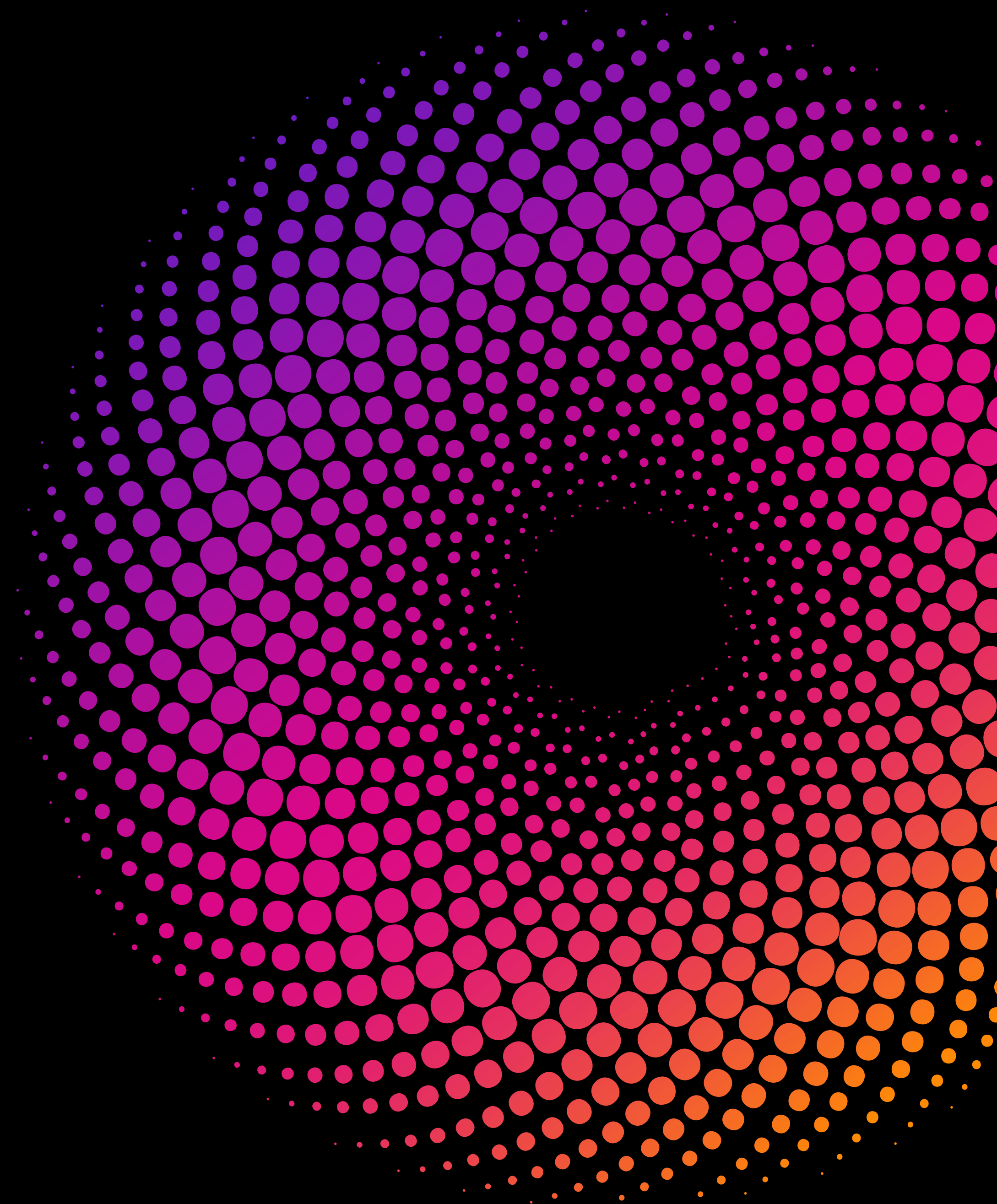




Power & partnership:

How top talent leaders win

CHROs share their top strategies





Letter from our CHRO

Colleagues,

Expectations for HR leadership have changed. Influence isn't optional. Strategy isn't someone else's job. The people you work with and how you leverage those relationships have shifted, too.

