

Modernising HR in the NHS

Revolutionise employee interaction and HR operations

The NHS HR Director's guide to unlocking efficiency and savings in your People Service.

A healthcare professional, likely a nurse or doctor, is shown in profile, looking down at a tablet device. She is wearing blue scrubs, a stethoscope, and a watch. The background is a clinical setting with anatomical charts on the wall and a potted plant in the foreground.

Proven tech solutions for next-level HR efficiency

Our purpose-built Employee Experience and HR Service Management solution powers a shift in focus from HR ops to strategic HR programs.

The NHS is powered by people

As the world's 5th largest employer, the NHS is unique in its scale and complexity. With a budget of £192 million, it consumes 11% of UK GDP to provide a broad range of primary, secondary, and tertiary health services.

It is the NHS's people who deliver those services. Without the nurses, doctors, paramedics, physios (and all the supporting admin, operations, and facilities functions), the NHS could not operate.

Every day these people make decisions that affect patient outcomes—working through seasonal spikes in demand, and challenges like Covid.

It's not surprising that almost half of the NHS budget is spent on payroll. People power the NHS.

To provide the best possible services to the public, the NHS needs to look after the recruitment, engagement, retention, and wellbeing of its 1.7 million people—which is why HR is such an important part of the success equation.

When frontline staff are stressed out, this can impact the quality of patient care and clinical outcomes. The employee experience matters. But NHS HR teams are typically overstretched—trying to juggle operation and strategic workloads.

With more than 1.7m people, the NHS is the world's 5th largest employer. That's more people than 11 European countries.

11%
Of UK GDP

£192Bn
budget

£71.1Bn
payroll

45%
Of NHS budget
is payroll

£8m
Spent every hour
on people

Budget

NHS

Regulations

Pressure to perform within tight constraints requires new ways of thinking and working.



Unique impact: HR decisions affect patient outcomes



Unique seasonal changes in demand



**HR
Challenges**



Talent Planning



Staff Engagement



Retention



Workforce Wellbeing

Pressure to innovate is greater than ever

As a result of a growing demand, staff costs continue to rise steadily, yet budget growth is slowing.

The NHS has been outspending budget—and is now facing a record £6.6Bn overspend in 2025/2026. As the deficit grows, pressure to cut costs will also grow.

At the same time, there's pressure to boost performance. The NHS is measured against a set of very visible KPIs. That means that Trusts must find innovative ways to make savings without compromising quality of care.

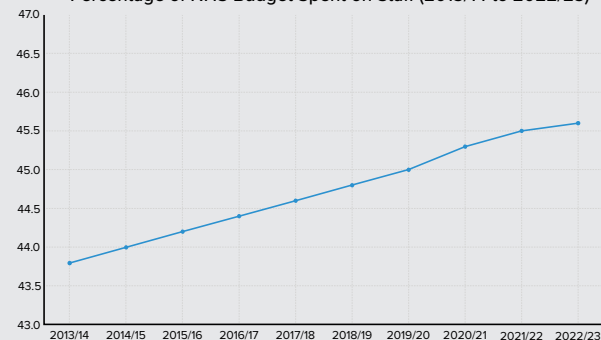
Front line staff are critical to improving the metrics that matter to the public. So it's the back-office teams that are the immediate target for savings.

In the wake of the closure of NHS England, NHS Trusts have been told to cut corporate staff—to collectively reduce admin roles by 30,000.

Likewise, Integrated Care Boards are under pressure to reduce operating costs by 50%.

