

THE ROAD TO CHRO/CPO

Career Stories of People Leaders
2025 Recap



 SHL MEDICAL




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 Ahold
Delhaize




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ASM 

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business job in disguise,
build the muscles that sit at the
intersection of people,
operations and digital, and
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*The road to CHRO is demanding,
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What leaders told us

This year we sat down with five CHROs and people leaders from very different businesses: Breitling, Ahold Delhaize, ASM, COFRA and SHL Medical. We asked them one simple question:

'What does it really take to sit in the CHRO seat today and have impact that matters?'

Behind the role title, one thing was crystal clear: the modern CHRO is a business leader first, an HR leader second. You are there to shape strategy, value creation and future leadership, with people, culture and organisation as your primary levers. As one of them put it: *"If HR is seen as separate from the business, we are already on the back foot. The real work starts when the people strategy is the business strategy."*

What great CHROs actually do

1. Start with value, not with HR

The best CHROs think in P&L, customers and competitive dynamics, then in talent and organisation. One leader summed up their starting point as: "Know the P&L, know where value is created, then point your people agenda at those hotspots." That mindset drives tough choices. What do we build in house, what do we automate, what do we stop doing, so that scarce HR capacity is always pointed at the work that moves the needle.

2. Wear three hats at once

Several interviewees described the future CHRO as sitting at the overlap of three roles:

- **Chief People Officer:** design, development, performance, leadership.
- **Chief Operating Officer:** where do we put our best people and leadership time.
- **Chief Digital Officer:** how do we use data, technology and AI to run this system at scale.

3. Shape culture with a spine, not slogans

Culture work shows up in hard decisions, not in posters. Do we keep the brilliant but toxic leader? What behaviours are genuinely non negotiable? How do we hold the ExCo to the same standards as everyone else?

One CHRO chose their current company because it was ready to "look at everything with a fresh pair of eyes" and do what is right for the business, not copy competitors. That kind of courage came up again and again.

The first 90 days: context over hero moves

None of the leaders arrived with a glossy “day one strategy”. In fact, they warned against it. A typical approach looked like this:

- Speak with the CEO, ExCo, business leaders, Works Council, key talent, even external partners.
- Ask what success would look like in three years, and what is getting in the way now.
- Be explicit that your first job is to understand the business, not to roll out a pre-packaged HR agenda.

One CHRO told colleagues early on:

“If I give you a full strategy in week two, you should worry. It means I have not yet understood your reality.”

Only after that discovery phase did they lock a small number of game-changing moves and start to reshape their core HR team around values, ethics and resilience, not just expertise.

Designing your road to the seat

There was no single career pattern, but two clear routes showed up repeatedly.

1. The classic route: HR operations, then business partnering, then leading HR at business or regional level, and eventually the Group or Global role, always close to where money is made and strategy is set.
2. The zig zag route: Rotating between CoEs and BP roles, moving from long-term design work to in-the-business execution, across different markets and business models, until you are ready for the full enterprise remit.

What mattered more than the sequence was the intent behind it.

The strongest signals from their advice:

- Say your ambition out loud. Sponsors cannot help if they do not know you want the CHRO seat.
- Touch every pillar of HR at some point, but develop a few deep spikes.
- Choose high growth, high change environments where HR co leads the business, not just runs processes.
- Volunteer for the messy, political, high risk problems. That is where your reputation is made.

The Human Reality behind the title

Every interview also surfaced the cost and the very human side of the role. Several leaders spoke about the loneliness of being the person who ultimately calls the shot on people, culture and sometimes jobs, and then lives with the consequences. A personal board of advisors, a small inner circle and a trusted team were mentioned as essential protective factors.

They also talked about the “shadow” of the role. Once you sit on the ExCo, your words and moods are amplified. An offhand remark can be heard as a decision, silence can be read as disapproval. That demands more conscious communication, without becoming fake.

