

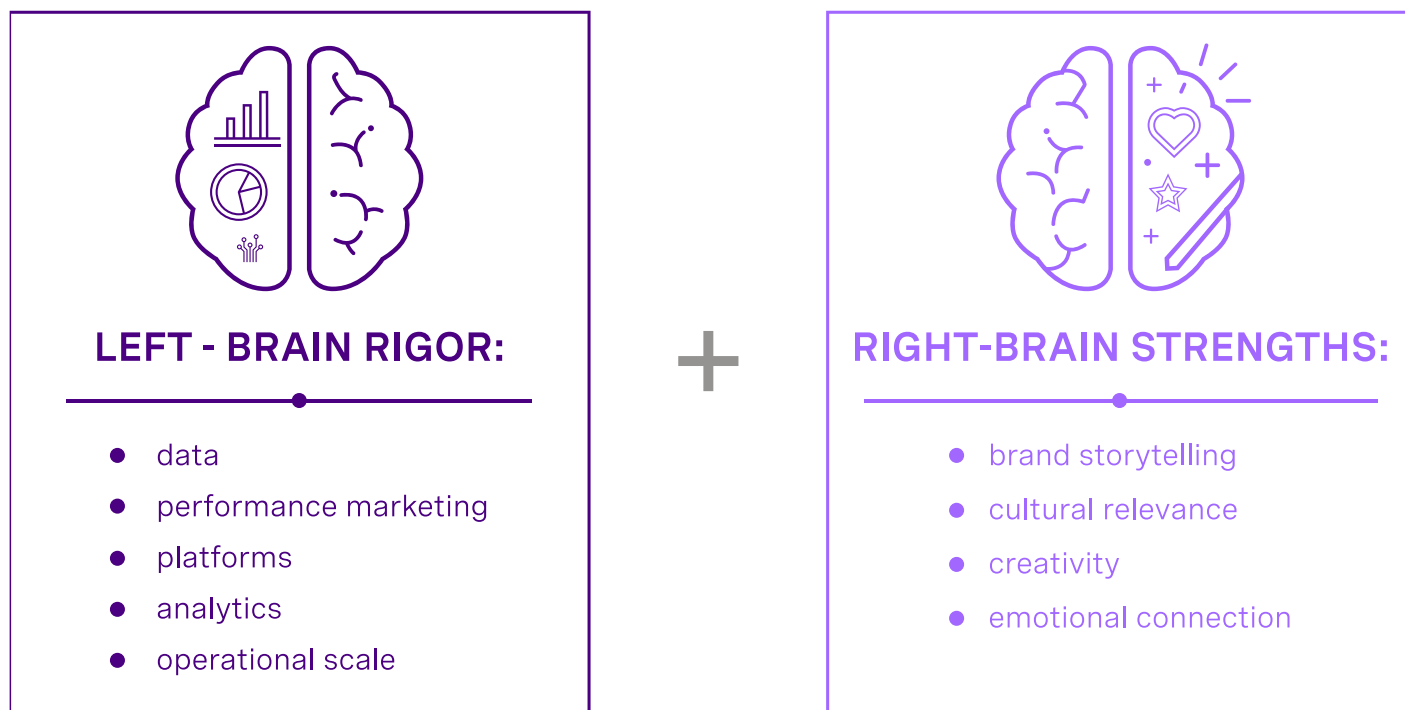
The Rise of the Whole-Brain Growth Leader: What Growth Leadership Moves Reveal for CEOs



Why today's most sought-after executives combine analytical rigor, creative instinct, and the ability to leverage technology to scale

As companies confront slower markets, rising costs of acquisition, and increasing complexity with the implementation of AI and technology platforms, the traditional levers of growth; and the leadership models behind them, are no longer delivering what they once did.

In response, organizations have reshaped the C-suite, introducing new roles and turning to external talent in search of acceleration. Yet our analysis of recent growth leadership moves reveals a deeper shift underway: the future of the C-suite will not be defined by new titles, but by how effectively leaders operate within increasingly complex, AI-driven environments. In this rapidly evolving landscape, breakthrough growth leaders must combine...



...to drive sustained growth and brand reinvention all while leveraging AI to scale.

In 2020, Russell Reynolds Associates began tracking global Customer Activation and Growth leadership hires (marketing, sales, digital, commercial, revenue, and growth) across industries to provide a deeper understanding of how rapid digitalization, changing consumer behaviors, and heightened emphasis on data-driven strategies is reshaping senior talent trends.

