



The HR Hierarchy of Needs:

Achieving Self-Actualization in Your Profession

WHITE PAPER | JUNE 2021

The background features a collage of office-related images, including people working at desks, computer monitors, and office furniture, all overlaid with several large, semi-transparent circles in various colors (green, yellow, blue) of different sizes.

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INTRODUCTION: SURVIVE OR THRIVE

If you're reading this white paper, chances are you're in a better position to assess your organization's HR health than practically anyone else. Are you and your fellow HR professionals thriving as an influential strategic force within your company? Or do you feel closer to merely *surviving*, seemingly stuck in a cycle of routine, repetitive tasks that consume the bulk of any given workweek?

Your answer — positive, negative or somewhere in between — comes with serious implications for the well-being of your organization as a whole. The greater an HR team's sense of belonging and strategic influence, the greater its ability to serve employees, ideally on a level of human understanding — for example, through initiatives aimed at boosting employees' sense of engagement and satisfaction with their overall experience.

Growth in this area, in turn, exerts positive ripple effects on the satisfaction of the *customers* or *clients* who are being served by those employees — relationships on which the organization's financial viability and the success of the executive vision ultimately depend.

Thus, the very *human* need for emotional and psychological well-being remains crucial for executives, co-workers, customers and you, the HR professional who plays a significant role in holding the whole thing together.

But countercurrents are involved. While our understanding of work has gradually evolved to make more room for the human element, the nature of work itself has become more digital. In 2020 alone, 85% of companies accelerated the digitization process — a trend that can only be expected to continue.¹

So where does all this leave today's HR professional? For too many, the answer involves duplicating tasks employees are already doing, reducing the time and energy those practitioners *could* be spending on strategic work that advances their organization — and their careers.

Does this sound familiar? How can HR spend more time on work that drives the business forward?



We wanted to identify exactly what was keeping HR teams from reaching their full potential, so we commissioned a nationwide survey of 500 HR and payroll professionals. The biggest takeaway was just *how much* of HR's time is spent doing unnecessary work, like duplicating or correcting employee data entry. According to these decision-makers, 58% of employees don't update their own personal information on their smartphones. Benefits enrollment? 68% of employees aren't doing that on their phones, either.

The landscape is even bleaker when it comes to two common work responsibilities: basic managerial approvals and taking training courses. In both cases, 77% of employees aren't tackling them on their smartphones. But regardless of the devices involved, if employees aren't equipped or empowered to self-manage these important, recurring tasks, the burden falls onto HR as duplicative work.

No wonder so many HR teams feel strapped for time! How can you focus on work that drives employee engagement, satisfaction and retention if the bulk of your time and energy is needed to maintain all the duplicative administrative tasks that get your employees paid, enrolled in benefits and other essentials?

We hope to answer that question and provide some insights to spur growth here.

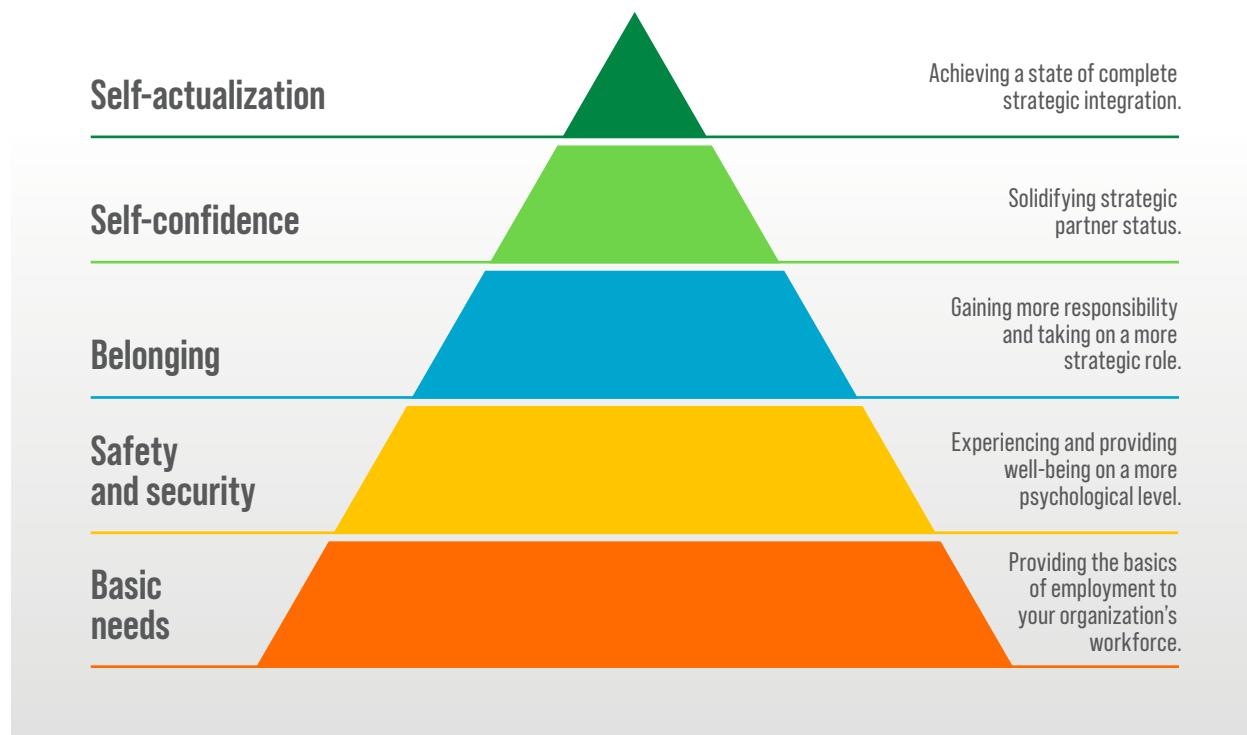
BACKGROUND: MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

To figure out where you're going, it's best to start with a clear understanding of where you are now. And to do *that*, it's useful to think in terms of a visual model.

