

From Operational Support to Data-Driven Strategic HR Partner

Best HRM Solutions in V4 Countries project

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1. What This Case Is About

A strategic transformation of the HR function at BONARD — a market research company based in Slovakia — turning it from an administrative support unit into a data-informed partner for leadership decision-making. The core of the approach:

- quarterly HR audits combining internal workforce data with external market benchmarks,
- structured internal surveys with mandatory team follow-ups,
- a competency-based framework with defined salary ranges,
- cross-department management sharing platforms to ensure alignment across the organisation.

2. Context

BONARD is a market research company operating in Slovakia, with up to 100 employees. The HR function is led by an HR Deputy Director who initiated and drove the data-informed HR transformation described in this case study.

The good practice was documented through an interview with the HR Deputy Director at BONARD, who shared how the organisation moved away from intuition-based people management towards structured, insight-driven HR practice embedded in quarterly routines. The transformation covers the whole organisation and was implemented in a phased approach throughout 2025.

The central question is straightforward: how can a small-to-mid-sized organisation — in this case a market research company of up to 100 people — create a systematic people management practice without complex tooling or a large HR team? The case demonstrates how consistent data collection, transparent communication of results, and structured follow-up processes can fundamentally transform the role of HR and the quality of leadership decisions.

3. From Where to Where?

3.1. The Starting Point

Before the transformation, BONARD's HR function operated primarily as an administrative support team. Its focus was on compliance, recruitment coordination, and reactive operational tasks. People-related decisions were made largely based on manager intuition and individual conversations rather than structured data or systematic insight.

The consequences were predictable: fragmented and inconsistent information, limited visibility across teams and departments, and no reliable mechanism for HR to provide strategic input to leadership. The organisation lacked the infrastructure to understand workforce trends, benchmark salaries against the market, or identify emerging people risks before they became critical.

3.2. The Background to Change

The decision to transform HR into a data-driven function was triggered by a convergence of internal and external pressures:

- A noticeable shift in the labour market — particularly rising candidate salary expectations — exposed gaps between BONARD's recruitment assumptions and market reality, creating urgency for a more strategic, data-grounded response.
- Differences in leadership styles, team management approaches, and informal norms across departments led to inconsistencies in how teams were managed, raising concerns about fairness and alignment.
- Leadership and hiring managers struggled to attract talent and make informed decisions without access to clear, comparable people data.
- HR itself lacked the tools and data to provide meaningful guidance beyond transactional support.

Those who felt the pain most acutely were leadership and hiring managers — who needed better decision support — as well as HR, which wanted to contribute more strategically but lacked the data infrastructure to do so.

3.3. The Solution in One Sentence

Structured data collection through quarterly HR audits and internal surveys + a competency-based framework with defined salary ranges + transparent, action-oriented follow-up processes = HR transformed from administrative function into a data-driven strategic partner for leadership.

4. The Pillars of the Data-Driven HR Practice

4.1. Quarterly HR Audits — The Foundation of Market Awareness

The cornerstone of the new HR practice is the quarterly HR audit: a structured review that combines internal workforce data with external market benchmarks. The audit provides

leadership with a regular, comparable snapshot of the organisation's people landscape — including hiring trends, salary positioning, and emerging workforce risks.

These audits are not passive reporting exercises. They generate concrete, actionable insights presented to leadership with specific recommendations. Over time, they have become the primary mechanism through which HR earns its seat at the strategic table.

4.2. Internal Surveys — The Voice of the Organisation

Alongside external data, BONARD introduced structured internal surveys that capture employee experience, team dynamics, and management effectiveness. A critical feature of the system is the mandatory follow-up process: survey results are not simply reported — they are discussed by managers with their teams, and action plans are developed and tracked.

This follow-up obligation transforms the survey from a measurement tool into an accountability mechanism. Participation rates have reached over 90%, in part because employees have seen that their input leads to real, visible changes.

The system has also had an unexpected secondary effect: employees now share feedback beyond formal survey cycles — proactively, because trust has been built through consistent action.

4.3. Competency Model and Salary Framework — A Shared Language for Expectations

A structured competency-based framework was introduced to define role expectations, development paths, and performance criteria in a consistent way across the organisation. This framework is paired with defined salary ranges — benchmarked against market data — that provide a transparent reference point for compensation discussions and decisions.

