

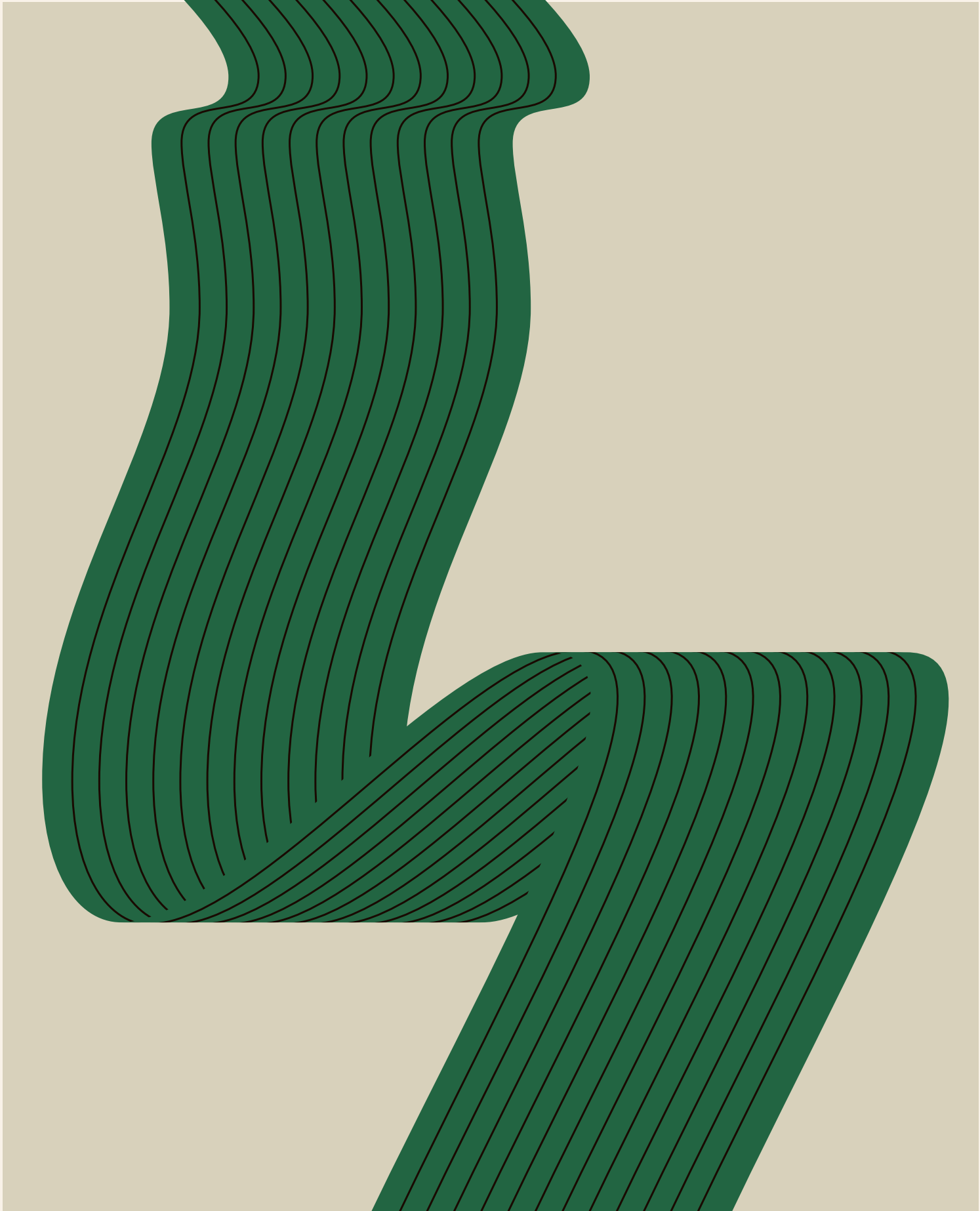
Compass by Guild

Navigating
the future of
HR together



The Big Bets issue

More than ever, HR is being called to design innovative solutions to urgent business challenges. Here's where to start.



Welcome to Compass

This is a new publication focused on helping forward-thinking leaders navigate what's next. It's also the latest addition to a growing suite of offerings we're launching to connect and build a thriving community of purpose-driven people leaders and changemakers.

As we usher in a transformative 2024, we have the opportunity to lean in on audacious concepts and visionary aspirations. The start of a new year symbolizes not just reflection but also rethinking—inviting us to explore big and bold ideas that drive impact. Moving these forward is likely not a solo act and often means building commitment and buy-in from your partners in the C-suite.

I've been down this road before, and I've got some learnings to share. Read on

to discover some tips and tactics for bringing your ideas to the C-suite, as well as real-world examples from other CHROs who've launched innovative programs, strategies for staying agile in times of uncertainty, and a rundown of the new must-have HR skillset.

We're also unveiling some new research on business leaders' top HR priorities — and there's no better time for us to step up and meet the challenge. As always, our community is in this together.

Stay well and be well,



*Dean Carter
Chief People and
Purpose Officer, Guild*

Bringing a bold idea to the C-suite

Focus on a clear problem to solve, keep it simple, start with a pilot, and come armed with data.



*By Dean Carter
Chief People and
Purpose Officer, Guild*

The challenges facing HR leaders in 2024 are complex and human, and executives in the C-suite and on Boards are going to expect tangible results.

That likely means raising expectations for CHROs to identify strategic opportunities, set a clear path for impact, and bring their full expertise to the table.

To bring bold ideas forward, you need to be highly purposeful in your approach to build buy-in on the investments or pivots you see as critical to better outcomes for the year.

Here are some tactics to consider when bringing your bold idea to the C-suite:

1

Focus on the clear problem to solve

The inspiration behind your bold idea should be pretty clear in your mind, but that doesn't necessarily mean it will be easily understood by your CEO or other C-suite executives.

This is where clarity and simplicity are your friends. Don't try to do too much with any single initiative or you might inadvertently invite more scrutiny than if you had focused on a specific issue.

Your time will often be better spent refining the idea to an elegant solution that also solves a problem that your C-suite is thinking about.

2

Run to simplification and away from complication

It's natural for us to focus on designing solutions to the problems we face. We want to address the issues that company leaders expect us to handle and deliver on them.

The trap that too many people fall into is picking an approach that makes their lives easier but may actually increase complexity. It's much easier to generate buy-in when you think beyond your own lane.

