

## ARTICLE

# Chief people officer focus: First-time chief people officers in the UK | 2026 Review

As the role becomes increasingly central to organizational strategy, first-time CPOs must quickly build credibility with CEOs, boards, investors, and their own teams to succeed. Here, seasoned HR leaders across the UK offer practical guidance for navigating the first 90 days and beyond.



**As organizations navigate the greatest economic, social, geopolitical, and technological upheavals since World War II, having the right leaders in the right roles has never been more critical. Yet the single biggest barrier to delivering on corporate ambition remains the same: insufficient leadership and talent to meet unprecedented challenges. We have found this to be true, time and time again, in UK-based organizations as well as in organizations around the world.<sup>1</sup> “It’s time we realized we are *all* in the people business,” an experienced FTSE 100 chair told us recently. “The people agenda and CPO role are absolutely center stage.”**

In 2021, we published our first First-Time Chief People Officer Guide, based on the experiences of CPOs and CHROs across global multinationals and UK-listed companies. Our goal was to compile the best practices UK-based professionals could offer for first-time chief people officers—practical, experience-led, immediately applicable advice. Since then, seismic shifts in the business landscape have further elevated both expectations of, and pressure on, the CPO, leading to the need for an update.

This 2026 report draws on interviews conducted through 2024 and 2025 with CPOs and group CHROs from FTSE 100, FTSE 250, and private equity-backed organizations within the UK. We see a clear shift in what CEOs, investors, and boards now expect, with wide implications for how CPOs must meet their mandate today.

They want a commercially minded executive-committee member who drives business outcomes through the workforce. They expect a function leader who can transform HR into a value-creating enterprise capability. And, increasingly, they rely on the CPO as a strategic adviser on CEO succession, nonexecutive director hiring, and overall board effectiveness.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, CPOs must help reimagine the workplace for a complex, multigenerational workforce with very different expectations. The UK labor market remains tight in many sectors. Generational attitudes toward flexibility, purpose, pay, and progression continue to shift. Regulatory expectations and governance requirements are exacting. Meanwhile, new technological advances both promise and threaten to upend long-standing ways of working. Stepping up for the first time in this context demands courage, business acumen, sophisticated influencing, and the ability to navigate nuanced relationships with credibility.

One CPO summarized the new reality: “It isn’t sufficient to know the people and culture discipline. Today, you’re expected to be a commercial business leader and an expert on risk, sustainability, AI, and geopolitics to advise the CEO and board in holistic ways.” All this resonates with many of CPOs’ priorities around the world.<sup>3</sup>

From our latest conversations, we have distilled eight foundations for success in a first-time UK CPO role, including advice from incumbent CPOs on how to remain grounded in these foundations in 2026.

1 “2026 CEO & Board Confidence Monitor,” Heidrick & Struggles, February 12, 2026, [heidrick.com](https://heidrick.com).

2 Jeffrey S. Sanders, Laryssa Topolnytsky, PhD, and Jennifer Wilson, “Chief people officer focus: How leadership planning can be a foundation of stronger relationships between CPOs and boards,” Heidrick & Struggles, December 15, 2025, [heidrick.com](https://heidrick.com).

3 Brad Warga, Jennifer Wilson, and Brian Kropp, “Chief people officer focus: 2026 agenda—becoming an enterprise CPO,” Heidrick & Struggles, February 3, 2026, [heidrick.com](https://heidrick.com).

## 1. Reinvent your leadership brand while protecting your authenticity



The more experienced you become, the more important it is to be yourself, to have the courage of your convictions and to show who you are.

The CPO role, like all top jobs, can be exposed and lonely. A new CPO will need a trusted support network—an external mentor or coach, and a small group of peers who can offer perspective, challenge, and empathy. “If you build good relationships—creating a ‘personal board’ of internal and external contacts—you can access experience and advice quickly,” says one interviewee.

For many, the transition requires a degree of reinvention, especially for internal promotees. “Other members of the executive committee may have a pre-formed opinion of you and may not regard you as an equal,” warns a current CPO. “You have to reposition your leadership brand and rebuild your understanding of the business through a new, broader lens. Keep what has served you well, recognize what to let go of, and be clear what you stand for.”