Our new report, "Power & partnership: How top talent leaders win," maps out from in-depth, one-on-one conversations how leading CHROs are building both power and partnership in their organizations.

Here are the key insights we'll be exploring in this report:

Build influence inside the business

Shift the perception from cost center to strategic driver. Understand what matters to your stakeholders. Use data to create leverage.

Collaborate with intention

Know when to align, when to challenge, and when to lead. Drive decisions, not just consensus.

Leverage the right partnerships

Use external expertise to extend your reach. Own your tech stack. Outsource with purpose.

We've also introduced the **CHRO influence index self-assessment**, a new tool to help you measure and strengthen your power in this evolving landscape.

Looking forward to your thoughts and seeing how you apply these insights.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kirsten Mayer". The script is fluid and cursive.

Kirsten Mayer, CHRO, Cielo

HR leaders at the crossroads of change

We asked top HR leaders how they’re navigating change — from AI and economic pressure to new talent models. Their perspectives power this report.

Blake Lowry

Global Head of Talent, Amgen

Cecilia McKenney

CHRO, Quest Diagnostics

Cathy Lamers

CHRO, Red Wing Shoes

Christian Wilfling

Senior Vice President, Human Resources, ASML

Jayne Stutt

Chief People Officer, Priory

Kristin Ruzicka

EVP, CHRO & Sustainability, Oil & Gas Company

Larry Kleinman

EVP and CHRO, Highmark Health

Rohit Joshi

VP, Global Head of Talent Acquisition, Sanofi

Tom Olenchock

Former Director of Talent, Financial Services Company

The CHRO's era of power

There is an important power shift in the C-suites of the corporate world.

Leadership is increasingly focused on the essential importance of human capital in driving resilience, innovation and financial success. This is a recognition that the only effective way to plan for the future of the company is with the CHRO at the table.

This is a significant transformation.

The CHRO role is evolving beyond expertise in human resources and people management. We're seeing a shift from Chief Human Resources Officer to Chief Advisor on the Future of Work. With that evolution comes broader accountabilities and new, steeper challenges.

To understand how CHROs are leading in a rapidly evolving environment, we spoke with HR executives across industries, from healthcare to manufacturing, about the shifts reshaping their roles.

We explored how they're navigating economic pressure, advancing technology (including AI), leveraging partnership models, and applying future talent strategies.

This report examines the strategies, trade-offs, and decision-making frameworks of high-impact CHROs. While there's alignment on strategic intent, execution varies by leadership style, industry and workforce structure.



The CHRO as a business leader

Organizational dynamics enable or undermine impact.

These CHROs understand the nuances of their companies – knowing when to align, when to challenge, and when to take ownership. Some operate in environments where HR's strategic value is already recognized. Others must reposition HR from cost center to competitive advantage.

