

Chief **HR**™

The Step Up to CHRO Reflections from those who have been there

May 2026





A note from the CEO

This research brings into sharp focus what I experienced in my first CHRO role: deep HR experience alone did not prepare me for the enterprise, governance and personal demands of the role.

That experience, and what I continue to hear in regular conversations with CHROs, was the catalyst for creating Chief HR in 2024. Chief HR was established as a trusted peer community for those already in the role, recognising that the work of the CHRO is complex, often isolating, and best navigated alongside others who understand the weight of the responsibility. The voices you will encounter throughout this research and the program, reflected in the quotes woven through these pages, are those of our Chief HR community members, capturing the lived reality of their first CHRO role.

This year, we are launching the **Chief HR Aspiring CHRO Program**, shaped directly by the research conducted with our community and aligned to the mission we set in 2024: to elevate the role of the CHRO to its full potential, demonstrate its value at board level, and develop and mentor emerging CHRO talent. This is not a theoretical program but one built from the lived experiences of those who have done the role before. It responds to a clear and consistent finding from the research: that the true demands of the role are often only fully visible once you are in it. Its purpose is to surface those demands earlier, so aspiring CHROs can build readiness well before appointment.

Together, Chief HR and the Aspiring CHRO Program reflect a simple, hard-earned belief: both the step into the CHRO role, and the time spent within it, are materially better when supported by peers who have been there or are in it now, and who are willing to learn together.

“It’s an extraordinary role – but you need to be set up for success.”

Janelle Leonard
CEO and Founder
Chief HR

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Executive Summary

The **Chief HR 2026 Research – The Step Up to CHRO: Reflections from those who have been there** - captures the lived experience of first-time CHROs and highlights a consistent reality: the step up to CHRO is materially bigger than most expect. While nearly all respondents had deep HR experience, 3 out of 5 CHROs felt unprepared when appointed, and many underestimated the demands of the role.

Effectiveness as a CHRO takes time, and if not adequately prepared for the first step up to CHRO, may take 2-3 years, or more, to be fully effective. The research is clear: stepping into the CHRO role is less about technical HR mastery and more about making a profound shift into enterprise leadership, governance and influence.

For aspiring CHROs, the central risk is not capability but misjudging readiness.

For CEOs and boards, the message is equally clear: first-time CHROs are enterprise leaders in transition and succeed fastest when explicitly supported.

“I was prepared in many ways, but more naïve than I realised about the full weight of the role.”

Study Snapshot

The findings are drawn from a mixed-methods survey of 86 Australian CHROs from ASX and non ASX backgrounds, most of whom had more than a decade of HR experience before their first appointment. Quantitative survey data is complemented by anonymised reflections from leaders who have already made the leap.

“I had seen the role up close for years – but it still surprised me.”

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank the CHROs who took time out of what we know is an already full and demanding role to contribute to this research. Your willingness to share candid reflections, not just successes, but the realities of the transition was a genuine act of giving back to the next generation of CHROs.

Most of you are members of the Chief HR community, and this research reflects what you already understand deeply: the value of trusted peer connection and learning alongside others who carry the same responsibility.

Without your generosity, openness and commitment to the profession, neither this research nor our broader community would be possible.

Key Findings

1. Pathways to the CHRO role

There is no one clear path to the role of CHRO. For many, the step into the CHRO seat is shaped as much by timing and circumstance as by long-term career planning.

Internal promotion accounted for around 40% of first-time appointments, spanning planned succession, unexpected vacancies, and step-ups from HR Director or regional HR leadership roles. Only 15% were through planned succession.

External hires represented a comparable 38% of appointments, most commonly through executive search, with network referrals also playing a meaningful role.

A further 16% of respondents were initially appointed as interim or acting CHROs before being confirmed.

Figure 1: By what method were you appointed to your first CHRO role?



“I was known to the CEO and the Board – my work was known and I was seen as a safe pair of hands.”

2. Predominant career pathways into the CHRO role

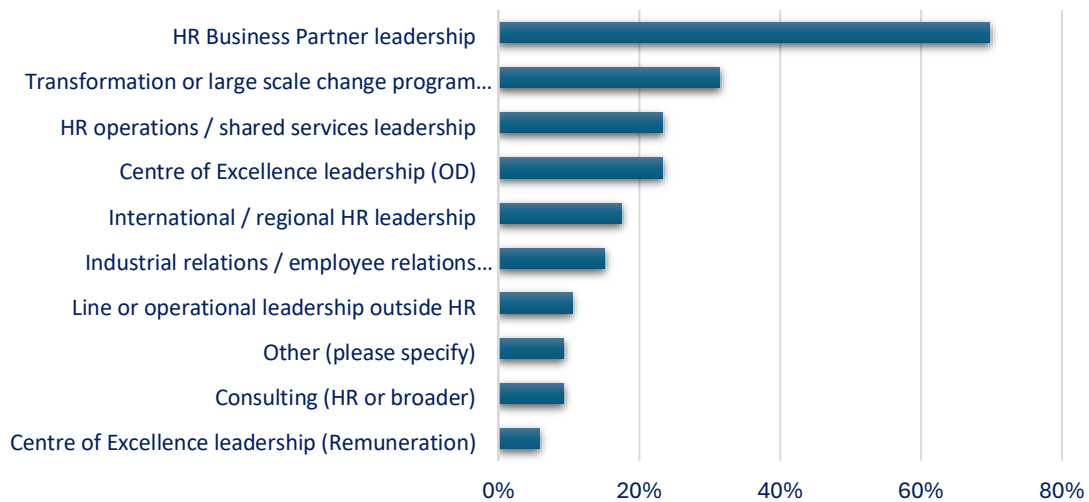
By a clear margin, HR Business Partner leadership was the most common career pathway into a first CHRO role, cited by around 70% of respondents.

