

FlemingMartin's Chief People Officer Lunch Series: Fall 2021 Notes

During early Fall 2021, the Practice Leaders at FlemingMartin held virtual lunches with nearly 100 Life Sciences, Tech, Fintech, and Digital Health CPOs (Chief People Officers). We explored topics such as attrition, vaccination, returning to the office, human resources budget items, and “net promoter scores” for the Chief People Officer job itself. Selected excerpts from these discussions are below.

Experiencing the Great Resignation?

A majority of CPOs we spoke with are seeing higher attrition now. Reasons behind the departures are varied, but opportunities for increased compensation and higher titling along with a yearning for enhanced connection to one's job and colleagues have been frequently cited in exit interviews.

Mandating COVID Vaccines for Employees?

[Many companies](#) are mandating COVID-19 vaccinations for all employees (while granting limited health and religious-based exemptions). A number of other companies are not taking this hardline approach but are strongly encouraging vaccination and requiring the unvaccinated to submit to frequent COVID testing. Geography and function-specific concerns have influenced many exec teams in their policy formation.

Planning an On-Site, Remote, or Hybrid Future?

Many leadership teams are embracing more flexible arrangements – hiring remote talent, allowing long-distance moves, adopting a hybrid office-home working model. Others are doubling down on a return-to-site. Unsurprisingly, issues are arising around diverging work philosophies and the unique challenge of creating an inclusive environment (one supportive of all employees whether onsite, remote, or hybrid).

What to Advocate for in 2022's HR Budget?

Approaching year's end, many CPOs are increasing spend on tools/events that will drive further employee engagement, community building, and collaboration. Additionally, a great number of CPOs are investing more heavily in Coaching, Talent Branding, DEI, and companywide Mental Health resources for 2022.

Recommending the Chief People Officer Job or Not?

CPOs roundly agreed that they've been relied upon more than ever before during this pandemic. Despite great exhaustion, most felt empowered as Boards and fellow C-Suite leaders are understanding the true importance of culture. For many, there has never been a better time to pursue the CPO path.

EXTRAS / RESOURCES

Highly Rated COVID Tests

- [Abbott's BinaxNOW Self-Test](#)
- [Labcorp's Pixel Home Test](#)

CPO-Recommended Tools/Resources

- [Next Step Partners](#)
- [MindGym](#)
- [Modern Health](#)
- [BetterUp](#)
- [Glint](#)
- [Workplace Analytics](#)
- [The Executive Advisory](#)
- [PayScale](#)

Tools/Resources (Continued)

- [Rhythm Systems](#) (Goal Setting)
- [LinkedIn Learning](#) (Training)
- [Better Manager](#) (Management Training)
- [Bravely](#) (Coaching)
- [Spring Health](#) (Mental Healthcare)
- [Engage](#) (Engagement)

For a Laugh

- [HR Correspondence Re: Return to Office](#)

Selected Quotes from CPOs

Experiencing the Great Resignation?

- *“We are doing a lot of work around our values and culture to increase retention. How do we make our employee value proposition more clearly resonate? The pandemic continues to be a challenge to our interconnectedness. We’ve had people leave who joined during the pandemic; they never felt a connection, so they have departed to join former colleagues elsewhere.”*
- *“We have had success in retaining new hires and I think our (designated) ‘guides’ are a factor. An employee is assigned to each new hire and it’s someone who arrived approximately 6 months earlier. They introduce newcomers and have a handle on what it’s like to join this organization during the pandemic. It feels great to have someone looking out for you who’s also pretty new...”*
- *“We are encouraging small groups to safely connect offline/outdoors and expense their activities to increase coworker bonding to (combat) attrition.”*
- *“Your shield to losing employees is trust and flexibility -- if you don’t offer those, you risk attrition.”*
- *“We are seeing higher turnover in recent hires due to a lack of connection. New hires are struggling to fit in with the team.”*
- *“Finding and keeping good candidates is what I’m focused on. There is so much movement, and candidates are receiving very enticing counter offers from their current employers.”*
- *“We’ve seen an uptick in turnover compared to past years. It’s been hard to isolate reasons. The industry has never been more competitive, and it seems that people are feeling a lot more mobile than they were at the outset of the pandemic in 2020.”*
- *“Our attrition is up; we’re losing engineers and the competing offers that we are seeing come in are staggering. The amount of comp they are getting, and higher titles, are tough to overcome.”*
- *“The speed of promotion is increasing. I’ve had three Executive Directors get recruited into SVP/EVP roles and we’re having a hard time selling against that.”*
- *“Our attrition rate has been higher than 20%. We have seen pent-up demand from COVID which initially slowed people’s movement. There has been a lot of change in our company too...”*
- *“Regardless of age, everyone is going through a midlife crisis, and they are reconsidering their priorities in life. As employers, we need to understand and be ready to address this.”*
- *“We’re realizing the truth about employees needing to feel connected to their employer and, more importantly, to the people they work with. Leaders need to have personal relationships with their team. That’s even more difficult in a remote work environment. We’re teaching our managers to ask more pertinent questions during exit interviews, but by then it’s too late.”*
- *“We recently had a key leader who went back to his prior company. He said that he enjoyed the relationships there more and had only been into our headquarters once.”*
- *“People are also realizing the grass is not always greener. We’ve worked to bring some people back -- boomerang employees -- who can now evangelize how good they have it here.”*
- *“Some of our attrition is due to the ‘Great Resignation’ but some of it is from people coming to terms with what they really want out of their life during this pandemic. The job market is so hot; it’s definitely time for a talent review here so we can proactively identify our top people.”*
- *“Some of our attrition is coming from people retiring. We’ve had multiple getting on into their careers for whom the pandemic has persuaded them to retire – definitely earlier than expected.”*

