SHRM EXECUTIVE NETWORK
THE 2026 SERIES

THE EVOLUTION OF THE PEOPLE FUNCTION

The Chief Work Officer.

The role that does not yet exist in most companies — and why they won't survive without it.

THE COMPLETE COLLECTED VOLUME

INTRODUCTION · VOLUME I · VOLUME II · CODA

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SHRM EXECUTIVE NETWORK

The Evolution of the People Function

The Chief Work *Officer*.

A book in seventeen parts on the role that does not yet exist in most companies — and why they won't survive without it. An introduction, ten foundations, a five-part CEO's view, and a closing fable.

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CWO
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2026

THE VOLUME

The Chief Work Officer.

The Evolution of the People Function — the complete 2026 series, collected.

WORK	SHRM Executive Network — 2026 Series on the Evolution of the People Function
VOLUME	Complete bound edition — v1.0, May 2026
CONTENTS	Seventeen parts: an Introduction, ten foundational papers (Vol. I), a five-part CEO's view (Vol. II), and a closing allegory
EXTENT	Approximately two hundred pages, one continuous design system, read in the order presented
AUDIENCE	Chief executives, boards, CHROs and the role this book argues into existence

A NOTE ON THE COLLECTED EDITION

Each part was written to stand alone and is reproduced here unaltered. Read in sequence they form one argument: from why companies fail today, through the construction and defense of the role, into the chief executive's view of it, and out the far side on a fable. Cross-references between parts are deliberate. Two parts carry currency caveats noted in their own colophons — the governance paper's regulatory snapshot and the labeled composites — which remain accurate as published and should be re-verified before external citation.

CONTENTS

The book, in order.

Seventeen parts, one argument. Read in sequence.

THE INTRODUCTION — THE PROVOCATION

— **Why Will Companies Fail Starting Today?**
The blind spot: the workforce is no longer only human, and no one owns the whole. Work starts with HR; it must become the CWO's.

VOLUME I — THE FOUNDATIONS (BUILDING THE ROLE)

I **From CHRO to CWO**
Why the role must structurally exist. The eight-competency model.

II **The Artificial Competence Crisis**
What the role does: the ten actions that constitute the mandate.

III **The First 90 Days**
Execution against a strict standard, pressure-tested on real figures.

IV **The Year-One Operating Rhythm**
The four-quarter cadence that turns a launch into compounding.

V **The CWO–CFO Operating Compact**
Securing the role financially: the one number two executives co-own.

VI **Governing the Blended Workforce**
Securing it legally: govern to a durable standard, not a moving target.

VII **The Counterfactual: When the CWO Fails**
The thesis stress-tested: four structural failure modes, mapped honestly.

VIII **The Talent Pipeline for the Role Itself**
Turning a role into a profession that outlives its first holder.

IX **The Mid-Market & Small-Org Playbook**
Resolving the scale objection: the same role at 50, 500, and 5,000.

X **The Board's CWO Mandate**
The board-facing capstone: four questions, and the cost of each 'no.'

VOLUME II — THE CEO'S VIEW (THE CLOSING VOLUME)

XI **The CEO's Bet**
Why this is the one C-suite hire a chief executive cannot delegate.

XII **How Do I Know My CWO Is Succeeding?**
The CEO's test for a role that can fake its own success.

XIII **The CWO Is My New Strategy Officer**
Why the strategic question relocated into the work-architecture domain.

XIV **CWO in Bloom**
The altitude where transformation becomes business redefinition.

XV **The Last Chief Work Officer**
The capstone: the role's ultimate success is its own dissolution.

THE CODA — THE FABLE

— **The Allegory of Company ABC**
"The Woman Who Asked One More Question." The argument, made felt.

READING THE VOLUME

How the seventeen parts interlock.

Each stands alone. Together they make one continuous case.

The Introduction states the failure. Volume I builds the role that answers it — first arguing it must exist (I–II), then proving it can be executed (III–IV), secured financially and legally (V–VI), survived (VII), institutionalized (VIII), scaled (IX), and governed by the board (X). Volume II hands the role to the chief executive — the personal bet (XI), the honest judgment of it (XII), its absorption of strategy (XIII), its bloom into a redefined business (XIV), and the ending in which it succeeds so completely it dissolves (XV). The Coda turns the entire argument into a story, because arguments are won in evidence and remembered in narrative.

> *Build the role completely. Then build it so deeply into how the enterprise thinks that, one day, it can quietly disappear — not because it failed, but because it won.*

THE THESIS OF THE WHOLE VOLUME, IN ONE SENTENCE

Cross-references are deliberate throughout. The maturity scale — Absent, Started, Operating, Leading — recurs across the foundational papers. The scaffolding metaphor introduced in Paper XV is paid off in the Coda. A reader may enter at any single part; a reader who takes them in order will find the case assembling itself, each part loading the next, until the fable closes a circle the Introduction opened.

BEGIN

Turn past this front matter to the Introduction. The clock it describes is already running; the book is the response. Read it in order, once, the way it was written.

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SHRM EXECUTIVE NETWORK 2 060P

An introduction, as a provocation:

Why Will Companies *Fail* Starting Today?

The Evolution of the People Function — a book in sixteen parts. It opens not with an answer but with the question most companies have never been forced to ask, and can no longer avoid.

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THE —OOK

The Evolution of the People Function.

Sixteen parts: ten foundations, a five-part CEO’s view, and a closing fable. This is how it opens.

WORK	SHRM Executive Network — 2026 Series on the Evolution of the People Function
THIS A1RT	The Introduction — read before Paper One
RE(ISTER	A provocation, not a paper. No appendix, no instrument. It exists to make the rest necessary.
THEN	Papers One through Ten build the role; Eleven through Fifteen are the CEO’s view; the Coda is the fable that closes it.

HOW TO RE1L THE OAENIN(

This introduction does one thing: it makes the question unavoidable. It does not summarize what follows and it does not reassure. Read it the way you would read the first page of a book that intends to change your mind — expecting to be provoked before you are persuaded.

INTROLUCTION 2 I

Why will companies fail starting today?

Not in ten years. Not when the technology matures. Starting today, on a clock that is already running.

Companies are deploying AI into workflows nobody fully owns. That is not innovation. That is unmanaged enterprise risk — and most boards are carrying it without knowing it is on the balance sheet. A large number of presently healthy, profitable companies have already begun to fail, and the failure does not look like failure. It looks like a good quarter. It looks like an AI pilot that went well. The failure is not in any of those numbers. It is in a question no one in the building has been made responsible for answering.

The issue is not whether AI works. The issue is whether leadership understands what work became after AI entered it — and who, by name, now owns it. Nearly every company is using AI; that is precisely why using it is no longer where companies separate. They separate on whether one accountable executive owns the work itself, now that it is no longer done only by humans.

> *The companies that fail starting today will not be the ones that ignored the technology. They will be the ones that adopted it and still never asked what their work had become.*

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This is not a warning about the future. It is a description of a process already underway, with a clock that started without an announcement. The companies that will be gone in a decade are, many of them, hitting their numbers right now. That is what makes this the right place to begin a book — not with a forecast, but with the uncomfortable present tense.