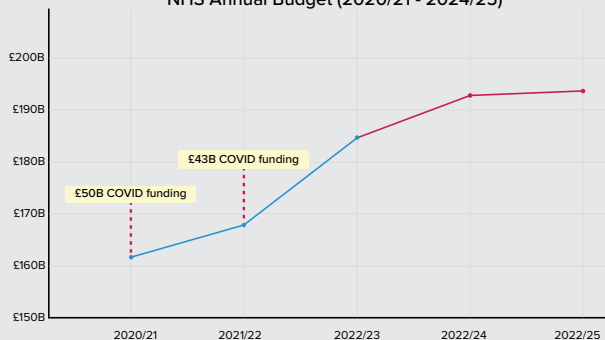
Staff costs are rising

Percentage of NHS Budget Spent on Staff (2013/14 to 2022/23)



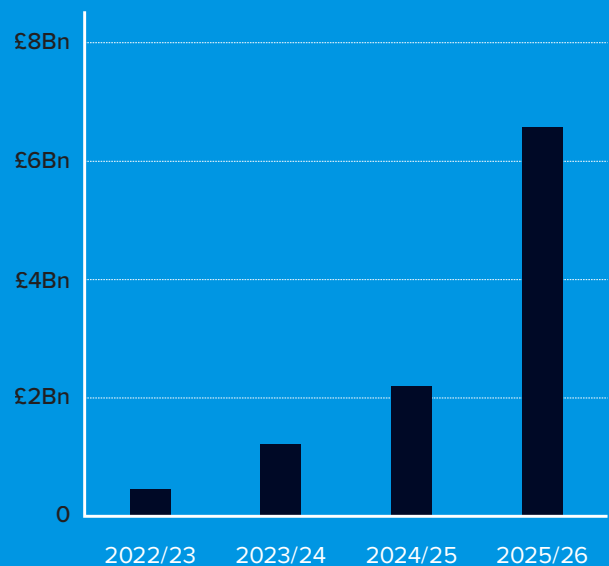
Budget growth is slowing

NHS Annual Budget (2020/21 - 2024/25)



Source: NHS Confederation and The King's Fund

Deficits are growing



NHS digital HR strategy

To handle demand more efficiently, HR teams need to change how they work. Today, many HR services are fragmented, inconsistent, and reliant on manual processes. Employees often struggle with confusing channels, repeated data entry, and delayed responses.

For HR teams, this results in inefficiencies, duplicated effort, and limited time to focus on strategic priorities (like retention, wellbeing, and workforce planning).

But it's difficult to change and improve operations when people are too busy with daily ops workloads. They have no time to think about better ways to work. Or change how they work. So how can you drive the shift in focus from routine operations to strategic HR when they're too busy with the routine work?

The Future of NHS human resources and organisational development report sets out the general vision for organisational development (within the NHS).



The Challenge

Disconnected systems, manual processes, and inconsistent service experiences hinder staff engagement and HR efficiency.



The Opportunity

Action 8 enables a smarter, connected self-service HR experience across the NHS—saving time, improving access, and enhancing workforce support.



Transform the way people access people services – using digital tools and platforms to create a more timely, standardised and intuitive service. This approach will also release more time for people professionals to focus on priorities that improve the working lives of our NHS people, which in turn supports delivery of high-quality care for patients.”

S: The future of NHS human resources and organisational development

Action 8 in the report is the most transformative aspect.

It focuses on using digitally enabled solutions to reshape how people access and experience HR services across the NHS. At its core, it recognises that the old ways of delivering people services are no longer fit for purpose. Digital transformation isn't just a 'nice to have'—it's essential for improving the working lives of NHS people (and by extension patient care). Digital transformation of HR is the key to making the shift from ops focus to strategic focus.

Action 8 sets out the broad changes that HR teams need to make

- Firstly, **normalising self-service across the NHS**. Making it easy for staff and managers to access what they need, when they need it (whether it's booking leave, viewing policies, or requesting support)—all through intuitive digital channels that are available 24/7.
- Next, **harmonising strategies across organisations**. Instead of every trust or ICS operating in isolation, the goal is to align around shared digital systems that enable joined-up working and service delivery at scale.

- Then we have **Improving services through real-time feedback**. Using feedback loops, data, and performance insights to continuously refine services—moving from reactive support to proactive, people-centric service design.
- And finally, **Co-designing digital systems that work for everyone**. This is about more than just tools. It's about rethinking the entire experience: reducing duplication, improving mobility across systems, using automation where appropriate, and delivering a service experience that feels both modern and human.

