

# AHEAD OF THE CURVE

## Agile thinking and innovative HR initiatives define the achievements of the 2020 CHRO of the Year Award finalists.

By Marta Chmielowicz

In the past year, the business world has had to face unprecedented obstacles. A pandemic rocked the global economy, halting travel and forcing companies to indefinitely shut their doors. Civil unrest in the U.S. followed, propelling a national conversation about race and diversity and putting the spotlight on the corporate response. And now, businesses are forced to navigate the safe transition back to the office in a time of ongoing uncertainty.

During all of this disruption, HR leaders have led the charge. They have rolled up their sleeves and collaborated across the business to respond to crisis after crisis and reengineer the new world of work. Now more than ever, they have demonstrated their role as a strategic business partner with a critical seat at the table. From switching to remote work seemingly overnight to inventing new ways to manage, incent, engage, and develop employees, HR has embraced agility and employee empowerment to usher in a new era of business.

To honor the contributions of such leaders, *HRO Today* is proud to present the finalists of the annual CHRO of the Year Awards.

FINALIST

**Katy Avila**  
Vice President of HR  
Worldwide Express



Since she first joined Worldwide Express in 2016, Katy Avila has built the HR function from the ground up during a period of hyper growth. Under her leadership, the company experienced massive expansion through M&A activity, increasing from 300 employees to more than 1,500. Avila built a sophisticated and innovative team of 25 to partner with the business to manage change, drive a strong company culture, and elevate employee engagement and experience, resulting in a best place to work. Her vision and strategic planning led to the development and implementation of new programs, processes, and systems to facilitate the recruitment, development, assessment, and retention of high-performing talent. Recently during the pandemic, Avila was an integral part of the taskforce that navigated the complexities and challenges that arose while operating in the new environment.

**FINALIST**

**Elisa Bannon-Jones**  
**Former Executive Vice President and Chief HR Officer, Frontier Communications**  
**Currently Chief People Officer, Pep Boys**



Elisa Bannon-Jones brings a sharp business focus to her role as chief HR officer at Frontier Communications, serving as a bridge between the company's human capital and executive leadership team. She distinguishes herself in her employee-centric, data-driven, and future-focused approach to people management, ensuring that all initiatives are aligned to greater business strategy and deliver positive ROI. Among her key priorities was the transformation of HR into functional centers of excellence, which significantly improved the labor relations function's ability to manage a unionized workforce. Another was an executive succession planning initiative designed to retain and strengthen next-level leadership talent through clear, data-driven development plans and paths to success.

**FINALIST**

**Mandy Clark**  
**Vice President and Head of HR**  
**Sierra Nevada Corp.**



In only a year since joining Sierra Nevada Corporation, a fast-growing company that has been recognized as one of the most innovative companies in the space industry and one of the top woman-owned federal contractors in the U.S., Mandy Clark has transformed the HR function and increased its impact as a strategic partner to every business line. Under her direction, the HR team has influenced several significant talent strategy investments that were implemented this year without missing a beat, despite the challenges of the global pandemic. She found success in advancing the function to suit SNC's ambitious growth agenda, while instituting programs to keep the entire SNC family safe and prosperous in these challenging times.

**FINALIST**

**Kim DiBello-Heintz**  
**Executive Vice President and Chief HR Officer**  
**Clear Channel Outdoors**



Kim DiBello-Heintz guided the separation of Clear Channel Outdoor from its parent company, creating an entirely new in-house HR function and doubling the size of the HR team. DiBello-Heintz works to make the HR team as accessible as possible to its employees. To this end, she transformed the benefits enrollment and onboarding processes to enhance the employee experience and provide a personal, supportive touch. In addition to championing a leadership development program that keeps employees engaged and motivated, she also introduced a number of diversity initiatives, including creating an effort to source and recruit diverse talent as well as programs to support military veterans. As a result of these efforts, employee engagement scores have increased and turnover has decreased.

**FINALIST**

**Mike Fenlon**  
Chief People Officer  
PwC U.S.



Mike Fenlon has been a key driver in fostering a culture of growth and learning across PwC's U.S. and global workforce. He played an instrumental role in the company's \$3 billion "New World, New Skills" initiative, providing employees with opportunities to engage in workplace-based, digital upskilling programs and develop individualized learning pathways to prepare them for digital transformation. From introducing a mobile learning app to developing an advanced skill-building leadership program, Fenlon's tech-driven learning initiatives have engaged over 95 percent of the firm's workforce and upskilled nearly 55,000 employees in the U.S. in a single year.