3

Pair with a partner

Convincing another executive leader to join your cause will make your case stronger, and it also shows that you're advocating for the business — not just for yourself.

When I proposed a pilot program at Patagonia that involved taking Fridays off on a specific schedule to help address employee retention, I got the head of the Design team on board with my idea.

4

Set the stage for stakeholders (if needed)

Let's face it — allocating budget for HR initiatives usually isn't the favorite activity for CEOs or Boards. If you've managed to get your CEO on board using the tactics outlined here, you can go even further toward getting your idea approved if you put in the work to help them make the case to your Board.

This step won't always be necessary, but especially if your big bet involves a large expenditure, you can use any expertise you have in Board level communication to strengthen your case. If you're inexperienced or rusty with your Board comms, this is a good reminder to seek out those skills now before you need them!

5

Pivot to pilot

As I mentioned above, a pilot can be a great compromise when executives are aligned with the vision but still have hesitations about cost or other implementation details. Getting approval for a pilot allows you to do a thoughtful rollout, gather data, and conduct analysis that will refine your proposal for a more permanent solution if you still recommend one.

Armed with data that supports your hypothesis, you have a much better chance of securing longer-term funding. Just this year at Guild, I proposed a pilot for a benefit to allow breastfeeding parents to take a traveling companion on work trips to allow their baby to come along with them. To help overcome concerns surrounding cost and liability, we agreed to a pilot that proved out the real-world impact of the program.

Survey: Business leaders want HR to innovate

Attracting talent is the most urgent priority, followed by retaining top talent and skills readiness.



*By Sarah Beldo
Editor-in-Chief,
Guild*

It's easy to champion innovation in stable times. You have the luxury of trying out new people-focused programs and ideas. But conventional wisdom suggests that in less certain times, a company's appetite for experimental HR initiatives would be lower.

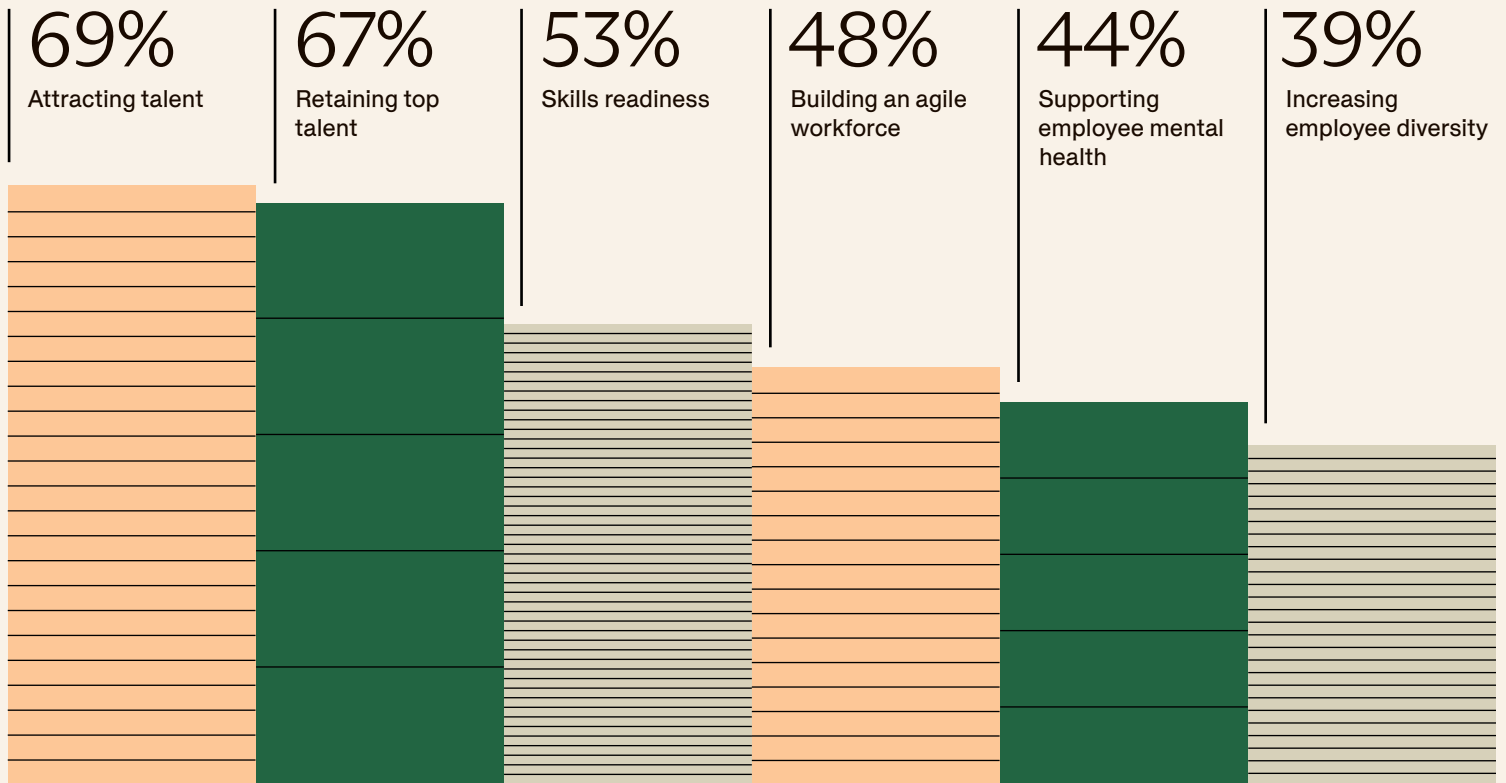
Or is it actually the other way around? [Many experts predict](#) 2024 will be a tumultuous year, but Guild's latest research reveals that 93% of business leaders are eager for HR to bring innovative solutions to the table.

What's top of mind for business leaders

So where to focus? In December 2023, we surveyed 266 business leaders at companies with 1000+ employees to find out how they feel about their partnership with HR, and how talent strategy impacts their business-critical goals.

You can use our findings to start charting your game plan for the coming months. Aligning with business priorities and outcomes is an imperative for HR leaders to meet the expectations of modern organizations—particularly with a year ripe for so many challenges, both known and unknown.