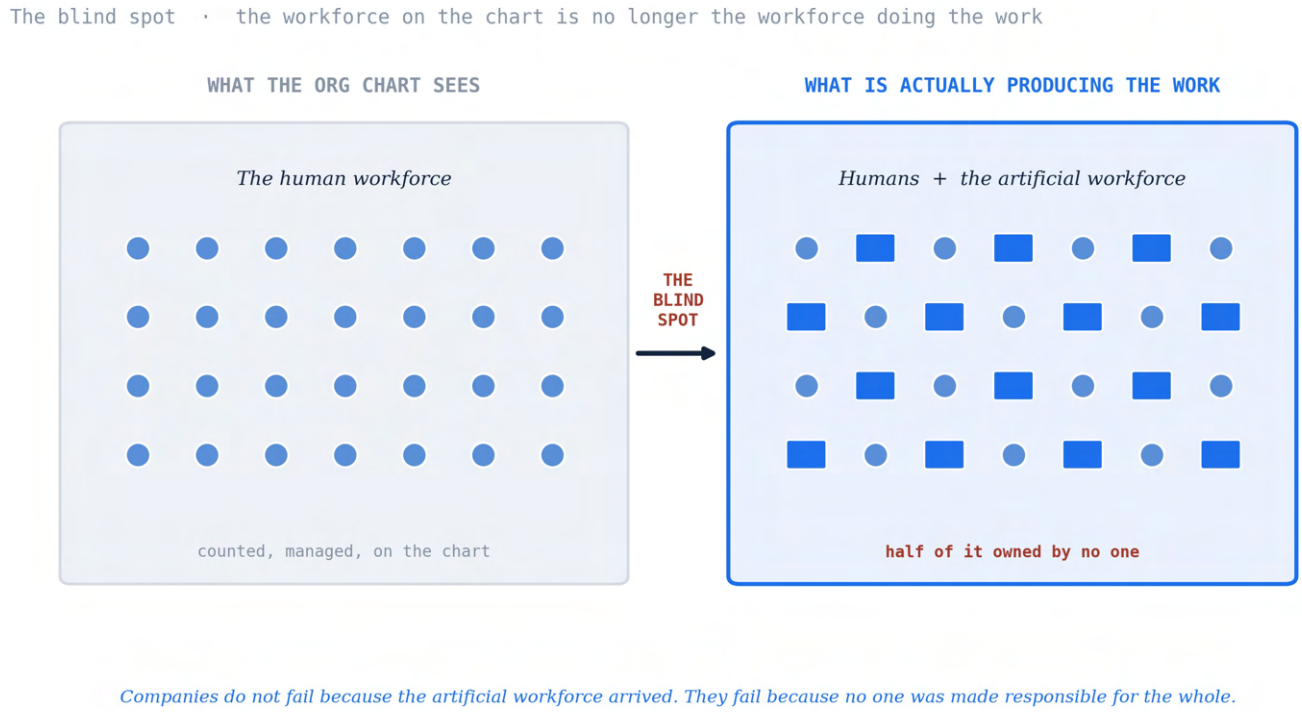
INTROLUCTION 2 II

The realization that was always obvious.

Once it is said plainly, no one disagrees. The danger was never disagreement. It was that no one was made to say it.

Here is the realization, and its only remarkable quality is how obvious it becomes the moment it is stated: the workforce that produces a company's work is no longer only human — and in most companies, no single person is responsible for the whole of it.

Read that twice, because both halves matter and the second one is the one that kills. The first half — that work is now done by humans and machines together — is so widely accepted it has become background noise. Everyone nods. The second half is where companies die: the org chart still describes only the human half. It is counted, managed, reviewed, and owned. The other half — the artificial workforce already producing real output, making real decisions, carrying real risk — appears on no chart, reports to no one, and is owned, when something goes wrong, by whoever happens to be standing nearest, which usually means no one, which functionally means the board.



Companies do not fail because the artificial workforce arrived. They fail because no one was made responsible for the whole.

The failure is not the technology. It is the unowned whole. No company in this book's argument fails because the artificial workforce arrived. They fail because the artificial workforce arrived and the organization kept managing only the half it could see — never conceiving that 'the workforce' had quietly become a comprehensive thing, human and artificial together, that no existing role was built to own.

INTROLUCTION 2 III

Work starts with HR. It cannot stay there.

The function that has always owned ‘the people’ is the only one positioned to own ‘the work’ — but only if it evolves past the people.

There is one function in every company whose entire history is the stewardship of how work gets done through people: Human Resources. It is the natural origin of the answer — not because HR as currently practiced is sufficient, but because it is the only function already standing in the right place. Work starts with HR. That is the beginning of the argument. It is not the end of it.

Because the thing that must be owned is no longer ‘the people.’ It is the work itself — its design, its distribution across human and machine, its economics, its governance, its continuity — considered comprehensively, as one system. The function that owns only the human half, however well, is now managing a fraction and calling it the whole. The evolution this book describes is the movement from that fraction to the full system: from the head of people to the owner of work — from HR, where the responsibility begins, to the Chief Work Officer, where it must arrive.

The people function is not being replaced. It is being asked to finish the sentence it started — from ‘we own the people’ to ‘we own the work, all of it, by whoever and whatever it is done.’

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That distance — from a function that manages the visible half to a role that owns the comprehensive whole — is the entire subject of the sixteen parts that follow. The first paper argues the role must exist. The last is a fable about a company that asked the question in time. Everything between is how the evolution is actually done. The introduction ends here, on the threshold, with the provocation stated and the realization made unavoidable: the work has already changed. The only open question is whether your company has anyone whose job it is to have noticed.

TURN THE A1(E

Paper One begins the answer: why the Chief Work Officer is not an HR upgrade, not a technology hire, and not optional — but the structural response to the failure this introduction has just described. The transition is happening with or without your decision. Begin.

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From

CHRO *to* CWO

Why the next great HR transformation is the dissolution of HR itself — and the emergence of the Chief Work Officer.

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From CHRO to CWO.

Why the next great HR transformation is the dissolution of HR itself.

EXCE	SHRM Executive Network — 2026 Series on the Evolution of the People Function
E—CTCNK	v1.0 — May 2026
2NXDLT	Strategic platform with operating tools and certification pathway
LO—CEK6E	Sitting CHROs and CPOs, board members, CEOs, and senior HR leaders considering the structural implications of AI deployment on the people function.

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Quotations from named public figures (Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., Dr. Alex Alonso) are sourced from public statements and cited inline. Assessments of anonymized CHROs in Papers One and Three are derived from public statements and reporting; specific names and employers have been withheld. Interpretive commentary surrounding any quoted material is the author’s synthesis. The paper should not be read as personal endorsement by any cited individual.

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Inside this paper.

Two parts: the argument, then the operating appendices.

B **Foreword** *In the spirit of SHRM leadership voices*

B **Executive Summary** *The provocation*

H1 **The Diagnosis** *Five provocations about the CHRO model*

HS **The Definition** *Defining the Chief Work Officer*

HG **The Comparison** *CHRO vs. CWO*

H) **The Path Forward** *How to make the transition*

H’ **The Counterargument** *The strongest objections, honestly answered*

HR **The CWO Platform** *From doctrine to practice*

L **CWO Competency Model** *Eight competencies, definitions and indicators*

F **Am I Actually Doing This?** *Self-assessment checklist*

6 **Pressure Test** *Two industry leaders against the checklist*

— **Illustrative Portraits** *Four composite operating examples*

E **Ideal Job Description** *Template for hiring or restructuring*

0 L X T M C

The Argument.