Finally, they were unambiguous on one point: values fit is non-negotiable. “You have to stay very close to who you are and stand up for what you believe in. When you find the right place, you will know you can fly.”

If there is a single message for aspiring CHROs from these conversations it is this. Treat the role as a business job in disguise, build the muscles that sit at the intersection of people, operations and digital, and design your career with intent. The road to CHRO is demanding, but for those who choose it with open eyes, it is one of the most impactful seats in the enterprise.

NATALIA WALLENBERG

CHRO AT AHOLD DELHAIZE



Natalia Wallenberg is the Chief Human Resources Officer at Ahold Delhaize, where she leads the company's global people strategy, covering leadership, culture, DE&I, talent development, and associate engagement. She stepped into the role in January 2022.

Natalia brings broad international HR experience across sectors including agriculture, financial services, and retail. Before joining Ahold Delhaize, she spent nearly nine years at Syngenta Group in senior HR leadership roles. Earlier in her career, she held HR positions at Renaissance Capital and IKEA.

Having lived and worked in the U.S., Switzerland, Russia, Belarus, the UAE, and now the Netherlands, Natalia brings a truly global perspective to her work. She also serves as a Board Member of the American Chamber of Commerce in Amsterdam.

Who inspired your journey to CHRO?

There wasn't just one person; there were many. Early in my career, Mark Sheridan taught me that HR isn't just about evaluating culture; it's about staying and making it better. Donna Burns became a mentor and lifelong friend, always offering honest feedback that helped me grow. And Laura Roberts challenged me to own my ambition. She asked, 'Do you want to be a CHRO?' That moment helped me realise that if I did, I needed to say it out loud. There have been numerous business leaders and colleagues who supported me, challenged me, gave me lots of trust and feedback and believed in me. And of course, my family, especially my husband and now my teenagers, have been very supportive and encouraging.

How do you know you are making an impact?

My purpose has always been to help people grow—using my head, heart, and guts. I believe HR should never be separate from business strategy. When a people strategy is fully integrated into the business strategy, that's when we make real impact. It's about shaping a culture that is conducive to the strategy and building leadership behaviours that align with purpose - Do we tolerate toxic behaviour because someone is successful or do we not? And it's about creating environments where people can thrive, which means not only getting to know your talent but also building mechanisms to sponsor and advocate for them. While some of this is hard to measure, I believe the ultimate metric is business success.

What's your no-nonsense advice for future CHROs?

First, get to know the business. HR expertise is a given, but what sets great CHROs apart is their ability to connect people strategy to business outcomes. Second, be vocal about your ambition. Let others know so they can support and coach you. Third, never stop learning. Whether you've been in the same company for years or are just starting out, keep your thinking fresh and your perspective broad. Fourth, surround yourself with great people who share the same purpose and values but think differently to you. You will learn from one another and build something greater thanks to their diverse perspectives. Fifth, be sure to work on your succession plan from the start. Make sure to invest in, develop and prepare talents in your team. And finally, contract with your loved ones upfront, these roles are demanding, and having the right support at home is essential.

How did you prepare for your first CHRO role?

I was intentional. I spoke with CHROs, CEOs, ExCo members and other trusted colleagues at all levels—inside and outside the company. I asked for advice, listened to expectations, and hired a coach to help me navigate the transition. Also, when in the first weeks people asked what my strategy would be, I told them “If I gave you a definitive answer right now, you might think I’m either overly confident or haven’t grasped the complexity yet.” I would then explain that I was first going to take time to understand the business before defining my strategy. That listening phase was crucial as it helped me build trust and shape a vision that was right for the company, not just a copy-paste from my past.

What surprised you about the role?

It wasn’t a surprise, but it was a shift: there’s no one above you in HR anymore. You’re it. That’s why maintaining a peer network of CHROs is so important. Also, as a CHRO on the ExCo you wear two hats – the hat of a business leader first and the hat of HR second. You need to contribute to strategy, M&A, sustainability, and more. It’s not enough to just represent HR. You have to show up as a full member of the executive team.

