



2026 WORKFORCE TRENDS SNAPSHOT

PIONEER MANAGEMENT CONSULTING

STAGE SETTING

We first ran the “Listening Series” in 2024 to capture what was top of mind for CHROs navigating a rapidly changing environment.

The insights were **practical, honest**, and for those who participated, extremely **valuable!**

*SINCE THEN, A LOT HAS CHANGED.
SO, WE ASKED AGAIN.*



This refreshed 2026 summary captures the themes that surfaced most consistently across industries and company sizes.

A sincere thank you to the CHROs and HR executives who took the time to share their perspective. We hope this provides useful context and perhaps reassurance that many of your peers are wrestling with similar questions.

To develop this report, we spoke with 30+ senior HR leaders, including CHROs and senior HR executives across industries, and paired their insights with Pioneer’s research and market analysis on emerging workforce and organizational trends.

Insights were gathered through confidential **30-minute 1:1 conversations** conducted as part of Pioneer’s 2026 CHRO Listening Series.

Industries represented:

- Healthcare
- Agriculture
- Energy & Infrastructure
- Manufacturing
- Retail
- Consumer Goods
- Financial Services
- Public Sector
- Industrial Services
- Construction / Engineering & Building Services

6 POWERFUL INSIGHTS

Six themes rose to the top that reflect the challenges, priorities, and questions HR leaders are navigating right now.

They don't represent every issue, but they do capture what's keeping HR leaders up at night across industries and company sizes.

THEME 01

AI Has Moved From Experimentation → Enterprise Integration

And often HR is being tapped to lead the adoption.

THEME 04

Skills Are the Strategy, But Execution Is the Gap

Skill-based strategies are maturing faster than organizational readiness.

THEME 02

Workforce Planning as a Strategic Imperative

No longer an annual exercise, it's a required capability, and AI may be the key to unlocking it.

THEME 05

Operating Model Simplification

Most operating models weren't built for where the business is today and closing the gap demands stronger organizational design capability.

THEME 03

The Succession Gap Is Widening While Leadership Readiness Is Lagging

Forget the workforce of the future if you don't have the workforce for the next three to five years.

THEME 06

Change Capacity Is (Still) A Measurable Concern

Change is no longer episodic. It's continuous and organizations are feeling the weight of it.

Within HR, leaders are shifting from isolated pilots to integrating AI into core processes across recruiting, service delivery, learning, and workforce analytics.

Across the organization, the conversation has also shifted. While experimentation continues, many told us the expectation is now to prove value, moving beyond pilots to measurable impact at scale.

As AI scales, we consistently heard that HR is playing a critical role in setting guardrails, enabling leaders and teams, and ensuring adoption translates into real impact. AI may not sit within HR, but it is fundamentally a people and behavior shift, and HR is uniquely positioned to help the organization turn potential into performance.

HR, as a business partner, also needs to be ready to support how the organization is rethinking people and talent. As AI reshapes work, this includes helping leaders rethink roles, shift skill requirements, and plan for a workforce that looks different than it does today.

THE CANDID CONVERSATION

We've invested in AI, but the value isn't fully showing up yet.

While organizations remain committed and hopeful, there is increasing pressure to turn early experimentation into tangible results. The dialogue has clearly evolved from *"Should we, and how do we?"* to *"What have we delivered, and what is it worth?"* The bar is rising quickly from access and pilots to proof and accountability.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR HR

AI adoption is not just a technology rollout, it is a workforce transformation. As a result, **HR's role is evolving from observer to architect** of how work changes.

This moment is exposing the limits of traditional change management. Awareness and compliance are no longer enough organizations need to shift toward change enablement, helping people understand the value, build confidence, and adopt new ways of working.

The distinction matters. Belief and capability drive sustained adoption. HR plays a critical role in bridging that gap ensuring AI is not just introduced, but embedded into how work gets done in a way that delivers measurable value.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

HR cannot sit on the sidelines as AI reshapes how work gets done. **Organizations need a people advocate at the table focused not just on the technology, but on how AI changes roles, behaviors, skills, leadership, and ways of working.** That means helping focus AI on high-value use cases, equipping leaders to model new behaviors, building capability over time, and embedding AI into real workflows with clear guardrails. Success should be measured by business impact — not just adoption activity.

