

# Understanding the Path to CHRO

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CHRO Insights™



# Overview

In today's rapidly evolving business climate, HR has become more important than ever. HR has evolved from an administrative compliance role to a consultative design function due to skills and labor shortages, hybrid work, AI advancements, workforce diversity across five generations, globalization, and industry transformation.

This change has altered the role of the HR leader. Commonly referred to as CHRO (chief HR officer), CPO (chief people officer), or SVP/EVP HR, this position has become a vital part of the C-suite, addressing key business, labor market, regulatory, and technology issues. Generally, the CHRO is the most senior HR leader in the organization.

This report, the first in our new CHRO Insights™ series<sup>1</sup>, is based on detailed job and career data from 500 senior HR leaders provided by SeekOut, an AI-based recruiting and talent management company. It outlines the role of the CHRO, career trajectories, education, experiences, and high-level success drivers, along with the implications for leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> The CHRO Insights™ series will include a quantitative study of the role; a series of interviews and case studies; CHRO roundtables; and a CHRO capability model, designed to help any HR leader assess their own areas of development.

## In This Report

- The CHRO: A C-Suite Member First
- Four CHRO Paths
- Distribution of the Four Paths
- CHRO Education, Experiences, and Background
- The Profile of the CHRO



# The CHRO: A C-Suite Member First

CEOs and other leaders tell us that high-impact CHROs are difficult to find, while CHROs themselves share that their careers and roles are rapidly changing. In an increasingly challenging labor market, this senior position is becoming more competitive and complex.

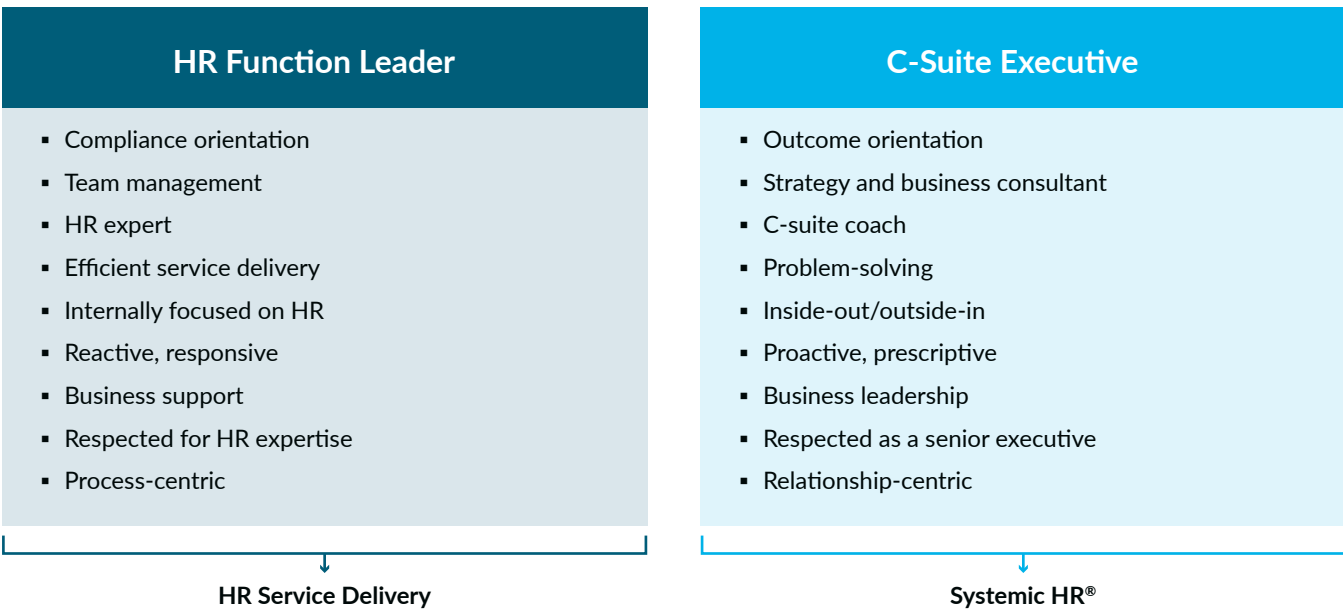
This evolution means the CHRO role is undergoing a radical transformation, demanding new skills and approaches to meet the challenges of today's environment (see Figure 1). Importantly, these approaches require what we call "Systemic HR<sup>®</sup>,"<sup>2</sup> meaning that the entire HR organization evolves from service delivery to product offerings to consulting.

# The Traditional CHRO: An Efficient Leader of HR

For many years, HR was considered a back-office operation focused on compliance, administration, payroll, hiring, staffing, and handling complex situations like exits, mergers and acquisitions, redeployments of people, and various support functions for the rest of the company. HR professionals were trained and organized to fulfill these roles.

Our Systemic HR study discovered that two in three HR departments are organized around optimizing service delivery.<sup>3</sup> In other words, these HR teams group specialists into centers of excellence, deliver low-cost services like recruiting or training, aim for standardized shared services, and deploy HR business partners as the interface between HR and the business.

Figure 1: Traditional vs. Systemic CHRO



Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2025

2 The Definitive Guide to Human Resources: Systemic HR<sup>®</sup>, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2023.

3 Ibid.





In these companies, HR is considered a lower-level function or a compliance group, often reporting to the CFO, COO, or risk department. And even if the CHRO reports to the CEO, this is often for “optics” to elevate people and culture, without true equal standing on the C-suite. A new CHRO shared their surprise at how few HR professionals had experience in other lines of business. These traditional CHROs primarily focus on leading their HR team and responding to requests by the business.

## The Systemic CHRO: A Consultative C-Suite Executive

Today, both the role of the CHRO and HR departments have evolved significantly. These roles now must address some of the company's most important and strategic challenges, such as hiring in a labor shortage; training and redeploying people into new technologies and business areas; leveraging AI for business transformation; managing work arrangements (gig, hybrid, remote, part-time); and offering complex benefits like job-sharing, fertility treatments, extended vacation leave, and other offerings that were never even considered to be part of HR 10 years ago.

Modern CHROs play a vital role as key partners to the CEO and the management team. This shift requires a redesign of the role itself, including its capabilities, experiences, and rewards systems, to meet these new demands.