Urgent HR priorities for business leaders in 2024



Top people-focused concerns for business leaders in 2024

82%

Loss of institutional knowledge as workers retire

81%

Losing unengaged high performers

73%

Not meeting expectations of Gen Z

71%

Impact of remote work on company culture

71%

Not having the skills to leverage AI

Attracting talent is the most urgent priority

Despite headlines about the pace of hiring slowing down, attracting talent was the most-cited HR-related concern in our study. An overwhelming **97% of leaders view attracting talent as a priority in 2024, with 69% of respondents labeling the need as “urgent.”**

As companies feel pressure to fill open roles, there are tailwinds that make the issue more acute: a record number of Baby Boomers are set to leave the workforce over the next 5 years, and research from Glassdoor shows that [Generation Z are slated to surpass Boomers](#) in the workforce this year.

The concerns arising from this trend are twofold. For one thing, **82% of leaders are concerned about losing institutional knowledge as workers retire.** But at the same time, there’s also a need to quickly adapt your employer value proposition for a new generation. A total of **73% of leaders are concerned about meeting the expectations of Gen Z.**

“I think HR needs to re-think and re-evaluate the mentality and expectations of young workers who are not just motivated by money anymore. They need continuous learning, good work-life balance, and a satisfying career,” said a Director of Cloud Operations in the Professional Services industry.

Innovation opportunity

Make career growth the heart of your EVP

Compensation and flexibility are undoubtedly important for catching the eye of prospective candidates, but today’s workers want companies to invest in *them*.

9/10

Say that when they’re job hunting, they are looking for an employer with career advancement opportunities and ways for them to progress.

74%

2022 Guild research reveals 74% of workers said they would be somewhat or very likely to leave for a new role if it offered additional education or career opportunities.

That means the opportunity is ripe to differentiate your company from the rest of the pack by providing true [career mobility](#) opportunities—and being loud and proud with your offerings.

[The Walt Disney Company is a powerful example](#) of putting this approach into action: 1 out of 4 people who apply to work at the company cite Disney Aspire—a program that covers 100% of tuition costs for education—as the reason they applied.

Don't deprioritize employee experience

For the past few months, data has shown that the “quit rate” is the lowest it has been in years and more employees are staying in jobs. And because of that trend, analysts have been raising the possibility of an [“employee experience winter,”](#) where EX-focused programs fall victim to cost-cutting measures because companies are less concerned about losing their people.

But these headlines can be incredibly deceiving. Our survey shows retention is still very much top of mind: **67% of business leaders say retaining top talent is an urgent priority this year.**

And a massive **81% of leaders are concerned about losing top performers who are unengaged.** Can you really afford to cut back on the programs that power your people's job satisfaction?

Employees want to stay with companies who take a holistic approach to caring for people. And with burnout still a major risk, caring for the whole employee is critical.

“I would love to see programs that can build on each other, with a foundation for newer team members and in-depth learning for seasoned workers,” said Daryl, VP of Procurement Operations in the food services industry.

[Research consistently shows](#) that lack of access to learning and growth is one of the main reasons people leave their jobs, and that [investing in training increases retention.](#) Continuous learning programs should have a holistic approach, addressing the entire lifecycle of employees, from hire to promotion—and beyond.

Innovation opportunity

Double down on championing people-first programs

Our research identified that business leaders have urgent HR needs and also crave innovation. Now it's time to connect the dots to make sure people-first programs are prioritized.

If DE&I, mental health benefits, and L&D programs are on the chopping block, it's up to HR to step up and advocate for these initiatives, clearly showing how they contribute to both employee satisfaction and business goals and outcomes.

To do this effectively, you'll need two sets of data: what's most important to employees, and what's most important to stakeholders.

Start by finding out what really matters to both of these groups through focus groups, interviews, and surveys. The more you can target your data to show the true impact of your programs, the better. We've got [some guidance on how you can do that.](#)

Continuous skilling to stay ahead

Upskilling and reskilling initiatives are gaining importance as trends like generative AI, the global energy transition, and disruptive technologies gain steam. **More than half (53%) of respondents see skills readiness as an urgent imperative** for 2024.

And **71% are specifically concerned with not having the skills to leverage AI**. This is understandable, given how quickly the need for generative AI know-how has sprung up. And surveys show that **[the majority of employees are already using this technology](#)**, with or without formal training.

With so much at stake, leaders are hungry for new solutions to familiar and emerging skilling issues.

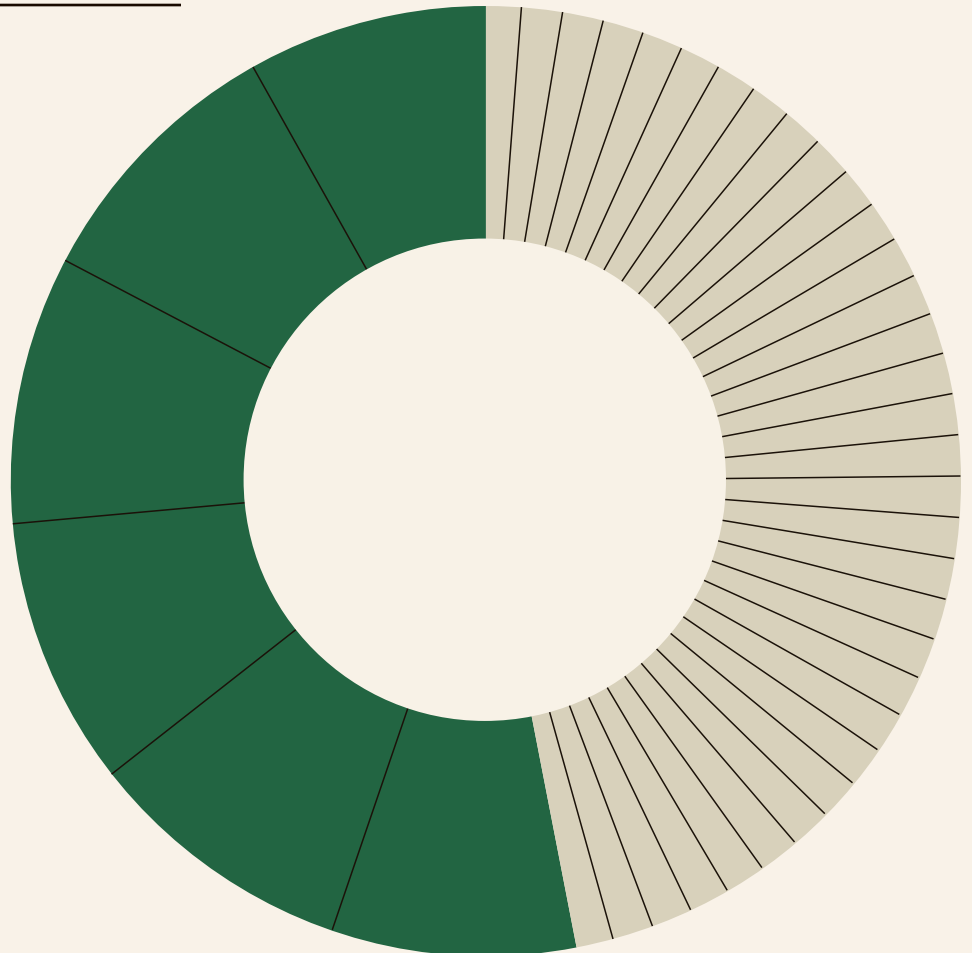
“HR should design an upskill program to promote from within, helping to maintain our culture throughout new departments and positions,” wrote James, an IT Director in the Manufacturing industry.