Selected Quotes from CPOs (continued)

- *“We are seeing the ‘Great Resignation.’ We reviewed salaries for specific functional groups – we did it at the midyear. We also decided to give additional equity grants to our top performers.”*
- *“There are big demands on compensation and... the data is always behind the market.”*
- *“The data we had been purchasing did not support our geographies accurately. Now, we have been using [PayScale](#) which is crowdsourced and covers all roles, so it provides the real time data that we need to be competitive.”*
- *“Our BOD is really emphasizing compensation. We are trying to improve how we communicate our compensation philosophy and methodology because there is a lot of ‘noise’ out there. We want to stick to our plan and be able to clearly explain it.”*
- *“We’re seeing wage inflation across the board. External hires are now being paid more and internal employees are frustrated by the differential. We’re looking at rewarding existing employees with more stock...”*
- *“Salaries are out of control. People want a 30% increase to move. That’s keeping me up at night and it’s affecting internal equity. Market studies are not able to keep up because it’s moving so fast. Also, not being able to directly ask salaries is hurting our ability to manage compensation.”*
- *“We are seeing that many people are a lot less attracted by Options and want RSUs instead.”*
- *“We had a downsizing exercise and other companies are really descending on us for our talent.”*
- *“Appreciating stock covers all ills, so we have been very fortunate to hang onto our talent.”*

Mandating COVID Vaccines for Employees?

- *“We became fully vaccinated as a company in September. We had [Dr. Margaret Liu](#), founder of the field of DNA-based vaccines, present. That helped to get every employee over the hump.”*
- *“To come onsite at many workplaces, you have to be vaccinated. So, our sales leaders are being given latitude to terminate their team members who are refusing vaccination.”*
- *“We are mandating vaccines to return to the office and to meet with customers.”*
- *“We are developing a policy for employees that need to be in the office or in front of customers but refuse to be vaccinated. They will be asked to take ‘personal leaves’ without job guarantees.”*
- *“We mandated a vaccine by September 1st. We have a framework for religious objections, and we worked with Cooley to develop it. It is strict and it helped push some employees to get vaccinated who were on the fence.”*
- *“We have had a medical accommodation, but the religious accommodation is harder to approve. We have a form that we’re revising where the person seeking the exemption must allow us to verify what they’re claiming with their religious leader.”*
- *“It comes down to: how much do you really want to fight religious accommodations? At the same time, why have a mandate at all if one can claim exemption without providing real proof?”*
- *“We mandated the vaccine and employees must meet that requirement by November 1st. Right now, we have a 98% vaccination rate at our company. We will terminate with severance for anyone who does not comply.”*
- *“We had one case of an employee trying to pass off a fraudulent vaccination card...”*
- *“We are requiring all new hires to be vaccinated.”*

Selected Quotes from CPOs (continued)

