

Ireland's HR Landscape 2026

First-hand insights and trends
from a survey of Ireland's leading
HR professionals

HR in Ireland in 2026

Ireland's HR function enters 2026 at a pivotal moment.

Organisations are facing intensifying competition for talent, rising employee expectations, significant regulatory change, and accelerating technological disruption - particularly through artificial intelligence.

At the same time, HR teams are demonstrating resilience, optimism, and a growing strategic maturity.

Ireland's HR Landscape 2026 survey gathered qualitative and quantitative insights from HR professionals and business leaders across public, private and not-for-profit sectors and organisations of all sizes, from 50 to 1,000+ employees.

The findings revealed a consistent picture: **attracting and retaining talent** remains the defining challenge of the year ahead, closely followed by **employee engagement, culture, and cost pressures**. These challenges are not isolated - they are deeply interconnected and increasingly complex.

Despite these pressures, confidence remains relatively strong. Most HR teams feel at least somewhat prepared to meet the challenges of 2026, with many actively investing in management capability, coaching, and training.

This report explores the data in-depth, highlights **sectoral and organisational differences**, and outlines what these findings mean for HR leaders navigating the year ahead.

You can also join myself and Commercial Director **Liam Barton** for a bumper in-depth episode of **The HR Room podcast** (ep. 254) in which we discuss the findings in even further detail.

As always, we'd love to hear from you. If any of this report resonates with you or you're in need of some external support or advice, we're here for you. You can reach us at info@insighthr.ie or pick up the phone and call **056 770 1060**.

Happy New Year and Best Regards
Mary

Mary Cullen

*Founder/Managing Director
Insight HR*



Section One

Key Challenges

The survey asked Ireland's HR professionals what their biggest challenges were going into 2026

The Dominant Challenge

Attracting and Retaining Talent

70%

chose 'attracting and retaining talent' as a key challenge for 2026

“

[There is] **huge competition** in the market

- A Chief People Officer in the private sector (1,000+ employees)

”

The Bigger the Business, The Bigger the Challenge

The bigger the organisation's size, the more HR professionals cited 'attracting and retaining talent' as a key challenge:

1-49 employees: **71%**
50-249 employees: **62%**
250-999 employees: **85%**
1,000+ employees: **100%**

Not-for-profits most concerned about talent

For not-for-profit organisations, funding constraints exacerbate attraction and retention challenges, directly impacting pay, benefits, culture, and employee wellbeing. Every respondent in the not-for-profit or charity sector highlighted this as a key concern:

Public sector: **67%**
Private sector: **62%**
Not-for-profit/charity: **100%**

The Cultural Challenge

Employee Engagement a Key Concern

52%

chose 'employee engagement/culture' as a key challenge for 2026

“ Retaining staff is an ongoing challenge for us as **cultural issues** are impacting turnover. ”

- A Director of People & Culture in the private sector (1,000+ employees)

Enterprise businesses less concerned about engagement/culture

This challenge featured far less for HR professionals at enterprise-sized organisations, suggesting these businesses may have more established engagement frameworks - or more formalised structures to support culture at scale.

1-49 employees: **51%**
50-249 employees: **52%**
250-999 employees: **71%**
1,000+ employees: **30%**

Evolving Employee Expectations

Respondents highlighted a range of related factors impacting employee engagement, including:

- Rising expectations around career development
- The need for cultural change
- Managing hybrid and flexible working realities
- The challenge of “keeping people happy” in uncertain times
- Compensation/financial concerns

The Cost Challenge

Budgets remain a Key Concern

45%

chose **'cost pressures and budgets'** as a key challenge for 2026

“ Operating within a **restricted budget**... impacts our services and has an impact on what we can do in the areas of **retention, benefits, culture, employee engagement** and **well-being**. ”

- Senior HR Business Partner in the public sector (50-249 employees)

Enterprise organisations most concerned on cost

Enterprise organisations are experiencing universal budget pressure, likely linked to large-scale benefits costs, compliance investment, and workforce scale.

1-49 employees: **28%**
50-249 employees: **54%**
250-999 employees: **27%**
1,000+ employees: **100%**

HR teams being asked to 'do more with less'

Qualitative feedback showed HR teams under pressure to deliver more training, better compliance and engagement – while budgets tighten.

- “Ensuring training and compliance consistency, while working within very tight budgets”
- “Tighter budgets and a reduction in recruitment/hiring activities [is a key concern]”
- “Budget reduction across the whole organisation affecting employee benefits.”

