

# LESS IS

**Three veteran CHROs  
describe the transformative  
power of eliminating HR  
concepts that are no longer  
purpose-built for this era.**



# MORE

The work of HR leaders is never done. There are always more responsibilities being heaped on their plates, and their C-suite peers often turn to them to solve the new problems that have made leadership so much harder in recent years. In addition, the function is overrun with “shiny new objects”—the latest research, technology, and approaches that promise to transform HR.

To shift the conversation away from “more,” *People + Strategy* asked three veteran CHROs who recently stepped down from their roles to share their insights on what should warrant less attention going forward. What are the concepts that are no longer built for this new era? What ideas are past their expiration date? And how should HR leaders rebalance their portfolios to provide greater focus and drive impact?



# Surveys, Job Postings, and Interviews Are Prime Targets for Innovation

by Kevin Cox

CHRO for 25 years at the Pepsi Bottling Group, American Express, and GE

One of the defining features of the CHRO role—a job I held for 25 years across three companies—is that you are barraged with inbounds. You have to play a lot of defense, including dealing with the crisis of the day. There’s a lot of noise. But we are also expected to play offense. One of the most difficult aspects of the role is figuring out where you can get leverage and how you can make a difference.

My focus was always on how I could help drive organizational performance and make the company more capable, effective, and likely to meet its growth objectives. You have to create the space to do that, and you have to be clear about what you are not going to do and the shiny new objects you are not going to chase.

By personality, I’m a middle-of-the-road guy, and I’m deeply allergic to hype. I’ve always been wary of anything that smacks of hyperbole. Though I confess to starting out as skeptical, I do believe it is important to pay attention to new trends, because the last thing you want to do in this role is to get stuck in your path and ignore new ideas and approaches. I intentionally tried to keep the ball in the center of the fairway, even as external factors, including politics and broader societal challenges, have come to play a bigger role in organizations.

After stepping down recently from a quarter-century in CHRO roles, I think there are several areas that warrant greater skepticism because of their limited usefulness. In fact, these areas are ripe for innovation—we could use a few new and better mousetraps. In almost every case, I believe artificial intelligence will play a long-term role in elevating their impact.

## Culture Surveys: AI Can Create Better Assessments by Analyzing More Sources

Companies have used these surveys—though they go by different names, including climate surveys and organizational health surveys—for decades. But I’ve long wondered about their accuracy. What are the most effective questions to ask employees to gauge how they are feeling about the company and the culture? Will people really tell you the truth? Do people who are inclined to fill out surveys have a particular bias, one way or another? I think culture surveys have been an imperfect method, but they are the only method we’ve really had.

Those gave way to innovations around more frequent “pulse surveys,” instead of a big annual polling of employees. Technology has evolved so that I can ask a handful of questions of my whole workforce every week or even every day. In theory, the process becomes more agile and more useful. But there remain fundamental questions about their accuracy, in the same way election polls are considered less accurate now than in the past. There can be big gaps between what people say, what they think, and how they behave.

That said, there is a persistent and legitimate interest in culture. Boards, for example, are seeing cultures through the lens of risk management. They are saying to CHROs, in effect, “Prove to me that your culture is healthy. Prove to me that your culture is not toxic. Prove to me that people will speak truth to power.”

I’ve been a board member, and I understand the hunger for those answers. But surveys are not only imperfect, they also are narrow. It would be like going for an annual checkup and only having your blood pressure tested. We owe our leadership, including our boards, a more complete picture of the strengths and gaps in our cultures, and AI could help provide a more accurate assessment of cultures by taking in and analyzing information from a lot of different sources.

AI could do “sentiment mining” from emails, internal message boards, and presentations. It could discern what’s going on inside a company with a greater level of accuracy than surveys. Obviously, there are some privacy questions that would have to be navigated. But I think it’s possible to get a more accurate read on culture by using tools that are becoming so effective at spotting patterns in seemingly disparate data.

## Internal Job Postings: Do They Take Leadership Off the Hook for Hiring?

In theory, internal job postings are attractive—they democratize the internal marketplace and make it easier for people to raise their hand for jobs so they could broaden their skill sets. It’s great for employees, but I’ve also seen that there are downsides.

