

## ARTICLE

# How chief human resource officer and general counsel collaboration creates a better employee experience

Interviews with general counsels and chief human resource officers across industries explore how strong collaborations between them have become more critical than ever over the past two years—and highlight six traits of these successful partnerships.



As companies face the challenges of attracting, developing, and retaining the best talent, meeting employees' concerns and expectations has become a priority. One often underestimated relationship in companies' success in doing so is the collaboration between the general counsel (GC) and the chief human resource officer (CHRO). GCs and the CHROs found their partnership centerstage as COVID-19 took hold and companies had to manage their response and develop unprecedented policies just to keep going.<sup>1</sup> But the reasons for and benefits of greater GC–CHRO partnerships are much broader.

For example, having an intentional, organization-wide response to issues such as diversity, social justice, sustainable operations, well-being, and giving back to the community is increasingly important for attracting and retaining employees. Traditionally most companies saw such topics as falling entirely into defined buckets such as compliance, the oversight of the GC, employee relations and communications, or the realm of human resources. However, with greater collaboration between the GC and CHRO, the way companies build, sustain, and communicate their efforts in these areas is making a meaningful difference to performance and retention. As employee activism rises in some industries, these partnerships are also a core driver of companies' response. Another key area in which CHROs and GCs collaborate is on CEO and C-suite succession planning, which is typically a complex and confidential endeavor. And finally, GCs and CHROs are finding that working together on managing employee working conditions and safety is leading to faster and more effective solutions that bolster engagement and reduce physical and reputational risks.

Overall, the CHRO needs the GC's judgment on human issues with a legal implication, and the GC needs the CHRO's judgment on legal issues with human implications. To learn more about the new and evolving relationships being forged between GCs and CHROs, we interviewed pairs of executives from four major US companies in different industries. Their experiences and insights suggest several considerations for other



Finally, GCs and CHROs are finding that working together on managing employee working conditions and safety is leading to faster and more effective solutions that bolster engagement and reduce physical and reputational risks.

<sup>1</sup> A survey of general counsels we conducted in summer 2020, for example, found that GCs with larger teams and at larger companies were spending more time on HR issues than before the pandemic. See Victoria Reese, "How the general counsel role is changing in 2020: A new job description?" Heidrick & Struggles, [heidrick.com](https://heidrick.com).

## Keys for successful ongoing partnerships

In a thriving company, the C-suite is a team that works together to drive revenues, protect shareholder value, and attract and retain the best talent. In the past two-plus years with the pandemic, the fight for social justice, the rise of employee activism, and a myriad of other issues, executives have been asked to stretch beyond their defined roles to address issues and crises that have not been on the table before. The CHRO and the GC especially had to quickly unite to develop policies and responses and to advise the board and senior management.

### The most effective pairs of GCs and CHROs we have seen exhibit the following six traits:

Executives have been asked to stretch beyond their defined roles to address issues and crises that have not been on the table before. The CHRO and the GC especially had to quickly unite to develop policies and responses and to advise the board and senior management.



- They are agile in over-communicating and working as one team with a common mission.



- They are not territorial—they check their egos and always ask what is best for the company.



- They are focused on building trust with each other early on.



- They build on core employee issues—such as terms of employment, working conditions, and safety—and then extend the partnership to all the areas where a joint focus can support their company. Some examples include:

- ☒ Shaping DE&I efforts and making them intentional and systemically aligned with the rest of the company's policies and operations
- ☒ Planning for CEO and executive succession
- ☒ Driving decision making about corporate statements on and responses to social issues

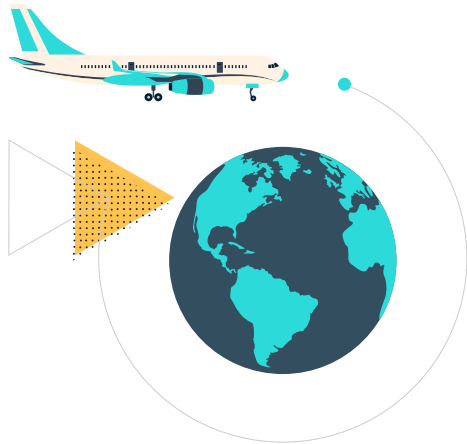


- They are focused on cross-silo collaboration on emerging issues.



- They model collaborative behavior for their teams.

## US airline



The safety of our team members and customers is always our top priority. We've seen some customers take out their frustrations on our employees in a way that we never saw before the pandemic.

