



THE ADECCO GROUP

The Chief People Officer of the Future

How is the top
people management role
changing as the
world of work evolves?



THE ADECCO GROUP

UZH
Center for Leadership in the
Future of Work





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The Adecco Group: Gordana Landen, Chief Human Resources Officer

The Innovation Foundation:

Cynthia Hansen, Managing Director; Liana Melchenko, Global Head of Innovation and Insights.

University of Zurich, Center for Leadership in the Future of Work:

Prof. Dr. Jochen Menges, CLFW Director

Prof. Dr. Lauren Howe, CLFW Head of Research

Perrine Lhuillier, CLFW Head of Partnerships and Communications

Patrick Hürzeler, CLFW Research Assistant

Timon Hüsler, CLFW Research Assistant

For more information visit www.leadthefuture.org

Foreword

In this rapidly changing world, employers and employees are re-thinking not only where we work but fundamentally how we work. People must remain at the heart of this transformation as they are literally the lifeblood of any organization. The Global HR Valley initiative, housed in the University of Zurich's Center for Leadership in the Future of Work, brings together leaders and practitioners from business, government, civil society, and academia in an innovation ecosystem, to understand the changing needs of people at work and the role of HR practices in supporting them, with the goal of creating novel, practical solutions. The Adecco Group is pleased to be a founding member of this initiative, collaborating with the University of Zurich to forge a positive and human-centric future of work.

Chief People Officers (CPOs) sit at the crossroads of strategy, technology, competitiveness, and culture in any organization. Ours is a pivotal role, and one that is undergoing its own rapid transformation, further

accelerated by the COVID pandemic. To drive good decision-making about people management, we need to understand the current state, the drivers of change, and the implications for the future. The Adecco Group is pleased to partner with the University of Zurich to bring you the results of our in-depth survey of Chief People Officers. This focuses on how companies are changing their approaches to talent and how the very role of the CPO is evolving. By understanding the CPO role of today, what is already in transformation, and the significant changes that are foreseen, we can better forge the CPO role of tomorrow as a strategic driver of change to benefit organizations and the people within them.

Alain Dehaze
CEO, The Adecco Group

Gordana Landen
Chief Human
Resources Officer,
The Adecco Group



Introduction

The pandemic put the value of human talent into the spotlight, making it a core strategic priority for companies. As the globe navigates rapidly changing, stressful, and uncertain times, how can leaders across all kinds of employers support their employees to do their best at work, take action to help companies thrive, and create a better world of work? What is the role of people management professionals alongside other types of executives in doing so?

Looking into the future, all signs suggest that Chief People Officers (or Chief Human Resources Officers, CHROs) and other top people management executives will be held ever more responsible for meeting a myriad of human challenges inherent in the future of work: from managing an increasing amount of data and rapid developments in technology, to promoting employee emotional well-being, to winning the war for talent, to creating a company culture that is flexible and agile, to fostering greater diversity and inclusion. To successfully navigate these challenges ahead, people management executives will need to develop new skills and implement innovative processes and policies in their companies.

How do top people management executives envision an effective response to these challenges? To address this question, the Adecco Group and the University of Zurich's Center for Leadership in the Future of Work partnered to conduct a joint study, entitled *The Chief People Officer of the Future: How is the Top People Management Role Changing as the World of Work Evolves?* The study tackled three key questions related to core human-centric challenges in the future of work. Results illustrate how the Chief People Officer role is evolving to become more human-centric as these challenges loom and offer insight into concrete solutions for tackling these challenges. In this report on the findings, we break these results down into three core questions.

1 First, we ask: How will Chief People Officers spend their time in the future and what kind of competencies will they need most? The research reveals that there is a tension in the future CPO role between a focus on understanding tech and data, and a focus on leading people and developing culture. Further, while there is ample noise around the need for future HR to focus more on tech, the research shows that there is a risk of neglecting key social and emotional competencies in this future, especially if executives take a short-term lens to the future of work.

2 Second, building on this, we then ask: Given an increasing need for social and emotional competencies in the future of the role, how do Chief People Officers engage with the topic of employee emotion at work – as one core competency relevant to future people management – and how could employee well-being be promoted by focusing more on emotion in the future? We identify the strategies that people management executives are using to address how employees in their organization feel and discuss how this could be improved to foster greater well-being in the future of work.

3 Third, given that diversity and inclusion is important for future well-being in organizations and in society more broadly, we examine a concrete solution that can be adopted to foster DE&I: returnships. We ask: How can Chief People Officers create a positive company culture that supports diversity and inclusion by attracting and retaining professionals with non-traditional career paths?

The joint study surveyed executives who work in human resources across the globe. Conducted during the summer of 2021, the survey asked these top people management executives to imagine how the world of work, with a particular focus the function of people management, would look in the future. Answers shed light on key people challenges for Chief People Officers in the future.

To gain a global perspective, people management executives were recruited to participate in the study from a variety of countries representing a total of four continents. Executives who responded to the survey represented Australia, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Japan, Mexico, Spain, Switzerland, the U.K., and the U.S.

The 122 people management executives who completed the survey were responsible for a total of 3,110,419 employees. Executives had on average 11.9 years of

experience in the field of human resources. The group of executives included 86 men (70.5%) and 36 women (29.5%) and spanned the ages of 24 to 63 years old, with an average age of 40.6 years in the group. The companies that executives led employed anywhere from 100 to over 500,000 employees and were located across a variety of industries, spanning finance, technology, agriculture, education, retail, aerospace and defense, and more.

The best way to gain insight into how the landscape of people management is changing, and what will prepare these leaders best to tackle human challenges in the future of work, is to ask those in the top executive role. The Adecco Group and the University of Zurich aim to share the perspectives of these global thought leaders to foster deeper conversations about the role that people management executives can play in shaping the future of work.





Results revealed key insights for three main human-centric challenges relevant to the role of future people management executives

1

The Changing Role of the Chief People Officer.

Future Chief People Officers are envisioned as a blend of fundamentally human skills and tech-savviness. What skills take precedence depends on how far executives look into the future.

The research shows that the top people management role is shifting on the one hand toward a greater focus on tech and data, and the other hand toward a greater focus on people, particularly culture and change.

2

Engaging with Employee Emotions for the Future of Work.

Future Chief People Officers increasingly need to measure – and implement processes and policies to improve – employee emotions at work.

As the Chief People Officer role increasingly focuses on people and the social and emotional competencies needed to lead them, the research shows that executives need strategies for managing employees' emotions to contribute to their well-being at work.

3

Bringing People Back to Work.

In an intensifying war for talent, future Chief People Officers can benefit from adopting programs that encourage skilled workers to re-enter the workforce after career breaks.

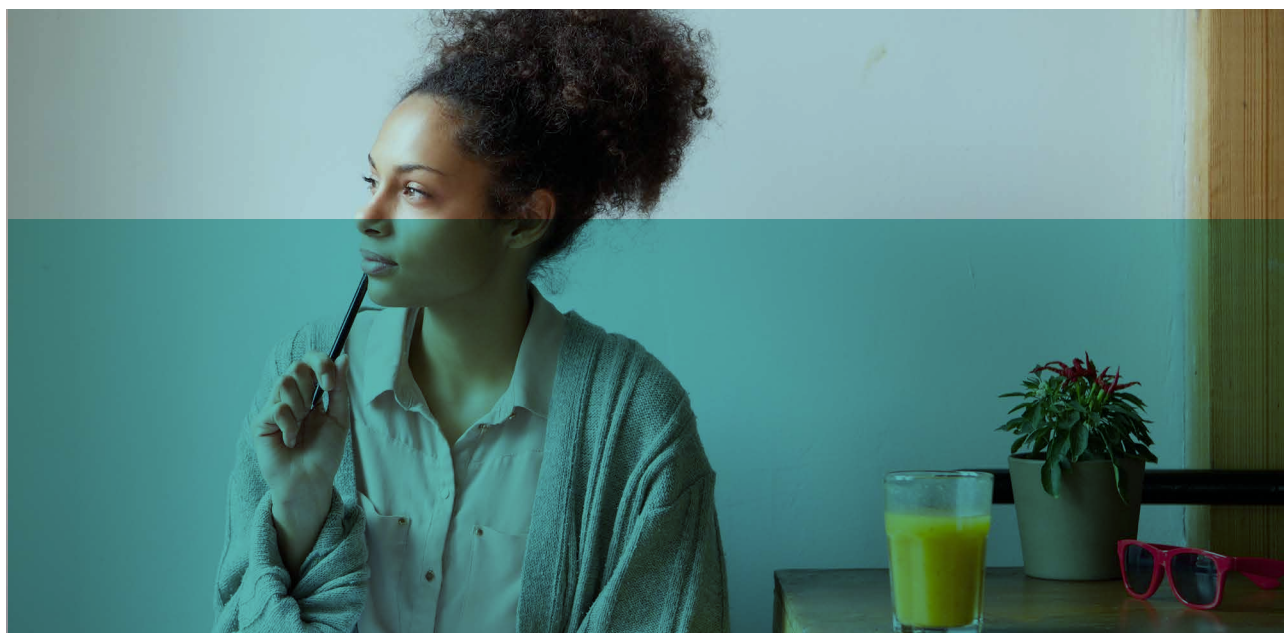
To create a positive culture at work and ensure gender equality, Chief People Officers will need strategies to recruit employees from a variety of backgrounds, and the research illustrates how returnship programs can help them to meet these goals.