Although the concept of HR development as a multilevel pyramid may be new to you, it draws from well-established roots in psychological theory. In 1943, Abraham Maslow suggested a hierachal ordering of universal human needs, often represented as a pyramid, with five levels comprising three broad categories:

- » basic needs (including physiological and safety) at the bottom
- » psychological needs (including social belonging and self-esteem) in the middle
- » self-fulfillment needs (including self-actualization) at the top

As a theory of motivation, Maslow suggested that people are unlikely to pursue these needs out of order. Thus, basic needs like food and shelter must be satisfied before a person turns his or her thoughts to things like romantic relationships (which are classified as part of belonging), and so on, until a deeper meaning and ultimate transcendence becomes a real possibility to those who wish to achieve it.²

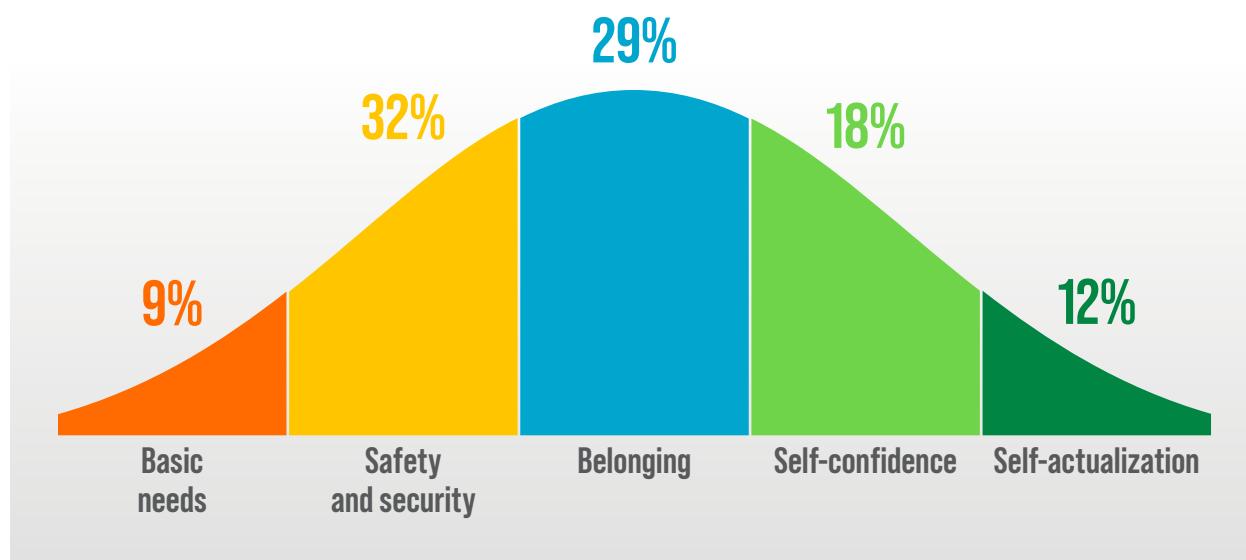


Maslow's theory has not escaped criticism in the intervening decades, particularly with regard to the ordering of needs and motivations beyond the most basic level.³ However, the model has also proven remarkably durable and resilient, eventually being adapted to the employee experience.⁴

Despite this – and somewhat surprisingly – the famous theory has so far seen little specific application to the world of HR, with direct research on the subject becoming available only recently.

According to this research, commissioned by Paycom and conducted by Evolve Research in early 2021, 67% of HR and payroll professionals see themselves as falling in the self-confidence or self-actualization levels. But self-perception and reality do not always align. The same study suggests that, based on their day-to-day HR practice, fully 70% of HR professionals actually find themselves stuck in the first three levels of the pyramid.

MASLOW LEVELS OF HR PROS



In fact, at the outset of this survey, HR professionals self-selected the level they felt best described their professional development and were later sorted into their actual levels based on their day-to-day responsibilities.

All told, 77% of HR professionals incorrectly categorized themselves. One area that held many of them back was HR technology. You'll learn more about specific hurdles in later sections.

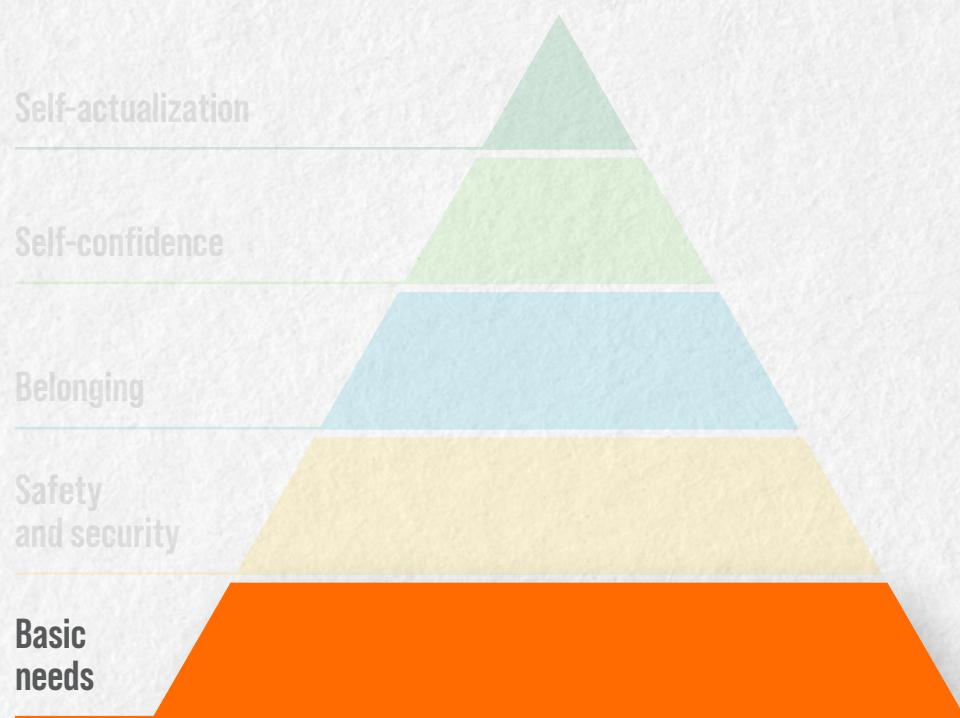
Does this mean that HR professionals are woefully out of touch? Of course not! But it does indicate that most are setting their sights *too low*. Much more is available, in terms of professional fulfillment, respect and understanding from the C-suite, and organizational impact than the average HR practitioner realizes.