Economic pressure, AI, and productivity mandates are forcing sharper answers to critical workforce questions and organizations are discovering they lack the foundation to answer them reliably.

The questions leaders are being forced to answer:

- ▶ What work changes?
- ▶ What roles disappear or evolve?
- ▶ What skills are critical next?
- ▶ Where are we structurally over- or under-capacity?

Most leaders acknowledge they are still establishing the foundation to building predictive capability and stronger HR/Finance integration.

And even in organizations with robust HR systems, it remains difficult to assemble a single, reliable view of the current state — one that integrates skills, cost, capacity, and performance data in a way that truly tells the story.

Many are asking... could AI offer an easier way to help me with this data and scenario plan?



“ WE KNOW WORKFORCE PLANNING MUST BE CONTINUOUS, BUT WE’RE STILL STITCHING TOGETHER THE BASICS. HARD TO PLAN THE FUTURE WITHOUT A CLEAR VIEW OF TODAY.”

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR HR

Workforce planning must become a living capability, not a calendar event. Many leaders are recognizing AI as a pathway to the predictive, integrated planning they've long needed but couldn't build fast enough.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

HR must become a stronger strategic partner to the business in solving for a rapidly changing workforce. That means moving workforce planning from a static annual process to a dynamic business capability — one that connects HR, Finance, skills, capacity, cost, and business demand into a clearer view of the workforce.

By leveraging AI for real-time insights and scenario modeling, HR can help leaders make faster, better decisions about where talent is needed, what skills are changing, and how work should evolve to meet business needs.

A consistent theme, regardless of industry or company size, is renewed urgency around succession. Forget the workforce of the future if you don't have the workforce for the next three to five years.

Leaders cited these accelerating factors:

- ▶ Roles are evolving faster than we're developing for
- ▶ Accelerating senior retirements
- ▶ Lack of real visibility into talent
- ▶ Over-reliance on a small group of "trusted" executives

Consistent with what we heard from our business leader interviews in 2025, there is also growing concern about the **middle layer managers** expected to translate strategy into execution.

Many managers today are overloaded and under-coached, while being asked to lead AI adoption and navigate increasing hybrid and cross-functional complexity. As a result, the conversation is shifting from "Who's next?" to a bigger question: "Are we truly preparing leaders *at every level* to run more complex, AI-enabled, faster-moving organizations?"

EMERGING TENSION

If AI frees up capacity, how do we elevate leadership expectations instead of lowering them?

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR HR

HR must urgently rethink how leadership pipelines are built and sustained shifting from static succession plans to dynamic, data-driven visibility into talent and readiness. The priority is no longer just identifying "who's next," but actively developing leaders at every level, especially the middle layer, to operate in faster, more complex, AI-enabled organizations.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

Reinvest in leadership capability development with focus on:

Enterprise thinking

Coaching and people leadership

AI fluency

Create true transparency into the leadership pipeline, de-risk over-reliance on key individuals, and redefine manager expectations—measuring and rewarding leadership, not just output.

4 SKILLS ARE THE STRATEGY, BUT EXECUTION IS THE GAP

With greater expectations on workforce planning, the starting point is clear: understand the skills in your organization today. What do you have and what do you need next?

Skills conversations are everywhere. Execution is harder. Many HR leaders aspire to enable more fluid talent movement and clearer visibility into skills across the organization, but most admit they aren't there yet.

Barriers to operationalize we heard include:

Complex job architecture

Legacy frameworks resist skills-based redesign

Ownership ambiguity

Who leads skills strategy is often unclear

Disconnected systems

Skills data lives in silos across platforms

Budget constraints

Investment appetite lags strategic ambition

Inconsistent data

Often reliant on employee self-identification

Change fatigue

Teams are saturated with transformation

THE REALITY

Foundational work is still required to define the skills framework, build the supporting data infrastructure, and create more reliable ways to capture and validate skills over time. Until then, skills-based strategies remain more aspirational than actionable. The challenge isn't ambition, it's operationalization.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR HR

HR must build the foundational infrastructure to enable skills-based strategies. That means defining a clear skills framework, investing in the data systems to support it, and establishing reliable ways to capture and validate skills over time. Without this foundation, workforce planning and talent mobility will continue to be constrained by what HR can see, not what the organization actually needs.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

- Define and align on a common skills taxonomy and job architecture
- Build or integrate systems that capture skills data reliably — beyond employee self-identification
- Establish clear ownership of skills strategy (HR, business, or shared)
- Create a roadmap that sequences foundational work before attempting fluid talent mobility
- Connect skills data to workforce planning, succession, and learning investments

THE CHALLENGE

“ITS NOT AMBITION, IT'S OPERATIONALIZATION.”

