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The CHRO Pipeline Was Built for a Different Job

As enterprise demands on CHROs expand, the experiences required to succeed in the role are changing. Can traditional pipelines keep pace?

The CHRO role is changing because the enterprise is changing. As AI reshapes work itself, productivity and transformation increasingly cut across traditional functional boundaries, and CEOs need people leaders who can connect people, technology, and performance across organizations. Against that backdrop, we spoke with more than 25 sitting CHROs about a practical question: **What will the person who eventually succeeds you need to be able to do?**

Three themes stood out. Future CHROs will need to think beyond the function, lead effectively where organizational ownership is unclear, and exercise judgment when there is no established response. Running through all three was the importance of influence: the ability to build relationships across the enterprise, create followership without relying on formal authority, and turn judgment into action.

Methodology

We interviewed more than 25 CHROs during 2026 to ask them about how the role is evolving, the most consequential challenges they are confronting, and how they are navigating the AI revolution. All interviews were conducted in confidence.

Deep HR expertise remains essential, but the profile is becoming considerably broader – raising an important question: Are we developing HR leaders fast enough and with the right development experiences for what the enterprise will require from its future CHROs?

What CHROs should look for now in potential successors

01 Can they operate as an enterprise leader?

The need for broader business understanding was one of the most consistent themes in our conversations. Future CHROs need to understand how the organization creates value, where the pressures sit, and how decisions get made. Crucially, they also need the relationships and credibility to influence those decisions.

Several CHROs described this as a gap in potential successors. It is not enough to understand the business from the sidelines; future leaders need to build followership across the enterprise, engage confidently with the executive team and board, and use those relationships to move work forward.

This is changing how some CHROs think about development. High-potential leaders are being given greater exposure to the business through enterprise-wide initiatives, roles closer to operations, and assignments outside the usual HR path. Some CHROs are also broadening the mix of backgrounds within their teams, bringing in people from areas such as technology, operations and transformation. For future successors, that points to another requirement: the ability to build and lead a broader tent of talent around them, extending the function's expertise and influence across the enterprise.

02 Can they lead in the seams?

CHROs are increasingly operating in areas where the organizational boundaries are less clear. People, technology, work and operating models are becoming more intertwined, and some of the most important questions no longer sit neatly within any one function.

AI is accelerating that convergence. As organizations rethink how work gets done, how processes are designed and where technology sits, accountabilities are beginning to shift too. In some organizations, technology and operational roles are starting to report into the CHRO rather than the functions where they would historically have sat.

CHROs also increasingly describe their remit intersecting with that of the COO. In some cases, they see this as a more difficult boundary to navigate than the blurring line between HR and technology. As questions of people, process and operating model become harder to separate, getting that relationship with operational leaders right (and ensuring the tension is productive, rather than territorial) will become increasingly important.

Several CHROs described value increasingly sitting "in the seams:" delivering guidance where processes cross teams, responsibilities are shared, or issue ownership isn't immediately obvious. Leading effectively in those areas depends less on formal authority and more on the ability to read stakeholders, build coalitions and create followership across different parts of the organization. For a successor, operating across functions means being more than a good collaborator; the next generation of HR leaders will need the ability to bring people with them, work through competing areas of ownership and maintain momentum when no single function is clearly in charge.

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03 Can they exercise judgment when there is no clear answer?

Working across the organization and leading "in the seams" also means dealing with issues that are less clearly defined than many successors may have encountered earlier in their careers. There is often limited precedent, incomplete information, and no obvious right answer.

The speed of change makes this harder still. Particularly where technology is concerned, CHROs are having to make decisions knowing that the assumptions they are working with today may look different in six or twelve months' time. Future leaders will need to be comfortable making a call without waiting for perfect clarity, while remaining ready to revisit it as the context changes.

Several CHROs therefore talked about the importance of exposing future leaders to more complex and less clearly defined situations earlier in their careers. Increasingly, that also means giving them experience of leading through change where the destination itself may continue to move: weighing competing considerations, bringing others with them, having the confidence to hold a position when challenged, and knowing when to stay the course and when to adjust.

To succeed, future CHROs will need a high degree of judgment and change tolerance. But judgment only matters if it can be translated into action. Experience still matters, but so does the ability to make a call, bring others with you and create momentum - while remaining ready to adjust as circumstances evolve.