Heidrick & Struggles:

### How would you describe your working relationship, and where do you typically work most closely together?

**GC:** We have a great culture here: no one ever tells you to stay in your lane and our CEO really wants to know what everyone on his team is thinking on different issues. So it's been a close relationship, perhaps closer than most. We both came from outside the industry, which gives us a unique perspective on certain issues. And in terms of where we work most closely together, we partner closely on topics related to our 85% unionized workforce.

**CHRO:** We are also a sanity check for each other on all the social and political issues, how they converge in the workplace, and how companies are balancing organizational risk and opportunities to support, advance, and empower team members, particularly on speaking about issues. HR and legal together provide a more holistic view. In the past, these issues were either HR or legal; now they are both. We employ people of all views and as a company we try to do a very good job to not assume the views of any person—and remind all team members to be respectful, inclusive, and tolerant. With this large of a workforce, those same issues that are outside the office walk into the office every day.

**GC:** We've seen that tension intensify particularly at the state and local government level. There's no easy way to navigate these issues. In these types of roles, you find yourself working on issues that are super-sensitive, where only you and the CEO are working on them.

**CHRO:** Another important place we work together is succession planning—how it is managed in terms of overall HR process and governance. We always have to consider new issues or risks as part of that process and work closely together on what are typically very confidential matters. That's where you see our partnership create real benefit for the company.

Heidrick & Struggles:

### How do you work together to ensure employees are safe in the workplace?

**CHRO:** The safety of our team members and customers is always our top priority. We've seen some customers take out their frustrations on our employees in a way that we never saw before the pandemic. That's an issue our entire senior leadership team is engaged on—not just the HR and legal teams. It's something that must be addressed.

**GC:** We have been really focused on this unruly passenger issue. We're partnering with federal, state, and local agencies and working closely with law enforcement to prosecute high-profile incidents. We're working with the attorney general, supporting legislation like the terrorist watchlist, and limiting liquor sales.

Heidrick & Struggles:

## What advice would you give to GCs and CHROs new to working together?

**CHRO:** I would encourage them to really foster a relationship with each other. One of my first relationships at the company was with [the GC]. I come to them all the time.

**GC:** In addition to building that relationship, try to have that level of relationship at all levels of the organization. My direct reports have great relationships with their direct reports.

## Financial services firm



Heidrick & Struggles:

## Where do you typically work most closely together? How do you collaborate?

**GC:** We interact all over the place, including many touch points with board work. And obviously on big personnel changes, too. The issue of employee investigations is front and center—our teams are focused on that. Also, we work closely together regarding trends that are happening in the world. The return to the office during COVID is one—and we have deeper interactions than we did when COVID didn't exist. We also take a collaborative approach on the company's response to public issues: Should we speak, should we not, and on what topic, and what do we say?

**CHRO:** We get to work together on some of the emerging spaces like diversity, equity, and inclusion. We are work closely on compensation decisions and regulatory issues. And the GC is in the middle of it with us on communications, morale, and overall employee relations. On public issues, it's a broader partnership—the corporate communications team and client teams get involved, too. We're pretty tight on these issues.

Heidrick & Struggles:

## How well do you work together?

**GC:** We don't really face any tension. Even though we wear different hats we have the same goals. We are not siloed. We are all executives of the company and look for what is the best answer for the company. We are talking all the time. If there are different perspectives, we talk it through. We say that whoever gets to the CEO first should address the issue. There is trust, and dialogue is encouraged with our respective teams.

**CHRO:** The nature of the partnership is that we share things. Our partnership is very strong. He helped me acclimate to the corporate center. There is transparency between us, and others in the organization can see it.

## Global technology company



Heidrick & Struggles:

### What kinds of topics do you work on together?

**CHRO:** We interact a lot as my job isn't just HR. All my jobs touch the GC's world. And we have definitely worked more closely through the great resignation and going back to the office—making decisions that have never been made before.

Also, before I became CHRO, we both felt that legal ended up doing the job of HR too much, and that caused some resentment internally. Now I am holding the HR team accountable.

**GC:** On the people side, there are natural synergies between legal and people. There has always been a bit of a deeper relationship between legal and HR. COVID brought the two functions even closer together. During the pandemic, we were joined from the hip on topics like vaccinations, working from home, and mask requirements. These decisions had a heavy legal component and a heavy judgment component.

Another really good example is our decision making about pulling out of Russia, where we were two of the key decision makers for the company. Sanctions and legal issues—this is a really good example of issues with a legal side and political implications. More broadly, in communications, we collaborate on how we talk about public policy issues and decisions we make about employees. We are in the conversations, and we have our own sidebar.

