How to win an HR Excellence Award 2020
Putting together an awards entry: 10 top tips

1 Describe the issue clearly.
   Was this a ‘nice to do’ or was there a genuine problem or area for improvement? Is there some data to include the budget. It’s hard for our judges to assess a strategy fully without knowing how much money was available. Entries without a cited budget often fail to be shortlisted for this reason alone.

2 Be commercial.
   Show there is a business benefit. Innovation doesn’t have to be big and expensive, but it should make a difference – in business metrics and softer benefits. Be clear on the measurable outcomes, but not overly innovative on the surface. Don’t tend to do as well as those that don’t have a genuine HR exercise, say, rather than a management textbook won’t be impressed. Some categories have 20 or more shortlisted entries so you really want to be clear and concrete in your language.

3 Provide all the information requested.
   If you miss any out it’s hard for the judges to compare your entry to others. Judges often report suspecting there was a more compelling, impressive strategy lurking just out of reach. But they can only judge what’s been described – even where they know the strategy is in reality more impressive. A story that doesn’t do justice to the work submitted doesn’t get a fair hearing, and often confuse as to what’s actually been done and achieved.

4 Describe the results and impact with data. Include business metrics and softer benefits. Be clear on the measurable outcomes, but remember this doesn’t mean throwing in data from the start or pro forma. Remember there has to be measurable results. It must be a genuine HR exercise, not just ‘commercial’ reasons one year I judged. Also, beware of serial applications for the same category – this isn’t always clear. It must be a genuine HR exercise, not just ‘commercial’ reasons one year I judged. Also, beware of serial applications for the same category.

5 Read the criteria on which the award will be judged.
   Make sure the entry covers all of them. Perhaps include sub headings. There have been occasions where I’ve only seen part of the story, or where the story is really strong but the entry doesn’t really complement it.

6 Show involvement right across the business.
   A real indicator of an impactful strategy is when a CEO or other business leader comments on the value of the work you’ve done. And of course comments from those employees whose working lives have been impacted by your project are always a strong indicator of excellence.

7 Check spelling and grammar.
   This is about excellence and that includes attention to detail. Judges won’t be inclined to look favourably on sloppy work. Think about fonts and presentation too; don’t let an unprofessional, difficult to read submission detract from some great content. Also, make sure you fill in the front page of the entry summarising the work; you would be surprised how many don’t. The judges spend hours reading and discussing the submissions and it never goes down well when it looks like an entrant hasn’t bothered to complete the forms properly.

8 Don’t be afraid to enter something that may not appear innovative.
   Even if it’s not overly innovative on the surface, it may still be a gamechanger for the organisation, and a role model for best practice. For me an award-winning entry makes a real difference to the organisation and the HR profession as a whole. This doesn’t mean to be clearly articulated, avoiding jargon, with clarity on the baseline, using business and people metrics. The ‘how’ has to explain the process clearly, followed, resources available and obstacles overcome, being as innovative as possible. Finally, the impact made to the business needs to demonstrate the real added value – through quantitative and qualitative data, including anecdotal quotes. A winning entry should position the HR function as a real gamechanger for the organisation, and a role model for best practice for the HR profession as a whole.

9 Make sure the entry comes from the HR team.
   We understand you might want to get help writing your entry, but ones that are submitted by suppliers or PR agencies don’t tend to do as well as those that come from the HR team themselves. Getting to the heart of the story and the impact the strategy had will only come from the HR team themselves. The entry should show pride, professionalism and be thoughtful about how it is brought to life. Don’t be afraid to share testimonials, blog posts, videos and photos from those who have benefited from the work. It needs to tell a persuasive story, we need the evidence and lots of it. Hard facts, measures and outcome data. You would be surprised how often this isn’t given, and it really is a key differentiator.

10 Writing entries in textbook speak.
   Submissions that seem like they could have come straight from a management textbook won’t capture our judges’ imaginations and often confuse as to what’s actually been done and achieved.

Entering an initiative too soon.
   A winning entry will demonstrate a passion for solving a problem. Judges will all be in agreement that a HR team is doing some good things, but it seems the strategy has been entered just a year or two too early, i.e. before the team had chance to measure and reflect on results. So ask yourself if it would be better to wait another year to build up more supporting evidence. This is not about being in the same category, word for word, in several categories. It’s fine to enter the same strategy in more than one category. But make sure you tailor your entries. Some judges will be judging both categories, and they may want to see some thought as to why each submission has been entered into each category. Finally, winning entries are written once the project has had chance to measure and reflect, to demonstrate clear, sustainable deliverables.

Frequently made mistakes

Entering a submission in the wrong category. You’d be surprised how often we move entries into a category all judges agree makes more sense. But this won’t always be possible. Often the entry is written, and the details provided, means that although the judges can see it’s really an engagement strategy, not a talent management one, it can be hard to move successfully. So think and think again: is this really an over-representation strategy, or is what it should have been entered in L&D?

Submitting self-serving aren’t happy with you, don’t let it make you feel engaged in the problem and its solution? If not, rewrite! Once you have told a persuasive story, we need the evidence and lots of it. Hard facts, measures and outcome data. You would be surprised how often this isn’t given, and it really is a key differentiator.

