




ET HRWorld
From The Economic Times

CHRO

Study 2025

From Function to Force

Annual study on decoding leadership shifts,
skills, and strategic impact



Introduction

The rise of the strategic CHRO

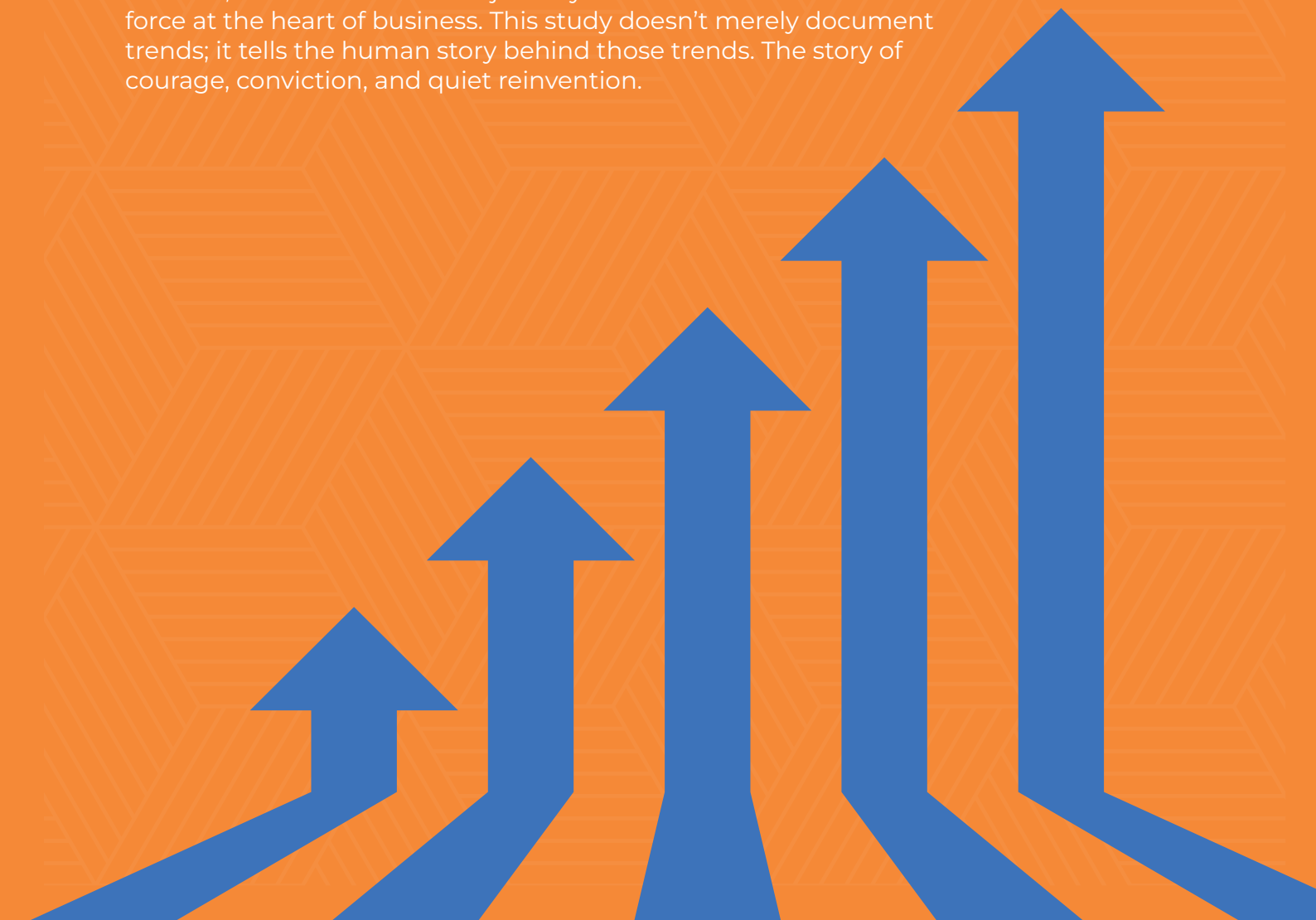
The world of work has changed. And with it, the expectations from those who lead people, shape culture, and carry the weight of transformation on their shoulders.

Once seen as stewards of compliance and gatekeepers of people policies, CHROs today are central to the future of business. They are strategists, storytellers, connectors, and catalysts. They guide their organizations through rapid reinvention—navigating global disruption, accelerating digitalisation, and now, confronting the seismic implications of artificial intelligence.

