CREATING PEOPLE ADVANTAGE 2026

Four Power Moves for the CHRO

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BCG + **WFPMA** World Federation of People Management Associations

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Executive Summary

In an increasingly fast-changing and complex business environment, CHROs can make or break business performance. The best CHROs have earned a seat at the table among leadership teams, deploying digital and AI to deliver HR services efficiently and effectively, building people capabilities to drive strategic priorities—including enterprise-wide AI transformation—looking ahead to meet rapidly evolving skill and workforce needs, and ultimately driving business value. But many HR teams still struggle to perform at that level.

Over the past two decades, BCG's Creating People Advantage reports, in partnership with the World Federation of People Management Associations (WFPMA), have provided critical guidance in helping CHROs position themselves in the first group. This year's analysis—which drew on responses from more than 7,000 HR and business leaders—looks at 28 people management topics and identifies the biggest priorities.

Key findings:

- **Stronger HR capabilities lead to greater business value.** Companies that have higher capabilities in areas like employee engagement and well-being, recruiting and onboarding, and sustainability can better support business objectives, by helping leaders shape and develop the workforce more strategically.

- **However, HR functions are stronger in traditional areas.** In contrast, companies remain strong in subjects like compliance and employee relations, and recruiting and onboarding continue to benefit from automation and data-driven processes. These are important, but they are foundational and won't drive outstanding business performance.

- **CHROs aren't yet capitalizing on digital.** Digital solutions made the biggest jump in terms of future importance among respondents—improving 13 ranks to 12th—but it should likely be ranked even higher. Current capabilities in this area are among the lowest overall, underscoring the need for CHROs to act.

- **Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) need to catch up in their adoption of digital.** Large companies are more likely to prioritize topics like GenAI, people analytics and strategic insights, whereas SMEs still rank these near the bottom in terms of future importance.

The results point to four moves for CHROs.

- **Deliver business value through HR.** CHROs should not only improve the performance of the HR function but expand their focus to more directly connect people efforts with the strategic business priorities. Everything the CHRO does should be viewed through this lens—does this serve a business outcome?

- **Lead the digital and AI transformation.** CHROs need to embrace the dual imperative of modernizing HR with digital and AI to better support business units, while also leading the broader AI transformation of the entire enterprise, which has massive workforce and talent implications.

- **Build workforce and leadership capabilities.** In a changing business environment, CHROs must develop people capabilities at all levels to help the company win in the market. Success requires developing a skills-based strategy, explicitly linked to business outcomes, and rethinking skills and roles.

- **Anchor the change.** Finally, CHROs need to ensure that changes take root. That requires setting clear governance and operating rhythms, embedding new behaviors into performance management schemes, and creating a culture of accountability.

The report includes case studies of companies putting these ideas into action. They illustrate that with the right approach, CHROs and their teams can evolve from a support function to a driver of outsized business value.

Introduction

CHROs and their teams face a range of challenges right now, making it hard to know where to focus their time and attention. Disruption and uncertainties are emerging that drive both outsized opportunities and challenges. AI, and especially agentic AI, is reshaping processes and workstreams. Talent is tougher than ever to recruit and retain. Businesses are evolving their strategies to win in this environment, which requires shifting resource allocations, bolstering and building new capabilities, and pulling back from less-attractive areas. CHROs and their teams need to be at the forefront of helping leaders deliver on their ambitious business agendas, through fit-for-purpose people strategies and matching HR capabilities.

Since 2007, BCG and the World Federation of People Management Associations (WFPMA) have tracked the evolution of HR priorities. Our Creating People Advantage reports over nearly two decades, including the previous edition in 2023, constitute the largest and longest-running global study on HR priorities. They trace the changing role of HR from functional administrator to strategic partner to creator of new value for the business. (See the **Appendices for details on the respondent base and methodology**.)

This year's survey drew responses from more than 7,000 HR and business leaders, spanning 115 countries and administrative regions, with data from 25 different industries.

- We ranked 28 people management topics by their future importance and companies' current capabilities, to identify the most urgent areas for action.

- We conducted three deep dives on HR priorities: leading the digital and AI transformation, building workforce and leadership capabilities, and creating outsized business value.

- Based on that analysis, we developed practical recommendations to help HR leaders translate these insights into improved organizational performance. A central thread through our report is the need for HR leaders to grow in terms of both business and digital acumen. They need to complement their deep functional expertise to meet the current people challenges and better create business value.

The results make one conclusion clear: HR is no longer an enabling function but a driver of transformation and value creation. Leading CHROs are partnering directly with CEOs to steer enterprise strategy and support business leaders in execution to create outsized returns. Every HR team should seek to earn and fulfill this role with their CEOs and leadership teams.

Today's HR Priorities

Our analysis assesses 28 people-management topics, measuring each by respondents' self-reported capability in that topic and how they view its future importance. This approach provides both a snapshot of the present and a view of where the HR agenda is heading over the next two to three years, giving HR leaders a clear view of the most critical capability gaps they must address.

- **HR leaders say that traditional HR topics are still the most important.** Ranking the 28 topics by their future importance, people and HR strategy remains at the top, reflecting pressure to translate headcount into capability and skills capacity. Strategic workforce planning and leadership development are close behind. Recruiting and onboarding and talent management and succession remain elevated as well, underscoring how the competition for scarce skills is a defining constraint. (See **Exhibit 1**.)

The topic that showed the biggest increase is digital solutions (such as HR process automation), jumping 13 ranks to 12th in the latest analysis. HR leaders increasingly experience pressure to utilize digital to automate, deliver analytical insights, and offer a seamless employee experience. Rather than being an objective themselves, digital and AI are a means to an end for HR, streamlining workflows and helping teams support the business more efficiently and effectively.

Employee-centric themes such as engagement and purpose remain highly rated as well, yet their movement in rankings suggests they are becoming foundational rather than differentiating factors.

EXHIBIT 1

HR Priorities Shift Toward Workforce Capability, Talent Infrastructure, and Digital Enablement

Future importance ranking		Responses of "high" or "somewhat high" (%)	2023 ranking	Ranking change
1	People and HR strategy	47 / 37 / 84	1	0 ⊜
2	Strategic workforce planning	41 / 39 / 80	5	3 ⬆
3	Leadership development	43 / 37 / 80	2	−1 ⬇
4	Employer value proposition	39 / 39 / 78	4	0 ⊜
5	Recruiting and onboarding	39 / 39 / 78	9	4 ⬆
6	Purpose and culture activation	38 / 39 / 77	6	0 ⊜
7	Upskilling and reskilling	38 / 39 / 77	7	0 ⊜
8	Talent management and succession planning	37 / 40 / 77	15	7 ⬆
9	Performance management	36 / 40 / 76	10	1 ⬆
10	Employee engagement and well-being	40 / 36 / 76	3	−7 ⬇
11	Employee relations	34 / 40 / 74	12	1 ⬆
12	Digital solutions (e.g., HR process automation)	36 / 37 / 73	25	13 ⬆
13	Organizational development and design	32 / 40 / 72	18	5 ⬆
14	Rewards and recognition	32 / 41 / 72	8	−6 ⬇
15	People analytics and reporting	35 / 37 / 72	16	1 ⬆
16	HR cost and impact steering	33 / 39 / 72	N/A	N/A
17	Health and safety	38 / 34 / 72	11	−6 ⬇
18	HR staff capabilities	32 / 39 / 71	13	−5 ⬇
19	HR IT architecture, software, and data	33 / 38 / 71	14	−5 ⬇
20	Policy management	30 / 39 / 69	22	2 ⬆
21	HR organization and governance	28 / 40 / 68	20	−1 ⬇
22	Deployment of GenAI and other emerging technologies	34 / 31 / 66	27	5 ⬆
23	Transformation management (including restructuring)	29 / 36 / 64	21	−2 ⬇
24	Flexible work schemes	28 / 35 / 63	17	−7 ⬇
25	Diversity, equity, and inclusion management	26 / 36 / 61	19	−6 ⬇
26	Staffing and mobility management	24 / 37 / 61	24	−2 ⬇
27	Sustainability and ESG	27 / 32 / 59	23	−4 ⬇
28	HR shared services	23 / 35 / 58	26	−2 ⬇

🟩 +3pp difference   🟥 −3pp difference   ▬ High importance   ▬ Somewhat high importance

Source: 2026 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis (n = 7,115).
Note: "Other" and "N/A" responses are not included in this overview. Because of rounding, not all sector percentages add up to 100%. The 2023 topic ranking was recalculated based on the average percentage of "high" and "somewhat high" responses considering merged topics.

- **Digital capabilities and innovation are lacking.** In our second set of rankings, which looks at the same 28 HR topics by current capability levels, companies remain strong in compliance and employee relations, as well as recruiting and onboarding. (See **Exhibit 2**.) Strategic areas such as strategic workforce planning and people analytics and reporting show steady progress but are still lower than their stated importance in the first ranking.

The greatest deficit lies in digital fluency and analytics maturity. Many HR functions have invested heavily in systems, yet few have built the skills or data culture to translate those systems into insight and decision support. This echoes broader findings that while companies continue to make sizable investments in digital, only a small share translate solutions into sustained business value.