What’s your wish for the next generation of leaders?

Stay curious. The world is changing fast, and the ability to learn, adapt, and experiment is more important than ever. Build real human connections—no technology can replace that. And don’t shy away from challenges. Raise your hand for the tough projects. That’s where the growth happens. Most importantly, know your purpose. When your work aligns with what drives you, that’s where you’ll find fulfilment.

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EDYTA JAKUBEK

CHRO AT ASM



Edyta Jakubek is the Chief People Officer at ASM and a key member of its Executive Committee, shaping the people strategy for one of the world's top semiconductor equipment suppliers. With 25+ years in HR leadership experience across global companies, she's known for her sharp strategic acumen and ability to drive transformation.

Before ASM, Edyta held senior roles at Royal Philips, AkzoNobel, and Heineken. Growing up in Poland, she learned early how to anticipate and adapt, skills that have shaped her leadership style.

She holds a master's in law and sociology from the University of Gdansk and completed the Executive HR Program at Michigan University. Passionate about HR's business impact, she believes future CHROs must combine business acumen, integrity, with a constant drive to evolve.



Did you always know you wanted to lead, or did leadership just find you along the way?

I've never shied away from accountability or a challenge. Growing up in Poland, during the time of Communism and Martial Law, as the oldest of 3 siblings, I had to take on a lot of responsibility for the family at a young age. My life experiences shaped me, instilling in me this superpower of being able to anticipate and lead.

How did you prepare yourself for the role of CHRO?

I was ready to shape the people and organization aspect of a company. Once I made up my mind, I reflected on what the right environment would be for me and set 2 criteria. First, it had to be a high growth environment. I already had a lot of experience in legacy industries and I wanted a new challenge. Second, I wanted to be able to make a real impact. Meaning that whichever CHRO role I stepped into, I would need to feel empowered to make a difference for the business; co-lead the business with my Executive colleagues and not just be a functional executor. Once my criteria were clear, I started to observe the market to see what's possible. And then ASM called. There must have been a bit of magic, because the company had already been on my radar for a while and was one I very much admired. Since my time at Philips I have always been interested in the tech space and enjoyed the honesty and straightforwardness that comes with working with Engineers.

When do you know you are making an impact?

When I see that with the Executive Committee we are shaping the organization, its capabilities and growing the next generation of leaders. At ASM, 3 months into my role as CHRO I was asked to shape the People Transformation Strategy for the next 4 years. This strategy is now our backbone. I also have a trusted partnership with the CEO, which allows me to have an impact in an agile, high quality way. This means that we could design and implement game changing initiatives, such as a culture evolution and transformation and leadership at scale. We have designed and implemented game-changing initiatives, such as a culture evolution, and leadership at scale. This agility and speed of change is crucial in ASM's high-growth environment, where the company has doubled its revenues within 2.5 years and hired 2,500 highly qualified employees over the past 2 years alone.

What's your no-nonsense advice for someone who wants to be in your shoes one day?

Know your company's P&L, identify key value creation drivers, understand the competitive landscape and get under the skin of the business. I am never going to be a software engineer or chemical engineer but I do understand the value creation of ASM. Once you grasp this, you can better align your strategies with business development and customer needs. This will help you determine what to focus on internally, what to outsource, and what to automate, ensuring that your efforts are directed towards areas that truly drive value.

Which skills and capabilities do you feel CHRO's of the future need to have?

- Business acumen; without that you are carried by your functional agenda. You can have a great story on talent management, culture, leadership etc. but if it's not anchored in the business it won't have a lasting impact.
- Understanding that what got you here, won't get you there. Life is not static or linear so you need to constantly ask yourself when you need to reframe from your current mindset and ways of working, and how to strengthen your resilience and endurance to build the ability of self-renewal and resilience.
- Integrity; you need to speak your mind, set the interest and benefit of the enterprise first, walk your talk and be constructive and honest in your feedback. Striving for genuine harmony leads to long-term success.