Across interviews, many leaders shared that they are rethinking their operating models both within HR and across the broader organization. Most current models weren't designed for today's speed and complexity; they evolved over time.

As a result, leaders described blurred accountabilities, too many handoffs, and slower decision-making than the business needs. At the same time, AI and automation are changing how work gets done, raising new questions about ownership and decision rights. Leaders also noted that work often moves across too many roles and teams, with unclear ownership at key moments.

This is increasingly shaping expectations for HR. Leaders are looking to HR not just to operate within the model, but to help design and support how the business operates—bringing greater clarity to roles, decision-making, and how work flows across teams.

The focus now is on simplification—but with intention. Leaders are working to clarify decision rights, strengthen accountability, and reduce unnecessary coordination so work can move faster. Across the board, the shift is toward operating models that are clearer, more focused, and better aligned to how work actually gets done today.

Common Model Redesign Focus Areas

- ▶ Redefining role scope & accountability
- ▶ Clarifying Center of Excellence (COE) ownership
- ▶ Streamlining governance & reducing handoff points
- ▶ Consolidating services enabled by technology



“I BELIEVE SIMPLER STRUCTURES WILL HELP US ENABLE FASTER EXECUTION.”

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR HR

As work becomes more fluid with AI and automation, the traditional boundaries between roles, teams, and functions are breaking down. This puts pressure on HR to bring greater clarity to decision rights, ownership, and how work flows across the organization. It also raises the bar for HRBPs and COEs, who are expected to operate with sharper focus, clearer accountability, and a stronger connection to business outcomes.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

HR must take a more deliberate, design-led approach to operating models moving beyond incremental changes to reimagine how the organization operates as a whole. It also requires **embedding AI and automation into operating model design clarifying where technology can accelerate work, where human judgment is most critical, and how the two come together to drive speed, accountability, and better outcomes.**

6 CHANGE CAPACITY IS (STILL) A MEASURABLE CONCERN

From AI adoption to operating model shifts, technology implementations, and cost restructuring, change is no longer episodic... it's continuous.

CHROs are placing greater focus on:

- ▶ Portfolio visibility across transformation initiatives
- ▶ Clear prioritization of enterprise change efforts
- ▶ Leader enablement to sustain change through execution
- ▶ More intentional measurement of adoption and outcomes

What was once described as “change fatigue” is increasingly being treated as a capacity management issue bringing new discipline to how organizations prioritize and sequence change.

The question is no longer how to manage change, it's how much change the organization can absorb.

The Role of AI in Managing Change at Scale

As change becomes more continuous, many organizations are exploring how AI and digital tools can provide better visibility into the full change portfolio. By bringing together data across initiatives, these tools can help leaders see where change is concentrated, identify potential overload, and make more informed decisions about prioritization and sequencing. Increasingly, the value is not just in tracking activity but in translating data into clear, actionable insights.

80%

OF ORGANIZATIONS INTERVIEWED SAID THEY ARE NAVIGATING MULTIPLE TRANSFORMATIONS AT ONCE

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR HR

Change is now constant, not occasional making capacity a real constraint. HR is being asked to help leaders see the full change portfolio, prioritize what matters most, and ensure the organization can absorb it. This shifts HR's role from supporting individual initiatives to enabling enterprise-wide change decisions.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

HR needs to **bring discipline to change improving visibility, setting clear priorities, and helping leaders sequence work based on capacity.** This includes equipping leaders to drive adoption, measuring outcomes more consistently, and ensuring change efforts are focused where they will have the greatest impact.

