

HR & TALENT ADVISORY

The Rise of the CHRO in Higher Education

KINCENTRIC

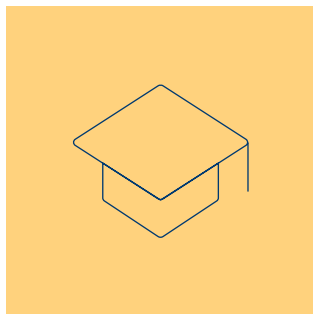
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Higher Education is increasingly realizing the value of the human resources (HR) function. With the need to develop leaders who can navigate during uncertain and complex times, the changing employment expectations of faculty and staff, and relentless cost pressures, HR is now viewed as a critical part of the solution. These changing expectations also come with the recognition that strong HR leadership is needed.

Historically, HR has been folded into the administrative arm of the university management structure, reporting up through the Chief Administration Officer or the Chief Financial Officer, without direct communication to the President or the Board. This has been a long-outdated reporting model based on a historical understanding of the role and expectations of the function. Specifically, the role was simply viewed as the head of Personnel—an administrative function focused on transactions associated with hiring and terminating employees and ensuring compliance.

Today, the expectations have changed and higher ed CHROs are rising to the challenge. They are not only being asked to transform the function, but to also redefine the employment value proposition – the relationship between the employee and employer that reflects culture and performance expectations. University Presidents are inviting CHROs to participate on their Executive Leadership Teams and some are establishing dotted and direct line reporting relationships.¹

Through a series of interviews with Higher Ed CHROs, we found commonality around the things they are doing to show up differently in the organization, validating and demonstrating that they are essential members of the top team.



1 - In baccalaureate, master's and doctoral institutions, 20-22 percent of CHROs report to the president/chancellor; 2020 CUPA Report: The Higher Ed HR Workforce

TAKING A STAND

New CHROs are coming into their roles with a strong stance that is shaping their institution's call to action.

Whether coming from general industry or growing up in higher ed, we are seeing CHROs be more assertive with establishing a vision for how HR contributes to the mission of the institution.

The stronger the stance and link to the university's business operations, the better the buy-in and support for HR's strategic importance.

"Being a person of color has informed my agenda. To best serve my university, I need to truly understand it and its rich history, appreciate the diverse talent contained within, and help further diversity and inclusion."

In our conversations with Higher Ed CHROs, we identified a number of imperatives:

- The increasing focus on Talent Management to build needed capabilities
- The strategic importance of Diversity and Inclusion
- The criticality of disciplined continuous improvement to address business gaps
- The necessity of supporting change management to help the organization remain relevant fiscally sound and transition to a sustainable state

Having a strong point of view, backed with relevant experience and insights, helped these CHROs establish credibility and shift senior leaders' perceptions regarding how HR adds value.

"My role as the head of HR is to understand the strategic talent needs of my university and be adept in solving for these. It's all about knowing what HR levers to pull at the right time."



BECOMING A TRUSTED ADVISOR

The CHROs that we talked with each had personal and unique stories about how they established a “trusted advisor” relationship with their senior leadership team.

While the COVID-19 pandemic provided some CHROs with an opportunity to build credibility and take their long-overdue position at the leadership table, others used different avenues, such as:

- Leveraging deep expertise in executive compensation to have conversations with the president about senior leader performance and capabilities
- Using leadership development as a launching point for assessing and advising on their top team’s effectiveness
- Participating in a strategic initiative or in COVID-19 response planning to advise on workforce planning and change management solutions

“I feel like there’s never been a better time for me and HR. Because of COVID-19, I now talk to the President almost every day. He’s come to understand the value I bring.”

“Nothing thrills and also stresses me more than my monthly meetings with the Board of Directors. They rely on me to answer their questions about the university’s leadership, their performance and effectiveness.”

No matter how their access to the senior leadership team came to be, these CHROs seized the opportunity to provide counsel and built from there. The ability of the CHRO to provide guidance to address current and emerging needs is critical to meet the challenges within higher ed. Today’s best higher ed CHROs use their knowledge and expertise to demonstrate their value as a trusted advisor.