EXHIBIT 2

Capabilities Lag Behind in Future-Critical Topics, with Limited Progress in Digital and AI

	Current capabilities ranking	Responses of "high" or "somewhat high" (%)			2023 ranking	Ranking change	
1	Health and safety	23	33	56	1	0	⊜
2	Employee relations	18	36	54	2	0	⊜
3	Policy management	19	32	51	3	0	⊜
4	Recruiting and onboarding	15	35	50	12	8	⇑
5	Employer value proposition	16	31	47	5	0	⊜
6	People and HR strategy	16	31	47	4	−2	⇓
7	Purpose and culture activation	16	28	44	7	0	⊜
8	Employee engagement and well-being	14	29	44	8	0	⊜
9	Flexible work schemes	14	28	42	6	−3	⇓
10	Performance management	14	27	42	9	−1	⇓
11	HR staff capabilities	10	31	41	10	−1	⇓
12	HR cost and impact steering	12	28	40	N/A	N/A	
13	Leadership development	13	26	39	14	1	⇑
14	Upskilling and reskilling	13	26	39	16	2	⇑
15	Strategic workforce planning	12	27	39	17	2	⇑
16	Diversity, equity, and inclusion management	12	26	38	15	−1	⇓
17	HR organization and governance	12	26	38	11	−6	⇓
18	Organizational development and design	13	25	37	18	0	⊜
19	Rewards and recognition	11	26	37	13	−6	⇓
20	Sustainability and ESG	11	24	35	24	4	⇑
21	People analytics and reporting	10	25	35	21	0	⊜
22	HR shared services	9	24	33	19	−3	⇓
23	Talent management and succession planning	10	23	33	22	−1	⇓
24	Transformation management (including restructuring)	9	23	32	20	−4	⇓
25	HR IT architecture, software, and data	9	21	31	23	−2	⇓
26	Staffing and mobility management	7	22	30	25	−1	⇓
27	Digital solutions (e.g., HR process automation)	9	21	29	26	−1	⇓
28	Deployment of GenAI and other emerging technologies	6	16	22	27	−1	⇓

■ +3pp difference   ■ −3pp difference   ■ High capabilities   ■ Somewhat high capabilities

Source: 2026 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis (n = 7,115).
Note: "Other" and "N/A" responses are not included in this overview. Because of rounding, not all sector percentages add up to 100%. The 2023 topic ranking was recalculated based on the average percentage of "high" and "somewhat high" responses considering merged topics.

- **Urgent priorities: the 2026 "need-to-act" matrix.** The matrix combining current capabilities with future importance highlights the biggest gaps and the topics where CHROs need to focus their efforts. (See **Exhibit 3**.) Specifically, two clusters of topics should become priorities for CHROs.

  The first is leading in a two-speed world: supporting the AI and digital transformation across the broader enterprise, while also driving their own processes to deliver better, faster, and more accurate services at lower costs through digitization and AI.

The second core priority for CHROs is building workforce and leadership capabilities. This includes talent management and succession, leadership development, strategic workforce planning, upskilling and reskilling, and people and HR strategy. These capabilities ensure that companies have the right skills and leadership behaviors in place to transform and capitalize on technology.

Together, these clusters form the agenda for 2026. CHROs who connect both will advance HR's contribution from functional excellence to enterprise-level value driver. In the next section, we will discuss these three topics in more detail, starting with the most important topic: how CHROs can create more business value.

EXHIBIT 3

Sorting the 28 Topics by Current Capabilities and Future Importance Identifies the Biggest Priorities for the HR Function
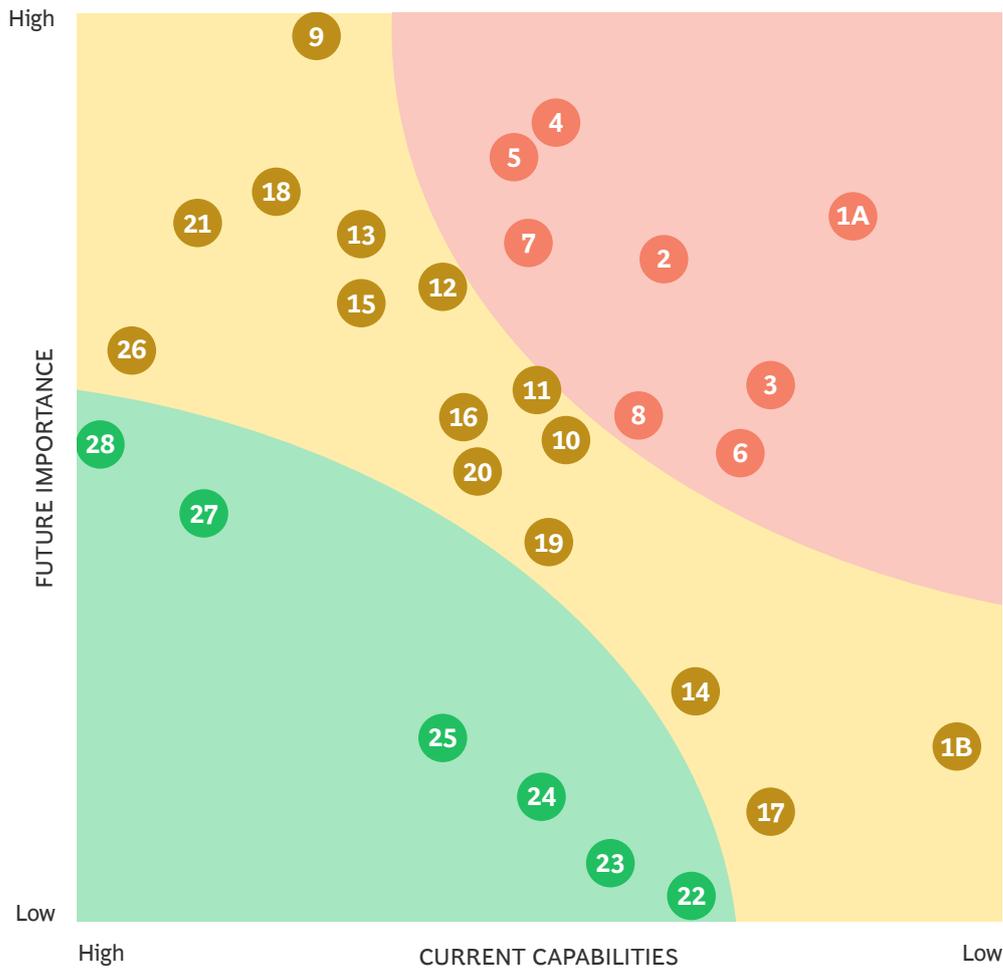
Strong need to act

1A Deployment of GenAI and other emerging technologies (large companies)[1]

2 Talent management and succession planning

3 Digital solutions (e.g., HR process automation)

4 Strategic workforce planning

5 Leadership development

6 HR IT architecture, software, and data

7 Upskilling and reskilling

8 People analytics and reporting

Medium need to act

1B Deployment of GenAI and other emerging technologies (small and medium-sized enterprises)[1]

9 People and HR strategy

10 Rewards and recognition

11 Organizational development and design

12 Performance management

13 Purpose and culture activation

14 Transformation management (including restructuring)

15 Employee engagement and well-being

16 HR cost and impact steering

17 Staffing and mobility management

18 Employer value proposition

19 HR organization and governance

20 HR staff capabilities

21 Recruiting and onboarding

26 Employee relations

Low need to act

22 HR shared services

23 Sustainability and ESG

24 Diversity, equity, and inclusion management

25 Flexible work schemes

27 Policy management

28 Health and safety

Source: 2026 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis (n = 7,115).
Note: Ranked by highest number of responses in "high" and "somewhat high" categories.
[1]Delta calculation for GenAI deployment split by company size due to significant differences. Large companies have at least 5,000 employees; small and medium-sized enterprises have fewer than 5,000 employees.

HR's Role in Creating Business Value

Ultimately, companies measure the success of the HR function by the value it creates for the business, not the volume of activity it delivers. In our survey, 65% of senior leaders view HR as a key business enabler, yet 51% cite administrative load as the primary barrier to the function making a more strategic contribution.

To create outsized value, HR functions must align closely with business leaders and their agendas, even as demands on efficiency and operational excellence constantly increase. For example, automation and shared services can make processes more consistent, improve the employee and manager experience, and free up HR capacity to play a more strategic role in shaping business performance. More broadly, HR leaders need to link the company's people strategy directly to innovation, productivity, and financial performance, in ways that deliver tangible results to the bottom line.

Focus on business metrics over HR metrics. To help create measurable value, HR teams need to deeply understand the business and what drives successful execution of business priorities. To do so, HR must move beyond traditional metrics such as time-to-hire or engagement scores and quantify how talent decisions directly affect profitability, growth, and innovation. This means translating workforce analytics into predictive insights that anticipate business needs, identify opportunities, and guide resource allocation.

Measure capability value to gauge the business impact of upskilling. Capability value is a key metric for assessing the business impact of upskilling. Defined as the measurable value created by investments in skills, reskilling, and learning, it links workforce capabilities directly to outcomes such as productivity gains, faster speed to mastery, improved retention, and progress against strategic priorities like AI and digital transformation and growth.

Capability value requires organizations to define the intended business impact of upskilling initiatives upfront, track outcome-oriented and interim metrics, and assess whether that impact has been achieved. Leading organizations use capability value as a performance metric to elevate upskilling from a cost to a strategic investment, making the contribution of HR to enterprise performance explicit and measurable.

Invest in people to improve retention. In our data, organizations that have the highest capabilities in employee-centric areas report lower turnover. (See **Exhibit 4**.) These include topics like employee engagement and well-being, recruiting and onboarding, and sustainability—a clear signal that investing in people yields dividends.