The CHRO Study 2025, spanning across India, Southeast Asia, and EMEA, is our earnest attempt to chronicle this shift. It is more than a report—it is a tribute to the leaders who are not just shaping talent strategy, but shaping the future itself.

This is one of ETHRWorld's most defining initiatives—an ambitious undertaking to understand and elevate the evolving mandate of HR leadership.

Through rigorous data, thoughtful reflection, and candid voices from the field, we trace the CHRO's journey from a functional head to a force at the heart of business. This study doesn't merely document trends; it tells the human story behind those trends. The story of courage, conviction, and quiet reinvention.



A note from the editor - To the unshaken, unstoppable

There are moments when a function doesn't just evolve—it rises. Quietly at first, then unmistakably. HR is living that moment right now.

And at the heart of it all stands you—the CHRO. No longer just a custodian of people practices, but a strategist, a culture architect, a steady hand in times of chaos and complexity.

As we spoke with leaders across roundtables, interviews, and candid conversations for this study, one truth kept surfacing: the role you play today carries more weight than ever before. More decisions, more contradictions, more expectations, and yet—you hold the line. You remain composed, resilient, unshaken.

You are championing inclusion where resistance once ruled. Making bold, thoughtful calls in moments where no playbook exists. Choosing empathy, even when the metrics demand otherwise. You are not just navigating change—you are leading it.

That's why the ETHRWorld CHRO Study 2025 isn't just about capturing data points. It's about honouring your experiences, reflecting your strength, your doubt, your truth. This is more than research—it's a recognition. Of your clarity, your leadership and your conviction.

Yes, you will find insights and numbers here. But more importantly, you will find yourself—in the patterns, the tensions, the breakthroughs that only someone in your seat will fully understand.

So as you read - pause, reflect, and know this: what you do matters, how you lead matters.

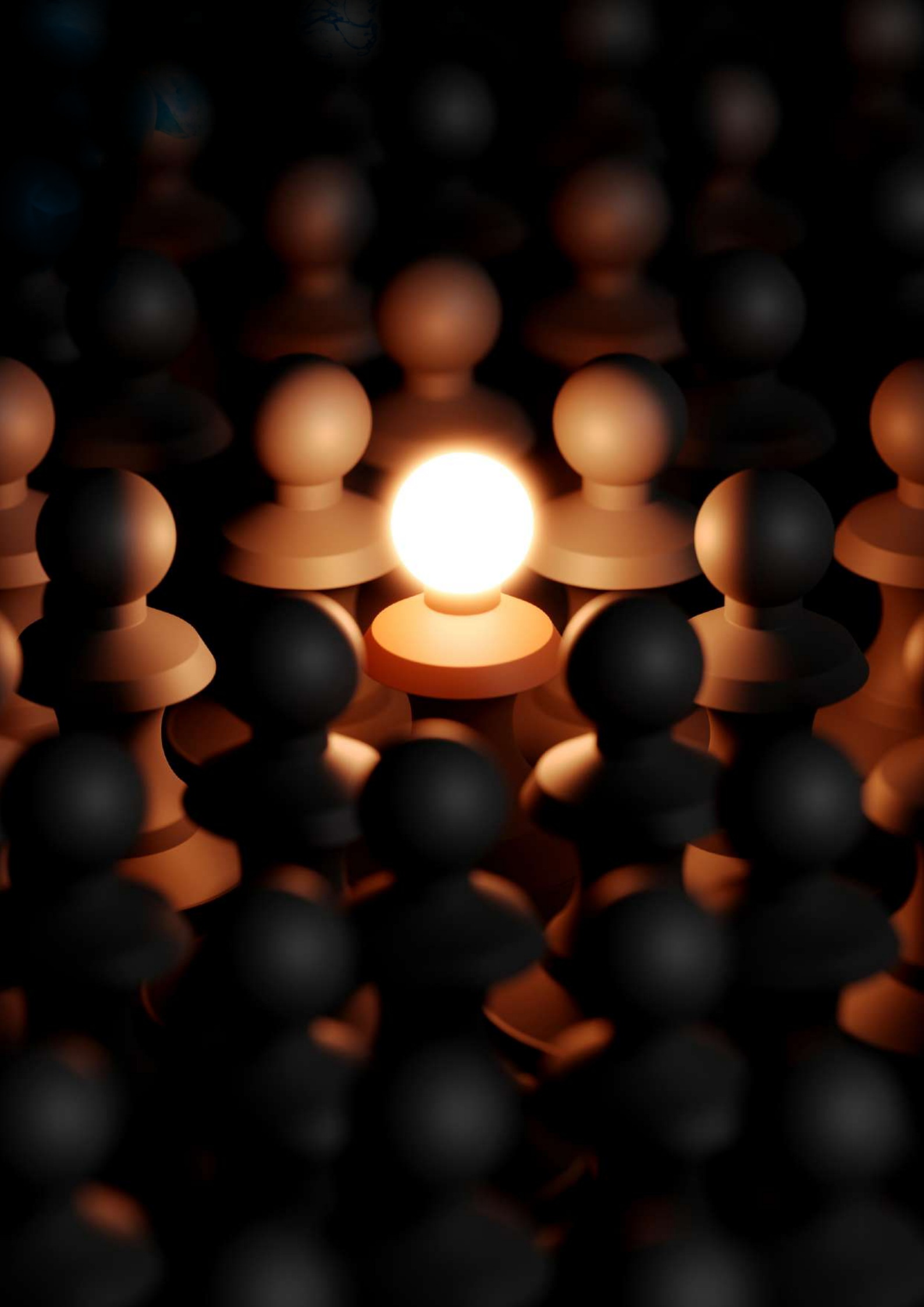
This is your story. Your moment. And it's our privilege to share it.



