

Chief People Officer Roundtable Series

Q1 2025 Summary



Overview

In March 2025, FlemingMartin convened roundtable discussions with more than 100 Chief People Officers (CPOs) from leading Technology and Life Science companies across the United States. These conversations provided valuable insights into the priorities and challenges faced by HR leaders.

Key discussion topics included:

- CEO performance reviews and best practices for delivering feedback.
- The influence of federal policies on return-to-office (RTO), diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and immigration strategies.
- The most pressing human capital concerns for boards and executive teams.
- The relative importance of employee retention versus performance management in 2025.
- Strategic investments that have enhanced CPO effectiveness.

Below are the key themes from these discussions as well as suggested resources shared by the attendees (consolidated on the final page).

Does your company conduct performance reviews for your CEO and, if so, who delivers the feedback?

Most companies are conducting performance reviews for their CEO, but it was clear from our discussions that many companies can tighten up their processes significantly in this area. At publicly traded companies the Board Chair or Compensation Committee Chair often leads the reviews and at private companies, this responsibility is typically held by the board, by the CEO's executive coach, or by the Chief People Officer.

How are the Federal Government's actions related to RTO, DEI, and Visas influencing your company's plans, if at all?

Most of our participant companies are not making any dramatic changes to their policies based on the Federal Government's recent actions. However, several companies are attempting to lower their public DEI profile. At least one company is leveraging the Government's stance against hybrid work to roll out a more aggressive RTO policy. Several participants mentioned frustration [related to U.S. policy] from their international employees and increased anxiety from employees seeking visa renewals.

A recent [survey by WTW](#) (see Exhibit 4) revealed that Succession Planning and Leadership Development are, by far, the most important human capital topics to board members. What additional human capital topic would you like your board and executive team to spend more time discussing?

AI training emerged as the number one human capital topic deserving of increased Board/Exec Team focus in our discussions. It is clear that we are still in the early days of AI adoption. The potential for AI usage is widely accepted, but most of our participants are still not using AI within HR in a meaningful way. Most are counting on vendors to develop solutions and training that can be more easily deployed.

Which is the greater concern for you in 2025: [employee retention](#) or [performance management](#)?

A few companies still had concerns about retention, especially if there was a perceived loss of belief in the company's prospects. That said, most participants were focused on performance management and goal alignment. Some CPOs lamented that their attrition was below healthy levels.

What recent investment has allowed you to be even more effective as a Chief People Officer?

A number of AI tools were mentioned and there was an interesting contrast between some CPOs that invested in stronger HR Business Partners and several that had eliminated HRBPs completely and were investing in a self-service model for their managers instead.

Select Highlights

Topic 1: Does your company conduct performance reviews for your CEO and, if so, who delivers the feedback?

- I got tapped to get confidential feedback on the CEO and present it to the Compensation Committee Chair, who delivers the feedback.
- Our independent director delivers the feedback.
- In my prior public company, the Nomination & Governance committee managed the feedback process. My current company is VC-backed and the CEO raised the question, “Shouldn’t I get a review by the board?” I encouraged her not to seek it out at this time because our growth is down.
- We are a private company. Our founder & Chair does the review with the CEO.
- [VC-backed company] When I joined, feedback was collected externally by the CEO’s executive coach. At first, we presented together and now I do it myself. The board does not get involved.
- This is the first year doing a review for the CEO and their executive coach delivered what I collected and consolidated.
- We partnered with our PE firm, Francisco Partners, and they use [Roster](#), which aggregates all the CEO feedback across the portfolio.
- We are owned by a Japanese company, so the CEO gets feedback directly from Japan.
- Public company board members often sit on other boards so they aren’t too involved--especially if the stock is going in the right direction. I thought they would be more rigorous.
- I have given feedback to the CEO with the CEO’s coach. It was just the three of us, so it was a more trusting environment and the feedback was anonymous - aggregated into themes.
- Our CEO does the executive team’s performance reviews, and the BOD reviews the CEO every quarter.
- Our CEO says he only accepts feedback that has a name tied to it.
- I’m surprised how informal it is. I have had one exception in my career. I sent an article on the [everyday habits of the CEO](#) by McKinsey. The CEO loved it and we turned it into a survey. It was such a helpful exercise. I can’t believe it isn’t done more formally.
- In a start-up it is different because the board works so closely on a daily basis with the CEO.
- At times, you get Boards that suggest retaining a (CEO) coach. I have done it in the past and the challenge is that the coaches don’t work with the CEO on a day-to-day basis. It is better when feedback comes from the BOD and those working directly with the CEO.