Staying true to one’s values while refining one’s personal leadership brand is central. “The more experienced you become, the more important it is to be yourself, to have the courage of your convictions and to show who you are,” as one CPO told us. Authenticity, combined with appropriate vulnerability, can deepen trust rather than diminish authority.

Protecting one’s resilience is equally important. “Everyone underestimates the sheer volume of the unfamiliar and the complexity involved in the role,” states one interviewee. “If you don’t manage your energy and downtime, there is a risk both to your health and also to you delivering business value as a C-suite executive.” The diary quickly fills with board preparation, executive team conversations, talent decisions, investor meetings, and crisis management.

Clear boundaries around time and availability are essential—new CPOs cannot become the organization’s universal confidant while still delivering strategic value. One of our interviewees offered this advice: “While you are in the powerful position to shape the people agenda, don’t be a rescuer. Hold your CEO and C-suite colleagues to account for the quality of their people leadership.”

## 2. Be a commercial business leader first, an HR leader second



CPOs have to be able to link their people strategy to financial outcomes, starting every strategic HR initiative by asking: what’s the P&L line this touches, and how will we measure ROI?

Our interviews reflect the end of human resources as a support function. The CPO now shapes the strategic people and culture agenda as a key member of the ExCo, alongside C-suite peers, responsible for delivering business outcomes. The role encompasses developing future leadership capability, leading a high-performing function, advising the CEO and chair, and challenging the business to uphold high ethical and governance standards.

CEOs now expect as a baseline that the CPO can read a P&L and understand how people-related decisions affect financial performance. People costs often represent the largest operating expense. The CPO must articulate how talent strategy, workforce design,<sup>4</sup> and cultural interventions create measurable value. “CPOs have to be able to link their people strategy to financial outcomes, starting every strategic HR initiative by asking: what’s the P&L line this touches, and how will we measure ROI?” one CPO noted.

Understanding how the organization creates value is foundational. New CPOs must quickly grasp where margins are earned and how the organization lines up against competitors, so they can meet ExCo colleagues at the commercial level. “It’s important to have the numbers at your fingertips and to talk the language of the business, so you can both contribute and challenge,” says a current CPO. “People are the single biggest cost of any business, so identifying the top three metrics where you can generate the highest value is essential,” points out another CPO.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Wilson and Brad Warga, “Leveraging the executive leadership team to improve workforce planning,” Heidrick & Struggles, February 18, 2026, [heidrick.com](https://heidrick.com).

The relationship between CPO, CFO, and CEO is particularly influential. At the same time, independence is critical to credibility with peer leaders. The CPO must be seen as an enterprise voice, not simply an enabler of the CEO's agenda. "In ExCo meetings, be intentional about how you show up," advises an experienced CPO. "Sitting next to the CEO can detract from your independence. I sit opposite them as I don't want people to assume they whisper in my ear."

### 3. Build a trusted, functional relationship with the CEO



The CEO won't see the same things in the business as the CPO, so bring your ideas to them rather than waiting for them to come to you for solutions.

Independence notwithstanding, the CEO is every CPO's most important working relationship. In today's environment, CEOs face complex trade-offs daily. They require a partner in these difficult decisions. "You are in a unique position to share with the CEO what is actually going on in the business. You can give them the unvarnished facts. I see myself as a sparring partner in the same way the CFO is. This takes courage and skill," one CPO observed.

CPOs interact across levels and functions, giving them a panoramic view of the organization. That vantage point is invaluable. "The CEO won't see the same things in the business as the CPO, so bring your ideas to them rather than waiting for them to come to you for solutions," advises one interviewee. "If you see a commercial issue, say so—help them solve problems where they have blind spots."

CEO succession is among the CPO's most sensitive responsibilities—vitaly important, but a potential source of conflict with the incumbent CEO. Other Heidrick research shows that the most effective CEO succession planning begins within six months of a CEO taking office, but convincing them of this can be hard, as 40% of board members and CEOs say succession planning isn't a priority.<sup>5</sup> Says one interviewee: "However the CEO feels, our role is to advocate for a well-structured, future-ready succession strategy that aligns with organizational needs, and includes both long-term and emergency planning."

