



**HRO**  
TODAY

# 2021 *HRO Today* Annual Top Concerns of CHROs<sup>©</sup>

**SEVENSTEP**

Presented by Sevenstep

# introduction

This is the second edition of the *HRO Today* Annual Top Concerns of CHROs.® While there are other studies that examine the perceptions of CEOs, there are none that truly capture the outlook of chief human resources officers (CHROs). Human resources is directly responsible for workforce planning and employee needs, so the insights gained from this analysis are unique and valuable.

The Annual Top Concerns of CHROs includes insights from over 150 top HR executives in North America, EMEA, and APAC. Survey respondents were invited to participate in the study via an email invitation between August 3, 2021 and October 10, 2021. The report examines the state of HR and how COVID-19 is impacting workforce planning this year and long term. It also quantifies the extent of other concerns when planning for future staffing needs and assesses how organizations are training their workforce to meet anticipated needs. Where appropriate, comparisons are made between findings from 2020 and 2021.

The results of the 2021 *HRO Today* Annual Top Concerns of CHROs® highlight the challenges of a turbulent year. The survey was fielded as most industrialized countries continue to slowly recover from the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. To date, over 7 billion doses of the vaccine have been administered, with 40.1% of the world population fully immunized.<sup>1</sup>

However, while the threat of COVID-19 has subsided in 2021, the pandemic has had a lasting impact on HR teams across the world. After massive layoffs, furloughs, and shutdowns in 2020, many organizations are struggling to fill critical talent gaps in 2021. CHROs in industries like healthcare and logistics haven't been able to find enough workers since early 2020, while others, like those in hospitality, began wrestling with that same reality during the first quarter of 2021. Worker retention has also become a major obstacle, with the phrase “The Great Resignation” coined to characterize the high turnover employers are facing.

In addition to these challenges, human resources must contend with long-standing issues: workforce planning, meeting the needs of a new workforce, managing the skills gap, and promoting an even more strategic role for HR at the highest levels of leadership. Read on to learn how today's top CHROs are tackling these issues and more to create real impact in their organizations.

This report was sponsored by Sevenstep.

# Six key themes emerged in the research:

## “Easy on Me” Adele, 2021

1

*“I had good intentions  
And the highest hopes  
But I know right now  
That probably doesn’t even show  
Go easy on me, baby”*

2021 workforce planning was a mess. When planning for 2021, most organizations anticipated a return towards “normal” and planned to use the traditionally established level of resources to support the business. But in an unpredictable year, most underestimated the size of the workforce they would need. The majority (60%) of study participants indicated they expanded their workforce more than planned in 2021, and only about one-quarter (28%) felt their workforce estimates were accurate. Facing a super-heated job market, with wages increasing and jobs going unfilled for extended periods of time, this meant trouble for today’s HR leaders.

## “Breathin” Ariana Grande, 2018

2

*“Some days, things just take way too much of my energy  
I look up and the whole room’s spinning.”*

The extent of CHRO concern grew markedly across one-third of the areas related to staffing. On average, the top four areas of concern, including retention, workforce planning, meeting the needs of the workforce, and the availability of skilled workers, increased by 26 percentage points from 2020 levels. The threat from inflation on worker turnover, which was not included in the 2020 report, was another area of concern for 44% of CHROs, ranking it fifth on the list.

## “50 Ways to Leave Your Lover” Paul Simon, 1975

3

*“You just slip out the back, Jack  
Make a new plan, Stan  
You don’t need to be coy, Roy  
Just get yourself free.”*

CHROs exhibited a strong concern over retention. In fact, retention was the area of greatest concern for 78% of respondents, up 44 percentage points since 2020. Part of this could be attributed to inadequate learning and development; While training programs are often thought of as a retention vehicle, CHROs self-reported mediocre training and development capabilities. Retaining employees who have been upskilled was regarded as the area of greatest interest among all seven skills-related HR goals examined.

## “Pressure” Billy Joel, 1982

4

*“You have to learn to pace yourself  
Pressure  
You’re just like everybody else  
Pressure  
You’ve only had to run so far  
So good  
But you will come to a place  
Where the only thing you feel  
Are loaded guns in your face  
And you’ll have to deal with  
Pressure.”*

Employee stress and mental health has also emerged as a key area of concern for today’s CHROs, with 71% of CHROs either concerned or very concerned about their employees’ health. The ongoing pandemic has led to an unparalleled period of anxiety in the population. Many organizations changed focus multiple times, sometimes going from survival mode to double digit growth in the span of a few months. Safety considerations led to remote work, and then workers were called back into an office setting while the virus mutated and stubbornly refused to go away. Complicating the return to work even more were childcare and elder care issues. These uncertain situations resulted in great stress and distraction, impeding the performance of employees.

## “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” Rolling Stones, 1969

5

*“You can’t always get what you want  
But if you try some time, you find  
You get what you need.”*

Despite the need for skilled talent, there has been a lack of progress in upskilling workers. One-in-five CHROs (20%) reported they’ve made no progress, up from 12% in 2020. Likewise, the percentage of those making significant progress fell from 15% in 2020 to 3% in 2021. This is a major concern as organizations face continued talent shortages. Analysts estimate that the need for upskilling will soon reach staggering heights, with as many as 40% of current workers requiring new skills by 2025. This trend, combined with an only marginal confidence in internal training programs, suggests that the talent chasm may only widen during the next three years.

## “Reflections” The Supremes, 1966

6

*“Through the mirror of my mind  
Time after time  
I see reflections of you and me.”*

Being a strategic partner means knowing the business. The vast majority (84%) of senior HR leaders consider themselves more of a business executive than an HR policy manager, but this view of their role contrasts with their opinions about their own department. Over half (58%) of CHROs said they wished their department thought more like businesspeople than HR policy makers—an increase from 2020. While a CHRO, like any member of the C-suite, has to think beyond their immediate area of responsibility, how do you train the next generation of HR leaders if their priorities are not consistent with their senior-most leader?