1. The Changing Role of the Chief People Officer

As the world of work changes, the role of the Chief People Officer changes too. When imagining the Chief People Officer of the future, executives saw a leader who is able to successfully navigate both the world of technology and the world of people.

The top people management role can go by many different names (e.g., Chief People Officer, Chief Human Resource Officer, Head of Talent), representing slightly different paths forward into the future of work. In the research, we use these titles interchangeably under the umbrella of top people management executives, and focus on the broader notion of what an executive who is spearheading people management will do in the future of work. How do people management executives across the globe view the changing nature of this role, and what is the ideal portrait of the future top people management executive?

To meet the demands of the changing world of work, Chief People Officers will need to focus on developing different skills and spend their time tackling different challenges. What competencies did Chief People Officers imagine people management executives would most urgently need in the future? How did they imagine that the people management executives of the future would spend their time? In the study, executives painted a picture of a Chief People Officer who engages with both tech and data, and who is also a champion for people and culture.



People management executives are moving further away from being “managers,” toward a dual role as data scientists and guardians of change and culture.

To get a sense of what the core role of future Chief People Officers will involve, the survey asked Chief People Officers to report what kinds of tasks they



Manage your teams and core HR functions,



Provide leadership across the organization, networking, relationship management,



Support, coach, and advise the CEO,



Engage in compliance and regulatory procedures,



Shape business strategy through HR input,

spend their time on today, and what kinds of tasks Chief People Officers imagined they would spend their time on in the future. Chief People Officers reported the percent of their time at work that they spend now for ten different tasks, and then reported the percent of the time that they estimated they would spend on these tasks in the future:



Drive transformation and change, prepare for the future,



Engage with data, people analytics, and prediction,



Measure, build, and protect organizational culture, integrate core values into business,



Do research and experimentation to drive innovation of new people practices,



Represent the organization, engage in thought leadership.

Chief People Officers imagined the largest increase in time spent engaging with **data, people analytics, and prediction** – a **2.7% increase**

The key competencies of Chief People Officers will evolve in the near future, putting more emphasis on **driving change, building culture, and people analytics**

When executives were tasked with imagining how people management executives would spend their time in the future, they imagined the biggest decreases in traditional “management” tasks – namely, a 1.4% decrease in time spent managing teams and core HR functions, and a 1.5% decrease in time spent engaging in compliance and regulatory procedures.

Where people management executives imagined spending more time fell into two key domains. First, people management executives imagined that they would spend more time wearing the hat of a data

scientist: they anticipated a 2.7% increase in spending their time engaging with data, people analytics, and prediction. Second, people management executives imagined that they would serve as guardians of change and culture: they anticipated a 1.3% increase in time spent driving transformation and change, and a 1.1% increase in time spent measuring, building, and protecting organizational culture.

These findings illustrate how the role of the Chief People Officer is changing in two different ways. It is shifting away from a more traditional “people manager”



role, to one that involves wearing two sets of shoes, one focused on technical aspects, such as engaging with data and tech, and one focused on fundamentally human aspects, such as leading people through change and maintaining a positive company culture. Thus, the role of the CPO is shifting away from transactional service provision to anticipating, predicting, and engaging more with the needs of people at the company.

Critically, these findings pinpoint a possible source of tension for the future Chief People Officer role: the duality between a focus on tech and data on one hand, and people and culture on the other hand. Will the future Chief People Officer need to engage more with data science and hard skills, or more with cultivating culture and soft skills? Does this dual focus pose a trade-off for executives, and if so, which part of the role and associated skill set takes precedence in an extremely time poor future?

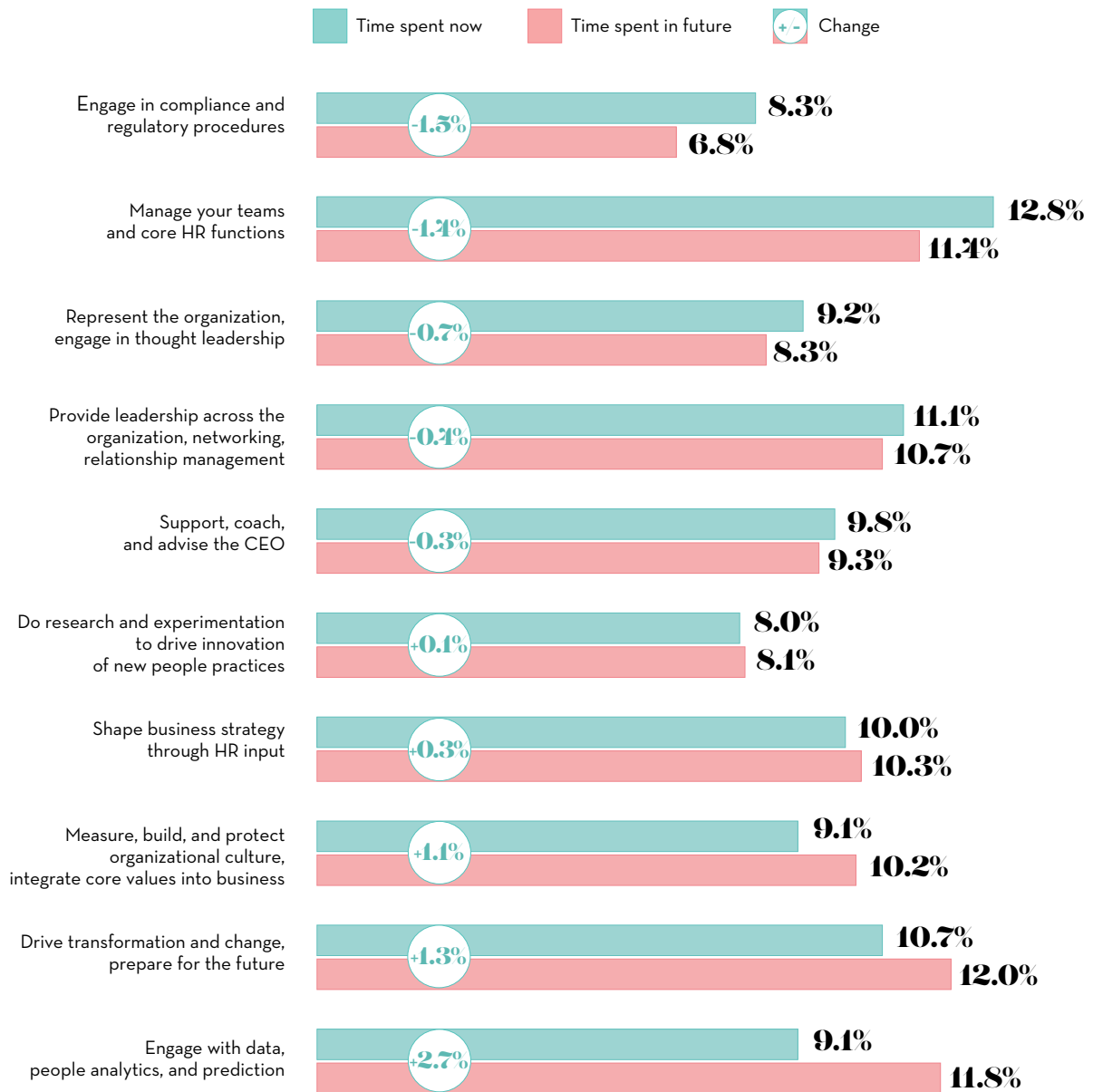
With the focus shifting in these two directions, the role of the Chief People Officer may begin to diverge between different companies, such that some Chief

People Officers increasingly wear a data science hat, while others with the same title focus less on the numbers in their daily tasks and ramp up a focus on skills like leadership and empathy that make culture and change possible. There are already trends such that companies are beginning to weigh technical expertise more heavily when recruiting top management in human executives, and programs that train people management executives are devoting more resources to digitalization and related topics.¹ Yet people management leaders also recognize, in light of global turmoil, employees' personal needs.² Companies that emphasize one of these aspects over the other in the Chief People Officer role may start to create different people management cultures and processes, and attract executives with strengths in different skill sets to lead them.

Alternatively, people management leaders might question whether these skill sets are really leading executives in opposing directions or not. Can hard and soft skills be fruitfully combined into one people management executive role? Perhaps future people management executive training will blend evidence

¹ https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/special-reports-and-expert-views/pages/translating_the_hr_digital_revolution_to_everyday_work.aspx
² Talha Khan, Asmus Komm, Dana Maor, and Florian Pollner (2021). 'Back to human': Why HR leaders want to focus on people again.