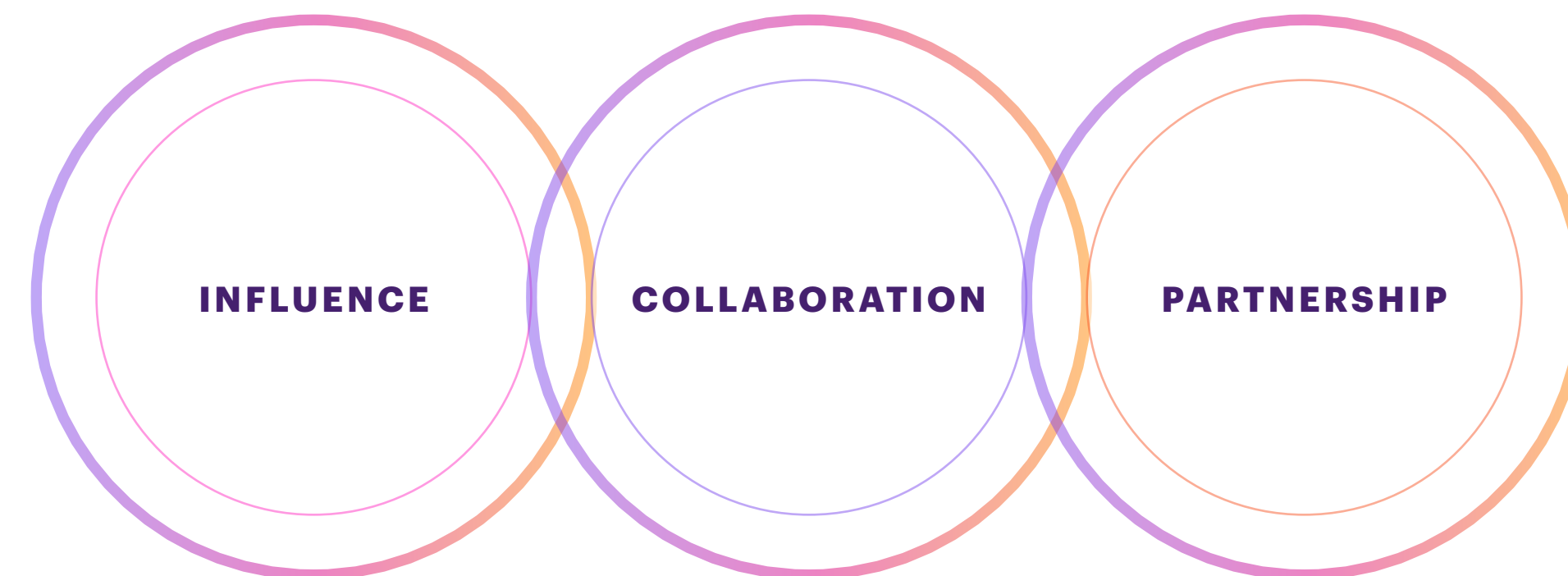
Collaboration and external partnerships must be managed with intention. When to push forward and when to build consensus are critical decisions.

External partnerships are enormously powerful. They extend HR's impact and contribution by providing required expertise on an as-needed basis, scaling effortlessly. They work best when robust checks and balances are baked in and there is a free flow of information.

Collaboration requires respect, communication and commitment from both sides.

The power levers

To be effective in forming and driving business strategy, these CHROs point to three power levers that define success:



The CHRO's role has never been more powerful – or more complex.

There are some who are more comfortable in a traditional reactive role and, once strategy has been set, see tactics as their sole domain. They will be left behind, replaced by the Chief Transformation Officer.

There are others, such as the respondents to this research, who are energized and eagerly embrace the new responsibilities, understanding and appreciating their unique strategic contribution. When they proceed with influence, collaboration and partnerships, they will define their company's future.

This report is for the CHROs of the future, driving business outcomes.