Foreword, executive summary, diagnosis, definition, comparison, path forward, and the counterargument — honestly answered.

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In the spirit of SHRM leadership voices.

Taylor & Alonso on the role this paper operationalizes.

The argument in this paper is not contrarian. It is aligned with what SHRM's senior leadership has already publicly called for — by name. In announcing his SHRM26 keynote, Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., President and CEO of SHRM, framed the transition this paper operationalizes in precisely these terms, calling on HR leaders to step up by

“taking back their rightful place as ‘Chief Work Officer.’”

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And SHRM's Chief Knowledge Officer, Dr. Alex Alonso, has been developing the capability frame that describes how the HR function must rebuild itself to live in the new role: a move away from the legacy posture of "rules, roles, regulations, and being right" toward four new disciplines — Reconnaissance, Reimagination, Redefinition, and Regeneration.

What follows is not an endorsement of this paper or its author by either leader. It is a synthesis of themes both have consistently advanced in their public writing, speaking, and SHRM platform, offered as the doctrinal context for the operating model described in the appendices.

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Six insights, four disciplines.

Where Taylor names the leadership posture, Alonso names the capability shift.

C·MCK C IT M2XNDM NIKK M6.MTL WNX M X.

H1MMAI is a workforce opportunity, not a technology project.

If AI is changing how work gets done, the executive accountable for the workforce is best positioned to capture the upside. “AI will not take your job. Someone proficient in AI will.” If proficiency unlocks value, the people function must own it at the enterprise level. That ownership is the CWO mandate.

HSMMThe question has shifted from “how many people” to “what is the work.”

Traditional labor planning asked how many people we need; the new question is what is the work, and which work will be done by people versus machines — the exact language of Work Architecture in Appendix A.

HGMMThe CHRO must take back the chair, not just keep the seat.

Taylor’s SHRM26 framing calls on HR to lead with clarity, courage, and vision — not advise on transformation but author it. The CWO is the structural form of that call.

H)MMSpeed matters. The window is closing.

AI fluency in HR is a this-week priority, not a planning-cycle priority. Audit fluency requirements within twelve months; schedule learning time on the calendar.

H’MMSpeed without dignity is a category error.

Done badly, AI compounds the problem it was meant to solve: “you will do more damage to your workforce, your workplace, and to your reputation.” Human-Centered Leadership pairs with Technical Fluency.

HRMMThe profession leads — or watches others lead.

Where the CHRO leads the redesign, the chair stays in the people function. Where the CHRO waits, the chair migrates — to a Chief Strategy & Transformation Officer, a Chief AI Officer, or a new role.

2NOXMX M2XNDM—X.MLWE·MLWNK N

X1MMReconnaissance

Reading the field continuously — workforce signals, vendor moves, regulation, sentiment, competitor restructurings — as a permanent discipline. The upstream input to Work Architecture and Technical Fluency.

XSMMReimagination

Refusing the inherited shape of work. Every process provisionally designed; every routing decision reversible. The CWO is licensed — and required — to challenge the inherited model.

XGMMRedefinition

Naming work, roles, and the function itself in terms that fit the present. Titles, scorecards, budgets, board language. Without it, the work happens but the chair never moves.

X)MMRegeneration

Building renewal capacity through re-skilling, redeployment, and learning velocity. Designing entries, not just exits — into new roles and new combinations of human and machine work.

> LMKNTEMNKMLTTXCFOTCNK
>
> The four quoted lines above are sourced from public statements by Mr. Taylor and Dr. Alonso and are cited inline. The interpretive commentary surrounding them is the author’s synthesis of themes both have publicly advanced, not direct paraphrase, and should not be read as personal endorsement of this paper by either individual.

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The provocation.

Why CHRO must become CWO — and why now.

The CHRO role succeeded in the workforce it was built for. The workforce changed. By 2026, material portions of enterprise work — particularly the planning, decision-support, and knowledge-work layers — route to AI agents, automated systems, and human-AI teams. Even where front-line work remains predominantly human, the people function optimized for a human-only workforce is now optimized for a fiction. The mandate must grow with the work it governs: not into a hybrid, not into CHRO 2.0, but into something structurally larger — the Chief Work Officer.

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01 The unit of analysis has changed.

Work is increasingly performed not in roles but in tasks — and a growing share of those tasks now route to machines.

02 The metrics are stale.

Engagement, retention, and time-to-fill measure the health of a human supply chain. They do not measure whether work gets done well.

03 The partnerships are wrong.

The CHRO–CFO partnership was about labor cost. The CWO–CTO–COO partnership is about capability architecture.

04 The mandate is too small.

“Talent strategy” assumes the scarce resource is people. The scarce resource is well-designed work.

05 The profession must lead this.

If HR does not redefine itself, technology, finance, and operations leaders will redefine it from the outside.

TIEMFNTTNDMWCKE

The CHRO role was designed to manage a workforce of humans. The CWO orchestrates a workforce of humans, AI agents, and automated systems — and is accountable for how work itself gets done, regardless of who or what performs it.

TIEML66NOKTLFCWCT M—N6TXCKE

Every system that makes or materially shapes an employment-impacting decision — who is hired, paid, promoted, managed, or let go — must have a single named executive owner. Not a committee. Not a vendor. Not “IT.” A person, on the org chart, who signs for its output, audits it, certifies its risk, can switch it off, and answers for it in the boardroom. Where that name is blank, the answer is the CEO, by default and by surprise. The CWO exists to make sure it is never blank.

KNTEMTNMTIEMXEL—EX

This paper is the doctrinal anchor for a broader SHRM Executive Network platform that develops, assesses, certifies, and convenes Chief Work Officers. See Section 06 for the platform; the argument runs through Section 05.

What is broken about the CHRO model.

Five provocations. The modern CHRO function is the most institutionally mature it has ever been — and that is part of the problem.

The modern CHRO function is, in many organizations, the most institutionally mature it has ever been. That is part of the problem. It was perfected for a world that is now rapidly receding. Five provocations follow.

01

You are planning a workforce that no longer exists.

CHROs plan in headcount, FTEs, requisitions, and roles. But work is no longer performed in roles. It is performed in tasks — discrete units of activity with inputs, outputs, and quality criteria. Many tasks now route to AI, and an increasing share will. A function that still plans in headcount cannot see where the work is actually going.

02

Your scorecard measures the wrong thing.

Engagement, retention, time-to-fill, and turnover are supply-chain metrics for a human workforce. They say nothing about whether work is improving. A team can be highly engaged and producing low-value output; a team can churn high and produce extraordinary output. The CHRO scorecard frequently optimizes for the wrong outcome.

03

You are not in the room where work gets architected.

The CHRO–CFO partnership is about cost containment: total rewards, benefits, headcount budgets. Necessary but no longer sufficient. The strategic partnership in a blended-workforce enterprise is CWO–CTO–COO — the joint architecture of capability across humans, agents, and automation. CHROs who are not at that table are not yet in the right job.

04

You are optimizing the wrong resource.

“Talent strategy” presumes humans are the scarce resource. Increasingly, humans are not the constraint. Well-designed work is. That is not talent strategy. That is work strategy. The mandate has to grow to match the constraint.

05

The risks you cannot see will be the ones that name you.