### The Most Impactful Role in Systemic HR®

In our *Definitive Guide to HR: Systemic HR®*, we identified the CHRO role as the most impactful in HR. A high-performing CHRO is a C-level officer handling C-level issues, including executive management, business strategy, operations, and productivity, as well as the basics of hiring, retaining, paying, managing, supporting, and developing people. The role, its importance, and its function have all changed. Some CHROs are now becoming prominent in their external visibility and are even aspiring to become CEOs. One well-known example is Leena Nair, former CHRO of Unilever and now CEO of Chanel.

Our research clearly shows that senior HR leaders who understand the nature of Systemic HR and the evolution of HR toward an innovative, consultative, problem-solving role are generating

significantly better business outcomes, customer satisfaction, competitive market position, retention, engagement, and employee productivity.<sup>4</sup> In fact, they are uniquely positioned to influence commercial strategies while also aligning people strategies that drive both business success and employee engagement.

### Respect and C-Suite Membership Matter Most

We also reviewed 105 HR and management practices to determine their impact on business, people, and innovation outcomes and identified two practices related to the CHRO role that are among the most impactful practices (see Figure 2 on the next page).<sup>5</sup>

Systemic HR organizations elevate the roles of the CHRO and other HR leaders, integrating them into crucial business conversations. Therefore, they *enable the CHRO and other HR leaders to be widely respected in the company and make the CHRO an active C-suite member, equally important as the CFO or CIO.*

These two highly impactful practices reinforce each other: when HR leaders are respected, they are invited to participate on leadership teams, where they can add strategic value and become more important C-suite members.

Additionally, companies can sometimes expand the CHRO's responsibilities to include other crucial functions. For example, the CHRO of Australian real estate company REA Group also oversees employee communication and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) responsibilities.<sup>6</sup> Patricia Frost, CHRO of Seagate, also manages facilities, real estate, and risk management. Loren Shuster, CHRO of the LEGO Group, also governs the company's corporate affairs, including public relations, government affairs, ESG, and communications.

### A Highly Rewarded C-Suite Member

Research by Stanford professors Nick Bloom and Mert Akan reveals that 13% of CHROs are now within the top 5 highest-paid executives, a significant increase from just 0.5% 30 years ago.<sup>7</sup> This shift underscores the growing complexity of the HR function, which includes more than 250 job titles and 400 critical skills, highlighting the constant expansion of responsibilities in the field.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *The Definitive Guide to Human Resources: Systemic HR®*, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.












<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> *The Rise of Human Resources*, Mert Akan and Nick Bloom, Stanford University, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> *The Definitive Guide to Human Resources: Systemic HR®*, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2023.



Figure 2: The CHRO Role—Respect and C-Suite Membership Correlate Most to Outcomes

Practice	Dimension	Element	Relative Impact
1 Make the people strategy an important component of the business strategy	Business and culture alignment	 Business-Centered HR and People Strategy	VERY HIGH
2 Change work for the future, not just execute on change management	Strategic focus	 Dynamic HR Work	
3 Create and regularly update a well-implemented workforce plan	Strategic focus	 Dynamic HR Work	
4 Effectively prioritize which solutions HR focuses on	Clear accountabilities	 Integrated HR Operating Model	
5 Make the HR function a "problem-solving" team in the company	Business and culture alignment	 Business-Centered HR and People Strategy	
6 CHRO and other HR leaders are widely respected in the company	HR leadership	 Consultative HR Jobs	
7 CHRO is an active C-suite member, equally important as the CFO or CIO	HR leadership	 Consultative HR Jobs	
8 Regularly update and improve HR offerings to keep them current	Transformation readiness	 Business-Centered HR and People Strategy	
9 Develop HRBPs to advise on all major aspects of management and talent strategy	Full-stack HR capabilities	 Dynamic HR Work	
10 Effectively hire, source, and recruit for key skills	Skills-based organization	 Dynamic HR Work	
11 Address business problems systemically for a comprehensive solution	Customer orientation	 Integrated HR Operating Model	HIGH

Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2025

CHROs now hold very senior roles: 53% of HR leaders are C-suite members, making them as important as CFOs and CIOs. In high-performing companies, this percentage rises to 60%, showing the impact that C-suite positions have on business outcomes.

### Success Measured through Outcomes

Systemic HR organizations measure their success by the success of the business (e.g., business growth, entering new markets, accomplishing strategic goals).<sup>9</sup> Encouragingly, 66%

of CHROs describe their success through business success measures on their LinkedIn profiles. For high-performing organizations, this percentage rises to 70%.

Outcome statements often highlight the company's culture or environment, being recognized as a great place to work, or creating an inclusive workplace. In some cases, the outcomes extend beyond HR results to show a connection to business growth or strategy.

<sup>9</sup> The Definitive Guide to Human Resources: Systemic HR®, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2023.



## What This Means for the CEO, CHRO, and HR Leaders

CEOs, CHROs, and HR leaders can help elevate the CHRO role from the leader of the HR function to a C-suite member through strategic exposure to the board and C-suite opportunities, upleveling capabilities through the right experiences. “My first board role was with a very senior board, and I’ve learned so much from this experience that now I am chairing a board,” the CHRO of a large consumer packaged goods company told us.

## Four CHRO Paths

How do CHROs arrive at their position? Do they work their way up within HR in the same organization, or do they frequently change companies, climbing the ranks across different organizations? Perhaps some come from a discipline

outside of HR into the HR role? Are some journeys more successful than others?

We identified four career paths into the CHRO position, each with its unique characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages (see Figure 3).





### The Career CHRO

The Career CHRO gains experience by moving around between companies in the HR domain, advancing to higher positions and gaining responsibilities until they reach the CHRO position.

#### Advantages

- They possess a cross-industry and cross-company background, enabling them to understand the complexities of HR and various company cultures.
- Their extensive external networks allow them to bring an outside-in perspective.