MOVING FROM BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS TO PARTNERSHIPS

Being an effective leader within Higher Ed has long been built on a foundation of relationships. The ability to build and nurture them is the price of admission.

The rising CHROs in our study went a step beyond building relationships – they cultivated strategic partnerships. The most effective business allies that CHROs partner with are the Chief Administration Officer (CAO), Chief Financial Officer (CFO) and Provost.

We heard stories of partnering with CFOs to develop shared objectives for their institutions, having weekly dinners to ensure that they stay aligned on business imperatives and strategic planning.



“It wasn’t always this way, but the Provost and I have built a solid relationship based on mutual respect. He now comes to me for advice on how to handle faculty talent and employee relations matters.”

These rising CHROs also understand the importance of cultivating a trusting relationship with the Provost. Collaboration often involves developing a united front to communicate the rationale for change and then partnering to manage the transition.

Establishing common objectives and successfully working together across the senior leadership team is the hallmark of innovative CHROs that are accelerating change at their institutions.

LEADING VERSUS INFLUENCING

In our 2016 study, “Influencing Others” was amongst the top core competencies for CHROs. Today, we see a shift away from influencing to a focus on “Leading Teams” and “Empowering Others.” This shift signifies an evolution in expectations and says something about the CHRO’s tacit authority. “To Lead” assumes followers, and “To Empower” implies having power to give.

Today’s rising CHRO is expected to demonstrate leadership and to drive change, and not just operate on the fringes.

The rising CHROs that we talked to emphasize the importance of listening to various points of view and gathering data to inform their opinions. But they also underscored the need to make decisions and not let the lack of consensus impede progress. As one CHRO shared, “I focus on the outcomes that I am trying to achieve and emphasize this in my communications.” CHROs stated that when they make a decision that is unpopular, they make sure that there is common understanding around the rationale and what they are ultimately trying to achieve.

It is no longer enough to be able to influence others. Rising CHROs must be able to lead broadly across the institution, drive accountability and achieve outcomes.

“An understanding of how to drive and manage change is ultimately the key skill set needed. Other capabilities are prioritized through this lens and based on what’s most pressing for my university.”

DRIVING CHANGE

The ability to manage change is critical for higher ed institutions. There is unavoidable imperative to transform.

Rising CHROs recognize the need to rapidly increase their organizations’ change management capabilities.

“In my first couple of days here, I was pulled to the side by my university President and told point blank that HR needed to be FAR LESS of a policing body and MUCH MORE of a collaborative partner.”

By demonstrating strong change management competencies in action for both large- and small-scale changes, and by creating methodologies and tools to help build faculty and staff capabilities, HR can have an indelible impact on an organization’s ability to embrace and drive change.

TRANSFORMING HR

CHROs are increasingly being asked by university leadership to transform the way in which HR operates.

Rising CHROs are focused on elevating the role of HR to support strategic talent management, while rigorously introducing operational efficiencies. Getting the right people doing the right work is essential to freeing up capacity. And focusing on building capabilities around change, analytics and organizational effectiveness is critical to serving the business.

“The HR function was so siloed, and my first order of business was to upskill the team and give them the tools they needed to collaborate and work together.”

“This [employee experience] is my #1 priority with regards to my strategic plan. How do I build HR platforms that deliver better services and experiences to the faculty and staff?”

Some have begun to view the HR Operating Model through the lens of their customer to improve the faculty and staff experience, while others who are leading multi-campus HR functions (often within university systems) are focused on partnering with the colleges to create an integrated service model.

With this long-awaited senior leadership support and elevated expectations, CHROs are making much-needed improvements in how HR delivers strategic and operational services to their higher education institutions.

CONCLUSION

Higher Ed HR is undergoing a renaissance, led by HR leaders with elevated business acumen and who understand the value that they can bring to the organization. By leading with a vision and a strong point of view, serving as a trusted advisor to the senior team, operating as a partner and leader, and leading the charge on managing change for the organization and its HR function, rising CHROs will be able to successfully meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.

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Special Thanks

We would like to thank Mike Rask (mike.rask@aon.com), Higher Education Practice Leader, Aon; and John Whelen, VP of Human Resources, Indiana University, for their partnership throughout the study.

Contact us to talk about how we can help.

About Kincentric

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