

# Chief People Officer Roundtable Series



## ***Q1 2026 Summary***

## Overview

This summary captures the most pressing priorities, challenges, and innovations discussed by Chief People Officers from leading tech and life sciences firms during our most recent Roundtable series. It is intended to inform HR strategy and executive decision-making for 2026 and beyond. Resources shared by attendees are consolidated on [the final page](#).

### **Key discussion topics included:**

- 2026 Corporate Economic Outlook Given AI Advancements, the “SaaSpocalypse,” and Geopolitical Uncertainty
- The Misunderstood Chief People Officer
- HR’s Strategic Role Going Forward
- Top Priorities for 2026

Additional discussions emerged related to enterprise org strategy related to AI, compensation trends, employee well-being, and AI fakes in recruiting. (see [Miscellaneous](#) section).

## Select Highlights

**Topic 1:** *At the end of 2025, our informal poll of HR leaders indicated guarded optimism for 2026... How are you feeling about your company’s prospects at present?*

### ***Cautious Optimism Amid Uncertainty***

**Positive sentiment included:** ongoing growth, strong financial results, better IPO prospects (for life science companies) and successful operational improvements.

**Areas negatively impacting confidence:** Ongoing turnaround efforts; market volatility; lower valuations (specifically for SaaS companies); external fears around AI-driven disruption; and the narrative created by large-scale layoffs at high-profile companies.

The IPO window for life science is open after years of limited activity whereas many software companies have put their IPO plans on hold due to valuation compression from expected AI competition.

Hiring for 2026 is largely expected to be in engineering and go to market roles. Most participant companies continue to keep G&A hiring to a minimum, which is putting strain on those functions.

- *We are going through a turnaround as a public company which is never easy--especially when you are hearing software and marketplace companies won’t exist. Some of the sentiments are real and some of them are an overreaction.*
- *We are finally achieving our enterprise operating plan and hitting growth targets.*
- *Last quarter, biotech transactions were better than the prior 4 years. Investors now have money to reinvest.*
- *We are cautious, but optimistic. We are on track for some big milestones in the next few months. but cash is still king.*

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**Topic 2:** *What's a key aspect of your job that you feel is misunderstood or overlooked by your executive team?*

### **HR's Strategic Role Remains Misunderstood**

Top areas overlooked by executive teams:

- Change management requirements (especially in AI adoption and reorganizations).
- The time, complexity, and legal risk associated with employee relations cases.
- HR's role in culture stewardship, communications, and organizational readiness.
- The fact that most business decisions have people implications, yet HR is often looped in too late.

Emerging tension:

- Many CEOs view HR primarily through a cost or productivity lens, not as a strategic partner.
- Culture remains important, but actions suggest it is being deprioritized compared to AI, productivity, and financial discipline.

**Takeaway:** HR is increasingly being asked to lead the transition to an AI-augmented workforce, yet many CEOs still see this work as transactional rather than strategic.

- *Most CEOs want things done yesterday without understanding what real people change requires. Driving change with culture is not easy.*
- *Some things are so nuanced especially something that might seem as basic as an executive offer for an international hire.*
- *The [Block layoff] story creates more fear. How do we keep people excited about AI? What is the right narrative? We have limited time with our ELT and 30 minutes to talk about talent isn't enough. Talent is a worthwhile investment for the future, and we need to be efficient and tell the story better so that the leaders buy-in.*
- *Our CEO gave the executive team a thought exercise after the Block layoff news came out... What would you do if you needed to cut 50% of your team? What would the cost profile be?*
- *Where I am now, they are cost focused. I plan to educate them on what great HR can mean to productivity and culture.*
- *Sometimes we have very scientific discussions, which I'm not always included in, because people don't understand the human dynamics involved in those decisions.*
- *You never know about someone's past experience with HR. I've found that people are surprised by how I use information to help instead of to punish people.*
- *Much of HR's value is difficult to capture. HR can shape an organization's culture through influence and storytelling. It's intrinsic to what we do, and sometimes not appreciated.*

### **Is Culture still top of mind?**

- *I don't think [our ELT] would admit that culture has moved down on the list of priorities, but their actions say that it has moved down.*
- *Culture is changing to where it is less about [employee satisfaction] and more about productivity and a culture of accountability.*

**Topic 3:** A recent *Fortune CHRO Newsletter* (3-minute read) argues that the next generation of chief people officers may need to look less like social scientists and more like workforce economists. Do you agree? Why or why not?

### **Leaders were divided, but key trends emerged**

- HR and Finance must operate “joined at the hip.”
- Workforce planning now requires a total cost of labor view, including FTEs, contractors, consultants, and AI agents.
- HR must demonstrate comfort with AI, automation, workforce analytics, and productivity modeling.