Figure 3: Four Paths to the CHRO

Path	Career CHRO 	Company CHRO 	Business CHRO 	Operations CHRO 
Background	HR background in various domains	HR background in various domains	Non-HR background, comes from the business (operations, sales, etc.)	Non-HR background, comes from administration (finance, risk, etc.)
Trajectory	Moved from company to company to rise to the CHRO position	Moved through HR ranks in the company	Moved from a business position to HR for development	Moved from an administrative position to HR to address a business issue
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Experience with HR</li> <li>▪ Outside-in perspective</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Experience with HR</li> <li>▪ Established relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ In-depth business acumen</li> <li>▪ Established relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ In-depth administrative expertise</li> <li>▪ Established relationships</li> </ul>
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Lack of relationships</li> <li>▪ Lack of business knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Internally focused</li> <li>▪ Lack of business knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Lack of HR expertise</li> <li>▪ Lack of outside perspective</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Lack of HR expertise</li> <li>▪ Lack of outside perspective</li> </ul>

Source: The Josh Bersin Company, 2025



## Disadvantages

- Coming from outside the company may mean they lack executive relationships within the company, including with the CEO.
- They may also lack the deep business knowledge and understanding of the company's operations and business model that an internal person would have.

**Fiona Cicconi, Chief People Officer of Google/Alphabet**, worked in various companies across industries and countries before taking on the top HR job at Google. Her career path includes starting as an HR manager at GE Oil & Gas; working as the Italian HR country leader at Cisco Systems, a tech company; joining Roche, a pharmaceutical company, to eventually lead the HR function for one of its business units in Switzerland; moving to AstraZeneca as the CHRO based in the UK; and finally landing at tech giant Alphabet.

## The Company CHRO

The Company CHRO moves up the HR ranks within the organization, demonstrating loyalty to the company and gaining knowledge across various HR domains.

### Advantages

- Their deep understanding of the HR function's complexity comes from hands-on experience in multiple HR roles with increasing responsibilities.
- Their tenure with the company provides them with deep and broad insights into the company culture and established internal relationships.

### Disadvantages

- Their internal focus may limit exposure to new perspectives from other organizations.
- Their relationships might be predominantly within the HR department, potentially lacking deep executive connections across the broader company.

**Ellyn Shook, Accenture's Chief Leadership and Human Resources Officer**, started her career at Accenture in HR. Over the next 35+ years, she advanced through various HR positions, which ranged from Global Human Resources Lead for career and performance management, total rewards, employee engagement, and mergers and acquisitions to overseeing the HR business partner organization and the centers of excellence.

## The Business CHRO

The Business CHRO advances from within the company into the top HR role, typically transitioning from another area of the business (e.g., consulting, operations, or sales), often as part of their development for other senior roles.

### Advantages

- Their leadership position gives them deep hands-on business expertise and executive relationships outside of HR.
- Their understanding of business problems and ability to navigate the C-suite are strong assets.

### Disadvantages

- They lack HR experience, which means they lack critical knowledge of people and culture challenges, relying heavily on the strength of their team.
- As an internal person, they may lack an outside perspective and external relationships.

**Loren Shuster, Chief People Officer of the LEGO Group**, held increasingly senior marketing positions in companies like Henkel, De Beers, Viacom, Nokia, and Google. He then took on the role of Chief Commercial Officer at LEGO. After a couple of years, he transitioned to the top HR position in the company.



## The Operations CHRO

The Operations CHRO transitions to the top HR position from an administrative leadership role within the company (e.g., administration, risk, compliance, legal, or finance), often addressing HR inefficiencies or legal/compliance issues.

### Advantages

- They have deep expertise in key operational, financial, legal, or compliance topics.
- Having worked within the company, they have established senior relationships.

### Disadvantages

- They lack HR expertise, which may result in less effective ways of addressing HR complexities.
- They may lack an understanding of outside best practices in HR to bring to the operational approach.

**Rob Kowalski, Novartis's CHRO**, spent his entire career in regulatory affairs in various pharmaceutical companies, including 12 years at Novartis, where he headed the regulatory affairs function before assuming the top HR job.

## What This Means for the CEO, CHRO, and HR Leaders

CEOs looking for a new CHRO can think strategically about the experiences, expertise, and strengths they need from this pivotal role, balancing the advantages and disadvantages of internal and external candidates. In a stable, operationally oriented company with limited change, a Company CHRO might be most appropriate, whereas an HR organization that needs to be more business-oriented might call for a Business CHRO. CHROs should be mindful of their strengths and weaknesses, supplementing with a strong HR leadership team to bolster where needed. And rising HR leaders can consider how to build their path to the top HR role—keeping in mind that there are various ways to get there.

## Distribution of the Four Paths

Among the four CHRO paths, only the Career CHRO comes from outside the company, while the three other paths are from within the company. Two paths—the Career CHRO and the Company CHRO—bring candidates with significant HR experience, while the other two—the Business CHRO and the Operations CHRO—need to supplement this expertise, often through a capable HR team.

How frequently are each of these career paths used, and how do high performers differ from others? Several clear trends emerge (see Figure 4 on the next page).

- Most companies find a CHRO from outside the company, prioritizing HR expertise and experience over established C-suite relationships, company knowledge, or cultural alignment.
- Only 17% of CHROs come from within the company's HR function. This may cause rising HR leaders to see a lack of opportunity to grow within the organization.
- Non-HR people from business or administrative areas are placed in the CHRO role 1 in 10 times, compared to 1.7 in 10 times for promotions from within the company's HR function—reinforcing the perception of lack of opportunity for internal HR leaders.
- In high-performing organizations<sup>10</sup>, an equal number of non-HR businesspeople and HR people (12% each) are promoted into the CHRO role. This shows how important the C-suite relationships of non-HR business leaders are to driving systemic HR change.

## Elevating Internal HR People to the C-Suite

One reason Company CHROs tend to be less impactful is their lower representation in the C-suite. Advancing to a C-suite position is more challenging for those promoted through the ranks of HR within the company: only 56% of Company CHROs are members of the C-suite, compared to 62% of Career CHROs, 63% of Operations CHROs, and 78% of Business CHROs.

<sup>10</sup> "High-performing organizations" are those at Level 4 in our four-level Systemic HR Maturity Model.





Figure 4: Distribution of the Four CHRO Paths



Source: SeekOut and The Josh Bersin Company, 2025

CHROs promoted from within the company's HR ranks are 40% less likely to assume a C-suite position than those moving into the top HR role from a business area.