By embedding these principles, the NHS can radically improve the day-to-day experience for staff. It cuts daily HR workloads, supports better decision-making, and helps HR focus on what matters most: attracting, retaining, and developing a strong and stable workforce.

But the operational angle isn't the only angle to be considered. For digital transformation to work, it needs to work for employees—first and foremost.

Why Employee Experience (EX) matters

Let's talk about the connection between digital service experiences and the employee experience (EX). EX encompasses how people feel about their role, workload, workplace, and employer. A big part of EX is the experiences they have when they need a service, help, or information.

In the NHS, where people are often under pressure, the way they interact with people services (especially HR) directly affects how supported, valued, and engaged they feel.

In the digital age, the digital experience is the employee experience. When staff need help (whether it's resolving a payroll issue, getting clarity on policy, or accessing support) it's not just about getting the job done. It's about how easy it is, how fast, and how they're treated during that process.

If someone's job security, pay, or contract is in question it's a deeply personal concern. A slow response amplifies anxiety. NHS people have diverse needs and expectations. And how we tailor digital people services to meet those needs can have a real impact—not only on staff wellbeing and retention, but on the communities the NHS serves through the quality of care.

Research shows that 93% of employees within high EX score organisations plan to stay with their organisation, compared with only 49% of employees within low EX index score organisations.



When employees feel supported – especially in moments of need—they're more likely to stay. This is where HR can make a measurable contribution to retention strategy. How HR responds becomes a reflection of the culture. Quick, empathetic service builds trust and keeps employees engaged.

Designing a positive digital experience requires knowing what employees like and dislike. Their expectations as employees are primarily influenced by their consumer-life experiences. They expect consumer-grade digital solutions.

Having a central, structured way for employees to raise issues, track progress, and get updates is critical. They want instant digital experiences accessible 24/7 and on any device. They want a response in minutes, not hours or days. They don't want to have to repeat information. They want transparency—so they can see progress on their request. And above all, they don't want their case to slip through the cracks.

They also want experiences that continually improve.

55% of consumers want better experiences to improve over time.

70% of 18-34s expect it.