Yasmin Taj

Editor - Features

ETHRWorld & ETEducation,
The Economic Times



Chapter 1:

Influence Redefined – The CHRO at the Strategy Table

There was a time when CHROs were the backstage crew of the enterprise—essential, but rarely center stage. Today, they are increasingly in the spotlight. And not just because people matter more in business than ever before—but because CHROs are proving they know how to turn that truth into strategy.

Our research reveals a quiet revolution underway: the CHRO's influence is no longer limited to the HR function. It's creeping into the boardroom, threading through investor conversations, and shaping the CEO's most crucial decisions. Over 60% of CHROs surveyed now describe themselves not as policy guardians, but as enterprise transformation drivers. In many organizations, the CHRO is now the CEO's closest thought partner—bringing insight not only about people but about performance, potential, and purpose.

The sectors leading this shift? Technology, financial services, and global enterprises—where talent is not just a resource, but the differentiator. In these ecosystems, CHROs are crafting strategies that fuse human insight with hard metrics. They're influencing product pivots, global expansions, and digital reinventions.

But this rise is not uniform. Across regions, influence varies. In some geographies, CHROs still battle outdated perceptions—seen more as enforcers than enablers. As one SEA-based CHRO noted, "Influence is still earned in moments of crisis, not granted by default."

At the heart of this elevation is trust. Trust built over time with CEOs who increasingly understand that culture isn't soft—it's strategic. CHROs who've embedded themselves into business reviews, strategic planning sessions, and investor briefings are the ones reshaping the narrative.

CHRO as CEO Partner

Trusted in



Strategic Planning Sessions



Investor Briefings



Business Reviews



Chapter 2:

The Skill Paradox – What CHROs Must Master

It's one thing to sit at the table. It's another to speak the language of the room. And today's CHROs are realizing that having influence isn't just about being heard—it's about being understood, respected, and sought after for strategic insight.

As the role of the CHRO expands beyond the confines of HR, so does the list of skills required to thrive. Business acumen. Political intelligence. Strategic storytelling. Cultural agility. Digital fluency. And now, a working understanding of AI. It's no longer enough to know people. You must also know the levers that drive enterprise value—and how to pull them.

Our data reveals a telling paradox: while HR has long prided itself on emotional intelligence and empathy, it is business acumen that's opening boardroom doors. CHROs who can read a P&L, forecast workforce ROI, or debate capital allocation are more likely to be seen as credible transformation partners. In fact, a clear majority of CHROs who report strong board influence cite business fluency as their top enabler.

Yet, the human side cannot be left behind. It must be evolved. The CHRO of today is expected to translate data into narrative, to move from dashboards to stories that inspire action. They must

navigate global, diverse, and hybrid workforces with cultural fluency—not just knowing how to operate across geographies, but how to connect across lived experiences.

The idea of the “neo-CHRO” is emerging—a leader equally comfortable in a spreadsheet and a townhall, capable of advising the CEO on M&A one moment and designing a leadership offsite the next. These polymaths are navigating a workplace landscape reshaped by AI, geopolitical tension, and shifting employee expectations. They are not waiting to be taught; they are teaching themselves, constantly.