This raises the question: What hurdles are preventing HR professionals from advancing upward and reaching their full potential?

To find the answers, let's take a closer look at how the psychologist's pyramidal concept applies to your profession, level by level, from the bottom to the top.

LEVEL 1: BASIC NEEDS



Just as the most fundamental requirements of life are met with ready access to food, water and other necessities, the most fundamental requirements of HR's role are met by providing employees with *the basics* of their employment.

While HR is unlikely to be tasked with providing workplace necessities to a degree so literal as to include desks and computers, thinking in terms of that example wouldn't lead you too far off the mark. What HR professionals *must* provide, or ensure someone else provides, are the things whose absence would render an organization completely nonfunctional, unable to sustain any kind of effective workforce.

Examples of needs encompassed by this level of the HR pyramid might include:

- » an effective means of **onboarding** new employees, including the verification of required documents, completion of paperwork and introductory trainings
- » a system by which employees can clock in and out, know the number of hours they've worked in a week or when their next shift begins, request time off and other basic **scheduling** needs
- » a **payroll** system to ensure workers are reliably and correctly compensated for their services
- » a way for employees to select basic **benefits** like health coverage

One factor that is likely to keep HR departments mired at this level is lack of employees' direct access to their own data via mobile. For example, 92% of those in the lower three levels said their employees don't use a smartphone app to do any basic work-related tasks, including enrolling in benefits, taking training courses or simply updating their personal information.



"Paycom has changed my day to day because I'm not sitting behind a desk, inputting data. I'm able to get out, talk to employees and improve company culture."

— HR MANAGER, MANUFACTURING FIRM

In fact, according to an early 2021 OnePoll survey of 1,000 American office workers, many of whom were working from home, 48% of employees signed up for benefits using digital forms or email, while only 18% used HR software.⁵ Unfortunately, this puts HR in the middle of the data-transfer process, taking employee information from paper forms or emails and re-entering it into the HRIS.



“You are the heart and soul of your organization’s ability to attract and develop and maintain great employees, and nothing could be more important”

If you aren’t able to have some of your basic needs met, and then on upward from there, you’re not well-positioned to help others self-actualize.”

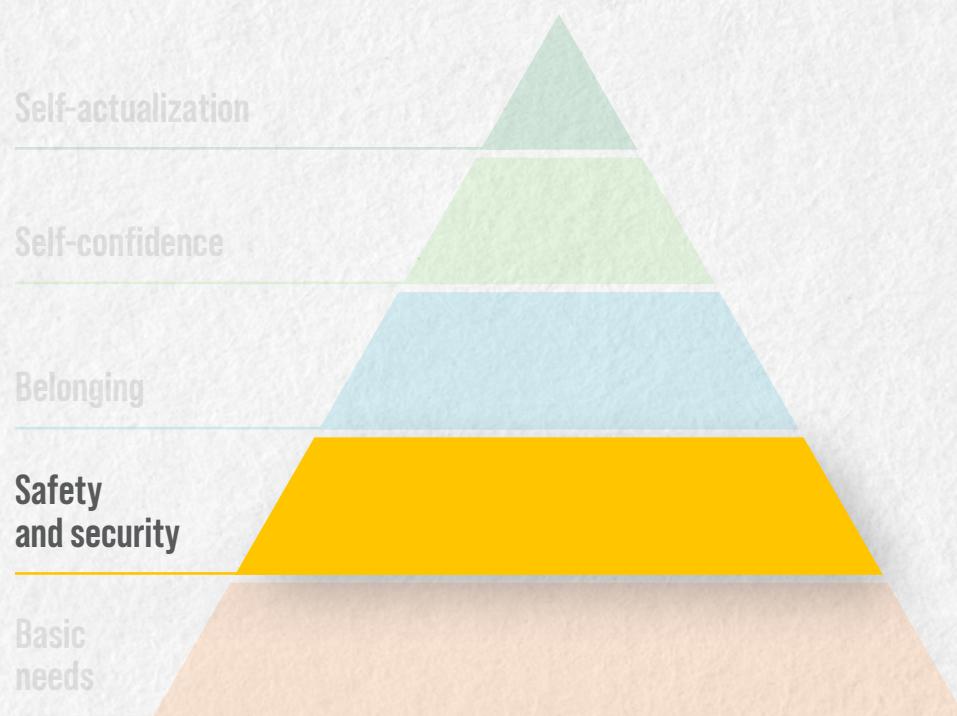
— AMY EDMONDSON, PH.D.,
HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PROFESSOR
OF LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

When you exist primarily at this level as an HR professional, your role in the organization is anything but strategic. Yet many find themselves stuck here for lengthy or indefinite stretches of time. For those who harbor no real ambition beyond coming into work for the day, fulfilling a familiar set of responsibilities and then going home, the “basic needs” level might be enough.