This combination addresses one of the core pain points: managers now have clear, comparable standards to reference when making hiring, promotion, or pay decisions. HR can provide guidance grounded in data rather than opinion.

4.4. Cross-Department Management Exchange — Alignment Through Dialogue

To address the inconsistencies in management practice across departments, BONARD introduced structured cross-department management exchange sessions. These forums

create a space for sharing approaches, aligning on expectations, and learning from each other's experience.

The result is not uniformity — differences in team dynamics are expected and appropriate — but a shared baseline of leadership standards and a greater sense of organisational coherence.

4.5. Governance and Accountability — Making the Cycle Work

The system is anchored in a clear governance structure. HR is responsible for collecting, analysing, and presenting people data as insights and recommendations. Managers are responsible for discussing results with their teams, gathering feedback, and implementing agreed actions. Leadership reviews the insights, aligns on priorities, and makes strategic decisions based on the data.

Transparent sharing of results — including what actions were taken in response — creates accountability and sustains trust across all levels of the organisation.

5. How It Was Built — The Story Behind the System

1. **Identifying the gap:** The process began with an honest assessment that HR was not providing the strategic input the organisation needed. The decision was made to invest in building a data-driven HR practice — starting simply, with a focus on real business questions.
2. **Piloting HR audits:** The first step was to introduce quarterly HR audits combining internal workforce data with basic external market benchmarks. These were tested in close collaboration with leadership to calibrate what information was most valuable for decision-making.
3. **Building the competency model and salary framework:** A structured competency model was developed to define role expectations consistently. This was paired with salary ranges benchmarked against market data, creating a reliable reference framework for compensation and career discussions.
4. **Launching internal surveys with follow-ups:** Structured internal surveys were introduced with a mandatory team follow-up process. Managers were expected to discuss results with their teams and develop action plans — making the survey cycle a driver of real change rather than a reporting formality.

5. **Introducing cross-department management exchange:** Structured forums were created for managers across departments to share practices, align on expectations, and build a shared management culture across the organisation.
6. **Embedding into quarterly routines:** All elements were integrated into a consistent quarterly cycle — audits, surveys, discussions, and follow-ups — making the data-driven HR practice a natural and expected part of organisational life rather than a one-off initiative.

The rollout followed a phased approach: starting with targeted pilots (HR audits and leadership engagement), then gradually expanding surveys, the competency framework, and management exchange sessions across the whole organisation. The full implementation cycle took approximately one year.

Roles throughout the process:

- HR — design, data collection, analysis, insight generation, and presentation to leadership
- Leadership — review of insights, strategic alignment, and decision-making based on data
- Managers — team discussions, feedback collection, and action implementation
- Employees — input through surveys, contributing to the data that drives decisions

6. Results and Evidence — What Actually Moved

The impact of the transformation is visible at multiple levels. The most direct result is a fundamental shift in the nature of HR's contribution: what was once a reactive support function is now a proactive strategic partner, regularly providing leadership with structured people data and actionable recommendations.

Key outcomes include:

- Survey participation rates exceeding 90% — reflecting the trust employees have in the process and its outcomes.
- Greater alignment between salary expectations and market reality, enabling more informed and competitive compensation decisions.
- A measurable improvement in the quality of leadership discussions — from intuition-based to data-grounded — particularly around people strategy and team management.
- Increased cross-department visibility and collaboration, supported by the management exchange platform.

- A cultural shift in employee openness: team members now proactively share feedback outside formal survey cycles because they see that their input leads to real action.

Before and after:

Before	After
Fragmented insights, decisions based on intuition	Structured people data, decisions grounded in evidence
Limited visibility across teams	Regular leadership discussions based on HR insights
HR as administrative support	HR as strategic partner to leadership
Annual performance cycles	Quarterly re-evaluations — more dynamic and relevant
Feedback gathered but not acted on	Feedback consistently followed up, building trust and openness

Perhaps the most telling indicator of success is what happened beyond the formal mechanisms: employees became more proactive in sharing feedback, leadership discussions became more structured and evidence-based, and the quarterly HR cycle became a natural — expected — feature of organisational rhythm.