Alongside business partnering, leading enterprise transformation and change featured strongly, with 31% of respondents identifying this experience as a defining part of their pathway.

Broader functional leadership also played an important role. HR operations leadership and Centre of Excellence roles in organisational development were common stepping stones. These experiences frequently complemented business partnering, rather than replacing it.

The data suggests that the most common pathway to the CHRO role is not linear progression through HR specialisms, but a career anchored in business partnering and strengthened through transformation, change and enterprise-wide leadership experience.

Figure 2: Which experiences best describe your pathway to your first CHRO role?



“I held a range of Centre of Excellence and HR Business Partner roles and critically led large-scale change. That responsibility secured senior sponsors who were instrumental in my first CHRO appointment.”

3. Preparedness for the first CHRO role

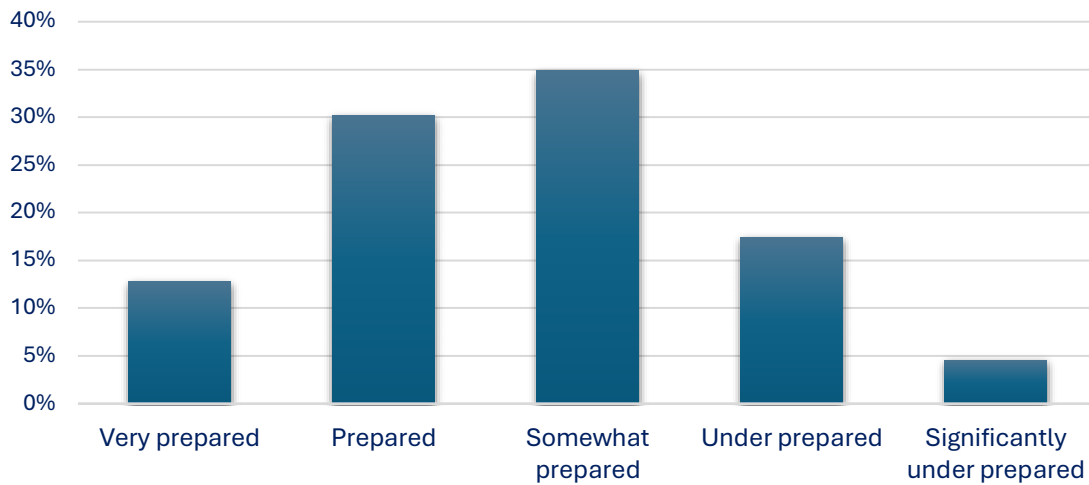
Despite extensive experience in HR, most respondents did not feel fully prepared when they stepped into their first CHRO role.

Around three in five respondents described themselves as not fully prepared, while only two in five felt prepared or very prepared overall. This pattern held true even though the vast majority brought deep HR capability into the role, with most having more than 10 years' experience in HR and many having led multiple HR disciplines prior to their appointment.

Taken together, the findings suggest that deep HR experience alone does not equate to feeling prepared for the CHRO role. While respondents were largely confident in their HR expertise, many underestimated the step change involved.

Several respondents noted that, in hindsight, they were capable, but not fully alive to what the role would ask of them.

Figure 3: How prepared did you feel for your first CHRO role?



“I thought I knew what the requirements of the role were, but the reality was very different.”

4. The Shift from Functional Leader to Enterprise Leader

CHROs consistently described the challenge of the fundamental shift from functional leader to enterprise leader. The three areas most frequently cited as difficult in this transition were business and financial acumen, strategic mindset, and executive influence and judgement.

<p>Business & Financial Acumen:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nearly 40% cited the need to build financial fluency (P&L, balance sheet, capital allocation). 27% emphasised understanding business models and value drivers. Gaps included contributing to non-HR executive discussions (34%) and linking people initiatives to enterprise value (15%). 	<p><i>“Get someone in Finance to help you understand business drivers immediately”</i></p>
<p>Strategic Mindset:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 35% highlighted the shift from functional HR leadership to enterprise leadership. Many noted the realisation that the CHRO role is fundamentally that of a business executive first, not just the head of HR. 	<p><i>“Understand that the primary job isn’t leading HR. You are a business exec first and foremost”</i></p>
<p>Executive Influence & Judgement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Board and committee effectiveness was the biggest executive presence challenge (57%). Key influence needs were enabling effective executive decision-making (39%) and navigating executive alignment (37%). 	<p><i>“Invest a disproportionate amount of time in your relationship with the CEO and Executive peers”</i></p>

5. Governance and Board Exposure Are Major Stretch Areas

For most first-time CHROs, stepping into the role brought immediate exposure to the Board, often for the first time. In fact, 78% reported direct interaction with the Board in their first CHRO role. Engagement with Boards and committees, particularly Remuneration Committees, was described as one of the steepest learning curves, with governance and risk capability gaps and Board relationships emerging as the key themes.