But many HR professionals — likely you included, if you’ve read this far — yearn for something more. They want the job to which they devote so much of their time and energy to offer a higher purpose within their organizations.

But what does that look like?

LEVEL 2: SAFETY AND SECURITY



When your basic needs are met as an employee — HR or otherwise — you can count on a reasonably comfortable working environment. The air conditioner runs during the summer, the heat during colder months. Coffee is provided and bathrooms are functional. But where do your thoughts and emotions turn in moments of downtime between tasks?

Thoughts and *emotions* are keywords here, because the next stage of security is largely psychological. Is your contribution to the organization seen as sufficiently valuable that you don't have to worry about being replaced? If you get sick, can you take time off to recover?



"HR professionals are often considered to be the 'keepers of company culture.' We not only have to think about the physical safety and security of our employees but be aware of our own safety and security needs as well. This includes psychological safety, the ability to speak up when we feel overwhelmed or need to challenge the status quo."

— SHARLYN LAUBY, FOUNDER OF HR BARTENDER

Because work and life are inextricably connected, these questions easily spill over into concerns over financial well-being, like getting bills paid on time and covering the basic needs of children or other dependents. Consider, for example, that only 39% of people believed companies were doing "well" or "very well" at protecting their employees' financial well-being or job security.⁶

Now let's return more specifically to your role in HR and what you might be doing at this stage. Clearly, we've graduated at least somewhat beyond scheduling, payroll and benefits. Think instead along the lines of:

- » any kind of work that helps the organization maintain **compliance** and avoid potential causes of liability as pertains to the Affordable Care Act, the Family and Medical Leave Act or Form I-9 employment-eligibility verification, to name just a few examples
- » **trainings** to help keep employees educated and aware on topics like bullying and sexual harassment
- » generating **reports** to identify and analyze trends in workforce data such as retention and demographic data



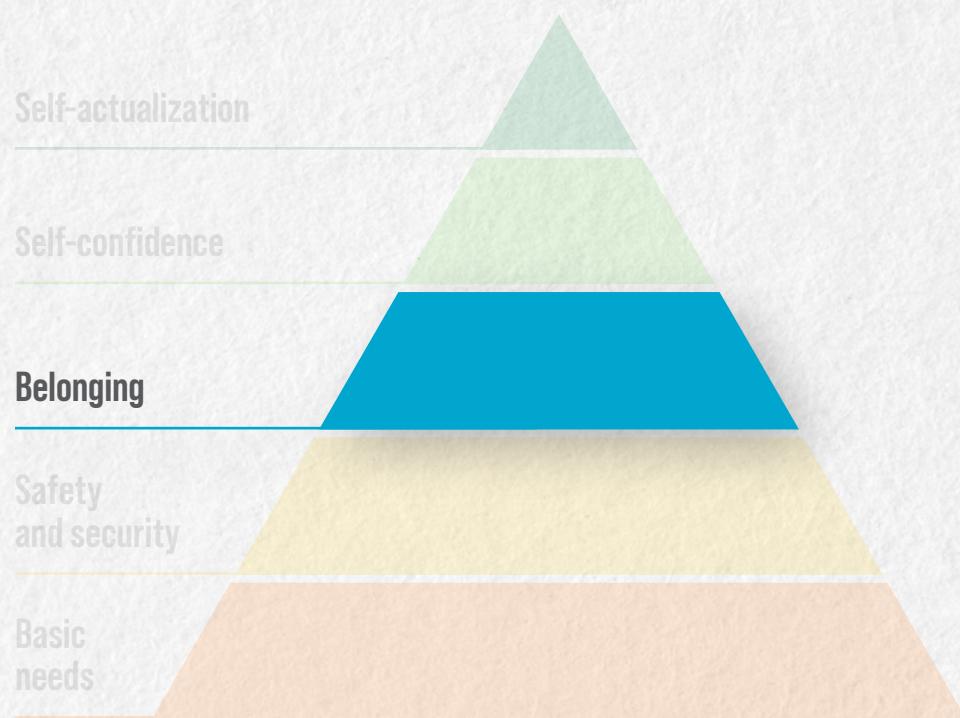
When it comes to ensuring employees have completed necessary safety and compliance trainings, for example, there are a few approaches. One is to verify manually through a sign-in form, email RSVPs or a virtual class roster and keep track of employee training completion in a spreadsheet. Another way is to use a software that automatically tracks completion and comprehension (or lack thereof) so that HR is able to address more strategic concerns, like planning for future training needs.

Still, tasks like these, while undeniably important, can also be mentally draining. You can easily find yourself so far from the top of the pyramid – and with so little time to even envision what the top of the pyramid *looks like* – that you lose sight of your journey there. You fall into what feels like a holding pattern.

It's as if you can't see the forest for the trees.

In the next few sections, let's clear away the brush and get a glimpse of what lies beyond it.

LEVEL 3: BELONGING



Those who choose HR as a career path are often defined by a certain *selflessness*. Their roles make them uniquely positioned to act as unsung heroes, uplifting the experience of the workforce as a whole.

The HR “belonging” stage puts you in a similarly unique position: The more you add to non-HR employees’ sense of belonging, the greater the belonging felt by you and your team. The more you contribute to other employees’ growth, the more personal and professional growth you experience.