### 4. Orchestrate board, RemCo, and investor interactions



Regular one-on-ones with the chair, RemCo chair, and other key board stakeholders become pivotal—not just for setting the agenda but for building relationship equity.

Beyond the executive team, the CPO must navigate a web of stakeholders, including the chair, board members, remuneration and nominations committees, and, increasingly, investors. The shared wisdom of many experienced CPOs is that they need to develop into sophisticated stakeholder managers.

Acting as a bridge between the chair and CEO is a particularly sophisticated job. "I didn't appreciate the delicate nature of the relationship and how I needed to build both sides, while also being visible and relatable to people who work with me," recalls one CPO. "It's about being good at reading people, using your intuition and experience, being brave enough to ask the right questions and listening to what has, and hasn't been said."

The CPO is also the bridge between board committees, such as risk, audit, and remuneration. "Regular one-on-ones with the chair, RemCo chair, and other key board stakeholders become pivotal—not just for setting the agenda but for building relationship equity," says a current CPO. This is especially the case for remuneration work, which is complex and often highly fraught.

Another new relationship for incoming CPOs is with investors and shareholders, who increasingly value the people function and the CPO role as commercial assets. "Culture is the secret sauce of an organization's success in the eyes of more and more investors. These investors take an interest in talent and people topics," as one CPO noted. "Success comes down to the CPO fully understanding what the stakeholders want," points out another CPO.

<sup>5</sup> "Route to the Top 2025 | The ascent redefined: Charting more effective routes to the summit," Heidrick & Struggles, July 23, 2025, [heidrick.com](https://heidrick.com).

## 5. Set a competitive people strategy



The first thing I do is a deep dive into every department, how they operate, what they do. In the early days, you've got the opportunity to ask all those questions without fear.

The CPO must set a people strategy that will find, shape, and support the right leaders, talent, and culture across the whole enterprise value chain. Start with a diagnosis of the organization. "The first thing I do is a deep dive into every department, how they operate, what they do," explains one interviewee. "In the early days, you've got the opportunity to ask all those questions without fear."

Focus on achievable goals. "Don't try to boil the ocean," says an experienced CPO. "You won't be judged on the amount you do, but on how well it works. Meet the business where it's at, recognizing what it's ready for and what it needs."

The CPO is responsible for future-proofing the organization's talent needs. This means taking a talent-to-value approach—identifying the roles that create business value, the skills required, and the plan to develop and hire the people who meet these needs. Heidrick's surveys have found that only around half of CEOs and directors say their executive attraction, retention, and development strategy is positioning the organization well for the long term,<sup>6</sup> meaning that CPOs who tackle this issue head-on have a major opportunity to build strong CEO and board relationships early.

"A business case needs to be made to articulate the value your strategy is going to bring. Don't present it as investing in the HR function. This is about how investment in the people will benefit the organization and deliver business results," as one contributor emphasized.

## 6. Assemble the right HR team at pace



That first three-month window, getting to know the ExCo, the board, and the business—that's going to tell you what you need in your final team.

No CPO can succeed without the right HR department behind them. Start with an early assessment of existing capabilities. "Before joining a company, I workshop and have one-to-ones with my new team to get a good sense of what I'm walking into," says one interviewee. Another interviewee recommends pre-assembling a significant part of one's team before taking up a new role, if possible.

One way to bridge gaps in the current HR team is to leverage on-demand talent. One CPO explains, "I didn't want to lose six months getting the right team in place, so on day one I brought with me an interim chief-of-staff and a transformation leader, so I could immediately move at pace."

"That first three-month window, getting to know the ExCo, the board, and the business—that's going to tell you what you need in your final team," points out another CPO. "You may evolve an HR strategy that requires a different kind of skillset, and you can't afford to make all your hiring decisions too early, because it's an expensive mistake."

## 7. Enable the business for the age of AI

Every organization is looking to understand how artificial intelligence will affect their workforce. "The question the CPO needs to be asking themselves is: how can the application of AI enable us to achieve our business's strategic priorities more effectively and quicker; and what does that mean for our people?" says a current incumbent.