Compliance and employee relations remain essential. But the risk surface has expanded: model risk, agent accountability gaps, displacement velocity, algorithmic bias in hiring and performance systems, trust erosion in a workforce uncertain about its future. A CHRO who treats AI as an HR-tech buying decision will miss every one of these risks until they are headlines.

The question has shifted from “how many people” to “what is the work.”

Defining the Chief Work Officer.

The executive accountable for how work gets done across the enterprise — regardless of whether that work is performed by a human, an AI agent, an automated system, or any blend.

The CWO owns six domains.

—NDLCKMH1

Work Architecture

Decomposing the enterprise's processes into discrete tasks, with clear inputs, outputs, and quality criteria. Continuously routing each task to its optimal executor based on cost, quality, risk, and strategic value.

—NDLCKMHS

Workforce Composition

Designing the optimal mix of human capacity, AI capacity, and automation across every function. Planning capacity not in FTEs alone, but in a unified view that includes agent hours, automation runs, and token budgets.

—NDLCKMHG

Capability Development

Building skills in humans and deploying capabilities through AI, in concert. Ensuring both compound over time. Re-skilling, redeploying, and offboarding humans with dignity as work shifts.

—NDLCKMH)

Performance & Productivity

Measuring throughput, quality, and cost-per-outcome — not hours, not engagement alone, not headcount. Quantifying productivity gains in CFO-grade financial language.

—NDLCKMH'

Trust, Governance & Risk

Establishing the policies, controls, and culture that make a blended workforce legitimate to employees, customers, regulators, and the public. Owning the model-risk register for any system that touches employment.

—NDLCKMHR

Culture

Shaping the lived experience of working alongside intelligent machines. Maintaining psychological safety, identity, and meaning as job content changes faster than job titles.

WHAT THE CWO IS NOT

Not a CHRO who reads AI newsletters. Not a renamed people function. Not a technology role wearing HR clothing. It is a re-scoped executive function for an enterprise in which significant portions of the workforce are now blended by default — and the rest are governed, scheduled, hired, and measured by systems that already are.

WHY THIS IS A GROWTH ENGINE, NOT A CONTROL FUNCTION

Read the six domains again as a revenue thesis, not a risk one. The constraint on most companies is no longer capital or headcount — it is the speed at which work can be redesigned to absorb new capability. The company that re-architects a workflow in a quarter ships the product, wins the customer, and books the margin while a competitor is still writing the policy. AI does not, by itself, create that advantage; whoever owns the redesign of the work does. The CWO is how a company converts available capability into growth faster than its industry. The governance is the floor. The outperformance is the point.

E6TCNKMHSFMBMTIEM OXC —C6TCNK

Why this is not the CTO’s job.

The skeptical CEO’s first question, answered before it is asked. Four officers, four objects of ownership, no overlap at the seam that matters.

6TN

Owns the technology.

The models, the platforms, the data infrastructure, the security of the stack. Answers: does the system work, is it safe, can it scale.

FOCW— MTIEMTNNW.

6NN

Owns the operation.

The end-to-end execution of the business: throughput, service levels, the P&L of running the company day to day. Answers: did the work ship, on time, at cost.

XOK MTIEMWCKE.

62N

Owns the capital.

Where money is allocated, what return it must clear, which bets get funded and which get killed. Answers: is this worth what it costs.

2OK— MTIEMFET.

6PN

Owns the work.

Which work should exist, who or what performs each task, how human and machine are composed into one operating model, and who is accountable when that model touches a person’s job. Answers: is the work itself designed right.

—E C K MTIEMPNXA.

The CTO owns the tool. The CWO owns the work the tool changed. These are not the same object and conflating them is the most expensive mistake in this transition. A CTO can deliver a flawless agentic platform and the enterprise can still fail — because no one re-decided which work should exist, which tasks the agent should and should not perform, what happens to the people whose tasks moved, and who answers for the result when it touches employment. That decision is not technical. It is not operational. It is not financial. It is a distinct object of ownership, and in most companies today it is owned by no one — which means it is owned, when it fails, by the CEO. The CWO exists so that it is owned on purpose, in advance, by name.

TIEMTE T

If you cannot name the single executive who would be called into the boardroom to answer for an AI system that wrongly affected employees, you do not have a CTO problem or a CFO problem. You have an unowned-work problem — and this paper is about the role that closes it.

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CHRO vs. CWO.

Across nine dimensions, the role redefines itself. The shift is not cosmetic.

—	6IXNM D	6PNM D ,
Unit of work	Role / FTE	**Task / outcome**
Workforce	Humans	**Humans + AI agents + automation**
Primary partners	CFO, business unit leaders	**CTO, COO, CFO, GC**
Core metrics	Engagement, retention, time-to-fill	**Throughput, quality, blended cost-per-outcome**
Mandate	Talent strategy	**Work strategy**
Skill priority	Recruit and retain	**Architect and orchestrate**
AI relationship	HR-tech consumer	**Workforce co-architect with CTO**
Risk lens	Compliance, employee relations	**Compliance, ER, model risk, displacement, trust**
Planning cadence	Annual cycle	**Quarterly work redesign**

Read across any row. If your function still sits primarily in the middle column, you are running a 2015 operating model in a 2026 enterprise. The opportunity is not to feel anxious about that. The opportunity is to be the executive who closes the gap.

How to make the transition.

For sitting CHROs, three moves. For boards and CEOs, three more. For the profession, three more still.

2NXM CTTCK M6IXN

H1MMAudit your work, not your workforce.

Map the top 20 processes by spend. For each, ask which tasks could be re-routed to AI, automation, or a redesigned human team — today, not eventually.

HSMMCo-own the AI agenda.

If your CTO is leading enterprise AI adoption without you as a peer co-architect, you are already late. Get in as an owner, not a stakeholder.

HGMMRe-skill yourself first.

You cannot lead a blended workforce you do not understand. Use the tools your employees use. Get fluent first.

2NXMFNLX— M(M6EN

H1MMStop hiring CHROs who cannot speak about AI agents the way they speak about benefits.

Add technical fluency to the must-have spec.

HSMMTie CWO variable comp to enterprise productivity gains, not HR KPIs.

Pay for the outcome you want.

HGMMMake the CWO a peer to the CTO and COO,

not a downstream consumer of their decisions.

2NXM IXDM(MTIEM0XN2E CNK

H1MMThe CHRO title is now an anchor.

The profession that built modern HR must lead its dissolution into something larger — or watch others lead it.

HSMMPivot certification, research, and convening

toward work architecture, human–AI collaboration, and the economics of blended workforces.

HGMMThe risk is not that HR is replaced.

The risk is that HR is bypassed.

Translating the language

Every CHRO metric has a CWO equivalent. Every familiar question has a sharper version. Mark the metrics on your own scorecard that have not yet made the translation — those are the next to retire.

C M M	M M M	T M6PNM
Time-to-fill	Speed of human hiring	**Time-to-capability (any executor)**
Engagement score	Employee sentiment	**Outcome quality + sentiment**
Cost per hire	Recruiting efficiency	**Blended cost-per-outcome**
Headcount budget	FTE volume	**Work-envelope & capacity mix**
Training hours	Inputs to learning	**Re-skilling & redeployment yield**
AI adoption rate	Vanity input	**AI-enabled productivity gain**

Cost discipline alone is not the goal. The CWO measures cost-per-outcome and value-per-outcome: revenue created by capacity freed, margin expansion from redesigned workflows, and growth that would not have been possible at the prior shape of work. The role is paid for the value it produces, not the headcount it manages.