In practice, this might include greater HR involvement in endeavors like:

- » team-building exercises
- » skip-level meetings
- » performance discussions (e.g., one-on-ones)
- » employee surveys

For example, implementing surveys — and, crucially, communicating the results — helps ensure HR’s work is really resonating with employees. Also, using HR technology that directs employee questions to the best personnel to provide answers or increases the efficiency of managerial approvals enables HR to facilitate two-way communication without expending undue time and mental energy.

At this point, there is much more of a psychological safety net in place. In Google’s influential re:Work project, “psychological safety” was identified as one of the five key traits of a successful team — among other reasons, because it makes people feel empowered to do what they should have been doing all along: *Speak up.*⁷ This results in an enhanced range of opinions, including a shared willingness to voice much-needed criticisms of projects (which might make all the difference between success and failure).



“Innovation is dependent upon people being willing to offer their ideas and to combine their different ideas with each other. Without an environment of psychological safety, that simply doesn’t happen ...

It’s a hierarchy because you can’t really jump to belonging without some of that fundamental psychological and physical security and safety.”

— AMY EDMONDSON, PH.D.,
HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PROFESSOR
OF LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

If you can imagine sharing a valid criticism of a major initiative with the head of your company – not only without fear of repercussion, but with a significant chance it will be genuinely appreciated – then you have a good sense of what it feels like to belong. You may be working more closely with other departments, too. For the many organizations that made a full or partial shift to remote working arrangements during the 2020 pandemic, a common result was a less superficial, more genuinely collaborative relationship between HR and IT.⁸ To get a sense of how the two might intersect – especially in post-2020 times – consider the example of digitally enabled onboarding of remote employees, which puts a premium on the efficiency of both tech *and* processes.

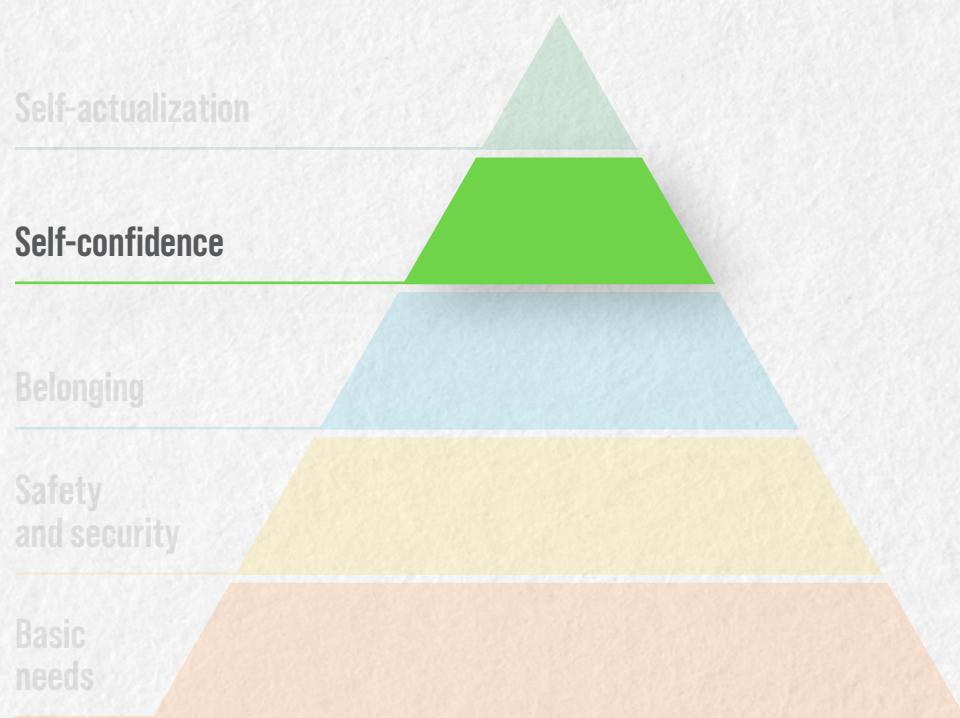


This, in turn, suggests yet another hallmark of this stage: the increasing speed of the digital transformation.

However, even as the possibility of a more dynamic and tech-savvy HR takes the form of a viable reality, further room for growth undoubtedly exists. For many HR professionals, the realization that belonging occupies essentially the middle of the HR's path to professional fulfillment will be equal parts daunting and exciting.

And if you're like many, you're ready to learn how much higher it's possible to go.

LEVEL 4: SELF-CONFIDENCE



As a state of mind, self-confidence is crucial to a meaningful, productive life. As a stage of HR's professional development, it is a source of equally profound meaning. Remember that psychological safety net from the previous level? Think of self-confidence as the stage at which you're comfortable walking without it (even though, for all intents and purposes, it remains in place).

The idea of HR as a *strategic partner* – something that began to take shape at the belonging level – now takes center stage. In the process, HR professionals start to remove themselves from the middle of the employee data transfer. Professionals at this stage are likely to become engaged in even more high-profile, macrolevel activities, which are understood by both HR and C-suite as meaningful contributions to the underlying organizational mission.

Speaking of understanding, HR departments whose C-suite completely understands HR are more likely to have reached self-confidence – and even self-actualization – and less likely to classify as basic needs. The higher the degree of cooperation between HR and leadership, the greater the likelihood of a consultative relationship.