EXHIBIT 4

Companies with Stronger Employee-Centric Capabilities Tend to Have Lower Workforce Turnover

Annual employee turnover rate (%) by capability
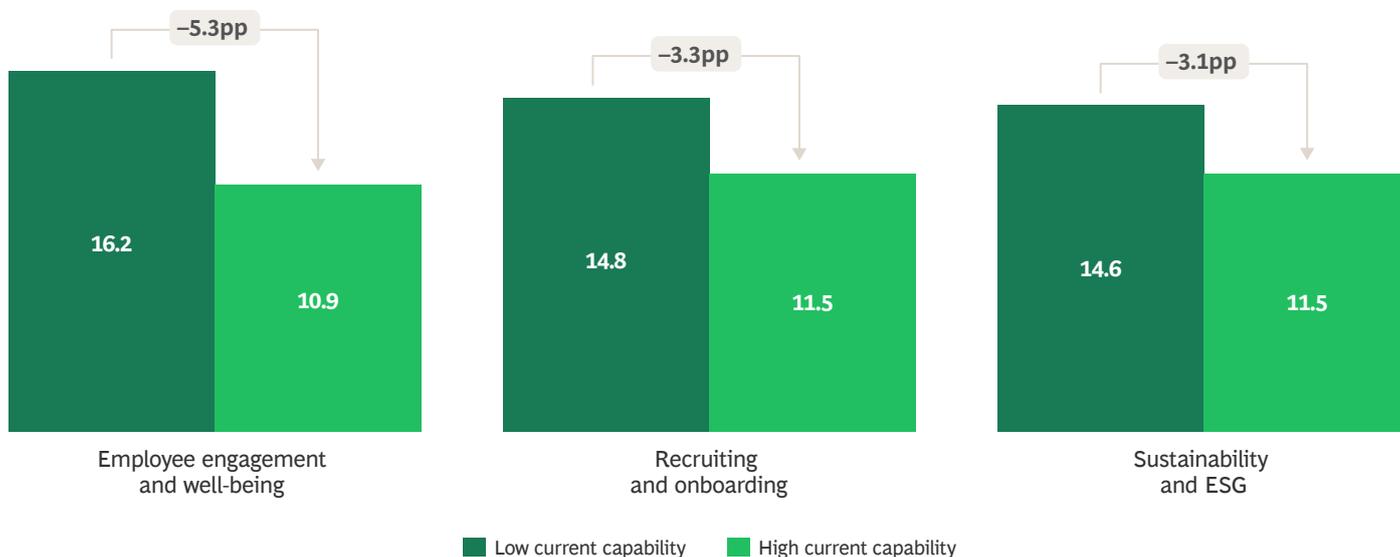
Sources: SPSS multiple linear regression analysis using the 2026 CPA data set; BCG analysis.
Note: Dependent variable: Annual employee turnover rate (%). Model statistically significant, $F_{(28, 3380)} = 13.65$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.102$ (Adj. $R^2 = 0.094$), $N \approx 3,409$. Although the model identifies several HR capabilities with meaningful associations to turnover, the overall explanatory power remains modest, indicating that turnover is also driven by broader organizational dynamics and external labor-market conditions.
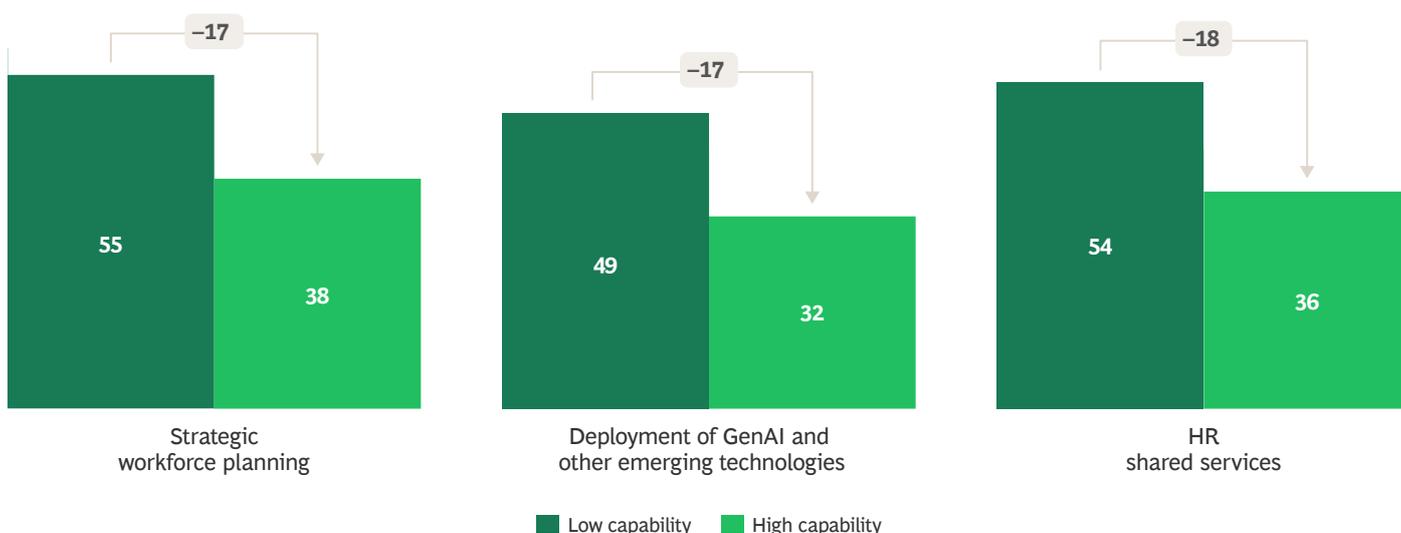
Make hiring a superpower. Organizations with strong capabilities in planning, analytics, mobility, and emerging tech fill critical roles significantly faster and better. (See **Exhibit 5**.) These high-capability teams cut time-to-fill by roughly 17 to 18 days on average compared to peers. Anecdotally, the best talent acquisition teams are not only faster, but better at matching recruited individuals to business needs.

EXHIBIT 5

Stronger Capabilities in Planning, Analytics, Mobility, and Emerging-Tech Lead to Faster Hiring Processes

Average days to fill critical roles by capability

	Strategic workforce planning	Deployment of GenAI and other emerging technologies	HR shared services
Low capability	55	49	54
High capability	38	32	36
Difference	−17	−17	−18

■ Low capability   ■ High capability

Source: SPSS multiple linear regression analysis using the 2026 CPA data set.
Note: Dependent variable: Average days to fill critical roles. Model statistically significant, $F_{(28, 3602)} = 6.04$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.045$ (Adj. $R^2 = 0.037$), $N \approx$ 3,631. The model demonstrates a statistically reliable relationship, though effect size remains modest, suggesting time-to-fill is influenced by a broader set of organizational and market factors beyond the HR capabilities captured here.

Leading the Digital and AI Transformation

A central theme in this year's report is the need for CHROs to move faster in terms of implementing digital technology. This is the case both within the HR function and driving the people elements of digital transformation across the business, in areas including upskilling, adoption, and designing new ways of working.

GenAI embodies this challenge. Nearly 70% of respondents use GenAI in some capacity, mainly for reporting, learning, and recruiting. However, only 38% of respondents indicate high or strong relevance of GenAI for their organization today. (See **Exhibit 6**.) We also found that 50% of organizations expect agentic AI to have high or transformational impact on their organizations in the future. This is in stark contrast with **other BCG research**, in which 90% of CEOs believe that AI will shape their industries and a similar portion of CEOs plans to further increase AI investments. That CEO sentiment should be a call to HR leaders to further lean into the AI agenda of their organizations and define the people agenda to support it.

Overall, only a small minority in HR teams in our study have scaled GenAI across their HR organization, for several reasons. (See **Exhibit 7**.)

- **Data Privacy.** Among respondents, 51% say concerns about data privacy or compliance are the greatest barriers to the introduction of GenAI, more than any other factor. However, 32% say their organization has limited or no processes in place to measure the risk of GenAI use.

- **Technical Skills.** Companies also point to a lack of institutional capabilities as a hurdle to GenAI adoption. People who have strong technology expertise tend to work in other functions, and they are in-demand across sectors right now, making them difficult for HR leaders to source.

- **Uncoordinated Pilots.** One challenge is the sheer number of applications and offerings—with new offerings coming onto the market all the time. Organizations often launch multiple uncoordinated pilots rather than focusing on a comprehensive set of linked initiatives. Companies with large **frontline workforces** are notably behind in this regard, often because of the organizational challenge of putting the technology in the hands of a large workforce.[1]

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1. Frontline industries are those where most employees work in physical, operational, or customer-facing environments, with location-dependent, hands-on roles and limited reliance on desk-based digital tools. In contrast, knowledge industries are those where most employees create value primarily through cognitive, analytical, or creative work performed at a desk or in hybrid/remote settings, enabled by digital tools and knowledge-intensive collaboration.

EXHIBIT 6

Only 38% of HR and Business Leaders View GenAI as Highly or Strongly Relevant for Their Organization Today

- High relevance
- Strong relevance
- Moderate relevance
- Some relevance
- Low relevance
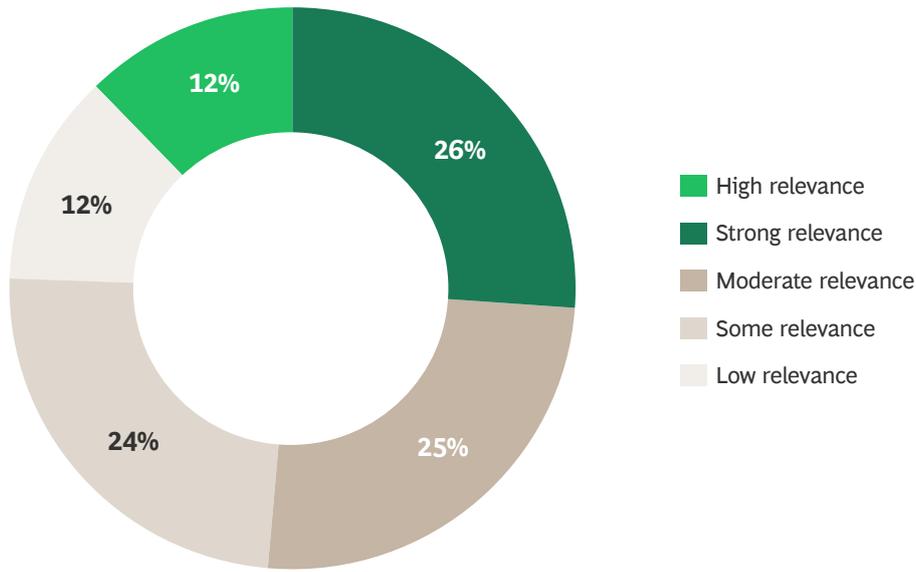
Source: 2026 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis (n = 2,075).