### Promoting Female Business Leaders to CHRO

Another interesting angle is the role of gender in the four career paths (see Figure 5 on the next page).

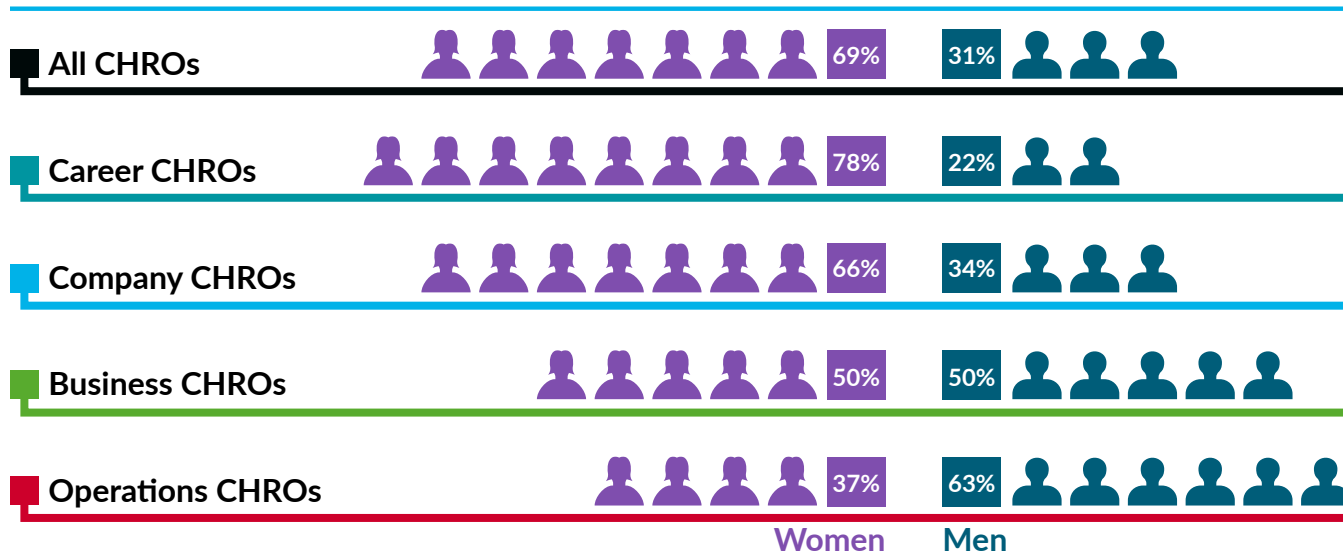
While 69% of CHROs are female (similar to the rest of the HR profession<sup>11</sup>), a different gender profile emerges across each of the four different CHRO paths.

### Female CHRO Trends

- Female HR leaders aiming to advance to the CHRO role often need to switch companies frequently, rather than work their way up in one organization: 78% of Career CHROs are female.

<sup>11</sup> The Definitive Guide to Human Resources: Systemic HR®, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2023.

Figure 5: The Four CHRO Paths and Gender



Source: SeekOut and The Josh Bersin Company, 2025

- It's easier for male HR leaders to be promoted to the top HR job within one company: 66% of Company CHROs are female (3 percentage points less than the overall CHRO female percentage).

### Male CHRO Trends

- Companies rotate more men from business positions into the CHRO role: 50% of Business CHROs are male (19 percentage points more than overall).
- Men are more likely to be seen as "fixers" of the HR function: 63% of Operations CHROs are male, although more women tend to hold finance, risk, and compliance positions (32 percentage points more than overall).

## What This Means for the CEO, CHRO, and HR Leaders

CEOs and CHROs can help rising HR leaders become more successful by supporting their exposure to and relationship-building with the C-suite before getting promoted to the top HR role. Developing a more effective, holistic, and equitable approach to nurturing a broader HR talent pool can better prepare internal candidates for the important CHRO role. While CHROs can't change their trajectory to the top HR role, they can actively address the disadvantages of their path

through continuous development, team support, and ongoing relationships. On the other hand, CEOs can incorporate these insights into their CHRO selection process, strategically considering the most important experiences and relationships for the company, now and into the future.

## CHRO Education, Experience, and Background

We also explored the educational backgrounds, work experiences, HR expertise, exposure to international environments, and other factors influencing CHROs and their outcomes.

### Higher Education Is Better and the Right Degrees Matter

Our study of the HR profession—based on 7.5 million LinkedIn profiles—shows that 96% hold a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>12</sup> CHROs are even more highly educated, with 98% holding at least a bachelor's degree. This underscores the increasing complexity and responsibilities of the function.

<sup>12</sup> *The Definitive Guide to Human Resources: Systemic HR®*, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2023.



## The Connection between Systemic HR and Advanced Degrees

Given the complexity and level of accountability of the CHRO role, it's unsurprising that more advanced degrees among CHROs correlate with more systemic HR practices and better business, people, and innovation outcomes. Highly mature organizations (Level 4 of our Systemic HR Maturity Model<sup>13</sup>) also correlate with more of these impactful outcomes (see Figure 6).

Systemic HR organizations are twice as likely to have a CHRO with a doctoral degree compared to their administrative peers.

- Advanced degree skills require a high level of critical thinking, innovation, problem-orientation, and data-based approaches.
- While these degrees themselves may not fully prepare CHROs for the actual work, the significant effort needed to complete a master's or doctoral degree creates stamina, drive, and determination needed to not only advance to the top HR job but also to succeed in helping the HR function thrive.

## The Surprising Truth about CHRO Majors

Analyzing the majors of CHROs, we find that there are many different educational paths for rising CHROs (see Figure 7 on the next page).

The top 10 majors account for only 52% of all degrees among CHROs. This indicates the dynamic, multifaceted nature of the HR profession. Unlike CFOs who typically study finance, CMOs who usually have marketing degrees, and CIOs who have a technical education, CHROs can come from a wide range of fields. Majors from anthropology to mechanical engineering or crime and justice studies can all lead to CHRO positions.