Remember modesty is a virtue.
   Notice missing an issue or more area for improvement? Make sure you show how the strategy has been entered just a year or more shortlisted entries so you really want to be clear and concrete in your language.

10 Make sure the entry includes all the relevant material. Supporting material should be just that: to support your entry, but not crucial to judges’ understanding of it.

Tips from the top:
What judges look for in an award-winning entry

Catherine Ward, global people director, British Council
   “The two things that I look for are a compelling story and hard evidence. So for a compelling story, I need to know why you needed to do it, what was the business context or ‘turning point’ – what you did, and what was the outcome? – critically, how was that original problem solved? Don’t be afraid to tell the story with passion and conviction – make it a really good, snappy, read. Get people who weren’t interested in your story – does it capture their interest, make them feel engaged in the problem and its solution? If not, rewrite! Once you have told a persuasive story, we need the evidence and lots of it. Hard facts, measures and outcome data. You would be surprised how often this isn’t given, and it really is a key differentiator.

Lisa Robbins, former HR director, Starbucks
   “A winning entry will demonstrate a passion for solving a problem. Judges will all be in agreement that a HR team is doing some good things, but it seems the strategy has been entered just a year or two too early, i.e. before the team had chance to measure and reflect on results. So ask yourself if it would be better to wait another year to build up more supporting evidence. This is not about being in the same category, word for word, in several categories. It’s fine to enter the same strategy in more than one category. But make sure you tailor your entries. Some judges will be judging both categories, and they may want to see some thought as to why each submission has been entered into each category.

Making the submission too long.
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   Notice missing an issue or more area for improvement? Make sure you show how the strategy has been entered just a year or more shortlisted entries so you really want to be clear and concrete in your language.
The winners of the HR Excellence Awards 2019 were unveiled at the London Hilton Park Lane. The FCA was joint winner of our Best people-focused workplace design strategy award. The BBC scooped Best diversity and inclusion strategy and Best transformation strategy. A glittering event: 2019’s gala dinner. Sindhu Vee entertained as compère.
The great and good (and really good)
of award-winning HR

Coverage in HR magazine of HR Excellence Award winners over the years

The University of Sheffield
The perennial complaint is HR isn’t commercial enough. But this accusation can’t be levelled at The University of Sheffield, with the team having launched an externally-facing, profit-generating health and wellbeing consultancy Everyday Juice Limited. No surprise then that the accusation can’t be levelled at The University of Sheffield, with the team

The United Learning Trust
The United Learning Trust has been a staple on our award winners list for several years – with Lindsay Batchford winning HR Practitioner of the Year in 2015 for her role in supporting the growth of the organisation – and the team winning our Best employee engagement strategy in 2016. In 2018 former director of people Mandy Coalter was shortlisted for HR director of the year award, and employee wellbeing and retention manager Lucy Woodward won HR future leader of the year. In our February 2018 issue Coalter offered her take on the importance of flexible working in the schools sector, and in our February 2019 issue Coalter featured in a piece on HR directors who’ve also written books.

Three UK
Wellness initiatives at Three UK have been created around three key pillars. Energise focuses on helping people to eat healthily, sleep well and keep moving. Connect is about giving staff time for things that are important to them, such as family or personal cases. Balance supports people with the ups and downs of life. This holistic approach saw the organisation crowned winner of our Health and wellbeing award at 2019’s HR Excellence Awards, with the strategy covered in detail in a case study for our October 2019 issue.

Surrey Police
BAME under-representation in policing is an historic issue. The solution at Surrey Police has been a raft of activity, led by Surrey Police’s BAME staff association SPACE (Surrey Police Association for Culture and Ethnicity). One key result: from January to December 2017 Surrey Police saw an average 8.4% BAME application rate, compared to zero applicants between April and December 2015. Also recognising the strategy’s success, our 2018 HR Excellence Awards named Surrey Police winners of the Best diversity and inclusion strategy award, with the initiative profiled in the November 2018 magazine.

MTR Crossrail
MTR Crossrail began life in July 2014 when transport operator MTR was awarded the contract to operate the services along the Elizabeth line – the railway that will stretch more than 60 miles from Reading and Heathrow through central London and across to Shenfield, Essex, and Abbey Wood. So it has experienced a meteoric rise from not existing pre-2014 to becoming the biggest infrastructure project in Europe – no small HR challenge for HRD Alison Bell, who was tasked with recruiting all 700 employees now working on the project. The organisation were a worthy winner, then, of 2018’s Best recruitment strategy award, and Bell a worthy contender for HR director of the year. We profiled her in the August 2018 issue of HR magazine.

BBC
This year outgoing group HR director at the BBC Valerie Hughes-D’Aeth entered our HR Most Influential Hall of Fame and the BBC won the Diversity and inclusion and Leading transformation awards at this year’s HR Excellence Awards. We’ve regularly covered the wide range of reforms Hughes-D’Aeth has been implementing over the last five years in the magazine and online, including in a piece on her role in making the UK economy less London-centric in the April 2017 magazine and on ‘Bridging the gender pay gap: Where now?’ in the September 2018 magazine. For the November 2019 issue we sat down with Hughes-D’Aeth to hear about all she’s achieved over her tenure – including improving pay transparency, simplifying the structure of the BBC, D&I targets and much more.