# Detailed Findings

## *How has the size of your workforce in 2021 changed so far compared to the plans made for it in 2020?*

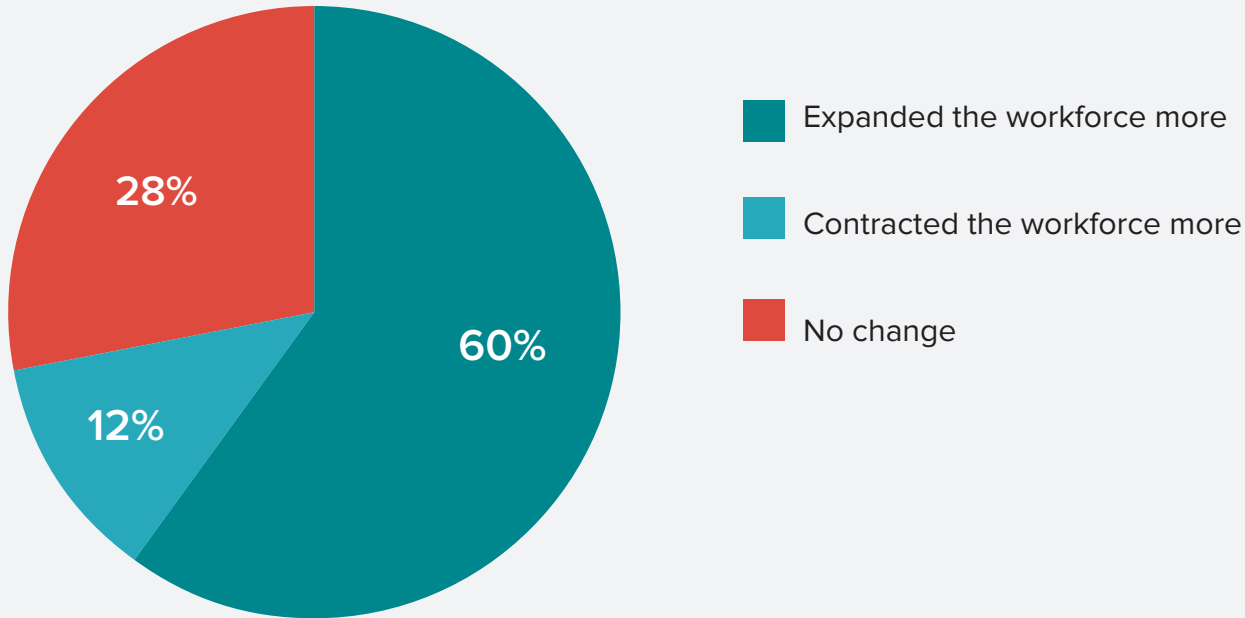
When asked how the size of their workforce has changed compared to their 2020 plans, the majority of CHROs (60%) indicated that they've expanded their workforce more than planned. Only 12% indicated that their workforce grew smaller than planned, and 28% indicated there was no difference between their planned and actual workforce size.

Normally, this would be considered poor workforce planning, but given the pandemic's unparalleled shock to the worldwide economy, an inability to anticipate the size of the needed workforce can be forgiven.

The growth of the workforce shows a promising trend of economic recovery. In Great Britain, employers added a record 241,000 staff in August, lifting the total number of employees on company payrolls to just above pre-pandemic levels.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, since May 2020, the U.S. has added back 16.7 million jobs, though it remains 5.7 million below the pre-pandemic level. But a mystery sits at the heart of the economic recovery: There are 10 million job openings, yet more than 8.4 million unemployed people are still actively looking for work. Job openings now outnumber job seekers.<sup>3</sup>

Actual Size of 2021 Workforce Change vs. Plans Made in 2020





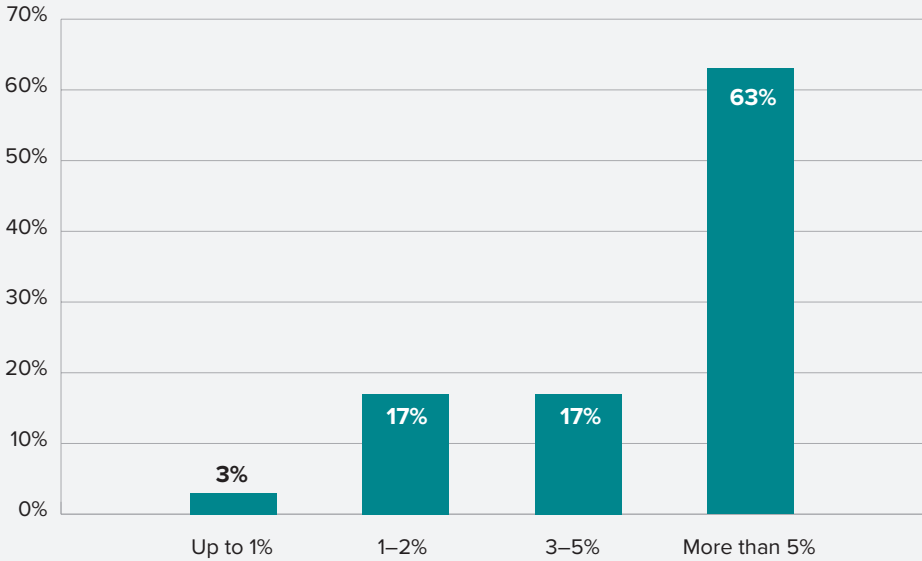
## Size of Workforce Increases in 2021

### *By what percentage has the size of your workforce increased?*

The respondents who indicated they had increased the size of their workforce were asked to quantify the extent of the increase. Nearly two-thirds (63%) said their workforce increased by more than 5%, with an average increase of 8%. Based upon the size of respondent companies, this amounts to nearly 8,000 jobs per company.

Job data from several countries supports the assertion that workforces are growing at a frantic pace. For example, year to date, there have been over 5 million new jobs added in the U.S., over 1 million in the UK, and 2.6 million in Indonesia. But the job growth isn't universal. Both Australia and Japan reported declines in workforce size in 2021. The table below contains a sample of the countries referenced.<sup>4</sup>

## Size of Workforce Increases in 2021



## Number of Jobs added in 2021 per Country

COUNTRY	JOBS ADDED 2021 YTD
United States	5.1 million
Indonesia	2.6 million
Mexico	1.9 million
Turkey	1.7 million
United Kingdom	1.1 million
Canada	646,500
France	437,900
Germany	383,000
Israel	145,200
Australia	-4,200
Japan	-350,000



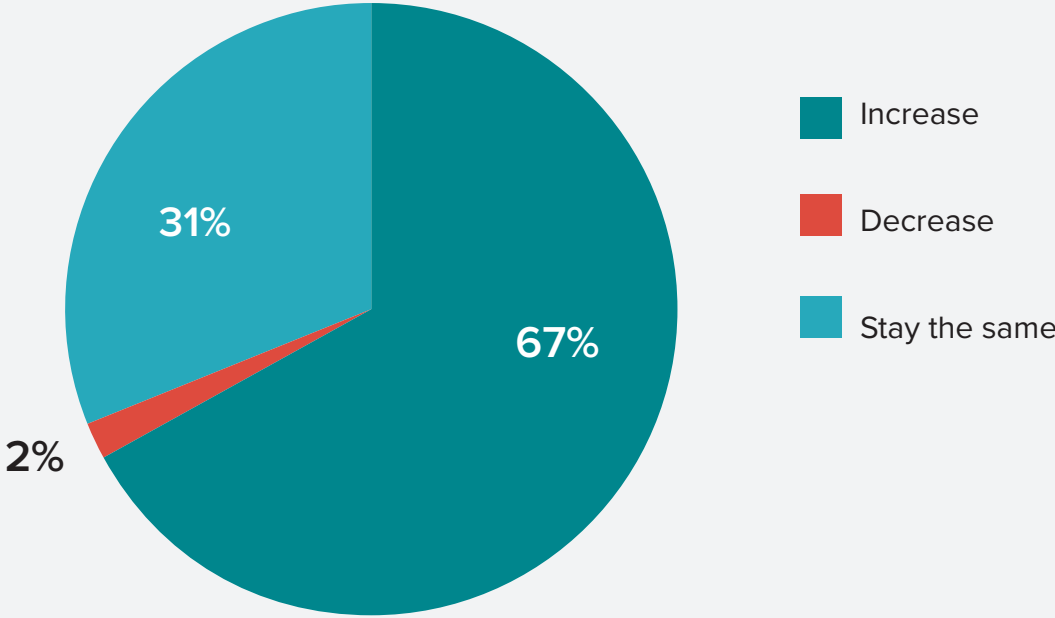
# Plans to Change Workforce Size in 2022

*What are your plans as to the change in the size of your worldwide workforce in 2022?*

When asked how they planned to change the size of their global workforce in 2022, two-thirds (67%) of respondents indicated an increase.