If your CEO eliminated your function tomorrow and rebuilt it from scratch — knowing what they now know about AI — would they hire you to lead it?

The strongest objections, honestly answered.

A position paper that does not engage its strongest objections is propaganda. Five objections; measured responses.

NF E6TCNKMH1

"This is just rebranding HR."

It can be. The CHRO who renames the function CWO without changing budgets, scorecards, partnerships, or hiring spec has done nothing — see David, Appendix D. But the structural argument here is a planning move (FTE → task envelope), a measurement move (engagement → throughput), a partnership move (CFO → CTO/COO), and a capability move (recruit-and-retain → architect-and-orchestrate). The branding is the cheapest test of whether the rest has happened.

NF E6TCNKMHS

"AI capabilities aren't mature enough to justify restructuring."

The paper does not depend on agentic systems being everywhere by next quarter. It depends on capability shift being a permanent feature of the enterprise. The discipline of planning across human, AI, and automation capacity is required even where the AI share is small — because the share is non-zero and growing, and the planning has to be done by someone. Waiting for maturity is the failure mode this paper most warns against.

NF E6TCNKMHG

"Most companies aren't ready."

True. Most enterprises were also not ready for the CFO role when it emerged in the 1960s–70s, the CIO in the 80s, or the Chief Risk Officer post-2008. Early adopters define the shape and late adopters inherit it. This paper is written for the early-adopter case; late adopters can use the same framework on a delayed clock — and probably should.

NF E6TCNKMH)

"The CHRO role has plenty of life in it."

It does — and the CWO contains it. The CWO role is additive, not substitutive: every responsibility a CHRO holds today is a responsibility a CWO holds tomorrow, plus the accountability for AI agents, automated systems, and how work actually gets done. The sitting CHRO who moves to CWO loses nothing and gains the room to build the role the next decade requires. For many enterprises, the existing CHRO role works — possibly for years. The deeper argument is that the work this paper describes must be done somewhere, by someone, at the executive level. Where the CHRO grows into the CWO mandate, the seat expands. Where they do not, a peer absorbs it — and the people function is being optimized out from underneath the executive who runs it.

OBJECTION 05

"This paper overstates AI's near-term workforce impact."

The case does not rest on a specific velocity claim. It rests on the structural observation that 'what is the work, and which work goes to whom?' has displaced 'how many people do we need?' as the central planning problem. If you believe that displacement is real — in any timeframe — then someone at the executive level must own the new question. The case for the CWO is the case for ownership, not for any particular pace of change.

> **THE POSITION, RESTATED**
>
> None of these objections defeat the argument. Each refines it. The CWO is not a prediction — it is a structural response to a planning problem that already exists in every enterprise serious about AI. Where the role exists in fact, it is creating advantage. Where it exists only in title, it is creating noise. Where it does not exist at all, the work is happening anyway, somewhere else in the org chart, with the people function increasingly downstream.

E6TCNKMHRMBMTIEM6PNM0WLT2NXD

From doctrine to practice.

A position paper is the beginning, not the end. SHRM Executive Network is building the platform around four interlocking capabilities.

The argument this paper makes — that the CHRO role must evolve into the Chief Work Officer — only matters if the profession has the instruments to develop, assess, certify, and convene the leaders who will operate in the new role.

The paper is the doctrine. The platform is how the doctrine becomes practice. What follows is the architecture of that platform; specifics of program design, eligibility, and engagement are available to SHRM Executive Network members.

—EVEWN0

Programs that build CWO capability — the competency model in Appendix A is the spine.

From CHRO to CWO Workshops

Multi-day immersions with applied exercises against the participant's own enterprise.

AI Workforce Architecture Sessions

Produces a decomposed map of one priority process and a CFO-grade business case.

Keynotes on the CWO Transition

Single-session formats with variants by audience.

L—VC E

Direct executive engagement for boards and C-suites making structural decisions.

Board Briefings

Closed sessions on the transition, succession, and the questions boards should ask.

CEO-CWO Alignment Sessions

Working through the operating model, scorecard, and first 100 days.

Sponsored Events

Industry- or geography-specific convenings; sponsors do not author content.

L E M(M6EXTC2

Instruments that measure CWO readiness and convert capability into a credential.

CWO Readiness Assessment

Scores a leader against the eight competencies; Appendix B is the preview.

Executive Certification: CWO

A new SHRM certification with workshop, assessment, and hybrid pathways.

6NKVEKE

Forums for practitioners to exchange operating practice and shape the profession.

The CWO Council

By-application council of practicing and emerging CWOs — members come to work.

EN: CWO Membership Tier

A new EN level with preferred-terms access to the platform.

> TIEMXELWMVLWOE
>
> The paper positions the role. The platform certifies its practitioners, benchmarks their progress, and convenes them as a profession. SHRM Executive Network is building both.

0 L X T M C C

Operating Appendices.

Competency model, self-assessment, pressure test against two industry leaders, four composite operating portraits, and an ideal job description.

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L00EK—C·MLMBM6ND0ETEK6 MDN—EW

Eight competencies.

Definitions and indicators. Each has behavioral indicators that distinguish proficient performance from aspirational language.

0WLT2NXD

This competency model is the foundation of the SHRM Executive Network certification curriculum. See Section 06 for the platform context.

Eight competencies define the role. Read them not as a menu but as the load-bearing structure of a re-scoped executive function — each one supports the others.

01 Workforce Architecture

Definition. Workforce Architecture is the structural discipline of decomposing enterprise processes into discrete tasks, defining the inputs, outputs, and quality criteria for each, and routing each task to the executor — human, AI agent, automated system, or hybrid — best suited to perform it. The CWO treats work itself as the unit of design and assumes the optimal composition of executors will change as capabilities, costs, and risks evolve.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS OF PROFICIENCY

- Maintains a current-state map of the enterprise's top 20–30 work streams, refreshed at least quarterly.
- For any major workflow, can articulate inputs, outputs, quality thresholds, cycle time, and cost-per-outcome from memory.
- Has explicitly designated, for each significant task, whether it is human-led, AI-led, or hybrid — with rationale documented.
- Designs hand-off protocols and escalation paths between human and machine work, anticipating failure modes before they arrive.
- Treats routing decisions as reversible and instruments them for continuous measurement, not one-time analysis.
- Resists role-based and headcount-based planning when task-based planning would yield more accuracy.
- Sunsets work streams that no longer create value rather than optimizing them at the margins.
- Owns a portfolio view of work redesign initiatives, prioritized by value and sequenced by capability readiness.

02 Workforce Strategy

Definition. Workforce Strategy is the forward-looking discipline of positioning the enterprise's capability base 12 to 36 months ahead of where the business will need it. Where Architecture asks how work is structured today, Strategy asks what the workforce must become — in skills, composition, geography, and operating model — to capture opportunities the business sees but cannot yet execute.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS OF PROFICIENCY

- Maintains a written 24-month workforce strategy linked to enterprise strategy, refreshed at least annually.
- Identifies the three to five capability bets that will most determine competitive position, and resources them.
- Translates corporate strategy into capability terms: what we will need to do, by when, with what blend of humans and machines.
- Anticipates capability shortages before they become hiring crises; builds and buys with intent, not under duress.
- Holds a defensible view on which capabilities to build internally, which to partner for, and which to acquire.
- Tracks build/buy/borrow ratios across critical capability domains and adjusts them deliberately.
- Maintains a named succession map for the top 10–15 critical roles and the capability pipeline that feeds them, refreshed annually.
- Builds workforce scenarios — best, base, downside — and pre-positions levers for each.
- Owns the workforce strategy line in the long-range plan, not just the headcount line in the operating budget.