EXHIBIT 7

Companies Face Several Barriers in Implementing GenAI in HR

(% OF RESPONDENTS)

Barrier	%
Concerns about data privacy or compliance	51
Lack of internal expertise	45
Budget or resource constraints	36
Concerns around ethics and responsible use	36
Inadequate technology infrastructure	29
Resistance to change among employees	26
Limited leadership buy-in or vision	23
Insufficient data quality	22
Regulatory uncertainty	22
No access to AI tools/licenses	15
Other	3
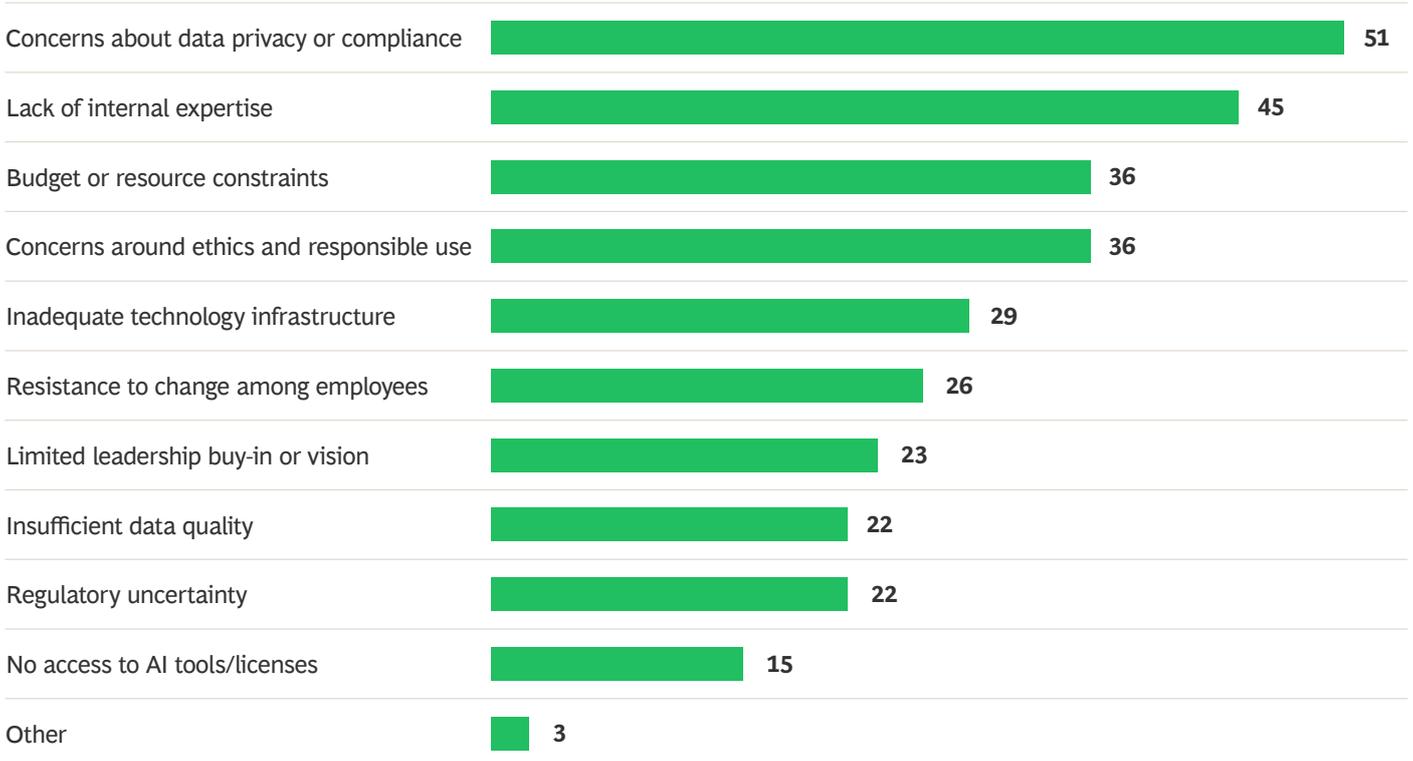
Source: 2026 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis (n = 1,291).

Shifting from exploration to at-scale implementation depends less on deploying AI (including agentic AI) into current work and more on reshaping processes and workstreams to generate greater value from the technology. That entails asking some core strategic questions ("How will the company create outsized value in the future?") and then drilling down to more tactical concerns ("How will our process, data management, tools, roles, and people skills change to support that?"). Rebuilding the HR function and processes in this way—along with key business processes— is a more complex endeavor, but it has correspondingly bigger financial benefits.

The second key priority in digital and AI transformation is building the required data infrastructure to connect HR and business systems end to end, with the goal of embedding technology across the full employee lifecycle.

Third, CHROs must ensure that teams within the HR function and across the entire enterprise have the skills and capabilities they need to succeed with AI. Most organizations will need sizable upskilling and reskilling initiatives, along with programs to reshape work and the workforce as a result of AI.

From these foundations, HR functions can advance from experimentation to broader adoption of digital and AI, assigning ownership of a prioritized set of AI use cases, building AI-literate HR teams, tracking ROI through productivity and experience metrics. Companies won't just gain efficiency but also intelligence, using analytics, process automation, and AI-driven insights to anticipate workforce needs, personalize learning, and inform business decisions. In that way, AI can help HR become a source of foresight rather than a reactive service function. (See "**Reinventing HR with AI at a Global Technology Company**.")

Reinventing HR with AI at a Global Technology Company

A leading technology company was struggling with fragmented processes, heavy manual workloads, and uneven employee experiences. The CHRO's mandate was clear: move from ticket-driven IT support to more responsive, AI-driven services, backed by strong governance, clean data, and high adoption among managers and employees.

To improve, the company developed an AI-enabled service layer inside HR. Virtual assistants and digital workers automated inquiries, forms, routing, and common transactions, with seamless handoffs to humans for complex cases. Core workflows, such as promotions and event administration, were orchestrated end to end on a simplified HR IT landscape with better data standards. Roles and rhythms were clarified so that HR business partners, centers of excellence, shared services, and an agile solutions team could scale new digital capabilities with human-in-the-loop controls.

Through this journey, HR became an always-on, data-driven service. Manager and executive adoption exceeded 93%; 94% of HR cases were resolved by the virtual assistant; more than four-fifths of all HR transactions were automated; and promotion processes took 50% of the time they used to.

The result was a function that not only digitized its own services but also demonstrated how AI can scale responsibly, linking digital solutions, HR IT architecture, people analytics and reporting, and GenAI into one coherent, value-producing system inside HR and across the business.

Building Workforce and Leadership Capabilities

The second set of priority topics are those dealing with workforce and leadership renewal.

When it comes to workforce renewal, companies have pushed over the last several years to revamp talent management around skills rather than roles. But progress is uneven, and many companies face a persistent gap in execution.

- In our survey, only about half of respondents (54%) use skills-based matching (matching an individual to a future role based on the individual's skill profiles and the requirements of the new position), and just 48% run structured reskilling programs.

- Yet most organizations are closer to the starting line than the finish line. Overall, just 11% of the companies in our sample have a full skills taxonomy across the enterprise. To be clear, companies may not need a skills-based approach for every employee, but they can start by focusing on the most important, value-creating roles in the organization.

To respond effectively, HR must take a more active role in orchestrating capability development at scale. CHROs must align fragmented initiatives into one coherent skills strategy, link that to critical business objectives and challenges, and then scale it up across the company. This includes using skills analytics to connect learning with workforce planning, integrating sustainability and digital leadership into talent frameworks, and introducing micro-credentialing to certify emerging capabilities in areas such as AI literacy and green operations. By linking skills data to business outcomes, HR can not only get the best work from their current talent but also create value across the enterprise.

The need for CHRO involvement in shaping and developing workforce capabilities is even more acute given how AI is changing the nature of work. For example, as AI agents become more prevalent, CHROs must now support business units in integrating agents into workstreams and processes. They can also rewire talent and upskilling agendas to factor in digital and AI skills across the workforce, including technical, behavioral, and managerial aspects. And the spread of AI means that CHROs must serve as a strategic advisor on the overall organizational design and agile ways of working, even as they build a culture of innovation and trust.

Data from this year's study show that organizations investing in their HR teams' capabilities, flexible work models, and purpose-driven culture experience lower voluntary turnover. These findings underline that workforce renewal is not only about developing new skills, it is also about creating environments where people want to grow and stay. (See sidebar, "**How an Industrial Goods Company Is Upgrading Employee Skills**.")

How An Industrial Goods Company Is Upgrading Employee Skills

A large industrial goods company was at an inflection point. A plan to more than double production capacity in the next five years—combined with growing cost pressures and digital and sustainability ambitions—exposed major capability gaps. The company would not be able to succeed unless it could build new skills in the workforce and redeploy staff to the areas of need.

To improve, leaders used analytics tools to map more than 350 skills across all functions into more than 60 skill clusters, ranging from process engineering and maintenance planning to data analytics, cybersecurity, and supply chain. Each employee was assessed against this framework, generating a snapshot of current proficiency levels and future readiness.

This transparency helped HR leaders identify key priorities and take concrete action. The company launched a new learning and development framework to deliver targeted reskilling programs with the intent to redeploy surplus talent and fill critical skill gaps.

Within a year, the company had established a skills-led approach to workforce renewal. Early indicators showed meaningful progress: critical skill gaps were being addressed in priority areas, employee mobility had become a focus across key assets, and operational efficiency improved across several key roles. Just as importantly, HR strengthened its role as a strategic partner to the business, demonstrating how a more systematic focus on skills can support transformation, resilience, and long-term growth.

Four Power Moves for the CHRO of the Future

Our findings leave no doubt: top HR functions focus on disciplined execution and measurable value. The imperatives below translate our insights into a practical agenda for HR leaders to succeed in 2026 and beyond.