Building the HR pipeline for a broader leadership role

CHROs are already looking for ways to give future leaders the experiences this broader role will require. In practice, that means:

- ✓ Giving high-potential talent earlier exposure to the wider business;
- ✓ Creating opportunities to operate across functional boundaries;
- ✓ Giving future leaders responsibility for unfamiliar, less clearly defined problems; and
- ✓ Looking beyond traditional HR career paths for talent who can bring broader business, financial or technology experience into the leadership pipeline.

The bigger question is how deliberately this is happening. Our conversations suggest that much of this breadth is still being built through the work itself: leaders acquire it because the opportunities arise, rather than because succession pathways have been consciously designed to provide it.

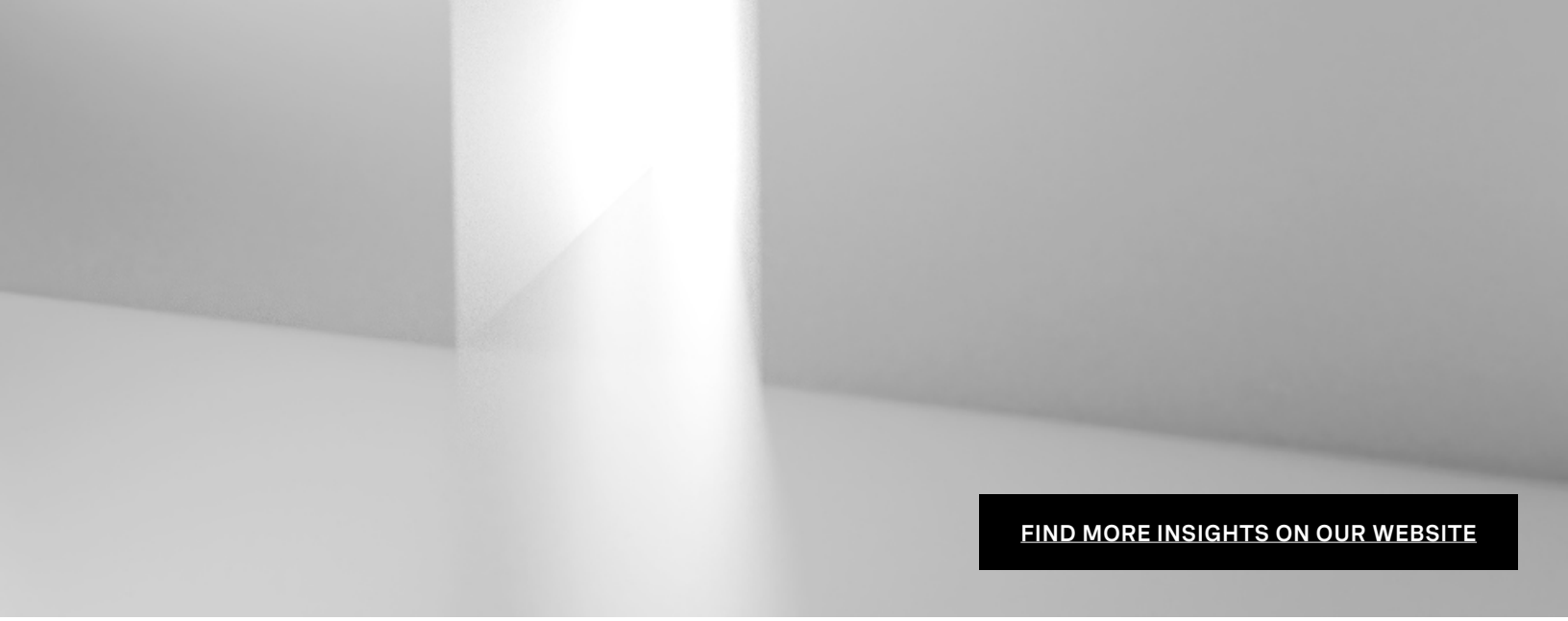
These experiences take time to accumulate. Identifying potential successors is only part of the task; organizations need to start earlier, look further down the pipeline and understand where the gaps are while there is still time to address them.

Returning to our opening question: is the profile of the CHRO changing faster than the pipeline beneath it? We outline four questions CHROs can ask to determine if they're truly preparing the next generation for the CHRO roles of the future.

