



## Quiet Changes, Loud Implications: The Transforming CHRO Role

CHROs have become key players in organizational transformation, operating model redesign, and systems integration. Yet many companies still define the role, hire for it, and plan succession without fully accounting for this new context.

Since the onset of the global pandemic in March 2020, CHROs have gained influence at the executive table, expanded their impact across the workforce, and played a central role in navigating disruption.

But a more fundamental change is now underway—and it is happening faster than most leadership teams have formally recognized.

Businesses are investing heavily in AI, automation, and workforce transformation, yet few are seeing meaningful returns. Legacy processes, entrenched habits, and risk concerns continue to stall pilots, dilute productivity gains, and prevent new capabilities from scaling. At the center of this challenge is a deeper question: How must work itself change? In many organizations, the greatest obstacle to AI adoption is not the technology itself, but the human resistance, organizational inertia, and behavioral change that must be overcome to make it work at scale. This is where the CHRO role is being reshaped—not around HR alone, but around the enterprise conditions required for AI to translate into performance.

## Methodology

We interviewed more than 20 CHROs during the first half of 2026 to understand how the role is evolving, what challenges are keeping them up at night, and how they are navigating the AI revolution. All interviews were conducted confidentially.

# The CHRO is redesigning the operating model

Most companies still approach AI as a tool that can be layered onto existing systems, processes, and workflows. In many firms, adoption is happening organically, with employees encouraged to experiment, identify use cases, and integrate AI into their day-to-day work. This bottom-up momentum is accelerating learning and giving employees greater influence over how work evolves.

But it also creates fragmentation. While pockets of progress are emerging, few leaders have a unified view of how those changes connect across the enterprise. Workflows are rarely redesigned end to end. Operating models remain largely intact, even as the work within them begins to shift. As a result, [enterprise-wide transformation](#) remains elusive. This is where the CHRO can play a critical “scout and scale” role: identifying where AI-enabled ways of working are already creating value, and then helping the business determine which use cases should be scaled across the enterprise.

The CHROs we spoke with recognize this gap. They see how AI is blurring the boundaries among roles, workflows, and functions, fundamentally challenging how work gets done across the business. As work itself changes, so too does the challenge of redesigning the operating model—a responsibility that may once have sat with COOs, CTOs, or transformation leaders, but is increasingly falling to CHROs or, in the best cases, being addressed through intentional partnership among these leaders.

## The CHRO is leading workforce transformation

This shift is exposing the limits of traditional talent models. Longstanding approaches to workforce planning, mobility, and role definition are coming under strain. Although many enterprises have been moving toward more flexible, skills-based models for years, the pace of technological change is now outstripping the frameworks that support them. As one CHRO put it, “traditional job architectures are becoming constraints.”

As roles become more fluid, businesses can lose clarity around ownership and accountability. Skills frameworks create flexibility, but they also introduce complexity, often making workforce planning harder rather than easier. CHROs are being forced to rethink foundational assumptions while continuing to deliver day-to-day performance. As one CHRO noted, “we have to rethink workforce planning, mobility, and selection through a skills lens while ensuring organizational clarity does not erode.”

The remit is becoming materially broader. CHROs are now expected to anticipate future capability needs, translate them into workforce decisions, execute against those decisions, and maintain enough flexibility to adapt as technology continues to evolve. Five years ago, this responsibility sat at the edge of the role. Today, it is central to it.



# The CHRO is integrating systems across the enterprise

Historically, the CHRO has owned talent strategy, culture, and organizational effectiveness within a relatively discrete set of accountabilities. That boundary is now dissolving as leadership teams recognize that their core challenge is no longer talent, technology, or work design in isolation, but how those elements fit together.

CHROs are stepping in to own this increasingly ambiguous space. As one said, “The CHRO role is expanding beyond traditional HR boundaries into core business decision-making, particularly around AI strategy and cross-functional initiatives.”

In many cases, this shift is being driven by necessity rather than formal mandate. As one CHRO described it, “the modern CHRO is uniquely situated to connect talent, technology, and business strategy,” increasingly acting as a system integrator.

This is also making the relationship between the CHRO and CTO more consequential. As AI moves from technical deployment to enterprise redesign, the CHRO and CTO are becoming an increasingly important leadership pairing: one focused on what the technology can enable, and the other on how work, capability, and behavior must change for that potential to be realized.