Deliver business value through HR. HR leaders that want to shape business performance must take a quantifiable approach, backing up their contributions with explicit metrics. They need to work in close partnership with the CEO, align people strategy with overall business strategy, and help leaders achieve their goals. They also need to set up the HR function and processes to deliver on all of these objectives with high quality and acceptable costs.

- Define value metrics, productivity per employee, innovation throughput, and capability ROI, and assign clear owners, baselines, and targets.

- Link people and performance. Connect workforce analytics to commercial and operational data; run quarterly HR–Finance reviews to validate impact and redirect investment.

- Require business cases to quantify the potential gains for major HR tech and capability programs, rooted in business outcomes and hard metrics.

Lead the digital and AI transformation. Second, CHROs must implement digital and AI in the HR function, in line with business priorities, and lead digital transformation efforts across the overall enterprise.

- Within the HR function, raise digital fluency. Upskill team members to not only embrace AI and analytics but translate insights into business decisions. Prioritize high-ROI process reimagination in areas like recruiting and onboarding, learning, and people analytics and reporting. Track HR performance using business metrics.

- Across the enterprise, create a capability playbook for HR to support all people aspects of AI and digital deployments, including workforce planning, skill development, organizational and role design, adoption, and change management. Partner deeply with business and tech teams to shape and deploy new processes and tooling and capture business value.

Build workforce and leadership capabilities. The third priority is evolving skills and capabilities in how companies assess and develop employees and leaders.

- Stand up a skills-based organization, enterprise taxonomies and governance linking learning, careers, and workforce planning; align role architecture and compensation to skills where appropriate.

- Make leadership adaptive, with development programs focused on transformation capability, agility, and systems thinking, using practice-based learning (labs, sprints, simulations) tied to live initiatives.

- Integrate learning with work, embed capability building into business programs; track time-to-competency and internal fill rates for critical roles.

Anchor the change. All of these initiatives require a solid change-management approach.

- Embed new behaviors such as collaboration, accountability, and continuous learning that are linked to leadership expectations, promotions, and recognition.

- Institutionalize rhythms and integrate change into performance management, leadership development, and planning cycles with a lightweight cadence (monthly check-ins, quarterly retros).

- Lead through culture. Treat culture as a product with defined outcomes, user groups, and feedback loops to iterate and scale.

Together, these moves cement the shift in HR from service provider to creator of enterprise value at scale.

Conclusion

Over nearly two decades, our research has tracked the evolving priorities for HR leaders and offered guidance on where they should focus their resources of time, capital, and attention. This year's analysis reaffirms HR's central role in enabling organizations to thrive amid uncertainty and change. Digitization, AI, and new ways of working are reshaping every aspect of the people agenda.

Organizations that succeed will be those that:

- **Deliver business value through HR:** drawing a direct line between activities in the function and bottom-line impact.

- **Lead the digital and AI transformation:** redoubling their efforts to implement digital and AI.

- **Build workforce and leadership capabilities:** equipping the company with the skills and capabilities needed to succeed.

- **Anchor the change:** setting clear governance, embedding new behaviors, and creating a culture of accountability.

HR leaders who focus on these areas can help shape their company's trajectory, improving performance not only within their function but across the entire enterprise.
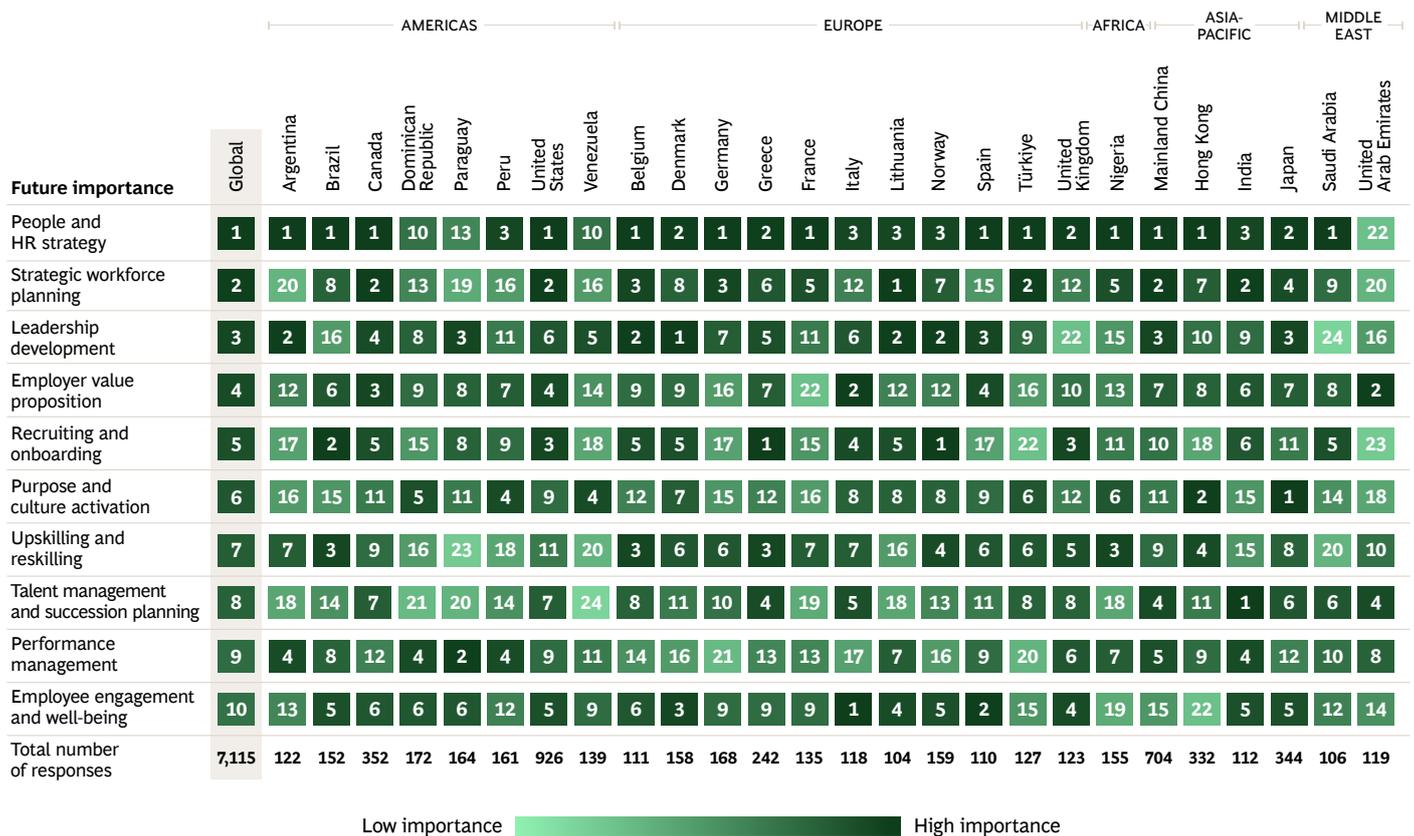
Across regions, our data shows a strong alignment on the importance of people and HR strategy and strategic workforce planning, underscoring their role as universal anchors of effective people agendas. (See **Exhibit 8**.)

Beyond this core, priorities diverge sharply. Respondents in Europe emphasize long-term structural capabilities, such as workforce planning, leadership development, and succession, reflecting demographic pressure and constrained labor markets, while those in Asia-Pacific prioritize leadership, upskilling, and employer value proposition to support rapid growth and capability scaling. Respondents in the Americas focus more on near-term execution levers such as recruiting, onboarding, and performance management, whereas respondents in Africa stand out for their emphasis on leadership, engagement, and purpose as foundational enablers of organizational effectiveness.

EXHIBIT 8

Regional Breakdown of the 10 People Management Topics with the Highest Overall Future Importance Rankings

Future importance	Global	AMERICAS Argentina	Brazil	Canada	Dominican Republic	Paraguay	Peru	United States	Venezuela	EUROPE Belgium	Denmark	Germany	Greece	France	Italy	Lithuania	Norway	Spain	Türkiye	United Kingdom	AFRICA Nigeria	ASIA-PACIFIC Mainland China	Hong Kong	India	Japan	MIDDLE EAST Saudi Arabia	United Arab Emirates
People and HR strategy	1	1	1	1	10	13	3	1	10	1	2	1	2	1	3	3	3	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	3	2	22
Strategic workforce planning	2	20	8	2	13	19	16	2	16	3	8	3	6	5	12	1	7	15	2	12	5	2	7	2	4	9	20
Leadership development	3	2	16	4	8	3	11	6	2	1	7	5	11	6	2	2	3	9	22	15	3	10	9	3	3	24	16
Employer value proposition	4	12	6	3	6	8	7	4	14	9	16	7	22	2	12	12	4	16	10	13	7	8	6	7	8	8	2
Recruiting and onboarding	5	17	2	5	15	8	9	3	18	5	5	17	1	15	4	5	1	17	22	3	11	10	18	6	11	5	23
Purpose and culture activation	6	16	15	11	5	11	4	9	4	12	7	15	12	16	8	8	8	9	6	12	6	11	2	15	1	14	18
Upskilling and reskilling	7	7	3	9	16	23	18	11	20	3	6	6	3	7	7	16	4	6	6	5	3	9	4	15	8	20	10
Talent management and succession planning	8	18	14	7	21	20	14	7	24	8	11	10	4	19	5	18	13	11	8	8	18	4	11	1	6	6	4
Performance management	9	4	8	12	4	2	4	9	11	14	16	21	13	13	17	7	16	9	20	6	7	5	9	4	12	10	8
Employee engagement and well-being	10	13	5	6	6	6	5	5	9	6	3	9	9	9	1	4	5	2	15	4	19	15	22	5	5	12	14
Total number of responses	7,115	122	152	352	172	164	161	926	139	111	158	168	242	135	118	104	159	110	127	123	155	704	332	112	344	106	119