"I've never shied away from accountability or a challenge. Growing up during Communism in Poland, I had to take on responsibility at a young age, which shaped my ability to anticipate and lead."



JEROEN WELS

CPO AT COFRA



Jeroen Wels joined COFRA Holding as Chief People Officer in September 2023, bringing over two decades of global HR experience and a passion for people and purpose.

He spent 20 years at Unilever in senior roles across the UK, Spain, the Netherlands and globally, including Group Chief Talent Officer and CHRO for the Beauty & Personal Care division.

Known for driving culture and leadership transformation, Jeroen is also the founder of the People@Work Innovation Collective and a former Senior Advisor at BCG.



At COFRA, he has helped shape a more adaptive, inclusive organization—one where people grow, belong, and matter. His mission? Unleash potential and build a future-ready workforce that drives lasting, positive impact.

Has there been someone, at work or in private, who has played a special role in your journey towards CHRO?

There have actually been 3 categories of people who have played a role in my journey. The first category is all the people who showed me the ropes of being a really good HR professional. I have always looked out for who is the best in e.g. Leadership Development, Talent Management, Reorganization and tried to learn from them. The same goes for leadership, which is the second category. Having good leaders, HR and especially non HR, around me allowed me to observe and absorb what good leadership looks and feels like. Who is led by principle and values? Who has a firm point of view but also listens well to the ideas of others? And who maintains the calm and engagement in times of crisis? This allowed me to learn what it means to be a leader in a way that fits me. And the last category are 3 close friends who helped me see how I could break through my self-limiting beliefs, define what impact means to me and see what is possible. A confronting but necessary and rewarding process.

Is there anything that has surprised you about the role? Something you didn't expect?

It's not so much a surprise as a learning, namely that the shadow of your leadership is much larger than you think, both in a positive and a negative way. Your words and behaviour carry more weight and you need to be aware of this. For example, when you make a suggestion it can be taken as a decision or an order, or if you are having a bad day it can be interpreted all sorts of ways. So you need to be mindful of this, without changing who you are, and be much more explicit in your communication.

How did you prepare yourself for the role of CHRO?

I've had a "zig zag" career but I think there are 2 routes you can take towards the CHRO role. One route is through HR Operations, then Business Partnering to understand the business, developing as a leader and then ending up in the seat. This route works well if you have strong strategic acumen and know how to bring in and work with the CoE's. The second route, the zig zag, is where you start in HR Operations, then do Business Partnering, then CoE, then back to Business Partnering, CoE etc. until you end up in the seat. In the CoE roles you will learn to think long-term, whereas in the Business Partnering roles you will learn how to transform a business. Irrespective of the route you take, you should spend the first 5 to 10 years of your career focussing on building hardcore HR skills and understanding the business. After that you can start expanding those skills with different experiences - different business units, geographies, leadership roles etc. Work hard, constantly reflect on what you can improve and...don't take yourself too seriously. Take the situation serious, but not yourself!

Which skills and capabilities do you feel CHRO's of the future need to have?

I have a strong view on that. I think you need to have the skills of a CPO, COO and CDO combined. The CPO skills are about structuring your organization in such a way that the talent of your people are being developed and maximized, so think OD, Performance Management, Development. Then you need to add to that the ability to make sure that you have enough talent and the right talent in the places that create most value for your strategy. Which is typically what a COO does, resource allocation to the highest value opportunity. And nowadays without digital skills, embracing and leveraging new technology, you won't get far. You need to understand the dynamics between these three areas. See it as concentric circles - CPO, COO and CDO - where the skills and capabilities of a future CHRO should sit in the heart of those three circles.

How do you inspire the next generation of leaders? What is your wish for them?

I hope I do but the truth lies in the eye of the beholder! I hope I show that I don't have all the answers. I am firm and have my own point of view but I don't have all the answers. I have my own doubts, I need help. At the same time I also try to show that I am constantly asking myself how we can be better and work smarter with others to make that next step of progress. Because a better future starts with hard and smart work now. And my wish for the next generation is that they will be the stewards of putting people first because being a steward means doing something not for yourself but for the generations to come.

