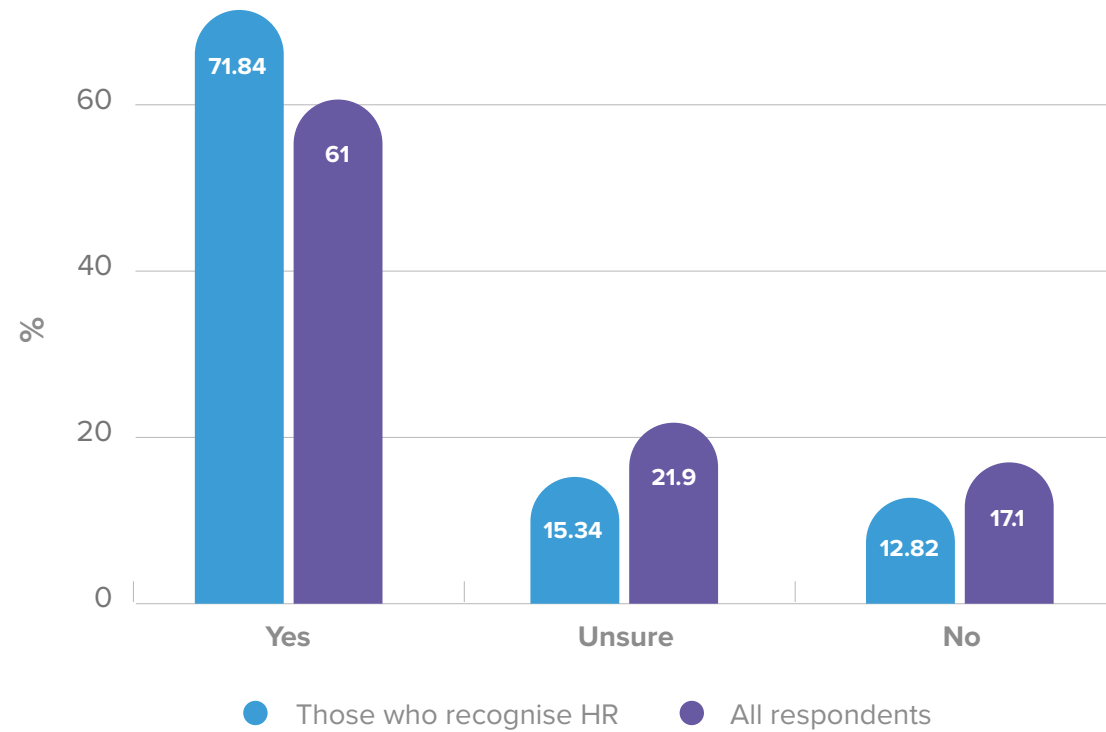**Would you trust HR to help you manage a conflict with another member of staff?**

- Those who recognise HR
- All respondents
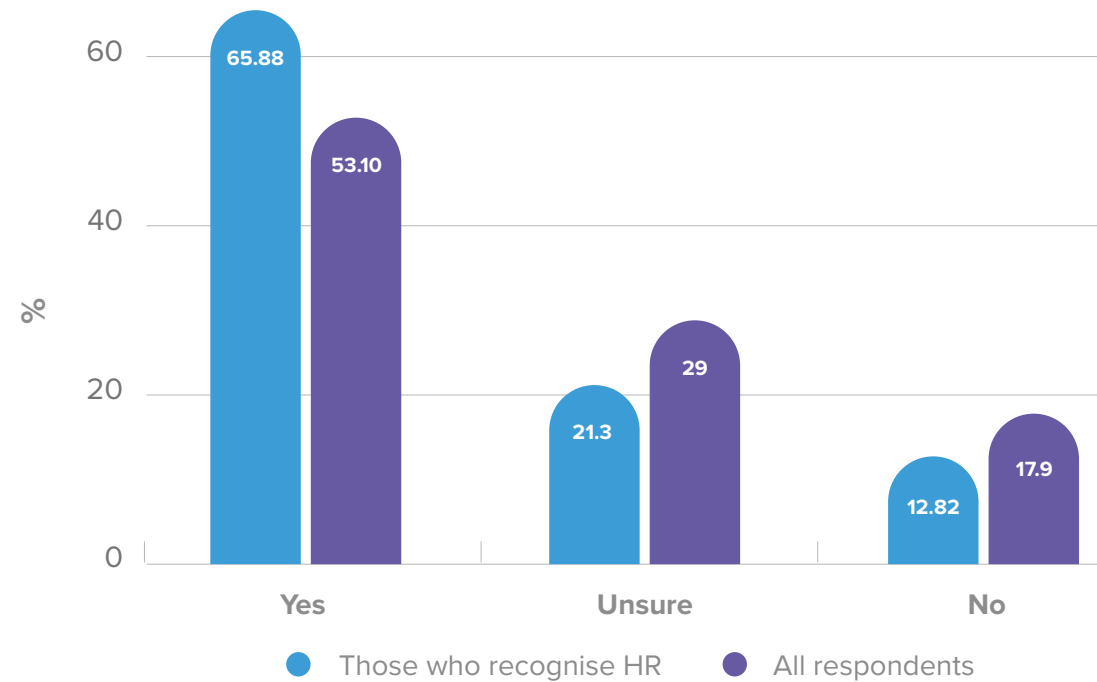
And perhaps unsurprisingly, those who would recognise HR, had higher responses for agreeing that their HR team has led during COVID-19...

Has your HR team taken the lead in your business' response to COVID-19?

