



## How to Function as a Small HR Team with BIG Responsibilities

**Intro:** Welcome to Strategic Insights, brought to you by PrideStaff. On each episode, we bring you interviews with leading management and employment experts from across the country. Your host for Strategic Insights is Brad Smith. And now, here's Brad.

**Brad Smith:** Hello and thank you for tuning into Strategic Insights, brought to you by PrideStaff. I'm your host, Brad Smith, and today I'm excited about our topic. We're going to talk about how to function as a small HR team with big responsibilities.

Joining me today, I have two special guests. First is Sarah Hayden. Sarah is the VP of risk management with PrideStaff. Sarah, thank you so much for joining me.

**Sarah Hayden:** Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here.

**Brad Smith:** Same. And our second guest is Maribeth Gossenberger, human resources manager for PrideStaff. Maribeth, thank you for joining us.

**Maribeth Gossen...:** Of course. Thanks for having me.

**Brad Smith:** So, I'm excited about our conversation, and I know that I'm probably preaching to the choir here of HR professionals or hiring managers that are tasked with so many different things to do and have limited resources and time to do that. I wanted to start by just sharing a few data points and statistics coming from SHRM. 67% of HR professionals in small teams cite increasing workload as their biggest concern. And as companies are ramping up for a new year and preparing strategic plans, I'm sure they're seeing this right now.

Another statistic, 58% find that maintaining compliance is challenging, particularly in high regulation states like California, Illinois, New York, and many others. And then 45% of small HR teams spend more than half of their time on transactional tasks. So, thinking about things like payroll and benefits, and that leaves limited time for the more strategic work, the more fulfilling work, and that came from Paycor.

So, my two guests today have experienced, I'm sure, all of that that we've just talked about. So, let's start things off with that said and talk about challenges for small HR teams. So, my key question here is, and Sarah, I'm going to start with you, what are some of the primary challenges you faced when you've built and managed a small HR team, and how do those impact day-to-day operations?

Sarah Hayden: That's a great question, and I love the statistics that you shared because they reflect very clearly what we experience. That's been the challenge all along is finding time to do both the transactional tasks that are necessary and strategic planning for the organization around human resources and then managing compliance as the employment laws get ever more complex. Especially being based in California, we experience a lot of compliance opportunities.

Definitely balancing compliance with strategic initiatives is a significant challenge for a smaller HR department. HR teams struggle to address broader goals like employee engagement and talent development because there's constant compliance demands that get in the way. We also have state-specific challenges. Like I mentioned, being based in California, we have very strict wage and hour laws and employee relations laws that can shift our focus from employee engagement to risk management.

Then you have different regulations in other states that we do business in, like Illinois, New Jersey, New York. They all have challenging legislation, and some of it is even targeted specifically at the staffing industry, making it harder to do business.

Also, just constraints with our resources. I mean, having a limited HR staff when you're a smaller company means that you have to prioritize high-risk areas, and so you often can't address all the key HR functions that you want to address, like workforce planning and development, on a regular basis.

Brad Smith: Sarah, I know that you have some deep experience there at PrideStaff and have been working in your role for a long time, and you've gone through each one of these, right? You've personally experienced each of these challenges, haven't you?

Sarah Hayden: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

Brad Smith: Now, let's talk a little bit about those resource constraints. So, there's a few ways to address resource constraints that could be bringing in additional resources, and that could be leveraging outside resources.

Maribeth, maybe I can point this question to you. At what point should a small HR team consider reaching out to external resources? Are there certain indicators or certain signals that say, "Hey, it's time to reach out and get some help."?

Maribeth Gossen...: I don't think there's a particular point when you... I just think you should at any point in your career, in your job function as an HR professional, because getting that outside knowledge and perspective of things that are going on outside of your office and your organization is critical. We heavily rely on our external resources for even just getting updated on new legislation. So, it's just such a critical part of what an HR professional should be doing.

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One thing I would reiterate as far as great resources is just networking and getting part of organizations. So, SHRM is a great resource, and SHRM has a lot of local chapters all across the country and those chapters usually will be hosting events. So, these HR professionals can get together and not only network, but also learn about trends and new laws and a lot of... They just provide some great resources.

Sarah Hayden: I'll add to that, if it's okay.

Brad Smith: [inaudible 00:05:54].

Sarah Hayden: Early on in my career at PrideStaff, I was kind of an HR department of one. My manager was growing in her role, and I did a lot of figuring things out on my own, and I relied heavily on our relationship with an employer association. So, a recommendation for small HR departments is to find a local employer association, something like in California, it's CEA, California Employers Association, and for a nominal membership fee they provide outsourced HR support and consulting. I would call them when I didn't know how to handle an employee relations issue that came up early on in my career. I would call them for help interpreting compliance requirements. How does this law apply to an employer in California? And they also have a lot of training resources and compliance resources like toolkits, forms, policies, available for members.