It is, in effect, a way to perfect mediocrity of talent across the organization because it takes leadership off the hook. I say that because I believe it is the job of leaders to decide the highest and best use of individual employees, rather than leaving it to them to decide what they want to do, often with far from ideal information.

Granted, leaders can’t do that in large companies below the most senior ranks of employees. And, in theory, internal job postings create a market where buyers and sellers meet. I’m in favor of that. But the problem I see today is the lack of rigor and specificity in job descriptions. Most are very generic, and they focus on activities and less on outcomes.

So the internal talent marketplace is a great concept, but I don’t think it’s being executed as well as it could be in many companies. It’s important to get this right. The next generations of talent want to be understood. They want to be seen, and they would like some sense of self-determination. They’re also more wary of bureaucracy.

So this era requires giving employees a greater sense of agency and expressing what they’re good at and what they want

to do. We need something that's more effective in helping their companies understand that better. This is probably another area where AI can make a difference by writing more sophisticated and complete job descriptions, starting with a greater focus on the expected outcomes of different roles.

### 360 Interviews: Technology Tools Often Add Bias and Remove Subtleties

To be sure, there is real value in understanding an employee's strengths and development needs from someone other than their supervisor. I'm a big fan of tools that will help people better understand how they are showing up with their peers and leaders, and whether there are gaps between what they intend and others' perceptions of them.

Given how matrixed so many organizations are becoming, understanding those gaps is increasingly important to help employees improve their self-awareness and performance, and to help them realize their potential. You also need a system that provides checks and balances for people who focus on managing up, at the expense of working well with their peers and managing their teams.

While I'm a fan of the concept, I'm not a fan of the computer-enabled tools that are often used to gather opinions about an employee. One problem is that employees are often allowed to choose the, say, 10 people to fill out a survey about them—in effect, cherry-picking the people who are likely to give better scores and ratings.

Another problem is that while these surveys have become more efficient for everyone—as they are shorter and less painful to complete—they lack nuance and subtleties. They are directional, at best. Finally, there is no shared standard among the survey group about what a particular score means. A score of three on some particular behavior, for example, can mean very different things to different people.

One solution is to hire a trained professional to do those 10 interviews, as they can press for specifics. The problem there, of course, is that this approach is expensive and difficult to scale beyond the ranks of the most senior leaders.

AI may provide a better long-term solution. Perhaps it could mine email exchanges and other communications be-

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### The Power of 'I Will ...'

Over my career in the CHRO role, the most effective tool I used to help sort through what mattered most was to write down what I considered the purpose of my job, starting with “I will ...”

I never showed that to anyone else, including my CEOs, because it was a contract that I wanted with myself and that would help guide my decisions every day. It's what I hoped people would say about my accomplishments in the role once I moved on.

If you think about that statement on the front end and then manage your time to that, it helps you stay focused. You'll not only be more likely to accomplish something special, but you'll also be happier and more content in the pursuit of those goals. —Kevin Cox

tween people for insights and use them to provide more texture and nuance to 360s. I'm confident that AI ultimately will help make 360s more meaningful and valuable.

### Recruiting: Tap into AI to Conduct Early-Stage Job Interviews

I believe the final step in a hiring process should always require a meeting—ideally in person, rather than virtual—between the hiring leader and the candidate. Nothing can replace that. There has to be some chemistry, and the person who will be managing the new employee has to feel accountable for their decision. If they are going to bet on someone, they need to do everything they can to help the person succeed.

That said, there are ways that AI could easily get more quickly to the core questions that you might have about somebody in the initial rounds of interviews to help narrow the candidate pool. It's not about trading messages with a bot; I doubt that could create a good experience. Perhaps that AI conversation could be done with avatars. The point is that I believe early-stage interviews could be done more effectively through AI. They would be able to guide the conversations in ways that probe more deeply on different topics and areas of expertise, and thereby avoid the problem of a recruiter interviewing everyone the same way.