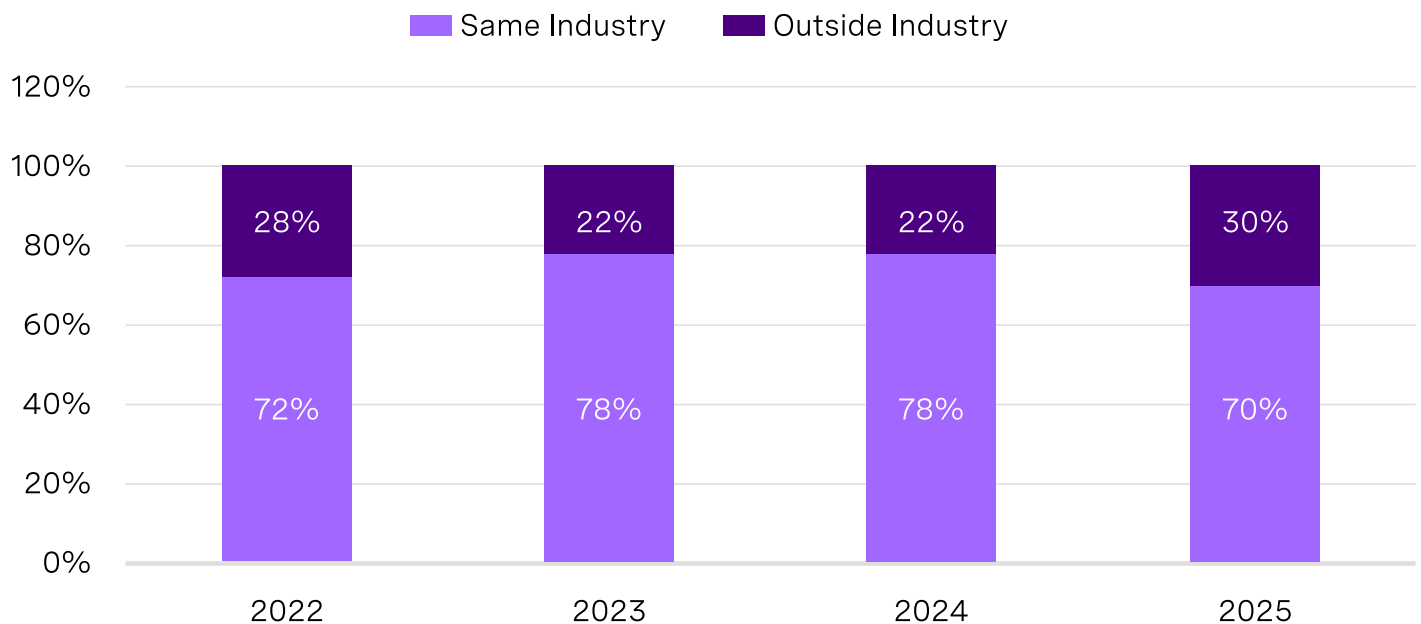
Here's what we're seeing emerge in 2026.

Why industry context matters more than ever

Approximately 70-75% of growth leadership hires in our dataset come from within the same industry, a proportion that has remained stable over the course of our six-year study (Figure 1).

This persistence suggests that sector context is becoming more important—not because growth leaders cannot move across industries, but because success increasingly depends on how quickly they can understand and adapt to the market dynamics, customer behaviors, and operating realities that shape growth. Instead, the data points to a market reality in which industry context is especially critical as outside ambiguity and new technology challenges make driving growth even more complex.

Figure 1: Growth leader placement by industry background



Source: Russell Reynolds Associates' CAG Moves analyses (2020-2026), n =16,788

This shift reflects the changing nature of growth itself. In many sectors, growth is now driven by highly specific dynamics: platform economics in technology, regulatory complexity in healthcare and financial services, or supply chain integration in industrials. These are not easily portable capabilities. Leaders must understand not only customers and competitors, but also the underlying “rules of the game” that govern how value is created and captured within a given industry; requiring a more integrated, “whole-brain” approach that combines analytical rigor, creative thinking, and technological fluency for scale. As those rules become more complex, the premium on contextual knowledge rises.

What this means for CEOs

Thoughtfully expand the aperture of how you define “top growth talent.” Even though this year we saw a slight uptick in outside-of-industry hires, the idea of the industry-agnostic growth leader is becoming more myth than reality. CEOs should prioritize candidates with deep or adjacent industry experience, even if it comes at the expense of perceived star power from outside sectors.