So, huge shout out to California Employers Association for being a great resource for PrideStaff early on in my career, and we still partner with them on various things. But there are many employer associations in many states that you can find that will provide that resource and support for a small HR company, or HR department.

Brad Smith: I love that. And if you've got locations, if you've got employees in different states, it's impossible to stay up on all those state regulations. So, leverage those outside resources and form those partnerships, and you'll find that it alleviates a lot of the challenges and helps you identify potential opportunities or risks or other things that you may not have otherwise been aware of.

Sarah Hayden: Absolutely.

Maribeth Gossen...: I would also add that to just make sure you're getting information regularly. So, you can sign up for newsletters for usually the larger legal firms such as Littler Mendelson, [inaudible 00:07:50]. Signing up for those newsletters, you'll get those legal updates, those employment law updates to your inbox, and those are usually free. So that at least just sign up for your resources that can educate you on things that might impact your organization. I think that's just really critical to just be informed and get yourself informed.

Brad Smith: And to throw a little plug in there, PrideStaff, I will say, does a fantastic job of bringing in some of those world-renowned speakers on employment law, on

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risk, on other areas. So, make sure that you work with your local PrideStaff office, sign up for the newsletter, sign up for alerts on upcoming events, and you often bring in a lot of key speakers when a big change is coming in the HR world.

Sarah Hayden: We do. We love to share resources and educate our clients on those kinds of issues. It's important to be informed, but then you also need help sometimes interpreting how that information applies to you and what you need to do, what steps you need to take as an employer. So, it's about staying educated, but having people you can talk to about what does this mean for me?

Brad Smith: For sure. Let's switch gears just a little bit. I want to talk about technology and AI in HR. AI, artificial intelligence, has been a big topic, especially in the AI space. When you think about things like interview bias or resume review and all of the technology plays that are going on right now, it can be overwhelming for a small HR team.

So, what technology solutions do you find most helpful for small HR teams to really stay efficient and compliant?

Maribeth Gossen...: So, I would say an HRIS system is critical. I would say that is a really important piece of software for an HR team to invest in. It's kind of your one-stop shop for everything with your employees from payroll to benefits, just depending on the software that you get. Just having that software and then having that employee have access to updating their tax forms and direct... It kind of relieves that administrative burden and time. So, I think that's really important to really focus on getting electronic and finding an HRIS system to streamline your work and filing.

And then another critical tool that's really important is AI for hr. I know AI is very intimidating and it needs to be used, it does involve the human eye and reviewing what AI spits out. But I have used AI for just getting me started on whether it's a job description or maybe we're creating a brand-new policy and we just need something to start off of. PrideStaff here, we utilize Gemini, and that integrates with Google Suite. So, if I need to draft up a job description, I'll just ask Gemini, hey, draft a job description for let's say a payroll specialist, and I have a starting point for that department head or that manager to then refine it to make it specific to that role within our organization.

And so, AI can be a great tool to create more efficiencies for your role and kind of help relieve some of that time and just getting started on various projects or administrative tasks. I would say partner with your IT team-

Brad Smith: For sure.

Maribeth Gossen...: ... and ensure that you have the security and AI governance and compliance in place for that.

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Brad Smith: You've built that in. So PrideStaff I know has a large IT team and a governance board, and you work with them to refine all of that, correct?

Maribeth Gossen...: Yes.

Brad Smith: Yeah. So, Sarah, Maribeth mentioned the HRIS and how important it is. I know that can be a big investment. Do you have anything to add there?

Sarah Hayden: I do. I do. There's a lot that an HRIS, which is a human resources information system, can provide for an organization that saves huge time, like she said, frees you up from the administrative burden of a lot of the HR functions. Maintaining employee records, you can create automated reporting off of those records. Some of them come with a mobile app so people can access their information through their phone. You can do new hire onboarding. You can handle payroll and benefits administration through an HRIS. Time tracking, so timecards and time input. Time off requests. People can manage their tax information through an HRIS to make changes to their withholdings. You can gauge employee experience and performance through some functions of an HRIS. You have a place that you can track performance management. You can gauge employee well-being. And depending on the HRIS, you can also integrate with other vendor platforms that your company may use, like Slack can integrate or your background check vendor might be able to integrate.

So, I think what happens is we tend to build our own systems and processes for things. But in retrospect, I would have loved the opportunity to get in with an HRIS much earlier in the game because we would've saved hours and hours of time building databases and custom reports and tracking tools when you can access all of that already made for you within an HRIS.

Brad Smith: Yeah, so could be a big investment upfront in expense and resources, but the amount of time it saves long-term, so worth it.