Low importance — High importance

Source: 2026 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis (n = 7,115).
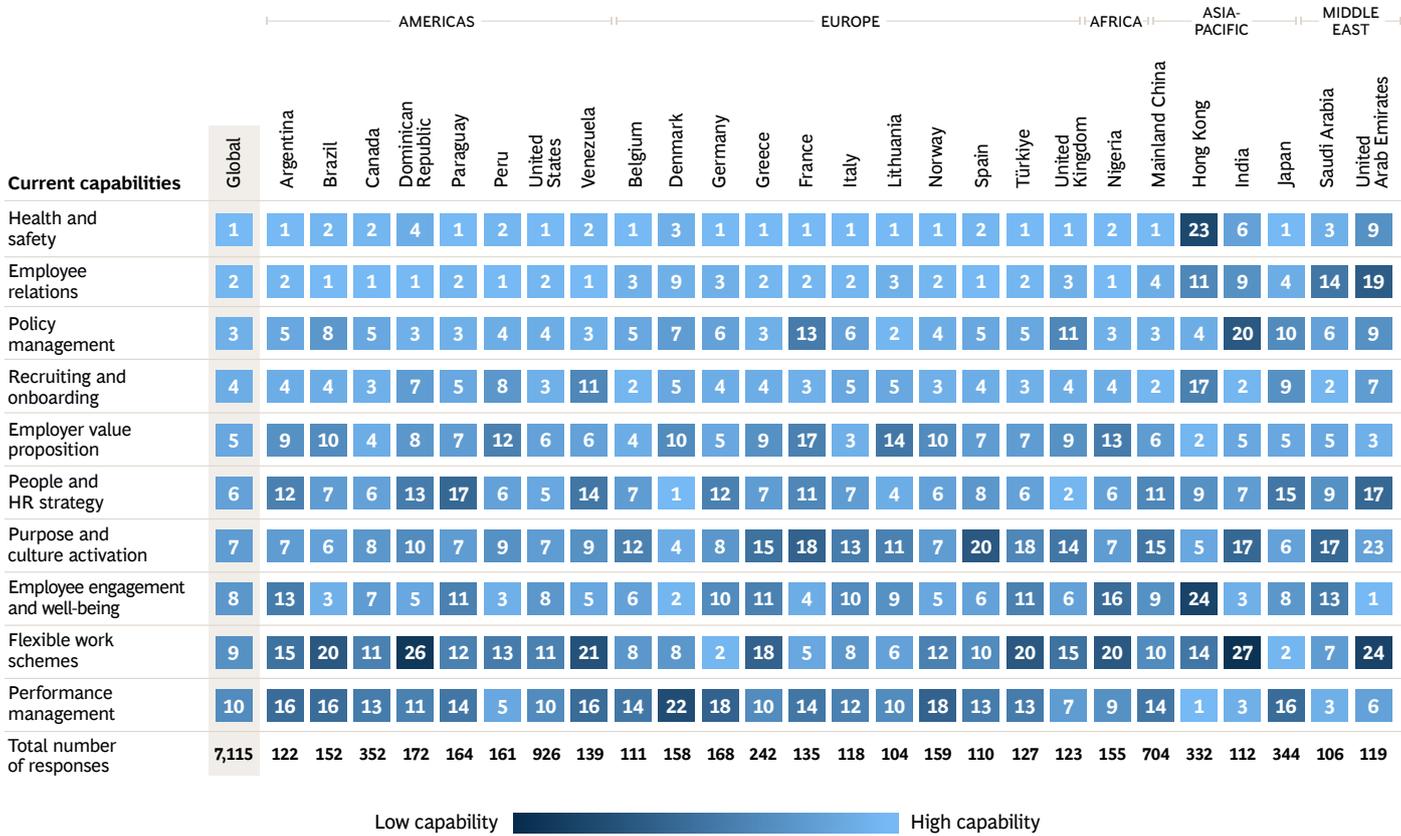**Note:** "Other" and "N/A" responses are not included. Selected sample of the 115 markets analyzed.

These regional differences make clear that a one-size-fits-all people agenda will not succeed. While global alignment on strategy and workforce planning provides a common backbone, impact depends on tailoring priorities to local labor-market realities, shifting the focus from long-term structural planning in mature markets to capability building and attraction in growth markets, and to leadership and engagement fundamentals where institutions are still strengthening. CHROs should therefore anchor on a small set of global priorities, but deliberately differentiate investments, capabilities, and sequencing at the regional level to maximize relevance and value creation.

Exhibit 9 shows a geographic breakdown of current capabilities. Companies across most geographic markets report their strongest current capabilities in health and safety and employee relations, a pattern that is remarkably homogeneous across regions. In contrast, more value-creating capabilities, such as performance management, flexible work schemes, and employee engagement and well-being, consistently rank lower in nearly all markets, with limited regional differentiation. This uniform capability profile suggests that organizations globally excel at foundational, compliance-driven topics but struggle to build the people capabilities that most directly drive productivity, experience, and long-term value creation.

EXHIBIT 9

Regional Breakdown of the 10 People Management Topics with the Highest Overall Current Capability Rankings

	Global	AMERICAS								EUROPE											AFRICA	ASIA-PACIFIC				MIDDLE EAST	
Current capabilities	Global	Argentina	Brazil	Canada	Dominican Republic	Paraguay	Peru	United States	Venezuela	Belgium	Denmark	Germany	Greece	France	Italy	Lithuania	Norway	Spain	Türkiye	United Kingdom	Nigeria	Mainland China	Hong Kong	India	Japan	Saudi Arabia	United Arab Emirates
Health and safety	1	1	2	2	4	1	2	1	2	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	23	6	1	3	9
Employee relations	2	2	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	3	9	3	2	2	2	3	2	1	2	3	1	4	11	9	4	14	19
Policy management	3	5	8	5	3	3	4	4	3	5	7	6	3	13	6	2	4	5	5	11	3	3	4	20	10	6	9
Recruiting and onboarding	4	4	4	3	7	5	8	3	11	2	5	4	4	3	5	5	3	4	3	4	4	2	17	2	9	2	7
Employer value proposition	5	9	10	4	8	7	12	6	6	4	10	5	9	17	3	14	10	7	7	9	13	6	2	5	5	5	3
People and HR strategy	6	12	7	6	13	17	6	5	14	7	1	12	7	11	7	4	6	8	6	2	6	11	9	7	15	9	17
Purpose and culture activation	7	7	6	8	10	7	9	7	9	12	4	8	15	18	13	11	7	20	18	14	7	15	5	17	6	17	23
Employee engagement and well-being	8	13	3	7	5	11	3	8	5	9	2	10	11	4	10	9	5	6	11	6	16	9	24	3	8	13	1
Flexible work schemes	9	15	20	11	26	12	13	11	21	8	18	5	8	6	12	10	20	15	20	10	14	15	14	27	2	7	24
Performance management	10	16	16	13	11	14	5	10	16	14	22	18	10	14	12	10	18	13	13	7	9	14	1	3	16	3	6
Total number of responses	7,115	122	152	352	172	164	161	926	139	111	158	168	242	135	118	104	159	110	127	123	155	704	332	112	344	106	119

Low capability ▇▇▇▇▇ High capability

Source: 2026 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis (n = 7,115).
Note: "Other" and "N/A" responses are not included. Selected sample of the 115 markets analyzed.

Appendix 2
How Company Size Shapes HR Priorities

An interesting aspect of our data is the clear gap between large companies and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in both future priorities and current capabilities. (See **Exhibit 10**.) Large organizations place a greater emphasis on—and demonstrate stronger capabilities in—data- and technology-driven topics such as people analytics and the deployment of GenAI, while SMEs lag in these areas. By contrast, SMEs attach relatively higher importance to culture, rewards, and skills-related topics, reflecting different levers for creating a people advantage at smaller scale. CHROs should tailor their people agenda by company size, with larger organizations accelerating investment in analytics and AI to scale impact, while smaller organizations double down on culture, skills, and rewards as primary drivers of people advantage.

EXHIBIT 10

Major Differences Exist Between Small and Large Companies Across Both Dimensions of the Analysis

	Overall rank	Rank among large companies	Rank among SMEs	Difference
Future importance				
People analytics and reporting	15	3	19	−16 ↓
Rewards and recognition	14	21	12	9 ↑
Employee relations	11	19	11	8 ↑
Deployment of GenAI and other emerging technologies	22	15	22	−7 ↓
Purpose and culture activation	6	13	6	7 ↑
Current capabilities				
People analytics and reporting	21	9	23	−14 ↓
Sustainability and ESG	20	8	21	−13 ↓
Diversity, equity, and inclusion management	16	9	19	−10 ↓
Upskilling and reskilling	14	21	13	8 ↑
Rewards and recognition	19	24	17	7 ↑

Source: 2026 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis (n = 7,115).
Note: Large companies have at least 5,000 employees (n = 784); small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have fewer than 5,000 employees (n = 5,213).
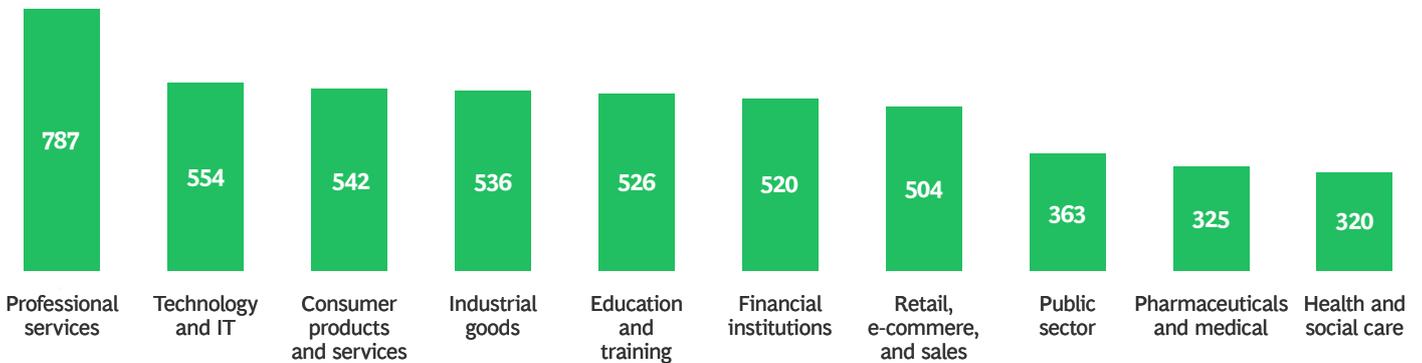
Appendix 3
Methodology