Percentage increases and decreases in time for each of the Chief People Officer tasks



with soft skills, teaching executives how to gain insights from data to make fundamentally human decisions (e.g., examining survey evidence about how employees in their organization feel in order to decide how to best lead through an upcoming change). One question for the future, then, is to consider whether companies need an executive role that bridges these two domains for the best insights – for instance, a “Chief People Analyst” or “Chief People and Data Scientist” – or whether and when companies might benefit from distributing these responsibilities between two different executives, for instance between a “Chief Data Officer” and a “Chief People Officer.”

By spearheading conversations now about the balance between tech and people, leaders can help to shape the Chief People Officer role in a tech-savvy, but also human-centered direction. Organizations can take steps to identify where leaders in people management feel their skills need the most improvement – for instance, whether rapid upskilling regarding data could help to supplement training in leadership and other key soft skills, or whether executives feel the largest gaps in their abilities to tackle more sensitive social and emotional issues in their organization, like bringing negative emotions in to the spotlight or discussing controversial sociopolitical issues.



The need to master tech dominates in the near future, but the further into the future, the more the role of a people management executive focused on fundamentally human skills.

Given the duality between a focus on tech and a focus on people that emerged in the portrait of the future Chief People Officer, we wondered what competencies executives see as most critical in the future. Which skills take precedence for future CPOs – and is there the same divergence between hard and soft skills? If the CPO role diverges to focus more on either tech or people – that is, these two domains are seen as a trade-off – then companies may lose out on the opportunities that come with combining these abilities, such as creating an executive position that focuses on using data to shape people practices in a human-centered way. Having a top management position that focuses on combining tech and socioemotional abilities in this way is likely to be particularly beneficial in navigating the challenges of the future of work.

In the study, executives imagined the Chief People Officer of the future and rated ten core competencies on how important they are for Chief People Officers to succeed. Competencies covered five core categories, drawing on the

U.S. Department of Labor’s framework³ for the different skills occupations require:

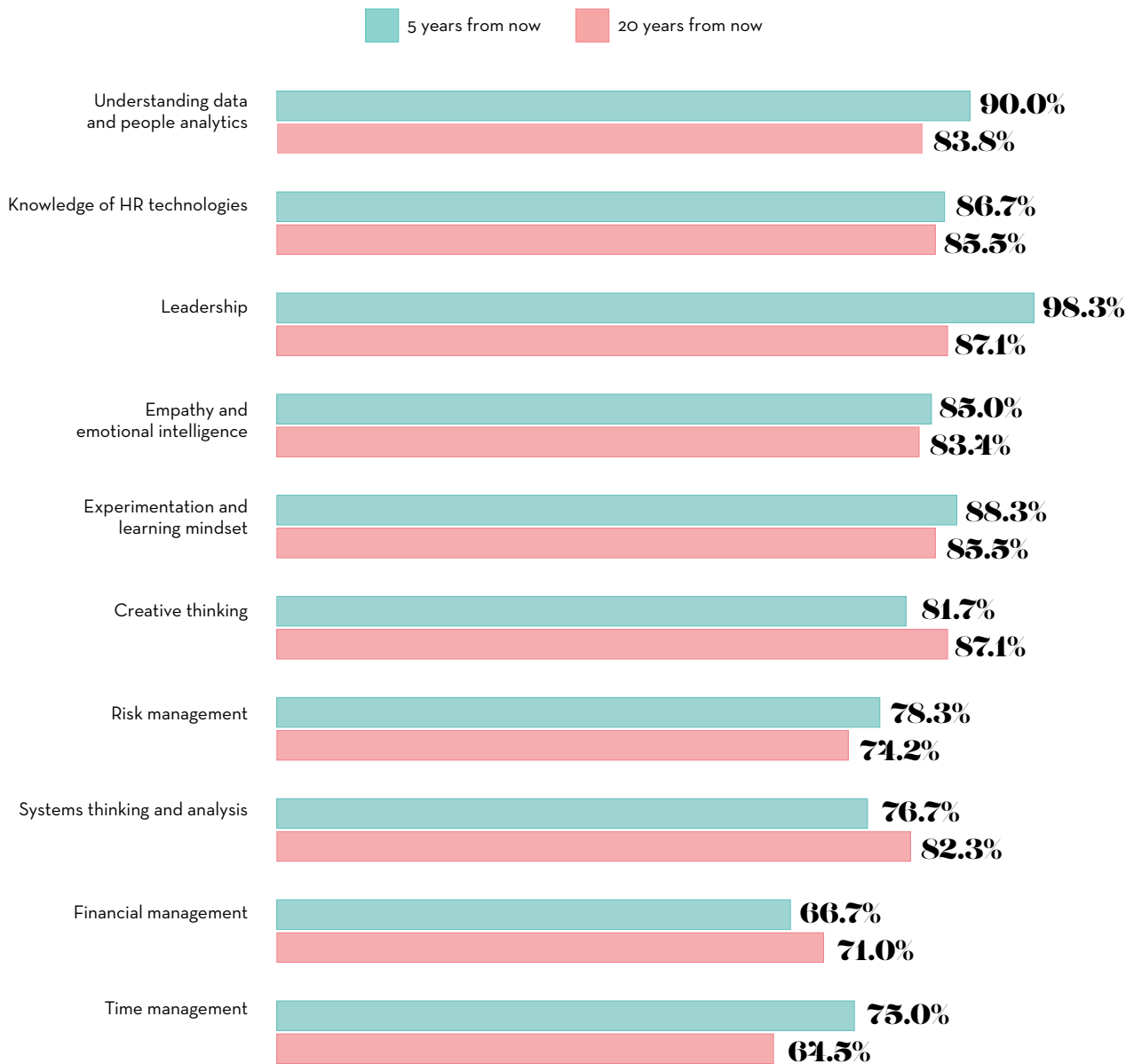
- 1 Technical competencies:**
Understanding data and people analytics,
Knowledge of HR technologies
- 2 Socioemotional competencies:**
Leadership, Empathy and emotional intelligence
- 3 Complex problem-solving competencies:**
Experimentation and learning mindset,
Creative thinking
- 4 Systems competencies:**
Risk management, Systems thinking and analysis
- 5 Resource management competencies:**
Financial management, Time management

The study randomly assigned executives to estimate how Chief People Officers would spend their time in the future over one of two different time frames. One group of executives were randomly assigned to imagine how CPOs would spend their time in the near future – over the

3

<https://www.onetonline.org/find/descriptor/browse/Skills/>

Percentage of executives who rated each skill as very or extremely important, by each time frame



next five years – and the other group of executives were randomly assigned to imagine how CPOs would spend their time in the distant future – over the next 20 years.

Would the competencies executives deem most important differ depending on whether they took a shorter or longer term view?

No matter what time frame executives imagined, leadership took position as the top skill people management executives need. 98.3% of executives who imagined the near future said this skill would be very or extremely important, as did 87.1% of executives who imagined the distant future.

But when executives imagined the near future over the next five years, the most important skills for executives after leadership were an understanding of data and people analytics (90%), followed by an experimentation and learning mindset (88.3%) and an understanding of HR technology (86.7%). However, when executives imagined the more distant future over the next 20 years, the importance of human skills went up a notch. Creative thinking jumped into the top needed skills (87.1%), tied with leadership, followed by an experimentation and learning mindset (85.5%) and an understanding of HR tech (85.5%), and only then data and people analytics (83.8%).

When executives imagined the future in 20 years instead of five, they put a higher priority on human skills:



there was a

5.4%
increase

in the number of executives who agreed that creativity is very or extremely important



there was a

6.2%
decrease

in the number of executives who agreed that understanding data and people analytics is very or extremely important

“I think we have to be creative in thinking about people and what they studied and what they can do. We also have to be creative and say, ‘Look, not everyone goes to a four-year school.’ Looking at non-traditional backgrounds is a great way to find great talent.”

— **Ken Cooper**, Chief Human Resources Officer, Bloomberg, on the importance of creativity for Chief People Officers

There was a surprising amount of stability in the way that Chief People Officers imagined their role over time, as evidenced by relatively small percentage shifts in the way executives imagined they would spend their time now and in the future. This suggests that change in the role may be more incremental than current narratives might suggest. However, the places in which executives imagined the most and least change reveal some key differences between CPOs now and in the future.

This shows that the skills that executives see as core to the Chief People Officer role change when executives take a longer-term perspective. For example, creativity stands out as one skill that gains in importance when executives look further into the future. There was a 5.4% increase in the number of executives who agreed that creativity is very or extremely important when executives thought about the more distant future.

Creativity can enable Chief People Officers to design innovative solutions for some of the pressing challenges in the future of work, whether designing new practices for employee experience or recruiting talented employees, or delving into strategy and thought leadership.⁴ But how much these skills are in focus might depend on how far ahead executives imagine the future. If the near-term future remains the only focus, executives might risk focusing on seemingly more urgent tech upskilling and neglecting the more human skills that are still essential for executives in the future of work.

This finding is particularly relevant given the duality between tech and people in the changing nature of the Chief People Officer role. It suggests that if organizations take a short-term perspective, they are likely to push top people management roles toward

4

<https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/leadership-and-navigation/pages/creativity-in-hr.aspx>



On average,
86.9%
of people management executives believe that
understanding data and people analytics
will be a crucial competency in the future

focusing on tech and data. But organizations that develop a longer-term strategy may develop the role in a more human-centric direction – for instance, they may focus on recruiting executives with a greater emphasis on social and emotional competencies.