"A better future starts with the work we do today. And my hope for the next generation is that they become stewards of putting people first—not for themselves, but for those yet to come."



MATHIEU POINTEAU

CPO AT BREITLING



Mathieu Pointeau, Chief People Officer at Breitling, leads HR for one of the world's most renowned watchmakers. With a 140-year legacy and over 1,900 employees across 20+ countries, Breitling's workforce is the engine behind its innovation and craftsmanship, sustaining the brand's iconic status in the luxury watch industry.

A business-turned-HR professional with an MBA from IMD, Mathieu's career spans diverse industries, regions, and leadership roles. His innovative approach fosters leadership and shapes an agile, inclusive culture, ensuring Breitling's people are equipped to craft the future of the brand.

Living in Lausanne with his wife and daughter, Mathieu balances strategic vision with human connection, championing an HR approach that celebrates the people behind Breitling's enduring legacy.



Why did you want to become CHRO? What fuels your drive?

It was a long journey before I finally found my place in the HR function. Once I did, my career really started to take off. I've always enjoyed doing a variety of things, and the role of CHRO was my ultimate goal because it covers such diverse areas - from talent management to rewards to business partnering - combined with the leadership aspect. I didn't expect to reach this role so quickly, in all modesty. It's exciting to know I still have so much to learn. In fact, this is the first time in my career that I haven't put an end date on my role. I feel like I could happily do this for 10 years—it's a great feeling!

How did you prepare yourself for the role of CHRO?

I didn't. During my MBA, I learned that you can throw anything at me, and I'll find a way to get it done. So, I went into the role with self-confidence, as well as authenticity, self-awareness, and vulnerability. You are never going to know everything in HR, so I leverage my team and ask a lot of people for their opinions. I try to learn while doing, seeking feedback from all levels and improving every time. It's a marathon, not a sprint. My advice for any aspiring CHRO is to make sure you touch all aspects of HR before stepping into the role.

Is there anything that has surprised you about the role? Something you didn't expect?

The loneliness that comes with the role at times. I am very collegial and like to share a lot, but you can't always share in this role. You need to call the shots, and not all of those decisions will be appreciated—you will face criticism. But at the end of the day, you are the one who has to set the direction. What helps is having people around you who provide constructive feedback—your own personal board of advisors. And it's essential to maintain a healthy balance between questioning yourself and congratulating yourself.

If there is one wish you could make for the next generation of leaders, what would it be?

I would love for them to challenge the status quo and experiment as much as they can. To not follow a fixed path but to find what is in full alignment with who they are as individuals. I believe there is an ideal job out there for everyone—one that matches our personality and who we are. It took a while for me to realize this, but once I did, I set off on a journey of progressively aligning who I am with the role I hold. That alignment is what I would wish for anyone joining—or already in—the employment market.

SATBIR BAINS

CHRO AT SHL MEDICAL



Satbir Bains was appointed as the CHRO of SHL Medical in February 2023. SHL Medical is a pioneering leader in self-injection devices.

Headquartered in Switzerland with locations across Europe, the Americas and Asia, SHL Medical employs close to 6,000 employees.



Satbir started her career in Engineering and then transitioned to HR. Having held business partnering, project and CoE roles at global companies in a variety of industries, she has built up 20+ years of experience in shaping the strategic people agenda.

Why did you want to become CHRO? What fuels your drive?

"It was never about the title for me. Transformation and change are what excite me and at SHL I had the opportunity to really shape and influence the whole People agenda with an organization that shares my values. What I really loved and made me take the leap was that they wanted to look at everything with a fresh pair of eyes. To set a new precedence of what are the right things to do that are meaningful for the business and drive growth, rather than follow the pack and copy what other organizations are doing."

Is there anything that has surprised you about the role? Something you didn't expect?