Sarah Hayden: Exactly. Especially as you grow, because those things that you set up for yourself only become more and more tedious and complex as your company grows and you add people to your roster. So, my advice is to get in early on an HRIS.

Brad Smith: The longer you wait, the more daunting that switch becomes, I would assume.

Sarah Hayden: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

Brad Smith: Wonderful, thank you. Let's talk a little bit about creating a positive workplace culture. We hear on the news all the time about work-life balance and mental wellness at work. How can a small HR team, given everything else that we've talked about and all their responsibilities with other items, how can they help to drive employee engagement and create a positive culture in many cases where there's a limited budget?

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Sarah Hayden: I can speak to that. It's as simple as building relationships. Relationship building sets the foundation, the type of rapport that's needed to effectively handle HR issues that arise. And just the courtesy of helping employees feel seen, heard, known, appreciated, that doesn't take a lot of time, it doesn't take a lot of money, but it pays significant dividends in terms of fostering a culture of teamwork, positivity, appreciation, all those things. There's a lot that you can do that's free, that just lets people know that they're valued and that you care.

Brad Smith: How do you go about making sure that that continues down the organization or throughout the organization? So, HR I think can have a big impact on that. But when it gets to department managers or hiring managers or things like that, what other things can you do? Do you have any tips on things like recognizing achievements or helping to support work-life balance or even maybe collecting feedback from team members?

Maribeth Gossen...: I would say it comes down to investing in the managers and your department heads and your supervisors, because they are at the front lines of the employees. They're the ones managing those employees on the day to day. So, you want to make sure that we are supplying or providing those managers tips and tools and resources to be able to ensure that those employees are having recognition within their own teams. It's really important to invest in the managers and making sure that they're doing more than just approving timecards and approving time off, that they're actually investing in those employees and ensuring that they're just being good leaders.

Brad Smith: Now, I know that one thing PrideStaff does with temporary employees is NPS scoring, so running a net promoter score. And that allows you to make sure that the staff that you're providing to the end employer is engaged, they're happy. It helps you identify potential issues before they even become an issue so that they can be addressed so that the employer isn't negatively impacted. Do you see other end employers using anything like net promoter surveys or anything like that with their internal teams or their internal staff?

Sarah Hayden: I think that something like net promoter score or even just surveying employees about their experience is critical. I'm a huge fan of surveys. I survey my teams all the time about a variety of things. Because not everybody feels comfortable vocalizing exactly what they're feeling or experiencing in a public setting or even in a one-on-one. But when you give people the opportunity to write out what's going on, even if it's anonymous sometimes, you really can gather really important information. You can't assume that everybody's having a great time at work. I've made that mistake of assuming that everybody's on the same page and happy and engaged only to find out, oh gosh, I didn't know that you were unhappy here. So surveying is important. Something like Google Forms you can use.

But again, the relationship building, just having regular conversations with your employees. And I think to Maribeth's point about empowering managers, we do that a lot by modeling the behavior that we want to see. And the golden rule

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comes into play a lot in HR. You model treating people the way that you would want to be treated, and I really think that contributes to building a successful team and building a successful company culture.

You asked about some things that are small or free ways to recognize employees and help with engagement. Things like letting people leave two hours early because you saw that they did a great job on something, or they finished a project that they've been working on, give them a half day off. It's not technically free, but it's not an extra out-of-pocket cost. Also, don't underestimate the power of a \$5 Starbucks gift card. If you can build something like that into your monthly budget, people get a free cup of coffee, it's a small thing but that makes a big impact. And then just shout-outs. Use your instant messaging platforms to put people on blast for the positive things that they contribute to the organization. You have to be careful that people are okay with that kind of recognition. But just letting people know about the good things that are happening reinforces that kind of behavior across the organization.

Brad Smith:

I love that. And that helps strengthen your employment brand, that makes retention better, that makes morale better, that improves productivity, that helps you attract the future workforce that's going to be superstars in your organization. So, I think all of those things that you just mentioned, Sarah and Maribeth, go into creating an amazing work environment and strengthening your employment brand.

Now, let's transition a little bit and let's talk about personal development and HR certifications. So, Sarah, I know you started as a solo HR professional. You've built a strong effective team over the years. When you look back, what role did professional development play in the growth of both yourself and the team that you've built?

Sarah Hayden:

That's a great question, Brad. I'm grateful that professional development has always been able to be part of my career trajectory. Definitely it's important to give employees opportunity to better themselves. I believe that significantly adds to employee engagement and fulfillment. But for a newer HR professional, definitely check out things like the SHRM certifications, the SHRM-CP, SHRM Certified Professional, and the SHRM Senior Certified Professional, and then the HR certifications like the PHR or the SPHR. In my experience that textbook learning helps broaden an HR professional's understanding of the full array of HR topics from workforce planning to compliance. And having that validation that you understand that material can build confidence and credibility and start your employees on a trajectory to even deeper professional development over the years.