A succession checklist for CHROs

- **Are we identifying potential successors early enough?**
  It takes time to gain the breadth of experience necessary to meet the demands of the future CHRO role. Without a deliberate approach, succession can become reliant on one or two individuals who happen to have accumulated the right experiences.
- **Are they getting enough exposure beyond HR?**
  For those coming up through traditional HR pathways, it means meaningful responsibility for enterprise-wide issues and unfamiliar problems rather than simply visibility of them.
- **Are we deliberately stretching future HR leaders into the seams?**
  Future leaders need experience of working across functions, influencing without clear authority and leading where ownership is less defined.
- **Is our pipeline wide enough?**
  As well as looking deeper into internal pipelines, organizations should consider casting the net more widely to high-impact business leaders outside traditional HR career paths who may bring broader business, financial and technology acumen, alongside the enterprise perspective, judgment and influence the future role will require.

Tomorrow's workforce will look markedly different; the leaders shaping it will need to as well. The question is whether organizations are building that capability early enough, thinking broadly enough about where future CHROs may come from, and giving their high-potential leaders the experiences that will stretch them. Those that do will be better prepared for the role the CHRO is becoming.



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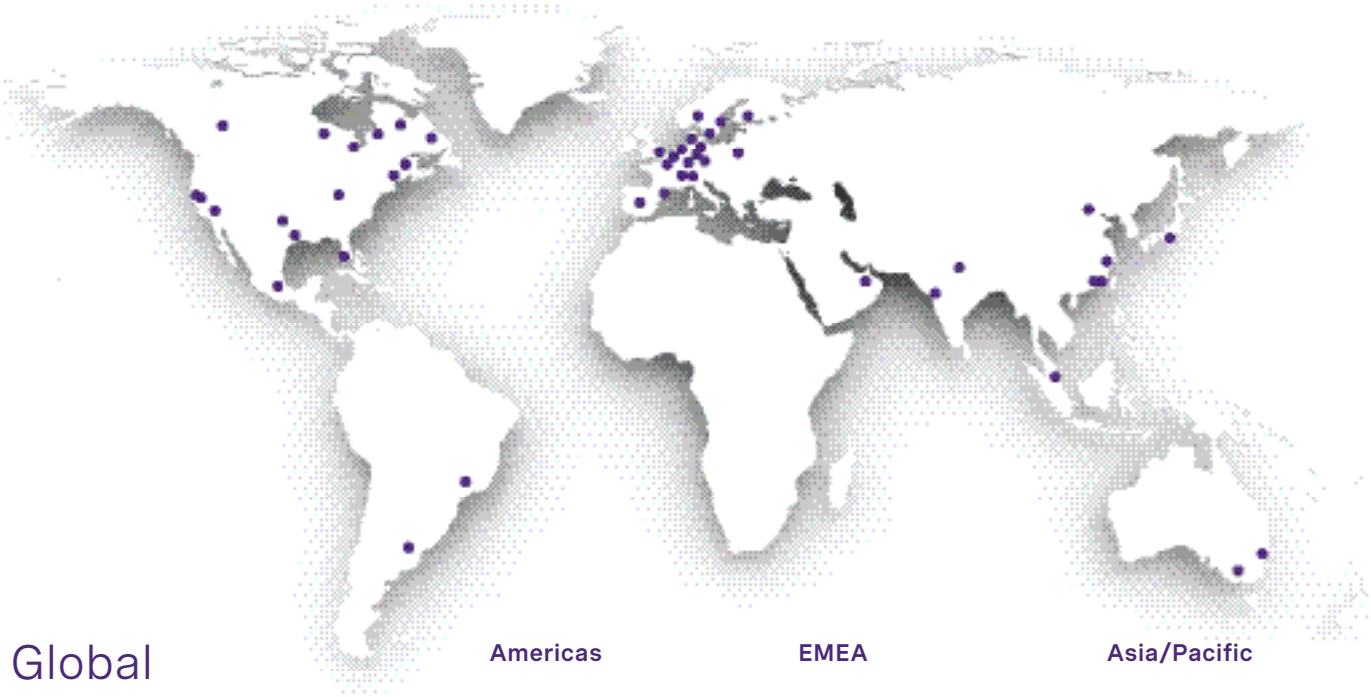
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