Section Two

Training & Development

The survey asked Ireland's HR professionals which areas of training and development they were looking to invest in during 2026

Investment Priorities

Development, Training & Capability

83%

plan to invest in **training and development programmes** in 2026

Most popular areas of Training & Development

43%

Coaching or mentoring

37%

Management Training

35%

Performance Management

25%

Employment Law

21%

Discipline & Grievance

21%

Change Management

20%

Workplace Investigations

Coaching and Mentoring

2026's most popular training investment

43%

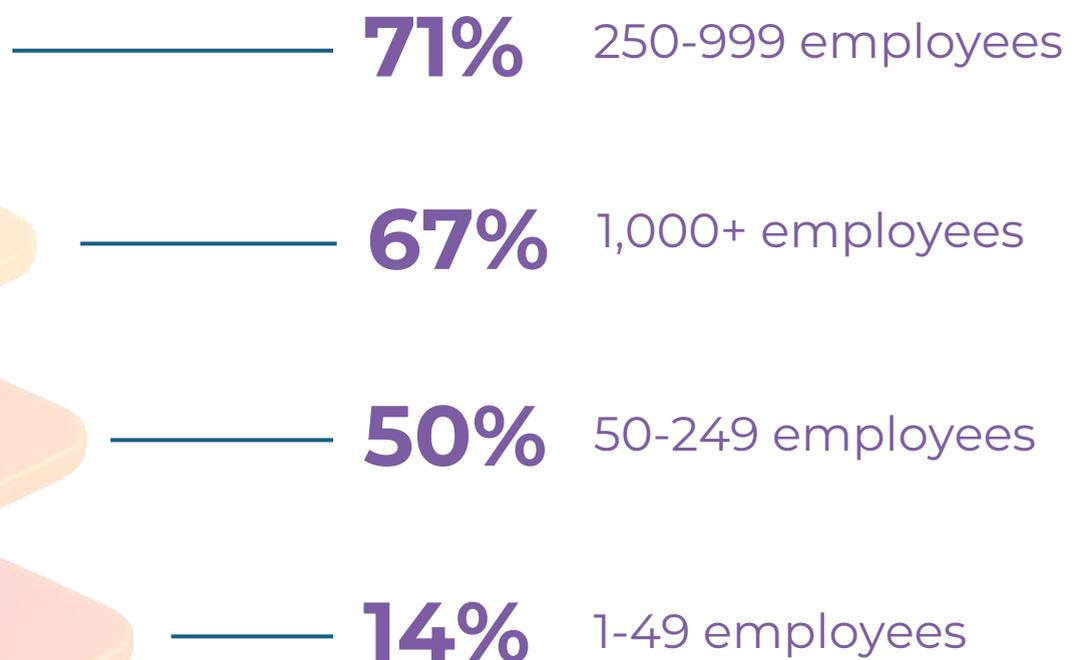
plan to invest in **coaching and mentoring** in 2026

Smaller businesses are less concerned with coaching and mentoring

The survey indicated that the need for coaching and mentoring programmes becomes more acute the bigger your organisation gets.

Knowledge and experience can become more siloed and less accessible as businesses grow, while employees in smaller organisations have more exposure to internal experience and senior leadership.

HR professionals intending to invest in coaching/mentoring in 2026 (by org size)



Section Three

Trends & Predictions

The survey asked Ireland's HR professionals what trend or shift in HR practice would become most significant in Ireland in 2026

Uncertainty is a Certainty

The defining challenge of 2026: Talent, Trust and Uncertainty

When asked about the single biggest challenge facing HR in 2026, respondents consistently returned to a familiar but intensified theme – **attracting and retaining talent** in a tight labour market.

Several factors emerged as contributing to this challenging landscape:



Ongoing wage inflation and cost-of-living pressures



Global economic uncertainty and political unrest



Increasing regulatory complexity



Rising employee expectations around fairness, flexibility and development

Crucially, many respondents framed this challenge not just as a talent issue, but as a trust issue. Organisations must balance compliance, technology adoption, and efficiency while maintaining credibility with their workforce. Missteps - particularly around **AI, pay transparency, or workforce restructuring**, can quickly erode confidence.

In response, HR teams are already adapting. Many plan to deliver **more training**, leverage subject matter experts, and prioritise targeted talent development to reduce costs while **supporting mobility and engagement**.

“ Between auto-enrolment, inflation and geo-political uncertainty there's a lot of challenges at this time. ”

- HR Business Partner at a not-for-profit (50-249 employees)

Where Work Happens

Return to Office, Hybrid Tension and Workforce Expectations

The second most common theme in the survey was the **ongoing tension between return-to-office (RTO) mandates and remote or hybrid working models**. Far from being resolved, this debate is expected to continue shaping HR priorities well into 2026.

A few common themes emerged:



The Debate Continues – No ‘Settled Model’



Hybrid working is an Expectation, Not a Benefit



External Pressures Shaping Workforce Expectations



HR shifting from Policy Owners to Relationship Managers

Respondents expressed mixed views. Some see greater physical presence as essential for **culture, collaboration, and engagement**. Others highlighted employee demand for flexibility, driven by cost of living pressures, traffic congestion, and **changing expectations of work-life balance**.