Arconic
Back in 2016 the workforce at aerospace, transportation and oil and gas market manufacturer Arconic weren’t engaged with health interventions. So HR created a strategy around their specific wellbeing needs. Two years’ later and its Kitts Green site had collectively lost 138 kilograms - to cite just one impressive result. With Arconic a worthy winner of the 2018 HR Excellence Awards Best health and wellbeing strategy category, we covered this in the December 2018 issue of HR magazine.

VHR
When traditional talent pools weren’t really working out, recruitment firm VHR decided to ‘grow its own’ by training people with no prior industry experience. Thus the VHR Academy was born, with the aim of finding eight individuals who could be developed into the type of consultants the firm needed. The initiative has been so successful that VHR is now on its third cohort, with the firm highly commended in the Best learning and development strategy category at 2019’s awards. We found out how VHR made it all work behind the scenes in the September 2019 issue of HR magazine.

All pieces can be found at hrmagazine.co.uk
Kathryn Austin

In 2010, when Kathryn Austin joined, Piazza Hut hadn’t had a profitable year since 2004. It’s a very different story now. “It’s great to see an HR person responsible for another area of the business and make a demonstrable contribution to business success,” was one HR peer’s comment in voting for Austin to win HR director of the year in 2016. Another described her as “an exemplar for HR.”

In the profile piece in the May 2016 edition of the magazine, Austin shared insight on empowering leaders, Piazza Hut’s hospitality business management degree, and her dual HR/marketing role as chief people and marketing director.

Emma Rose

A lot has changed since Rose took the helm of HR at Kerry Foods. But as with all transformation success stories, it hasn’t been painless. Far from it – with some tough decisions needing to be made. An example of one of these is Kerry Food’s new ways of working, which Rose has played a key leadership role in. Other activity has included bringing recruitment in-house, launching a new employer brand, a Trailblazer engagement initiative, and a microlearning programme.

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Fiona Evans

When she opened in 2014, Fiona Evans saw the opportunity to make HR at the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) much more strategic and contribute more strongly to the organisation’s critical overarching purpose. Winning plaudits from both employees and the senior team at ZSL, Evans has overseen the HR department’s evolution since then, as it’s expanded far beyond limited operational activities. “[Evans] is honest, fair and trustworthy, and I have had personal experience of her fantastic ability to mediate and resolve difficult situations with a firm fairness,” reported one employee in voting for her to win 2017’s award. We took a fascinating walk on the wild side to find out more for our September 2017 issue.

Fiona Deal

In June 2012 Deal became a record breaker (minus the Guinness World Records verification) when she swept the board at the HR Excellence Awards. The then-executive director of people and culture at Housing Association AmicusHorizon (now Optima) took home six trophies – a record at the time and yet to be repeated at awards since. In 2019 Deal, now new executive director of people and technology at Network Homes, managed to almost match her previous record by taking home five awards, including HR director of the year, Best HR team and our prestigious Gold award. Which means she set a new record in 2020 as the only HR director (as far as HR magazine’s current regime is aware) to return and do it all again at a different organisation. We discovered the secrets to her success for a profile in the September 2019 issue of the magazine.

Frequently asked questions...

What is the deadline to submit an entry to the HR Excellence Awards 2020? You must submit your entry/entries by Friday 13 March 2020.

How much does it cost to enter? If you enter before 13 January 2020 you can enter as many categories as possible. Do not duplicate entries across multiple categories, instead tailoring the entry specifically to the criteria of the category you are entering. If your question is not answered here, please get in touch with the awards team on 0207 501 6782 or visit www.hrexcellenceawards.com.

I have an initiative that I could enter into Best CSR strategy, but it could fit another category too, what should I do? For the Best CSR strategy award judges are looking for work that not only has a positive impact on an organisation’s wider community, but also delivers strongly on an organisation’s HR and commercial strategic aims. Therefore, it’s likely your strategy should be entered into the CSR category (but you might want to enter it elsewhere too). Please do contact us if you would like further advice on this.

What is the difference between the entry document and supporting material? All main component of your entry is the entry document. All key information listed in the criteria for the category needs to be in the entry document and not in the supporting material. Supporting material is optional and may be submitted in addition to the entry document. It should be used to illustrate/demonstrate what is in the entry document. Supporting material may include, but is not limited to: photographs, testimonials, graphs/data, videos (please send a USB stick), hard copies of any printed material (e.g. brochures). While supporting material is important and helpful to the judges, we ask that you keep these documents to a reasonable amount.

What happens after I have submitted my entries? Once you have submitted your entries they will be processed by the awards team, ready for judging. Judging takes place in April and we will announce the shortlist in the week commencing 24 April 2020.

When are the winners announced? The winners are announced at the ceremony on Tuesday 30 March in London. Please keep this date free in your diary.

Who are the judges? The HR Excellence Awards 2020 will be judged by a panel made up of some of the UK’s top HR directors and former HR directors from leading organisations.