Building influence inside the business

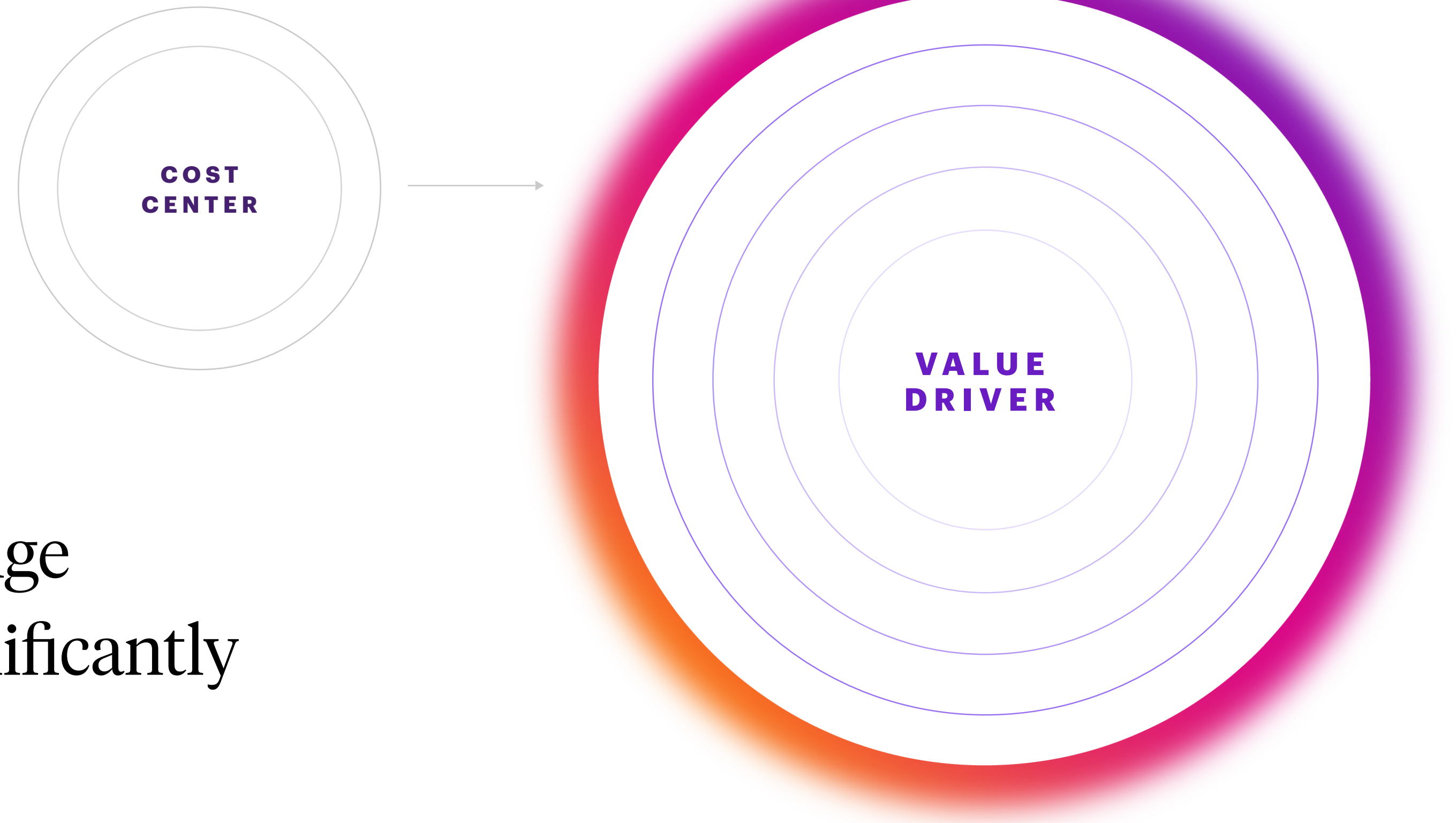
From cost to value

The CHRO power grid needs a solid foundation, and that begins with **repositioning HR from cost center to value driver**.

Larry Kleinman, EVP and CHRO of Highmark Health, stepped into an HR function that was considered “nonexistent and broken.” His challenge wasn’t just launching new initiatives; it was changing the perception of HR’s role altogether.

“Understanding what must change internally empowers HR to significantly boost business performance.”

- Larry Kleinman | EVP and CHRO, Highmark Health



Cathy Lamers, CHRO at Red Wing Shoes, is a great example of those who work in environments where leadership already recognizes HR's strategic importance. This allows these CHROs to push workforce innovation without first vying for credibility.

When a CHRO is a new invite to the strategy party, it's essential that they become a student of executive alignment.

It's not just proximity. It's about understanding the needs and priorities of each stakeholder and working with them to set the direction of the entire business. CHROs who align closely with CFOs secure more control over workforce investments. Others embed deeply with COOs to integrate talent strategy into business operations.

“I start with the CEO to ensure alignment, bringing data and best practices.”

- **Cathy Lamers** | CHRO, Red Wing Shoes

From data to traction

A CHRO's strategy needs to be based in hard data so they guide the business on the most productive paths. Two kinds of data are required.



Non-HR data

The first is to come prepared and prepped on the non-HR data that drives the business. This includes business constraints, economic shifts, competition, regulatory changes, geopolitical events, evolving workforce expectations, and rapid technological advancements. This situational fluency is essential.



Strong business cases

The second is information to build detailed business cases, which speak much louder than HR rationales. For instance, Blake Lowry, Global Head of Talent at Amgen, connects workforce decisions with revenue, efficiency and market positioning. This enables him to understand what the business needs and how HR can deliver.

