

# First-time chief people officer

## A guide from current to future chief people officers

The chief people officer (CPO) report outlines the step changes that people face when they get into the CPO role, some of which they may previously have considered, and others which fall far outside their sphere of experience.

### The main themes emerging from our interviews are:

- **As CPO, you are now part of running the business.** Sitting on the executive committee, working with the remuneration committee, reporting to the board, and building relationships with the chair and CEO are all significant steps up from the responsibilities of HR director.
- **The realisation that you're on your own can be countered** by establishing networks, finding sounding boards, and shaping your own personal leadership style. Integrity, authenticity, identity and courage all count here.
- **Leading the HR function also means letting go of running it on a day-to-day basis.** Formulating and instigating the HR strategy is a broader role, and requires wider business skills and the ability to get the organisation's leadership onside.
- **The breadth of the role is big and getting bigger.** It is commercial, political, strategic, personal – and varies from business to business. To succeed you must have the Board's ear, the Executive Committee's ear, and your ear to the ground.
- **The role is both internal and external.** All the business's stakeholders are also your stakeholders. You need to understand their priorities, whether they're shareholders, customers, employees or regulating bodies. These priorities are entwined with ESG issues, and you have to own these, as well as the future of work and impact of technology.
- **The expertise you have is essential.** The expertise you don't yet have is myriad. It will need to include the P&L position, what makes the business money, and how investors assess the business. Study finance for non-finance people, work hard to get up to speed, ask questions, and don't be afraid to admit you don't have all the answers.
- **Identifying business trends before other members of the executive committee** and bringing them into the commercial conversation, outlining the risks, opportunities and implications of ESG issues is now a key part of the role.

The CPO role has a complete, holistic view of the business. The quest for competitive advantage runs through everything the CPO does. For future-focused chief executives, hiring the right CPO is a commercial imperative. Their work impacts all of the people in the organisation, not just the HR function. It's a business risk if the hire is wrong, and without a good fit in the role, business opportunities will be missed.

Similarly, those with ambitions to be a CPO need to find the position that aligns with their motivations, sense of purpose, and which will set them up for success. By understanding the breadth of the CPO's remit, and how much the role differs within different organisations, you will be better placed to find your fit – whether it's a multinational, a group FTSE 1000 CPO role, a FTSE 250, or an agile, emerging business establishing its C-suite.

**By doing your due diligence into the requirements of the job, you will find the right culture, the right goals, the right CEO, and ultimately the right CHFO role for you.**

---

## First time checklist:

# Set yourself up for a future chief people officer role



### Know yourself:

"Be self-aware. What sort of CPO you are suited to being? Be clear about the sort of CPO position are you suited to. Many people are keen to jump into their first CPO role, but where you start out is important. If it's not the right fit, you'll have a miss-start and that is what will be remembered."



### Construct a career ladder:

"Take responsibility for how you build your experience and marketability to get that next role. Sometimes taking a smaller number one role can be a useful broadening of your career, and a way to differentiate yourself."



### Get business experience:

"If you haven't got business experience, go get it quick. Be curious about what the market is doing, have an external perspective. Is there a business project you can lead, or a broader change project you can do outside of HR?"



### Work in reward:

"A lot of HR generalists don't have reward experience and that's a problem. You need be able to play in this area to be successful as CPO. Get experience in reward early in your career, because it gets harder as you get more senior."



### Take a centre of excellence role:

"When I was Head of HR I knew I was too much of a generic business partner, and I had to take on a centre of excellence role. You have to make a conscious investment in your career, even if it's just a steppingstone."



### Do due diligence:

"Manage risk by asking the right questions before you start the job. Meet a good cross section of people, ideally including the Chair and the Remuneration Committee Chair, do all the research you can online, put feelers out to your network, really explore what the CEO wants to do and what the agenda is."



### Research the company:

"Learn as much as you can before joining – finance, strategy, customers – and have a cache of data and information that you can use to validate your points. Understand shareholder sentiment. Read analyst reports, the balance sheet, profiles of leaders, informal referencing, Glassdoor reviews, annual reports."

# First-time chief people officer: How to thrive in the first 90 days

1

## Have a plan



"Start with the end in mind – if you don't know where you're going, you'll end up someplace else, to quote Yogi Berra." Go in with a growth mindset and a focus on how you are going to support the organisation commercially. "What type of CPO do you want to be? That will inform how you make decisions and conduct yourself. There is no one answer – just have strong principles and vision."

2

## Accept you don't know everything



There is a massive learning curve ahead, even if you have been with the organisation a long time. "Don't take relationships for granted, and treat the first 100 days as if you were working for a new company." Be prepared to be challenged – what's worked previously won't necessarily work again. "And be kind to yourself – recognise you will not become an expert within a month."

3

## Deep-dive the business



You're an executive first, the people leader second. Find out how the business works, run the numbers, get the facts, and test the strategy, purpose and values behind top-level decisions. "There's a window to learn, then the Chair will want to know what you think. Take a forensic approach to the first 90 days, so you can deliver your opinion."

4

## Capture the culture



Every organisation has its own pulse, and you need to move to the beat. "I didn't anticipate the slow pace of my new company: I came from a super-fast organisation where you would be fired if you didn't deliver instantly. Here, I had to take my time." Get a handle on the culture, then figure out the best way to win people over.

5

## Be accessible



"Visibility, visibility, visibility – people have an expectation that the CPO will be available." Hold induction meetings with managers and set out what you stand for. "Call people all over the organisation and meet people at all levels to ask how things stand."

6

## Build the right team



You may be firefighting to begin with, but the emergency team may not be the one you need going forward. "Pause, take a breath, work out which people you really need and get them in as quickly as possible." Acknowledge that former peers may now be your juniors, and set out how the team is going to work together in future.

7

## Stay neutral



Identify the Board's agenda, what they are worrying about, the scrutiny they are getting and how you can support them. Fathom the board dynamic, in particular the relationship between the CEO and Chair. "You need to adopt an authentic and sophisticated style to not fall on one side or the other until you have a good read of the topography. Be Switzerland – occupy that middle ground."

8

## Practice patience



Don't be in a rush to make an impact. Listen, learn, validate, and hear what is not being said. "You only get one chance to be the new CPO. You have a window when you're excused for asking dumb questions." Don't stake your position too early, as it may be hard to withdraw from. Instead, focus on delivering multiple small wins.