Of the competencies that executives thought future people management executives would need, those that were deemed least important – regardless of whether executives imagined 5 or 20 years in the future – were resource management skills. On average across the two time frames, financial management was selected by only 68.0% of executives as very or extremely important for the future, and time management was selected by only 69.7% of executives as very or extremely important for the future. This finding again highlights a shift away from Chief People Officers as a more traditional “manager” of resources, to a new role that involves balancing concerns about

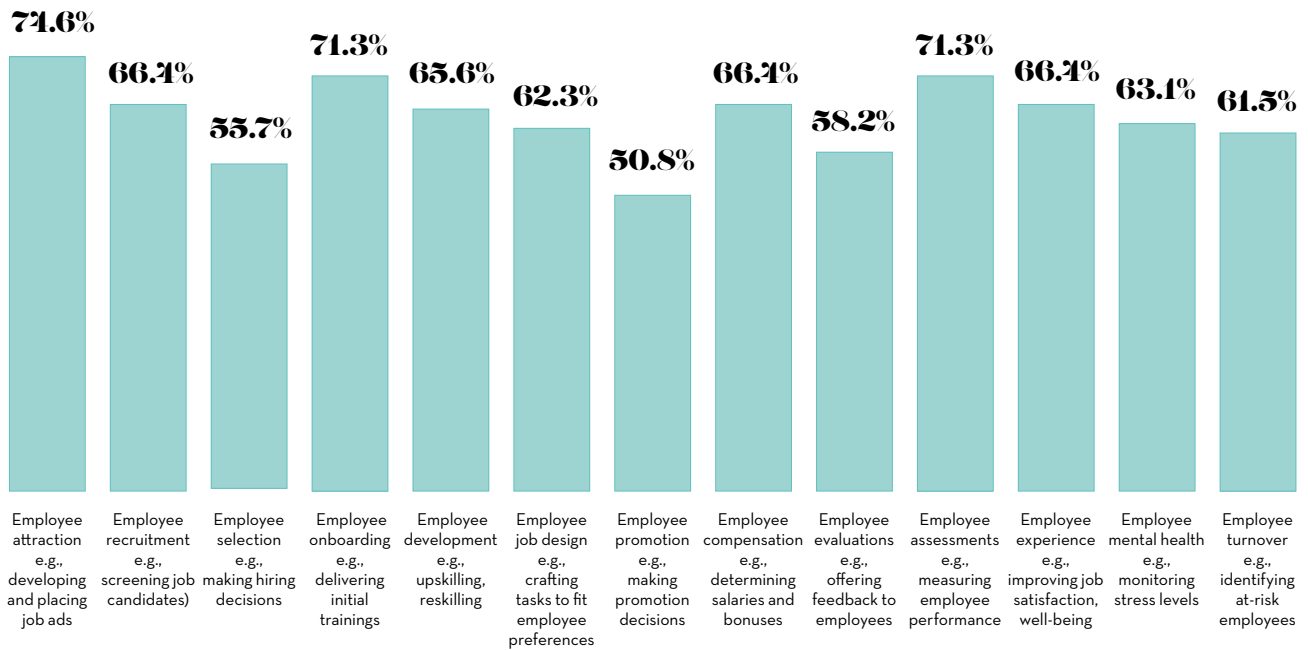
tech and data, and concerns about people, culture, and change. This transition is particularly accented in the reconsideration of the future of the Chief People Officer and other people management leadership roles, given that this role has been put into the spotlight by the pandemic and a growing number of organizations are considering how to re-define it to focus more on people rather than process.⁵

How far executives look into the future of people management can shape the skills that are sharpest in their focus. When thinking about and preparing for the future world of work, people management executives might benefit from deliberately considering the time range they hold in mind. What is important now – versus what might be important a few years further into the future of work? The future of work is a constantly moving target and the demands may change the further we go down the road.

5

<https://www.strategy-business.com/article/Superhuman-resources-How-HR-leaders-have-redefined-their-C-suite-role>

Chart showing the different parts of the employee life cycle with the average percent of Chief People Officers who said that this part of the life cycle would be “very likely” or “extremely likely” to be automated



Executives are reluctant to use HR technologies to make decisions about employees’ personal performance.

Even as understanding technology and data becomes a key competency for executives, executives may not work with technology in all HR practices and processes, and there are areas where human skills cannot be replaced. The study’s results also showed that executives are hesitant about the use of HR technologies for certain parts of the employee life cycle: specifically, those that focus on making decisions about employees’ futures.

To get at what aspects of human resources technology executives are less comfortable with, the survey asked executives to rate the likelihood that different parts of the employee life cycle would be automated through technologies in their company.

The parts of the employee life cycle that executives showed the most discomfort with automating included employee promotion (e.g., making promotion decisions), employee selection (e.g., making hiring decisions), and employee evaluations (e.g., offering feedback to employees).

While HR technologies can help executives to accomplish their work, it is unlikely it will become core to all of the ways in which Chief People Officers spend their time. Just because technology can be used for certain aspects of people management practices and processes does not mean it *will* be used. There are limits to what technology use people management executives deem desirable, even if technology use is feasible. The fact that executives felt that sensitive decisions about employee performance – such as promotions, hiring, and giving feedback – would be less likely to involve technology also shows that a human touch continues to be required for key people decisions, highlighting the need for people skills in the future of people management.

50.8%
of people management executives believe that HR technologies will be used to make employee promotion decisions in the future



Key Takeaways

1

***The Chief People Officer of the future** faces a tension between understanding tech and data on the one hand, and working with people, particularly regarding culture and change, on the other. Discussions of the future of the role should focus on the extent to which each of these aspects of the role should be prioritized in an organization.*

2

***The further into the future**, the more soft skills take center stage in the Chief People Officer role – suggesting that a short-term focus may lead tech to dominate the CPO role.*

3

***HR functions related to making decisions** about employee performance are seen as most off-limits for HR tech, showing a need for a human touch in this domain.*

2. Engaging with Employee Emotions for the Future of Work

Understanding and improving employee emotions is key to a healthy and productive future of work. But most companies neglect to measure emotions and their effects, and companies use strategies to try to improve emotions less often than would be expected given their importance.

The pandemic showed the world yet again how important employee emotions are at work. This trend has put people management into the spotlight, and people management executives are increasingly held responsible for employee mental health and their emotional and psychological well-being.⁶ Thus, there is a growing need for executives to understand and manage the emotions that people in their organization feel, especially as – as the results above revealed – the role of the CPO changes to focus more on people and socioemotional competencies. Yet how leaders can address emotions at work, as one key social and emotional competency for these leaders, largely remains a black box.

For decades, emotions were considered a factor that interferes with work accomplishment and is best left out of business. For example, the scholar Max Weber wrote in 1921 that the ideal company “succeeds in eliminating from all official business love, hatred, and all emotional elements.” Only in recent years have organizations started to incorporate emotions into their processes and practices

through happiness initiatives and other activities. But recent research suggests that the world still has a long way to go in improving emotions at work. For example, a recent study of over 14,500 employees in the United States shows that even though employees say that they want to feel emotions like excited, appreciated, satisfied, and proud at work, they also feel emotions like bored, stressed, frustrated, or tired in reality.⁷ There is a feelings gap at work that leaders need to address to foster well-being and improve employee productivity and performance.

Research on how leaders can harness the power of emotions at work shows promise for doing so. For example, more emotionally intelligent supervisors foster greater creativity and innovation in their workplaces by improving how their employees feel.⁸ Especially in crisis situations like the pandemic, leaders play a key role in helping employees to manage negative emotions and thus in offsetting their adverse consequences.⁹ But less is known about the practices and processes in an organization that can be implemented to address emotion at work.

6 Phil Abinus (2021), “What World Mental Health Day means to these top HR leaders.” <https://hrxecutive.com/what-world-mental-health-day-means-to-these-top-hr-leaders/>

7 <https://ycei.org/emotion-revolution-in-the-workplace-1>

8 Zorana Ivcevic, Julia Moeller, Jochen Menges, and Marc Brackett (2021). “Supervisor emotionally intelligent behavior and employee creativity.” *Journal of Creative Behavior*.

9 Lauren Howe and Jochen Menges (2021), “Leaders, don’t be afraid to talk about your fears and anxieties”. Harvard Business Review (digital edition).



A study of
over 14,500
U.S. employees shows that though employees want
to feel excited, appreciated, satisfied,
and proud at work, they also feel bored,
stressed, frustrated, or tired.

In an era fraught with the dangers of emotional exhaustion, stress, and burnout, yet also holding the promise of inspiration, purpose, and fulfillment through work, what actions can Chief People Officers take to effectively address negative emotions that undermine well-being and performance and promote positive emotions that boost them? In the study, we sought to learn what concrete solutions people management executives are implementing in their company to address employee emotions and where there may be room for improvement.