**FINALIST**

**Lisa Foust**  
Chief People and Engagement Officer  
John Muir Health



Faced with an organization undergoing a significant transformation period, Lisa Foust spearheaded a strategic partnership with Optum, a subsidiary of UnitedHealth, to lower expenses and help John Muir Health remain competitive in the healthcare market. As a result of her expert leadership, communications, change management, and partnership skills, John Muir Health was able to cut \$300 million in staffing expenses over a three-year period.

**FINALIST**

**Jill Geimer**  
Managing Director and Head of HR  
Ecentria



With more than 25 years of HR experience, Jill Geimer has led Ecentria, the parent company of OpticsPlanet, to its position as an award-winning best place to work. Thanks to her influence, OpticsPlanet prioritizes employee development and advancement, offering an internal apprentice program that allows high potential employees the opportunity to work in a different job or department for 90 days. In fact, most of the company's upper-level roles are filled internally. Diversity and inclusion are also a major organizational priority; a robust international recruiting program welcomes employees of all backgrounds and employee workshops allow workers to engage with diverse guest speakers and learn about each other.

**FINALIST**

**Courtney Graham**  
**Chief People Officer**  
**Four Winds Interactive**



Courtney Graham has demonstrated time and time again that she is a passionate, engaged, and inspiring leader. She has worked toward an inclusive and authentic workplace culture at Four Winds Interactive, leading a listening tour and reaching out to each individual employee to identify organizational strengths and weaknesses. Based on these conversations, feedback from company leaders, and employee engagement metrics, she developed a people strategy that prioritized employee development, diversity and inclusion, and data-driven action. Thanks to her efforts, engagement scores rose by 1,000 percent and the company grew by 40 percent in merely two years.

**FINALIST**

**Kristin Gwinner**  
**Executive Vice President and Chief HR Officer**  
**Chico's FAS Inc.**



A diverse and inclusive workplace is Kristin Gwinner's top priority. With an executive team and board of directors composed of 84 percent and 50 percent women, respectively, Chico's FAS exhibits a demonstrated commitment to diversity and women's advancement. To support this culture, Gwinner has worked to ensure that her company's benefit offerings are inclusive of its employees' multi-faceted lives and beliefs, introducing additional holidays and paid days off and overseeing a new parental leave and adoption leave policy. In addition, she provides unconscious bias training to every one of the company's 23,000 employees and focuses corporate philanthropy initiatives on women's health, wellness, and empowerment.

**FINALIST**

**Tammy Heller**  
**Senior Vice President and Chief HR Officer**  
**Perspecta**



In 2018, Tammy Heller joined newly-merged public company Perspecta as the Chief HR Officer. Her first task was to build an HR function almost completely from the ground up all while trying to integrate three very different cultures. After the inaugural year, the company and the HR organization found their stride, successfully completing large HR integration activities including moving from three HRIS systems and applicant tracking systems to one and implementing compensation and benefits programs. Perspecta's innovative HR strategy has had significant business impacts: voluntary attrition has been steadily dropping, engagement scores rose by 12 points year over year, and Perspecta has met or exceeded revenue targets for nine consecutive quarters.

FINALIST

**Larry Indovina**  
Former Executive Vice President of HR, Fleet Complete  
Currently Chief People Officer, Top Hat



Larry Indovina helped Fleet Complete grow from an unknown start-up to a leading, multinational employer brand that operates across 17 countries. While many of his initiatives were costly, he fought to demonstrate the value of investing in employees, reinforcing a customer-centric culture of transparency and accountability. Some of Indovina's key initiatives include a new parental leave program; a custom leadership training program that allows for internal career growth; and data-driven employee engagement initiatives that eliminate key friction points. These programs have enabled the company to achieve six times higher revenue in five years, from \$20 million in 2015 to \$125 million in 2020.