03 Workforce Orchestration

Definition. Workforce Orchestration is the operational discipline of running blended teams in steady state — composing human and machine capacity intentionally, setting accountability between them, managing performance across both, and adjusting capacity as work shifts. Where Architecture and Strategy are design, Orchestration is execution.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS OF PROFICIENCY

- Composes teams by capability required, not by precedent, headcount allocation, or org-chart convenience.
- Maintains a unified capacity plan combining human FTE, AI agent capacity, and automation throughput in one forecast.
- Sets shared scorecards across human and machine contributors to a workflow, with outcome-level accountability.
- Manages AI system performance with the same rigor as human performance — drift detection, re-evaluation, replacement.
- Designates clear accountability for blended-team output, regardless of which executor produced any single artifact.
- Tracks blended cost-per-outcome alongside individual unit economics for humans, agents, and automation.
- Rapidly recomposes teams when a new model, tool, or constraint shifts the optimal mix.
- Owns the operating rituals — planning, retrospectives, capability reviews — that keep capacity in sync.

04 Technical Fluency

Definition. Technical Fluency is sufficient understanding of the AI systems, automation platforms, and data infrastructure shaping the workforce that the CWO can co-architect deployments rather than merely receive briefings. Fluency does not require building models — it requires the discrimination to evaluate, deploy, govern, and improve them in business terms.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS OF PROFICIENCY

- Personally uses the AI tools deployed in the workforce — frontier chat models, copilots, agentic systems — monthly, for real work.
- Can articulate, in plain business language, the distinction between traditional ML, generative AI, and agentic systems.
- Reads vendor capability claims skeptically and asks the second-order questions that expose limitations.
- Understands common failure modes — hallucination, drift, bias, brittleness, prompt injection — and standard mitigations.
- Is conversant in the cost economics of AI versus human labor: not dollars-per-seat but dollars-per-outcome.
- Co-designs deployments with the CTO/CIO from the architecture phase, not the change-management phase.
- Distinguishes ‘AI as feature’ from ‘AI as workflow re-architecture’ and routes investment accordingly.
- Maintains a working point of view on what the next 12–18 months of capability will and will not enable.

05 Financial Acumen

Definition. Financial Acumen is the CWO’s ability to read the enterprise as a P&L, defend the workforce plan in unit economics, and translate work redesign into the financial outcomes the CFO, CEO, and Board care about. The CWO who cannot speak revenue, margin, capital allocation, and return on invested capability is structurally junior in any strategic room.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS OF PROFICIENCY

- Reads the income statement, balance sheet, and cash flow without translation; can locate the workforce inside each.
- Defends the workforce plan in unit economics — revenue per work-unit, margin contribution, capital intensity.
- Quantifies the value, not just the cost, of work redesign: revenue enabled, margin expansion, capacity reinvested.
- Builds the business case for major workforce investments in CFO-grade terms: NPV, IRR, payback, sensitivities.
- Understands the financial mechanics of the industry — what drives margin and which workforce moves shift it.
- Co-owns the productivity line of the long-range plan with the CFO, as a peer, not a downstream contributor.
- Reframes ‘HR cost’ as ‘work-system investment’ in board reporting, with returns measured against outcomes.
- Knows the difference between cost discipline and value creation, and resists optimizing the first at the expense of the second.

06 Competitive Intelligence

Definition. Competitive Intelligence is the disciplined practice of reading the external environment — competitor restructurings, talent flows, regulatory shifts, macroeconomic trajectories, and capability moves across the industry — and translating those signals into workforce decisions before they become reactive ones.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS OF PROFICIENCY

- Maintains a working brief on the top five competitors’ workforce structure, executive team, and capability bets, refreshed quarterly.
- Tracks executive moves across the industry as a leading indicator of strategic shifts.
- Reads macroeconomic signals — labor market, interest rate, regulatory — and translates them into workforce scenarios.
- Has a documented view on which industry shifts will most reshape labor demand over the next 24 months.
- Stress-tests the workforce plan against recession, acceleration, and competitor-shock scenarios.
- Engages externally with the discipline of a strategy function, not the social calendar of a benefits leader.
- Distinguishes signal from noise. Not every competitor move is a model to copy; some are warnings.
- Pre-positions ahead of regulatory shifts (EU AI Act, U.S. state laws, industry codes) rather than scrambling at the date.

07 Human-Centered Leadership

Definition. The work of maintaining trust, dignity, identity, and psychological safety in a workforce whose job content is changing faster than its job titles. The CWO derives legitimacy from being trusted with both the enterprise's competitive position and its people's livelihoods — and refusing to trade one for the other.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS OF PROFICIENCY

- Communicates change with specificity: what is changing, when, why, and what comes next — in language people can act on.
- Refuses euphemism about displacement. Tells people the truth in language that lets them plan.
- Develops named programs that move humans into roles complementing AI, with measurable enrollment and outcomes.
- Invests deliberately in employee skill development — not only as a transition mechanism during workforce change, but as a continuous operational discipline that compounds the value of human capacity.
- Protects psychological safety even while delivering hard news about role obsolescence.
- Maintains sentiment visibility beyond surveys — listening posts, skip-levels, exit-interview themes.
- Personally models use of AI tools so employees see leadership taking the same risks asked of them.
- Holds the line on dignity in transitions: severance, references, and retraining commitments are honored.
- Surfaces ethical concerns about deployments before they become headlines, not after.

08 Governance, Ethics & Risk

Definition. Owning the legitimacy of the blended workforce — to employees, customers, regulators, courts, works councils, and the public. The CWO maintains the systems of policy, audit, and disclosure that let the enterprise deploy AI at scale without surrendering its license to operate or its values.

BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS OF PROFICIENCY

- Maintains a model-risk register for every AI system touching employment, compensation, or performance — with named owners.
- Has clear bright-line rules for where humans must remain in the loop, defensible in CFO and CEO terms.
- Engages proactively with works councils, unions, and policy bodies — before escalation, not after.
- Co-owns the enterprise AI governance framework with the General Counsel, CTO, and CISO.
- Tracks emerging regulation (EU AI Act, U.S. state laws, industry codes) and pre-positions ahead of compliance dates.
- Distinguishes legal compliance from ethical legitimacy — and invests in both.
- Treats algorithmic bias in hiring, performance, and compensation as a board-level risk and reports it as such.
- Maintains the audit trail. Any employment-affecting decision involving AI is reconstructable months later.

> **TIEMDN—EW MXEL—ML6XN**
>
> The eight competencies are not a checklist of skills. They are the load-bearing arches of a re-scoped executive role. A CWO operating at proficiency on seven of eight is missing a structural element that holds the rest up. Hire and develop accordingly.

L00EK—C·MFMBM EW2 L E DEKT

Am I actually doing this?

Score honestly. Half-credit is not credit.

0WLT2NXD

This checklist is the public preview of the CWO Readiness Assessment. The full diagnostic is delivered through SHRM Executive Network with confidential reporting.