But this upskilling demand also exposes a growing skills gap. Not every HR leader has had the chance—or support—to build this expansive toolkit. Many still grapple with legacy perceptions or lack of access to business-critical experiences. The path to becoming a high-impact CHRO is riddled with barriers that require systemic intervention.

In response, forward-thinking organizations are investing in CHRO development—not just in HR certifications, but in rotational programs, cross-functional immersion, and global exposure. Some are even encouraging CHROs to sit on external boards to build governance acumen.

Top Skills for CHROs



**Business
Acumen**



**Political
Intelligence**



**Strategic
Storytelling**



**Cultural
Agility**



**Digital
Fluency**



**AI
Knowledge**

Chapter 3:

Strategic Impact – Leading Beyond HR

As organizations face complexity, disruption, and reinvention at breakneck speed, CHROs are stepping up—not just as custodians of people, but as architects of enterprise transformation.

Our research shows that CHROs are now leading some of the most mission-critical shifts within companies. The boldest actions they've taken over the past year range from leading **company-wide cultural transformations (67%)**, to **overhauling performance management and reward systems (50%)**, and **redesigning workforce strategies such as remote and hybrid models (44%)**. Nearly **42% have navigated organizational restructuring or downsizing**, helping businesses pivot in response to market shocks, mergers, or scale-ups. And almost a quarter (**23%**) are embedding **AI-driven talent management systems** into the core of workforce planning and development.

This is leadership that transcends function. This is the CHRO as a business builder. And yet, for all the impact CHROs are driving, recognition and rewards haven't always caught up. Many respondents voiced frustration that while their responsibilities have ballooned, the boardroom still underestimates the strategic value they bring. This disconnect is slowly shifting—but not fast enough.

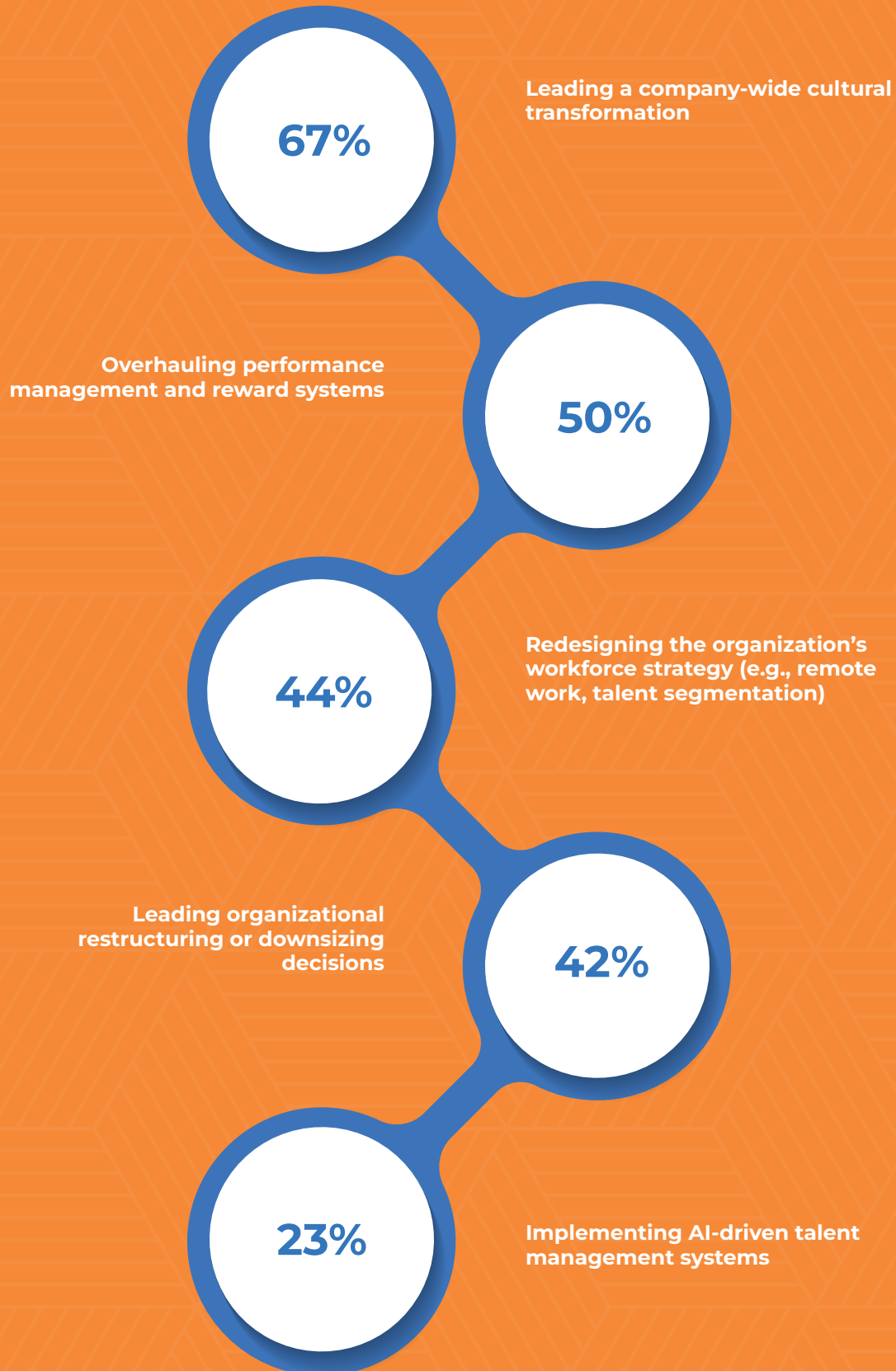
The most visionary CHROs are not waiting. They are using their seat at the table to reshape culture, design for inclusion, and scale wellbeing like never before. They are signals of a broader shift: where CHROs are being entrusted with enterprise transformation mandates once reserved for COOs or Strategy Heads. But with this evolution comes a