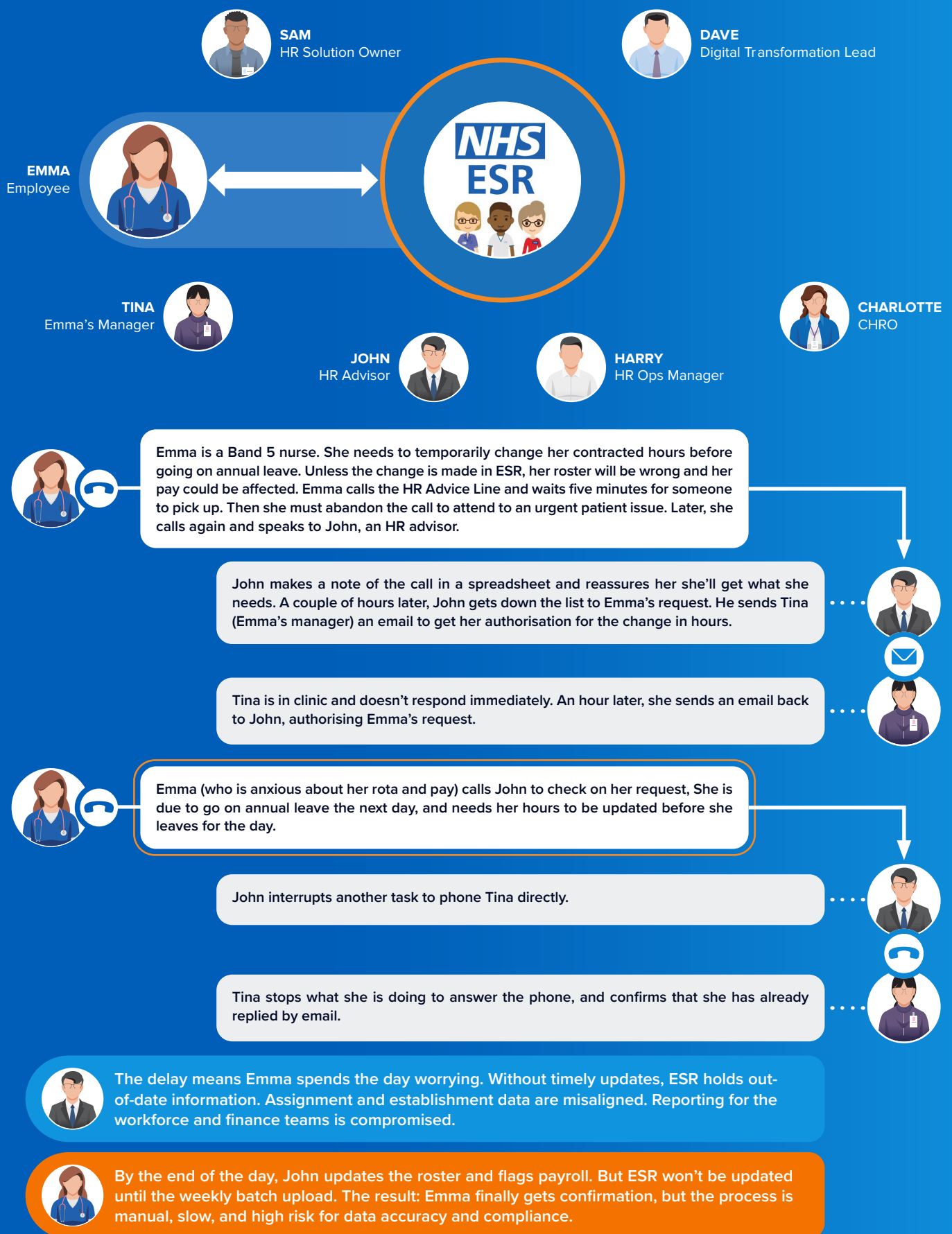
Digital experience design isn't a one-off task. Continual improvement is essential, so it's important to have a service management platform that lets you quickly and easily iterate—without the delays caused by the need for coding or outside consultants.

'Creating a Great Employee Experience' is one of the 8 key pillars set out in the Future of NHS HR report. This isn't a standalone initiative—it's one of the central drivers of the future NHS workforce vision. Digitally enabling HR is not a back-office exercise. It's frontline in terms of employee impact.

By transforming digital interactions, we shift HR from a support function to a strategic enabler of wellbeing, trust, and performance across the NHS.

Is your Employee Experience working?

Let's look at what a legacy HR service experience can look like—from the different employee and HR operations perspectives.



A legacy HR ecosystem has an impact on the whole HR team and beyond



HARRY
HR Ops Manager

Harry oversees day-to-day running of HR ops. His team is responsible for processing assignment changes, managing establishment data, and ensuring ESR records stay accurate.

However, ESR is a closed and complex system—so much of this is done manually. Harry's team often gets bogged down in backlogs—chasing managers for information and re-keying data into ESR. If an emergency comes up or someone in his team is off sick, cases can remain unattended for days. They're not easily reassigned without starting the process again, which causes delays and frustrates staff.

Harry knows that delays damage the employee experience and hurt HR's reputation. He wants better visibility of workloads, a way to prioritise cases, and tools to ensure all cases are tracked. Without that, his team are stuck firefighting rather than delivering a consistent, proactive service.



SAM
HR Solution Owner

Sam is the ESR Manager and first suggested using spreadsheets when paper forms and sticky notes became unmanageable.

This helped temporarily but left the team reliant on manual tracking that quickly becomes outdated. His responsibility is to safeguard the accuracy of assignment and establishment data, knowing that poor data undermines pay, compliance, and workforce reporting. ESR is a closed system, so every change depends on manual steps, emails, and approvals. This creates bottlenecks and forces Sam to spend more time chasing and fixing errors than improving services. In emergencies or staff absences, cases can sit unattended for days, with no easy way to reassign.

