

The New CHRO: How Expanded Responsibilities Are Reshaping the Role

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Executive Summary

An emailed survey of CHRO members of M1, Modern Executive Solutions' executive network, finds many HR leaders have expanded portfolios in areas as diverse as communications, real estate, philanthropy, and strategy as CEOs increasingly expect HR executives to be top strategic partners.

CHROs have taken on a dizzying array of responsibilities in recent years, juggling roles that range from pandemic policy adviser and AI strategist to return-to-office broker and social unrest peacemaker.

If it feels like the job is getting bigger—it is.

A new survey of CHRO members of M1, Modern Executive Solutions' executive network, finds such expanded responsibilities are now part of many CHROs' official jobs, with 39% of members self-reporting they oversee duties beyond traditional HR. Out of 335 members in March and April (the community now tops 375 members), 132 reported functions as diverse as real estate, communications, strategy, legal, and even corporate aviation now fall within their remit. Among respondents, the average number of roles outside HR was two.

By far, the most frequently mentioned additional responsibility was communications, with 52% of respondents saying they oversee the function. Real estate and facilities were the second most cited, by 25%, and philanthropy and community engagement were named by 24%. Security and risk (17%) and sustainability and ESG (also 17%) rounded out the top five.

A Bigger Job and a Bigger Mandate

What's driving the expansion of the role are several ongoing trends that highlight both external and strategic realities. A global pandemic, the proliferation of social media and a generation of values-conscious consumers and employees has made earning

workers' trust and communicating employer brand more important for HR than ever. Meanwhile, enhancing employee experience as companies try to draw workers back to the office has tied real estate much closer to HR.

As a result, decoupling either one from the CHRO's portfolio has become much harder for leaders driving people strategy. CHROs have become responsible for the nuance of those communications, which have become much more important.

Those with especially broad "mega" portfolios that include marketing, strategy, or legal tend to have specialized skills or reflect hyper-talented CHROs who add roles over time, says Scott Macfarlane, a senior partner at Modern who leads the firm's CHRO search and organizational consulting practices.

Macfarlane estimates that in some 90% of success profiles for Modern's CHRO searches or successions, CEOs now expect a much higher level of business acumen and strategic leadership. "It used to be a chief people officer took the business strategy and effectively translated that into the talent strategy," he says. "The step change now is CEOs want an equal partner in the CHRO who is driving the business strategy itself."

From Small Teams to Networked Executives

The evolution of the position is part of a broader shift in how C-suites are structured, one CHRO shared. Executive teams were initially quite small, then evolved to be highly function oriented. Now, in a third phase, “C-suites are going to be increasingly more networked, where just having the functional expertise is too siloed,” the CHRO said. The leadership role is particularly well positioned given its visibility of the company, time with the board, and role that touches all parts of the business.

Nearly a quarter of CHROs who said they oversee communications report owning both internal and external comms, but that number is likely even larger: Another 41% listed communications as part of their remit, but did not provide further details.

Kroger Chief Associate Experience Officer Tim Massa added communications to his HR portfolio more than a decade ago, and government relations in 2020. Having those under one umbrella, especially at a company with more than 300 labor contracts, he says, has helped in a range of critical moments, such as when security issues have popped up from time to time at local stores or during recent merger discussions.

While Kroger’s proposed merger with Albertson’s ultimately didn’t get regulatory sign-off, Massa says being the “quarterback” for communications, government affairs, labor relations, and more meant “we had a much stronger, seamless, connected message. I think we had a leg up because we were designed the way we are.” His broad remit—he also manages corporate aviation, customer care, sustainability, and more—fits into Kroger’s more cross-functional leadership approach, he says. “We’ve really tried to develop a people strategy that leaders bring to life. It’s not HR doing it.”

BMO Financial Group Chief Administrative Officer Mona Malone, who also holds the title of CHRO and Head of People, Culture and Brand, has one of the broadest portfolios among leaders who responded to the survey. In addition to HR, Malone has added marketing, communications, social impact, corporate real estate, and more since becoming CHRO in 2019. Earlier in her career, she held roles as a regional VP of personal banking at BMO and head of marketing at ePost, a BMO and Canada Post joint venture. “Those experiences were all very helpful as I moved in and took on these additional capabilities,” she said.