Legend:
● Those who recognise HR   ● All respondents

Chart data:
- Yes: 71.84 (Those who recognise HR), 61 (All respondents)
- Unsure: 15.34 (Those who recognise HR), 21.9 (All respondents)
- No: 12.82 (Those who recognise HR), 17.1 (All respondents)

Tips for HR

These results suggest that HR teams would benefit from spending more time interacting with employees face to face (or via video call if working from home or across different sites) to build on their visibility. There are a number of ways this can be done, such as:

- hosting a networking event for staff to meet their HR team in an informal setting

- organising a drop-in day with different members of HR available to explain what HR does and how they can help staff members

- actively getting involved in cross-department working groups so HR has a voice and impact on work outside of HR's immediate remit

- when working on site, taking time to walk the floor and have informal chats with staff from other teams.

Being part of decision-making committees is also important for visibility, especially at a leadership level. **4 ways to use your HR system to win HR a position in the C-suite** provides advice on how to use HR software to achieve this, explaining: 'Experience and intuition aren't enough, HR needs the backing of hard – and reliable – data to prove their worth, and they need time to make sense of this information to devise HR strategies.'

Making HR **accessible**

To understand how accessible employees feel their HR teams are, Cezanne HR's survey asked: 'If you wanted to get help from HR, how easy do you think that would be?' There is quite a spread of responses between very easy, not easy and impossible, indicating that some HR teams might have some work to do in this area.

**If you wanted to get help from HR, how easy do you think that would be?**

| Very easy | Not easy | Impossible |
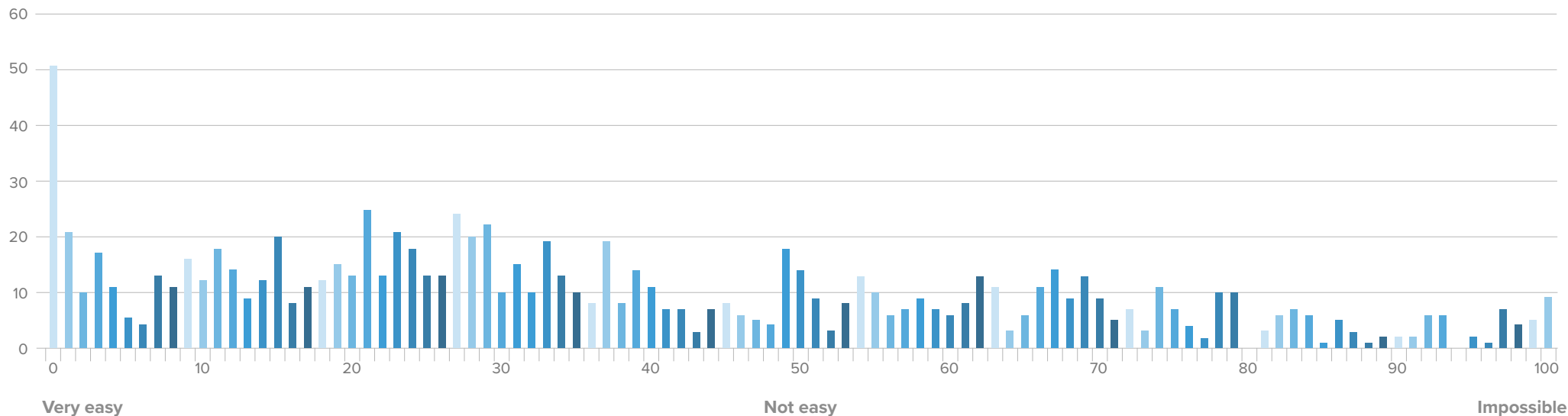
Tips for HR

In addition to the suggestions mentioned earlier about increasing visibility, HR might also want to think about the contact channels they make available to their workforce. If people are finding it hard to reach HR, offering a few different ways to interact might be helpful, such as email, phone, or an online workspace in an HR system for non-confidential matters.

Workspaces can be a great way for HR to build rapport and to interact with employees. Cezanne HR's system allows for multiple workspaces, so HR could set up a dedicated one for HR-related feedback and ideas that concern everyone. It's essential for HR to interact with this workspace so people know it's being monitored and listened to.

Setting expectations up front about how long it will take HR to respond to a query is also very important. Autoresponders to incoming emails explaining that HR will take, for example, 3 working days to reply, will save a lot of frustration and chaser emails. Similarly, a phone line should have a voicemail indicating when someone from HR will return a call if the call was missed. These simple actions, and adhering to the timeframes promised, will immediately improve how employees feel about contacting HR.
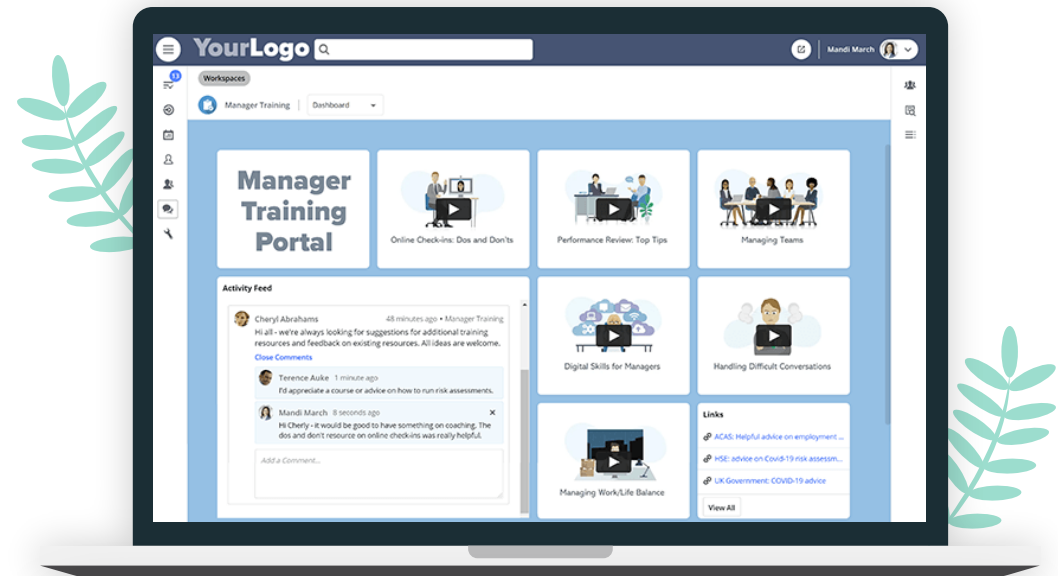
RESPECT