Most macroeconomic forecasts of the size of the workforce in 2022 have severely underestimated the rate of job growth. For the most part, many of these forecasts for 2022 have already been surpassed in 2021. But there is one consistent message: Baring some unforeseen setback, employers are going to continue hiring at a frantic pace throughout 2022.

## Plans to Change Workforce Size in 2022







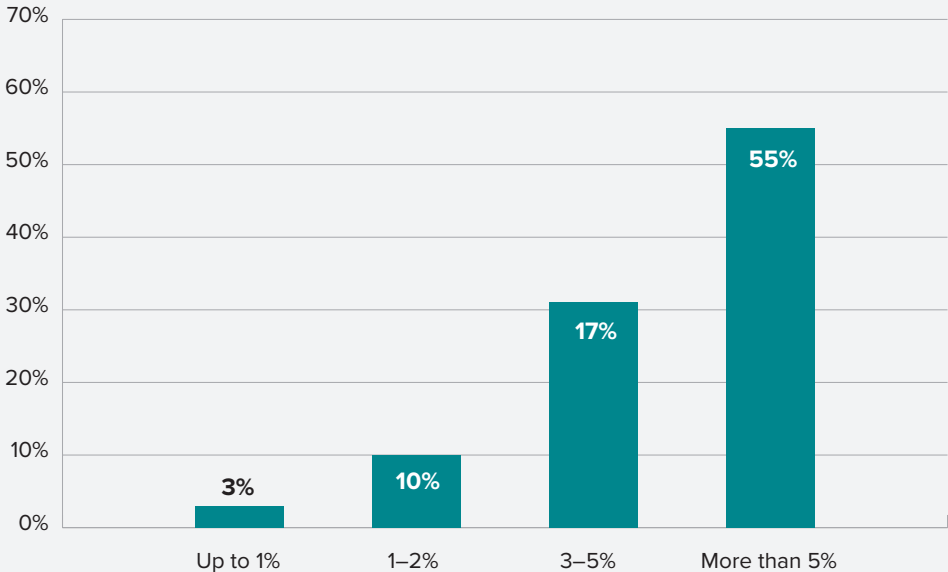
# Plans for Workforce Growth in 2022

*By what percentage is the size of your workforce planned to increase in 2022?*

The respondents who anticipated an increase in workforce size were asked to quantify the size of the planned increase. Over one-half (55%) indicated planned growth of more than 5%, while the average increase was just over 6%.

While these numbers imply strong economic growth, surging energy prices across the globe may put economic recovery in the wake of the pandemic in jeopardy. According to The Economist, rising fuel costs increase the cost of doing just about anything, and those costs are passed down to consumers. There has already been an uptick in inflation rates, with 3.4% and 5.4% inflation in September in Europe and the U.S., respectively. And when consumers devote more of their earnings to their energy bills, they may have less cash on hand to buy other things, setting the stage for a slowdown in economic growth.<sup>5</sup>

# Plans for Workforce Growth in 2022



## Extent of Concern: Preparing for Future Staffing Needs

### How concerned are you, if at all, about each of the following areas that relate to preparing for future staffing needs?

Study participants were asked to indicate their level of concern about 13 priorities related to future staffing requirements. Overall, respondents were more worried in 2021 than 2020 in six of the nine areas examined in both years and showed considerable anxiety in each of the four new elements introduced in 2021.

The foremost concern was retention. Over three-quarters (78%) of respondents felt “extremely” or “very” concerned about this area, with nearly every respondent expressing at least moderate concern. Apprehension in this area more than doubled in the past year, up from 34% in 2020.

According to a recent article in Harvard Business Review (HBR), resignation rates are highest among mid-career (30-45 years old) employees. One of the key reasons for this trend is their greater leverage in securing new positions given their breadth of experience, especially in the absence of in-person training and guidance. Of course, many of these workers may have simply reached a breaking point after months and months of high workloads, hiring freezes, and other pandemic pressures, causing them to rethink their work and life goals. Addressing the issue involves quantifying the problem, identifying the root causes, and developing tailored retention programs.<sup>6</sup>

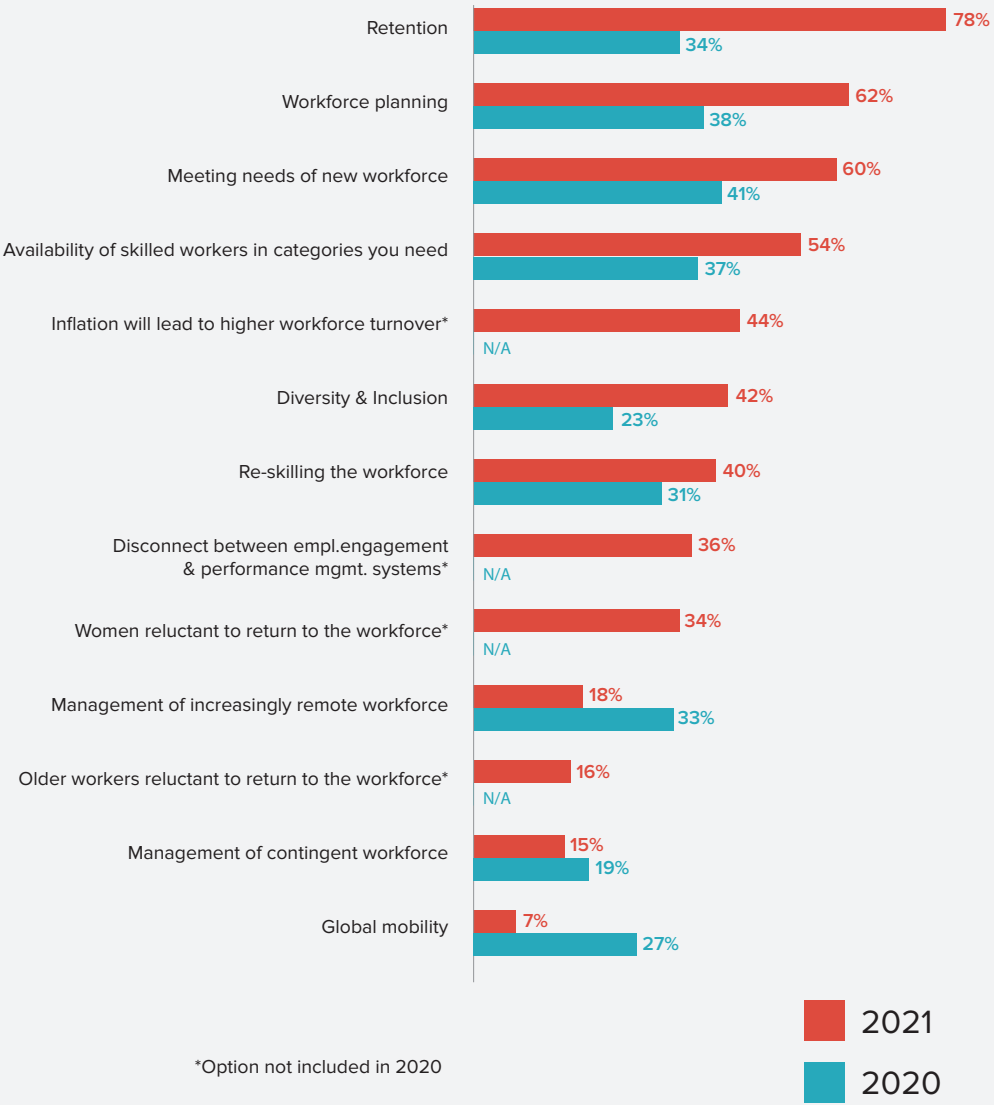
Workforce planning was the second greatest concern. Given the lack of accuracy CHRO’s indicated was their