Respondents linked **working-from-home flexibility** directly to **attraction and retention challenges**. Any perceived rollback on flexibility - especially when not clearly justified - risks **disengagement and increased turnover**.

Rather than policy enforcement, HR's role will increasingly focus on **relationship management, trust-building, and expectation-setting**. Successful organisations will be those that align working models with their values, operational realities, and employee needs, while remaining adaptable as circumstances evolve.

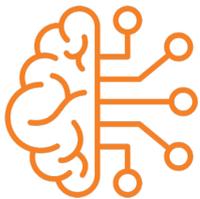
Respondents implicitly positioned HR as the function responsible for **absorbing and managing the friction** created by hybrid working debates - often in the absence of perfect solutions.

AI & HR

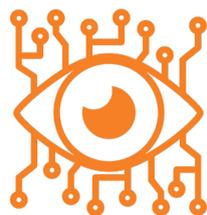
Opportunity, Risk, and the Question of Trust

The adoption of AI emerged as the most frequently cited trend across the survey. Respondents anticipate increased use of AI in **recruitment, workforce planning, learning platforms, and administrative HR processes**. By 2026, AI will no longer be a differentiator - it will be embedded, expected, and increasingly invisible.

A few common themes emerged:



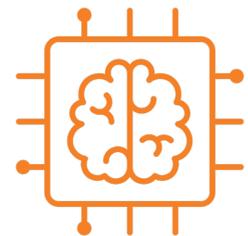
AI Adoption is inevitable, no longer a differentiator



Growing Distrust of AI in Recruitment Processes



Ethical Use and Human Judgement Are Critical



Transparency, Governance, and Explainability Are Lacking

While there is clear recognition of AI's potential, there is also deep concern about its **implementation and impact on trust**. Several respondents highlighted that current AI-driven recruitment tools can be crude and ineffective at identifying high-quality candidates. Rather than improving outcomes, poorly governed AI risks **filtering out talent, reinforcing bias, and damaging employer reputation**.

Some respondents predicted that high-profile failures in AI-driven hiring could **undermine confidence** in the entire approach. As a result, HR leaders will increasingly act as **custodians** - balancing **efficiency with transparency**, and **automation with accountability**.

Beyond recruitment, AI will also influence how organisations **“rightsized for the future.”** Decisions around workforce shape, capability investment, and role evolution will increasingly rely on data-driven insights. Yet, respondents stressed the importance of **protecting human capability** during this transition. Rightsizing cannot be purely technical - it must be ethical, inclusive, and aligned with long-term organisational sustainability.

Optimism Prevails

Irish HR professionals are confident in the face of mounting challenges

60% of respondents said they felt **somewhat prepared** to meet 2026's challenges

Despite all of the challenges and uncertainty Irish and international businesses are facing – global economic turbulence, AI implementation and the constant tug-of-war of remote, hybrid and in-office working – the survey revealed a clear sense of optimism.

“ I’m optimistic and open to new opportunities this year, despite the many challenges and changes the talent landscape presents. ”

- Head of Talent at a start-up in the private sector (50-249 employees)

4% of respondents felt **extremely confident** to meet their biggest challenges in 2026, **16%** felt **very confident** and **60%** felt **somewhat confident**. **16%** were **not so confident**, with **2%** having **no confidence at all**.

One thing was clear – these challenges are **not being faced in isolation**. HR are experiencing the same challenges across all sectors, business sizes and industries, and these challenges can and should be tackled as a **community**. One respondent summed this up perfectly with this comment:

“ Every business I work with tends to have the same HR challenges cropping up, year after year. The more things change, the more they stay the same. ”

- A Director of Leadership & Capability in the private sector (500-999 employees)

Can we help?

If any of the challenges outlined in this report feel familiar, you're not alone. If you're feeling under-resourced or overburdened, Insight HR is here to help.

We offer a range of services, including:



**Training &
Development
Programmes**



**Workplace
Investigations**



**Change &
Transformation
Projects**



**Contracts &
Handbooks**

Your Trusted HR Partner

For more than 25 years, Insight HR has provided HR services and solutions to some of Ireland's best companies.

Our team of highly respected and experienced consultants have a diverse set of skills not often found in internal HR departments, including barrister qualifications, CIPD membership, mediation accreditation, and decades of HR experience across dozens of sectors and businesses, both national and international.

Whether it's ongoing HR support, one-off projects or emergency expertise and advice, Insight HR will provide you with a customised solution and a dedicated team of human experts you can trust, giving you peace of mind and security.



Mary Cullen
Managing Director

“With Insight HR, your investment will never just be about fixing a problem or developing a strategy. Instead, our partnership approach **arms teams with the knowledge they need to make better decisions.** We leave HR teams **better informed** and **more confident** in their abilities to resolve future HR issues.”

Thank you for reading our report.
Remember - no matter what challenge you face in 2026, you're not alone.

We're always ready to help...



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