To build strong relationships with employees, the workforce needs to believe that HR is a department that can be respected and trusted to do the right thing.

Indeed rightly states in **What Is Respect in the Workplace?**: 'Respect is one of the most important traits in the workplace. It allows you and your team to work together to accomplish goals.'

And Mind Tools, in **Mutual Respect: Bringing Humanity and Fairness to Work**, says: 'Respect is the foundation of humane and ethical behavior, and mutual respect underpins good relationships.'

Cezanne HR's survey explored inferred respect in HR from a few different angles, including perceived favouritism, usefulness in terms of progression, and competence with data security.

Is **favouritism** a problem for HR?

When asked who respondents believe **HR favours** more, junior staff, senior staff or neither, **45%** of people **selected senior staff, 43%** said **neither**, and **12%** said **junior staff**.

Who do you believe your HR team favours more?

12.3%	45%	42.7%
Junior staff	Senior staff	Neither: I trust HR to act impartially
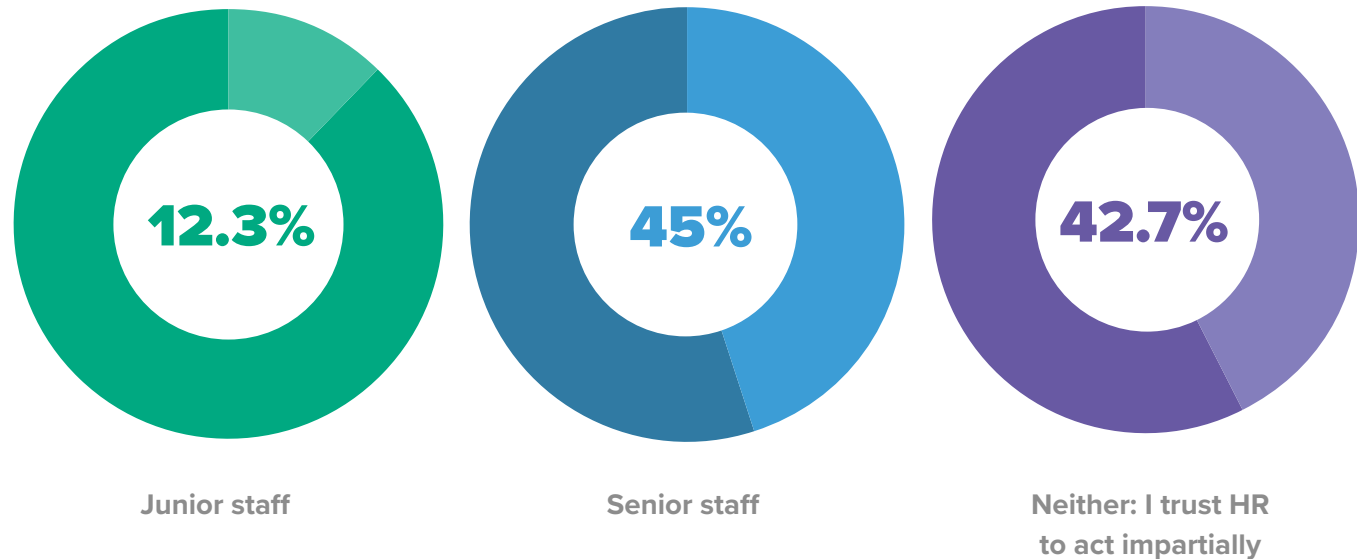
Tips for HR

Playing favourites doesn't help to build trust or respect, and risks alienating some of the people HR should have good relationships with. Being impartial, and making sure employees know HR is impartial (as much as they can be) is very important.

Of course, there will always be situations where HR has to side with managers and business leaders, but that doesn't mean that they can't also provide advice and support to junior staff. The HR function should be a resource for all employees.

Do employees perceive HR as useful to their **development**?

To further understand if employees feel like HR is 'in their corner', Cezanne HR's survey asked: 'Do you trust your HR team to tell you about internal promotion/development opportunities?' **Almost half** **of respondents said** **no or** **that they were** **unsure**.

Do you trust your HR team to tell you about internal promotion/development opportunities?