The 2026 Creating People Advantage study builds on a comprehensive global data set to provide a cross-sectional view of HR priorities, capabilities, and emerging challenges across industries and regions. (See **Exhibit 11** and **Exhibit 12**.)
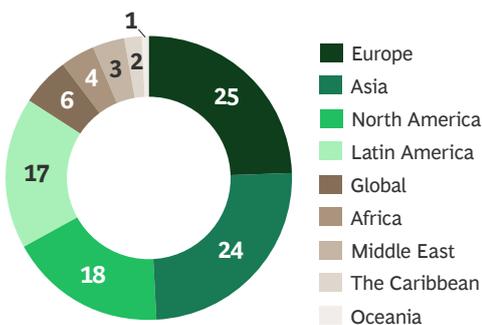
EXHIBIT 11

Our Survey Drew Responses from 7,115 Participants in 115 Markets Across Various Industries and Seniority Levels
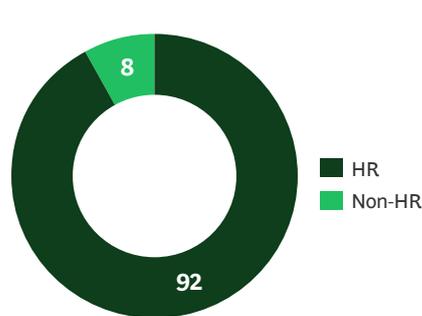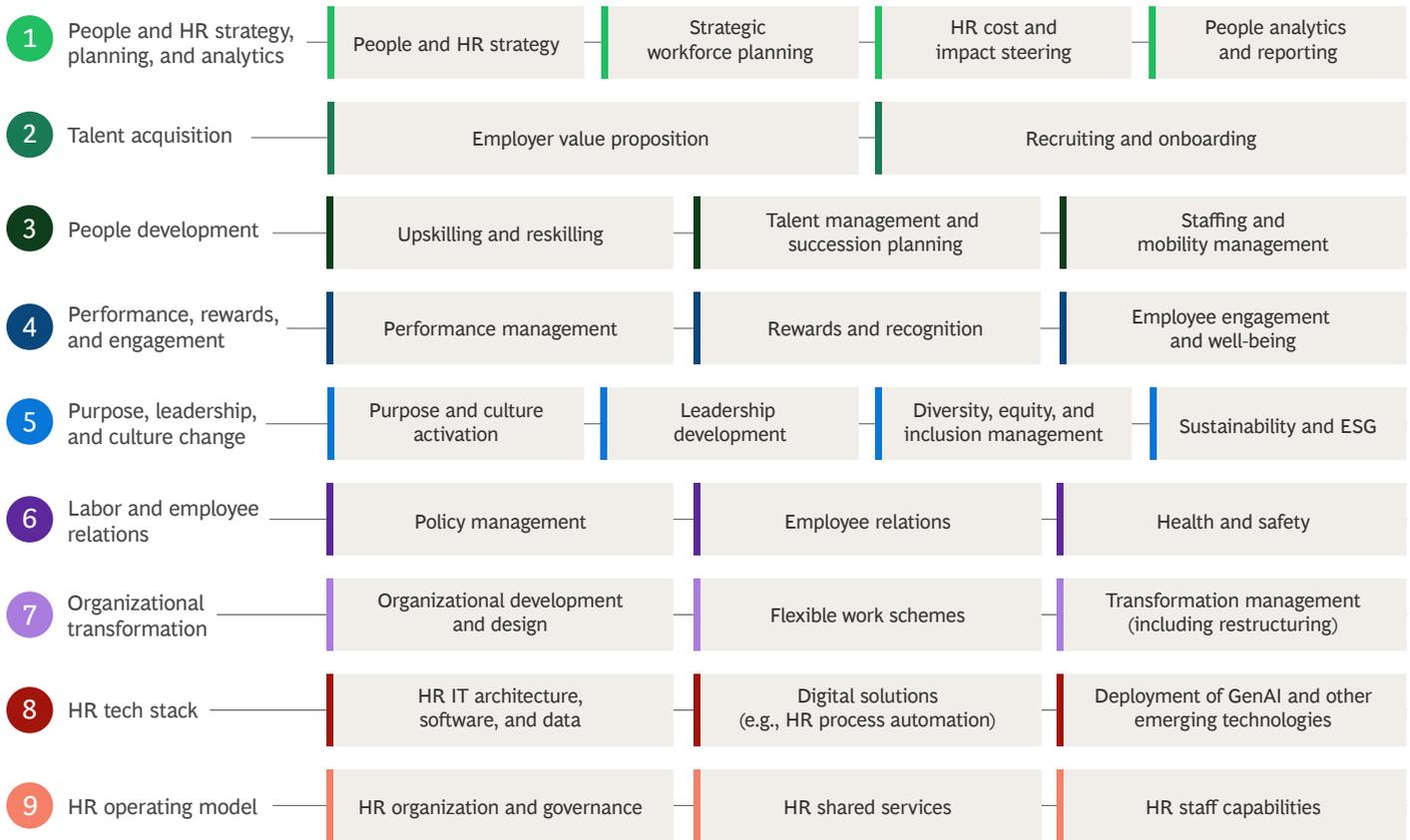
115 markets

7,115 participants answered survey

Number of responses
- None
- <50
- 51–100
- 100–200
- >200
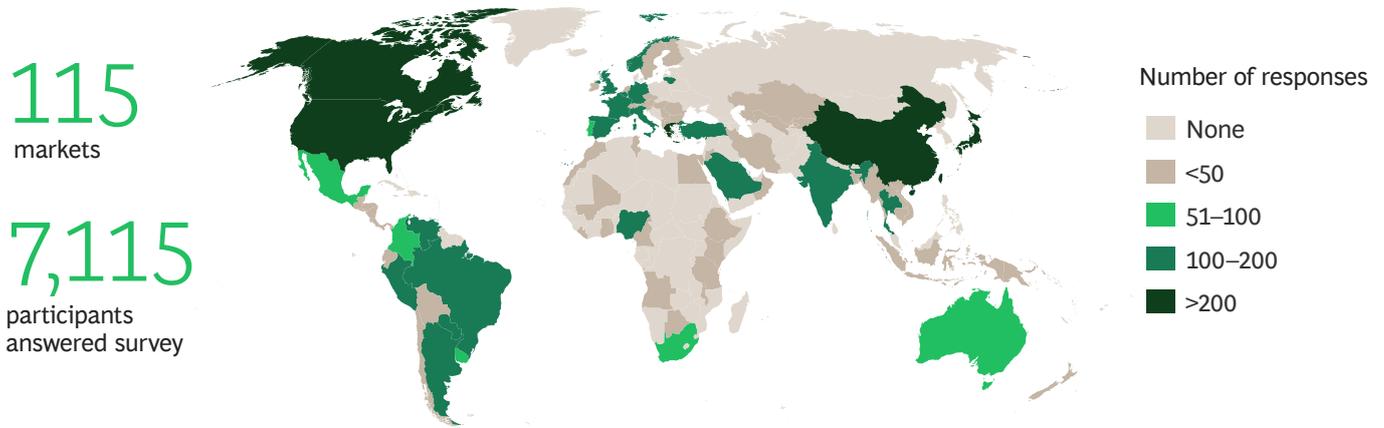
Participants by top 10 industries

Professional services	Technology and IT	Consumer products and services	Industrial goods	Education and training	Financial institutions	Retail, e-commerce, and sales	Public sector	Pharmaceuticals and medical	Health and social care
787	554	542	536	526	520	504	363	325	320

Region of focus (%)

- Europe — 25
- Asia — 24
- North America — 18
- Latin America — 17
- Global — 6
- Africa — 4
- Middle East — 3
- The Caribbean — 2
- Oceania — 1

Current position (%)

- HR — 92
- Non-HR — 8

Level of seniority

2,884 Manager and senior manager

1,528 Director and senior director

1,418 C-suite and VP

990 Individual contributor

Source: 2026 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis (n = 7,115)
Note: "Other" and "N/A" responses are not included in this overview. "China" includes Mainland China (704), Hong Kong (332), and Taiwan (18).

EXHIBIT 12

The Analysis Considers 28 People Management Topics, Grouped into Nine Clusters

1 People and HR strategy, planning, and analytics	People and HR strategy	Strategic workforce planning	HR cost and impact steering	People analytics and reporting
2 Talent acquisition	Employer value proposition		Recruiting and onboarding	
3 People development	Upskilling and reskilling	Talent management and succession planning	Staffing and mobility management	
4 Performance, rewards, and engagement	Performance management	Rewards and recognition	Employee engagement and well-being	
5 Purpose, leadership, and culture change	Purpose and culture activation	Leadership development	Diversity, equity, and inclusion management	Sustainability and ESG
6 Labor and employee relations	Policy management	Employee relations	Health and safety	
7 Organizational transformation	Organizational development and design	Flexible work schemes	Transformation management (including restructuring)	
8 HR tech stack	HR IT architecture, software, and data	Digital solutions (e.g., HR process automation)	Deployment of GenAI and other emerging technologies	
9 HR operating model	HR organization and governance	HR shared services	HR staff capabilities	

Source: 2026 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis.