Brad Smith:

Love that. Now, let's talk about future-facing too. So obviously you want to build in those certifications. You want to build in those credentials. When you think about the HR function overall, especially when it comes to emerging technology, how can HR teams prepare for the future of HR as it continues to evolve so rapidly?

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Maribeth Gossen...: I think it comes down to just being educated and, like I said, networking I think is really important, getting out and mingling with other HR professionals and understanding that we were all understanding new ways and tips to learn or adapt to new technologies. I know initially in talking about AI, there was a lot of fear with AI that it would replace jobs. But it educating ourselves and seeing what the potential could be, we realize it's not replacing our job. It's really making us more efficient with our time. Getting yourself out there and educating yourself can really help you understand where the future of HR can go.

I know I mentioned SHRM, SHRM has great resources and articles about where HR is going and the future of HR and or workforce trends. That's a huge great resource that I would highly recommend companies invest a membership in just for those articles and resources alone. But I would say definitely educating yourself and staying on top of current trends and what's going on in the HR world.

Brad Smith: And then when you think about internally at an organization, obviously HR needs to align with the company mission, needs to support initiatives, things like that. Any tips or best practices for making sure that the HR function is supporting other areas of the company and the company vision?

Sarah Hayden: I think it's important for HR to have regular meetings with the company's executive team to make sure that the human resources team understands the company's strategies and priorities and their goals and growth plans so that the HR initiatives can be aligned with what the executive team hopes to achieve over a calendar year or a five-year span. So those regular meetings with the executive team, I highly recommend getting that alignment on important company initiatives because HR can be a significant support to a company's success, ensuring that you have the right people who are engaged and motivated to carry forward the company's mission.

Brad Smith: So, Sarah, to bring that full circle, we talked earlier about how the more tactical items or roles or responsibilities of HR often get in the way of that strategic side. How do you make sure you don't get distracted with the tactical and you still have time for the strategic? Any tips there?

Sarah Hayden: Build in time for strategizing. Put it on your calendar. Have regular meetings with stakeholders and don't skip them. Time management is a very important skill for an HR professional to have. But there's certain things that you have to just build into your schedule. Time for management objectives, time for your own professional development, time for educating yourself on HR trends within the industry and in your state and in the country. Those things you truly just have to make a commitment to yourself to spend the time on. But again, they feel like, you can feel really pressured to spend time on those things when you've got a huge to-do list and you have people banging on your door and compliance initiatives to work on. But it's really important to invest that



proactive time so that you can make sure that you are in alignment with where the company's going.

Brad Smith: To wrap things up, I'm going to ask you both one final question. I'll ask you the same question, but I want one key takeaway. So, for those that are listening, for those HR professionals that want to take the next step in their careers, what are some practical things they can do to develop their skills, expand their impact in the organization, and make sure that you are having a strategic seat at the table? Maribeth, maybe we can start with you. What's one takeaway for people that are listening?

Maribeth Gossen...: I would say if you do not have your like SHRM-CP or your PHR or SPHR, investing in yourself and getting those designations is a great introduction into that bigger strategic thinking. Speaking from my experience of really doing a lot of day-to-day HR and then pursuing that certification, it just expanded my knowledge into where I can go in HR and where I can take the organization with HR. And it's a great introduction to all this strategic thinking from a bigger picture. So that is my one recommendation is to pursue those designations if you don't already have one.

Brad Smith: I love that. And Sarah, how about you? One recommendation to close things out.

Sarah Hayden: Getting connected with other people in your field, participating in HR networking events, engaging with professional HR associations or employer associations, leveraging LinkedIn. You never know who you're going to meet and what they can teach you. So it can be intimidating to go out and meet new people, but I think some of your greatest opportunities come from taking that risk. Just getting involved in local HR organizations, employer associations, attending webinars, industry events, so that you can have the necessary connections for building on your success.

Brad Smith: I love that. And I'm going to add one final one myself. I'm going to again plug PrideStaff's resources, PrideStaff puts on strategic insights, webinars, educational events, brings in world-renowned speakers, provides white papers, guides, eBooks, resources. Visit [pridestaff.com](http://pridestaff.com), take advantage of all of those resources, many of which offer SHRM and continuing education credits so that you can get and maintain those designations. So, leverage all of those free resources that PrideStaff provides. And if you do have questions, comments, concerns, your struggling with something, reach out to the PrideStaff team, reach out to your local PrideStaff office. They'd be happy to point you in the right direction and help you solve some of those big challenges.

Sarah and Maribeth, I can't thank you enough for your time today. Great insight and really appreciate it.

Sarah Hayden: ... having us, this was really fun.

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Maribeth Gossen...: Thank you.

Brad Smith: Thank you everyone. Take care.

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