

FlemingMartin

Chief People Officer Roundtable Series

Q3 2026 Summary

Overview

This summary captures the most pressing priorities, challenges, and innovations discussed by Chief People Officers from leading tech and life science 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 into a [Resources List](#) at the end of this document.

Key discussion topics included:

- [Top Budget Priorities.](#)
- [AI Wins and Misses.](#)
- [Where is AI Adoption Stalling?](#)
- [New Roles, and Roles That Are Going Away.](#)

Key Takeaways:

- HR's standing with their executive teams rose for over half of respondents.
- AI adoption is stalling on coordination and regulation, not resistance.
- Healthcare renewal rates are up sharply.
- Life Science is adding Chiefs of Staff and Tech is not backfilling recruiters, HRBPs, and HR Ops.

We added two polling questions across our roundtables and included those results.

Additional discussions emerged related to **healthcare renewal costs, 401(k) matching, and fraudulent applicants** (see [Miscellaneous section](#)).



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FlemingMartin is a leading retained executive search firm focused on the Technology and Life Science industries. We partner with Boards, Venture Capital Firms, and CXOs to build successful, execution-focused management teams.

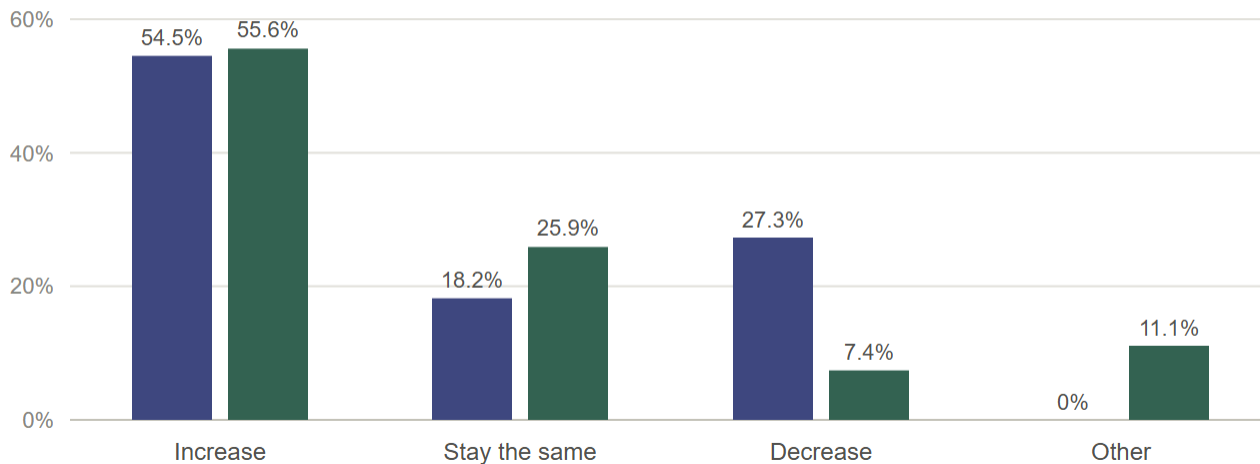
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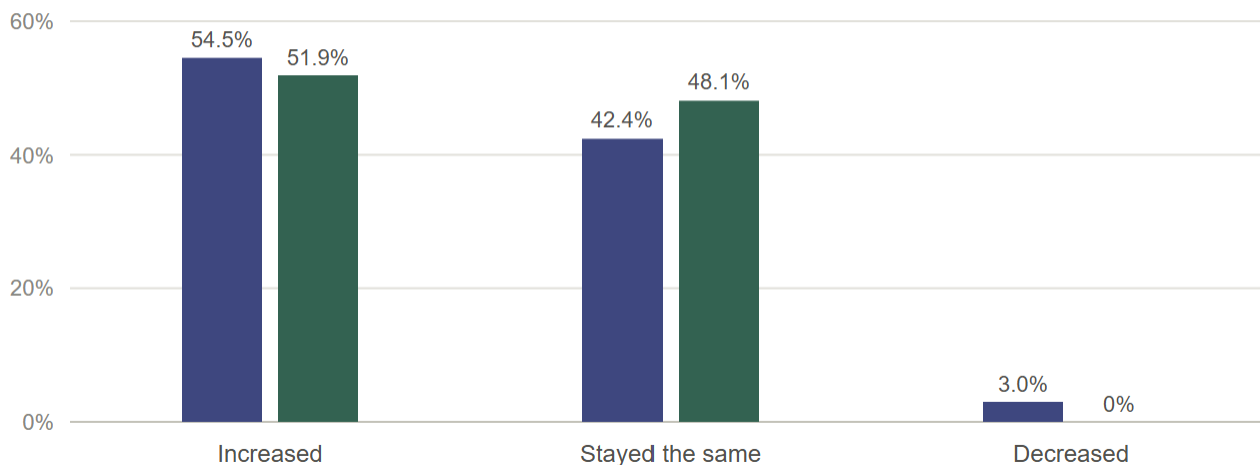
Q3 Poll Results