new challenge—ensuring that HR teams beneath them are ready to step up too.

The ripple effect of CHRO leadership is now felt far beyond HR dashboards. It's seen in company culture, in shareholder trust, in digital maturity scores, and in employee advocacy. CHROs are no longer just aligning talent to strategy—they're reshaping the strategy itself.



The bold moves defining CHRO leadership



Chapter 4:

The Hidden Strain – Pressures and Burnout

With great influence comes great visibility—and an even greater emotional toll. While CHROs today are seen as strategic power players, many are quietly carrying the weight of transformation on their shoulders, often without the safety net of recognition, peer support, or systemic relief.

This chapter peels back the curtain to reveal the less visible cost of elevation: the emotional and psychological strain that comes with leading in times of relentless change.

Nearly 43% of CHROs surveyed admitted to contemplating stepping away—not because they don't believe in the mission, but because the burden has become too great. What's pushing them to the edge? It's not just long hours or tight budgets. It's the collision of growing expectations with insufficient structural support.

Top stressors cited in the study include:

- Unrealistic board expectations, particularly around immediate culture change.
- Inadequate resourcing of HR transformation agendas.
- Role misalignment—where the remit has expanded, but authority hasn't.

In many cases, CHROs are expected to lead systemic change without the necessary levers of influence or investment. They're navigating high-stakes decisions—reskilling the workforce, rethinking leadership pipelines, embedding AI—while also being the go-to for every human crisis that arises.

This is not to say CHROs are breaking down. Quite the opposite: most are resilient, purpose-driven, and deeply committed to people and performance. But the risk of silent burnout is real—and

rising. Especially as the scope of their work continues to widen into ESG, hybrid work design, neurodiversity, geopolitics, and automation.

What CHROs need now is not just empathy—but infrastructure. That includes:

- Peer communities for safe dialogue and shared problem-solving.
- Board-level education to better calibrate expectations.
- Recognition frameworks that value emotional labour, not just KPIs.

There's also a growing case for CHRO succession planning and pipeline building. If organizations truly see the CHRO as a mission-critical leader, they must invest in the sustainability of that role, just as they do for other CXOs.

Behind the confident, competent CHRO persona is often a human navigating intense complexity with limited support. These insights remind us that if we want people-first companies, we must start by protecting the people who lead them.

43%
of CHROs
have contemplated
stepping away



TOP STRESSORS:



*Unrealistic board
expectations*



*Inadequate
HR transformation resources*



*Role misalignment
(expanded remit without
authority)*

CHRO SURVIVAL TOOLKIT:



*Peer
communities*



*Recognition
frameworks*



*Succession
planning*

Chapter 5:

The Road Ahead – CHROs and the Next Frontier

The CHRO has come a long way—from compliance custodian to transformation architect. But even as they stand at the center of enterprise reinvention today, many are already looking beyond the horizon, asking: What's next for us?