# Set Aside Incremental, Low-Value Work to Tackle High-Impact Transformation

by Susan Podlogar

CHRO of MetLife from 2017 to 2024

Six years ago, not long after I became CHRO of MetLife, I was asked in an interview how the role of chief human resources officer had changed. My answer at the time: “HR is expected to provide macro solutions rather than micro solutions. It’s moving to optimizing the organization, not just a function or process, and moving to maximizing the productivity of the organization as an integrated whole.”

Now, after stepping down earlier this year from that role, my ambition for the function remains the same. While we have made some incredible progress, there remains a persistent gap between what is needed from HR today and what HR consistently delivers.

To be sure, HR moved to center stage during the pandemic and met the challenge, working with colleagues across the organization to weave together the tapestry of an integrated, caring solution. This was a defining moment, a proud moment. But it was more of a moment than the beginning of systematic change.

The pressures on CHROs have not let up, and in fact have intensified. All employees, including our C-suite colleagues, are looking to their HR leaders to provide clarity, direction, and stability in these tumultuous times. The challenge of optimizing the organization is growing exponentially.

How do we do that? The answer is not to simply work harder; we are at capacity already and cannot absorb more into our current portfolio. We need a rebalancing—letting go of or decelerating some outdated approaches while accelerating others, plus making a fundamental mindset shift.

## What We Need to Decelerate or Leave Behind

**Processes with low value-to-time-invested ratios.** Two examples of this come to mind: performance review calibration and compensation planning. Both consume enormous amounts of time with actions that primarily look in the rearview mirror rather than preparing staff or the business for the journey forward.

We need to view this work through the lens of whether the time and effort expended truly creates value for the business. These processes, among others, are ripe for technological advancement. HR teams should devote some offsite time to reviewing key processes and determine if they are adding differentiated value to the business and whether the time required is worth the effort. If not, identify the action plans to streamline.

**Traditional talent management.** I spent many hours in succession meetings discussing the strengths and development areas for senior executives, and then setting a development plan for them, including exposure to more opportunities. The next year, we often saw incremental improvement. Sound familiar?

While these conversations can be helpful, they are no longer sufficient. Succession should be a systematic, intentional desti-

nation planning process with intensified talent rhythms. That starts with clarity around a handful of foundational questions:

- What is the destination role we see for this person?
- What is the time frame?
- What specific role or roles will they need to get there?

This type of detailed planning increases the complexity of the talent discussion. However, a more intentional and realistic approach will lead to better preparedness for critical talent.

**Incremental programs.** There is no room or time in HR’s portfolio anymore for incremental, customized programs for specific groups, such as a recognition program for legal affairs or a new diversity program for IT. Leveraging the scale of the enterprise now is paramount.

The work ahead for HR should be transformative and not incremental. It means applying a broader lens to the organizational construct, preparing talent, defining skills, integrating new technology, and energizing the culture—all in service of realizing the potential of the organization.

These are examples of processes that have long been perceived as value drivers for the HR function. But these and others should all be pressure-tested with the same question: Are they ultimately the value drivers of the collective organization? Ideally, with less time required for these outdated and incremental approaches, HR leaders will have more bandwidth to focus their energies elsewhere.

## Higher-Impact Work to Accelerate the Business

**Portfolio management.** This muscle requires the discipline to make trade-offs and reallocate HR resources. It requires a selflessness in HR teams to start with what is best for the organization, rather than protecting focus areas. The payoff is worth the effort, even if it requires a few tries to help the team build this new muscle, with greater credibility for the function. Priorities get funded, and trust and enterprise impact become by-products of deep conversations about organizational priorities.

**Technology/AI.** We know that technology—and AI specifically—can shape new ways of working, add value, and create efficiencies. But to reap the full benefits of technology’s possibilities, HR must be at the forefront to influence how technology is integrated. If HR sees technology as someone else’s work, HR will have missed a huge opportunity. To drive these discussions, rather than follow others, HR leaders should be students of technology and how it can influence work, strategy, and culture. Focus on opportunities that will have the greatest business impact and look for quick wins to build momentum.