“You need a perspective beyond the people space. You must understand the commercial and financial landscape, as well as systems, processes and technology.”

- Jayne Stutt | Chief People Officer, Priory

“The future CEO isn’t standing on a mountaintop seeing everything ahead clearly. They’re dropped in a jungle, inspiring people to follow through uncertainty.”

- Blake Lowry | Global Head of Talent, Amgen



Influence inside the business demands executive alignment, strategic use of data, and deep commercial awareness. CHROs who own these skills drive decisions, steer investments, and position HR as central to business success.

When to align, when to challenge, when to own it

Collaboration, credibility and consensus

Collaboration, when used cleverly and deliberately, builds credibility, because each stakeholder's needs and priorities are part of the discussion. With that representation, the path to consensus is clear. Everyone becomes invested in success.

With all onboard, successful collaboration lets strategy unfold relatively unencumbered, with speed and purpose. CHROs have to know when to push forward, and when too many voices can stall progress. They must work proactively to bring leadership to a decision.

Cecilia McKenney, SVP and CHRO at Quest Diagnostics, has seen some initiatives take time to gain traction when management isn't fully invested or doesn't see their strategic value.

“We realized tuition reimbursement programs were unintentionally exclusionary. It challenged our assumptions, and we had to rethink our approach.”

- Cecilia McKenney | SVP and CHRO, Quest Diagnostics

Decision-making without delay

There's a Latin phrase, tempus fugit – “time flies.” A primary reason for delayed decisions is lack of collaboration.

Stakeholders need to have their say and understand that their priorities are included and addressed, or know the reason why not. Collaboration creates participation, contribution and consensus.

Rohit Joshi, Global Head of Talent Acquisition at Sanofi, applies a “one-way door vs. two-way door” framework: If a decision is easily reversible, there's no reason to delay action. It's a mindset shift that HR leaders increasingly adopt to prevent collaboration from turning into indecision.

“We didn't have a global talent strategy, so we created one. Now, executing on it is our clear mission. But I always check in with key internal stakeholders – C-suite and line of business leaders, especially – to make sure they're aligned with the vision.”

- Rohit Joshi | VP, Global Head of Talent Acquisition, Sanofi

Data-driven persuasion

Data is a powerful tool for influence.

Persuasive CHROs frame contributions, input and decisions with hard data that correlates to the company’s business goals. Jayne Stutt, Chief People Officer at Priory, emphasizes being “very data-driven” to move discussions past opinion and toward clear, decisive action.

Effective collaboration requires CHROs to know when to align stakeholders, when to challenge assumptions, and when to own decisions outright. By leveraging collaboration to build credibility, streamline decisions, and support strategies with compelling data, CHROs accelerate organizational progress and reinforce their role as essential drivers of strategic outcomes.

“Numbers matter, but qualitative feedback matters just as much. Real insight comes from combining both.”

- Jayne Stutt | Chief People Officer, Priory

Leveraging partnerships to extend value

Trust and transparency deliver success

Partnerships provide the executorial confidence CHRO leaders need to set strategy to a high bar, extending corporate capabilities and expertise, and increasing profitability. They also provide the leverage needed to scale rapidly without sacrificing quality.

The most effective CHROs extend their influence outward, knowing that the right partnerships expand possibilities and accelerate impact – but the wrong ones can underperform and do reputational harm. HR isn't just operating within the walls of the company anymore.

“Sometimes you need an external voice to lend credibility internally. You can't always be a prophet in your own land.”

- Tom Olenchok | Former Director of Talent, Financial Services Company



Partnerships to increase speed and profitability

Potential partners, from SaaS providers to strategic consultants, must understand and share the company's values, goals and ambitions.

Some CHROs, like Cecilia McKenney at Quest Diagnostics, fully leverage strategic talent acquisition partnerships to manage core hiring elements, like assessing future needs and sourcing specialized skills, and freeing up internal team focus for other strategic work.

Others, like Christian Wilfling, Senior Vice President of HR at ASML, use external partners for their specialized knowledge and expertise. The distinction isn't about whether to partner but how to make the best use of both internal and external resources.