In fact, you're not only helping your organization achieve its purpose; you're helping define what that purpose is in the first place. To get a better idea of what this means, think in terms of:

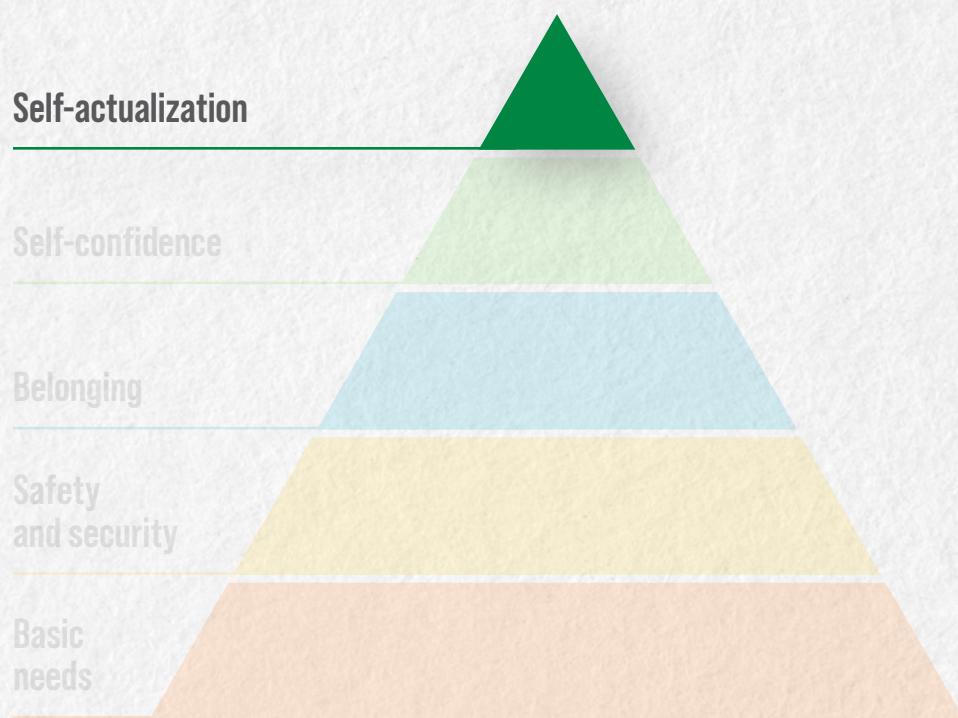
- » coaching and mentoring
- » long-term career development and succession planning
- » diversity, inclusion and belonging initiatives
- » starting to drive the digital transformation

At this point, HR should be able to track how effectively employees are using HR technology as their primary interaction with HR and updating processes accordingly. When a company nears 100% usage of its HR tech among employees, it's a strong indication that HR professionals have gained freedom from the data-transfer process, allowing them to better focus on the strategic demands that require their unique expertise.

In many ways, it probably sounds like the apex of the HR profession. But there is still a little further to go. Like any heights worth ascending (whether literal mountains or figurative professional fulfillment), reaching the top is not an endeavor to be taken lightly.



LEVEL 5: SELF-ACTUALIZATION



Imagine a life devoted to constant physical and mental improvement. Each book you read broadens your intellectual or spiritual horizons. Each workout burns a little more than the last because you've pushed yourself that much further beyond the previous limits of your endurance. From physical skills to abstract concepts – essentially anything to which you turn the full light of your attention – you eventually arrive at a state of mastery.

Now realize the same is possible with your job.

When you finally reach the point of self-actualization, you and your teammates function as a well-oiled machine operating at peak efficiency. You're not just *trusted* by C-suite leaders; you're *essential* to them. You're not just helping *communicate* your organization's value proposition to employees; you're helping *create* it. And you're not just a useful source of insight in the *formulation* of a talent-management strategy; you're a necessary presence in the *execution* of that strategy.

To put it more simply, terms that might describe HR professionals at this stage include:

- » “digital transformation leader”
- » “employer brand champion”
- » “expert”
- » “adviser to the business” [as Robin Boudreau, senior vice president of HR for the New England Patriots, described her team]
- » “ROI achiever”

Speaking of ROI, HR professionals at this level should be able to not only put hard numbers to employee adoption of their tech, but also know exact monetary amounts associated with specific HR tasks that are no longer subject to duplicative work.

At this stage, you are also likely to find yourself becoming a primary driver of key performance indicators (KPIs) like recruiting and retention metrics, employee usage metrics and leadership development metrics. These are mutually reinforcing. For example, high levels of employee satisfaction will contribute to both happier clients and the success of leadership development plans.

But what brings HR professionals to this final stage of accomplishment? One major commonality is the ability to focus on strategic initiatives without being bogged down by duplicative administrative data entry that sometimes holds HR professionals back in earlier levels of development.



“As HR professionals continue to evolve their services so they can become true partners that are tying their HR strategy to the business strategy, they can continue to leverage their HR technology to tell the story – why it’s a great place to work, how they are continuing to make the employee’s life easier, and how HR continues to improve the experiences and opportunities it offers to employees.”

“And as HR professionals, we need to meet our employees where they are comfortable and deliver technical solutions to their questions in a manner that they are used to.”

— DIRECTOR OF BENEFITS, COMPENSATION AND HRIS, PROFESSIONAL SPORTS FRANCHISE

The new research found that, of those HR departments that do not empower employees to update their personal information on a mobile app, 98% place at a level lower than self-actualization. This is likely due to increased bandwidth that comes from empowering employees to own those tasks (such as enrolling in benefits, checking PTO and expense management).

And this, in turn, ties back to the OnePoll survey, wherein 79% of workers said they could get more work done faster with up-to-date workplace tech. As for the features they are most keen on seeing in their tech, PTO and accruals, managerial functions and paycheck details topped the list.⁹

All of this may raise the question: Is there anywhere left to go from here? Perhaps, but without wishing to get too high-minded, that requires us to use another word: *transcendence*.