Sam sees the ripple effects: anxious employees, frustrated managers, and HR operations under pressure because critical data isn't reliable or timely.



CHARLOTTE
CHRO

Charlotte needs clear, real-time oversight of HR ops and workforce trends. But what she gets are backward-looking spreadsheets and siloed updates.

She can't easily see where gaps are opening up, or whether critical processes (like professional registration renewals) are handled on time. Without visibility, she relies on anecdotal feedback. That leaves her exposed. She worries about HR's reputation when staff experience slow, inconsistent processes that directly affect pay, contracts, or career progression.

Charlotte knows these gaps erode trust, damage retention, and make it harder to build the compassionate, inclusive culture the NHS People Plan demands. What she wants is insights: where bottlenecks are forming, whether governance is being applied consistently, and how her team is impacting staff wellbeing and engagement.



DAVE
Digital Transformation Lead

Dave is responsible for improving healthcare delivery, operational efficiency, and both the patient and employee experience.

He's spoken with Harry, Sam, and Charlotte about the operational issues (delays, manual approvals, and data gaps) but because ESR lacks workflow and ticketing features, he has no levers to fix them.

He wants to use digital technology to transform how HR interacts with employees and how HR operations run through orchestration and automation. But ESR is centrally controlled, rigid, and closed to local configuration. This leaves Dave unable to deliver the joined-up, modern staff experience the Trust needs—stalling both his transformation agenda and HR's ability to work strategically.

Transforming HR operations

Digitalisation of the way HR teams work offers huge potential to boost productivity, cut costs, and accelerate delivery for NHS employees.

Guided workflows

Replace ad-hoc with guided digital processes

Guided workflows (replacing ad-hoc processes based around spreadsheets and paper forms) put the outcomes your employees need on rails, meaning they get what they need quickly, efficiently, and consistently.

By creating standard, guided workflows in a drag-and-drop workflow canvas, you can improve efficiency by 40%. By setting out clear steps, you remove thinking time and human error from the equation. **The bonus here is that managing work processes makes work visible, trackable, and auditable. You can analyse performance and drive improvement. Anomalies and bottlenecks become obvious and quickly treatable.**

Improve process efficiency inside teams by

40%

Orchestration

Get teams working together for your employees

Orchestration delivers another boost in performance, especially for more complex processes. For processes that span multiple teams (for example, workflows that require a team leader authorisation), you get a further 20% efficiency gain by streamlined the hand-offs. **Hand-offs flow cleanly from one team to another (and back)—including all the information required to progress the process—without the need for people to pick up the phone for clarification.**

Coordinate workflows across teams for a further

20%

Error Reduction

The right process eliminates faulty outcomes and rework

Reduced variation reduces work errors by 50% because the digital process guides the tasks that combine to deliver the outcome.

Standardised processes cut work errors by

50%

Data Quality

The right data enables the right outcome

Often, getting it right first time relies on having the right data—and by using a digital system, with validated input forms and integration with ESR, you can boost data accuracy by 88%—further reducing the need for rework.

Digital data capture boosts data accuracy by

88%

HR Engagement

Make life easier for your HR team

As a result of all these benefits, the simplification of routine work translates into a 22% increase in HR team satisfaction—helping you keep the HR team you have, and train new members more quickly.