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Finding the Balance of Depth and Breadth

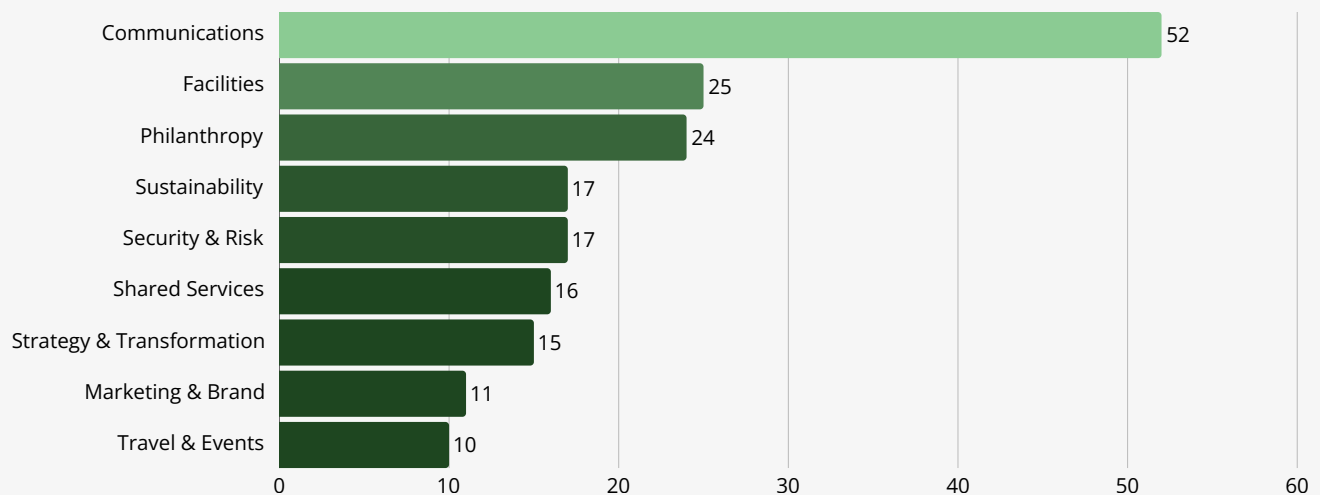
Malone pointed to BMO's recent flagship branch launch at Sankofa Square in Toronto as an example of how bringing together HR, corporate real estate, and marketing can help. A large outdoor digital screen on the front of the branch, one of the largest installations in the world of its kind, has tourists flocking to take selfies in front of the bank's brand at one of Canada's busiest pedestrian intersections. Inside the space, retail bankers interact with customers, offering advice and digital tools. "We are constantly thinking about how employees and customers interact through space, digital technology, and with the brand."

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Scott Macfarlane

CHROs Are Now Often Chief Communication Officers, Too

By percent (%) of respondents reporting role area



Malone has also found ways to move leaders between the functions she leads to both lean into their strengths and offer development opportunities. For instance, she's moved executives from her marketing team to lead talent acquisition. "What they brought was a deep sense of digital marketing, design thinking, data-driven decision making, and deep understanding around experience design—all of which is hugely helpful for talent acquisition."

One challenge, she says, is "when you have a portfolio of different functions, it's always hard to find that balance of where you go deep and where you stay broad. Effective leaders can do both, but your judgment around when you're doing that and for what is a big part of success."

A Proxy on an Expanding Role

The span of those added responsibilities is reflected in compensation, as CEOs recognize talent is as much a strategic lever as finance for driving value and transformation. Macfarlane expects to see continued growth in total compensation, more parity or near-parity between CHRO and general counsel pay, and

more board willingness to meet long-term incentive buy-out needs of CHRO candidates. "CHROs never used to be on proxy statements—ever," Macfarlane says. "The fact that we have publicly available data on so many chief people officers is itself an acknowledgement the role is demonstrably more important than it was even several years ago."

Even as companies grow CHROs' portfolios, they often become disaggregated when leaders move on—and it's relatively rare to see CHROs hired in with a broad span. Firms need to be careful about cutting and pasting job profiles from one leader to the next.

Still, it's clear the trend is toward expanded roles, especially in an era when CEOs and boards want CHROs to not just translate strategy, but drive it themselves. If HR historically led through expertise, armed with the deep subject area savvy that propelled them for years, they now must lead with communications influence, strategic acumen and cross-functional leadership skills. Says Macfarlane: "Effectively, you've got to be a better leader. You can't rely on just your knowledge and expertise to lead anymore."



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