FINALIST

**Amber Kennelly**  
Chief HR Officer  
HUB International



Prior to Amber Kennelly's arrival at HUB International, HR wasn't yet recognized as a strategic business partner across HUB's six regions and over 450 offices. In a short period of time, Kennelly established herself as a key member of HUB's executive management team, driving board-level talent conversations and championing the first cohort of "LEAD," an accelerated leadership program, and "Managing with Impact." These programs have been delivered to more than 400 managers across different regions, strengthening the company's manager effectiveness and leadership pipeline. In addition to leading the adoption of Workday for recruiting and talent management, Kennelly and HUB's marketing team drove its talent brand development and support of the people strategy as an important part of merger and acquisition conversations—helping drive growth across the organization.

FINALIST

**Dave Kozel**  
Executive Vice President and Chief HR Officer  
PVH Corp.



Dave Kozel is committed to investing in people and empowering his employees to bring their best selves to work. To that end, he implemented PVH's first employee engagement survey, "PVH Listens," which he uses to develop action plans and identify areas of improvement. This strategy has been met with promising results; in response to the most recent survey, 515 managers globally submitted 1,027 action plans to improve scores. Actions ranged from establishing buddy programs for new hires to increasing cross-functional communication and highlighting associates for exceptional performance in public gatherings. Kozel also spearheaded PVH's diversity and inclusion program, introducing business resource groups for minority employees; rolling out mandatory training for leaders; and partnering with universities that enable a more diverse candidate pipeline.

FINALIST

**Chatelle Lynch**  
Senior Vice President and Chief People Officer  
McAfee



Chatelle Lynch successfully led the charge for McAfee to achieve gender pay parity in only one year. After an initial 2018 global audit of employee data analyzed by job code, grade level, and location and controlled for pay differentiators such as performance, tenure, and experience, Lynch's team identified a pay gap in nine out of 45 countries. The company resolved these pay gaps by Equal Pay Day (April 1, 2019), and continues to uphold pay parity. She has also launched a robust diversity program and joined the "CEO Action for Diversity and Inclusion" group. Thanks to her efforts, McAfee's annual employee engagement survey revealed women scored 17 percent higher than the McAfee average and minorities scored 192 percent higher than the McAfee average on job satisfaction.

FINALIST

**Stacey Martin**  
Chief HR Officer  
Omnitracs



Stacey Martin led an organizational design and effectiveness program that reshaped and flattened her company's leadership structure, empowering employees at all levels to achieve career growth by removing micromanagement and delivering faster, more reliable, and consistent communication. In support of this initiative, she spearheaded the launch of "OmniEssentials," a toolkit outlining a common set of competencies and behaviors to which employees are held accountable throughout the employee lifecycle. This transformation greatly enhanced the overall experience, improving engagement scores by 7 percent, reducing regrettable turnover by 6.8 percent (a 61 percent overall improvement), and decreasing voluntary turnover by 6.5 percent (a 48 percent overall improvement).

FINALIST

**Terilyn Juarez Monroe**  
Chief People Officer and Senior Vice President of People and Places  
Varian



When she first introduced the "Shifting the Culture" initiative at Varian, a company that has been operating for over 70 years in 33 countries, Terilyn Juarez-Monroe encountered significant headwinds at all levels of the organization. But she faced these challenges head-on, championing new cultural inclusion programs, leadership development trainings, and tools and resources to create a more diverse and inclusive company culture. Juarez-Monroe created inclusive leadership field guides, embedded diversity into talent processes, and led over 150 culture workshops that touched 75 percent of the company's 9,000 employees. As a result, the organization's employee engagement scores and culture, diversity, inclusion, and belonging indices have increased by five-plus points.

**FINALIST**

**Linda Nedelcoff**  
**Executive Vice President and Chief Strategy and HR Officer**  
**CUNA Mutual Group**



In her role as chief strategy and HR officer at CUNA Mutual Group, Linda Nedelcoff has spearheaded a focus on employee experience, championing an “Employee Experience Unit” in lieu of a traditional HR department. This mirrors a broader organizational shift to becoming more customer experience-focused, no matter who the customer may be. At the same time, she ensured that the initiatives undertaken by the employee experience team mirrored the organization’s larger push to become more agile, recruiting agile coaches to work with the leadership team to improve their processes. These efforts have enabled Nedelcoff to successfully integrate more than 100 employees into the company through a series of acquisitions.