Boost HR team satisfaction by

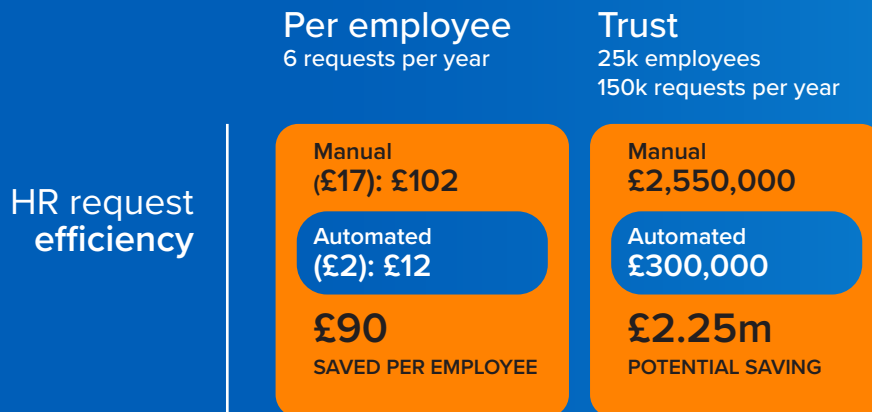
22%

Impact of modernising HR operations

Every year, each NHS Trust employee raises 6 HR requests (on average). When handled manually, the average case cost is £17 (or £102 every year for each employee).

When the interaction and response are automated, the cost per case drops from £17 to £2—saving £90 per year, per employee—and a significant time saving for your HR team.

In a trust with 25,000 employees where HR handles 150,000 requests every year, the manual cost will be over £2 ½ million. **Automating HR service delivery processes will cut that down to £300k—saving £2 ¼ million annually.**



Now let's look at how much time streamlined HR ops can save your workforce, and how that drives significant cost savings. By streamlining HR ops, you will cut the average delivery time on an HR request from 4.23 days to 1.64 days.

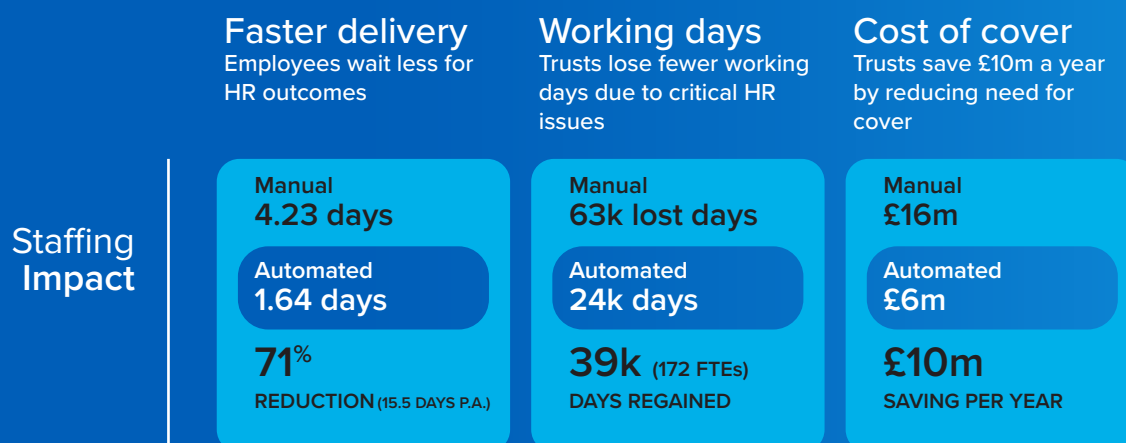
Some HR issues (such as right to work, disclosure clearance, and professional registration) are critical to an employee's ability to work. On these types of requests, any wait time may mean that an employee is not allowed to work—which can mean spending money to cover their shifts.

Across a trust of 25,000 employees, people are waiting a total of 63,450 days per year to get the outcomes they need. Through automation, this is reduced to 24,600

days—regaining 38,850 days of productive work each year. This is equivalent to having another 172 employees without increasing payroll.

When employees are blocked from working, it's necessary to provide cover with either bank or agency staff, which can cost £16 million every year when HR operations aren't streamlined.

Through the application of HR automation, fewer days are lost—saving your Trust £10 million a year that would have otherwise been paid to agency and bank staff.



National systems can stand in the way of the digital transformation

Hornbill frees you from legacy limitations

Mandated and standardised national systems (like ESR, NHS Jobs, and TRAC) enable consistency, nation-wide

insights, and economies of scale—but they also create some challenges that can make it difficult for trusts to deliver on the promise of the NHS People Plan. Hornbill's modern cloud service platform integrates with your standard systems to let you modernise your employee HR experience, and optimise the way your HR teams work.