"The most significant surprise has been the importance of having the right team around you. Not only in terms of competencies, but to have individuals who have the same kind of ethics, integrity, values and resilience. Who bring their best every day. Because as a CHRO you are not going to have a great day every day and if you don't have the right people around you, with whom you have a trustful relationship, I think you can feel very lonely in this role. You need a safe space where you don't have to act like you're a superhuman, where you can talk, show your vulnerability and be yourself. The fact that I can be myself with my team gives me a huge amount of strength."

When do you know are making an impact?

"When the business is not seeing HR as something separate but as part of their team. I like to work with the business in tandem and have just developed the next 5 year People Strategy with the business, not separate from it. In HR, we have so many specialist functions that don't always connect that a change in business strategy, may impact the way we need to source talent, the competencies we need to develop in the future and how we engage our Team Members etc. We need to build the connections between these different topics and translate it into something that's meaningful for the business and not just do things for HR's sake."

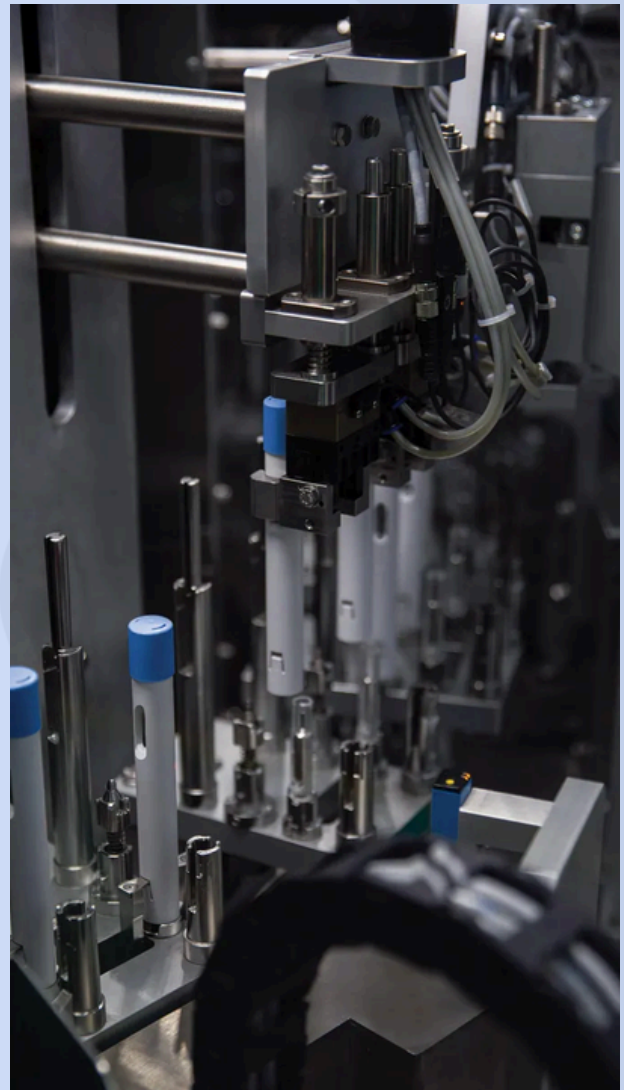


How important is your network in your role as CHRO, any tips for making connections that last?

The way I have developed my network during my career is by getting things done and then when people see the results I get approached by people because they know I'm someone who will move and change things when it is required to get the business to a better place. Not just because I am posting something on LinkedIn every week, which can be a bit artificial. I think it's important that people know who you are and what you stand for. From there you can build a network of authentic connections that you can trust, talk to and tap into for support and ideas.

How do you inspire the next generation of leaders?

Something that is really important to me is about staying true to who you are. We all have different backgrounds – our own story and journey – and it's important to not try to replicate or copy what others are doing. For me, it's very important to be in an environment where you feel you do not need to compromise your values. You have to stay very close to who you are and stand up for what you believe in. Because when you find the right place then you'll know you can fly!



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