actual hiring vs. planned, the trepidation expressed is no surprise. But workforce planning involves more than forecasting headcount. It is the process of analyzing, forecasting, and planning workforce supply and demand, and assessing gaps to ensure that an organization has employees with the right skills in to fulfill organizational objectives. Under more typical situations, it is a daunting task. But given the uncertainties and radical swings in worker demand of the last two years, the waters have become treacherous to navigate.

Meeting the needs of the new workforce was another area of concern indicated by over one-half of respondents, up from 41% in 2020 to 60% in 2021, an increase of nearly 50%. The pandemic hastened the retirement of thousands of baby boomers, giving Gen Xers and millennials an unprecedented opportunity for career advancement. At the same time, the oldest members of Gen Z are graduating college and filling entry-level positions. The influx of young employees is changing the paradigm of the workplace, with a greater focus on work-life balance, diversity, and inclusion, learning and development, and other initiatives.

The availability of skilled workers in needed categories was the fourth greatest concern. According to the HBR article, resignations are highest in the technology and healthcare industries. This applies to recruiting demand as well. Further, construction, logistics, and information security analysts are among the most in demand.<sup>7</sup>

## Extent of Concern: Preparing for Future Staffing Needs





## Extent of Concern: HR Responsibilities

*How concerned are you about each of the following areas that are included, at least in part, among HR responsibilities?*

When study respondents were asked to indicate the extent of their concern about issues falling under HR’s area of responsibility, the overall trend revealed significant anxiety. There was increased concern in seven of the 10 areas examined last year, and considerable anxiety reported in each of the three new areas examined this year.

Foremost on CHROs’ minds is the reduction of employee stress and mental health concerns, with nearly three-quarters (71%) extremely/very concerned. There is a myriad of research about stress during the COVID-19 era, and the article below from Frontiers in Psychology contains a good overview of the impact of stress on employees:

It becomes difficult for organizations to maintain consistency in their operations in uncertain external situations that can affect the well-being of their employees. These uncertain situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can develop stress which hampers the performance of employees. The hazards prevailing in the work environment due to pandemics not only distract the attention of employees from work but also threaten their survival at the workplace by causing health problems (Carroll et al., 2009). Stressed employees may experience

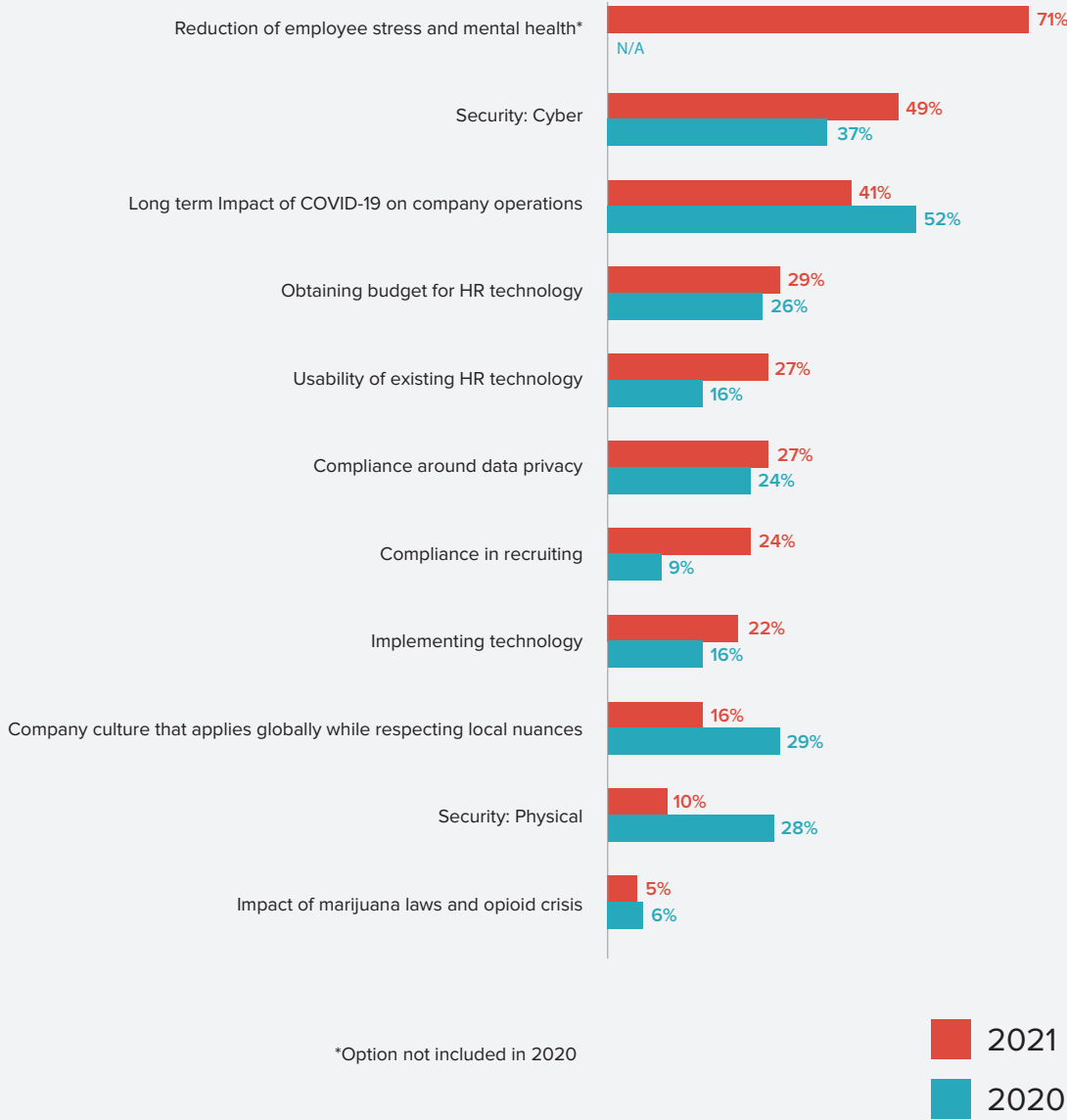
depression and become unable to concentrate on their work, thus resulting in decreased performance.<sup>8</sup>

Cyber security was another area selected by nearly one-half (49%) of respondents as an extreme or very high concern, up from 37% in 2020. Related to cyber security is compliance around data privacy, selected by over one-quarter (27%) as an area of extreme or very high concern.