The study revealed that executives recognize the important influence that employee emotions have in the workplace. But the results also showed that despite recognizing emotions' importance for work outcomes, many executives did not take steps to try to capture or change how employees feel at work in their companies. To create a future of work that focuses on employee well-being, executives first need to measure employee emotions, and then create policies and processes that focus on changing these emotions for the better.

How people feel at work is relevant to core company objectives.

In the past decades, scientific research on emotions at work has shown that emotions shape everything that leaders care about at work: from increasing employee loyalty and retention, to reducing absenteeism and turnover, to fostering creativity and innovation, to boosting productivity and performance.¹⁰ Emotions also relate to productivity in new ways of working, like increased remote work.¹¹ Helping employees to feel better helps them to accomplish their work more effectively and can result in a multitude of benefits not only for employees, but also for companies, in the future of work. But do executives in people management recognize this side of emotion?

Importantly, the study showed that Chief People Officers recognize this core role that emotions play in success at work. Executives said that if they could improve how their employees feel at work, it would have the largest effect on improving employee productivity. Far from the historically widespread notion that getting employees to feel better at work is a superfluous goal for business or something that is “nice-to-have” but not essential, executives recognized

¹⁰ Neal M. Ashkanasy and Alan D. Dorris (2017), “Emotions in the Workplace.” *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*.

¹¹ Lauren Howe and Jochen Menges (2021), “Remote work mindsets predict emotions and productivity in home office: A longitudinal study of knowledge workers during the Covid-19 pandemic.” *Human-Computer Interaction*.

Emotions matter most for productivity

Executives selected the top three benefits that their organization would experience if their organization improved how their employees feel at work. The list of possible options from which executives could choose included six benefits of improving emotions at work that research has documented: increased creativity and innovation, increased loyalty and retention, increased adaptivity and change-readiness, increased employee health, decreased absenteeism, and increased productivity and performance.

The #1 benefit that Chief People Officers selected was increased productivity and performance, chosen as one of the top three benefits by 68.9% of executives. The second most selected was creativity and innovation,

chosen in the top three by 51.6% of executives. These were ranked above other benefits, such as increased loyalty and retention (put in the top three benefits by 44.3% of executives) and decreased absenteeism (put in the top three benefits by 16.4% of executives). Executives see improving emotions at work not just as something that avoids undesirable outcomes for companies (e.g., getting employees into the office), but as something has a tangible impact on the quality and quantity of work output once employees are at work. Executives also recognized the role that improving emotions plays in promoting employee health and well-being: 53.3% put increased employee health into the top three benefits of improving how employees feel at work.

Top benefits of improving how employees feel at work.



that improving emotion at work is key to core company objectives. And as employee health is increasingly on the radar in the wake of the pandemic, executives also recognized the key role of emotions in promoting employee health.

Yet even as emotions become more important at work, almost half of Chief People Officers don't measure them systematically.

We asked the executives what their company does to improve employees' feelings. Executives could select from a list of ten strategies that companies might use to improve employee feelings which their company did to improve how employees feel at work:

- Run a happiness, well-being, or other program focused on feelings
- Have a person or team be responsible for how employees feel (e.g., a happiness manager)
- Craft jobs or redesign work to better elicit desired feelings in employees
- Regularly measure and provide feedback on how employees feel
- Hold managers and leaders accountable for how employees feel
- Provide office spaces to create desired feelings
- Offer non-work opportunities to create desired feelings (e.g., social activities)
- Align the organizational culture with desired feelings
- Assess employees' emotional skills
- Train employees on emotional skills.

The most common strategy that companies use to improve how employees feel at work is regularly measuring and providing feedback on how employees feel, yet only

51.6%
say they do this

40.2%

of executives said that their company runs a happiness, well-being, or other program focused on feelings, driving change, building culture, and people analytics

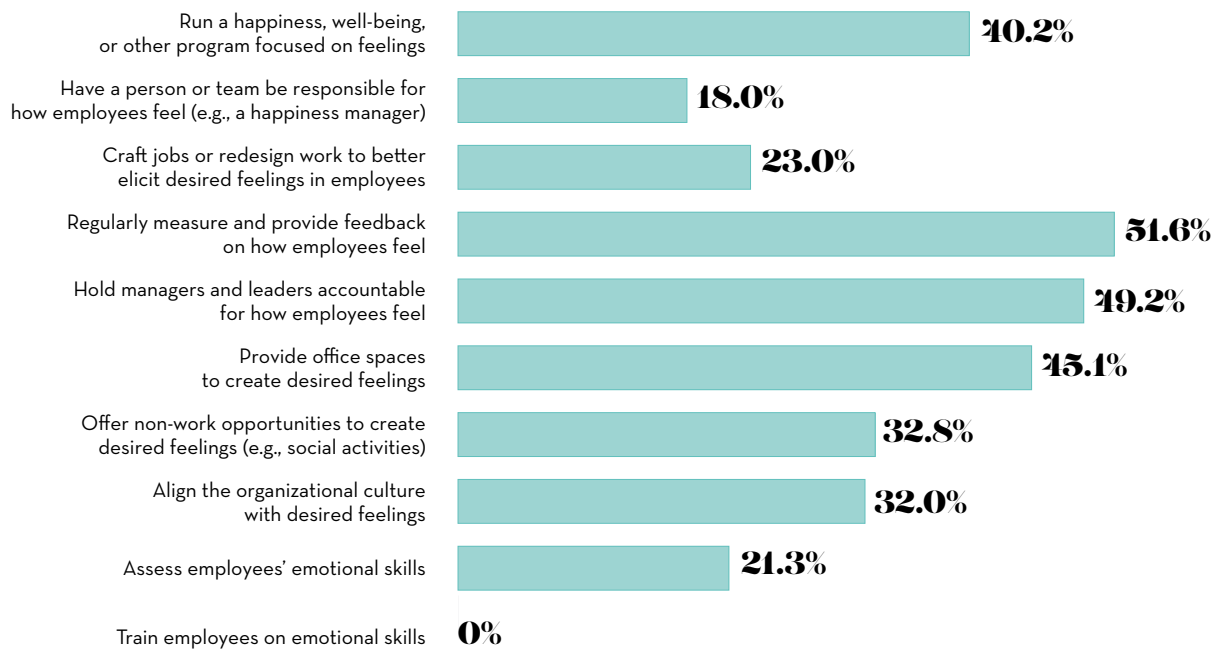
The most common strategy that executives employed was “regularly measuring and providing feedback on how employees feel.” Yet only 51.6% of executives said that they did so. Breaking it down by the country in which executives worked, measuring feelings was most common in the U.S. (71.4% of companies) and rarest in Mexico (35.7% of companies), Japan (40.0% of companies) and Switzerland (42.9%).

The science has shown that employee emotions relate to results at work. But do companies regularly measure this to understand how employee emotions might be shaping performance in their company context? The survey asked executives whether their organization regularly measures how employee feelings impact results. Only 30.3% of companies said that they track

how employee feelings affect results (like employee performance) at their company. Without documenting the fact that emotions matter for work, companies risk overlooking emotions and failing to gain a better understanding of how the positive benefits of emotion can be harnessed in their particular company context.

These findings speak for the need for a call to action for Chief People Officers to begin systematically measuring emotions for the future of work if their company does not already do so. To improve anything, we first have to be aware of its current state, and then decide how to make it better in areas where there is particular need. Measuring emotions is a first step to being able to improve them, and therefore employee experience and well-being, for the future of work.

Percentage of executives whose company adopts each strategy





Few companies try to measure employees' emotional skills or help employees develop them further.

After measuring emotions, the next most frequently mentioned strategy executives utilized to improve emotions at work was holding managers and leaders accountable for how employees feel, with 49.2% of executives saying that their company takes steps to do this. The next most common strategy was providing employees with office spaces to create desired feelings, with 45.1% of executives stating that they employ this strategy in their company. 40.2% of executives said that they run a happiness, well-being, or other program focused on feelings, the next most frequently mentioned strategy, followed by offering non-work opportunities to create desired feelings (e.g., social activities), which was employed in 32.8% of companies.

Strategies that were used more rarely included having a person or team be responsible for how employees feel (employed by 18.0% of companies). Yet there were a few interesting examples that surfaced in our findings. For instance, one executive mentioned that their company has created “mental health champions” who were trained to foster well-being, and that their company has begun utilizing an app to promote well-being. Another executive mentioned that their company has created “engagement catalysts” who are tasked with measuring employees’ feelings to promote employee engagement.

“Everything starts with employee experience. Focusing on well-being has a real priority – physical well-being, of course, but also mental, financial, social well-being.”

— **David Henderson**, Former Group Chief Human Resources Officer, Zurich Insurance Group

Only a small number of executives (26, 21.3%) said that their companies assess employees’ emotional skills. The most unused strategy was building employees’ emotional skills: no executives (0.0%) said that they trained employees on emotional skills in their company, even though the benefits of such trainings have been shown across research studies.¹²

“Our organization has established a group of people, ‘Engagement Catalysts’, to address employee sentiment and engagement at broad scale.”