51.9%	24.5%	23.6%
Yes	Unsure	No
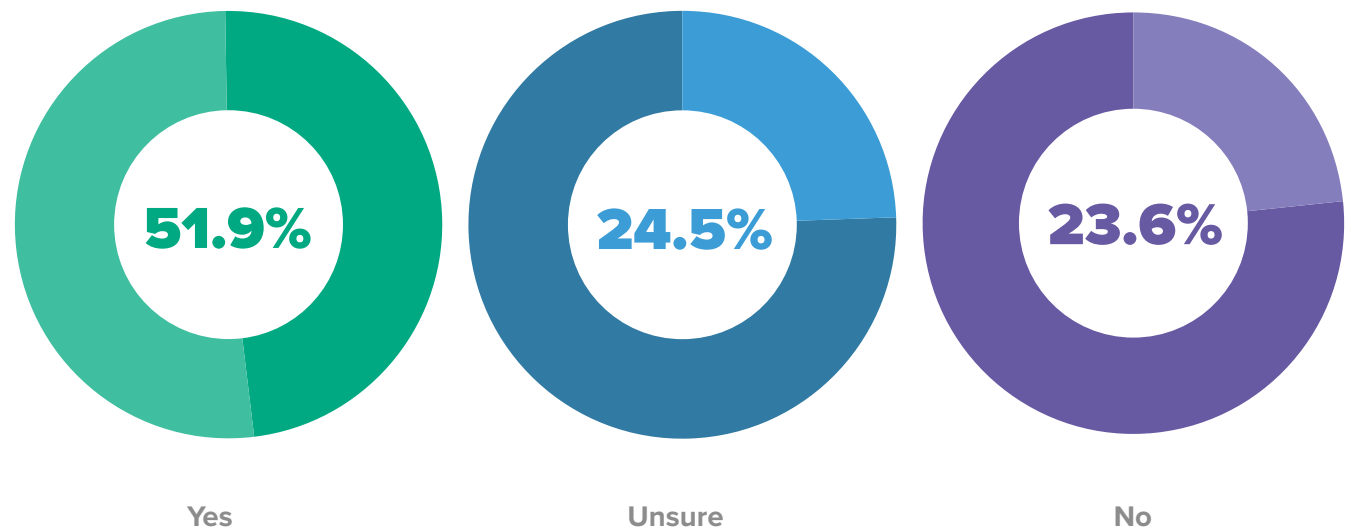
Tips for HR

To raise the bar in this area, it's important for HR teams to work on communicating opportunities with their employees. Using employee portals to advise staff about current vacancies that they might wish to apply for, or training opportunities, is a great way to reach a wide audience and reassure current employees that they haven't been forgotten.

It's disheartening when staff see roles advertised externally without being given the opportunity to apply. If there is a reason why current staff wouldn't be appropriate for a role, HR should pre-empt disappointment and explain why the organisation decided to go to the market to look for new talent.

Similarly, offering training also needs to be done fairly. If two employees hold the same skills and the same job type, but only one is given a chance to learn new skills, the other employee will lose their respect in HR and management, and quickly disengage.

What are your career and succession plans? Don't lose talent post lockdown concludes: 'Career and succession planning is a great way to engage your workforce and to nurture talent pools. When considerations such as your organisation's culture and DEI are also taken into account, career and succession planning can be an instrumental tool in shaping your organisation for future success.'

Privacy and **confidentiality**:
is HR trusted with this?

The survey also asked if people trust their HR team to respect their privacy and confidentiality. This question probes both trust and perceived competence. If employees don't trust their HR team with privacy concerns, then it's unlikely they'll have much respect for the department as this is a fundamental part of the HR role.

Reassuringly, **69%** of people do **trust their HR team to respect their privacy and confidentiality**. But for the **31%** who said **no or** that they were **unsure**, this is a big concern.

Do you trust your HR team to respect your privacy and confidentiality?

Yes	No	Don't know
69%	15.2%	15.8%
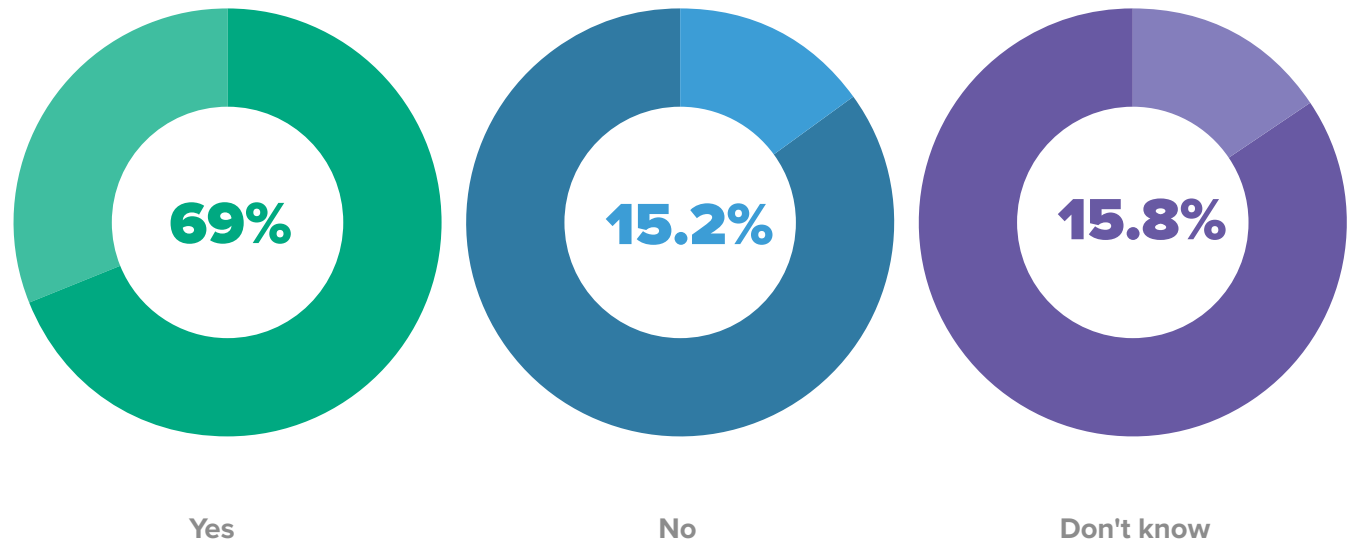
Tips for HR

What can HR do to help build trust in this area?