■ Tech ■ Life Science

Next quarter, my company's headcount will...



During the prior quarter, HR's reputation among the executive team has...



Select Highlights

Topic 1: What's the one company investment you're going to fight for next year?

“Technology” meaning AI-enabled HR automation was the single most common one-word answer for technology company Chief People Officers. Several attendees want a dedicated technical resource embedded in HR — an AI engineer, “talent engineer,” or an HR product-manager type that can map processes and build agents. Leadership development and total rewards were also popular.

For Life Science participants, headcount, leadership training for first-time leaders, and retention/equity refreshes were most common. Systems came up mainly as "we've outgrown spreadsheets" and healthcare renewal pain was arguably the loudest sub-thread: Anthem +50%, Aetna +40–50%, with companies leaving trusts and PEOs (TriNet received two "avoid" comments).

- HR Technology/Automation
 - HRIS
 - CRM
 - Performance Management System
- HR Staffing
 - AI Engineer
 - Project Manager for HR
 - Compensation Manager
 - HRBP
- Benefits
 - More compensation for top performers that are delivering greater results with AI
 - Shift from fully insured to self-funded programs to manage costs and maintain margins
 - 401k benefits
- Training/Leadership Development
- Retention Tools
- Culture
- Security technology to support expanding AI infrastructure
- Improving company margins
- More Tokens for SG&A

Topic 2: What has actually moved the needle on AI for you and where did you spend money that didn't pay off?

Tech: HR chatbots used for tier-one deflection. Talent Acquisition AI tools were the most concrete ROI with companies reporting reduced time-to-fill, better sourcing, and better coordination.

Life Science: Wins were mostly personal-productivity and AI training.

What has not worked:

- Automations built by one person that break when they leave the company.
- Encouraging people to experiment and "let a thousand flowers bloom" was expensive and confusing.
- Lack of governance and enterprise vision.

We have adopted a "get on board with AI or leave the company" approach.



We formed an ERG early on, but this was before we had controls. Legal was worried and slowed things down. We also tried an internal group run by IT that really didn't go anywhere. I talked with our CEO to bring in outside training on the basics. Gen AI Academy was a game changer! That said, people regress to their comfort level, so it's not a one-time fix.

I used Claude to help create a Leadership Model that I will use next year. It replaced a consultant for me!

We achieved an 80% ticket deflection rate through effective knowledge management. We started at 20-30% and kept refining our tools and content to get more wins.

I hired contractors for the workflows I knew we would automate because I knew we would not need to staff these roles long term.

Topic 3: Where has AI adoption stalled in your company and is it a skill problem, a fear problem, or a leader who doesn't believe in it?