The need for that partnership reflects a familiar pattern from earlier waves of transformation. Companies have often succeeded in adapting processes and deploying new technologies, but struggled to align how work is structured, managed, and experienced by people. The difference now is the growing recognition that these issues cannot be solved separately.

As AI reshapes work across the enterprise, integrating technology, work design, and capability is becoming the defining leadership challenge. Increasingly, that challenge sits with the CHRO, whether or not the role has formally been defined that way.

## The CHRO role now demands more than traditional HR skills

As the remit expands, so do expectations. The capabilities that have traditionally defined strong CHROs — functional expertise, operational discipline, and stewardship of culture — remain essential, but they are no longer sufficient on their own.

As the role moves further into the intersection of talent, technology, and work design, success increasingly depends on the ability to operate across systems, not simply within a function. As one CHRO put it, “the future requires broader business acumen and the ability to operate across interconnected systems.” That shift is already influencing how leadership teams think about capability within HR itself. Several CHROs described intentionally hiring people from outside traditional HR backgrounds — leaders who think more holistically about the business and are comfortable operating across functional boundaries.

The role is also becoming more externally oriented. CHROs are increasingly engaging with boards and external stakeholders on questions of workforce capability, leadership pipelines, and transformation readiness — topics once considered adjacent to the role. Taken together, this points to a shift in mindset as much as skill set. The CHRO is no longer operating solely as a functional leader, but as an executive expected to shape how the enterprise evolves. That requires comfort with ambiguity, the ability to balance competing priorities, and a far more explicit focus on transformation.

The question, then, is not simply whether CHROs have the right capabilities, but whether the role itself is being defined, supported, and developed in line with what it now demands.



# What to consider in CHRO succession

The CHRO role is becoming broader, more complex, and more central to enterprise performance. As companies rethink how work gets done and how capability is built, they are no longer asking only who should lead HR, but who is best positioned to shape the future of the enterprise itself.

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## Three considerations stand out:

### 1. Define the CHRO's mandate for workforce transformation

As AI reshapes how work is structured and delivered, the boundaries among HR, operations, technology, and strategy are becoming increasingly blurred. In many businesses, responsibility for workforce transformation remains fragmented, even as the task of integrating those elements increasingly falls to the CHRO.

This makes it critical to define the remit more explicitly. Where should the CHRO lead? How should responsibilities be shared across functions? What will the business need from the role over the next three to five years?

Clarifying this upfront helps ensure the role is designed to match its expanding mandate and creates a stronger foundation for succession decisions.

### 2. Benchmark potential successors against the future shape of the role

As the role evolves, the benchmark against which potential successors are assessed must evolve with it. But in a period of rapid change, how do companies assess leaders against what often feels like a moving target?

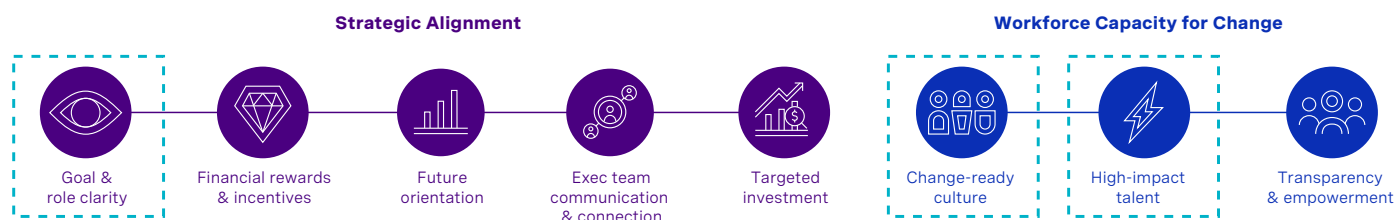
This is where evaluating a leader's potential becomes critical. Structured assessments, such as our Leadership Portrait model, can help companies understand both a leader's ability to succeed today and their potential to guide the enterprise through the transformation still ahead.

### 3. Build the governance required to turn workforce transformation into enterprise impact

In many companies, responsibility for workforce transformation remains fragmented. AI use cases are often developed from the bottom up, operating model decisions sit elsewhere, and workforce planning continues in parallel. The result is progress in pockets, but limited enterprise-wide impact.