William, a Director of IT in the retail industry, wrote: “I would like to see HR focus their hiring on knowledge-based criteria instead of university based learning criteria.”

His thoughts echo a wider trend of skills-based hiring when it comes to sourcing talent. But skills-based hiring is rarely enough on its own. Too many times, internal talent is left behind, with no clear way to attain these crucial skills.

53%

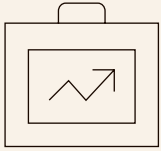
Of respondents see skills readiness as an urgent imperative for 2024



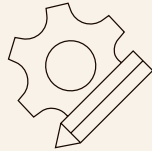
Innovation opportunity

Pair skills with career pathways

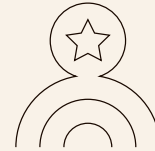
An approach that focuses on skills alone often falls short of meeting the needs of the employee—and the business.



Instead, pair skills with a clear articulation of career pathways. Show employees how they can grow, give them access to project-based learning and relevant nearer-term certifications. Outline exactly what steps they need to take to get them into high-demand positions.



This creates a powerful dynamic to hire from a wider pool of people, bolster DE&I efforts, attract a new generation who has different expectations, and build a pipeline of the skills needed for the future.



For example, [Bon Secours Mercy Health created an innovative internal mobility framework](#), which enables them to hire entry-level people with no prior experience and give them the targeted support to help them grow into (often higher-paying) in-demand roles.

Paving the way forward

With connections to so many departments across the organization, you may feel like you're already clear on company priorities. But a new year offers new opportunities to re-evaluate what's most crucial for your business partners to succeed—and focus your efforts there.

Despite a legacy perception that HR isn't a business-critical function, our survey revealed that cross-functional stakeholders want an even tighter feedback loop with their HR partners. Some 85% confirmed that a closer relationship with HR would help them achieve their goals.

The upshot? To make an impact in 2024, HR leaders should act with increased urgency and confidence to reach out to your partners across the organization, ask questions, listen, and think big. It's time to lean in.

The new HR all-rounder: Time to up your skills

Strategic HR leaders need to be fluent in everything from AI to design and more.



By Dan Tynan
Contributing writer

HR is used to thinking about critical upskilling and reskilling needs for employees. But within the HR department itself, the need for development is equally acute. Have you taken stock of your skill set recently?

The role of people leaders is changing once again. The more well-rounded HR leaders become, the greater role they will play in an organization's long-term success. And those who don't grow risk getting left behind.

The pandemic brought challenges and opportunities

Let's begin by looking at how far the HR function has come. What began as a centralized function for hiring, firing, and compensating employees has morphed into a multi-headed strategy and operations shop.

The strategic importance of HR came into stark relief during the pandemic, says Matthew Daniel, senior principal for talent strategy at Guild. Almost overnight, people leaders had to become

experts in how to manage a remote workforce and handle health policies.

Not only that, but they were still responsible for allocating resources, maintaining productivity, measuring performance, and boosting employee morale across what was suddenly hundreds or thousands of work-at-home locations.

"Before the pandemic, HR was regularly struggling for relevance," says Daniel. "CHROs really carried the torch during that difficult time."

Now, with the rapid emergence of generative AI, new [skills-based approaches to talent](#), and evolving paradigms of work design, HR is being asked to broaden its domains of expertise yet again. It's just a matter of accepting the challenge.

"Some people leaders are deferring critical decisions to the business," Daniel cautions. "If HR leaders don't lean into this moment and set the AI and skills agendas, we risk falling back into irrelevancy."



“The business models of the last 20 or 30 years were based on industrial scale — more products, more channels, more distribution,” he says. “Now business models are built around iterative design, time to market, creativity, and closeness to customers.”

“Most of the organizational structures designed for old business models aren’t useful any more. That’s why breaking down silos and developing ‘full stack’ HR professionals is crucial.”

The need for ‘Systemic HR’

But as HR departments added new responsibilities, those domains became increasingly specialized, notes Josh Bersin, founder and CEO of research and advisory organization [The Josh Bersin Company](#). And for most companies, that is still the case.

Experts in salary and benefits are unlikely to know much about training. Learning and development professionals are probably unfamiliar with the challenges facing recruiters. Talent acquisition specialists probably couldn’t tell you much about how to implement diversity, equity, and inclusion policies. And so on.

With little crossover between these specialties, HR departments became highly siloed service delivery organizations, not unlike the IT departments of the 1980s and early 1990s, says Bersin.