**Talent marketplaces.** I have seen several leading organizations implement progressive, AI-driven talent marketplaces to create internal gig economies. In my years in HR, this democra-



tized talent practice has had profound positive outcomes for the employee experience matched with organizational needs. Those outcomes include busting the hierarchy of access to development, surfacing dormant skills, and creating a culture evolution.

**Burnout.** HR leaders are exhausted from all the demands on the function in the last several years, and those pressures show no sign of slowing down. Plus, we have to be “always on” for others who are dealing with their own fatigue. After retiring recently, I realized that I was oblivious to the impact of this “slow burn” until I really rested.

To show up with energy for others, we must replenish ourselves first. I am an ardent student of human performance, so when I retired, I did every baseline test possible: bloodwork, DEXA scan, Vo2 max, resting metabolism, etc. Find your baseline, commit, and watch your progress. Personal energy establishes the roots of individual and organizational performance.

**Coaching.** I was a competitive swimmer when I was younger, and I fundamentally believe that coaches can bring out the best in us and help make us ready for the future so we can better contribute to the team. Coaching is fundamentally about potential. So why is coaching in business often seen as selective and remedial? We are doing better lately, as I have seen the quality and impact of internal and external coaching go up. But we can do more to democratize coaches for all.

### The Need for Proactive Thinking

This rebalancing of focus and priorities for the HR function will require a new mindset that leads to optimizing the entire organization rather than playing a supporting-actor role. That requires proactive, next-order thinking. We must always be looking around corners and sharing our point of view about

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what the organization should be paying attention to and how to execute against those priorities.

We need to have a fingertip feel for the skills needed from the next generation and how those map to their expectations. We have to integrate technology to create meaningful efficiencies and customer value that will bring out the vitality of the organization.

Ultimately, it is about having a systems mindset so HR creates end-to-end solutions that would otherwise be suboptimized in narrow swim lanes. HR is at the forefront of defining the work and releasing the energy of the organization within this systems context. This is where true value for the business is created.

The challenge comes down to the specific priorities in your HR portfolio and how you are showing up to the business. Holding up a mirror to where you are spending your time is the greatest and most critical gift you can provide for your HR function, employees, and company to help everyone thrive in these unprecedented times.

This is the best time to be in HR, and one of the most difficult times to be in HR. For those willing to break the traditional HR lens, the future is yours. You will shape the profession, you will shape the experience of the next generation of employees, and you will shape the future of business.



## Rethink Generic Culture Documents, Staff ‘Happiness,’ and Work-from-Anywhere

by Katie Burke

Former chief people officer of HubSpot

**H**R leaders have a front-row seat to watch trends in management and leadership come and go. That article that went viral? We read it and sent it to our teams. The podcast where a founder reveals their best hack for hiring hundreds more engineers? We listened and added the insight to our approach.

I’m old enough to have had Jack Welch as a professor, and I’ve seen a lot while overseeing HR at HubSpot for more than a decade. Now that I’ve had a few months off to rest and reflect on that time—before moving on to my next CHRO role—I’m more convinced than ever that a few long-held beliefs and approaches in HR are past their prime, including:

### 1. Culture Documents that Try to Appeal to All

After the success of the original and widely lauded Netflix Culture deck and the HubSpot Culture Code (for which I have great personal affection), more companies started codifying their cultures and publishing their values. The impulse is a good one, but the problem is that they all started to sound the same.

In an effort not to rub any candidate the wrong way, most culture decks adopted similar language, as in, “We want to work with smart people with low egos on high-impact problems with urgency and inclusion.” Can you think of a company or someone you would want to work with who doesn’t want that? Exactly, and that is the heart of the problem.

In the musical “Hamilton,” Alexander Hamilton asks his archrival Aaron Burr, “If you stand for nothing, Burr, what will you fall for?” The same question should be asked of companies about their cultures. If you try to appeal to everyone, the culture document will have less impact as a veritable sorting hat for candidates and as a guidepost to help your leaders make decisions.

I think we’ll see more companies do what MongoDB did in outlining specifically what their culture values are not, along with a return to more opinionated leadership principles that help meaningfully differentiate behaviors for candidates and employees alike.