Appendix 4
Definitions of the 28 People Management Topics

I. People and HR strategy, planning, and analytics

1. People and HR strategy
A strategy ensuring that the organization's people priorities and HR operations are aligned with business goals and take into account external mega trends to deliver the most impactful levers.

2. Strategic workforce planning
Systematic forecast of workforce supply and demand scenarios, including job architecture and skills taxonomy based on business goals, external trends, and competency requirements from a strategic, long-term perspective.

3. HR cost and impact steering
Development and use of frameworks and KPIs to measure the cost, efficiency, effectiveness, and impact of HR, with the goal of positioning HR as a value driver; identifying and steering high-impact levers to enable smarter, ROI-focused HR investments. (This topic is new in this year's analysis and was not explicitly assessed as a standalone topic in previous reports.)

4. People analytics and reporting
Analysis of people data to improve transparency, decision making, efficiency of HR processes, HR outcomes, and the impact and value of people management, and to facilitate reporting.

II. Talent acquisition

5. Employer value proposition
Proactive development of the organization's value proposition (for example, career development, competitive compensation, workplace culture, benefits) to increase employer attractiveness and promote retention.

6. Recruiting and onboarding
Strategy and operational processes to determine hiring needs and effectively attract, engage, and convert suitable candidates for open roles. Active integration of new hires into the organization culturally, professionally, and administratively. (This topic consolidates three topics that were assessed separately in CPA 2023: recruiting strategy and process, onboarding, and talent sourcing ecosystem.)

III. People development

7. Upskilling and reskilling
Strategy and operational setup to identify competencies and reskilling/upskilling needs, manage learning functions, and provide formal and informal learning opportunities that help employees build new skills for their current or future roles, supported by digital applications and services (for example, learning academies).

8. Talent management and succession planning
Assessment of employees, provision of opportunities for them to perform, develop, and advance in their careers (career pathing), and ensuring the right pipeline for key positions. Leveraging talent management insights to identify and develop internal talent for critical positions to strengthen the leadership pipeline and ensure continuity in key roles. (This topic merges top talent management and career pathing, which were assessed as separate topics in CPA 2023.)

9. Staffing and mobility management
Coordination and encouragement of short-term and long-term project assignments (for example, international transfers, assignments to squads, or special projects) for employees and support of their realization.

IV. Performance, rewards, and engagement

10. Performance management
Regular and transparent performance management processes based on agreed-upon and known performance and/or behavior criteria.

11. Rewards and recognition
Connection of individual performance to reward schemes, remuneration, incentives, and career development options designed to drive the organization's success.

12. Employee engagement and well-being
Delivery of tools, systems, and processes to engage and retain employees, as well as to ensure and enhance their well-being, with focus on creating psychologically safe work environments.

V. Purpose, leadership, and culture change

13. Purpose and culture activation
Articulating and embedding a powerful business purpose to create a sense of meaning, inspire employees, and unlock efforts to grow sustainably, fulfilling the role in society; as well as implementing and maintaining a strong company culture that supports attitudes and behaviors vital to achieving the organization's goals.

14. Leadership development
Developing individuals through targeted measures (for example, training, coaching) into leaders who are capable

of influencing, motivating, and enabling their staff to reach organizational, team, and individual goals.

15. Diversity, equity, and inclusion management
Actively encouraging and managing gender, cultural, religious, educational, social, national, ethnic, and other diversity to the mutual benefit of both employees and the organization.

16. Sustainability and ESG
Advancing integrated sustainability initiatives and goals of the organization (for example, implementing performance outcomes based on ESG standards), and embedding sustainability and ESG principles into core business and people strategies.

VI. Labor and employee relations

17. Policy management
Managing HR policies and standards to achieve business goals in line with changing legal requirements (for example, labor law, codetermination, data protection, or other regulations).

18. Employee relations
Ensuring harmonious relations between business and individual employees through direct communication and interaction with representatives (for example, unions, social bodies) to address staff demands and ensure understanding and buy-in of staff in change processes.

19. Health and safety
Designing and maintaining a safe and healthy work environment by ensuring compliance with occupational safety regulations, managing workplace risks, and providing occupational health services such as company medical care, health assessments, and preventive measures.

VII. Organizational transformation

20. Organizational development and design
Supporting the development toward an organization that blends human capabilities and technology, focuses on the customer, and adapts quickly to changes (for example, by HR acting as agile coaches, organizational design advisors, or trainers for man-machine collaboration).

21. Flexible work schemes
Designing and implementing models that enable flexibility in when, where, and how work is performed, including hybrid and remote work arrangements, adaptable schedules, and part-time or job-sharing options, to support business needs and employee preferences.

22. Transformation management (including restructuring)
Leading and supporting business transformation from an HR perspective, including change management, workforce planning, and restructuring efforts such as modifying financial and operational aspects of the company. (This

topic combines change management capabilities and restructuring management, which were assessed separately in CPA 2023.)

VIII. HR tech stack

23. HR IT architecture, software, and data
Using suitable HR IT architecture (for example, human capital management cloud solutions) to build scalable, secure, and integrated technology environments that support end-to-end digital HR operations and real-time data access.

24. Digital solutions (for example, HR process automation)
Using digital solutions (for example, process automation, self-service tools and platforms) to accelerate HR processes and services and reduce manual effort.

25. Deployment of GenAI and other emerging technologies
Application of generative AI and other emerging technologies across the HR function to automate processes (including workforce planning, talent sourcing), personalize services, and support decision making, with a focus on scalable deployment and enabling business success. (This topic did not appear as a standalone topic in the final published CPA 2023 edition. Although AI-related questions were initially included during the CPA 2023 survey fieldwork, responses showed strong timing effects as awareness, understanding, and adoption of GenAI evolved rapidly over the extended field period. To preserve analytical consistency and comparability, the topic was therefore excluded from the final 2023 publication. In CPA 2026, the topic is explicitly included and renamed under this broader definition, reflecting the increased maturity, stability, and relevance of generative AI and other emerging technologies for people management.)

IX. HR operating model

26. HR organization and governance
Designing an effective and efficient HR organization (for example, the right roles, organizational units, agile practices, and collaboration methods) and creating strong governance structures that enable fast but responsible and evidence-based decisions.

27. HR shared services
Building a strong HR shared services center structure by, for example, bundling HR operations in hubs and consolidating the regional footprint.

28. HR staff capabilities
Forecasting and developing the right mix of skills, individuals, and roles in HR to further improve the quality and impact of HR work and future-proof the HR function.

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- Association of Human Resource Professionals of Mauritius (MAHRP), Mauritius
- Association Nationale de Gestionnaires et Formateurs des Ressources Humaines (AGEF), Morocco
- IPM Namibia, Namibia
- Chartered Institute of Personnel Management of Nigeria (CIPMN), Nigeria
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- Institute of Personnel Management of Zimbabwe (IPMZ), Zimbabwe

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- Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI), Australia
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- Global HR Institute of Mongolia (GHRIM), Mongolia
- Human Resources New Zealand (HRNZ), New Zealand
- Pakistan Society of Human Resource Management, Pakistan
- Papua New Guinea Human Resources Institute (PNGHRI), Papua New Guinea
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- Singapore Human Resources Institute (SHRI), Singapore
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- Personnel Management Association of Thailand (PMAT), Thailand
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- Bulgarian Association for People Management (BAPM), Bulgaria
- Cyprus Human Resource Management Association (CyHRMA), Cyprus
- Network of Corporate Academies (NOCA), Denmark

- Estonian Association for Personnel Development (PARE), Estonia

- Finnish Association for People Management (HENRY), Finland

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- Deutsche Gesellschaft für Personalführung (DGFP), Germany

- Greek People Management Association (GPMA), Greece

- Hungarian Association for People Management (OHE), Hungary

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- Federación Colombiana de Gestión Humana (ACRIP Nacional), Colombia

- Asociación Costarricense de Talento Humano (ACTHUA), Costa Rica

- Asociación Dominicana de Administradores de Gestión Humana (ADOARH), Dominican Republic

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- Asociación de Administradores de Recursos Humanos de El Salvador (AARHES), El Salvador

- Asociación Guatemalteca de Profesionales de Gestión Humana (AGH), Guatemala

- Societé Haitienne de Management des Ressources Humaines (SHAMARH), Haiti

- Asociación Nacional de Profesionales de Recursos Humanos de Panamá (ANREH), Panama

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- Asociación Venezolana de Gestión Humana (AVGH), Venezuela

North American Human Resources Management Association (NAHRMA)

- Chartered Professionals in Human Resources (CPHR), Canada

- Human Resources Certification Institute (HRCI), United States

- Asociación Mexicana en Dirección de Recursos Humanos (AMEDIRH), Mexico

For Further Reading

Boston Consulting Group has published other reports and articles that may be of interest to the reader.

The Reinvention of the CHRO in an AI-Driven Enterprise

February 2026

AI Is Moving Faster Than Your Workforce Strategy. Are You Ready?

September 2025

BCG AI Radar 2026: As AI Investments Surge, CEOs Take the Lead

January 2026

Skills-Based Organizations Aren't Reaching Their Potential. Here's How They Can Succeed.

July 2025

What Boards Expect of CEO Candidates

January 2026

AI at Work: Momentum Builds, but Gaps Remain

June 2025

Leading in the Age of AI Agents: Managing the Machines That Manage Themselves

November 2025

The Secret to Building Great Leaders

April 2025

BCG

WFPMA
World Federation of People
Management Associations

Boston Consulting Group

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WFPMA

The WFPMA is a global network of professionals in people management, founded in 1976 to aid the development and improve the effectiveness of professional people management all over the world. Its members are predominantly the regional federations which are made up of more than 90 national human resource associations representing over 550,000 people management professionals.

The World Federation of People Management Associations (WFPMA) is an organization representing more than 550,000 people management professionals in over 90 national personnel associations around the world.