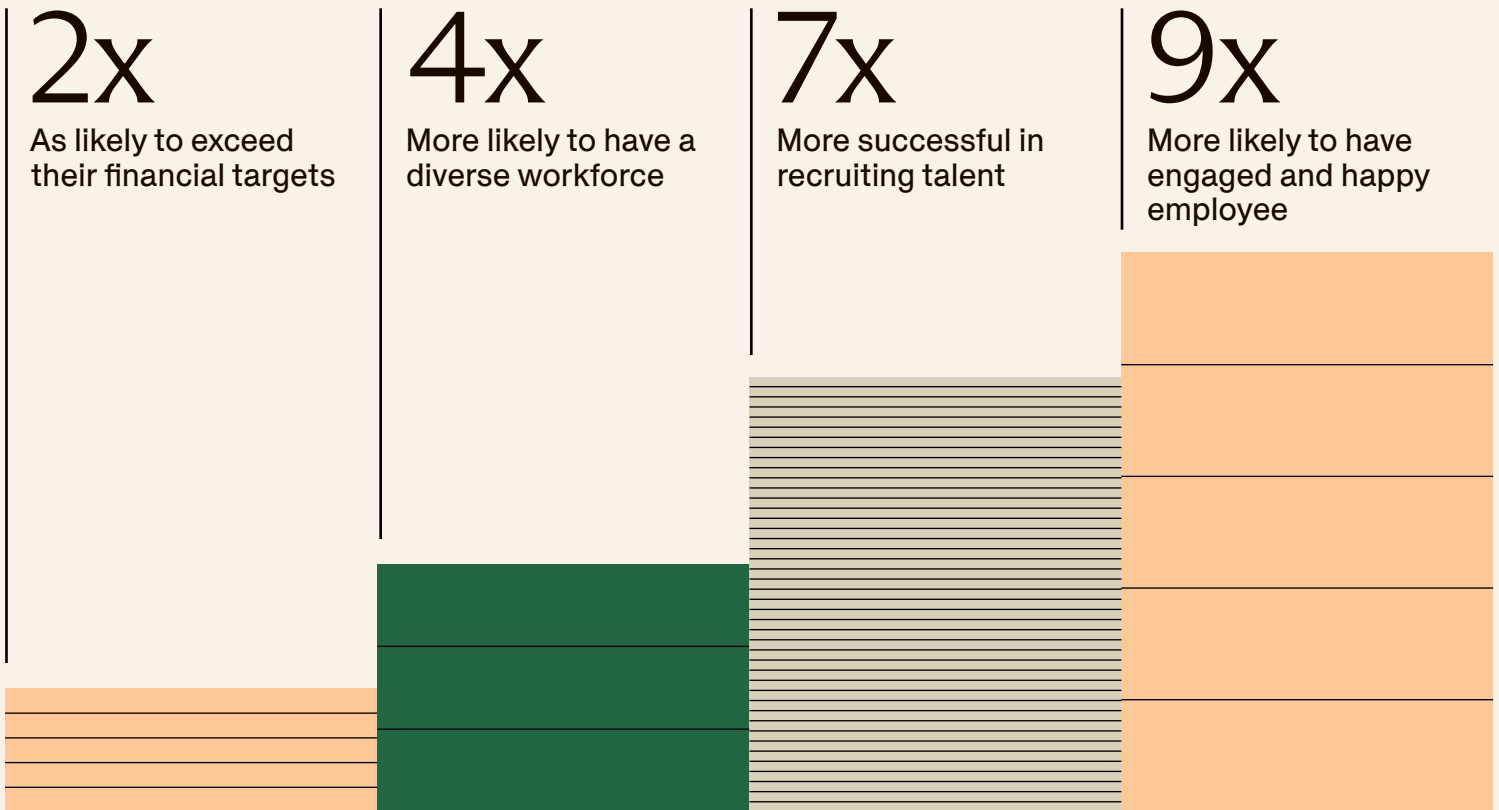
Bersin has termed this new paradigm of strategic people management “[Systemic HR](#).” In this scheme, HR departments function less like compliance mechanisms or service delivery organizations and more like internal consulting firms.

And while his research estimates that only 11% of organizations have achieved this level of systemic maturity, the returns for these firms are significant.

According to [Bersin Company research](#), companies that have implemented systemic HR are twice as likely to exceed their financial targets than less mature ones.

They are four times more likely to have a diverse workforce, seven times more successful in recruiting talent, and nine times more likely to have engaged and happy employees. Not surprisingly, these organizations are also better at adapting to change and innovating effectively.

Companies implementing systemic HR see impressive results



Bersin company research

Dive in and get your hands dirty

Breaking down silos between specialties means learning more about different HR domains, through either professional development or rotation programs that allow specialists in one domain to gain exposure to new disciplines.

Most companies need to invest more in HR career development and succession planning, notes Dieter Veldsman, chief HR scientist for the [Academy to Innovate HR](#). They may also need to change their operating models, breaking up monolithic departments into multi-disciplinary teams.

Some larger organizations are even creating independent people teams for every business unit within the company, each with its leadership, specialties, and strategies.

At the same time, every HR pro also needs to develop and hone new sets of multi-disciplinary skills — especially in the areas of business acumen, data literacy, user-centered design, and analytics, adds Daniel.

“HR leaders cannot outsource data analytics to some other team within the organization,” he says. “Every HR practitioner needs to be able to look at your HR data and the business data, make correlations between them, then know which levers your HR teams can pull to have an impact on the business.”

As an HR leader, Daniel honed his own number-crunching skills by embedding an analyst into his team for “reverse-mentoring,” helping him dive deeper into the data. He developed design skills by attending a week-long bootcamp, then experimented with building new learning projects,

calling in UX design experts within the company to check his work.

“At the end of the day it’s all about finding learning programs you can trust, a mentor to guide you, and getting your hands dirty,” he says.

“Figuring out what the business problems are and how to solve them is the best way to learn.”

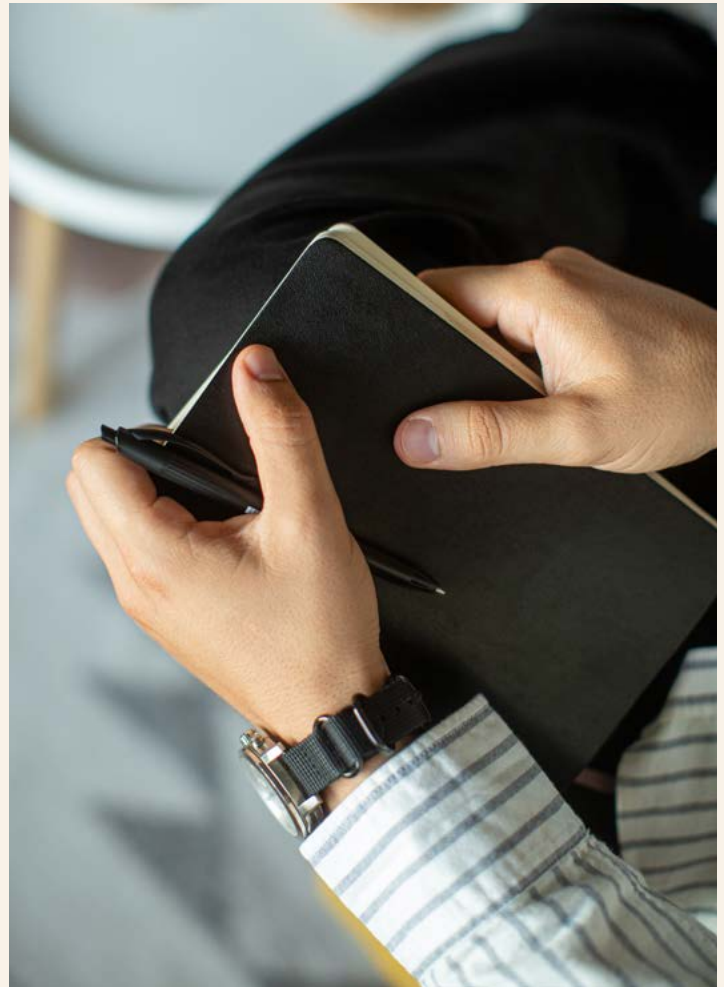
Dedicate time for learning

Still, it’s a lot to ask. Make time for your own learning and development, rotate into cross-functional teams, learn the business, and master new digital skills like UX design or generative AI — all while continuing to manage a queue full of crises every day.