- *“We took a hard approach partly because our CEO caught COVID and spent two weeks in the hospital (pre-vaccine). We will let employees go if they don’t get vaccinated.”*
- *“We have three employees who haven’t yet been vaccinated. I’ve talked to them individually and they have until January to comply. I feel we are ahead of the curve. Until then, they must produce a negative COVID test before coming onsite.”*
- *“There was a lot of debate about whether to mandate vaccination or not. Since we are a science-based company, the leadership decided to require it. I am happy that we did.”*
- *“We announced we would be requiring vaccination for all back in April. As a science-based company, our CEO’s stance has been: ‘You shouldn’t work here if you don’t believe the science.’”*
- *“We have opposing views (within the executive ranks). Many want a vaccine mandate, and the others are worried about being able to retain people, especially in manufacturing/operations.”*
- *“We’re testing the unvaccinated employees weekly and it’s onerous for us as a small company.”*
- *We don’t want to give the impression we are ‘rewarding’ non-vaccinated employees by allowing them to work from home indefinitely. We are still trying to figure it out.”*
- *“We are finding among our employees that contracting COVID is much more common than several months ago due to Delta. It’s usually related to extended family gatherings.”*
- *“We have two facilities in the Carolinas, two in Canada, and one in California. None of our facilities’ vaccination rates are that high. 43% of our workforce in the South does not intend to get vaccinated. With the newest variants, this has started becoming a bigger deal. We’ve had nurses’ aides walk the production floor to cite people who are not wearing their masks properly”.*
- *“Our company is headquartered in the U.K., and there are a lot of privacy and legal issues that have prevented us from requiring vaccination...”*
- *“We want to mandate vaccinations, but some executives are nervous about losing good people. Unfortunately, the FDA approval didn’t move the needle much. The sad truth is our Costa Rica plant is 97% vaccinated, compared to only 80% of our people in the United States.”*
- *“There are so many different policies between the 50 states, local cities, counties and internationally! It is impossible to have a single plan that covers everything.”*
- *“We did a voluntary ask of our employees to find out who was vaccinated. We found that we had a 90% vaccination rate, but the remaining 10% who would not respond were very vocal about the ask being a ‘violation of their privacy.’”*
- *“We are scrambling to find third party software that will help us track all the vaccine/testing requirements... Google is piloting a tool for tracking testing, and we are looking at it.”*
- *“[ADP’s Return to Workplace](#) module is good. Employees are required to upload a vax card.”*
- *“We have used [Workday’s Vaccine Management](#) capabilities to configure and capture the data.”*
- *“[Envoy](#) is now also being used to track vaccination statuses of employees...”*
- *“We have been tracking vaccinations through [CrisisGo](#).”*
- *“We have been tracking via [HireRight](#).”*
- *“We feel obligated to let other attendees know if people who will be on site or at company events are not vaxxed. Those that are not vaxxed need to take a test and be negative to attend.”*
- *“It feels like no one is leading on policy because no one wants to get sued first!”*

Selected Quotes from CPOs (continued)

Planning an On-Site, Remote, or Hybrid Future?

- *“We are driving a return to office and highlighting the benefits of in-office connection and a vibrant culture. So, we are not supporting remote work as we move forward. Our CEO feels strongly about this, and we communicate this while interviewing and onboarding. We have still been able to attract great talent, but I worry about sustainability over the long-term if we don’t offer flexibility.”*
- *“We are enticing people back to the office with free food. Many employees are seeking out deeper connections with colleagues and there is community in eating together at the office.”*
- *“We find that our employees are craving connections — particularly in Europe, where being in the office is a large part of people’s social life.”*
- *“I am concerned that ‘remote only’ is an extreme reaction to something that’s happened in the past 20 months. Is this the healthiest way for long-term work? Is it the best way to build trust and relationships? Are we reacting to a moment? Data on new entrants to the workforce shows they want a back-in-office option, mentorship, and choice. Plus, many senior executives making these decisions are not going to be working too much longer. Yet, they are making the decisions that will have long-lasting impacts on the junior employees and the future workforce.”*
- *“We are pushing a return to site in February 2022. We will wait until after the holiday family gatherings to see if there is a COVID spike. Our CEO is very eager to get full teams back to the office. We will have less than 5% of our company remote. There are plenty of other companies you can go to if you want to be fully remote.”*
- *“Our executive team is very divided on what to do. Ideally, they’d want to see everyone in the office several days per week. But why rock the boat if we’re having such success while remote?”*
- *“We feel the future of work is hybrid. Everyone is expected onsite 3 days per week. But we are finding candidates are getting more aggressive in their demands around remote expectations.”*
- *“The pandemic kicked away assumptions about people being unproductive away from an office.”*
- *“The expectation for our hybrid employees is to be here 3 days per week. But we are fluid as to when and for how long they should be onsite... What’s common is someone coming in for a 10am meeting, having a working lunch with colleagues, attending another meeting, and leaving before hitting peak traffic, say at 2:30pm.”*
- *“We feel everyone is going to choose when/where they want to work -- there are so many opportunities in our industry. So, we’re going hybrid to capture the broadest possible pool.”*
- *“We’ve empowered managers to decide: can X person perform effectively in a remote setting?”*
- *“Our biggest demographic, pre-pandemic, was remote employees. So, when everyone went to remote, the world was better for us. We will now be fully remote but host quarterly events when people can get together, and we will invest in those events. We’ll have a WeWork option for folks who can’t work from their homes. But the office will be for off-sites or meetings.”*
- *“We think the phrase ‘return to site’ is a bit of a myth. We’re workforce planning for the future and we will try to encourage, but not force, certain days in the office. We are going to be flexible, and we are hiring a lot of talent outside the Bay Area now.”*
- *“We’ve moved to a mindset of: ‘let’s hire talent where the talent is.’ Now, 27% of our employees are remote. We’ve really closed our ‘time to fill’ with this approach... It was so competitive to find a VP Regulatory Affairs in SF or Boston, but we just found a great leader for us in Indiana.”*