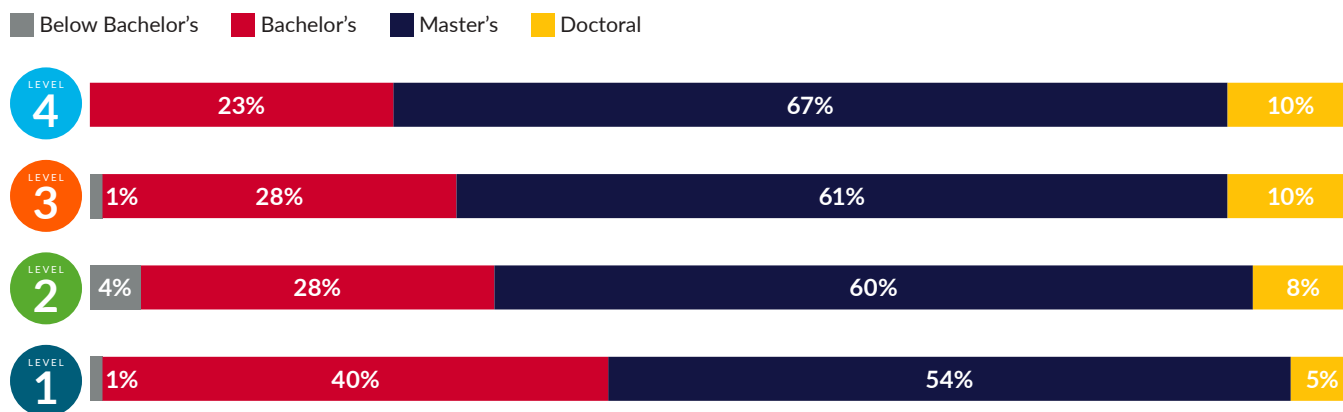
## Most and Least Frequent CHRO Majors

- **HR, business, and psychology** (15%, 11%, and 6%, respectively) are the most frequent majors, which aligns with the nature of the work. However, the fact that these three degrees combined only account for 32% of CHRO majors shows the diverse paths that can lead to a CHRO position.
- **Accounting/finance, marketing, and sociology** (each at 2%) are the least frequent majors within the top 10—still well above the hundreds of majors not on the top 10 list.

## Most Impactful CHRO Majors

- **Political science majors** often make the strongest CHROs. They bring a unique set of skills and perspectives that are highly valuable for the role. Their ability to analyze complex systems, communicate effectively, understand human behavior, and develop policies makes them well-suited to lead HR functions in today's dynamic global business environment.

Figure 6: CHRO Degrees and Systemic HR Maturity Levels



Source: SeekOut and The Josh Bersin Company, 2025

<sup>13</sup> The Systemic HR Maturity Model is the result of quantitative and qualitative analyses. Organizations fall into one of four levels depending on the practices they deploy, with Level 1 being the least impactful and Level 4, the most.



Figure 7: Top 10 CHRO Majors and Impact

Major	Percent of CHROs	Frequency Rank	Impact on Company Performance	Impact Relative to All Majors
Political Science	3%	6	Extremely High	127%
Accounting/Finance	2%	8	Very High	109%
Economics	3%	5	Very High	106%
Law	4%	4	High	104%
Human Resources	15%	1	High	103%
Psychology	6%	3	Significant	99%
Sociology	2%	10	Significant	99%
Marketing	2%	9	Less Significant	94%
Business	11%	2	Less Significant	90%
Languages	3%	7	Less Significant	86%

Note: Percent of CHROs only adds up to 52%, as the top 10 majors only account for that percentage of all CHRO majors.

Source: SeekOut and The Josh Bersin Company, 2025

- **Accounting/finance and economics majors** are also highly impactful. Their analytical and quantitative skills, understanding of economic and market trends, financial acumen, strategic thinking, risk-management capabilities, and performance measurement expertise prepare them well for high-impact CHRO roles.

### Least Impactful CHRO Majors

- **Language majors** are least likely to prepare CHROs to lead high-performing companies. While they bring strengths in communication, cultural awareness, and empathy, they may face potential gaps in data analysis, financial management, HR-specific knowledge, and strategic planning.
- **Business majors** can also be problematic. Although they prepare CHROs with needed business acumen, they can sometimes emphasize short-term financial

gains and quick wins, potentially overlooking the long-term perspective focused on building a sustainable and positive organizational culture, trust, and loyalty.

- **Marketing majors** are sometimes connected to administrative HR functions. While they bring valuable skills in communication and branding, they may lack HR knowledge, consultative and strategic skills, cross-functional collaboration experience, and business acumen needed for high-impact CHRO roles.

Beyond degrees, what are the areas of work experience CHROs bring to the table, and which ones are most impactful?

## HR Experiences: The Multidisciplinary CHRO

Our research shows that 9 out of 10 CHROs come to the top HR position with prior HR experience. Those who are placed into the role without previous HR expertise often find





themselves overwhelmed by the complexity of the function and how much there is to learn. We reviewed the prevalence and impact on performance from 13 HR domains (see Figure 8).

Some CHROs have experience in more than one HR domain: 2 in 5 have gained in-depth expertise in several HR domains, supporting the notion of the “full-stack CHRO” detailed in our Systemic HR study.<sup>14</sup>

### Most Frequent HR Domain Experiences

The following strategic and broad domains are essential in preparing HR specialists for the top HR job.

- **Talent and performance management** experience is the most frequent (2 in 5 CHROs).
- **Organizational development** is the next most common domain (1 in 3 CHROs).

- **HR strategy** follows, with 1 in 4 CHROs having a background in it.

### Least Frequent HR Domain Experiences

The following specialized technical domains are often outsourced to direct reports.

- **People analytics** has only 7% of CHROs from this profession.
- **HR tech and employee communication** follow, both at 8%.

### Most Impactful HR Domain Experiences

- **Talent acquisition** experience tops the list of the most impactful HR experiences. Only 1 in 5 CHROs have this expertise, but it prepares HR leaders well for the senior role because it aligns with the principles of integration,

Figure 8: CHRO HR Domain Experiences and Impact

HR Domain Experience	Percent of CHROs	Frequency Rank	Impact on Company Performance	Impact Relative to All HR Domains
Talent Acquisition	20%	5	Very High	111%
Organizational Development	34%	2	Very High	108%
Compensation & Benefits	20%	6	High	104%
Talent & Performance Management	41%	1	High	103%
Diversity, Equity, Inclusion	17%	8	High	103%
HR Strategy	25%	3	High	102%
Employee Experience	13%	10	Significant	98%
Learning & Development	8%	7	Significant	98%
People Analytics	7%	13	Significant	96%
Employee & Labor Relations	22%	4	Less Significant	95%
HR Operations	16%	9	Less Significant	93%
HR Technology	8%	12	Less Significant	90%
Employee Communication	8%	11	Less Significant	88%

Source: SeekOut and The Josh Bersin Company, 2025

14 The Definitive Guide to Human Resources: Systemic HR®, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2023.



data-driven decision-making, strategic workforce planning, and agility that define Systemic HR and ultimately business success.