Data privacy laws are designed in part to protect employee and customer data from being accessed by unauthorized sources—a critical concern in the era of remote work. According to the Identity Theft Resource Center (ITRC), the number of data breaches publicly reported so far this year has already exceeded the total for 2020, putting 2021 on track for a record year. One source estimates that the costs of ransomware attacks is expected to reach \$265 billion by 2031.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, the long-term impact of COVID-19 on company operations and all of its ramifications continue to concern HR executives, with 41% extremely or very concerned—down from 52% one year ago. More CHROs are seeing the worst of the pandemic behind them as vaccinations spread throughout the world, particularly now in the less industrialized nations.

## Extent of Concern: HR Responsibilities





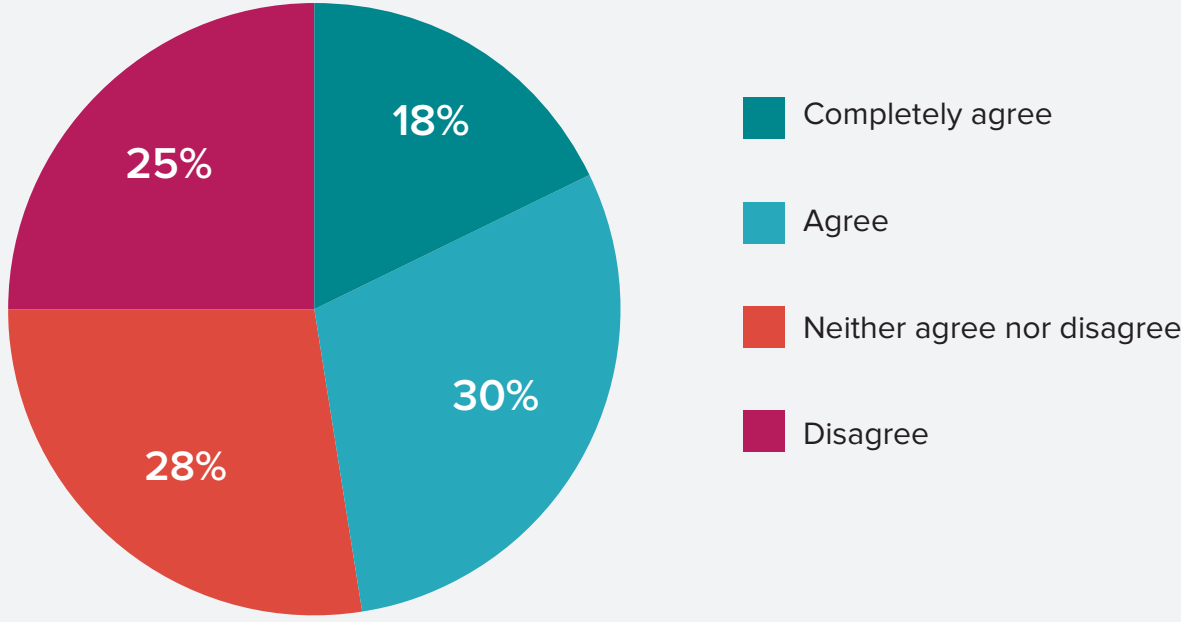
# Remote Work’s Impact on Employee Attachment and Loyalty

*Please indicate your extent of agreement with the following statement: “I am concerned that remote work over an extended period has reduced employee attachment and loyalty to our company.”*

Remote work has become the new normal during the pandemic, but concerns remain about its impact on company culture. Nearly one-third (30%) of CHROs agreed that remote work has reduced employee attachment and loyalty to their company, and 18% completely agreed. So, while the concern is not pervasive, it is disturbing to nearly half of CHROs, many of whom are already struggling with retention issues.

As remote work becomes an expectation among the younger generations, HR leaders will need to find ways to engage and retain their workforce. A study from Microsoft found that among job seekers, 73% hoped remote work options would continue when the pandemic ends. Gen Z applicants were slightly more likely to apply for a job with remote options than for one strictly in an office.<sup>10</sup>

Extent of Agreement: Remote Work’s Impact on Employee Attachment and Loyalty





# Progress in Establishing Upskilling Programs

*How much progress has your organization made in establishing an upskilling program that develops a mix of soft, technical, and digital skills?*

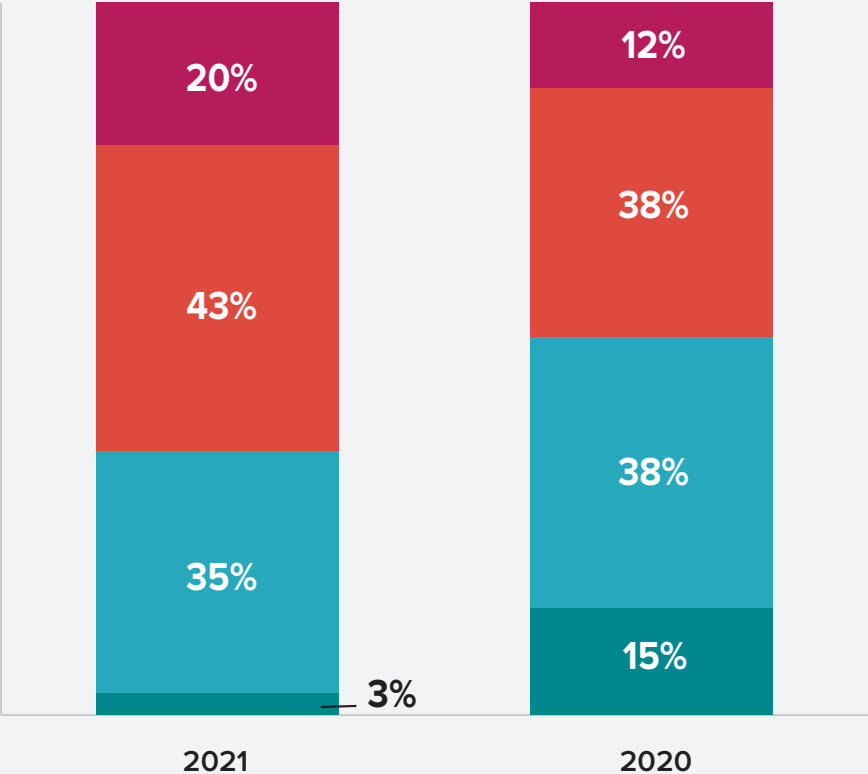
It's fair to say that a lot has happened since early 2020, and in the fray, HR's priorities may not have included upskilling programs. One-in-five (20%) CHROs reported that they made no progress at all, up from 12% in 2020. The percentage of those making significant progress fell from 15% in 2020 to 3% in 2021.