OUR PIONEER PERSPECTIVE

Across these conversations, one message came through clearly: **the CHRO agenda is becoming more operational, more integrated, and more consequential to business performance than ever before.** AI, workforce planning, leadership succession, operating model design, and change capacity are no longer separate conversations. They are increasingly interconnected elements of how organizations execute strategy.

At the center of this shift is a fundamental question: *Does the organization truly understand its workforce today and is it prepared to evolve it fast enough for what comes next?* Many leaders described a similar challenge and the ambition is clear. The business demands more agile organizations, skills-based talent strategies, stronger leadership benches, and technology-enabled productivity. But the path forward requires foundational work cleaner data, clearer operating models, stronger leadership capability, and more disciplined prioritization of change.

At the same time, we would be remiss not to acknowledge that leaders are operating in a broader context of instability including geopolitical tension, economic uncertainty, and shifting workforce expectations. While not always called out as a standalone theme, these forces are shaping decisions and increasing the stakes. In this environment, culture, leadership clarity, and organizational resilience become even more critical.

In many ways, **the CHRO role is expanding from steward of talent to architect of organizational capability.** The leaders who will move fastest are those who treat workforce strategy not as a series of HR programs, but as an integrated business discipline connecting workforce planning, leadership development, technology adoption, and operating model clarity.

The opportunity for HR is significant. Organizations that build this capability well will not only navigate the current environment more effectively they will be better positioned to adapt as the pace of change continues to accelerate.

— The Pioneer Team



PIONEER CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY

ENABLING A HIGH-GROWTH VENTURE THROUGH A NEW OPERATING MODEL

CHALLENGE

A global equipment manufacturer launched a robotics venture to accelerate growth, but its legacy structure lacked the speed and clarity needed to scale.

Pioneer was engaged to design and stand up the operating model and organizational structure, addressing fragmented roles and unclear decision rights.

APPROACH

- Defined mission, vision, value proposition & operating model
- Clarified roles, decision rights & governance
- Aligned job architecture, levels & compensation
- Embedded desired culture into leadership alignment

IMPACT

- High-velocity operating model enabling speed & autonomy
- Accelerated decision-making through clear governance
- ~80% of employees experienced low disruption
- Agility & accountability embedded in leadership behaviors

CASE STUDY

ACCELERATING WORKFORCE PLANNING THROUGH AI

CHALLENGE

An organization needed a rapid, accurate view of its workforce and the ability to model future scenarios, but fragmented data and manual processes slowed decision-making.

Pioneer was engaged to establish a baseline and enable faster, AI-driven workforce scenario planning.

APPROACH

- Deployed AI-enabled solution to aggregate workforce data
- Established baseline view of roles, skills, capacity & cost
- Enabled dynamic scenario modeling for workforce shifts

IMPACT

- Reduced time to workforce visibility from weeks to days
- Enabled real-time scenario planning across key workforce variables
- Improved decision-making with a unified, data-driven view
- Strengthened HR's role in strategic business planning

CASE STUDY

DRIVING ENTERPRISE CHANGE VISIBILITY WITH CHANGEIQ

CHALLENGE

An organization was managing a high volume of concurrent transformations but lacked a clear, consolidated view of change across the enterprise.

Pioneer was engaged to implement ChangeIQ, our proprietary AI enabled change management platform, to centralize change data, improve visibility, and enable more proactive decision-making.

APPROACH

- Centralized change initiatives & intake processes
- Established change intensity & impact views
- Deployed pulse surveys to measure readiness & adoption
- Enabled real-time dashboards for leaders

IMPACT

- Increased enterprise visibility into change & potential collisions
- Improved prioritization through clearer impact understanding
- Enabled proactive intervention using real-time data
- Replaced fragmented spreadsheets with centralized platform



ABOUT US

▲ We are an elite team of problem solvers who unabashedly love business and want yours to be as successful as possible.

98%

CLIENT SATISFACTION
SCORE

84%

EMPLOYEE
ENGAGEMENT SCORE



LET'S KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING.

Whether you're working through the challenges highlighted here, exploring new ideas, or simply want to compare notes—we'd love to connect.



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OUR HR EXPERTISE

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- CULTURE & LEADERSHIP • HR TECH SELECTION & IMPLEMENTATION • OPERATING MODEL & ORG
- DESIGNATIONAL DESIGN • CHANGE MANAGEMENT