- Comply with regulations like the GDPR and the UK's Data Protection Act 2018**. https://www.gov.uk/data-protection**

- Invest in a good modern HR system with proven security features, like Cezanne HR, to show employees that their personal data is respected and protected.

- Remember to be mindful of who might be able to overhear private conversations. If HR is caught talking about confidential matters in the coffee room for instance, this will raise concern and lose the respect of employees.

Is HR leading the way on **diversity**, **equity** and **inclusion (DEI)**?

Being at the forefront of progress on important issues like DEI helps to cement HR's standing in the business and the relationships HR professionals have with employees.
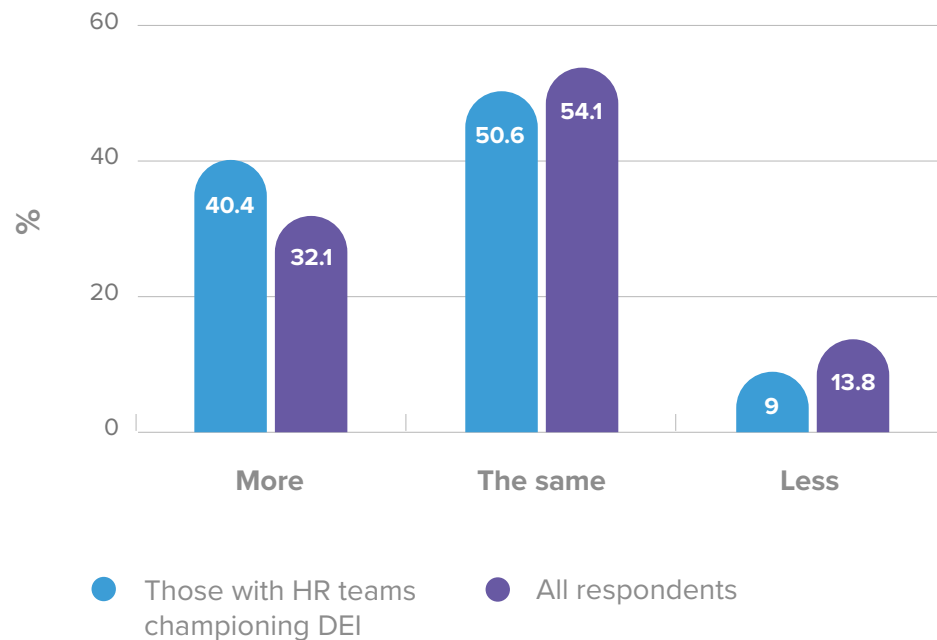
When the Cezanne HR survey asked if respondent's think their **HR team champions DEI**, reassuringly, **58%** said **yes**.

Does your HR team champion DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion)?

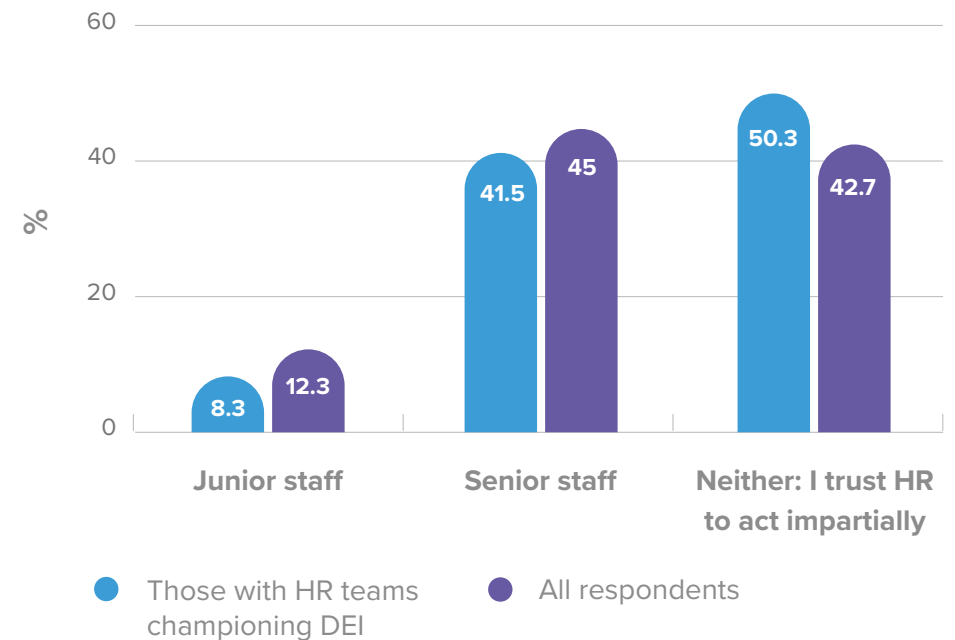| 57.9%	11.9%	30.2%
Yes	No	Don't know
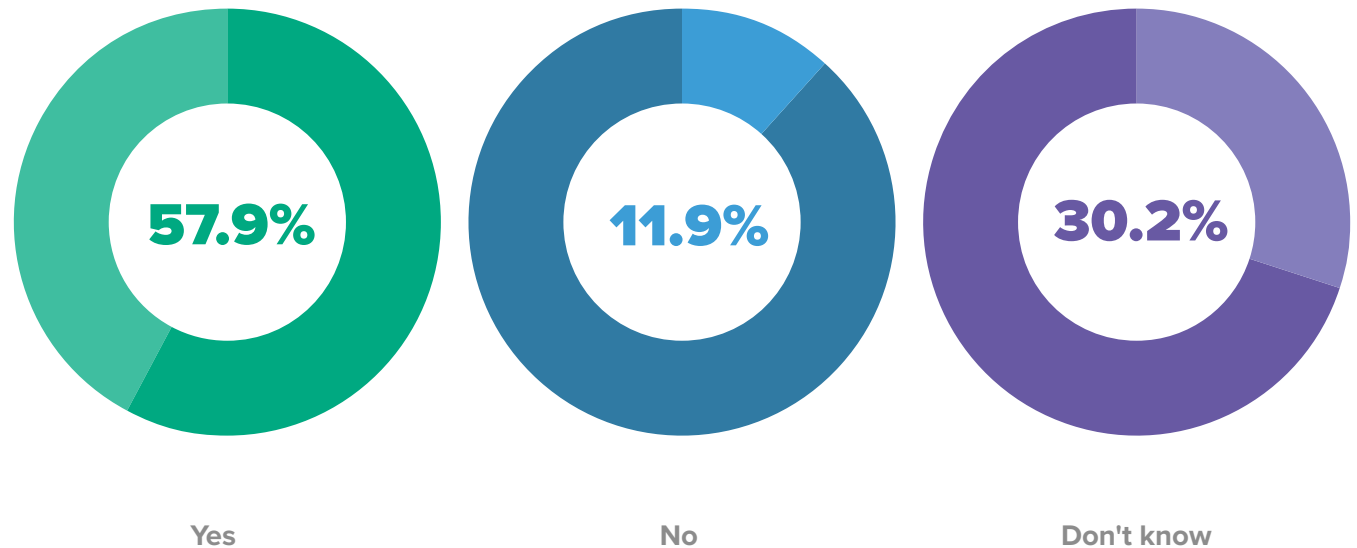
Our research found a clear correlation between HR teams that were seen to champion DEI and trust. Employees consistently rated them higher across a number of different trust factors.