**FINALIST**

**Barbara Polk**  
**Chief HR Officer**  
**The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts**



Upon joining the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Barbara Polk was tasked with driving cultural change in the Washington National Opera (WNO), an affiliate organization of the Kennedy Center with operations spread across three locations. Prior to her involvement, the WNO did not have a clear organizational culture or set of values that aligned with those of the Kennedy Center, leading to a strained relationship between the two entities and low levels of trust across the leadership chain. Polk dove in to repair this relationship, leveraging her transparent and open communication style to lead a “Workplace Values Task Force” that facilitated a greater sense of trust and purpose between the organizations. This cultural transformation had a significant impact for the WNO.

**FINALIST**

**Rebecca Sinclair**  
**Chief People Officer**  
**American Tire Distributors**



Rebecca Sinclair’s primary focus at American Tire Distributors (ATD) was transforming an antiquated culture by creating knowledge and learning across the organization. Using an integrated, digitally-enabled, personalized learning program that allows associates to learn at their own pace, her integrated approach to learning spans from onboarding to professional development and solidifies ATD’s people-first culture. This has not only transformed the organization’s culture, it has become a vehicle for how ATD engages with its associates. Using the platform, the organization can connect directly with each employee through leader videos and messages, drive adoption of new initiatives, and check for understanding across key business drivers. These insights allow the company to remain agile and respond to business needs quickly.

FINALIST

**Alex Smith**  
Chief HR Officer  
City of Memphis



With a focus on innovation, collaboration, accountability, and service, Alex Smith is helping position the City of Memphis as a model for a 21st century city. Under her guidance, the City of Memphis was the largest public sector implementation of Oracle HCM, a cloud-based HR management technology. Her focus on economic empowerment through workforce sustainability permeates the city's talent management, training, employee relations, employee engagement, benefits, compensation, total rewards, and diversity and inclusion initiatives.

FINALIST

**Cathy Spencer**  
Senior Vice President and Head of Human Capital  
AllianceBernstein



Cathy Spencer was instrumental in facilitating AllianceBernstein's 2018 corporate relocation from New York to Nashville—the largest initiative of its kind that the company had undertaken in its 50-year history. From site location scouting to managing on-the-ground support resources for new and existing employees in the new location, Spencer's coordination was a large reason for the move's success. During a time of unprecedented transition for the firm, Spencer was able to work one-on-one with employees to foster a culture of engagement and inclusiveness. She did this while cultivating a global HR function across 25 countries and jurisdictions, working with on-the-ground partners to manage regulatory compliance issues.

FINALIST

**Peggy Stone**  
Former Executive Vice President of HR, Jacobsen Construction Company Inc.  
Currently HR Consultant, Threshold Consulting Group



As the first woman CHRO and the first member of the HR team to sit on the executive committee in Jacobsen's 93-year history, Peggy Stone has built a high-performing, strategic HR discipline in only four years that has enhanced the company's growth, profitability, and prosperity. All annual HR initiatives are now aligned with corporate strategic initiatives and rely on a strong sense of cross-functional business partnership that did not exist prior to her leadership. In addition to enhancing the HR department's foundational tools and systems, Stone dramatically strengthened enterprise-wide training initiatives, introducing a new supervisor training course, a lengthy leadership development program, and courses to enhance Jacobsen's culture. She also tackled talent acquisition strategies, saving an estimated \$1.7 million by moving recruitment efforts in-house and developing programs for students at the high school and college level. During her tenure, total gross revenues increased 15 percent and gross profit margins increased 10.5 percent while employee engagement increased from 71 percent in 2016 to 89 percent in 2019.



**FINALIST**

**Nikki Sumper**  
**Senior Vice President and Chief HR Officer**  
**Atlantic Health System**



The challenge of improving employee access to high-quality, affordable healthcare is one that looms large over CHROs nationwide, and one that Nikki Sumper was determined to approach in a new way. Understanding that there is strength in numbers, Sumper piloted the creation of the “Healthcare Transformation Consortium” (HTC), a collaborative of seven healthcare organizations, each with self-insured employee health plans that offer employees the option to receive preferred rates at all HTC medical centers. While Atlantic Health System once provided medical benefits to approximately 24,000 team members and families, HTC is collectively providing medical benefits to nearly 75,000 employees and families in New Jersey. This has resulted in significant cost savings: In the first year, as a result of the HTC discounts, plan design, care coordination, and better in-network utilization, Atlantic saved approximately \$5 million in health insurance cost and collectively, the HTC saved over \$10 million. Thanks to Sumper’s vision, collaborative leadership, and change management skills, her organization was able to create a replicable model that drives down costs and improves health options for the greater community.