Robert E. Moritz, chairman of the PwC Network, provides a fascinating discussion of the need for upskilling. PwC analysis found that:"

- 74% of CEOs are concerned about the availability of key skills
- 40% of workers will require up to six months of reskilling by 2025
- Closing the skills gap by 2030 could create 5.3 million new jobs globally
- There will be US\$6.5 trillion added to global GDP

# Progress in Establishing Upskilling Programs

- No or nearly no progress
- Limited progress
- Moderate progress
- Significant progress





## Rating of Company Training and Development Capability

### How would you rate your company's training and development capability?

When asked to rate their company's training and development capability, less than one-third (31%) of respondents considered it strong or very strong. Overall, mediocrity characterizes company training and development capabilities, as 48% of CHROs rated their company's effort as mediocre, with an average score of 3.05 out of 5.00.

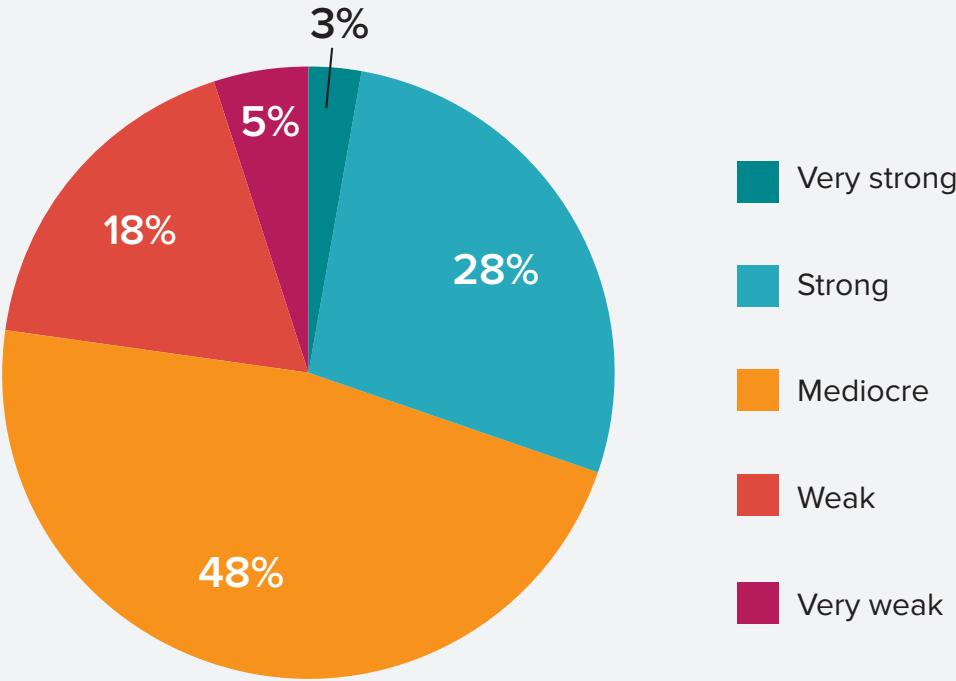
Given the critical need for upskilling, it's particularly concerning that training and development programs are lacking. These initiatives provide a host of benefits, including enhanced employee performance, boosted employee productivity, reduced employee turnover, and improved company culture.

Below are three of the reasons why employee training and development is critical:<sup>12</sup>

1. Higher employee retention. The hiring and retention of talent can be an ongoing challenge for employers; however, one way to retain staff is by providing them with career development opportunities. Including development program offerings in employment contracts establishes an employee's sense of value within the company, fostering loyalty and ultimately increasing retention.

2. Training future leaders. Having established leadership development programs ensures that a business is always considering future organizational goals and succession planning by preparing promotable talent.
3. Increased workplace engagement. Regular development initiatives can help keep employees motivated and engaged, while frequent training programs also offer an opportunity to regularly evaluate employee skills and processes. Assessing the current skills and abilities within a team will enable managers to strategically plan targeted development programs that consider any potential skills gaps.

