

#HREX21

**HR**  
EXCELLENCE  
AWARDS 2021

The.  
*magic*  
of *HR*

**HR**

For people-focused business leaders

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How to *win* an  
*HR Excellence Award 2021*



# 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? Make sure you show how the piece of work fits into the overall business strategy. Think of your reader; tell the story in a lively, compelling way to bring it to life.

**2 Be commercial.** Show there is a business benefit. Innovation doesn’t have to be big and expensive, but it should make a difference. Remember 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.

**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 and the submission doesn’t do it justice. Don’t rely on your success story being widely known within HR circles. To reiterate: judges can only judge what they’ve been given.

**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 numbers around – just relevant ones.

**5 Read the criteria on which the award will be judged.** And make sure your entry covers all of them. Perhaps include sub headings listing the criteria. This might make it easier for the judges to get the full picture.

**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 work 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, is it something you did in a creative way? Context is everything.

**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 to life if submitted by the people who made it happen. Agencies may polish your entry, but be sure it comes from the team who actually implemented it.

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

## 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 way the entry is written, and the details provided, means that although the judges can see it’s really an engagement strategy, say, rather than a talent management one, it can be hard to move successfully. So think and think again: is this really an overarching engagement strategy, or should it have been entered in L&D?

**✗ Submitting self-serving ‘aren’t we marvellous’ entries.** These don’t fare well with our judges. Remember modesty is a virtue...

**✗ Making the submission too long.** Some categories have 20 or more shortlisted entries so you want yours to be easy to read and understand...and memorable. Don’t attach reams of appendices, particularly where the information isn’t relevant.

**✗ 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.** Often 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’s 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.

**✗ Submitting exactly the same entry, 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 will want to see some thought as to why each submission has been entered into each category.

## 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 what you did, what

was the business context or ‘burning platform,’ 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 involved to read 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,**  
HR director,  
Starbucks

“A winning entry will demonstrate a passion for solving a business issue or taking advantage of an opportunity, showing clearly the context, business case, approach

and output in terms of what impact was made and how that has helped deliver on the initial opportunity. It should show innovative thinking and inspire others to follow suit. The entry should show pride, professionalism and careful thought about how it is brought to life. Don’t be afraid to share testimonials, blogs, photos and videos from those who have benefited from the work. It needs to feel real and not just written by management. Finally, winning entries are written once there has been enough time to demonstrate clear, sustainable deliverables.”



**Neil Morrison,**  
HR director, Severn Trent

“The first thing that I look for is the relevance to the organisation, not just relevance to the HR team. I want to understand the challenges that the organisation faces and how the work helped solve that or improve the situation. That context is really important in helping compare companies with different budgets, cultures and maturity. For me, excellence can be well-executed simplicity as much as leading edge innovation; it all depends on the context and demonstrable results. I want to understand the data that supports a submission. Remember that the judges are experienced professionals who will be able to sniff out dodgy or contradictory numbers. So be really honest and straightforward. I also want to read a compelling narrative that demonstrates pride and passion and sets an example to the profession as a whole. A really good example was a submission in the technology category one year. It wasn’t the most cutting-edge, but it was absolutely right for the business, and the submission explained why and the results achieved.”



**Shakil Butt,** founder,  
HR Hero for Hire

“A good entry has to start with the ‘why,’ identifying the business challenge to contextualise the circumstances. This can include trends in the industry as a whole and/or a specific issue for the organisation. This ensures it is actually owned by the organisation rather than being a stand-alone HR project. The HR/OD intervention or the ‘what’ needs to be clearly articulated, avoiding jargon, with clarity on the baseline, using business and people metrics. The ‘how’ has to explain the process 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.”

**Paula Jordan,** group HR director,  
McCarthy & Stone

“For me an award-winning entry makes a real difference to the business, sets out clearly what was needed to be achieved and what was actually achieved – this isn’t always clear. It must be a genuine HR exercise, rather than a wider organisational change programme with an HR component (e.g. implementation of a new ERP system for the whole organisation). The case for why it’s excellent must be backed up with financial or other relevant metrics; it should go beyond the ordinary (unless the organisation is very small or starting from a very low base), demonstrating originality and something genuinely new rather than standard good practice. Presentation should be succinct and compelling, such that the judges do not need to delve into countless attachments to form a view. Data should be provided about the size of the budget and the number of employees covered (this was sometimes left blank for ‘commercial’ reasons one year I judged). Also, beware of serial applications (i.e. the same presentation for multiple categories).”





# A glittering event: 2019's gala dinner

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



Sindhu Vee entertained as compère



The BBC scooped Best diversity and inclusion strategy and Best transformation strategy





# 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 team were highly commended in 2016's HR team of the year and then scooped Best internal communications strategy in 2018. November 2015 saw us profile HRD Andy Dodman (below), while a piece on commercialising HR in September 2016 explored how the team makes Everyday Juice work. Since then Dodman, who is now chief HR officer at Leeds City Council, has regularly commented in the magazine.



## 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 causes. 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.



## 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.



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## 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 HR's 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 year's 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 onto 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](http://hrmagazine.co.uk)



## HR director of the year winners

### Kathryn Austin

In 2010, when Kathryn Austin joined, Pizza Hut hadn't had a profitable year since 2006. 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, Pizza Hut's hospitality business management degree, and her dual HR/marketing role as chief people and marketing director.



### Fiona Evans

When she joined 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 overriding 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.

### 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 plain sailing. 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 new 'Talent Deal,' with wellbeing and flexible working also on the agenda. Rose has also been instrumental in the development of the leadership team, challenging and encouraging them to be courageous and creative. Following her win at the 2018 awards, we profiled this inspirational HRD in the January 2019 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 Optivo) took home six trophies – a record at the time and yet to be repeated at an awards since. In 2019 Deal, now 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's set a new record this year 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...

### Will there be an in person ceremony this year?

Yes. The ceremony will be held in London on Wednesday 1st December 2021. More information will be available soon.

### I work for a company outside the UK, can I enter the awards?

We have a category specifically for overseas entrants. Alternatively, if you are entering on behalf of a company based in the UK or work directly with a company based in the UK, then your entry will be accepted.

### What are the main characteristics you see in a winning entry?

A breakdown of each category criteria is available on the categories page. You will also find links to previous winners on the HR Excellence Awards website.

### Are there any new categories this year?

This year there are two new categories. These will be announced when the awards launch on 1st April 2021.

### My project could fit into two categories, how do I decide which to enter it into?

The criteria on the categories page specifies and advises which category to enter. However, you can enter both categories if you feel your entry is relevant to both.

### Why is there a cost associated with entering the awards?

The HR Excellence Awards are the one of most well-regarded and prestigious events in the sector. For this reason, we expect a high calibre of entries and have chosen a price point which matches this. There are early bird discounts and charity rates. We are able to offer this reduced fee thanks for to our sponsors and HR Magazine.

### Who are the judges? and How are they chosen?

The judges are all leading industry experts and have been chosen based on their experience in the HR industry. They span the public, private and charity sectors.

### How do you prevent bias in the judging process?

The judges all must sign an NDA. A lot of work goes in to making sure there is no conflict of interest, with each judge sending in their scores individually, meaning they do not know the winner until the night of the awards.

### Which supporting evidence will best support my submission?

Data and metrics is preferable to case studies and anecdotes, yet all add to the quality of the entry.

**If your question is not answered here, please get in touch with the awards team on 0207 501 6782 or visit [www.hrexcellenceawards.com](http://www.hrexcellenceawards.com)**