

# CHRO role requires balance, decisiveness

This May's SCN session centred on unpacking *Learning to Fly*, Aon Hewitt's 2015 study of 45 CHROs. The intent of the study was to answer the question "Is HR developing its own leaders to tackle the challenges of a dynamic (VUCA) environment?"

The key finding of the study, "Developing the Next Generation of CHROs," was a definite "no." Human resources is, in fact, doing an awful job preparing HR professionals for the C-suite: "The number of people taking on the CHRO position without any background in the function is alarming."

Now, an attendee at the SCN event could be forgiven for not knowing this because, like any good consultant, Aon Hewitt repurposed their study (full disclosure: I'm a consultant). At the session, the study was instead used to answer a different, implied question: "What are the characteristics of (45 presumably successful) CHROs in this VUCA environment?"

The individual characteristics



**Michael Clark**  
ORGANIZATIONAL  
EFFECTIVENESS

identified by the study will not be new to anyone tracking the qualities and trends of HR executives, but the compilation and categorization of the findings is impressive. A model emerges of a role that requires — simultaneously — balance and decisiveness.

Your human capital strategy needs to be integrated into business strategy, not parallel to it. Be close to the chief experience officers, but

not too close. Understand the business and promote collaboration between your peers — but not so much that you forget to champion yourself and the HR function. Lead in all directions simultaneously: up, across, functionally, externally and internally (yourself).

Balance and decisiveness are indicative of what organizational psychologist Elliott Jaques referred to as stratum-five thinking. This is the level at which you must leave behind zero-sum games and trade-offs. Rather, the role calls for decisiveness within a constantly shifting internal and external environment of variables, actions and consequences too complex to control outright.

The CHRO must sense the interaction between these forces, including their second- and third-order effects, all the while moving things forward by constantly re-imagining the means to do so. Contrast this with a stratum-four vice-president of HR role, whose

task should be that of orchestrating the complicated rather than re-imagining the complex. It is a world of trade-offs between parallel paths of people's own making, and controlling a changing yet finite set of resources that they must constantly shift from one path to the next and back again to maintain overall progress.

So, what does Aon Hewitt's report have to do with organizational effectiveness? Well, if most of OE is a function of having the right people, and having the right people is a function of having the right HR, and having the right HR is a function of hiring the right CHRO, then it's a good place to start. You might as well. As the report says, HR isn't going to help you.

---

*Michael Clark is director of business development at Forrest & Company. Forrest is an organizational transformation firm with over 25 years experience in developing the organizational and leadership capacity in organizations.*