When making cross-industry hires, organizations must explicitly plan for longer ramp times and provide structured support to accelerate contextual learning. Without this, the risk is not just slower performance, but strategic missteps rooted in misapplied playbooks.

Brand is back (but not how you remember it)

Our data shows a notable increase in roles with explicit brand mandates, including chief brand officers or brand-heavy CMO profiles. This shift coincides with broader market dynamics: rising customer acquisition costs, signal loss from changes in federal privacy legislations, and diminishing returns from performance marketing. Together, these forces are pushing organizations to view brand not as a communications function, but as a core driver of growth.

At the same time, advances in AI are increasing the scale and precision with which companies can activate brand value, enabling more personalized engagement, faster content adaptation, and real-time optimization across customer touchpoints.

Brand is becoming an economic lever. Strong brands reduce acquisition costs, increase conversion, and enable pricing power; capabilities that have become more valuable as traditional performance channels lose efficiency. In this context, brand is no longer separate from growth; it is a foundational component. The resurgence of brand-oriented leadership roles reflects this shift, as companies seek to rebalance their growth strategies toward demand creation rather than pure demand capture.

What this means for CEOs

Clearly integrate brand directly into the growth agenda and KPIs. The separation between brand and revenue is increasingly artificial and costly. CEOs should ensure that growth leaders are accountable for both short-term performance and long-term brand equity, and that these metrics are managed in tandem, rather than in tension. This may require rethinking role design, incentives, and reporting structures. Organizations that continue to treat brand as a secondary or support function risk structurally overpaying for growth in an environment where efficiency is already under pressure.

The title explosion is a symptom of strategic confusion

Our dataset highlights a proliferation of growth-related titles including (but not limited to) CMO, CRO, CGO, CCO, and chief brand officer. The lack of standardization across this expansion reflects underlying ambiguity about who owns growth and how it should be managed. As organizations attempt to adapt to more complex growth challenges, many have added roles without fully redefining accountabilities, resulting in overlapping mandates and fragmented ownership.

This pattern suggests that the C-suite is in a transitional phase. Much like the evolution of the CFO or COO roles in prior decades, customer-centric growth leadership is moving toward consolidation but has not yet reached it. In the interim, companies are experimenting with different configurations, often leading to unclear decision rights across marketing, sales, product, and customer experience.

AI implementation is increasingly adding another layer of complexity, as organizations debate whether ownership should sit within technology, operations, product, or commercial leadership teams. The result is not just inefficiency, but diluted accountability for outcomes that are [inherently cross-functional](#).