When HR professionals reach the pinnacle of their professional accomplishments, they can make a significant impact that improves the business and the experience of employees throughout the company.

CONCLUSION: OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

One of the most important things to understand about the HR pyramid is its sheer fluidity. Not only is it possible for HR professionals to move from one level to another, it happens all the time!

It's worth noting, however, that this movement flows in both directions. When HR professionals move down on the hierarchy, it may be a result of external forces or circumstances beyond their control, like budget cuts or downsizing.

Or it may result from self-directed changes that cause them to revert back to their former place in the middle of the data-transfer process.

Significantly, even in this seemingly worst-case scenario, the downgrade need not be permanent. By understanding the differences between self-confidence and the levels below it, and working hard to earn C-suite's trust, the HR team can (and should) climb its way back up – and not just back to self-confidence, but conceivably, all the way up to self-actualization and transcendence. It's critical to have the right tools to help HR prove the strategic worth of the department. But it's worth noting that *owning* software employees can use doesn't automatically translate into a lessened administrative load for HR and greater time for strategic work.



According to the OnePoll survey, 77% of workers said they were frustrated with outdated tech at work and 67% said they would be willing to take a pay cut to have better tech in their workplace.¹⁰

When asked his opinion, Steve Boese, program chair for HR Technology Conference, was surprised, to say the least.



"That was shocking to me," Boese said. "It's clear that employers haven't taken the time or invested the resources to ensure the technologies they provide to their employees are actually making their jobs easier."

"Employees are the ones who will make or break the success of any system," he said. **"I want to make sure those voices are heard [when making enterprise technology decisions]. The simplest way to do this is to make sure you have a diverse, well-represented set of people involved in the process, not just the people in the administrative offices or at the headquarters."**

"If 77% of an organization's customers said they were frustrated with any part of their experience with your company, you would do something about it or you wouldn't have a company for very long."

Enterprise technology lags behind consumer technology – and is often designed for HR's ease of use without regard for the employee's ease of use.

This means employees simply don't use it, even if it's available to them. And low adoption of technology by employees is often the barrier that keeps HR professionals from advancing up the pyramid.

It may be counterintuitive to think of the employee as the end user for HR technology, but when you're able to do that and truly empower employees to manage their own data entry, you're freed to make the strategic contributions you desire to provide today.

With the right combination of knowledge, experience, determination and (as we will see in a moment) HR technology, this professional peak is possible for you, too.

ADDENDUM: THE RIGHT SOFTWARE

The image displays a collection of Paycom software interface screenshots, illustrating the company's integrated HR and payroll solutions.

Top Left Screenshot: A Paycom dashboard titled "Direct Data Exchange" showing "Trending Employee Changes". The chart tracks the percentage of changes by employees from January 2020 to December 2020, showing a steady increase from approximately 25% to over 75%. To the right are two green circular metrics: "All Time ESS Logins" at 100% (Total Logins and App Logins) and "Employee Usage Score" at 100%.

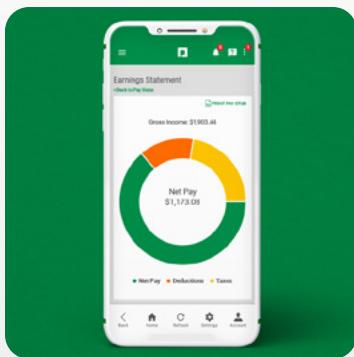
Bottom Left Screenshot: A table titled "December 2020" showing "Changes by Employee" across various modules. The table includes columns for Module, Trending, Total Changes, Changes by Employee, Employer Savings, and Changes by Employee. The "Grand Total" row shows 21,107 total changes and 100% completion.

Mobile App Screenshot: A smartphone displaying the Paycom mobile application menu. The menu items include Time Management, Time Off Requests, Information, Payroll, Expenses, Documents, Checklists, Benefits, Performance, Learning, and Company Information. Navigation icons for Back, Home, Refresh, Settings, and Account are at the bottom.

Right Side Screenshot: A "Earnings Statement" page showing a breakdown of pay components. It highlights a "Net Pay" of \$1,713.75 and lists "Gross Income: \$2,550.40", "Deductions: \$621.67", and "Taxes: \$214.98". A "PRINT PAY STUB" button is visible.

Paycom provides a range of digital tools to bring cutting-edge convenience and efficiency to HR. These transformative tools can be implemented at *any* level of HR development to help you move onward and upward.

LEVEL 1: BASIC NEEDS



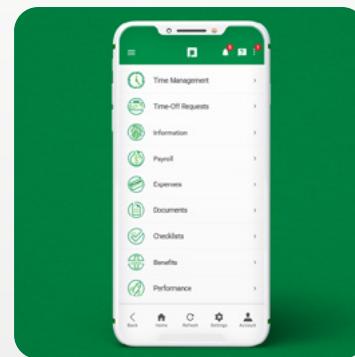
Employment Essentials

With tools like **Payroll**, **Onboarding**, **Scheduling**, **Time and Attendance** and **Benefits Administration**, HR teams can streamline their most fundamental roles like never before, making ascendance more viable. In fact, not conducting open enrollment through their HRIS system kept 54% of respondents stuck at basic needs.