— **Head of HR**, Anonymous Respondent in the Chief People Officer of the Future Study

¹² Paulo N. Lopes (2016), “Emotional Intelligence in Organizations: Bridging Research and Practice.” *Emotion Review*; Kotsou, I., Mikolajczak, M., Heeren, A., Grégoire, J., & Leys, C. 2018. Improving Emotional Intelligence: A Systematic Review of Existing Work and Future Challenges. *Emotion Review*, 11: 151-165.



Only
21.3%
of people management executives said that their company assesses employees' emotional skills – and 0.0% said that their company trains employees on emotional skills

Even though it may be tempting to see the world of work as one that already addresses emotion, grounded in the recent years in which happiness initiatives have begun to proliferate¹³, these findings show how much room there is to grow when it comes to improving emotion at work. Emotions need to become embedded in organizational processes, from changing how people are hired and trained, to what people do together in an organization, to what kinds of jobs are created, and what kind of data are collected. This notion of effectively addressing emotions throughout the levels of an organization – or “organizational emotional intelligence,”¹⁴ can be a guidepost for companies that aim to become more human-centered by more effectively addressing employee emotions in the coming decades.

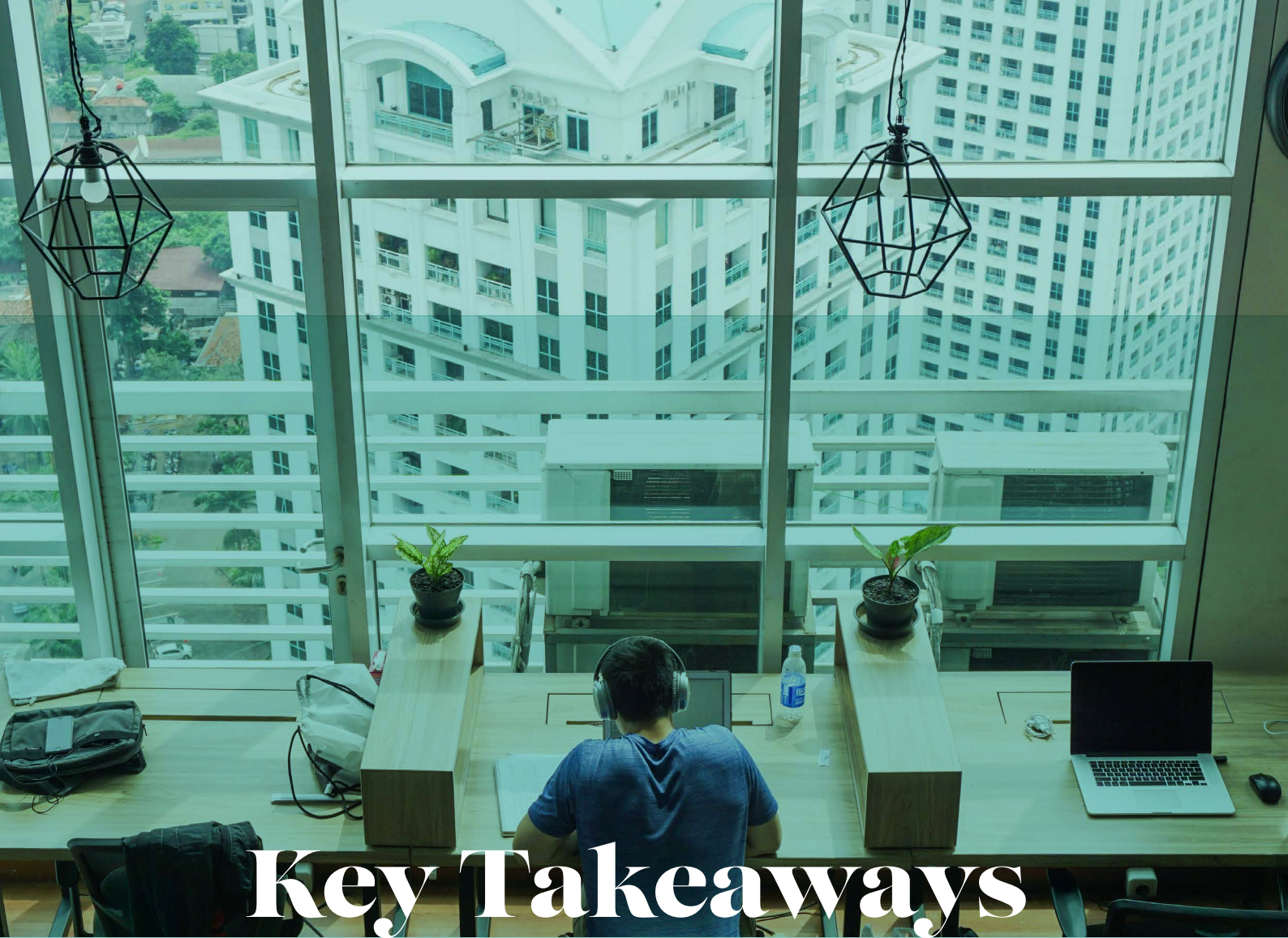
The research reveals some actions that people management executives can take to start addressing employee emotions at work, as their role increasingly requires them to focus on how people in their organization feel.

“Given how important emotions are for work and how little companies do to help employees with them, we urgently need new solutions for companies to enable employees to better deal with emotions. We need to innovate not just about how to digitally transform businesses but also how to emotionally transform them.”

— **Dr. Jochen Menges**, Chair of Human Resource Management and Leadership and Director of the Center for Leadership in the Future of Work, University of Zurich

¹³ <https://www.strategy-business.com/article/How-to-create-happier-employees>

¹⁴ Jochen I. Menges (2012), “Organizational Emotional Intelligence: Theoretical Foundations and Practical Implications.” In *Experiencing and Managing Emotions in the Workplace (Research on Emotion in Organizations, Vol. 8)*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited.



Key Takeaways

1

Executives recognize that emotions matter for results at work.

2

Despite the recognition of emotions' importance at work, many companies do not measure them, and training employees' emotional skills in companies is surprisingly rare.

3

Some companies are creating innovative positions that focus specifically on managing employee emotions at work, such as "engagement catalysts".

3. Solving the talent scarcity crisis through returnships

As talent scarcity has moved into the spotlight, Chief People Officers are increasingly concerned about ways to recruit talented workers into their companies. As well, recruiting talent from diverse groups is a growing concern. Workplace re-integration programs like returnships can help Chief People Officers encourage highly talented workers to return to the office after a career break. But there may be misperceptions about these programs that prevent companies from adopting them.

The effects of the pandemic on gender equality, as well as social unrest and concern about social issues, has made diversity and inclusion a key topic in the future of work. What concrete actions can future people management executives take to foster diversity? In the research, we examined one concrete solution: returnships that integrate different social groups who have taken career breaks back into the workforce.

The COVID-19 crisis pushed women out of the workforce at an alarming rate, as a lack of childcare options forced women to cut back on their hours and leave their jobs. The first year of the pandemic alone pushed around 54 million women across the globe out of the workforce, according to a study led by *The Washington Post*.¹⁵ The International Labor Organization predicted that in 2021, only 43.2% of women in the labor force would be employed, compared to 68.6% of men in the labor force – a gap of over 25%.¹⁶ In light of this widening gender gap that exacerbates already existing inequalities, programs that help women to re-enter the workforce are critical for ensuring that companies remain diverse and inclusive in the future world of work.

Returnships are programs that try to tackle this challenge. Returnships offer professionals who have taken career breaks a path back into the workplace, by offering a mix of paid work placement, targeted opportunities to refresh skills and knowledge, and networking, coaching and mentorship for returnees. Prevalent in the financial and professional services industries, many of these focus on highly qualified women who have left the corporate world and wish to return to the same field. For instance, the consulting company Capgemini has a 6-month program for anyone who has taken a career break between 2 and 10 years. Recognizing how many people were pushed out of work from the pandemic, Mastercard began extending their 4-month returnship program to cover anyone who has taken a career break of a year or more during the time of COVID. Amazon offers 16-week virtual returnships to reintegrate professionals into the workplace and Amazon's company culture through remote work. Returnship opportunities like these can be key for re-launching the careers of professional women who have taken multi-year career breaks for parenthood.

15 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2021/coronavirus-women-work/>

16 https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_813449/lang-en/index.htm



While **68.9%** of people management executives said that their company offers support to reintegrate mothers back into the workforce, **only 40.1% – a 28.8% drop –** said that they offer similar support to workers returning after caring for adult dependents.

But these programs can extend beyond women who are returning to work after childcare responsibilities. They can benefit other groups of professionals who have taken career breaks for family duties: not only men who've taken childcare breaks, but also any adult workers who took career breaks to care for adult dependents. Returnships can also be expanded to benefit workers who took career breaks for reasons other than caregiving, for instance people who had career breaks because of illness, people who took time off from their careers to pursue a passion for travel or volunteering, "trailing spouses" who moved abroad for their partner's career and want to pursue a career as they return to their home country, or people who were incarcerated. These groups include relatively untapped sources of talent that can help companies to attract and retain skilled workers as this becomes increasingly difficult in the coming decades.