- The problem is coordination, not resistance.
- Security, legal and confidentiality concerns are the top blockers in life science.
- Third-party risk management came up repeatedly. SOC 2 ≠ secure.
- Bad knowledge management, unorganized data, and broken processes with AI layered on top.
- Measuring AI adoption instead of business KPIs improved by AI.
- Tokens and budget. Agents stop working when tokens run out and people hesitate to build more.
- Uncertainty about selecting AI tools. What is hot today could be obsolete next quarter.
- Finance teams were the most-cited resistant function in tech.
- AI slop with no critical thinking.

Highlighted Thoughts:

- *Our HR team has invested heavily in our own AI knowledge. We must understand AI if we are going to advise the other functions as they think through work design and workflows. So, we spent a lot of time learning. Everyone on the (HR) team took different classes and then we shared what we learned. We did a bunch of "train the trainer" sessions for the company.*
- *I am fortunate that we have two engineers on our HR team. But... there's a danger in having an engineer on an HR team. What is their career development? Where do they go? Who do they learn from? In team meetings they ask, "Why is everyone talking about feelings so much? I just want to engineer something."*
- *It's shocking how little our admins are using AI!*
- *Our IT department and security people are extremely conservative.*
- *We are signing up for short-term contracts [for AI tools], so we can stay flexible and pivot.*

Topic 4: What role on your team or your leadership team didn't exist two years ago? What role are you quietly not backfilling?

New Roles (Life Science):

- *Our CEO had 13 reports and needs to be free to spend more time focused on investors and other external relationships, so we just hired a COO to take on some of the internal responsibilities.*
- *We hired a VP Strategic Ops, who is essentially a Chief of Staff. This hire is forcing communication that wasn't there.* Note: Chief of Staff mentioned by multiple Life Science attendees.
- *Our Chief Business Officer left, and that gave us an opportunity to ask whether we need that role now. We are now thinking about it differently and may create a Chief of Staff role instead.*
- *Head of Public Relations. We've used an IR firm, but now we're working with a PR firm to manage media and branding etc.*
- *We hired a President of R&D to consolidate responsibilities. Our CMO (Chief Medical Officer) and Regulatory and CSO all report to that person.*
- *We added a stand-alone Program Team Lead. This is a VP role on the ELT with the finesse and grit to push when needed. Game changer.*

New Roles (Tech):

- AI engineer / talent engineer / HR product manager (embedded in HR) / AI workforce enablement lead
- Head of HR technology
- Transformation office or workforce-transformation lead
- People analytics
- Director of Talent Planning (merging HRBPs and talent)
- Comp + workforce planning combined
- L&OD merged with TA
- Project manager with change management expertise
- A "linguist" to train AI agents
- Forward-deployed engineers (FDEs)
- GTM engineer/RevOps

Quietly not backfilling:

Tech:

- Recruiters
- HRBPs
- HR Ops
- Coordinators
- Program managers

- Shared Services
- Benefits administrators
- BDRs, SEs and SAs
- Hardware engineers (down to two)
- Junior engineers
- IT
- Quality Assurance (Two firms said QA teams essentially no longer exist at their companies)

Life Science: Much quieter on non-backfills.

Highlighted Thoughts:

- *I considered hiring an OD expert with depth in AI but landed on an HRBP instead. I am thinking it is more important to invest in the HRBP's learning how to be better in org design and AI.*
- *We still have roles that need to become more hybrid and span different teams, so that we can get more utilization out of everyone.*
- *I am thinking about getting rid of L&D. I've never been a fan of centralized L&D because I don't think most of us need to learn the same things at the same time.*
- *We split our CIO function into a CIO and CISO given the increasing risk/importance of security.*

Miscellaneous

Healthcare Renewal Costs

Participants voiced concern about receiving large healthcare insurance renewal increases from their brokers/carriers. The increases feel even more painful given consistently large increases during prior years. HMO plan costs appeared to be staying flat, but PPO plans were rising dramatically.

- *Our carrier came back with a 23% increase. We were able to get them to reduce their increase to just under 10% but it is not something that makes us want to celebrate.*
- *We self-insure, but we're seeing heavier utilization for some reason this quarter, which will increase our rates.*

401(k) Matching

Several attendees were advocating for matching programs for their 401(k) plans. However, with budgets tight and outsized increases in healthcare costs, many were stuck on how to proceed.