## Rating of Company Training and Development Capability





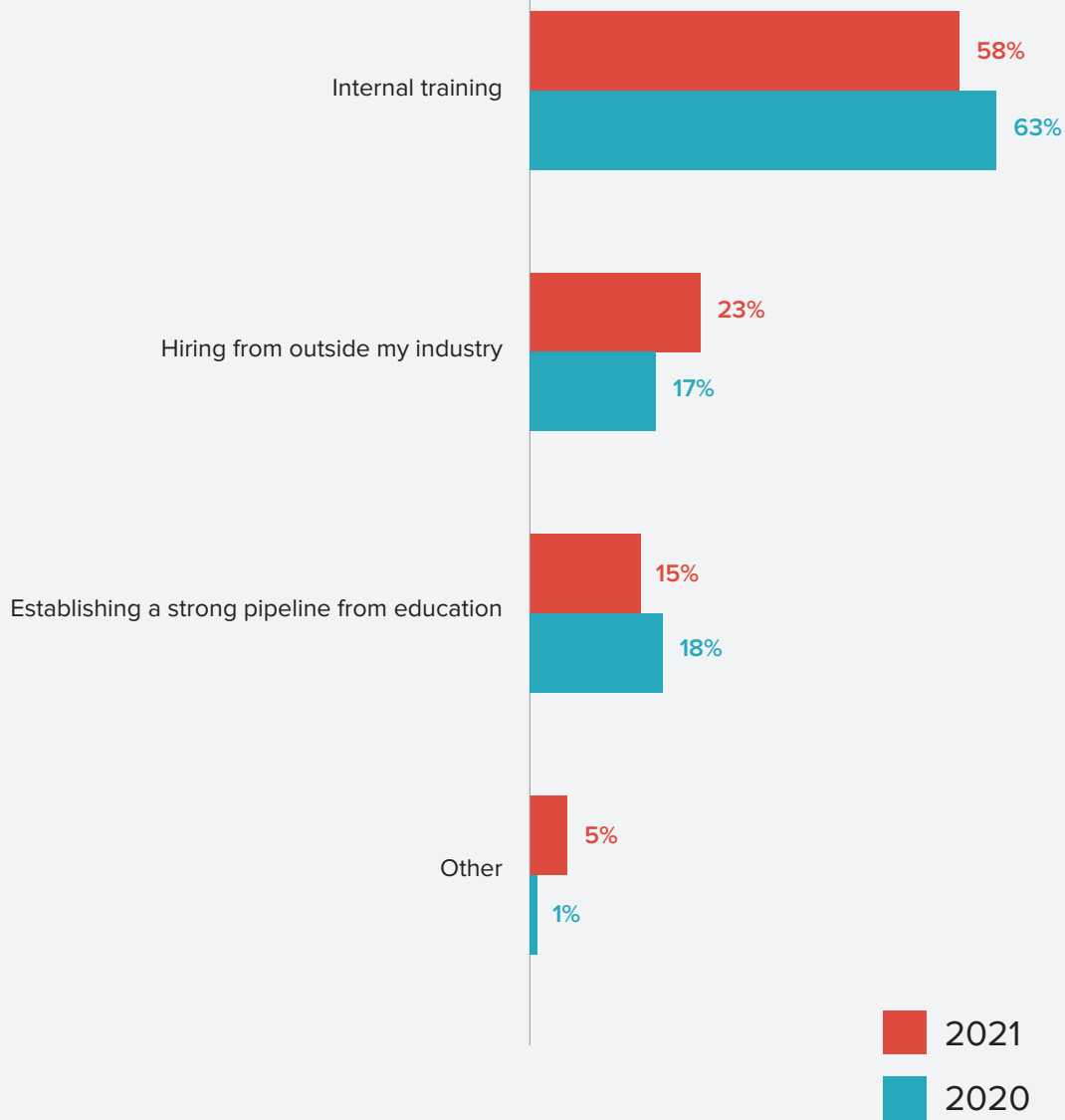
# Closing the Skills Gap

*Which is the most important to close a potential skills gap in your organization?*

Respondents were asked to identify the most important vehicle to close potential skills gaps in their organization. Overwhelmingly, internal training was the clear choice in 2021, as indicated by over one-half (58%) of respondents, more than twice that of any other area. There was little year-over-year change in this area from 2020.

The concern this raises is that only 28% of CHROs consider their training and development capability strong, and 3% very strong. Organizations will have to invest more in internal training if they hope to close the skills gap.

# Closing the Skills Gap



## Interest in Skills-Related HR Goals

*Please rank (1-7) the following skills-related HR goals in order of interest.*

Study participants were asked to rank seven skills-related HR goals in order of interest. Retaining employees who have been upskilled ranked first. Given the current job market and concerns over “the Great Resignation,” it’s no wonder that anything to do with retention is high on the list for CHROs.

Better managing the disruption of day-to-day business activities ranked second in 2021, down from first place in 2020. Companies are still struggling with the unprecedented impact of the pandemic, and the fallout likely contributed to the great interest in developing skills to manage disruption of business activities.

CHROs are also interested in the ability of employees to learn new skills in future. The pandemic highlighted many reasons why employee agility is essential, and research examining the employee skills gap are causing many HR leaders to consider the ramifications of not upskilling their workers.<sup>13</sup>

## Rank Interest in Skills-Related HR Goals

	2021	2020
Retaining employees who have been upskilled	1	2
Better managing disruption of day-to-day business activities	2	1
Ability of employees to learn new skills needed for the future	3	5
Defining the skills your organization should build	4	3
Dedicating additional resources to conduct the upskilling programs you need	5	6
Measuring the return on investment of your upskilling program	6	4
Activity encouraging employees to learn and apply their learning	7	7



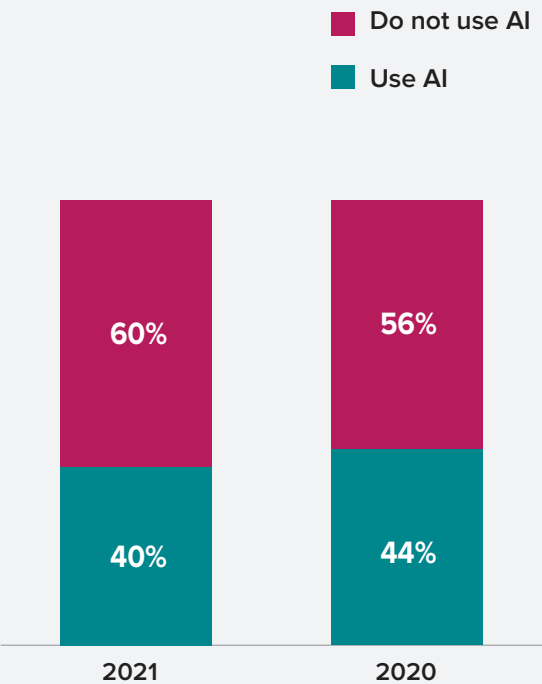


# Deployment of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning

## Where in your department are you employing use of AI/machine learning?

While AI adoption has become more common in recent years, survey results show that it is not yet widely adopted by the majority of organizations. In fact, fewer than one-half (40%) of HR leaders are currently using AI in HR.

### Adoption of AI and Machine Learning in HR



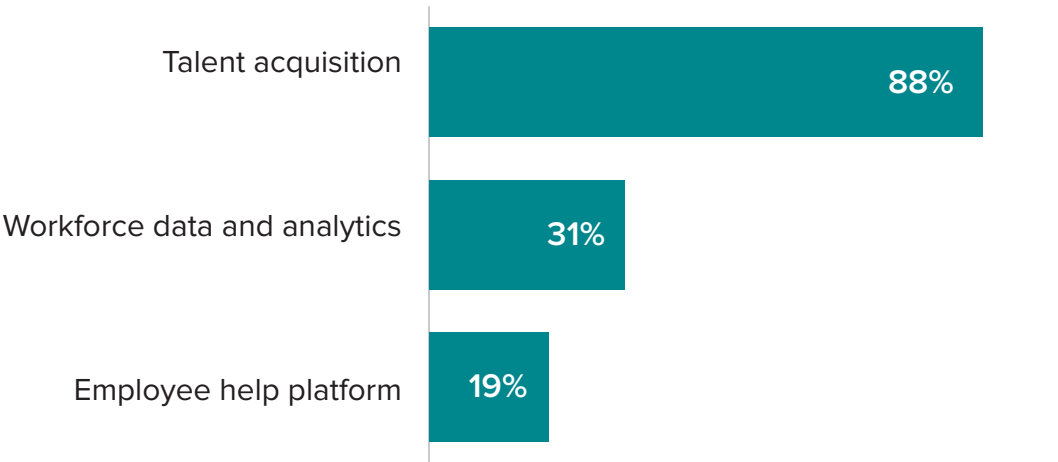
AI and machine learning are most often used for talent acquisition, as indicated by the vast majority (88%) of respondents. Candidate experience is especially important during a tight labor market, and smart technology can make companies more competitive in the marketplace by allowing recruiters to respond to candidates more quickly and make the entire application process go more smoothly. This improves candidate quality as well as time-to-hire and gives recruiters back time to focus on the business of engaging candidates rather than administrative tasks.

Workforce data and analytics was another common application of AI and machine learning, as indicated

by nearly one-third (31%) of respondents. HR managers can use real-time analytics to show the impact of absences, open shifts, and unplanned schedule changes on key performance indicators. Workforce data can also inform employee engagement initiatives, offering deep insights into employee needs and points of drop-off.