Social issues are very important to our business and employees. However, we do not take a public stance on these issues.

Heidrick & Struggles:

### How would you describe your working relationship?

**CHRO:** We're like-minded people. We deal with hard stuff, and it is really helpful to have this partner. We see things a certain way, and we pressure-test them with each other. There's never a collision—the question is, "You want to do X, and there is some risk; where can we find a middle ground?" But I have changed—I'm more open to advocating for the people side and give less weight to the risk.

**GC:** We will step through issues together. We come at them with trust and respect. We will always find the right spot for our company.

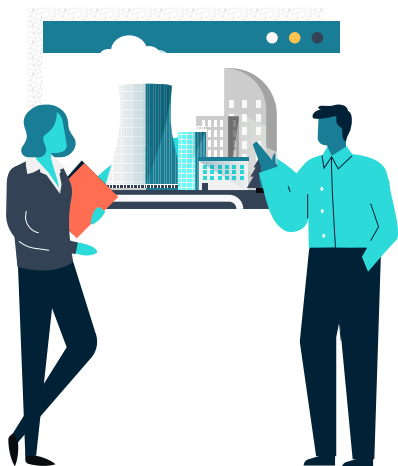
Heidrick & Struggles:

### What should other GCs and CHROs be aware of as they build relationships?

**CHRO:** I do think that legal is often plugged in in the absence of, well, fill in the blank: the comms team, the people team. Legal is often seen as the default.

**GC:** It is that trust between the functions that drives the growth of the business, and we are there for each other. We have a great executive committee but there is a natural synergy between legal and HR.

## Industrial company



There is no ego that comes into play, and neither of us needs to be right. The best interest of the company is critical.

Heidrick & Struggles:

### Where do the two of you work most closely together?

**GC:** We closely collaborate on issues that require an employee lens and a risk-assessment lens. We have crossing lines in the spaces of labor, employment law, corporate communications, and legal affairs. We've had a lot of overlap on social issues that corporate entities have been required to comment on.

**CHRO:** We collaborate on topics that have been determined as a current trend or gap; some are more important for the CHRO team, such as conduct and harassment training. We also work on broad social issues, investing heavily in inclusion and diversity and driving inclusive leader development. We are very connected and aligned on building a culture of appreciation. We both think as enterprise leaders—we wear hats in global functions and think about the whole business, and we come to each other to ask for help to elevate the whole executive team.

Heidrick & Struggles:

### How do you interact with the board on topics where you're working particularly closely together?

**GC:** I used to have sole oversight of the board in my previous role. Now I have less visibility, as there are more secretaries in the group. At first, I felt a bit uncertain, but now I think it works well and is a good opportunity for growth. I am also able to keep the CHRO apprised of what is discussed in those meetings. We collaborate on proxy statements and other documents. We share information with each other for the benefit of those documents. We also partner on board recruitment as part of the governance committee.

**CHRO:** There is an executive committee talent review done for the whole team. And I work with the CEO on succession planning for his role specifically and on board talent reviews, which connect to board recruitment. [The GC] is involved in the process of what happens if the CEO becomes incapacitated or similar possible governance-related scenarios.

Heidrick & Struggles:

### What are the benefits of working closely together?

**GC:** It's really nice to have a partner to help lead the company. We are very flexible with each other and the needs of the company. I collaborate more than I did with the prior CHRO. It's part of our culture now. That has been a great benefit. We share the same mindset as we provide support. There is no ego that comes into play, and neither of us needs to be right. The best interest of the company is critical. We are both involved in driving the company forward.

**CHRO:** Our teams are closely connected. Collaboration is greatly valued at the company and across regions. Not being territorial allows us to focus on enabling the company to succeed and grow. Connecting the functions across the company is the greatest asset. It creates more alignment and greater autonomy. It accurately reflects the company culture.

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# Legal, Risk, Compliance & Government Affairs Practice

Heidrick & Struggles' Legal, Risk, Compliance & Government Affairs Practice draws on more than 60 years of leadership expertise to provide strategic counsel to some of the world's most influential public and private organizations.

When it comes to legislation, litigation, and regulation, a handful of critical roles can help determine an organization's profitability and success. Our experienced team helps clients acquire, develop, and manage talent in these core practice areas on a global scale: legal, risk, compliance, and government affairs.

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## Leader of Heidrick & Struggles' Legal, Risk, Compliance & Government Affairs

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# 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.

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