“Too many CHROs are insecure about outsourcing – but external partners often hold the freshest ideas.”

- Cecilia McKenney | CHRO, Quest Diagnostics

“We rely on external experts for specialized knowledge we don't have in-house. That depth of insight is critical, especially when you're working within a specific leadership or organizational model.”

- Christian Wilfling | Senior Vice President, Human Resources, ASML

Owning HR tech decisions

AI and workforce analytics are reshaping talent strategy. HR must retain oversight of its tech stack.

Some CHROs work closely with Chief Information Officers to ensure alignment of the HR tech stack and the enterprise's technology strategy. It's critically important that the CIO/CTO understands HR's mission, complexity and importance to the corporation so they can advocate for the necessary resources. In many corporations, HR doesn't have the internal priority for IT expertise, integrations and hands-on management.

To get the most out of any technology investment, partnership is key, from the selection of the provider to any third-party support that enables the integration and ongoing optimization. With core functionality or custom use cases, value is reliant on the end users' capabilities. CHROs must choose wisely to ensure, whether it's "build or buy," that their teams or their partners have the specific skills required for cutting-edge tech execution.

“Implementing new technology isn’t just about turning it on. It’s a massive exercise in change management.”

- Kristin Ruzicka | EVP, CHRO & Sustainability, Oil & Gas Company

The partner advantage

Companies with ambitious hiring needs, like Sanofi, rely on external partners to scale talent acquisition up and down efficiently. Others, operating in more stable environments, focus on building internal recruitment capability.

Strategic partnerships amplify HR's capabilities, but only when managed deliberately. CHROs must maintain clarity and oversight, ensuring every external relationship strengthens the organization rather than dilutes its influence.

“Strategic talent acquisition providers exist because they bring flexibility, scalability and agility to our talent acquisition function that’s extremely difficult to build internally.”

- Rohit Joshi | VP, Global Head of Talent Acquisition, Sanofi

“Cielo brings valuable insights into what’s happening in the industry. They share best practices not just broadly across HR, but specifically within the niche areas we operate in. That kind of perspective helps us stay sharp and informed.”

- Christian Wilfling | Senior Vice President, Human Resources, ASML

Measuring and strengthening your power

CHROs need to communicate the impact of HR in terms that the C-suite will understand. Some CHROs tie success to business metrics, others to workforce engagement, but the common thread is that influence must be quantifiable.

Key areas to measure your power include:



Driving business performance

Resilience, innovation and financial success are dependent on talent.

Example: Lamers ensures workforce strategy is linked to Red Wing Shoes’ corporate values, tying talent decisions directly to revenue and growth objectives.



Securing workforce stability

The stability of the workforce and the tenure of key talent impact the ability to set and achieve strategy.

Example: At Priory, Stutt tracks colleague turnover, absences and engagement scores, using the combination of these metrics to predict talent stability – an essential factor.



Delivering tech-driven ROI

Automation and AI simplify processes, increasing productivity while decreasing cost. AI implementation should be prioritized based on execution needs.