The checklist below is structured around the eight competencies in Appendix A. A high score on AI items alone is not a passing grade — the CWO who is fluent in AI but cannot read a P&L or name three competitor moves is operating with a structural gap.

TIC MPEEA

- ☐ I have looked, in detail, at one process my function owns and asked which tasks could be re-routed to AI today.
- ☐ I have had a substantive one-on-one conversation with the CTO about an AI deployment — not in a steering committee.
- ☐ I can name three AI systems my organization deploys and articulate what they do, where they fail, and what they cost.
- ☐ I have read the enterprise's most recent earnings transcript or board materials and can locate the workforce in the numbers.
- ☐ I can name the two or three macroeconomic shifts most likely to reshape labor demand in my industry this year.

TIC MDNKTI

- ☐ I have proposed at least one workflow redesign that crosses functional lines.
- ☐ I have shifted at least one metric on my own scorecard from human-supply to work-outcome.
- ☐ I have personally used — not just demoed — the AI tools my workforce uses, for at least two hours.
- ☐ I have updated my working brief on the top five competitors' workforce structure and capability bets.
- ☐ I have built the business case for at least one workforce investment in CFO-grade terms: NPV, payback, sensitivities.

TIC M OLXTEX

- ☐ I have published a point of view to my organization about the future of work in our industry, with specifics.
- ☐ I have re-skilled or redeployed at least one team whose work has materially shifted.
- ☐ I can defend my workforce plan to the CFO in unit economics — not just cost language.
- ☐ I have stress-tested the workforce plan against a downside macro scenario and a competitor-shock scenario.
- ☐ I have refreshed the 24-month workforce strategy with explicit capability bets and build/buy/borrow decisions.

TIC M ELX

- ☐ I have changed how at least one major process is staffed by adjusting the human / AI / automation mix.
- ☐ I have built or hired technical fluency on my own team — not just bought consulting.
- ☐ I have stopped describing my function as "HR" in conversations with the CEO, the board, and external audiences.
- ☐ I can defend the workforce plan against alternative capital allocation choices the CFO might prefer.
- ☐ I have shifted board-level conversation from headcount and engagement to throughput, value, and capability.

TIEMOWTCDLTEM OE TCNK

If your CEO eliminated your function tomorrow and rebuilt it from scratch — knowing what they now know about AI — would they hire you to lead it?

Two industry leaders against the checklist.

A framework is only useful if it discriminates — and honest about the gap between the role as practiced today and the role this paper argues for.

0WLT2NXD

Pressure tests of this kind — confidential, applied to a participant's own enterprise — are conducted within the CWO Council.

SUBJECT 1 — LARGE-CAP BIOTECHNOLOGY

Chief People & Technology Officer.

ASSESSED FROM THE PUBLIC RECORD

The CPO formally merged the company's HR and IT functions in late 2024 and now leads both. She manages several thousand employees alongside a large estate of custom AI agents through an enterprise-wide GenAI platform partnership. In public interviews she describes her job as "architecting the flow of work" and contrasts "work planning" with traditional workforce planning. Reports directly to the CEO.

VERDICT — SUBJECT 1

High proficiency. She is not merely close to the model — she is the model. The company's structural merger of HR and IT is the rare case of an enterprise that has put the CWO mandate into the org chart, not just the strategy deck.

SUBJECT 2 — LARGE-CAP FOOD & BEVERAGE

EVP & Chief People Officer.

ASSESSED FROM THE PUBLIC RECORD

The CPO joined from a major professional services firm in 2023 and leads global HR for a workforce of several hundred thousand employees. She has a thoughtful public point of view on AI in the workforce — including a critique of "AI babysitter" entry-level roles — and leads a skills-first hiring agenda. The company's enterprise AI agenda, including its at-scale agentic-platform deployment, is led by the Chief Strategy & Transformation Officer, not the CPO.

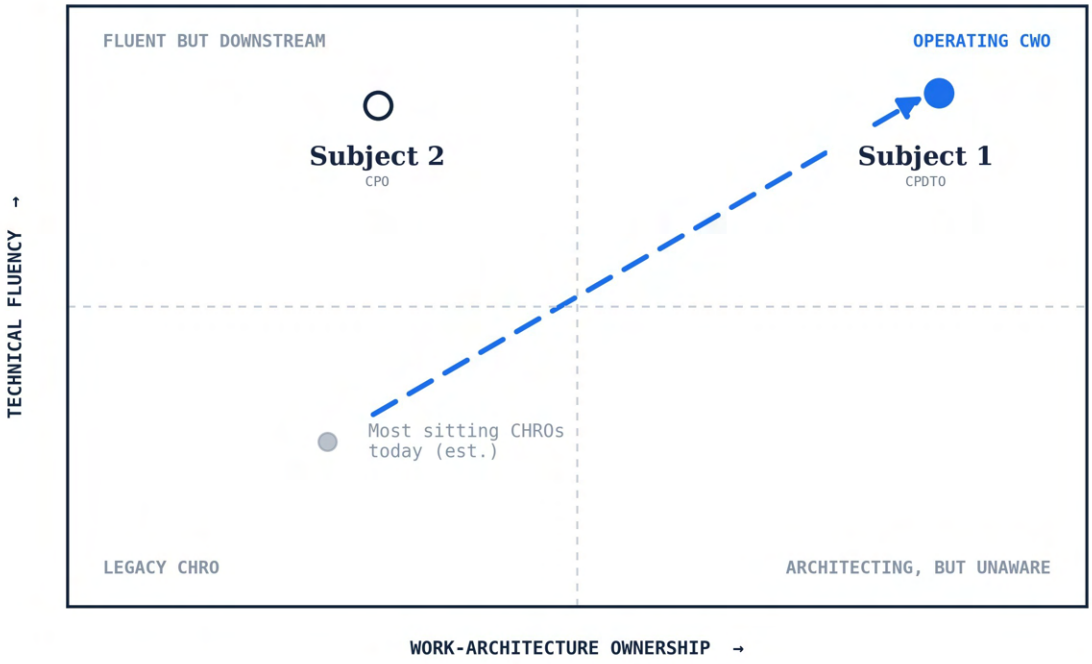
VERDICT — SUBJECT 2

Highly capable CHRO doing demanding work. On the CWO checklist, much of what the framework describes sits structurally with a different executive at this company. Not a personal gap — an org-chart gap. The precise gap most enterprises will have to close in the next 24 months.

L00EK—C·M6MBMTIEM2CEW— MDL00E—

The field, mapped.

Plot the two subjects against two axes — technical fluency and work-architecture ownership — and the gap visualizes.



SUBJECT 1

Top-right — the Operating CWO quadrant. The model put into the org chart, not just the strategy deck.

SUBJECT 2

Top-left — fluent and thoughtful, but the architecture work sits with a peer executive in the same enterprise.

TRAJECTORY

The dashed path is the journey from where most sitting CHROs sit today to where the role needs to be.

WHAT THIS TELLS US ABOUT THE FRAMEWORK

The CWO framework discriminates. Applied honestly, it tells us where the role exists in name only, where it exists in fact, and — most importantly — where the work of redefining the role is still ahead. Boards and CEOs should read the gap in their own enterprises and ask whether their people function is on the Subject 1 trajectory or the (more common) Subject 2 trajectory. There is no judgment in that question. There is only consequence.