Topic 2: How are the Federal Government’s actions related to RTO, DEI, and Visas influencing your company’s plans, if at all?

RTO:

- Our CEO changed his mind and referenced how many other companies came back five days a week. He referenced the federal government coming back too. Effective today, everybody has to be in the office four days a week. I talked him out of five days a week. We have a lot of dissent. For the most part, the executive team thought two days a week from home was fair. But they respect the CEO’s decision. He knows there may be a lot of disagreement and perhaps turnover. We gave at least a month and a half notice. Everybody that wants to work one day a week from home has to fill out an actual form to be approved.

DEI:

- We are not making any changes to our programs.
- Our *DEI Council* is now going to be known as *The Council*.
- We now call it “Inclusion, Belonging, and Culture” – IBC instead of DEI.
- We are a federal contractor, so we have been cautious about what we are doing. When the executive order was signed, we had to come out with a statement for our customers. Some customers asked us to remove DEI training from our list of tools and instead of doing that, we told them how they could remove it themselves.
- We pumped the brakes on our affirmative action plan because we are looking to be a federal contractor. We are also looking at the language we are using.
- We partner closely with [a sister organization] which dissolved their DEI team, and we removed any reference to DEI on our website.
- On our website, we show our diversity stats... We’re consulting with outside counsel about this... We used to say that we try to make sure at least 20% of our hires are from underrepresented communities and have already taken that language out.
- We are being more conscious of language but not changing programs.
- We’ve had questions about travel. Is it safe to travel to the U.S.?
- We are a global company so we think about DEI beyond the U.S. Our [traditional customer] has been a white male that is pretty conservative, but our employees are diverse so we have to be thoughtful.
- We’re underscoring that we continue to support our ERGs, both on the financial side and with process and program support.

Immigration:

- About 25% of our employee population is on a visa, so we’ve retained additional counsel to help with the current situation.
- It is creating a lot of anxiety for our employees on visas.
- We recently had to send an employee all the way back to their home country in order to get their visa renewed.
- On immigration, we hosted a Q&A session with our attorneys. They didn’t record the session and employees could ask any questions they wanted to. It was well received.
- Our R&D is out of Pakistan and so we have updated our immigration and H1B programs. We proactively moved an engineer to Canada from Pakistan and we had never done that before.
- We are slowing down our hiring of candidates that require visas.

Other:

- The BOD asked me to present a “risk assessment” of the implications of the federal changes and how they affect us. They don’t want us to be on the front page.
- We are seeing DOGE showing up in our environment. We have some managers asking their people to write a summary of what they have accomplished over the last two weeks.
- We are seeing interesting movement on the TA side. Lifetime government employees are applying for our jobs.
- We were establishing a federal practice. We had a contract to implement Workday for [a government body] and it has been canceled, so we are moving away from the Federal business.
- Our global teams are disappointed and ask the question, “Why is the US doing this to us?”
- Two different employees asked if we would support them if they moved out of the country, since they are afraid of staying in the US right now.

- In the workplace, there are zero-sum situations. We have moved to a spot where you can personally have your opinion but in the workplace, we are going to focus on bringing people together so don't put your political statements on Slack.

Topic 3: A recent [survey by WTW](#) (see Exhibit 4) revealed that Succession Planning and Leadership Development are, by far, the most important human capital topics to board members. What additional human capital topic would you like your board and executive team to spend more time discussing?

- I don't want to add anything. I just want to gain better traction on those two topics (Succession Planning and Leadership Development).
- We're still private and our BOD is mostly investors. All they want to talk about is money and the product.
- It can be like opening a can of worms. I give a very high-level update on the state of the team but discourage the board from getting into the weeds. Thankfully, they are more focused on [the product] and the financing.
- We are focused on cost optimization and looking at the bottom line. I wish [the board and executive team] would also focus on the risk associated with cost optimization.
- Our board focuses more on compensation than on succession and development.
- The BOD does not seem to value executive team development. I [believe that] when executives see it's important for themselves, they will do it more with their team.
- We need leaders to understand what is working and not working in the organization. If you enable that as the CPO, it ensures the CEO and leaders do their jobs. I'm shocked by ELT members that don't know their own goals.