- **Organizational development** is highly correlated to significantly better innovation, financial performance, customer success, and change agility.<sup>15</sup> Organization design capabilities of HR business partners are the second most impactful.<sup>16</sup> In a world where every company needs to constantly reinvent itself, redesign jobs and roles for AI adoption, and navigate industry transformation and labor shortages, organization development experience is key to superior outcomes.
- **Compensation and benefits** is the third most impactful HR experience. While the domain itself is stuck in the past, with legacy tools and mindsets crippling progress,<sup>17</sup> CHROs who have led this area often experience working with the CEO and the board of directors on compensation topics, thus having established key executive relationships.

## Least Impactful HR Domain Experiences

- **Employee communication, HR technology, and HR operations** are least impactful to business outcomes. While these domains are necessary to run an effective HR function, they are not strategic enough to differentiate high-performing CHROs.

## Non-HR Business Experiences Matter

CHROs need to be business executives first and HR leaders second. Non-HR business experiences are important, as they expose CHROs to the world outside of HR, help create a better understanding of the problems addressed with talent solutions, and support building critical executive relationships. However, only 3% of organizations rotate HR leaders across non-HR functions.<sup>18</sup>

Only 1 in 4 CHROs have non-HR business experience, but it's a key success factor. In high-performing organizations, this ratio increases to 1 in 3 CHROs. We reviewed the non-HR business experiences and their correlation to performance outcomes (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: CHRO Business Experiences and Impact

Business Experience	Percent of CHROs	Frequency Rank	Impact on Company Performance	Impact Relative to All Experiences
Consulting	20%	2	Very High	111%
IT	8%	6	Very High	108%
Strategy	10%	5	High	102%
Sales & Marketing	11%	4	High	101%
Legal	8%	7	Significant	99%
Operations	25%	1	Less Significant	92%
Finance	12%	3	Less Significant	91%
Administration	5%	8	Less Significant	86%

Source: SeekOut and The Josh Bersin Company, 2025

15 *The Definitive Guide to Organization Design: The Journey to Agile*, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2022.

16 *The New HR Business Partner: Essential for Systemic HR®*, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2024.

17 *The Definitive Guide to Pay and Benefits: The Road to Systemic Rewards*, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2023.

18 *The Definitive Guide to Human Resources: Systemic HR®*, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2023.



### Most Frequent Business Experiences

- **Operations** is the most frequent business experience, with 1 in 4 CHROs having this experience. As we described earlier, sometimes Business CHROs come from operations, or an operations person might be drawn to the HR profession and rotate into an HR career.
- **Consulting** is next on the list, with 1 in 5 coming from this area. The consultative nature of high-performing HR functions makes this an easy shift.

### Least Frequent Business Experiences

- **Administration** is the least frequent, with only 1 in 20 CHROs having this experience.
- **Legal and IT** follow, with only 8% of CHROs having this experience.

### Most Impactful Business Experiences

- **Consulting** experience tops the list of most impactful business experiences, as a systemic HR function operates like a consulting team, not a support function.<sup>19</sup>
- **IT and strategy** experiences also highly correlate to business outcomes. IT leaders have a tight grasp on evolving enterprise technology transformation and strong relationships with the CEO and CFO. Strategy leaders work across the company to align with finance, operations, IT, and sales, helping them become deeply integrated in leadership team discussions.

### Least Impactful Business Experiences

- **Administration, finance, and operations** experiences are less likely to result in high-performing CHROs because they relate more to administrative, compliance-oriented, or less strategic HR functions.

### Cross-Company, International, and Overall Life Experience Matter

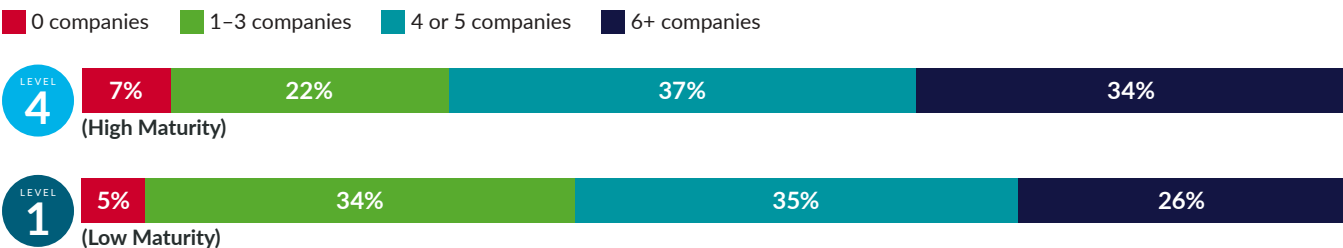
We also reviewed the number of companies CHROs have worked for, their international (outside of their home country) work experience, and their overall length of experience (how long they have been in the workforce) to determine which factors most relate to success.

### Cross-Company Experience: Building Business and Leadership Expertise

Working in different companies helps CHROs understand different business models, build leadership expertise in various scenarios, and support a more balanced perspective. What, then, is the sweet spot of previous companies a CHRO should have worked for before attaining their top HR role? Our study shows there is a wide range of experiences that all can lead to high performance (see Figure 10).

- Rising to the top HR role within just one company is uncommon but not impossible; only 7% of CHROs remain with their first company.

Figure 10: Prior Company Experience of CHROs and HR Maturity



Source: SeekOut and The Josh Bersin Company, 2025

<sup>19</sup> The Definitive Guide to Human Resources: Systemic HR®, Josh Bersin and Kathi Enderes, PhD/The Josh Bersin Company, 2023..