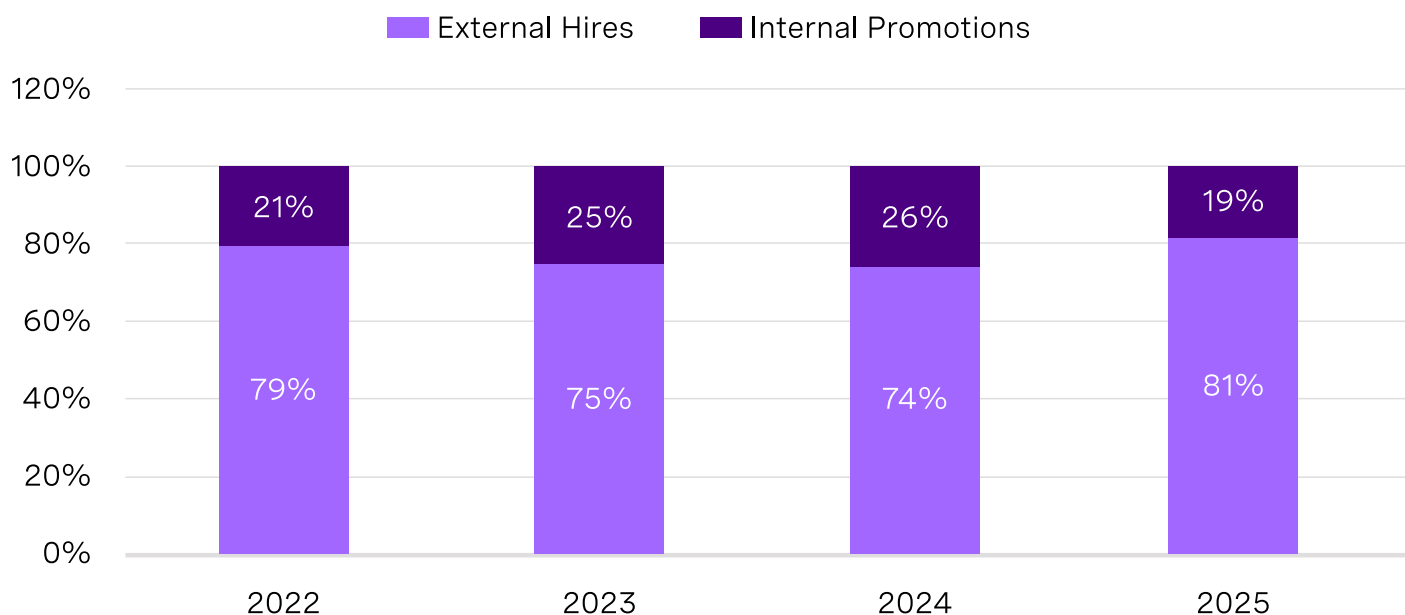
What this means for CEOs

Simplify and clarify ownership of growth. The proliferation of titles should not obscure a fundamental question: who is ultimately accountable for revenue? CEOs should resist the urge to solve growth challenges by adding roles and instead focus on a “whole brain” approach with single ownership across the full customer lifecycle; from demand generation to retention and expansion. Where multiple leaders are involved, decision rights and metrics must be explicitly delineated. In most cases, if growth accountability appears “shared,” it’s effectively owned by no one—a [structural risk](#) that no amount of talent can compensate for.

The long-standing belief in the “external savior” leader is overdue for a reset

External hiring continues to dominate growth leadership appointments, consistently accounting for roughly 75-80% of moves (Figure 2). However, the data reveals a meaningful shift: internal promotions increased steadily through 2024 before dipping again in 2025.

Figure 2: Internal versus external growth leader placements



Source: Russell Reynolds Associates' CAG Moves analyses (2020-2026), n =16,788

This fluctuation is telling. While boards and CEOs still default to external talent in moments of pressure, there is growing recognition that internal leaders are well positioned to navigate the complexity of modern growth systems, in which success depends less on introducing new ideas and more on orchestrating existing capabilities across product, data, marketing, and sales.

The underlying tension is structural. Growth roles have become deeply embedded in company-specific ecosystems: proprietary data, legacy tech stacks, organizational incentives, and cross-functional dependencies. External hires, no matter how capable, face an increasingly steep ramp and timeline to understand and influence these systems. As a result, the traditional “outside change agent” model is facing increased challenges.

What this means for CEOs

Treat external hiring as a targeted intervention, not a default strategy. The data suggests that sustainable customer-centric growth leadership increasingly depends on leaders who can operate the system, not just critique it; whether developed internally or brought in from outside. CEOs should focus on identifying and cultivating “whole-brain” leaders through rotational roles, cross-functional exposure, and deliberate development, while also remaining open to external talent that brings complementary capabilities. The goal is not to choose between internal and external, but to build a leadership pipeline equipped to manage the full complexity of modern, tech-enabled growth.

Integrated accountability and the future of growth leadership

The next phase of customer-centric, tech-enabled leadership will not be defined by new titles or external hires, but by a fundamental evolution in how leadership itself is exercised. As growth becomes more complex, organizations can no longer rely on narrowly specialized leadership models built around isolated channel expertise or functional optimization. Instead, companies are increasingly seeking leaders who can operate with a “whole-brain” mentality: combining the creative and intuitive strengths traditionally associated with brand-building and customer insight with the analytical rigor required to navigate data, operations, and performance at scale.

At the same time, advances in AI and automation are amplifying the value of leaders who can integrate both dimensions effectively. Technology can scale execution, accelerate insight generation, and increase organizational efficiency, but only when paired with leaders capable of balancing imagination with precision, and long-term vision with measurable outcomes. This shift is moving organizations away from fragmented ownership and toward integrated accountability across marketing, product, sales, customer experience, and technology functions.

For CEOs, the implication is increasingly clear: sustainable growth will depend less on fragmented functional leadership and more on identifying a clear owner of growth who can connect creativity, analytics, and technology into a unified growth system. As customer acquisition, brand, product experience, data, and AI become more interconnected, organizations need leaders capable of integrating these dimensions into a cohesive strategy that scales across the enterprise.