Every CPO must become AI literate as quickly as possible and model AI adoption for the organization. Part of this process is helping the organization's leadership see AI adoption as a people-driven business transformation. "AI enablement will succeed or fail due to the leadership team and their ability to drive complex transformation in those areas the business needs to be re-wired," states one of our interviewees. CPOs are ideally positioned to drive that change.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> "CEO and board confidence monitor 2025: Persistent concerns, pockets of increased confidence," Heidrick & Struggles, February 5, 2025, [heidrick.com](https://heidrick.com).

<sup>7</sup> Learn more about CPOs' role in AI adoption and AI-enabled workforce design in Brad Warga, Jennifer Wilson, and Brian Kropp, "Chief people officer focus: 2026 agenda—becoming an enterprise CPO," Heidrick & Struggles, February 3, 2026, [heidrick.com](https://heidrick.com).

## 8. Adapt to the evolution of ESG

It is a volatile time for ESG commitments. Leaders are tasked with bridging divisive issues across politics and culture—before they drive teams apart. “These clashes can arise very quickly, and you need to be ready for them, and help leaders whose business unit has internal, interpersonal conflicts,” as one interviewee reflected.<sup>8</sup>

CPOs should understand how both ESG and diversity expectations are evolving in their market. “However, DEI is referenced, businesses need diverse workforces with different perspectives and backgrounds that reflect their customers, understand their target market, and produce the right products and the right services,” outlined another interviewee. “It’s the CPO’s role to ensure the organization can continue to perform commercially by having the right level of diversity.”

## How to thrive in your first 90 days

While there is no single blueprint for embarking on your role as a new CPO, established HR leaders agree there are key priorities for the first three months. Adopting these core behaviors and targets will set you up for long-term success.

- 1 Have a plan**  
Start with the end in mind by setting a clear 90-day plan grounded in strong principles, a growth mindset, commercial focus, and a clear view of the kind of CPO you intend to be.
- 2 Accept you don’t know everything**  
Recognize the scale of your learning curve, treat your first three months as if you have joined a new company, remain open to challenge, and avoid assuming past approaches or relationships will automatically translate into success.
- 3 Deep dive into the business**  
Approach your first 90 days forensically by understanding how the business works, running the numbers, testing strategy and values, and forming informed views before the CEO and chair expect clear advice.
- 4 Capture the culture**  
Read the organization’s pace, norms, and informal dynamics carefully, and avoid triggering an immune reaction by attempting major change before you have built insight, strategy, and support.
- 5 Be accessible**  
From day one, invest in visibility across levels and locations, connecting widely to understand how things truly work while clearly signaling what you stand for and where your boundaries lie.
- 6 Build a team for the long term**  
Move beyond short-term firefighting by identifying the capability you will need for your long-term strategy, securing the right talent quickly, and resetting expectations with former peers who now report to you.

<sup>8</sup> “Navigating fault lines: Leaders’ crucial capability for 2026,” Heidrick & Struggles, February 26, 2026, [heidrick.com](https://heidrick.com).

**7 Stay neutral**  
Understand both the board and the CEO's priorities, assess the dynamics between them, and maintain an independent, enterprise-focused stance that allows you to operate credibly in the middle ground.

**8 Practice patience**  
Resist the urge to make dramatic early moves, use your initial window to listen and learn deeply, avoid premature positions, and build momentum through a series of thoughtful, well-judged wins.

---

## About the authors

**Rachel Farley**

is a partner in the Human Resources Officers Practice; she is based in the London office.

[rfarley@heidrick.com](mailto:rfarley@heidrick.com)

**Cathy Powell**

is a partner in Heidrick Consulting; she is based in the London office.

[cpowell@heidrick.com](mailto:cpowell@heidrick.com)

---

# Human Resources Officers Practice

We partner with organizations to help them identify strategic human resources leaders who are prepared to lead and create high-performing organizations. We help our clients find HR leaders with the business acumen, strategic and market insight, financial savvy, operational capabilities, and ability to harness data and technology to drive business success. These leaders must be culture shapers with the foresight, resilience, and adaptability to drive transformative change in organizations through strategic talent management.

---

## Leaders of Heidrick & Struggles' Human Resources Officers Practice

---

Global

Brad Warga  
San Francisco  
[bwarga@heidrick.com](mailto:bwarga@heidrick.com)

Jennifer Wilson  
Dallas  
[jwilson@heidrick.com](mailto:jwilson@heidrick.com)