- CHROs in less mature companies tend to have less cross-company experience; about 1 in 3 have between 1 and 3 previous companies, while the highest-performing organizations only have about 1 in 5 CHROs in this group.
- High-performing CHROs often have extensive cross-company experience, building business acumen and a more agile approach to navigating relationships. Specifically, 1 in 3 have worked in 6+ companies, compared to 1 in 4 CHROs in the lowest-performing companies.

### International Experience: Creating Cultural Competence

Working internationally—outside the CHRO's home country—develops a better understanding of diverse practices, creates cultural competence, and builds a more inclusive approach for a diverse workforce and customer base.

- The Americas are least effective in creating international experiences, while in EMEA, about 7 in 10 CHROs have this experience, and in APAC (Asia-Pacific), it's 6 in 10. It is under 4 in 10 in the Americas (see Figure 11).
- International experience correlates with higher performance: 3 in 4 of the highest-performing CHROs have international experience, compared to every other CHRO in the least mature organizations.
- CHROs with international experience tend to hold more senior positions: 68% of CHROs with international experience are C-suite members or board members, compared to 56% of CHROs without international experience.

### More Mature CHROs Have Better Outcomes

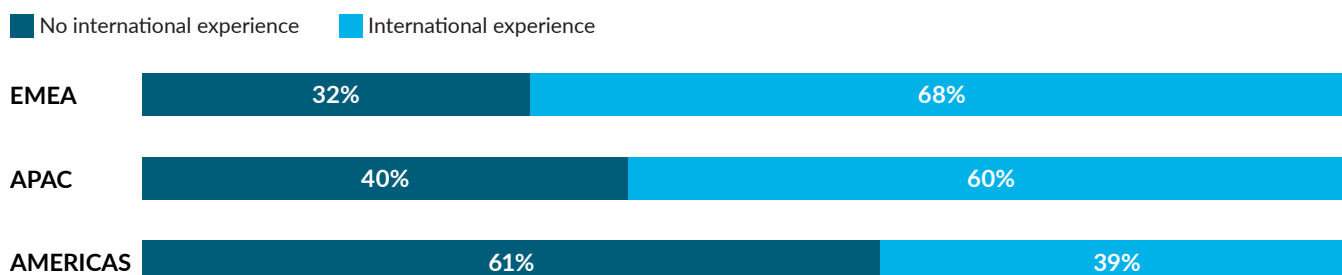
How does the length of time CHROs have been in the workforce relate to their performance? CHROs come in all age groups, with most falling in the 50- to 59-year-old category (see Figure 12 on the next page).

- The most experienced CHROs are also the best performers due to the complexity of the HR profession, the depth of the relationships across the business, the leadership capabilities required, and the wisdom needed to make good business decisions in ambiguous, challenging times.
- Older CHROs are more likely to be high performing. CHROs over 50 are 36% more likely to be high performing and lead systemic HR professions compared to those under 50.
- Seniority in years also relates to more senior positions: 83% of CHROs over 60 are C-suite or board members, compared to just 46% of CHROs under 40.

### What This Means for the CEO, CHRO, and HR Leaders

The demands on the CHRO are high, and with increasing complexity of both the HR function and organizational constructs overall, CHROs need support to build the right capabilities. This can be accomplished through education (advanced degrees and the right majors), focusing on a few value-added HR experiences, adding non-HR business experience through rotations across the company, creating opportunities for gaining international experience through cross-country assignments, and by calling on the most senior CHROs to mentor and guide rising HR

Figure 11: CHRO International Experience by Region

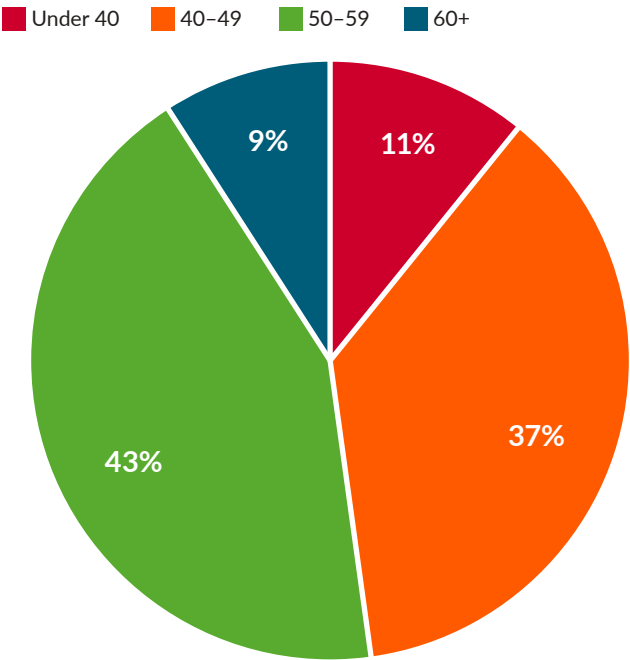


Source: SeekOut and The Josh Bersin Company, 2025





Figure 12: CHROs by Age Group



Source: SeekOut and The Josh Bersin Company, 2025

leaders. CEOs looking for their next CHRO can use these insights to guide their search, strategically focusing on what is most useful for the company.