Do you trust your HR team more or less than you did before COVID-19?

	More	The same	Less
Those with HR teams championing DEI	40.4	50.6	9
All respondents	32.1	54.1	13.8

● Those with HR teams championing DEI   ● All respondents

Who do you believe your HR team favours more?

	Junior staff	Senior staff	Neither: I trust HR to act impartially
Those with HR teams championing DEI	8.3	41.5	50.3
All respondents	12.3	45	42.7

● Those with HR teams championing DEI   ● All respondents

Tips for HR

For HR teams who would like to take more of a lead with DEI, starting with a three-pronged approach can help.

1. As an HR team, look at your current DEI initiatives to analyse where there might be gaps.

2. Ask employees for feedback on how they feel about DEI at the organisation.

3. Seek external consultation and resources to widen the HR team's knowledge and perspective on DEI – it's a deeply layered topic and new perspectives shed light on areas that might need attention.

Case study: **Brook**

Brook is a leading UK charity, specialising in sexual health and wellbeing. Cezanne HR talked to Brook's Head of People and Organisational Development, Sarah Hogg, about how their HR team has built relationships with their diverse workforce, including tips that would work for any organisation.

When you started at Brook, did HR have a good relationship with employees?

When I joined the HR team, I was fortunate in that my colleague Laura had already built some really solid relationships with our workforce. She'd been in other roles with Brook before joining HR, and she brought the relationships she'd developed with her to her HR role. Laura then made further connections as needed. So, when I started, Laura had already laid a lot of groundwork in building good working relationships between HR and our employees, although our team of two still had some challenges ahead supporting our 200 plus workforce.

How does the distribution of your current team help with relationship building?

Our team is based out of both Manchester and London, with my colleagues in Manchester working in an office above a Brook clinic. Having a presence in two locations lets us reach a wider pool of employees, who are able to come and chat with us, and it also gives us a direct connection with some of the services we are running.

I think it's really important to be visible to people, to have those 5-minute chats that stop bigger problems coming up down the track. People won't always pick up the phone to talk about something that is bothering them, but a quick informal conversation, face to face, nips a lot of issues in the bud.

How does your HR team interact with employees?

I am part of Brook's wider leadership team and while I don't attend the Executive team meetings, I do go to anything that touches on HR issues – the organisation is good at judging when HR should be involved. I have a great relationship with our chief executive, and this certainly helps in terms of how HR is seen at Brook. And having the buy-in for HR initiatives from our chief exec definitely empowers us as an HR team.

Laura, our HR manager, has a lot of day-to-day contact with people. She looks after queries and talks to people about case work. On the whole, all of the HR team tries to reach out to employees as much as possible. Being accessible is really important to us – and this doesn't mean just sending emails out, we want people to talk to us.

How do you support mental wellbeing?

We have done a lot of work around mental health and wellbeing, including setting up a wellbeing hub full of useful resources for both employees and their line managers. Last year we ran a week-long campaign (which ran at the same time as a national mental health awareness day) where we promoted the good advice in our staff wellbeing 'check' document, by sharing stories of the ways colleagues had improved their mental health and wellbeing. It was a simple campaign, but one that our team really appreciated because they got to hear from colleagues across the organisation in a different way.

We understand that talking about mental health, and in particular poor mental health, can be difficult. Our role in HR is to provide our workforce with helpful information, training and resources, to build relationships and trust with our people, and to help line managers and employees forge relationships with each other, too. Our resilience training last year helped managers better support staff who might be anxious returning to work after furlough or isolation due to COVID-19. We also have over 20 mental health first aiders across the organisation.

We've seen that quality conversations with employees can help stop a lot of problems before they escalate and we empower our line managers to have productive and supportive discussions, stepping away from heavily scripted intervention-style talks.