- *We started very modestly at 100% match up to 4% of salary with a max dollar cap per employee of \$1,500-\$2,000. We emphasized value to lower wage earners in year one.*
- *To increase participation, we automatically enroll everyone and then do a 1% increase on their auto-enrollment every year up to 10% of their salary.*



Fraudulent Applicants

One participant lamented that, *“AI has destroyed recruiting.”*

- *We use small talk during interviews to identify bots that cannot handle non-scripted interactions.*
- *We insert “fake skills” into job descriptions to automatically filter out AI-generated resumes. Good candidates ask us about it and appreciate that we are weeding out the bad actors.*
- *Rippling flags fraud tied to candidates with VOIP phone numbers or using the same resume with different names.*
- *A new LinkedIn profile without a photo is a big red flag for our recruiting team.*

Resources List

Mentioned during the roundtables.

FlemingMartin Resources

- [Takeaways from Q2 Chief People Officer Roundtable](#)
- [How CFO's Are Navigating the Start-Stop Economy](#)
- [Takeaways from VC/PE Talent Partner Roundtable](#)
- [What Top Operating Partners Are Doing Differently in 2026](#)

AI Tools & Training

- [Beamery](#) (AI Platform – Workforce Transformation)
- [The CHRO Office](#) (AI Training)
- [Fetcher](#) (AI Sourcing Tool)
- [Findem](#) (AI Sourcing Tool)
- [Gen AI Academy](#) (AI Training)
- [Glean AI](#) (AI Agent Platform)
- [GSTI](#) (AI Training)
- [HackingHR](#) (HR Focused AI Training)
- [Harper](#) (AI HR Teammate owned by WISQ)
- [Kimi](#) (Chinese LLM Lab)
- [Neon Pi](#) (AI Consulting for Biotech)
- [Noon.ai](#) (AI Sourcing Tool)
- [Perplexity](#) (AI Model cited for research)
- [PIN](#) (AI Sourcing Tool)
- [Runlayer](#) (Agent Permissioning Harness)
- [Sana](#) (AI Agent Platform owned by Workday)
- [SHRM](#) (AI Training)

Articles/Books/Events/Podcasts/Websites

- [Are AI tokens the new signing bonus or just a cost of doing business?](#) (TechCrunch)
- [Communicating AI Risks](#) (Brian Elliott)
- [How to Talk to AI](#) (Book by Jamie Bartlett)
- [HuggingFace Incident](#) (Wikipedia Entry)

Compensation & Benefits

- [Alpine Rewards](#) (Comp Consultant)
- [Lyra](#) (Mental Health)
- [Modern Health](#) (Mental Health)
- [Spring Health](#) (Mental Health)
- [United Pet Care](#) (Healthcare for Pets)

HRIS/ATS/HR Ops

- [ADP](#) (HRIS)
- [Ashby](#) (ATS)
- [Branner](#) (Catches Fake Applicants)
- [Greenhouse](#) (ATS)
- [Juicebox](#) (Recruiting Platform - expensive)
- [Lever](#) (ATS)
- [Metaview](#) (Recruiting Platform)
- [Paradox](#) (Conversational AI platform owned by Workday)
- [Paycom](#) (HRIS)
- [Rippling](#) (HRIS)
- [Sprockets](#) (AI Hiring Platform)
- [SuccessFactors](#) (Performance Mgmt)
- [TriNet](#) (PEO – 2 Avoid Comments)
- [Workday](#) (HRIS)

Leadership Training (Life Science Specific)

- [Elysian HR](#)
- [Hands On](#)
- [The Leadership Edge](#)
- [LifeLabs Learning](#)

Talent/Org Development

- [15five](#) (Performance Mgmt)
- [Betterworks](#) (Performance Mgmt – replacing)
- [CultureAmp](#) (Performance Mgmt)
- [Lattice](#) (Performance Mgmt)