Lastly, AI-powered chatbots are often used to answer routine questions in employee help platforms. Chatbots have the advantage of always being available, no matter the time. Using these tools can enhance the candidate and employee experience alike.

### Deployment of AI and Machine Learning





## Working towards HR Business Agility

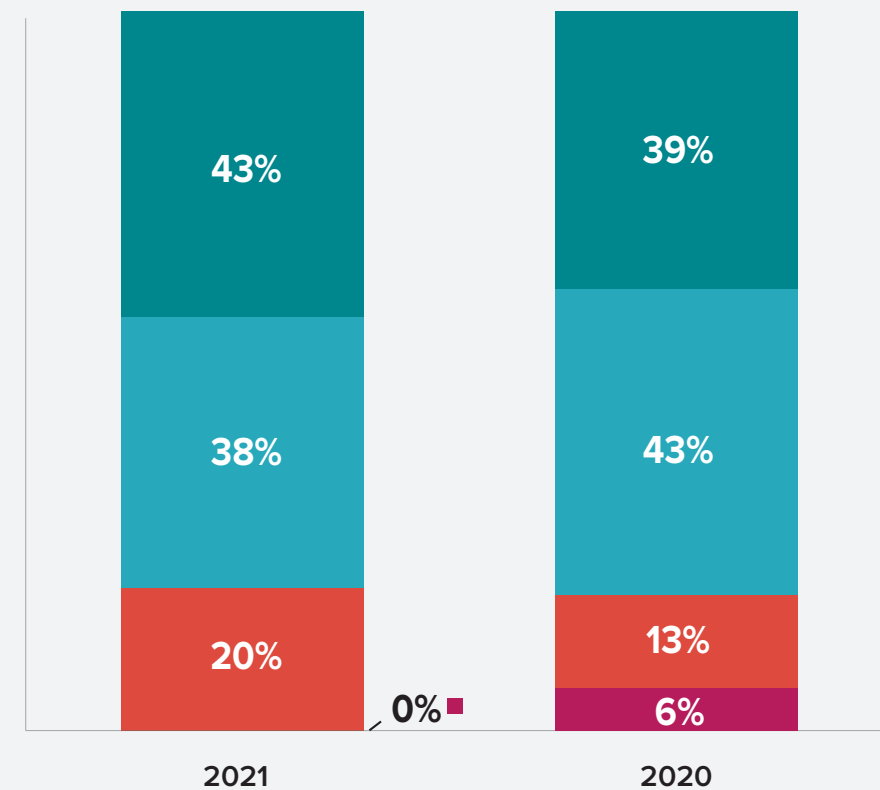
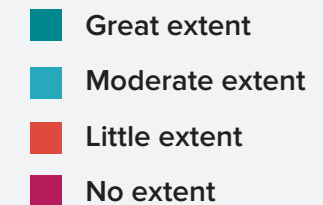
*To what extent are you working towards achieving increased business agility in HR?*

Study participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they are working towards achieving business agility in HR, an area sorely tested since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

HR agility is the capability of the HR function to respond more quickly and effectively to changing employee expectations, workplace disruptions, and business requirements. However, there is a lurking concern that HR agility is in danger of becoming a trending buzzword in corporate conversations rather than delivering on its promise.<sup>14</sup>

While most respondents (80%) are working towards HR business agility to some extent, just under one-half (43%) are making it a top priority, compared to 39% in 2020. This slight uptick may be in response to the demands put upon HR during the pandemic and the renewed focus on diversity and inclusion that has characterized much of the last two years. Demands placed upon the workforce planning process to include more defined DEI efforts in the organization have forced HR adapt to changes in the hiring and promotion landscapes.

## Working towards HR Business Agility





## Examining the Strategic Role of HR in the Business

Please indicate the extent of your agreement with both statements below:

*“I consider myself more of a business executive than HR manager.”*

*“I wish my HR department thought more like businesspeople than HR policy makers.”*

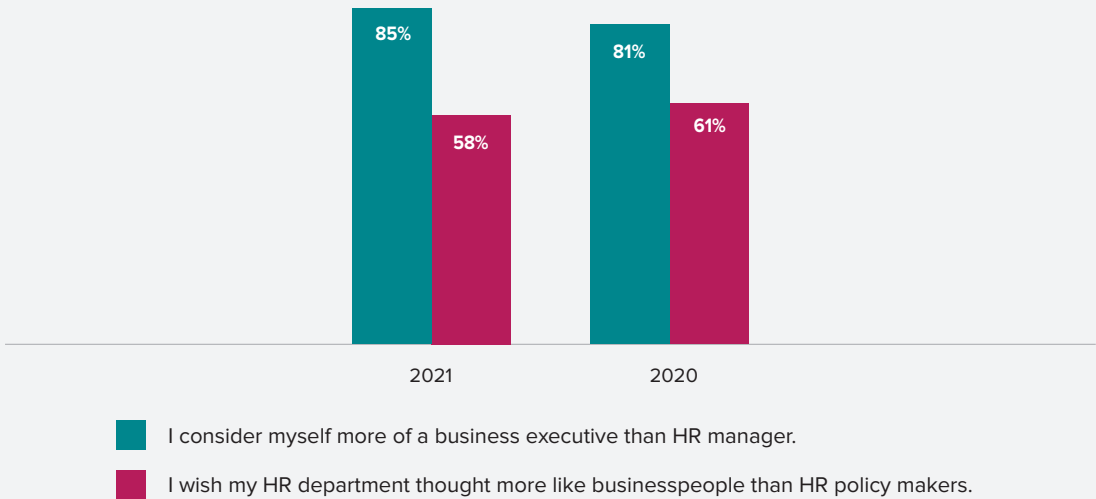
When asked about the strategic role of HR in their organization, the vast majority (85%) of CHROs completely agreed (57%) or agreed (28%) that they consider themselves to be more of a business executive than HR manager. This contrasts with their opinions about their department, where only 58% completely agreed (21%) or agreed (37%) that they wished their department thought more like businesspeople than HR policy makers.

This is a difference of 27 percentage points—7% more than last year—marking a disconnect between the goals of the HR leaders and their departments.

Strategic Role of HR in the Business



Strategic Role of HR in the Business, Year-over-Year





Demographics:

JOB TITLE	
CHRO	56%
SVP/VP/GM	26%
Director	15%
Manager	3%

NUMBER OF FULL-TIME EQUIVALENTS (FTEs) GLOBALLY	
Fewer than 500	31%
500 – 2,999	36%
3,000 – 9,999	21%
10,000 – 24,999	5%
25,000 – 49,999	5%
50,000 – 99,999	3%

PRIMARY INDUSTRY	
Automotive	1%
Chemicals	1%
Construction	1%
Education	3%
Finance, Insurance & Real Estate	6%
Healthcare	15%
Hospitality	4%
IT, Technology, Software	13%
Manufacturing	9%
Media	3%
Non-Profit	4%
Pharmaceuticals	3%
Professional Services	18%
Retail trade	9%
Transportation and storage	1%
Utilities	4%
Other	4%

# End Notes

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