Companies that continue to separate these capabilities into disconnected functions will struggle to adapt. But those that empower whole-brain growth leaders with end-to-end accountability will be better positioned to drive durable competitive advantage in an increasingly AI-enabled market.



Authors

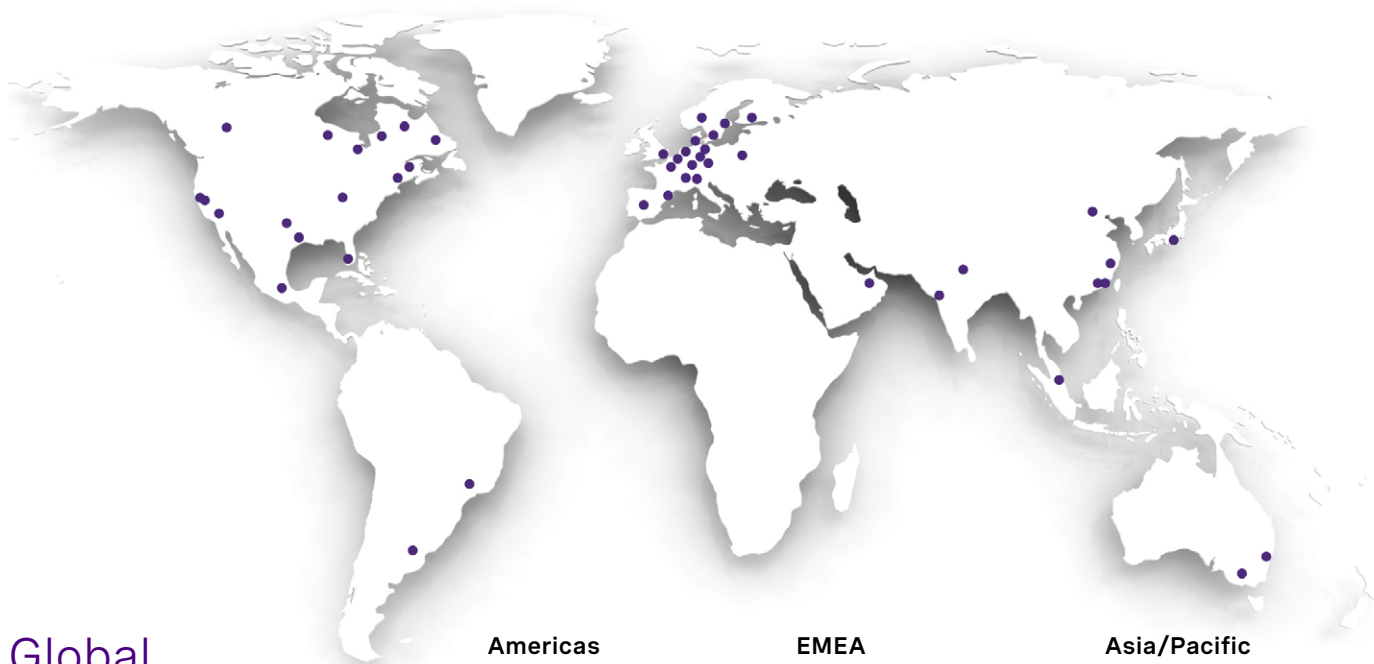
Norm Yustin leads Russell Reynolds Associates' Global Customer Activation & Growth and Global Omnichannel Retail and Luxury practices. He is based in Chicago.

Amanda Callahan leads Russell Reynolds Associates' Global Customer Activation & Growth Commercial Strategy & Insights team. She is based in Chicago.

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

www.russellreynolds.com



Global offices

Americas

- Atlanta
- Boston
- Buenos Aires
- Calgary
- Chicago
- Dallas
- Houston
- Los Angeles
- Mexico City
- Miami
- Minneapolis/St.Paul
- Montreal
- New York
- Palo Alto
- San Francisco
- São Paulo
- Stamford
- Toronto
- Washington, D.C.

EMEA

- Amsterdam
- Barcelona
- Berlin
- Brussels
- Copenhagen
- Dubai
- Frankfurt
- Hamburg
- Helsinki
- London
- Madrid
- Milan
- Munich
- Oslo
- Paris
- Stockholm
- Warsaw
- Zürich

Asia/Pacific

- Beijing
- Hong Kong
- Melbourne
- Mumbai
- New Delhi
- Shanghai
- Shenzhen
- Singapore
- Sydney
- Tokyo