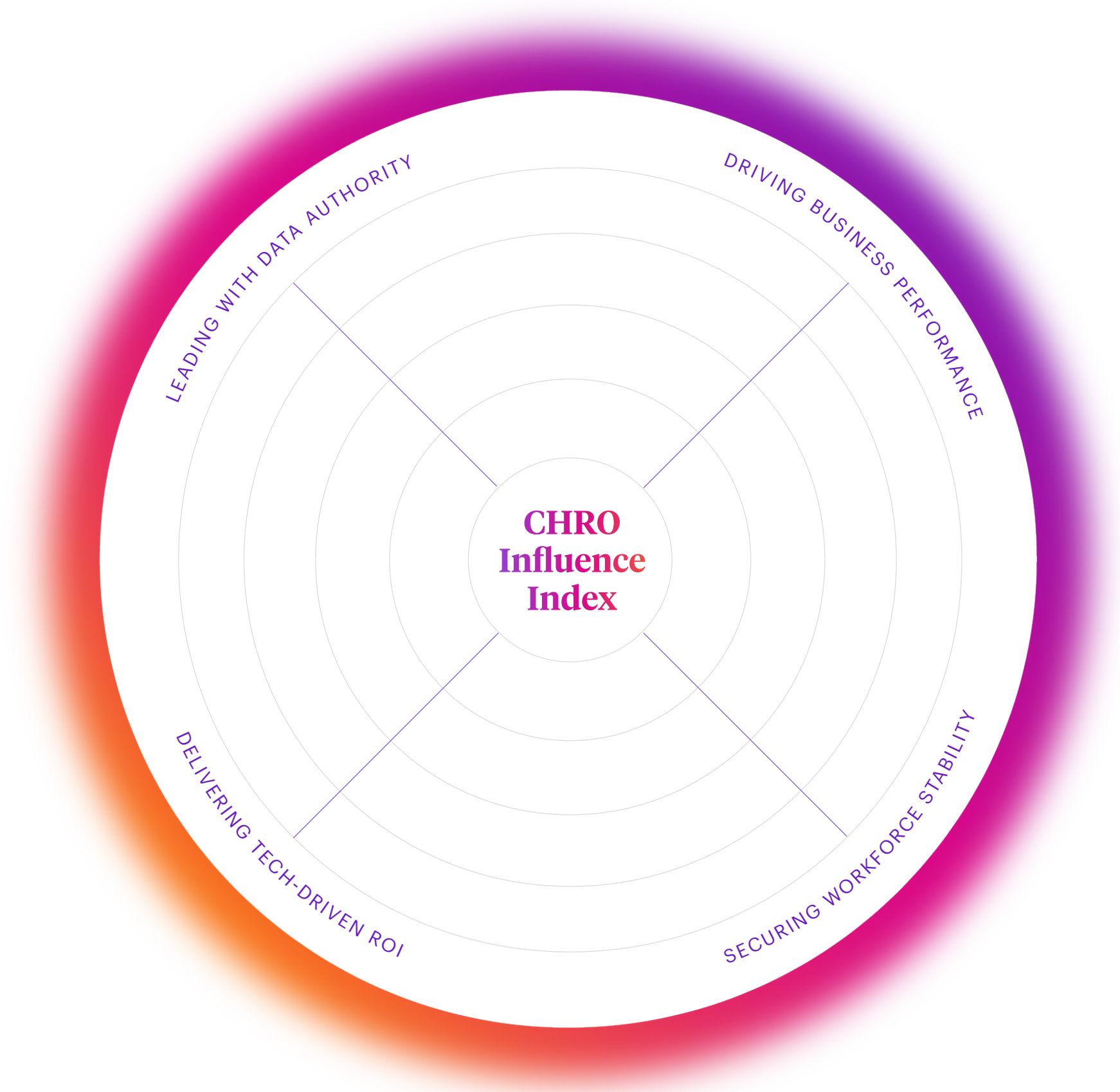
Example: Ruzicka prioritizes utilization and efficiency metrics in HR tech implementation, ensuring investments translate into real value.



Leading with data authority

Data tells a story. Numbers drive influence, whether it’s showing HR’s role in profitability, demonstrating the ROI of upskilling programs, or proving that a well-run HR function lowers operational risk.

Example: Wilfling, at ASML, is focused on investing in analytics to generate insights and connect data in more meaningful ways, moving past basic reporting to enable deeper analysis.



CHRO influence index self-assessment

Instructions: Check all statements that are currently true. More checks = more power in that area.



Driving business performance

- ☐ I help shape overall business strategy, not just talent plans
- ☐ HR strategy is aligned with revenue, margin and growth goals
- ☐ Talent initiatives are designed with input from the CEO/CFO/COO
- ☐ AI or automation is used to reduce cost, increase speed, or improve engagement
- ☐ Workforce decisions are made with clear business outcomes in mind



Securing workforce stability

- ☐ We monitor turnover, absence and engagement as leading indicators
- ☐ I can identify roles or teams at risk of destabilizing strategy
- ☐ We have succession plans for key positions
- ☐ We've reduced regrettable attrition through intentional programs
- ☐ Talent risk is included in enterprise risk conversations