**FINALIST**

**Valerie Utsey**  
**Vice President and Chief HR Officer**  
**T-Rex Solutions LLC**



Valerie Utsey’s top priority during her three years at T-Rex Solutions has been enhancing the employee experience. Year over year, her initiatives in employee recognition, professional development, internal communications, and philanthropy have led to dramatic increases in employee engagement scores to an astounding 95 percent in 2019. While previous years saw a communication satisfaction rating as low as 50 percent, Utsey’s efforts to institute a new employee newsletter, increase communication from the CEO, and organize more frequent all-hands meetings have brought scores up to 80 percent. Likewise, professional development scores rose from 44 percent to 70 percent following Utsey’s implementation of a program that offers an annual \$5,000 budget to each employee who wishes to take continuing development courses. A new total rewards program that incorporates peer and spot recognition alongside quarterly and team awards via an online awards platform has also seen major success.

**FINALIST**

**Sean Vanderelzen**  
**Chief HR Officer**  
**Lineage Logistics**



Since joining Lineage Logistics in 2015, Sean Vanderelzen has championed the role of HR as a strategic business partner. Under his watch, Lineage has worked to promote greater diversity and inclusion in a male-dominated industry by introducing an employee resource group called “Women in Lineage Leadership” (WILL), with plans to expand its footprint and kick off additional diversity initiatives for military veterans and Hispanic team members in 2020. Corporate responsibility has also become a priority, with Vanderelzen personally spearheading a partnership with Feeding America, an organization dedicated to making food supply chains more sustainable, through which the company volunteered 3,873 hours and donated 1.7 million meals totaling more than \$170,000 in only one year.

FINALIST

**Ian Watkins**  
**Executive Vice President and Chief HR Officer**  
**Mallinckrodt Pharmaceuticals**



Ian Watkins led several key initiatives at Mallinckrodt Pharmaceuticals during a period of significant transformation. He established a succession planning playbook for strategic roles to ensure that the company had the talent it needed to drive its new business portfolio, hiring 400 to 500 people each year with an average time to fill of 55 days. This required a revitalization of the brand and employer value proposition to maintain engagement across talent pools. Watkins also oversaw an organization-wide move, building a new office and managing the relocations of over 300 employees in under 12 months.

FINALIST

**Barbie Winterbottom**  
**Former Chief People Officer, BIC Graphic**  
**Currently CEO, The Business of HR**



When she joined BIC Graphic, Barbie Winterbottom inherited an organization with no defined cultural identity and little investment in people infrastructure, programs, and solutions. A hands-on leader, Winterbottom took it upon herself to challenge the status quo and redefine the core competencies that form the foundation of her company's approach to business. The seven new "People Powers" influence everything from recruitment practices to interactions with customers: treat each other with kindness, act with integrity, raise the bar, be customer obsessed, take ownership, be curious, and learn and act as one team. Winterbottom took this one step further, reinventing the talent acquisition structure to eliminate 95 percent of agency dependency while ensuring higher quality of hire and closer connection to the organization's core competencies.

FINALIST

**Michael "Mike" Yonker**  
**Executive Vice President and Chief HR Officer**  
**Marriott Vacations Worldwide**



In a single year, Mike Yonker architected and led a massive HR transformation at Marriott Vacations Worldwide, modernizing the company's HR function from the disjointed set of legacy systems remaining after a series of acquisitions that nearly doubled the organization's size. The scope of this transformation touched every HR discipline, ranging from streamlining benefits and compensation plans to introducing a new HR operating model and adopting a Workday platform that reconfigured talent management, learning, performance management, compensation, leave, and recruitment systems. Yonker's decision to move talent acquisition in-house and orchestrate the simultaneous reinvention of each HR process resulted in an estimated \$12 million in savings for the organization—all while coming in 32 percent under budget and maintaining an employee engagement score of 80 percent. This result is a testament to his commitment to success, excellent communication and change management skills, and ability to hold teams accountable to a set of guiding principles.