“There’s been a lot thrown at us over the last four years, and a lot of people are fatigued and on the verge of burnout,” says Jessica Lantis, vice president of people operations for [Guru](#), an AI-powered knowledge platform.

“As HR practitioners, we support everyone else. It’s uncommon for us to say, ‘I have my own learning and development priorities,’ because there’s always some other fire we have to put out.”

Lantis notes that leveraging new technology — such as using gen AI tools to draft job descriptions, candidate letters, and emails — can automate repetitive elements of the job, leaving more time for skill development. But it also requires top management to enable more opportunities for learning.



“You need dedicated time chunked out for deep thought and comprehension, and you can’t do that when you’re playing whack-a-mole,” she says.

“It starts when the business looks at its people team as a strategic thought partner, not just an administrative function within the organization. That’s how you crack the code.”

Think like a consultant

When HR leaders evolve into full stack professionals they become strategic consultants instead of service administrators, which will offer greater opportunities to contribute to the organization's success, notes Bersin.

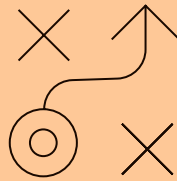
"If you're in a service delivery job, you answer the phone and say 'How can I help you?'" he says. "If you're a consultant, you dig in and learn the depth of the problem. Once you move to this level, you are in every strategic conversation. You're talking to the board, you're dealing with M&A, layoffs, reorgs, all of that stuff. And the profession itself becomes a lot more enjoyable."

Every employee in every workplace is being asked to do more today than they were five or ten years ago, notes Daniel. HR is no exception. And that's a good thing.

"Most HR leaders are thrilled by solving real business problems," he says. "As even more challenging business problems like AI arise, CHROs need to identify those gnarly problems and figure out the people-angle to each of them."

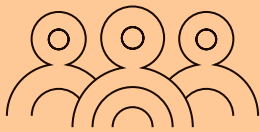
Since one of those problems is figuring out how AI will impact the business, then enabling people to develop skills that allow them to remain relevant is an exciting bit of work for us to do as HR professionals."

The new must-have HR skill set



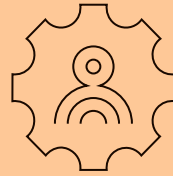
Change management

- Lead employees through change, communicate the need, and manage resistance
- Provide training that meets employees where they are



People analytics

- Understand the value of data and how it connects to organizational goals
- Make data-driven decisions and communicate the why



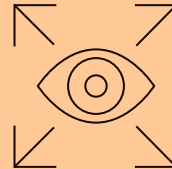
Design thinking

- Employ a human-centered approach, starting with user research
- Prototype ideas, gather feedback, and iterate



Systems thinking

- Understand how various different challenges and departments are interconnected
- Offer more holistic solutions and improve stakeholder management

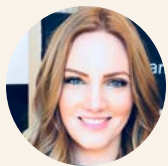


AI

- Be more efficient with administrative tasks like records management and sourcing
- Improve decision-making via insights and predictive analytics

Workplace disruption isn't going away. Here's how to stay resilient.

Your ability to pivot quickly hinges on your entire workforce being future-ready.



By Alex Cannon
Contributing writer,
Guild

The pace of paradigm-shifting threats to business seems to be speeding up. Since COVID, companies have had to address the impact of social protests, generative AI, and political instability—with more on the horizon.

Although disruptive changes can take unexpected shape, the fact that disruption will continue to happen is beyond dispute. The question is: how will people leaders prepare their organizations for it?

This note from giant insurer Allianz sums up the outlook of many economists and strategists: “The year 2024 is set to be one of significant political upheaval and economic instability. As countries representing 60% of the global GDP head to the polls, governments, businesses, and households are adopting a widespread ‘wait-and-see’ attitude that will likely delay critical economic decisions.”

Future-ready workforces don't come as a result of waiting and seeing — especially when we know jobs and businesses will continue to change.

Instead, here's what you can do to ensure your organization is agile and resilient when those inevitable changes arise:



People: Are we taking the right steps to help our talent grow?

The agility a company has to make major pivots hinges on the entire workforce, not just its leaders. Successful future-ready strategies center on helping today's employees see and realize their potential.

Take steps to deeply understand who your people are and where they want to go. Frameworks and buy-in matter, but if your investment in future-readiness doesn't start with the needs and identities of the people in your workforce, it will fail at any scale.

1. Rethink "high potential."

It's easy to think of high potential as something that's proven: employees are expected to achieve a certain job level or credential before real investment in their development kicks in.

But building workforce agility requires entire workforces to be future-ready. That means the path to workforce resiliency can't be paved with reserving development for an elite few. That approach overlooks the potential that sits within frontline and entry-level roles — or [70% of the workforce](#).

2. Build occupational identity.

Your people need to view their current roles as part of their career journey, rather than just a job. When they don't, upskilling in their current role feels pointless. (Hint: this is one of the reasons why ["owning your own development" doesn't fly](#).)

That's where occupational identity, or how we see ourselves as workers, comes into play.

Give your managers the tools to lead career conversations and exercises that foster the self knowledge and self-belief (like this [reflected best-self portrait](#)) that help individuals build this sense of identity.

Once employees have this, the conversation shifts to growing skills and careers in ways that complement their individual talents and interests, and where there may be overlap between these and priority roles they might grow into.

When you provide skilling opportunities for all of your workforce, you grow future leaders — and create a talent pipeline to fill ever-widening skills gaps.

3. Offer mentoring and job exploration.

First-generation college students often face a barrier known as ["the hidden curriculum,"](#) an unwritten set of norms and expectations for navigating college that other students learn from their college-educated relatives.