AI:

- We are getting pressure from the board to monetize AI features in our product AND for internal efficiencies. Every department is looking at how to incorporate AI.
- We realized people don't know what they are doing with AI. So, we are investing in basic AI training and the potential risks and dangers of using AI.
- We have an EA who started taking notes with [Zoom's](#) AI tool. When she observed how effective the tool was, she worried she was going to lose her job. Some people have been here 25 years and [the advancement of] AI can be scary, so how do we get them comfortable?
- The reality is if you can't work with an AI companion, you won't be successful. A recruiter who isn't using AI won't be successful. AI tools are the bare minimum of how you need to do your job.
- I'm telling my team to use one AI tool. Some people are nervous to try. It is about being less worried on being right and more focused on being curious.
- One CPO encouraged other CPOs to experiment with [PyCharm](#), an IDE for Python Development. The tool allows non-technical people to extract the information they need from their systems. The user enters prompts to write the code similar to ChatGPT for generating emails or documents.

Topic 4: Which is the greater concern for you in 2025: [employee retention](#) or [performance management](#)?

- Retention is less of an issue now because the outside market isn't as strong as it was a few years ago.
- We restructured last year to manage out low performers. Our growth is slower this year, so we are getting company confidence questions and are more focused on how we retain our top talent.

- We are focused on retention as we are at 25-30% attrition. The employees are uncertain about the company's future, so AI start-ups are picking off our engineers.
- We are more focused on goals and company achievements. Does everyone understand what they need to do to be successful? We have scary low attrition.
- We have incredibly low turnover, which creates a whole host of other challenges. Merit pools are so little these days, it is hard to drive change with the merit process.
- Employee retention is not that big of a concern for me. We were at 10% turnover last year and 5% now. Still below the benchmark of 16-17%...
- We spent 18 months implementing a performance-based pay system. Our hope is that the new compensation alignment will solve our retention issues. We also have a high equity burn rate.
- Put tension in the budgets. Managers will do the right thing with the money [versus performance ratings].
- We have a few [people] that are a single point of failure so I want to make sure we train others. We are using succession planning to do this, but I'm not sure we have anyone identified internally. There is a hero mentality here that we are changing slowly. If I were the board and I knew this was the situation I would want to fire me so I'm trying to fix this [ASAP].
- We are accelerating talent in a way that I'm afraid we are going to break them.
- Our stock-based compensation expense is too high like many other tech companies.
- I'm dealing with early employees who are asking about refresh grants.
- We used the [Boxcar methodology](#) for refresh grants. Our investors love it and want to use it at other companies. It is very helpful for early lifecycle companies. You can't switch to it. We worked with [Cooley](#), but they haven't been great. We shifted to [King & Spalding](#).
- I have done several different reworks on equity. Be thoughtful about international issues.
- I just engaged with [Hands on Learning](#) [for performance management]. I didn't expect their offerings to be as good as they are. [Kathryn Matz](#) is our contact there.

Topic 5: What recent investment has allowed you to be even more effective as a Chief People Officer?

- We recently invested in enhancing Workday.
- Investment in coaching and training.
- I was certified in [Leadership Effectiveness Analysis](#) last year and that has proven to be a very helpful tool to help assess and develop leaders. Last year, I ran our Executive Team and VPs through the program, which led to every person creating their own development plan.
- We implemented [Modern Health](#) which is a platform to help employees. They get 6 therapy and 6 coaching sessions. It took off in EMEA. The CEO made a point to tell them to try it out. We also brought in a program called [Men and Women of Discomfort](#) (MWAD). I did the fitness and ice baths. It was a complete reset and reminded me that I can do hard things. Cost is \$75 dollars per employee.
- We have been using [Motivosity](#) as an employee recognition tool. Employees like it and it's easier to control the spending with this tool, since everything starts at \$1.
- Another CHRO recommended [Assembly](#) as an employee recognition tool.
- We rolled out a leadership development program using an instructional designer and [Articulate 360](#) as the platform. Our goal is to be a manager-led organization.
- We invested in a compensation tool called [Comprehensive](#), which integrates with our talent management system ([15Five](#)) and has significantly improved our comp process. It's been a huge upgrade from using spreadsheets, providing analysis, creating reward letters, and enabling me to look at total rewards more strategically instead of spending so much time in the weeds.