Leading with data authority

- ☐ I use business cases, not just logic, to drive talent decisions
- ☐ Our HR analytics go beyond dashboards to deliver actionable insights
- ☐ I regularly bring workforce data into C-suite or board-level discussions
- ☐ I combine quantitative and qualitative data for better decisions
- ☐ Data helps me influence and explain HR's role in outcomes



Delivering tech-driven ROI

- ☐ I co-lead or own the HR tech strategy, including vendor decisions
- ☐ We evaluate tech for usability, adoption and business impact
- ☐ Our external partners are selected for strategic contribution, not just cost
- ☐ We've modernized core systems to support flexibility and scale
- ☐ HR tech enables the business to act faster, not just more efficiently



Next steps

Count your checks per section

4-5: Strategic strength

2-3: In progress

0-1: Needs focus

Where are you strongest?

Where's your next power move?

To cement influence, CHROs must measure impact using the language and metrics that the broader business understands and values.

“The conversation has to shift from tasks to ‘what value are we providing?’”

- **Tom Olenchok** | Former Director of Talent, Financial Services Company

“We have to be forward-thinking to prepare the business, so we’re not the reason it can’t do what it needs to do.”

- **Jayne Stutt** | Chief People Officer, Priory

By clearly linking HR initiatives to financial outcomes, operational effectiveness, and workforce stability, CHROs build a robust, evidence-backed case for their strategic importance. Influence grows when results are tangible, outcomes measurable, and success stories compelling.

Those who communicate this clearly – and often – win the ongoing support and trust of their executive peers.

The next CHRO power move

The role of the CHRO is rapidly evolving and expanding.

From a strong base in people management, a new space of power is emerging, requiring the CHRO to contribute their expertise and vision to a broader role in strategic planning and execution. Their sphere of influence now includes shaping business direction, influencing the C-suite, determining how companies compete, and guiding the future of work as a whole.

To bring the full extent of their experiences and knowledge to bear, CHROs must acknowledge that:

- **Influence isn't given – it's built.**
- **Collaboration isn't an automatic win – it's a strategic tool.**
- **External partnerships aren't outsourcing HR – they're expanding its reach and capabilities.**

The best CHROs know exactly when to align, when to push back, and when to take full ownership. These are the executives who will remain relevant and see their role and contribution grow exponentially.

CHROs must determine where their approach needs to evolve, and where consistency remains key.

CHROs now hold the keys to their company's future. But power is earned, not given. Influence strategically, collaborate intentionally, and leverage partnerships boldly. **The path forward belongs to those who seize it.**



What do your peers say are the best next steps?

“Drive value, not process. Minimize process to maximize business impact.”

- **Blake Lowry** | Global Head of Talent, Amgen

“Cast your net wide. Fresh ideas come from conversations outside your usual circles.”

- **Cecilia McKenney** | CHRO, Quest Diagnostics

“Keep looking outward. Spot trends inside and outside HR. Anticipate what’s coming next, so you’re never playing catch-up.”

- **Cathy Lamers** | CHRO, Red Wing Shoes

“Be cautious about burning bridges; the relationships you preserve today may be essential tomorrow.”

- **Christian Wilfling** | Senior Vice President, Human Resources, ASML

“People don’t leave companies; they leave leaders. Focus your energy on middle leaders. They’re the ones shaping everyday experiences.”

- **Jayne Stutt** | Chief People Officer, PricewaterhouseCoopers

“You can’t be effective in the boardroom unless you understand what’s happening on the front line. Get out in the field and listen.”

- **Larry Kleinman** | EVP and CHRO, Highmark Health

“Having a Plan A isn’t enough. Anticipate the unexpected, prepare contingencies, and communicate clearly. Because speed always matters.”

- **Kristin Ruzicka** | EVP, CHRO & Sustainability, Oil & Gas Company

“Define your time horizon clearly. Align your vision with leadership expectations. Misalignment here is your biggest risk.”

- **Rohit Joshi** | VP, Global Head of Talent Acquisition, Sanofi

“Critical thinking cuts through noise. Don’t solve surface issues. Dig deep into root problems and demonstrate clear business impact.”

- **Tom Olenchok** | Former Director of Talent, Financial Services Company



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