By broadening a notion of returnships to a variety of skilled groups of workers, companies can ensure that imagination is not limited and that in a time where the search for talent is ever harder, companies think creatively about how to recruit talented workers.

Many executives say that they offer programs to help integrate professionals who have taken career breaks back into the workforce. But the target groups of these programs differ.

Executives responded to a question asking if their company currently offers programs to help integrate three different groups who have taken career breaks back into the workforce: 1. mothers returning after childcare, 2. fathers returning after childcare, and 3. adults returning after care for adult dependents. The question did not refer specifically to returnships, but instead to any kind of program that might offer assistance to these groups as they return to the office.

While 68.9% of executives said that their company offered programs to help integrate mothers back into the workforce, the percentage dropped 12.3 points to 56.6% for fathers. And only 40.1% of executives said that they had programs for workers returning after taking time off for caring for adults.

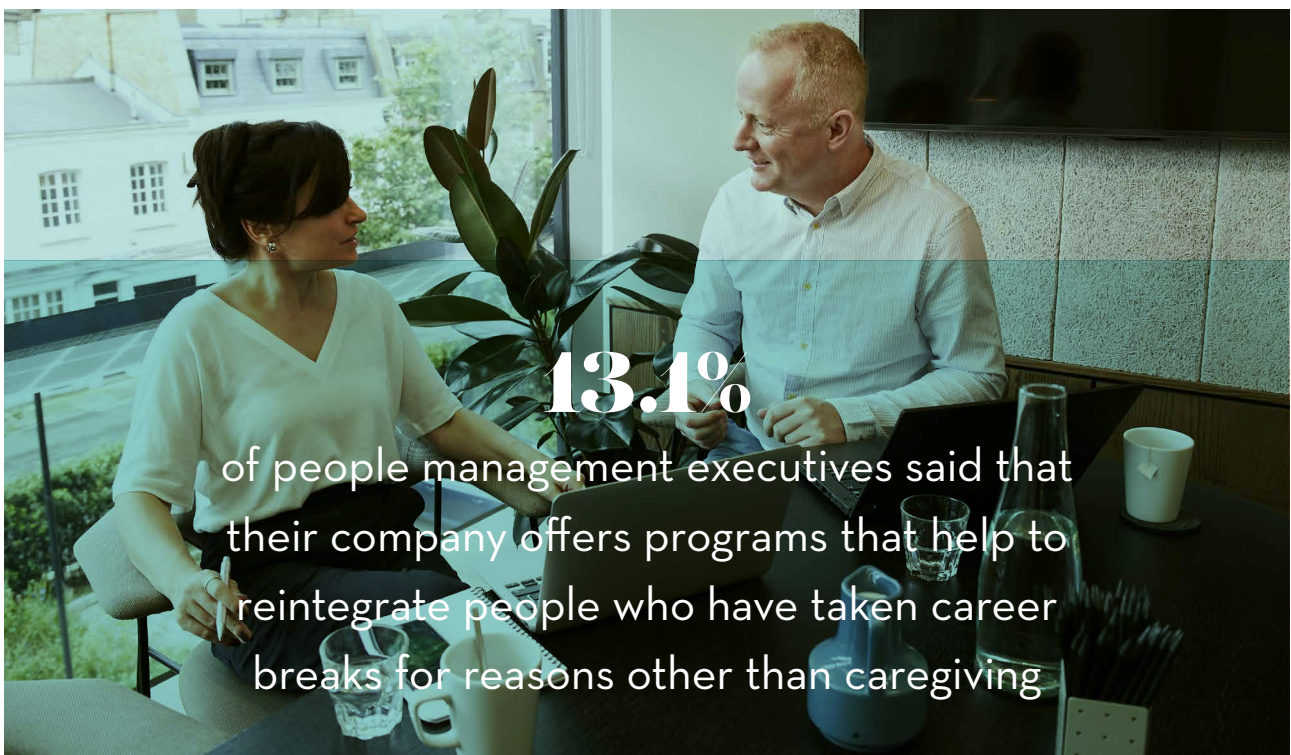
These numbers are striking given the general rarity of returnship programs. For example, the non-profit organization Path Forward, which since 2016 has worked

“At Path Forward, we’ve worked with 100 different employers and graduated more than 600 returners from returnships and other return to work programs. On average, 80% of those returners are retained into full-time employment at those companies and many more go on to secure jobs elsewhere. We believe this shows that both employers and returners benefit from these programs. Employers find talent they keep long-term — we have program alumni who have celebrated 5 and 6-year anniversaries! And returners gain confidence, skills and get a system of support that serves them over the long-term of their career. We’ve celebrated alongside many who’ve been promoted and gone on to new positions as their careers have advanced.”

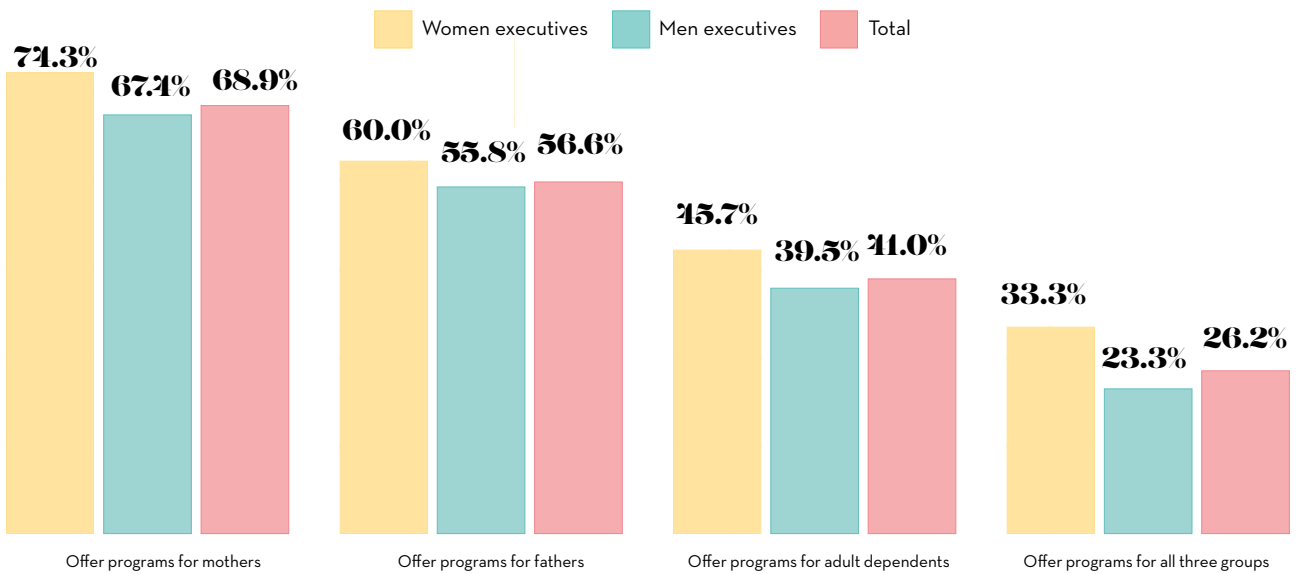
– **Tami Forman**, Chief Executive Officer of Path Forward

with over 100 companies to help execute returnships, estimates that there are around 150-200 total companies in the U.S. that have offered returnship programs (including their clients and around 60 additional companies that Path Forward has documented as having offered returnship programs).¹⁷ The fact that almost three-fourths of the executives who responded to the survey said that they offered programs to help integrate women who have taken childcare breaks back into the workforce

suggests that companies may indeed be implementing some policies that support mothers’ workforce re-entry, but it is an open question as to how extensive these programs are and which kind(s) of support they offer, whether financial, social, skill development, or other. By incorporating these different kinds of support in one program, returnships offer a way to support women and other groups more systematically and extensively in returning back to work.



Percent of women and men executives who said their company offers returnships for different groups



In the survey, executives could also mention other groups that they offered workforce re-entry programs for beyond these three groups of caregivers. However, only 13.1% mentioned another group. These included professionals returning from extended sick leave, military duty, or sabbatical.

These findings also suggest that the prevalence – and the willingness to adopt – returnships that target different kinds of groups may vary. Programs that are specifically targeted at helping workers who take career breaks to care for adult dependents return to the workforce are still rare, compared to programs oriented toward parents, perhaps because this issue is less on executives’ radars. And there are many other groups of skilled workers executives could tap as a source of talent through returnships.

