

10 Top CHRO Insights from the M1 Community's Inaugural Year

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Executive Summary

As the year draws to a close, we've pulled together some of the best insights from meetings held during the inaugural year for the M1 CHRO Community, Modern's peer-only executive network and first-of-its-kind executive intelligence platform. From communication to collaboration, adopting AI to employee mental health, here are some of the best insights you can put to work yourself.

How are top CHROs navigating AI adoption and geopolitical uncertainty in a disruptive, tumultuous year? What are they saying about DEI, employee mental health, and communications in a rapidly shifting world? How is AI transforming how work gets done?

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CULTURE TRANSFORMATION

Language is strategy. Bury behaviors—but do it by injecting fun.

In one meeting, a CHRO shared something of a ghost story: Her HR team faced an urgent need to transform the culture, and the team knew how much a company's culture can be embedded in the words its people use. Her direct report's idea to help fix it? Dress as a tombstone for an annual HR Halloween party, and have people stick Post-it notes to the tombstone with words they wanted to eliminate. Transformation needs to be approached with intentionality, a lot of creativity, and a recognition that culture change requires both symbolic actions and systematic strategies.

INTRODUCING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

When launching new tools, extend invitations rather than forcing enablement.

How should you introduce new AI? "I can tell you what NOT to do," Analog Devices Head of Global Talent Jennifer Carpenter told Modern. "I learned the hard way." She thought employees would share her excitement about an AI pilot group and use it immediately. But in the first 30 days, only 10% had activated their license. Sending invitations—especially to those with an engaged, optimistic mindset about AI—helped jumpstart interest. "We have to be dot-connectors" Carpenter says, noting she assumed "everyone would want to come to the AI party" when "they need to feel invited first with a compelling reason to RSVP."

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Big changes—and headcount reductions—are likely for the field.

In some M1 meetings, CHROs expressed astonishment at the AI tools being used to create training coursework. One pointed to an AI-generated video and avatar tool his company used to create a series of micro-learning videos for coursework launching this fall. "What would have taken at least a month and \$50,000 two years ago was done over a weekend with our team using the vendor," the CHRO said. "If you're an instructional designer right now, you should be looking at plumbing school." While the comment was made somewhat in jest, CHROs say it's clear these jobs face big disruptions. Instructional designers must shift from being content creators to becoming learning architects, strategists, and data interpreters, developing skills like the ability to critically evaluate AI outputs, think more strategically, and exercise greater judgment.

EMPLOYEE MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is a safety issue. Treat it like one.

Many employers confuse mental health with well-being and lump programs focused on it in with general wellness. But one of the most effective ways to gain executive understanding and buy-in, said a convening of Chief Medical Officers this year, is to focus on safety, an area leadership teams know well and that's engrained in the company culture. "Linking mental health to safety, which links to performance, is very much where we're trying to get the organization," said one participant.

SOCIAL ISSUES MANAGEMENT

Many HR teams are staying neutral on social issues. But there's a performance impact of too much silence.

The role of the CHRO in shaping how organizations handle divisive political and societal topics has never been more complex or more critical. The challenge is how to speak up without speaking out too loudly, CHROs said in meetings earlier this year. Organizations must still have values—but find ways to reinforce them by preserving unity, minimizing backlash, and moving the culture forward. Remaining too silent, however, could have consequences that go beyond brand reputation or external pressure, and impact performance, too. "If someone can't show up and be themselves, they cannot show up in psychological safety," one CHRO said.

INTERNAL TALENT MOBILITY

To drive internal talent mobility, policies must match practice.

When Schneider Electric rolled out a new employee mobility platform, it changed HR policies, too. Before the launch of the platform, employees had to stay in a role three years before changing jobs internally, but they removed that policy. If you force people to stay in one role too long, Le told Modern, "he or she will look externally anyway." The company also explicitly said people can spend up to 20% of their time on project work. While it's not a perfect system, Le says, the policy empowers employees to manage their time. "It's more of a principle, a guideline," she says. "We said 'we believe you will figure it out.'"

WORKER BURNOUT

Watch out for the cognitive load shift, when AI helps the easy work disappear.

Everyone knows the satisfaction of crossing things off a to-do list. But when AI eliminates routine tasks, employees lose the mental breaks that transactional work provide, leading to cognitive overload and, paradoxically, the risk of lower productivity. One CHRO articulated this counterintuitive problem: "If you answer transactional questions all day, you get ten or 20 'thank yous.' But when you do the hard work [left over when AI routinizes transactional tasks] nobody's telling you thank you." CHROs discussed how they might help workers maintain some routine work to take those cognitive breaks.

ADOPTING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Increase usage by looking for the “legends.”

IBM CHRO Nickle LaMoreaux told Modern if she were to start over again with an AI chatbot rollout, she'd first use it for high-volume, simpler issues, rather than the full-scale rollout they took. Then, to really drive adoption, find the things people complain about most or the “moments that matter,” she says. For IBM, one of those was generating employment verification letters, which can cause big headaches if there's a mistake, but also often get requested at the last minute. “The employment verification letter became like legend at IBM,” she says. “It became this moment where people were like, ‘oh, did you know it could do that?’”

DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

When it comes to DEI, what's in a name matters—a lot.

In meetings earlier this year, CHROs acknowledged changes they were making to DEI nomenclature, with phrases like “inclusion,” “culture,” “care,” “belonging” and “impact” increasingly replacing words like “diversity” and

“equity.” At some companies, employee resource groups have also been renamed, or made clear they are open to allies. One CHRO said he was keeping ERG meetings open to all but was allowing breakouts within them formed by gender or underrepresented groups. A couple of CHROs noted changes to DEI job titles, sometimes requested by executives themselves.

MEETINGS

Make meetings more effective with simple rules that set boundaries and drive purpose.

At a meeting for talent leaders in April, executives discussed ways to fight meeting bloat, make them more effective, and save managers' time. One participant said her team had set up their meeting invites so they can't be forwarded to other people without asking—a way to prevent attendee creep. Others recalibrate recurring meetings regularly, pulling all recurring meetings off their calendars temporarily to make sure none are lingering unnecessarily. Another tip: Make sure you're not just meeting to get updates, but make decisions. “Bring a problem that we're solving and your recommendation to solve it versus a presentation where you're just giving information,” said one talent leader.



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