Selected Quotes from CPOs (continued)

- *“We’re moving along the ‘flexible work path.’ Before the pandemic, we only hired people in California -- we didn’t want to create other legal entities. But now we’re reconsidering which states we would want to have employees located in, and in which ones we don’t.”*
- *“We have multiple locations across the U.S. and it’s a different world outside of California -- fully up and running. We see a split remote/hybrid model as a competitive advantage going forward. Many want to come in regularly to feel closeness with their teams. But some positions are very hard to recruit for and we feel certain roles can be remote with occasional visits to our sites.”*
- *“We’re bending to keep our talent. We’ve now retreated on our original position of location-based pay. So, we will not be adjusting compensation for people who have relocated out of California, but that will impact eligibility for increases going forward.”*
- *“We’re working on balancing inequities between those who need to work on-site and those who don’t. So, we are being flexible with alternative hours. We’re also discussing four 10-hour days for our company’s new standard as a work week.”*
- *“Problems are cropping up... For example, in manufacturing, we are hearing complaints that a remote office worker, who used to come onto the factory floor to help troubleshoot a problem right away, is now taking 3-4 days to respond. The plant supervisor feels forced to take on the work that this unresponsive person used to do in a timely fashion.”*
- *“We are starting to see productivity and accountability issues with some of our remote workers. Also, average leaders really don’t do well in a remote management environment.”*
- *“Two related issues with a remote and hybrid environment are overwork and a lack of ‘prioritization’—everything is urgent. So, we are implementing [Rhythm Systems](#) as a tool to help us chose and manage goals and objectives and then to stay true to each other on our priorities.”*
- *“When the most prominent companies, like Google and Facebook, delay their return to office, our employees react to their announcements. We feel like we need to follow suit...”*
- *“I think many of us have felt so productive working from home that there is going to be an illusion of lower productivity in moving back to an office setting -- even in a hybrid model. As people leaders, we need to communicate that connecting over lunch or taking a walk with a colleague is a valuable way to spend our time. There can’t be a persistent feeling of: ‘How are we going to get our work done?’ We must encourage reengagement between colleagues on-site.”*
- *“I’ve been advocating for leaders to articulate why they want people back in the office. Is it for arranging purposeful events? What does that look like for their team? Why does it matter that someone’s zooming in from home for this specific meeting? I want to take away the stigma.”*
- *“I’m pushing for managers to be really intentional about how we bring people together. Will it be for a retreat or brainstorming for a specific project? Do we need a cross-section of employees present? If yes, can we facilitate that, so people interact with folks in other parts of our org?”*
- *“We’re allowing more and more people to move and work remotely. We’ve bumped up salaries across the board, but merits will be less and less going forward.”*
- *“My patience is at an all-time low with colleagues who do not want to come back on-site even in a hybrid model. I am increasingly intolerant of that mindset – especially for those who live within a 20-mile radius of the office. Hallway conversations are important, and our culture suffers...”*
- *“If a role is not tied to a lab bench or manufacturing floor, there’s an expectation for flexibility.”*

Selected Quotes from CPOs (continued)

- *“In ten years, I am afraid we are going to look back at this period and see how much it has set working women and mothers back -- related to employment options, compensation, et cetera. Many are not going to come back to the office anytime soon, and it will hurt their careers.”*
- *“I think we’ll definitely see a return to having location bias. If people are hired away from where the core leadership team is, their careers will suffer. That will drive people back to the hubs.”*
- *“We’ve had many folks relocate outside of California. People we thought would leave have actually stuck around to see what happens with our approach to remote work. If we continue to maintain flexibility, we’ll keep headcount. If we’d been more rigid, we would’ve already lost many people.”*
- *“I was called by another CPO who asked me about one of our remote employees: ‘Is (John Doe) still at your company?’ I said, ‘Yes.’ Then he replied, ‘Well, (John Doe) is working here too and has been for some time!’ So, keep an eye out for ‘meeting dodgers.’”*

What to Advocate for in 2022’s HR Budget?