A good indicator of success should not be the headlines or number of views a deck generates, but rather whether it creates a meaningful moment of reflection for current and prospective employees on whether it’s the right place for them? Cultures that appeal to everyone feel better on launch day but create way more friction down the line because they don’t actually inform behavior or create meaningful strategic differences for the company.

## 2. A Singular Focus on Employee Happiness

Over the past 10 years, there’s been a core focus on employee engagement, employee happiness, and employee experience. I believe elements of this focus will remain, but not without an equally important focus on impact, productivity, and business results. That will include paying more attention to what top talent expects from their employers and more tools to help managers focus on and discuss productivity in ongoing conversations with direct reports. The global adoption of AI will increase the speed of this change.

Employee happiness is at a four-year low, largely driven by significant layoffs, frustration around lack of career growth, and differing opinions on return to work. Rather than reflexively seeing those as problems to be addressed, CEOs and CHROs are now pointing out that work is ... well ... work. Employee engagement is critical, but it has to be seen as a driver of productivity and impact, rather than a standalone goal. This shift includes a heightened focus on not just measuring performance but also taking action to hold persistent underperformers accountable.

I anticipate that more boards will be scrutinizing metrics to track underperformers—such as the number of low performers still with the organization after, say, two evaluation periods with subpar reviews. This tougher standard—whether leaders can make the tough calls on people—may also become a greater component of how executives and leaders across the business are assessed and rewarded. Given the faster pace of business, organizations cannot afford the implicit tax they pay in carrying low performers.

**“Given the faster pace of business, organizations cannot afford the implicit tax they pay in carrying low performers.”**

## 3. The False Promise of Work-from-Anywhere

The phrase was embraced as a tagline by many companies during the Great Resignation to attract talent in a competitive market. The premise sounded amazing: Do yoga in Bali while logging in from your laptop! What could possibly go wrong?

This was a false promise from the start. I’m a fan of remote work and believe it can be successful at scale in many organizations. But promising work from anywhere is not tenable for most organizations and ignores many important local employment laws, to say nothing of personal tax obligations, work visas, and other nuisances of compliance and legality.

But even with the help from tech solutions, this promise ignores the practical realities of collaborating across time zones, meeting the needs of customers in core regions, and managers navigating conversations around output and expectations.

To be clear, I’m not predicting the end of remote work. I think it will continue to exist and thrive long-term, but in smaller pockets and with more restrictions than during the Great Resignation. This topic will inevitably result in more teeth-grinding frustration among employers and employees,

The tug of war is playing out in headlines, such as Dell saying that remote employees will not be eligible for promotion and that Salesforce, Apple, and Google are tracking badge swipes. I suspect companies will sharpen their policies over time to clarify the flexibility they offer and the implications for career growth, leaving employees to vote with their feet. But the days of “hoping” people will be excited to battle traffic and be back in person “for the good of the company” are gone, as are false promises that your time zone, hours, or work location has no implications for your career growth or ability to contribute to a team.

## Tailor Your HR Messaging to the Decline in Employee Attention Spans

With these three macro trends expiring, why not take advantage of this moment to update our approach on communications as people leaders? Marketers focus a lot on attention spans. Studies show the average amount of time an individual can focus on something has declined from 2.5 minutes to 45 seconds. And yet, when it comes to sharing updates on benefits, change management, or instructions on performance reviews, most core HR teams still communicate in a manner closer to “War and Peace” than TikTok.

With the shortening of attention spans and the massive adoption of AI and audio and video content, I think we’ll see the days of 14-page PDFs coming to an end, replaced by employee-generated summaries of key takeaways or by technology that scans and contextualizes key organizationwide initiatives.

One of my longtime engineering colleagues at HubSpot said it well: “When you’re communicating with engineers, we generally are skeptical of what we are reading and wish it was a third as long and five times as clear and less corporate.”

So many trends in management and leadership get recycled over the years, but I think there are some clear practices that have truly passed their prime and merit retirement. And, like a good spring cleaning, parting ways with them will leave room for new and innovative ideas to help us meet the business needs and employee needs of the future, not the past. ■■