With Hornbill, ESR stays central as the mandated system of record—and the Hornbill platform becomes the system of engagement for employee and HR. People Services becomes faster, more transparent, and more consistent—directly supporting staff wellbeing, retention, and inclusivity.

Hornbill helps NHS HR leaders move from managing problems to leading transformation—delivering the experience staff demand, and the efficiency tools the HR team deserve.

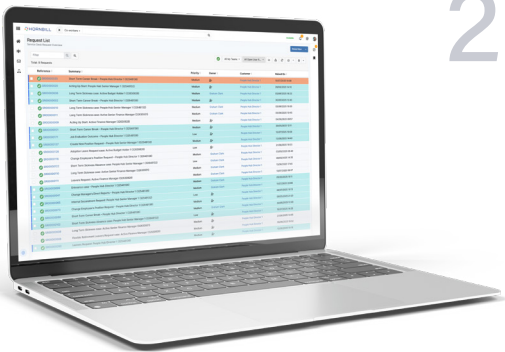
3 steps to HR service transformation



1 Digital HR portal

Transform interaction with compelling digital experiences. 24/7 and on any device.

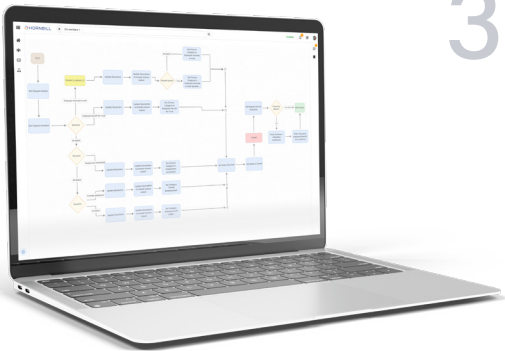
Shift routine interactions from phone and email to digital—reducing calls by 90% and making demand fully visible and trackable. The key is delivering a service experience that works for the employee.



2 Digital case management

Provide visibility over workloads, priorities, status, and performance.

With digital case management, teams know exactly what to focus on. Guided workflows establish Stand Operating Procedures (SOPs) and elevate performance for rapid and consistent delivery of outcomes. Role-based reporting gives everyone the insights they need to really drive performance.



3 HR automation

Codelessly automate routine workloads to save up to 80% of time spent on admin.

Start with 50+ out-of-the-box NHS HR processes. Create your own custom drag-and-drop workflows in minutes—including actions to automatically update NHS ESR records. Less time spent on admin means more time for strategic HR projects.



Accelerated set-up

Hornbill includes over 50 ready-to-use NHS HR request processes—including all the assets you need for rapid setup:

- Self-service request forms
- Orchestration workflows
- Automation steps
- Pre-configured integration with ESR to automatically update staff records

Based on best practices, these have been co-developed with NHS Trust HR teams to fit the precise needs of the NHS—including automatic updates of ESR records.

There are also a set of automated compliance workflows (such as professional registration) so that HR teams can ensure uninterrupted continuity.

Find out more about Hornbill HR service management

[Find out why NHS HR teams use Hornbill HR Service Manager →](#)

[Benefits of ESR data synchronisation →](#)

[Read about digital transformation for NHS HR teams →](#)

If you have any questions about how you can get started with HR service management, drop us a line at hello@hornbill.com

About Hornbill

Hornbill is a market leader in Enterprise Service Management, partnering with leading organisations across the UK—including PLCs, public sector and more than 100 NHS entities.

Our platform empowers organisations to transform their employee experiences by removing friction from everyday employee service requests across IT, Facilities, and HR. Through intelligent automation that's codeless to configure, we help clients eliminate up to 90% of manual effort, enabling teams to focus on higher-value work.

With intuitive self-service, adaptable workflows, and seamless integration into core business systems such as ESR, Hornbill ensures data accuracy, operational efficiency, and continuous service innovation—making transformation not just achievable, but effortless.



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