

The Hidden Load of Healthcare HR: Challenges, Stressors, and Shared Realities (Part 1 of 2)

Part 1 Highlights: What We Heard from the ASHHRA Roundtable

Overview

Part 1 of this ASHHRA member-exclusive roundtable brought members together for an open conversation on the current realities shaping the healthcare HR experience.

Facilitated by ASHHRA's Learning and Education Committee (L&EC) Chair, Elizabeth Bruno, MSN, and moderated by members of the ASHHRA Learning and Education Committee, the discussion created space for candid dialogue across organizations and roles.

ASHHRA members shared what they are seeing day to day, talked through common challenges, and reflected on what is — and is not — working in their organizations.

Across the discussion, one theme came up consistently: healthcare HR teams are navigating a fast-moving environment defined by high expectations, constant change, and sustained workload pressure, while continuing to serve as both strategic partners and operational leaders.

What We're Seeing Across the Membership

Roundtable attendees described navigating sustained pressure across multiple fronts.

From both the pre-survey and the live discussion, attendees consistently pointed to:

- Staffing shortages and turnover that continue to strain teams.
- Burnout and workload volume that remain high.
- A steady pace of new priorities and initiatives.
- Increasing involvement in issues that extend beyond traditional HR scope.

Attendees also shared that expectations around HR's role continue to expand, often requiring them to support leadership, guide employees, and operationalize change—all at once.

The Reality of the “Hidden Load”

Roundtable attendees described the “hidden load” as more than just a heavy workload, sharing that it reflects the combination of volume, pace, and competing demands they are managing day to day.

They pointed to core responsibilities that never slow down, additional projects layered on without removing existing work, and the need to remain constantly responsive to new or urgent requests.



Attendees noted that this often places HR teams in the role of not only managing their own work, but also serving as a connector across the organization—stepping in to help navigate challenges and support alignment as they arise.

Change Is Constant — and Piling Up

Roundtable attendees shared that change is no longer happening one initiative at a time. Instead, they described experiencing multiple changes at once, often overlapping and moving at different speeds.

Several attendees noted that what once felt like a more structured process now feels continuous, with little time in between to fully absorb or sustain each new shift.

Common experiences attendees discussed included:

- New initiatives starting before others are fully implemented.
- Limited time to communicate or reinforce change.
- Teams feeling like priorities may shift before progress is made.

Attendees noted that when change happens this quickly and this often, even well-intentioned efforts can lose impact simply because teams do not have the time or space to fully engage with them.

Day-to-Day Work: Where the Strain Shows Up

In addition to big-picture challenges, roundtable attendees spent time discussing the daily realities of getting work done—and how those realities contribute to ongoing strain.

Across organizations, attendees described similar patterns in how day-to-day work is experienced:

- Full calendars with meetings, often leaving limited room for focused work.
- A steady flow of email and communication throughout the day.
- Frequent “quick” requests that can shift priorities in real time.

Attendees shared that, taken together, these patterns create a work environment where attention is constantly divided and priorities can change quickly.

They noted that this makes it more difficult to focus on strategic priorities, make meaningful progress on larger initiatives, and build in time to step back and think.

Several attendees also mentioned that while small adjustments—such as canceling unnecessary meetings or creating space between them—can help create moments of relief, the overall volume of activity continues to present challenges across teams.

What’s Making a Difference

Even with these challenges, roundtable attendees shared examples of what is helping within their organizations.

Leadership support came through as the most consistent and impactful factor.

Attendees noted that when leaders are clear about priorities, supportive of pausing or stopping work, and visible and engaged with staff, these leadership behaviors can make a noticeable difference in workload and morale.

Other practices attendees highlighted included encouraging teams to step away and take breaks during the day, creating space to reassess workload and expectations, and maintaining regular connection points with staff.

While these actions may seem small, attendees emphasized that they add up to a more sustainable day-to-day experience.

Creating Capacity: Letting Work Go

One of the most practical parts of the discussion focused on something simple—but often difficult: stopping work.

Roundtable attendees shared that when teams take time to review what they are doing, they often find work that continues out of habit, tasks that no longer align with current priorities, and, in some cases, efforts that were never clearly defined to begin with.

They noted that teams can reduce some of the pressure by asking questions such as:

- Do we still need to be doing this?
- Who is this for?
- What would happen if we stopped?

Attendees described this as one of the most immediate ways to begin creating capacity, even though it can be difficult to implement.

Prioritization and Taking a More Proactive Approach

Many attendees talked about how challenging it can be when priorities are not clearly defined across the organization.

They shared that without clear alignment, new work continues to be added, teams are often left trying to manage everything at once, and it becomes difficult to focus on what matters most.

Some attendees noted that their organizations are beginning to address this by:

- Connecting work more directly to strategic priorities.
- Taking a closer look at capacity before launching new initiatives.
- Being more disciplined about what gets started — and what does not.

They shared that when this happens, it becomes easier to focus, deliver, and reduce unnecessary stress.



Attendees also pointed to the importance of taking a more proactive approach, noting that organizations are seeing better results when they:

- Use data to identify trends early, such as workload or staffing patterns.
- Act before issues become urgent.
- Follow through on feedback from engagement surveys.

They noted that this approach helps build trust and reduces the likelihood of issues escalating.

Staying Connected Matters

Even with the pace of work, attendees emphasized how important it is to stay connected to teams.

They pointed to practices such as leadership rounding, intentional check-ins, and cross-team collaboration as meaningful ways to stay engaged—particularly when those interactions go beyond surface-level communication.

Attendees noted that employees want to feel seen, heard, and supported, and that strong connections can help offset some of the pressure created by workload and change.

What's Next

Part 1 made it clear that healthcare HR professionals are carrying an extraordinary load.

Part 2 picks up where this conversation left off, moving from shared experiences to practical ways to navigate the day-to-day realities of the role. It will focus on the same stressors surfaced in this discussion — capacity demands, shifting priorities, and ongoing fatigue — and what it looks like to address them in real time.

With guidance from Dr. Lisa Herbert, MD, FAAFP, PCC, this session will offer actionable strategies to help reduce strain, strengthen support for your teams, and sustain your impact in a complex and evolving environment.