A similar phenomenon can happen with first-generation managers. The knowledge that makes career growth possible isn't always universal, and this can cause bottlenecks in your internal pipeline.

Mentoring programs can provide employees with the [confidence and know-how](#) to navigate internal job growth and understand the opportunities before them.

Similarly, job rotation and ‘stretch’ assignments can help employees explore growth avenues within the company while developing relevant skills and experience.

4. Align skills with mobility.

We hear a lot about [skills-based hiring](#) these days. On the whole, it’s a good thing: removing degree requirements can open doors to roles that were previously out of reach for many. But without a strategy to help your people continue to grow their skills alongside their careers (with or without degrees), it’s just another un-scalable approach to job-matching.



Instead, complement your employees’ willingness to grow their skill sets with the [right structures to make it possible](#), at scale.

Building [career mobility pathways](#) that make it

easy for employees to transition from entry-level and frontline roles into “destination” roles within the organization is critical.

Out-skilling can happen, eventually. But only after companies realize [better retention for providing the opportunity to up-skill](#) in the first place (to say nothing of the [halo effect of employee brand advocacy](#)).

Training: Are we being strategic with skilling?

We don’t know all of the skills that will be needed in the future. But we can invest in skills we know will endure, and forge partnerships with institutions that prioritize employees’ needs as learners to gain skills efficiently.

1. Balance durable and perishable skills.

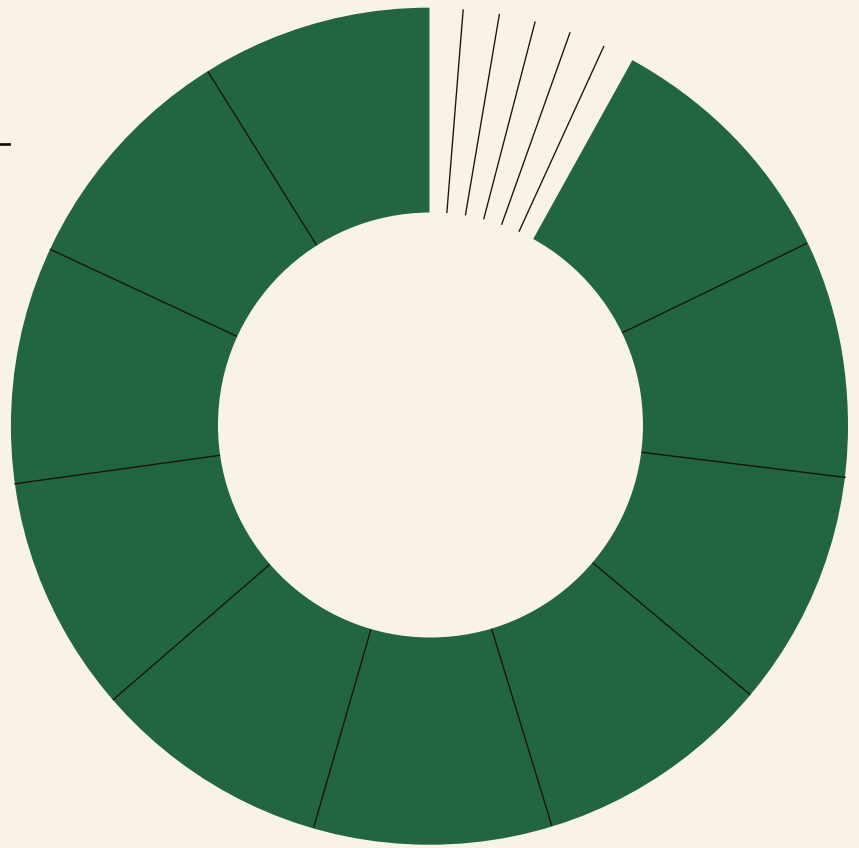
“Skilling” often over-focuses on short-term gains, like backfilling existing gaps, or trying to get ahead of high-demand “hard” skills (think AI prompt engineering).

Although these gains matter, focusing too much on the hard skills of the moment isn’t strategic, and it won’t go far in ensuring a workforce is future-ready.

Time management, goal setting, problem solving, giving and receiving feedback, and collaboration are prerequisites for nearly every role in an organization—but they are often overlooked.

92%

Of companies agree that human or “soft” skills matter at least as much as hard skills, according to Deloitte



Becoming strategic starts with [thinking of skills in terms of their durability or perishability](#). Durable skills not only have a longer half-life than perishable skills, they’re often foundational to more specialized skillsets.

Ensuring employees have access to strengthening their durable skills early on will set them on a path to make lateral or upward transitions into new roles—including leadership roles.

2. Prioritize learning how to learn.

Where change is constant, learning must be constant. Helping employees see how the skills they’re learning and using in their roles today can translate across future roles is a critical part of preparing them for whatever the future may hold. This approach can [encourage a learning mindset](#), rather than viewing learning as just a means to an end.

For example, the “people” skills that clinicians use when helping patients understand and make decisions about their health are rooted in the ability to communicate well with a breadth of

people. Retail associates and customer service representatives are building those foundational, durable communication skills in their day-to-day roles, too.

And as generative AI rolls out, the skill of “learning how to learn” new skills will be fundamental to [making the most of not just the technology](#) now, but any future iterations of the technology.

Future-ready in action

The combined aftereffects of the pandemic caused a critical spike in healthcare vacancies. Like many healthcare organizations, Bon Secours Mercy Health was forced to drastically increase short-term spending on contract labor alongside operating income losses.

“We have over a million patient encounters a year. Staffing our facilities is a matter of life and death; that is the critical short-term need,” Allan Calogne, Chief People Officer, Core Operations for Bon Secours Mercy Health said at Guild’s 2023 Opportunity Summit.

The need to ease staffing exigencies now while finding a better long-term solution to them quickly turned future readiness into an operational imperative.

For the long-term, that meant investing in today’s employees, and building pathways for them to access the skills and credentials needed to move into critical roles.

The result? Thousands of employees enrolled in programs aligned with mission-critical roles, resulting in better retention rates and reduced shortages in mission-critical roles.

“The long-term view ended up actually helping us in the short term in many ways,” Calogne said. “We’ve seen our turnover plummet, our vacancy has reduced by about 45% since the heart of the pandemic.”

So, while not all future disruptions can be foreseen, there are practical steps you can take to guard against them.



“We have over a million patient encounters a year. Staffing our facilities is a matter of life and death; that is the critical short-term need.”

