

Catch Up with the IHRS Team

Katherine, how have you found your time as Head of HR Consultancy at IHRS so far?

Katherine:

I am incredibly proud of what we have created for clients in what has been yet another challenging year thanks to Covid-19. At the start of the year, I wanted to create a supportive HR consultancy for brokers and insurers. Having been an in-house international HR Director for many years, I've seen the good, the bad and the awful when it comes to HR support!

We have built a first-class offering based on our experience. My team has proven essential in the relationships we have built in this first year. They have been approachable, knowledgeable, and timely in their responses. The feedback we get from our clients makes me really proud.

Laura, how have you settled into your role and responsibilities at IHRS?

Laura:

I'm actually a little shocked that so much time has passed already; however, they do say time flies when you're having fun. My time with IHRS has been fast-paced and highly rewarding. With the world of work undergoing such significant change, we have had a unique opportunity to innovate, trial, and get firms involved to create fairer, healthier workplaces.

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**Katherine Watkins -
Head of HR Consultancy**



**Laura Findlay -
Senior HR Consultant**

So, what are the most common issues businesses have with their existing HR functions?

Katherine:

There are a lot of HR consultancies for clients to choose from. The biggest gripe we hear is when they are forced into tie-ins that often clients don't really need (for example, buying additional insurances to get access to HR collateral and support), to slow responses from the HR consultancy, that have led some of our new clients into legal trouble because emails were sent at odd times or consultants were off. This frustrates me as an HR professional.

Other clients tell us that they have found their HR support has not been proactive and not kept them up to date with critical matters – things such as FCA regulations and the impact this has on businesses and what they need to do. These are easy things. A good HR professional should be: leading from the front, being proactive not just reactive, and sharing their industry insights to help clients.

Laura:

The pandemic has definitely escalated change in terms of what businesses expect. Business leaders have had to evolve to be more agile, more responsive, and more resilient – and HR support needs to adapt too, to meet the changing needs of the businesses we work with.

What are the ‘hot topics’ in HR right now?

Katherine:

For a start, we’ve had to deal with a lot of new terminology: Covid-19, furlough, hybrid working. These are definitely the ‘buzzwords’ at the moment. The world of HR is continually shifting as a result of the pandemic.

Laura:

I think hybrid working is set to become a key feature in many workplaces in the future. Many firms are now exploring hybrid working models. This may well be a good thing, but there will be challenges too. Remote working can lead to blurred boundaries between an employee’s personal life and work life, and employers will need to manage this carefully. There’s an element of trust involved too, and some employers may find it difficult to get their heads around this.

Katherine:

Prioritising diversity, inclusion and equality is also top of the agenda for the remainder of 2021 and beyond.

Laura:

DE&I can enhance retention, recruitment and civic responsibility. We’ve published multiple publications and articles on DE&I and race on our website – it’s an area we feel passionate about.

Speaking of your new website... What exciting features can clients find on there?

Katherine:

Our new website is a breath of fresh air. It’s easy to navigate, it houses all our material for retained clients and has great insights for those looking to engage a HR team. The key features are the HR Vault, which houses over 200 HR templates that are ready for clients to download, and our articles that summarise new guidance produced by the regulators and court system. We still want clients to speak to us, so it may seem strange to host some material on there for them to download... but we are keen for our clients to own their HR processes and not see us as the gatekeepers or blockers. Ironically, many of our clients still call us for the documents so we take that as a good sign that they like us!

IHRS specialises in advising those in the insurance industry. What are the biggest crossovers between HR and insurance compliance? How do you tailor your services to the insurance industry?

Laura:

There are obvious links between ensuring the health of your HR environment and complying with regulations—for example, GDPR, SM&CR and treating customers fairly. The regulator is increasingly concerned with improving culture and conduct at all levels within financial services. Firms should review and update employment-related policies and procedures to ensure that they will be consistent with SM&CR requirements and processes.