- *“Big initiatives for us are investing more in onboarding capabilities as well as in management development. We’ve done some good cohort-based leadership trainings that have been well received. We’re seeing good results from those, and we feel it’s smart to push it further down.”*
- *“We’ve secured [LinkedIn Learning](#) for the whole company, which is not cheap, but it is helping equip our managers with the right tools.”*
- *“Development plus Diversity, Equity & Inclusion are top priorities.”*
- *“We are embracing the ‘Reimagined Workplace’ and are spending a lot of money to support our managers with development tools -- to better lead their remote and distributed teams.”*
- *“Despite the fact that we’ve had a Reduction-In-Force, our Learning & Development budget has gone up. We’ve added Resilience Training for overcoming the business challenges we’re facing.”*
- *“We are investing in [Bravely](#) for coaching and [Spring Health](#) for mental healthcare.”*
- *“Our HR department is investing in tech enablement to drive greater productivity. We are also focusing more on our talent brand, talent development, and bringing on more talent sourcers.”*
- *“We are focused on adjusting compensation for existing employees to move them up to market rates and improve our retention.”*
- *“We’re ensuring that our physical spaces at the office are more hybrid friendly...”*
- *“We need to get better on employee engagement and are now using a tool called [Energage](#)...”*
- *“DEI is an area where we’re focusing – especially with more targeted campus outreach.”*
- *“We’re highlighting new manager training with [Better Manager](#), and new employee trainings.”*
- *“We are enriching remote work, funding monthly and quarterly get-togethers to enhance the culture. We have monthly ‘recharge days’ –one day per month to support mental health. People love it and are getting together with colleagues on those days. The feedback has been great!”*

Recommending the Chief People Officer Job or Not?

- *“Now, more than ever, a CPO path is great to pursue because we have more impact than ever before. In this unprecedented time, you can get your fingerprints all over an organization.”*
- *“Being a CPO is super challenging, but we are seeing ourselves in a unique spotlight due to the impact we are making within our organizations right now.”*

Selected Quotes from CPOs (continued)

- *“COVID has created a lane for People Operations that wasn’t there before. Many of us are finally being seen as strategic partners. We’ve finally gotten pulled into those key meetings. We shouldn’t be going backwards now. It’s a ‘thank you for seeing what I’ve been telling you for years...’ situation. We will move forward and make big asks.”*
- *“There is increased visibility in our role now. We have had to keep everyone safe during the pandemic, and we have been up for the challenge. We all have played a vital role in navigating our organizations through significant change management over the past two years.”*
- *“Unlike nearly every other position on the executive team, the CPO role is as broad as the company wants it to be. This field is one that allows a lot of innovation year to year as well.”*
- *“The CPO job hits all the different pockets of an org and remains a noble and great profession. It’s one of the few functions where you can really learn about every different aspect of the company.”*
- *“You need to have your battery fully charged to step into a Chief People Officer role, that’s for sure. The expectations and needs for a CPO have never been higher!”*
- *“We may all need a monthlong sabbatical right now, but there has never been a more consequential time to be a Chief People Officer. We’ve emerged as real problem solvers. You are both exhilarated and exhausted in this job – those two states can coexist.”*
- *“ESG and DEI have played a part in increasing our visibility too. Boards and Wall Street are seeing our role as the Chief People Officer quite differently now.”*
- *“Moving forward, I think we’re going to perhaps see more CEOs rise up through the HR ranks.”*
- *“It’s so exhausting. I have seen a lot of people who started out, earlier in their careers, in this field. Now they have moved into ops or consulting. Anyone recruiting for HR talent knows it’s so tough!”*
- *“I don’t want to have to manage COVID anymore in my CPO role. So, I would only recommend this career path if someone else took on COVID oversight – the masks, vaccinations, testing, etc.”*
- *“I think we are often underpaid compared to others in the C-Suite and there is an underlying element of misogyny/racism. Too often, the lone female member or lone person of color within the C-Suite is the Chief People Officer.”*
- *“We must look at what other people are paid within the C-Suite. Often HR is the lowest on the totem pole. We must advocate for ourselves a little bit more -- we have all the data.”*