What advice would you give other HR professionals about building good employee relationships?

We've found staff surveys to be really helpful; but it's also very important to follow up on them with clear communication. If you get feedback from your people, make an action plan off the back of that, and then show your employees how your actions link back to their input. We also use our regular staff e-newsletter to communicate new HR initiatives and invite engagement.

Our HR team also knows that it's important to not over complicate things and to be clear and practical in how we bring policies and procedures to life. Part of this is to not be too scripted or over standardised – each situation is different and needs to be understood on its own terms. We have a really varied workforce at Brook – from office staff to those on the frontline in our clinics and our educational team working in schools. We keep this in mind when we're introducing HR initiatives, such as our new appraisal process.

Lastly, I'd say to never lose sight of what you're trying to achieve, to admit mistakes if they're made, and to be honest and authentic. Being 'real' with people definitely helps to build relationships.

As an HR team, we have a lot of tricky conversations, and we find on the whole that people are just very relieved that we're normal and approachable. We don't hide behind emails – we'll ring people and speak to them to get things resolved.

Sarah Hogg

Top tips

✓ Recruiting internal people to HR brings well-established relationships into the team.

✓ Where possible, base HR team members at different sites for face-to-face conversations.

✓ Build good relationships with your leadership team *and* your employees.

✓ Trust and help your line managers so they can support employees.

✓ Listen, act, and follow up on employee feedback.

✓ Keep HR policies straightforward and adaptable.

✓ Don't be afraid to pick up the phone!

Why **good technology** is integral to **building trust** between HR and the business

Accurate, timely and secure HR data is essential for HR to build trust with their workforce: business leaders and employees alike. It's also important for HR to have well-documented processes, so the business can trust that HR is organised, consistent and fair in how they approach people management.
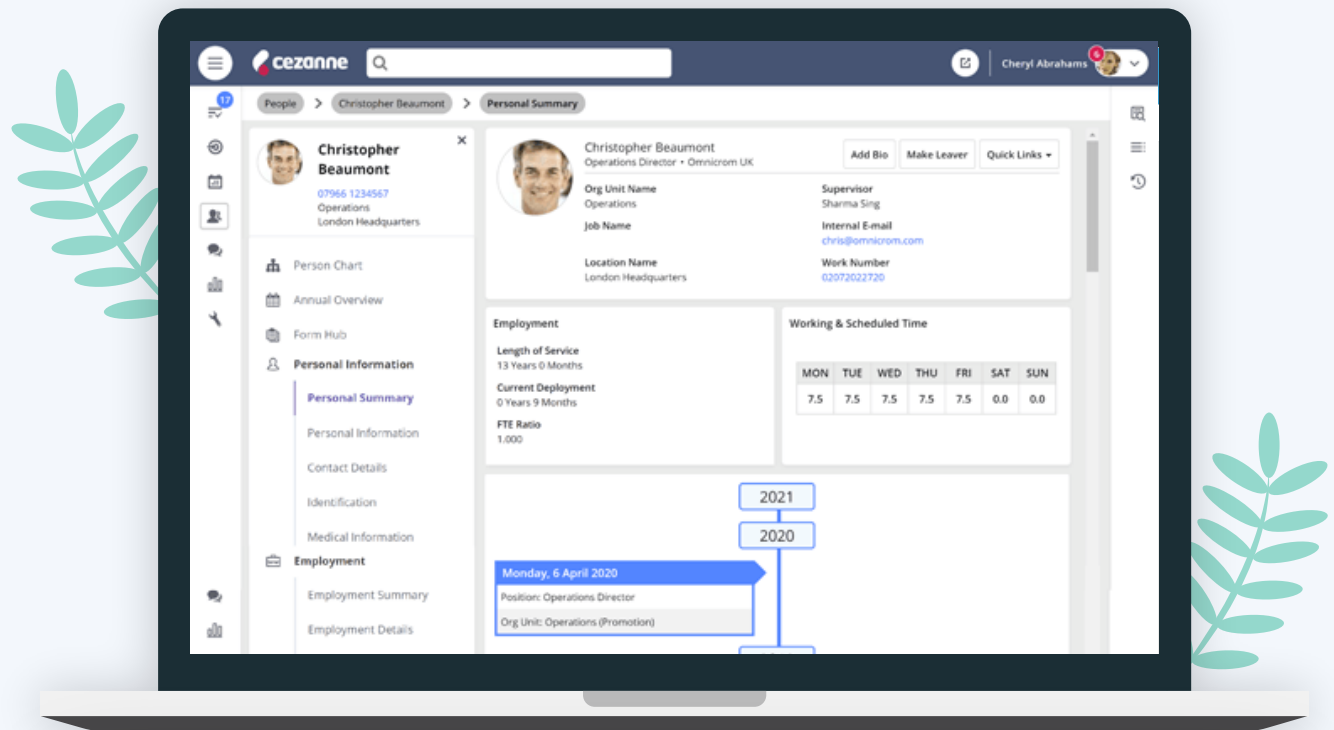
Better relationships between HR and business leaders

Business leaders rely on HR to provide them with data and insights that they can trust. Whether it's the CEO making decisions that require an overview of absence and/or performance management, or a line manager who needs to see who in their team is off and when, leaders will quickly lose faith in HR if this information isn't easy to find and reliable.

Good HR systems, based in the Cloud, engender trust and goodwill between HR and the organisation because this tech keeps the information that managers need up to date and readily available.