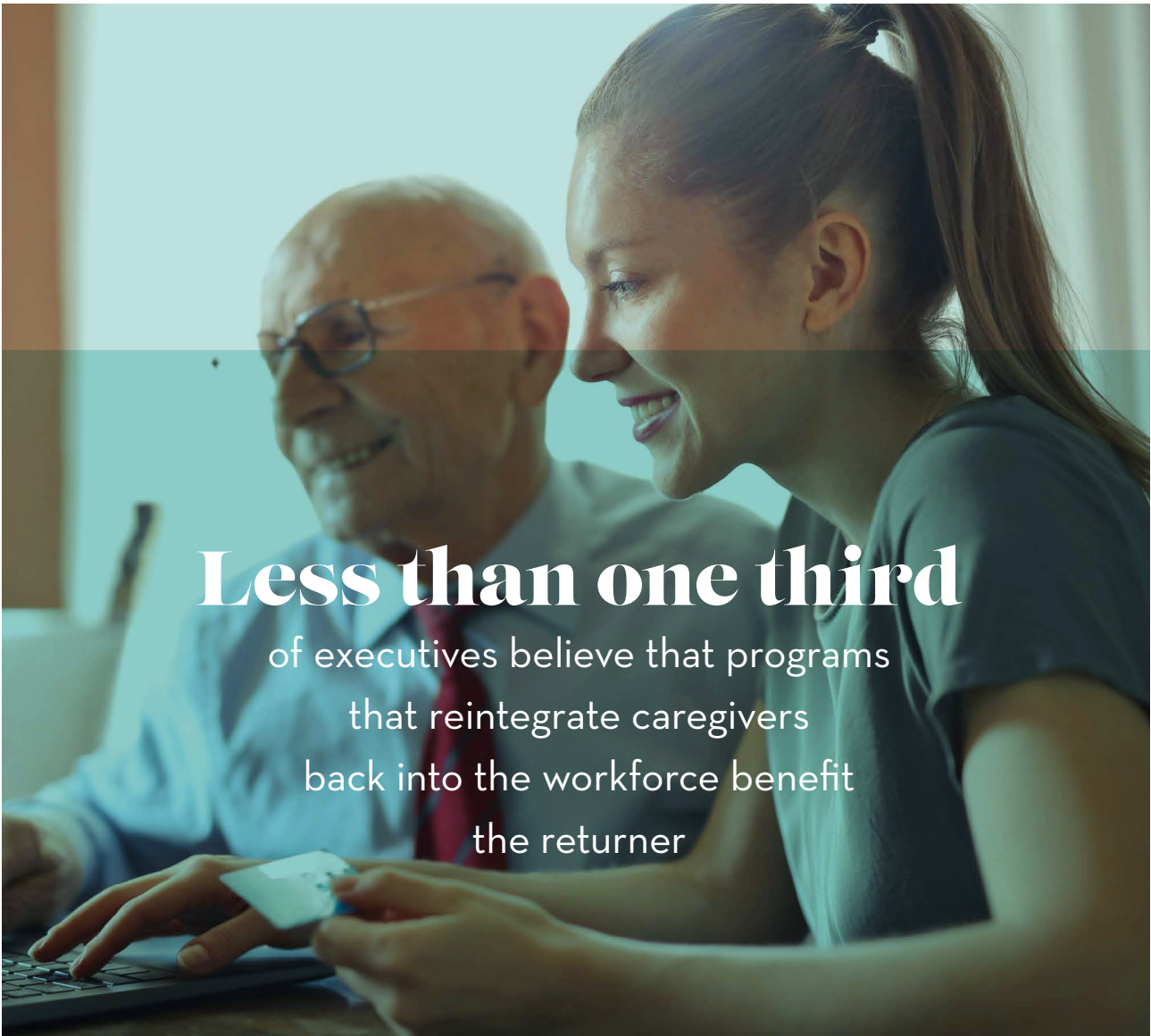
The women executives among the survey respondents were more likely to offer programs for all three target groups, by 10 percentage points (33.3% of women executives vs. 23.3% men executives). This suggests that women executives take a broader perspective on the groups that can benefit from returnships – and that the world may need a stronger call to action for men executives to broaden a notion of what returnships can mean.

Returnships are seen as mostly benefitting society – even more so than the individual returner or the company that hires them.

Executives rated how much programs that help adults to re-enter the workforce after caregiving 1) improve career prospects for returners, 2) benefit

“Returnships are not only a great way for organizations to recruit from a high-caliber, untapped talent pool, but they really have a sustainable impact on the workforce and society as a whole.”

– **Dr. Patricia Widmer**, Programme Director Open Enrolment and Diversity, University of St. Gallen



Less than one third

of executives believe that programs that reintegrate caregivers back into the workforce benefit the returner

the organization who has the program, and 3) have a positive societal impact.

While 41.0% of executives said that returnships have a great deal of positive societal impact, only 36.9% said that returnships have a great deal of benefits for the organization, and only 29.5% said that returnships benefit the actual returner. Unpacking some myths about returnships – that they promote societal good, but don't end up benefitting the job seeker or the company that hosts the program – might be needed to encourage their adoption.

In a time of unprecedented unemployment, programs like returnships offer structured ways for employees to return to work with the confidence that they will

be supported and have the skills necessary to succeed in securing long-term work. To fully embrace these programs, we need a global mindset shift to begin viewing returnships as programs that benefit core company objectives and do make a positive impact in the long-term careers of returners, as well as having positive effects on society.

As returnships become a more regular practice, it's also important to consider what groups of workers these programs can target in order to bring a variety of talented workers back to work. Returnships could provide a source of creativity in winning the war for talent, as executives draw on highly skilled workers who have taken non-traditional career paths.



Key Takeaways

1

Programs that help professionals reintegrate into the workforce mainly focus on bringing parents, especially mothers, back into the office.

2

Women executives have a broader notion about which groups could be recruited as talent, being more likely to offer programs to help all three groups of caregivers – mothers, fathers, and caregivers for adult dependents – get back to work.

3

Executives see the benefits of returnship programs as focused on society, and underweight benefits for professionals seeking to re-enter work and the company who hosts the program

Making People the Focus of the Future of Work

The pandemic has made the human challenges that lie ahead in the world of work even more urgent to tackle. With the impetus to reflect on and plan for these challenges comes a powerful opportunity to reshape the world of work to make it more human-oriented, resilient, and inclusive in the decades ahead. As the world's leaders think about strategies for creating a positive new normal, people management executives can play a key role in creating a better world of work for companies and their most precious resource – their people.

The results from the *Chief People Officer of the Future* study shed light on three key challenges to making organizations more human-centered in the future of work.

First, how is the role of the Chief People Officer shifting to meet the rapidly changing demands in the world of work? The study showed that a balance between understanding tech and data and managing critical people challenges, including leading through change and nurturing culture and values, is the image of an ideal future Chief People Officer in human resource executives' minds. But short-term needs to adapt to changing tech may cause Chief People Officers to focus on hard skills and overlook the need for soft skills that may be vital over the longer term, such as creativity. To develop the CPO role further, organizations should explicitly consider the extent to which a focus on tech and a focus on people should be fostered in the top executive role or distributed among various executive roles in the organization.

Ensuring that both technical and socioemotional skill sets are valued as part of the future of an organization and represented in executive roles is essential to successfully navigating challenges in the future of work.

In addition, remembering the people management issues that technology can't solve, and where human skills are most needed, is key to appropriately harnessing the power of tech and data in the future of people management and spotting areas where a human touch remains essential.

Second, given an increasing focus on social and emotional competencies in people management leadership, what concrete actions can people management executives better support employee well-being in a stressful and uncertain world of work?

As the CPO role changes to focus more on maintaining culture and supporting employees, executives need an understanding of what practices and policies can help them to do so. In particular, managing employee emotions is a critical competency. The study showed that even though executives recognize the important influence of emotions on factors such as productivity at work, many companies don't yet have an established process for measuring employee emotions. And less than a third systematically record how employee emotions influence important outcomes at work.

Getting such processes established is key to understanding a company's emotional state and how it could be improved. When it comes to improving employee emotions at work, there are also some strategies that appear widely underused. For example, specifically training employees to better manage emotions is rare as a strategy for helping to promote employee well-being at work – the responsibility for managing emotions seems to be mostly placed on managers and leaders.

As evidence mounts that employees can benefit from programs that train better emotional intelligence and other core emotional skills, companies should rethink



the opportunities they could offer to employees, as well as their managers and leaders, to help them take their emotional well-being into their own hands.

Third, how can people management leaders create a company culture that fosters greater diversity and inclusion as the threat of widening gender gaps looms?

Another key human-centric challenge for the CPO role to tackle is that of making sure that their organization includes people from a variety of backgrounds – especially as women are pushed out of the workforce in the light of COVID. The study pinpointed returnships as a promising solution for bringing under-represented groups back into the workforce – such as the millions of women across the globe who are no longer working because of the pandemic. But it also showed that the imagination about returnships may sometimes be limited, mostly focusing on parents as a demographic group, when a much broader vision of returnship programs and their target groups is possible.

Returnships could present a creative solution to the intensifying war for talent, creating opportunities to recruit from a variety of highly talented professionals who have taken career breaks for any reason, not just parenthood. Expanding these programs could benefit not only the individuals from these groups who seek permanent employment, but also the company who hires them and society as a whole.

When we imagine a human-centered company in the future of work, we think of a company that is described with qualities like empathetic, caring, inclusive, diverse, flexible, adaptable, and evidence-based. An important first step to get to this human-centered future world of work is to proactively reimagine and redesign the function of human resources so that it enables companies to have these qualities. Leaders in people management can pave the way forward to a future that remains people-centric and thoughtfully uses technology and data as the world of work is dramatically reshaped.