In our study, nearly 1 in 4 CHROs sees themselves stepping into CEO, Chief Transformation Officer, or Board roles in the next phase of their journey. Their ambition is not driven by title, but by a deep belief that their skills—systems thinking, people acumen, change orchestration—are critical to the future of business at large.

Yet the path ahead isn't smooth. CHROs cite persistent barriers that block upward movement, including:

- Lack of P&L ownership, limiting perceived commercial credibility.
- Board biases that still place HR outside the 'core business' lens.
- Limited cross-functional mobility, especially in legacy organizations.

These hurdles are not insurmountable—but they are real. They speak to a broader perception gap that still lingers in parts of the corporate world. And yet, some CHROs are already breaking through. We heard stories of HR leaders who've become transformation officers, taken on COO roles, or joined boards as governance experts—not in spite of their HR background, but because of it.

To scale this transition, three things must happen:

1. Boards must recalibrate their view of the CHRO role, recognising its strategic and enterprise-wide impact.
2. Organizations must design cross-functional pathways for HR leaders to gain exposure to finance, operations, and digital business.



NEXT-CAREER AMBITIONS

1 in 4 CHROs



CEO

Chief Transformation Officer

Board Roles

3. CHROs themselves must continue evolving—building deeper business acumen, mastering tech fluency, and telling their story with power.

The future CHRO will not just be fluent in people science. They will be sustainability-literate, crisis-ready, and digitally bilingual. They will balance AI with ethics, data with empathy. They will not only manage transformation—they will become its most trusted face.

What does this mean for HR as a function? It means letting go of old templates. It means designing HR operating models that are agile, tech-augmented, and globally scalable. It means building HR teams with cognitive diversity—mixing analysts with storytellers, behavioral scientists with systems thinkers. The CHRO role is evolving faster than ever before. And with the right enablers, it could become the most influential and integrative leadership role of the next decade.

The road ahead is clear: CHROs must keep climbing. And the organizations that walk with them will be the ones best equipped for what's coming next.

BARRIERS TO PROGRESSION



*Lack of
P&L ownership*



*Board
biases*



*Limited cross-
functional mobility*

FUTURE CHRO MUST-HAVES



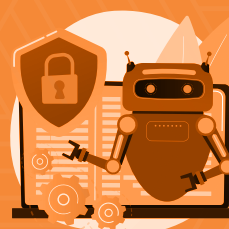
*Sustainability
literacy*



*Crisis
readiness*



*Digital
fluency*



*Balance:
AI + Ethics, Data
+ Empathy*

FUTURE HR OPERATING MODELS



Conclusion

A Moment of Reckoning and Renewal

We began this journey seeking answers. What is the true scope of a CHRO's influence today? What skills define their success? Where are they headed next?

But what we discovered through conversations, data, and moments of quiet candor is something deeper: this is not just a time of evolution—it is a time of reckoning and renewal for HR leadership.

CHROs are no longer defined by policies or pipelines. They are the pulse of purpose, the stewards of trust, and the translators of ambiguity. They are leading from the front—guiding organizations through restructuring, transformation, and societal upheaval. They are balancing paradoxes daily: empathy with efficiency, data with intuition, urgency with care.

And yet, their power often exceeds their authority. Their

responsibilities outpace their recognition.

This report is both a reflection and a provocation. It affirms that CHROs are indispensable to business resilience and growth. But it also challenges boards, CEOs, and even the CHROs themselves to reimagine what's possible. To invest in the role not as a silo, but as a strategic nucleus. To create systems that support—not strain—the people who carry so much of the organization's soul.

The CHRO Study 2025 is not a full stop. It is a comma. A moment to pause, look around, and decide what the next chapter should hold.

Because the future of work is not just being built by technology or strategy. It's being built by people—and the leaders who champion them.

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Acknowledgements

To every CHRO who generously lent us their voices—whether through a survey response, a thoughtful quote, or a candid conversation—thank you. Your honesty, time, and perspective shaped the very soul of this report.

The ETHRWorld CHRO Study 2025 is more than an editorial project. It is one of our most defining and deeply intentional research efforts—rooted in the belief that HR leadership deserves to be seen, heard, and celebrated not just as a support function, but as a strategic force.

To every leader who continues to lead transformation with both courage and clarity—this report is our tribute to you. May it reflect your journey, inspire future conversations, and serve as a marker of just how far the function has come.

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