## The Profile of the CHRO

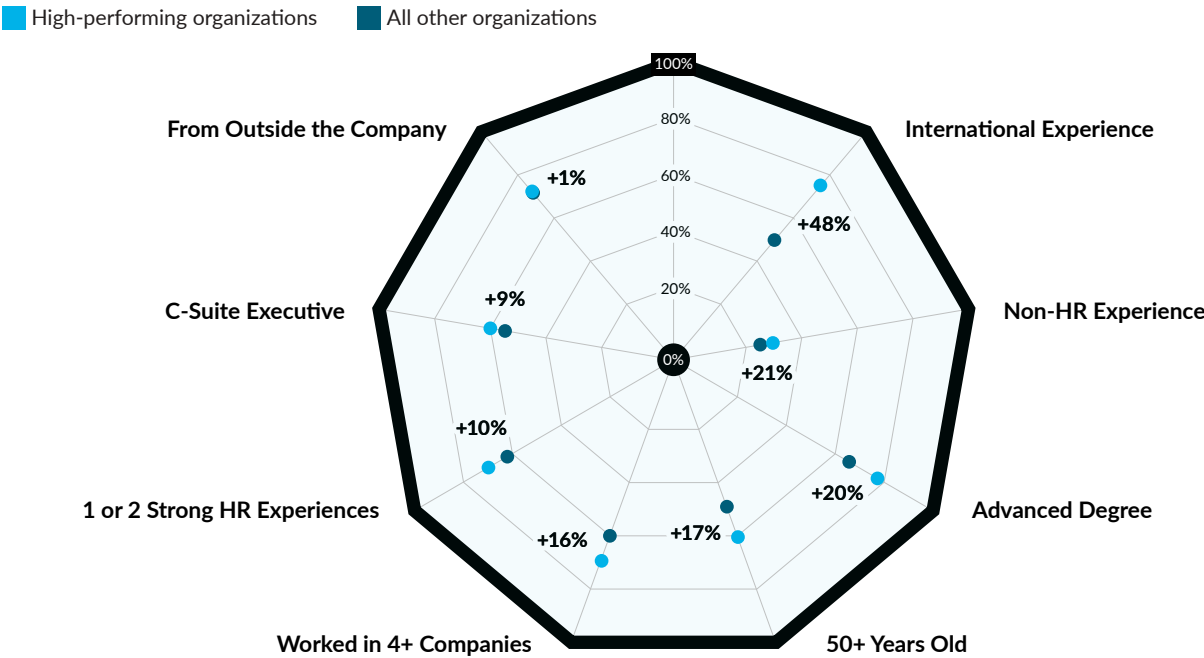
Putting together all the learnings of this study, we created key characteristics of the CHRO, comparing CHROs of high-performing organizations with all others (see Figure 13).

### What This Means for the CEO, CHRO, and HR Leaders

CEOs, CHROs, and aspiring HR leaders can use this profile as a guide to evaluate CHRO candidates and criteria for success. It's important to note that every company, CEO, HR team, and situation is different, so the ideal candidate may not match these criteria. The most critical success factor for CHROs is they are right for the company, executive team, and workforce at the right time.

For example, a fast-growing technology company aiming to expand internationally will need a different CHRO profile compared with a healthcare organization trying to contain costs and keep up with evolving regulations.

Figure 13: CHRO Characteristics



Note: Percent difference indicates relative percent, not percentage points.  
Source: SeekOut and The Josh Bersin Company, 2025



## Next Steps

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As CEOs, CHROs, and aspiring CHROs think about how to put these insights into practice, consider the following next steps.

- **Define what the company needs.** CHRO profiles, experiences, and education come in many shapes and forms, and it's important to be clear about what the company needs at this moment in time. One size doesn't fit all.
- **Prioritize CHRO development.** As more than 70% of CHROs are hired from the outside, it's important to develop HR leadership capabilities from within, building the next generation of CHROs.
- **Support C-suite and board.** C-suite and board relationships are critical to CHRO success, so HR leaders need to develop strong relationships across the entire executive team to jumpstart success.
- **Fill in the blanks.** Knowing which majors, HR domains, and business experiences most relate to success is one thing. Rather than look for a candidate who checks all the boxes, think about where to supplement with intentional team support, education, exposure, experiences, and the right environment.
- **Never stop refining.** As organizations change, so do the success profiles of HR leaders. Continuously refine the criteria for success and help the CHRO become the best for the company today and tomorrow.

## Key Takeaways

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- The CHRO role is critical for business success, with CHROs serving as C-suite leaders first, and HR function leaders second.
- There are four distinct paths to becoming a CHRO, each with different benefits and challenges.
- Most CHROs advance to the role from outside of the organization.
- To excel in the complex CHRO role, a variety of experiences can be beneficial: international experience, experience in a non-HR business function, specialization in one or two primary HR domains, an advanced degree, having worked in four or more companies, and the maturity to balance conflicting demands.
- The ideal CHRO depends on several factors: business environment, company situation, fit with the CEO and C-suite and board, workforce demands, and cultural requirements—one size doesn't fit all.



## About the Authors



### Josh Bersin

Josh founded Bersin & Associates in 2001 to provide research and advisory services focused on corporate learning. He expanded the company's coverage to encompass HR, talent management, talent acquisition, and leadership and became a recognized expert in the talent market. Josh sold the company to Deloitte in 2012 and was a partner in Bersin by Deloitte up until 2018.

In 2019, Josh founded the Josh Bersin Academy, a professional development academy that has become the "home for HR." In 2020, he put together a team of analysts and advisors who are now working with him to support and guide HR organizations from around the world under the umbrella of The Josh Bersin Company. He is frequently featured in publications such as *Forbes*, *Harvard Business Review*, *HR Executive*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *CLO Magazine*. He is a popular blogger and has more than 800,000 followers on LinkedIn.



### Kathi Enderes, PhD

Kathi is the senior vice president research and global industry analyst at The Josh Bersin Company, supporting clients and the market with evidence-based insights on all areas of HR, learning, talent, and HR technology. Kathi has more than 20 years of global experience from management consulting with IBM, PwC, and EY, and as a talent leader at McKesson and Kaiser Permanente. Most recently, Kathi led talent and workforce research at Deloitte. She is a frequent keynote speaker, author, and thought leader. Her passion is to make work better and more meaningful.

Originally from Austria, Kathi has worked in Vienna, London, San Francisco, and Spain and now lives in Palo Alto, California. Kathi holds a doctoral degree in mathematics and a master's degree in mathematics from the University of Vienna, Austria.

## The Josh Bersin Company Membership

The Josh Bersin Company provides a wide range of research, tools, and advisory services to help HR leaders and professionals address the ever-evolving needs and challenges of today's workforce. We cover all topics in HR, HR technology, talent, and corporate learning with a special focus on the professional development of HR teams.

Our corporate membership program provides HR leaders and teams with the skills, strategies, benchmarks, and insights to build cutting-edge HR and people strategies through research, assessments, professional development, exclusive events, and community. Corporate membership also includes access to Galileo™, the world's first AI-powered expert assistant specifically developed for HR. Trained on 25 years of The Josh Bersin Company's research, insights, and expertise, and enriched by carefully curated material from our trusted content partners, Galileo unlocks information from over 50,000 verified assets to answer any HR-related question with timely and meaningful answers.

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