Report Center

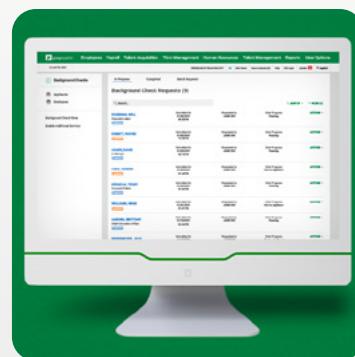
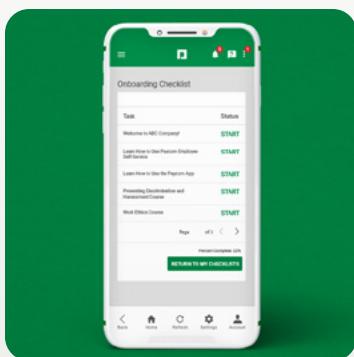
Report Center enables HR teams to easily generate real-time analytics on any data in the software, customized to their needs.



Employee Self-Service®

Meanwhile, give employees anytime, anywhere access to their own HR data with the mobile-friendly **Employee Self-Service** tool. Managers can attain a similar level of game-changing convenience with **Manager on-the-Go™**, which allows them to complete essential supervisory tasks from the convenience of their smartphones.

LEVEL 2: SAFETY AND SECURITY



Documents and Checklists

With tools like **Documents and Checklists** and **Government and Compliance**, HR professionals can improve organization and help put their businesses in a better position to avoid the costs associated with noncompliance.

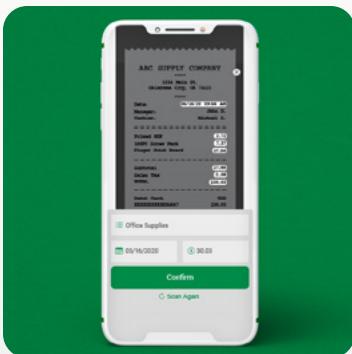
Direct Data Exchange®

Direct Data Exchange, using data from Ernst & Young, can help quantify the cost reduction for the business when employees enter their own personal data – for onboarding or signing policy forms, for example.

Compliance Tools

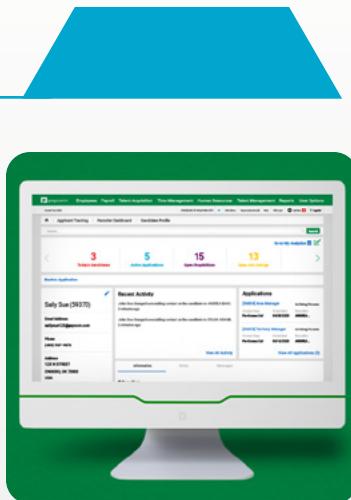
HR can also streamline more advanced tasks with tools like **Enhanced Background Checks**, **Enhanced ACA**, **E-Verify®**, **COBRA Administration**, **Garnishment Administration**, **GL Concierge** and **Push Reporting®**.

LEVEL 3: BELONGING



New Responsibilities

As the importance of HR's role becomes more solidified, professionals can level up with tools like **Expense Management**, **Compensation Budgeting**, **Personnel Action Forms**, **Ask Here™** and **Paycom Surveys**.



Applicant Tracking

Strengthen the efficiency of the talent acquisition process with **Applicant Tracking**, which automatically posts open positions to top job boards from a single location.



Performance Management

Make employee assessments easier than ever with **Performance Management** and **Performance Discussion Forms**.



Direct Data Exchange

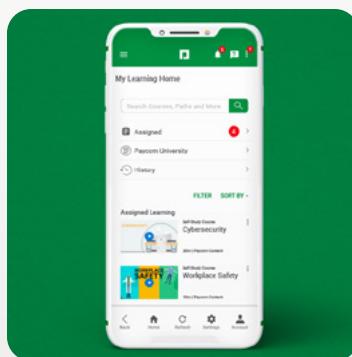
As on other levels, **Direct Data Exchange** also comes into play here – for example, in tracking employees' submission of expenses.

LEVEL 4: SELF-CONFIDENCE



My Analytics

HR teams can further fine-tune their processes with more granular tools like **My Analytics** and **Employment Predictor**.



Paycom Learning

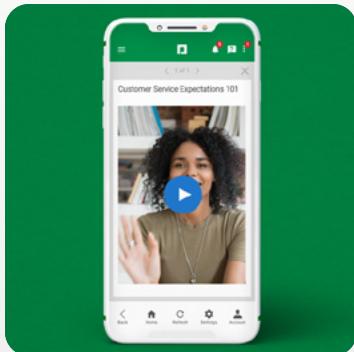
Paycom Learning takes necessary trainings out of the classroom and onto the devices that employees are already using in their everyday lives.



Direct Data Exchange

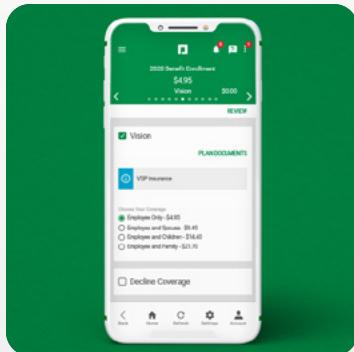
Total employee usage of HR tech is not only possible, but achievable. **Direct Data Exchange** measures it and provides a score. Regular use of the tool helps ensure this score is moving in the right direction: toward 100%.

LEVEL 5: SELF-ACTUALIZATION



Video Content Creator

Delve deeper into the possibilities offered by **Paycom Learning with Video Content Creator**, which enables managers to upload microlearning videos from their smartphone, and **Performance Evidence**, which allows employees to demonstrate mastery of new concepts via video just as easily.



Benefit Enrollment Service

Complete the benefits suite with our **Benefit Enrollment Service**, which includes a dedicated coordinator who helps facilitate all aspects of open enrollment, and **Benefits to Carrier**, with automatic updates that resolve disparities in data.



Direct Data Exchange

Direct Data Exchange offers next-level insight into employee usage of HR tech by measuring it and assigning a percentage-based score and associated costs, helping HR prove the ROI of their technology purchase.

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