- We added [Included AI](#), which takes data from our HRIS, our performance management system, and our ATS, then creates metrics and slides. It is an easy tool and not a lot of work.
- When we wrote budgets as an ELT, we decided we were going to hire two data analysts for just the ELT. This has helped us improve our dashboards tremendously. Now, every team can shine, not just Sales and Finance. The board was impressed. It meant getting comfortable with a 25-year-old [analyst] telling you what they are seeing in the data.
- I am focused on making sure we have strong HRBPs globally. It is so strategic and so important not to skimp on this headcount.
- I radically changed HR by eliminating our HRBPs. I now have two people focusing on org effectiveness and enabling managers to be leaders and everything else is for manager self-service. Everyone was nervous but we found that the change is accelerating leadership and management skills because they don't have the crutch of the HRBP. The HR team loves it because they don't get the question, "Where do I find this?" Also, they are free to work on strategic things. No doubt, we will have bumps in the road. As an enterprise, we will be light years ahead. I took out about half of my team yet those still here feel free and empowered to do more strategy work. [Note: Two other CPOs in this roundtable mentioned they have done or are about to do the same thing.]

Miscellaneous

Generational Differences:

- I'm curious about the generational challenges or what I call the "[Silver Tsunami](#)" while Gen Z is entering the workforce. People don't want to hire Gen Z because they think they are not loyal. What can we do to harness the Gen Z population?
- On the retirement side, we are working on a returning retiree program for retirees to work on gig assignments.
- We are focused on early career and college graduates...[Gartner](#) came in and presented information to us which showed the drivers for this generation. Being treated with respect was at the top. Benefits were also important as they are leaving their parents health plans for the first time. Based on what we learned, we are implementing a rotation program for new hires because the data indicates they are not patient about working in one area for an extended period.
- A [NY Post article](#) highlighted that one of the biggest perks for Gen Z was "micro-retirements."
- We take people that want to retire and reduce their hours. We match them with people needing to learn new skills. We also have an Opportunities Module which lists projects that need to be done and people can apply. They get to learn new things. It is taking off after only a month.
- We have learned that a lot of our employees have side gigs.
- I have seen examples of our sales reps also selling other products.
- We recently discovered that two of our employees are also fully employed with other biotech companies. We found out by chance, which makes me think there may be others doing the same thing. This is a clear violation of our policies, and both employees were terminated in a pretty public manner so that we could make an example of them.
- Some managers think we "own employees' time" and some think we own their output. It is fascinating to see it play out.

Resources List

AI Tools

- [Cursor AI](#) (Edits AI Code)
- [Eightfold](#) (TA tool)
- [Findem](#) (Talent Acquisition)
- [Goodtime](#) (AI Hiring)
- [Hacket Study on AI workforce](#)
- [Included AI](#) (People Analytics)
- [Juicebox](#) (AI Sourcing)
- [Kindred Minds](#) (AI Leadership Coaching for Managers.)
- [Metaview](#) (Transcribes and Summarizes interviews)
- [Poe](#) (LLM model)
- [PyCharm](#) (IDE for Python Development)
- [ThoughtfulGPT](#) (AI Consultant)

Benefits

- [Assembly](#) (Employee Recognition Tool)
- [Cocoon](#) (Employee Leaves)
- [Men and Women of Discomfort](#) (Fitness)
- [Modern Health](#) (Mental Health)
- [Motivosity](#) (Employee Recognition Tool)

Coaches / Speakers / Authors

- Laury Hammel, author of [How to Build Business Partnerships that Strengthen your Community](#)
- [Fred Kohler](#) (Coach Recommendation)
- [Sabina Nawaz](#), author of [You're the Boss](#)
- [Caitlin O'Riordan](#) (Coach Recommendation)

HRIS

- [Rippling](#) (HRIS and Payroll)
- [Workday](#) (ERP)

Legal

- [Clifford Chance](#) (International Equity)
- [Cooley](#) (Equity Refresh)
- [King & Spalding](#) (Equity Refresh)

Talent Development / Training

- [15Five](#) (Talent Management System)
- [Articulate 360](#) (Leadership Development Tool)
- [Cashman Leadership](#) (CEO Development)
- [Everyday Habits of the CEO](#) (McKinsey)
- [Gartner HR](#)
- [Hands On Learning](#) (Performance Management Consulting)
- [Josh Bersin Academy](#) (HR Training)
- [Lattice](#) (Performance Management)
- [Leadership Circle](#) (360 Reviews)
- [Leadership Effectiveness Analysis](#) (Assessment Tools)
- [LinkedIn Learning](#) (Training)
- [Roster](#) (Leadership Development)

Other

- [Alpine Rewards](#) (Compensation Consultant)
- [Boxcar Methodology](#) (Equity Tool)
- [Comprehensive](#) (Compensation Tool)
- [Jira](#) (Service Desk Tool)
- [Pave](#) (Compensation Tool)
- Article: [I'm a Gen Z worker who has taken 30 'micro-retirements' in three years — it's made me a better employee](#)