**But...** Many leaders argue that judgment, EQ, culture building, and human complexity still sit at the center of HR’s mandate. CPOs of the future will likely need a hybrid profile: Human-centered leadership + economic fluency + AI literacy.

- *We’re in 100 countries, and each has an HR group. We’re looking at creating Center-of-Excellence clusters in lower-cost locations and leveraging new technology more. So far, I’m seeing that people who can use the [AI] tech are the ones who will progress and allow us to be more effective.*
- *As I recently interviewed with different companies for the Head of HR role, I heard more about “the economics of people” in interviews than I had previously. CEOs are more concerned about rightsizing and getting the most out of people, and less about the culture.*
- *HR now has a unique opportunity to step in and help steward the integration of AI into the business. I’ve seen that HR can be an early adopter of AI and have the opportunity to show others how to leverage AI to be more productive.*
- *AI helps elevate and enhance HR so that it is more than just a service department. It frees up my team to do more higher-value work.*
- *It’s reasonable to argue that HR should be concerned with overall resources for the business, not just people resources. That said, I don’t think change moves as quickly as people are afraid it will.*

**Topic 4:** What is your top priority for 2026 and what information would you like from your CPO peers to help you achieve it?

### **Top Priorities:**

1. **Workforce planning** (most frequently mentioned).
2. **AI literacy and adoption** at scale.
3. **Driving productivity without eroding culture.**
4. **Building manager capability** in an era of fewer HRBPs.
5. **Recruiting velocity** and modernized hiring models.
6. **Data infrastructure & integrated toolsets.**
7. **Readiness for commercialization** in biotech and life sciences.

**Takeaway:** The HR agenda is shifting from programs to **systems**, from roles to **capabilities**, and from culture as sentiment to culture as **accountability + enablement**.

- *We are going to a self-service model with ideally a team of 10 [in HR] that are only doing thought partnership work. That is a really big shift for the current HR team I inherited. Our approach will be to give each manager the tools and then they have to go do it. Our philosophy is, “Don’t get between the manager and their employees.” HRBPs were a crutch so I have eliminated them in the past. If you have HRBPs in this model, they have to be really top talent, so they are invited to interesting conversations [because they are seen as adding value].*
- *We are transitioning to a commercial company and have added some new executive leadership. My priority is galvanizing employees through this change, especially those who have been here a long time and may not feel “as important” as we grow.*
- *I really want to provide more training on AI so that people are more comfortable with it and can better envision how it can improve their work productivity.*
- *Using AI to speed up recruiting. We are using Copilot and ChatGPT to make screenings faster. Many of the succession plans in place need to evolve. We are going through an aggressive return to office, and we tend to have hubs where people cluster.*

#### Miscellaneous:

#### Compensation

- *With an increase in applicants, some of our executives are choosing not to be as competitive with salaries.*
- *We are seeing job hugging and increasing fear related to job uncertainty from some employees, but we also found that we were under market compensation in some roles and adjusted up.*
- *Our philosophy is to pay the cost of labor not the cost of living.*
- *We offer generous benefits packages. Surprised people are not indexing more on benefits.*
- *Doing more early career perks in India versus equity.*
- *We have gone away from OTE and focused on base pay. Employees with target bonuses of \$10K or less would prefer the cash in their base.*
- *We have changed our RSU vesting schedule from 4 years (25% year one, 6 month vesting in equal installments for remainder of term) to 3 years (33% year one, 6 month vesting in equal installments for remainder of term).*
- *[Early-stage AI-native company] going to 40/30/20/10 vesting model to attract good people. OpenAI is doing Profit Participation Units (PPUs) after 6 months. Boards hate giving away more equity early.*

#### AI Usage...

- *We are really seeing an increase in fake candidates. We were on Greenhouse and moving to Ashby as it helps identify fakes. We actually hired someone out of North Korea but figured it out on their first day. [almost every attendee in this session echoed that fake profiles were an increasing challenge.]*
- *We have sped up our contract process using AI. Our Account Executives are throwing fits at how fast legal is operating. Legal used to be a convenient excuse for them not closing deals more quickly.*
- *We built agents to handle employee questions, and it was incredible. The level of complexity the bot was able to handle was stronger than what we could have trained an employee to do in that short period of time. AI is great with “high complexity Q&A.”*
- *I see most companies bring AI in due to vendor enhancements or due to a process optimization. I personally think that’s the wrong way to think about AI because it’s not systemic. Companies are using*

*AI to measure productivity but that's the wrong ROI. The value of AI will be in allowing people to focus more on [breakout] creativity and innovation.*