Governance & Risk Knowledge Gaps:

- 78% of first-time CHROs had direct Board interaction, often with limited prior governance exposure.
- The steepest learning areas were working with the Board/RemCo (45%), executive remuneration (42%), and CHRO governance accountabilities (38%).
- Investor expectations on people issues (30%) and ESG/ people-related risk (29%) were also significant gaps.

“My first board meeting was a shock – I realised quickly how much I still had to learn.”

Board Relationships:

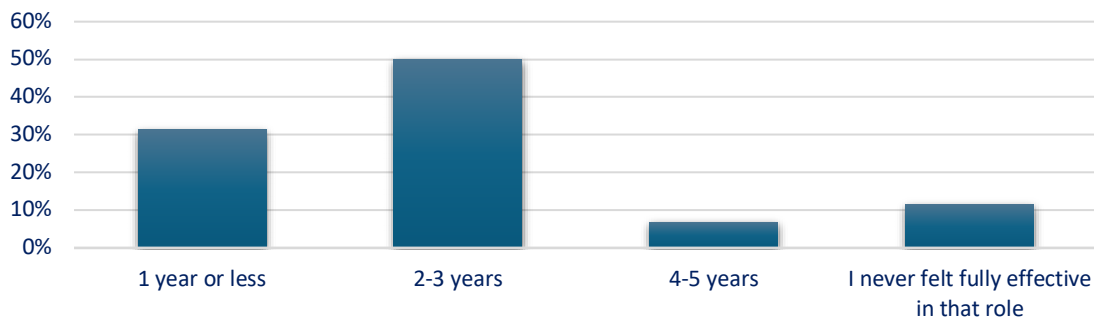
- The Board Chair was cited as one of the hardest stakeholder relationships to build (26%), alongside executive peers (26%).
- Early alignment with the RemCo Chair was seen as critical.
- Participants stressed the importance of being aligned not just with the CEO, but with the Board, given the impact Board dynamics can have on CHRO effectiveness.

“I had no prior experience in executive rem in a highly regulated environment... wasn't sure how to navigate RemCo or work with the Board.”

6. Effectiveness Takes Longer Than Expected

Becoming fully effective in the CHRO role is rarely a short ramp. Around half of respondents took two to three years to feel genuinely confident and effective, while only around a third felt effective within the first year. 12% never felt fully effective in their first CHRO role.

Figure 4: How long did it take you to feel effective in your first CHRO role?



“It took me far longer than I expected to feel on top of the role.”

7. The Impact is Real – No One Should Navigate It Alone

The transition to CHRO is not only professional, but deeply personal. Nearly half of respondents reported struggling with the identity shift from HR leader to enterprise executive, with imposter syndrome and self-doubt common even among highly capable leaders.

Just over 40% cited the emotional and cognitive load of the role as one of the hardest aspects of the transition. Additionally, 36% noted “managing personal resilience, pace and energy” as critical.

What helped most was trusted support. More than 70% leaned heavily on their CEO or executive peers, while many also turned to experienced CHRO mentors, coaches and external peer networks.

“It can be a very lonely role if you don’t have people outside the organisation you trust.”

Conclusion

These reflections point to a simple but often overlooked truth. The step into the CHRO role is a complex leadership transition, and it deserves to be treated as such.

When we acknowledge the scale of the shift, from functional excellence to enterprise influence we create the conditions for CHROs to succeed sooner and more sustainably.

This research is offered in that spirit. It is not a prescription, but a practical contribution from those who have been there to those who are preparing for, or already carrying, the role. If it helps make the path clearer, the conversations more honest, or the journey less isolating, then it has served its purpose.

Chief HR started with a simple idea

To create a community where CHROs could connect, learn and lead together, without sales pitches, suppliers or surface level conversations.

It has evolved into a peer-led national network of senior HR leaders who value discretion, practical insight and genuine connection.

You can find more information at www.chiefhr.com.au

AUSTRALIA'S FASTEST GROWING CHRO NETWORK

ChiefHR™

OUR MISSION

Advocate



Together we advocate...

- for the commercial value of investing in people;
- for the future of work that we want to inhabit.

Collaborate



Collaboratively we...

- provide a safe space for peer mentoring and support;
- sharing our knowledge and best practice to create greater impact.

Elevate



Our aim is to elevate...

- the role of the Chief Human Resource Officer (CHRO) to its full potential;
- demonstrate CHRO value to Boards;
- develop and mentor emerging CHRO talent.

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