Allan Calogne | Chief People Officer of
Core Operations at Bon Secours Mercy Health
[Guild's 2023 Opportunity Summit](#)

How 3 HR leaders launched their innovative ideas in uncertain times

Post-pandemic, people leaders are being tested on whether they can continue to deliver value and solve pressing business challenges.



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Often, the most pressing business issues facing a company are—at their root—human issues. Which makes them HR issues.

That was the case for Charter Communications, a broadband connectivity company and cable operator serving more than 32 million customers.

“Our big challenge is turnover. Among our frontline workers, we have the highest turnover within the first year of employment,” Beth Biggs, Charter’s Group Vice President, Benefits & ESC, told an audience at [Guild’s Opportunity Summit in late 2023](#).

The inability to hold on to workers meant that Charter might fall short of having enough skilled workers to install the cables they needed to meet their ambitious goal of bringing broadband millions of new customers.

“We always say if we can get workers to the three-year mark, they’re here to stay,” Biggs explained. But to reach a geographically dispersed population with engaging programs that inspired them to make a longer-term commitment to the company, the People Team had to think differently.

“Employees are absolutely expecting something different from us today than they were even a few years ago,” said Biggs. “They’re not just looking for competitive pay or great benefits; they’re looking for career opportunities. They don’t just want a job, they want to know how you will help them grow.”

The answer at Charter was a bold new way of packaging their industry-leading investments in pay and benefits. But, like so many complex and new people investments, getting it approved and launched took thought, creativity, and perseverance.

Back to basics: what is the business need?

Since Covid, the influence of HR has grown dramatically. The tight budgets of 2023 and 2024 have become the first true test of whether CHROs can maintain their newly found favor and if HR teams can deliver the value their business counterparts need in a time of uncertainty.

The three HR leaders on stage at Opportunity Summit’s Making the Case For People Investments session came from different industries, but they cited a similar approach to launching visionary HR programs: start by developing a deep understanding of both the macro business environment and your employees’ evolving expectations. These are the ideas that will win.

At Darden, a multi-brand restaurant company that operates 1900+ locations including Olive Garden and Outback Steakhouse, the roller coaster of consumer behavior gave the People team cues on where to focus. At insurance and financial services brand USAA, supply chain issues, interest rates, and climate change have had a huge impact on their business. And a multi-generational customer base poses new challenges.

“Our service is our secret sauce,” Tamla Oates-Forney, former CHRO at USAA, explained. But younger generations are more cost-sensitive and less likely to show brand affinity, so USAA must increasingly compete on both customer service and price. This requires different skills from customer service reps than in the past.

Sarah King, Chief People and Diversity Officer at Darden, said that at Darden the expectations of hourly workers changed significantly post-pandemic. While these employees can’t work from home the way that desk-based employees can, they still want options in terms of schedules and PTO.

“The number one change we’ve seen is a demand for flexibility, and we’ve really had to shift our paradigm about what it means to manage an hourly workforce,” King explains. “Flexibility is the new engagement currency, particularly in a frontline environment.”



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Sarah King | Chief People and Diversity Officer
at Darden, [Guild's 2023 Opportunity Summit](#)

For maximum impact, think long-term

While it's true that external market forces and internal needs are always evolving, an impactful HR strategy can't merely be reactive.

Maintaining relevance to the hot topics for the Board this quarter and aligning to multi-year strategic needs is critical.

Oates-Forney explained that USAA switched from a just-in-time hiring and development model to a more long-term approach of strategic workforce planning or SWP.

Companies have long had SWP functions, but these functions have evolved from working at the job level to taking advantage of skills data to work at a more granular level. They are focusing on understanding where the business is going, the skills required, when they need those skills, and how many they need.

“This means we can look at our investments in learning and talent development to make sure it's meeting the company at its point of need,” she said. “That way, when you need that talent, it's already skilled and ready.”

She also talked about partnering with her CFO on unit cost analysis, to get more granularity on how much HR's products and services are costing USAA. The first question to ask is: do you need this service? Then, is there a more efficient way to get this service? What does that involve? And finally: what does that mean to the organization?

Never stop marketing

One risk of over-indexing on long-term strategy is that your internal audience loses track of how this abstract planning translates into tangible solutions to their current burning problems. Who cares about anticipating future skills needs when you have a critical skills gap right this very moment?

It's crucial to keep marketing your vision and the results you're already seeing from smaller initiatives, as you build toward your ultimate outcome. HR teams can only do this if they've mastered delivering on two things at the same time: gathering robust data, and forming that data into stories like a master marketer.

Biggs explained: "You keep the long-term in focus, and then over time you make incremental improvements that serve short-term needs." In other words, stay true to your vision and keep educating people on what you want to build for them, where you want to take them in the long term.

And don't forget about the power of branding. Biggs explained that Charter had been investing in innovative programs for years. But when they put all of their proposed people offerings under a catchy name, "Investing in You," suddenly internal stakeholders took note—and got on board.

"It's funny that when you brand something and start talking about it under one umbrella, it really resonates," she said.



Lead with the math

Painting the vision is one part of the equation, but what about the [real-word impact to the bottom line?](#)

When Oates-Forney approached her CFO with a proposal for an education benefit that wouldn't just cover employee tuition, but also tuition for workers' dependents, she used numbers to connect the dots and show how it would help lower the "unprecedented double-digit turnover" they had been seeing since the pandemic, which put their reputation for incredible customer service at risk.

She explained that not only would the program increase prospective employees' interest in working at USAA, but it meant they'd be able to retain them longer. "I did the math. If every employee has 2.3 kids, and those kids are in school at different times, they're going to stay until that last kid is out of school," she said.

Biggs noted that data isn't just a nice-to-have, it's an imperative. "When you talk to your finance people and they're asking about ROI, always go back to the data. If you don't have data, they're going to look at you and tell you you're just talking about fluff."

Charter's results could hardly be labeled as "fluffy." Since "Investing in You" launched in Fall 2022, Charter has seen a 20 basis point reduction in voluntary turnover.

King emphasized that the key to working effectively with a CFO is like working with any other stakeholder: empathy. Take the time to understand what they care about and how they like to communicate. Build the relationship, tailor your message, and be cognizant of what they are held accountable for.

Balancing the future with tomorrow

In essence, HR is always about balancing the long-term and the short-term.

"Attracting talent is a short-term goal. Getting them to stay is our longer-term initiative," Biggs explained. "The best case scenario is when you have an initiative that serves both needs."

And those are the initiatives that will deliver the best returns.

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