Turning transformation into sustained performance requires clear ownership of how work is redesigned end to end, linking technology, roles, skills, and organizational structure. In practice, that responsibility will often sit with the CHRO. What matters most is that accountability is explicit and aligned with the scale of the challenge.

**Figure 1: The eight organizational conditions needed for transformation, with the three most important highlighted**



Source: [The Three Conditions That Matter Most for Transformation | Russell Reynolds Associates](#)

## The future CHRO

The CHRO is no longer a role bounded by the traditional human resources remit. It now sits at the intersection of strategy, technology, and work itself, with a remit that extends across the enterprise.

For companies, the challenge is to recognize and embrace that shift. For CHROs, it presents something larger: the opportunity to shape the future of business itself — not only by redefining work, but also by overcoming the institutional inertia that determines whether transformation succeeds or fails.

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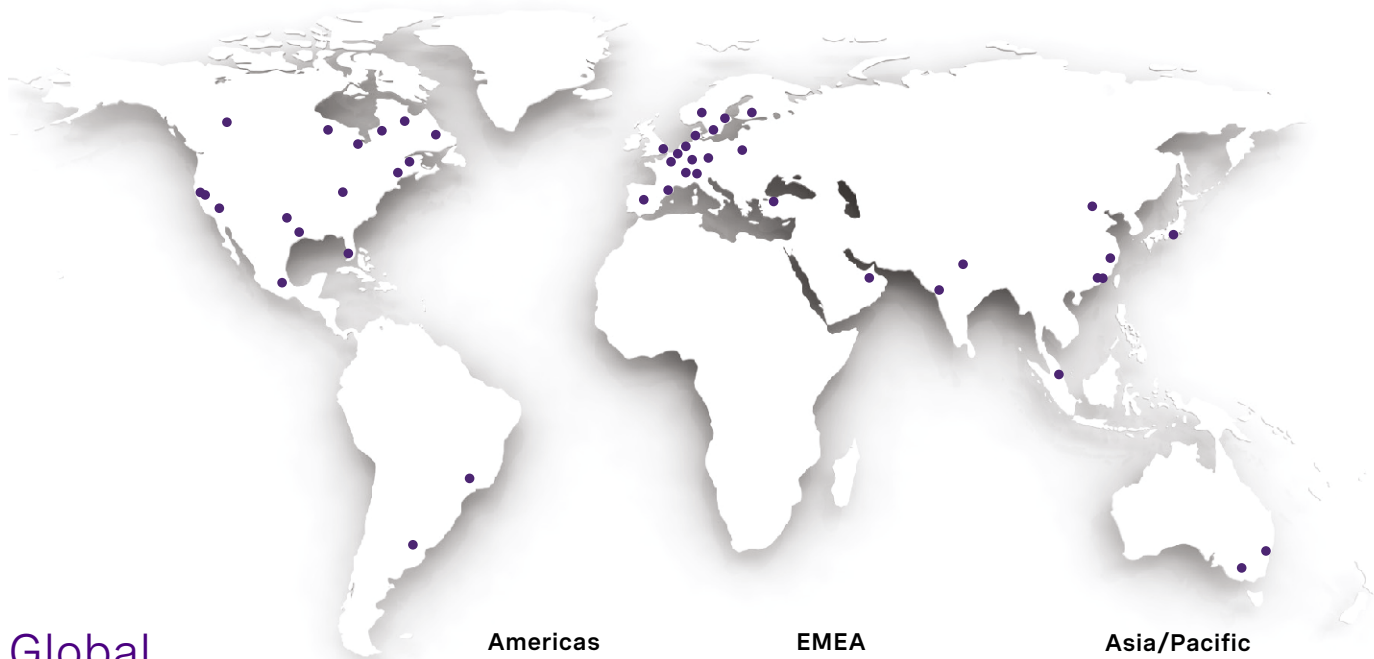
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# About Russell Reynolds Associates

Russell Reynolds Associates is a global leadership advisory firm. Our 500+ consultants in 47 offices work with public, private, and nonprofit organizations across all industries and regions. We help our clients build teams of transformational leaders who can meet today's challenges and anticipate the digital, economic, sustainability, and political trends that are reshaping the global business environment. From helping boards with their structure, culture, and effectiveness to identifying, assessing and defining the best leadership for organizations, our teams bring their decades of expertise to help clients address their most complex leadership issues. We exist to improve the way the world is led

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