7. What Can We Learn as HR Leaders of Another Company?

Three key lessons from the BONARD case:

- Data-driven HR is not about technology — it is about discipline. BONARD's transformation was built primarily on Excel, structured processes, and consistent follow-through. The sophistication lies not in the tools but in the commitment to using data systematically and acting on what it reveals.
- The power of the system lies in the follow-up. Collecting data creates information. Acting on it consistently creates trust — and trust creates the conditions for even richer, more honest data in the next cycle. Without mandatory follow-up, the system loses its credibility and impact.
- Involving managers and employees early creates ownership. The system works because it is not done to people — it is done with them. Managers understand the rationale, employees see their input matter, and HR earns its strategic role by consistently delivering value.

Two typical traps to watch out for:

- Treating data collection as the goal. The point is not to gather data — it is to use data to drive better decisions and actions. A sophisticated survey with no meaningful follow-up is worse than no survey at all.
- Designing overly complex frameworks. Complexity is the enemy of adoption. Start simple: one relevant business question, one clear data source, two or three concrete recommendations. Build from there.

Trade-offs and surprise:

Greater transparency inevitably reveals uncomfortable truths — about leadership effectiveness, pay inconsistencies, or team dynamics. More structured processes require additional time and discipline from HR and managers alike. These are real costs that must be acknowledged.

The surprise: how quickly trust and openness increase when employees see that their feedback leads to real, visible change. The cultural shift happened faster than expected — and has proven more durable.

"The success of a data-driven HR practice does not depend on the tools you use. It depends on whether HR has the discipline to follow through on what the data reveals — and whether managers and employees trust that their input will be taken seriously. Once that trust exists, everything else follows."

8. If You Were to Adopt Something from This Good Practice...

Minimum viable version (you could start tomorrow)

Start with a single, focused HR audit on one real business question — for example: where do our salary expectations diverge most from market reality? Or: which teams show the highest signs of disengagement based on simple pulse data?

Combine whatever internal data you already have (headcount, turnover, salary data) with one external market reference point. Prepare a short, structured presentation for leadership with two or three concrete recommendations. That is your minimum viable version.

If you were starting now: 3 steps

1. Choose one relevant business topic — hiring gaps, salary expectations, retention risks, or management consistency — where better data would most improve your current decisions.

2. Collect simple internal data and validate it against basic external market insights. You do not need a sophisticated tool — a structured spreadsheet and one market benchmark source are enough to start.
3. Prepare a short, structured HR audit with two or three clear recommendations and discuss it with leadership. The goal of this first audit is not to be comprehensive — it is to demonstrate that HR can deliver decision-relevant insight.

Minimum conditions

- Access to basic people and recruitment data — without this, there is nothing to analyse.
- Leadership willingness to engage — the system only creates value if insights are discussed and acted on.
- HR capability to analyse and structure insights — even at a basic level. The analytical skill matters more than the tool.

What not to overcomplicate

- Do not wait for perfect data before starting. Good enough data, acted on consistently, is worth more than perfect data that never reaches a decision-maker.
- Do not build complex frameworks or tools upfront. Simplicity is the key — a clear question, a structured analysis, and two or three actionable recommendations are more valuable than a sophisticated model that no one uses.
- Do not try to cover everything at once. Start with one topic, do it well, build trust — then expand.

Summary: What Makes a Successful Data-Driven HR Transformation

Element	Details
Timeline	1 year of phased implementation, followed by continuous quarterly cycles
Critical resources	HR team (design & analysis) + leadership (decision-making) + managers (follow-up & implementation)
Greatest benefit	Structured people data, data-driven leadership decisions, greater transparency and organisational alignment
Greatest challenge	Building trust through consistent follow-up; managing increased transparency that may reveal uncomfortable truths
Technology support	Internal surveys, recruitment data, market benchmarks, competency model — primarily Excel-based
Success factors	Leadership willingness to engage, HR capability to analyse data, consistent follow-through on insights

"The most surprising result was how quickly trust and openness increase when employees see that their feedback leads to real change. The cultural shift happened faster than expected — and has proven more durable than any process or framework we put in place."