#### **Dealing with Employee Stress:**

- *We've been looking at our health benefits and have seen a huge increase in services around psychology/therapy.*
- *There are blurred lines between world stress and work stress. Most companies are reluctant to comment because it moves into the territory of politics.*
- *We used to comment on things. We stopped and left it up to managers to create psychological safety so people can show up, have space to be themselves, and voice their concerns.*
- *We created a single ERG for the company. If someone wants to share about Ramadan or Yom Kippur, great. That's cultural, not political. Anyone can step up and share. It has worked out well.*
- *A lot of our employee base has been looking for us to solve all of the things going on in the world. Most bad things in the world won't change [soon]. These things are out of our control. Our emphasis is around how do you become a more resilient person? We get to change the world through our work, but we can't solve everything. Our approach is not met positively in some cases, but there's clarity that we won't comment on everything.*

#### **Other:**

- *I'm fascinated by how organizations will change when agents are included in headcount. I predict that that'll be the organizational structure of the future and we'll have fewer layers. It's a good time for leaders to dig into structures that didn't work in the past. I have a Chief of Staff agent, but it's not placed in the org chart. It scares employees if you put it in the org chart.*
- *HR ops is so manual; you'll be able to automate all of that so we're not considering offshoring as much. I worry about this next generation. Entry level is being decimated by AI.*
- *There is an emotional connection to the value of work and importance of having something to do. The psyche of the workforce could be problematic for the economy. [Howard Marks](#) did a [presentation](#) where he quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Knowledge is the antidote to fear." Takeaway: Be transparent about the company's roadmap and goals and talk openly with your team about what they need to be actively doing to benefit from technological change.*

## Resources List (Mentioned during the roundtables)

### FlemingMartin Resources

- [FlemingMartin and Thelander AI Compensation Panel – March 25, 2026, 10am PT Registration Link](#)
- [FM Talent Partner Summary](#) (Feb '25)
- [FM Operating Partner Summary](#) (Feb '25)

### AI Tools

- [ChatGPT](#) (OpenAI's AI Model)
- [Claude](#) (Anthropic AI Model)
- [Claude Coworker](#) (Agent Creation Tool)
- [CoPilot](#) (Microsoft's AI Model)
- [Eightfold](#) (AI Recruiting Software)
- [Gemini](#) (Google's AI Model)
- [GitHub Copilot](#) (Developer platform)
- [Google Agentspace](#) (AI Agent developer)
- [NotebookLM](#) (Google's AI Research & Writing Assistant)
- [Oracle Fusion](#) (AI Data Platform)
- [Perplexity](#) (AI Model cited for research)
- [Synthesia](#) (Text to Video AI Tool)

### Articles/Books/Events/Podcasts/Websites

- [AI Hurtles Ahead](#) (Howard Marks @ Oaktree)
- [The Claude-Native Law Firm - How I Actually Practice Law with AI in 2026](#) (Twitter / x.com post)
- [Confused About Generative AI in HR? Here's How To Run A Hackathon!](#) (Josh Bersin)
- [HR Heretics](#) (Podcast)
- [IBM is tripling the number of Gen Z entry-level jobs after finding the limits of AI adoption](#) (Fortune)
- [The Quiet Erosion of HR's Power](#) (Fortune)

### Coaches & Speakers

- [Valence](#) (AI Coach)

### Compensation & Benefits

- [Pave](#) (Compensation Data)
- [Rippling](#) (Payroll)
- [Sparrow](#) (Leave Management)

### HR Ops – Agent Tools for Service Desks

- [LeenaAI](#) (Noted reporting is not too robust)
- [Moveworks](#) (acquired by ServiceNow)
- [ServiceNow](#) (AI Data Platform)
- [Snowflake](#) (AI Data Platform)
- [Techwolf](#) (To analyze HR workflows)

### HRIS/ATS

- [Ashby](#) (ATS) Moving from Greenhouse to Ashby
- [Greenhouse](#) (ATS)
- [Lever](#) (ATS)
- [Workday](#) (HRIS)

### RPO Suggestions for a Life Science Commercial Launch

- [AmpersandPeople](#)
- [PrincetonOne](#)

### Talent Development/Org Development

- [15Five](#) (Performance Management)
- [Asana](#) (Human & AI Collaboration Platform)
- [Betterworks](#) (Performance Management)
- [CultureAmp](#) (Employee Survey) switching to [Qualtrics](#) for more depth
- [Gartner](#) (Using for workforce planning)
- [Lattice](#) (Performance Management w/succession planning tools)
- [LinkedIn Learning](#)
- [Sana](#) (Workday's AI Knowledge Tool)
- [SuccessFactors](#) (Performance Management)
- [Udemy](#) (E-Learning)

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