Lizanne, HR Business Partner at PRMA:

'I know how crucial it is to have an HR system that can fulfil important, time-sensitive C-suite requests. Just recently, another department's director asked me for a new set of reports at short notice – half an hour after the request was made, I was able to provide him with all the information he needed via Cezanne HR's reporting functionality. It can't be underestimated how important being able to provide this level of service is to our business and HR's reputation in it.'

Easier HR processes for everyone

Absences can be requested by staff, approved by managers, and reported back to the business with relative ease with an absence management module, like Cezanne HR's. Check ins and performance appraisals can be recorded and easily followed up with performance management software.

To make life easier for managers, HR software can also help with time management, such as recording when employees clock in and out; recruitment, to fill roles quickly; onboarding, to help new starters get off on the right foot; and career and succession planning, to prepare for the organisation's future workforce needs.

Chris (Director of Global Operations) and Toby (Customer Solutions Executive), Portas Global:

> 'The Absence Management module allows us to have different leave plans. It means that our employees (no matter what country they're in) see 'their plan' and feel like the system is tailored to them – because essentially it is. We're able to reflect different legislative environments and working practices, and because the system automatically calculates holiday entitlements based on different leave plans, it saves us a lot of time.'

2021
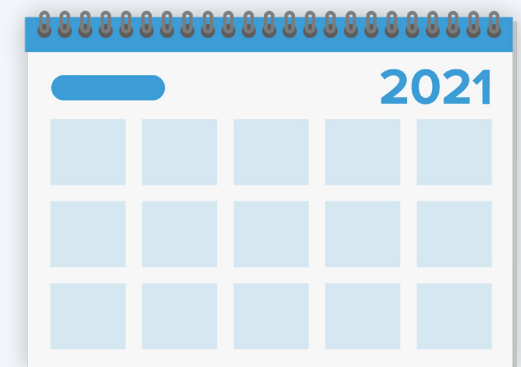
More trust between HR and employees

For employees, a modern HR system builds trust in HR by keeping personal data safe and transparent. In the past, performance management forms might have been kept by managers or HR after the appraisal, making it easy for employees to forget what was agreed. In a performance management module like Cezanne HR's, employees can easily refer back to check-in and appraisal conversations.

Employees can be assured that HR has the most up-to-date information on them via HR software with self service. With Cezanne HR, address and bank details can be quickly amended, as can emergency contacts details. This gives employees faith that HR has the right data for them, and that one, true, current record is being kept in a secure system, rather than on an easily lost or unsecured Excel spreadsheet, for example.

Ian, Group Human Resources Director at ASL Aviation Group

'The Cezanne HR system has allowed ASL to streamline core HR processes across the business and provide secure online access to employees and their managers 24/7. Employees are able to update their personal records, request time off, complete performance reviews and access important information online at any time from a mobile, tablet, laptop or PC.

'Disconnected processes and HR databases have been replaced by a unified, and much more coherent and consistent approach – with local variations when needed. It is saving everyone time, reducing administrative backlogs and has improved the quality of information available to the business.

'It provides a single, central source of information and is allowing us to improve the accuracy of our data and generate the reports we need to inform decisions quickly and easily.'

Recruitment through to succession planning – good HR tech can do it all

Ultimately, an HR system can assist with the whole employee lifecycle, from recruitment and onboarding through to performance management and succession planning. And it's HR who'll get the kudos for introducing and administering such a useful, accurate and powerful system.

John (Managing Director) and Kerry (Financial Controller), Aztec Event Services:

'When you take on a system that does everything Cezanne HR can do, you achieve a big win! Most businesses are motivated by reducing HR administration and saving time, but the true win with a system like Cezanne HR is that your employees will find it really helpful. Don't underestimate this as it's a really big tick for your company.'
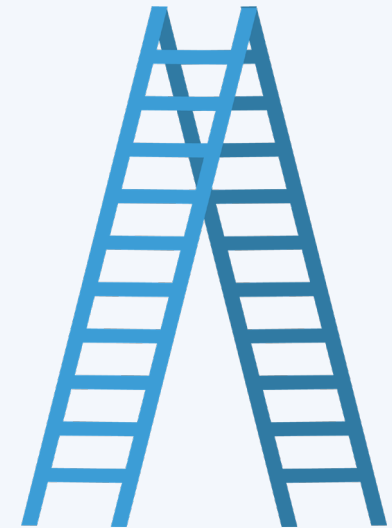
Bibliography /Resources

- **3 Traits of a Strong Professional Relationship**

- **4 ways to use your HR system to win HR a position in the C-suite**

- **7 Building Blocks of a Great Relationship**

- **14 Ways To Build More Meaningful Professional Relationships**

- **Building Good Work Relationships: Making Work Enjoyable and Productive**

- **Data protection**

- **Estimating the costs of workplace conflict**

- **Here's Why Having a Brain Means You Have Bias**

- **Managing workplace conflict: the changing role of HR**

- **Mutual Respect: Bringing Humanity and Fairness to Work**

- **The relationship between trust, HRM practices and firm performance**

- **Top tips for HR to manage workforce conflict**

- **What are your career and succession plans? Don't lose talent post lockdown**

- **What Is Respect in the Workplace?**

- **Workplace conflict: estimating the cost to employers**

Our survey was completed in June 2021 by 1,000 respondents across the UK and Ireland. At the time of the survey, all respondents worked for a company with 250+ employees and were not on furlough.

About Cezanne HR

This report was written by Cezanne HR. Cezanne HR is leading the way in delivering smart Cloud HR software solutions to mid-sized and growing businesses, both locally and globally, at a cost unthinkable just a few years ago. Cezanne HR's system is quick to deploy, easy to manage and packed full of features that save time and help everyone work together more productively and successfully.

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