Katherine:

The FCA has upped the game for brokers and insurers. There is more regulation than many will have seen in their lifetime. Compliance and HR are bedfellows and should be treated as such. HR is the best neutral partner a company can have. If you are ill, you go to a doctor, if you have a legal problem, you go to a lawyer, if you have a financial problem, you go to an accountant – for everything else you go to HR.

If you engage with the right HR partner, they will become your trusted, impartial advisor who will always have your best interests at heart. You can speak to them as confidentially as you like. My team excel in being compassionate, yet professional, and we have built strong relationships and guided our clients through more rapids than a slalom team in the Olympics!

How will businesses benefit by coming to IHRS for support?

Katherine:

We care about your business. We want you to flourish and grow. We offer an affordable HR consultancy that offers one to one service. We are not a one-man band, nor do we have a call centre – we feel we've struck a good balance in that sense. We are formed out of experienced industry partners. You're getting the best HR support for your business needs.

You've been promoting your specialism in wellness. In your opinion, why is focussing on wellness so important for businesses?

Laura:

Wellbeing applies to us all, and the events of the past 18 months have brought wellbeing and mental health into the spotlight for businesses in a way that hasn't been seen before. I think it's unlikely that mental health and wellbeing would be as high up on the organisational agenda if it weren't for Covid-19.

Stress, whether that be from work issues or problems at home, can result in difficulties concentrating – it can have a wide-reaching impact on staff productivity and morale. Employees should be encouraged to talk to their managers if they're feeling overwhelmed. Open channels of communication are important and should be encouraged.

Katherine:

At IHRS, we're committed to changing the conversation around mental health, wellbeing and employee engagement. We can provide several solutions to help businesses promote wellbeing in the workplace.

There's been much discussion recently about Diversity, Equality & Inclusion. What can businesses do to promote DE&I in their everyday activities?

Laura:

Industry and sector-based initiatives have led to some progress, but it's clear that there's still a long way to go. Significant gender and ethnicity pay gaps still exist in financial services, and there remains a lack of diversity, particularly at senior levels.

Katherine:

The attitudes of senior employees and managers are crucial when it comes to promoting DE&I.

Laura:

We also have practical templates, training courses and policies available to support meaningful DE&I transformation in the workplace.

Katherine, you have a history of working in HR within the insurance industry. How have you seen things change during the pandemic?

Katherine:

I've worked internally in insurance as a mergers and acquisitions HR Partner and also as a consultant on the other side of the table. The pandemic for insurance, in my experience, has not been as massively impactful as it has been on the legal sector. When I worked in Magic Circle law firms, it was always a culture of rarely working from home... if ever. For many years, it felt as though law could only be practised from an office. So, in that respect, insurance has always been more practical despite being a very old industry.

What has changed in the pandemic has been the search for candidates... it has become harder than ever to attract candidates to roles. Some of that has been down to wanting truly flexible working but for others it has come down to salary and employee benefits. Insurers have had to reassess the offering they give to new entrants and then consider how that reflects the benefits and salaries available to existing staff to ensure harmonisation across the business.

You recently launched a revamped HR Health Appraisal – tell us a bit about how that works and the benefits to businesses?

Katherine:

Companies will be familiar with finance audits and compliance audits, but few consider HR audits. I can't fathom why. Maybe it's because they are worried about what it will show. You can't put a price on the value of a good audit (well, maybe you can if it means litigation!) Our team offers a comprehensive audit of 17 key areas.

Laura:

We do all the analysis and look at each area alongside the others – we don't look at policies in isolation. We give clients a robust recommendations report which offers practical solutions on what they need to do to enhance their current HR processes and minimise risks.

Katherine:

We also don't charge the steep price that some consultancies do. What's not to like? We do it for the love of our profession and the knowledge of how it will benefit companies and staff.

If you would like to find out more about IHRS and how we can help your business, please get in touch!



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