Four composite operating examples.

Names are illustrative; the behaviors are drawn from observed practice across multiple organizations.

0WLT2NXD

These composite portraits are drawn from the operating case material developed for SHRM's From CHRO to CWO workshops and AI Workforce Architecture sessions.

N0EXLTCK MLTMIC IM0XN2C6CEK6

Sarah

6PNMUMDC— 6L0MCK OXLK6EM6LXXCEX

Sarah opens Monday by reviewing not headcount, but a single dashboard showing throughput, quality, and cost-per-outcome across her top 30 work streams. Claims-intake processing time has dropped 40% since deploying an agentic intake system three months ago — but quality scores have softened.

By 10am she has convened a 30-minute working session with the claims VP, the head of AI, and the customer-experience lead. By Tuesday afternoon they have identified the model is over-summarizing rare claim types and designed a human-in-the-loop fallback. By Friday it is deployed.

She does not call this an "AI initiative." She calls it work design. Her board treats her as a peer of the CFO and the CTO, because she behaves like one.

Marcus

6PNMUMXE CNKLWMIELWTI6LXEM TED

Marcus presents to the board. The CFO opens with a cost slide. Marcus replaces it with a productivity slide: cost-per-discharge dropping; quality scores rising; nurse satisfaction up 11 points after AI-assisted documentation removed 90 minutes of charting per shift.

He does not lead with engagement scores. He leads with the financial and human case together. When a board member asks about AI risk, he has a one-page model-risk register ready, co-signed by the CTO and General Counsel.

DLTOXCK MCKTNM0XN2C6CEK6

Priya

6IXNMTXLK CTCNKCK MTNM6PNMUMXE CNKLWMFLKA

Priya knows she needs to evolve. She has commissioned an AI strategy from a top-tier consultancy and is waiting for the deck. She has not yet personally used any of the AI tools her bank deploys. When the CTO presents an agentic underwriting pilot, she asks thoughtful questions about employee impact but defers to him on capability. Her scorecard still anchors on time-to-fill, engagement, and turnover.

The honest read: *Sincere, learning, and six months behind where she needs to be. The move: pick one process. Get personally hands-on. Bring back a redesign by next quarter, not a consulting deck.*

David

6IXNMUMDLKO2L6TOXCK M6ND0LK

David has retitled himself "Chief People & Work Officer" but operates exactly as a CHRO. He attends AI town halls but does not co-lead them. He has not yet changed any of his function's KPIs. When asked what work has been re-architected this year, he describes training programs, not workflows.

The honest read: *The title change is necessary but not sufficient. The move: change one metric on his own scorecard this quarter. Tell his team why. Demonstrate, in operating terms, that the new title is real.*

L00EK—C·MEMBMC—ELWM NFM—E 6XC0TCNK

Chief Work Officer.

Template for hiring or restructuring the role.

0WLT2NXD

This template is the recruiting standard maintained by SHRM Executive Network and supported by the CWO Council in successive iterations.

TCTWE	**Chief Work Officer (CWO)**
XE0NXT MTN	**Chief Executive Officer**
0EEX	**CFO · CTO / CIO · COO · General Counsel**
6N0E	**Enterprise-wide**

DLK—LTE

The Chief Work Officer is accountable for how work gets done at [Company] — across humans, AI agents, and automated systems. The CWO owns the design, composition, performance, and integrity of the enterprise's work. This is not a renamed CHRO role. It is a re-scoped executive function for an enterprise in which significant portions of the workforce are now blended by default — and the rest are governed, scheduled, hired, and measured by systems that already are.

PILTM NOMPCWWMNPK

Workforce Architecture.
Decompose work into tasks; route each to its best executor.

Workforce Strategy.
Position the capability base 12 to 36 months ahead of need; own succession for critical roles.

Workforce Orchestration.
Run blended teams in steady state — capacity, accountability, performance.

Technical Fluency.
Co-architect AI and automation deployments with the CTO and CIO.

Financial Acumen.
Defend the workforce plan in CFO-grade unit economics; co-own the productivity line.

Competitive Intelligence.
Translate competitor moves, talent flows, and regulation into workforce decisions.

Human-Centered Leadership.
Maintain trust, dignity, and continuous skill development through change.

Governance, Ethics & Risk.
Own the model-risk register, the audit trail, and the legitimacy of the blended workforce.

O66E MBM ELXMNKE

- A documented map of the top 25 work streams, each with current- and target-state models.
- At least five processes materially re-architected, with quantified gains.
- A quarterly workforce plan integrating human FTE, AI capacity, and automation in one view.
- A model-risk and employment-risk framework co-owned with the CTO and General Counsel.
- A measurable shift in board conversation: from headcount to throughput, quality, value.

PINM NOMLXE

- An executive who has led large workforces — and is hungry to lead them differently.
- Technically fluent. You hold your own on LLMs, agents, and automation economics.
- Comfortable in the C-suite. You partner naturally with the CFO, CTO, and COO.
- Operationally grounded. You have re-engineered a process, not just sponsored one.
- Ethically serious. You have made hard calls about people, technology, and trust.
- Allergic to title-only change. It shows up in budgets, scorecards, roadmaps.

A NOTE ON THIS DOCUMENT

This is a working paper, not a finished theory. The Chief Work Officer concept will be sharpened by the executives who try it, fail at parts of it, and report back honestly. The profession does not need consensus to begin. It needs people willing to act before the question is settled.

6WN CK

About this paper, and what to do next.

LFNOTMTIC M0L0EX

This is the inaugural release in the SHRM Executive Network 2026 series on the evolution of the people function in blended-workforce enterprises. It is the doctrinal anchor for a broader strategic platform — workshops, advisory, assessment, certification, and convening — detailed in Section 06. The frameworks it contains are provisional and will be refined by the executives who try them and the practitioners who certify in them.

LFNOTMTIEMKETPNXA

SHRM Executive Network convenes senior HR and people leaders across industry for cross-cutting dialogue on the structural questions reshaping the profession. The Network publishes papers, hosts working sessions, and curates research for executives building the next generation of the people function.

LFNOTMTIEMLOTINX

Alexander is a contributor to the SHRM Executive Network and engages with senior HR leaders on AI adoption and workforce transformation. He works at the intersection of strategy, leadership, and the practical operating-model questions that follow from autonomous AI tools entering enterprise work.

KE·TM TE0

1. Take the CWO Readiness Assessment — locate yourself in the eight-competency model. **2. Bring a From CHRO to CWO workshop or CEO-CWO alignment session** to your enterprise. **3. Apply to the CWO Council** — shape the role at the profession-wide level.

SHSRM EXCE MMUMMTIEMEVNWOTCNKMN2MTIEM0EN0WEM2OK6TCNK

The Artificial

Competence Crisis.

Why the appearance of capability is no longer a proxy for competence — and the ten actions every Chief Work Officer must take now.

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The Artificial Competence Crisis.

Why the appearance of capability is no longer a proxy for competence.

EXCE	SHRM Executive Network — 2026 Series on the Evolution of the People Function · Paper Two
E—CTCNK	v1.0 — May 2026
2NXDLT	Position paper with a ten-action leadership mandate and operating architecture
LO—CEK6E	Sitting CHROs and CPOs, board members, CEOs, and senior HR leaders governing AI adoption across the workforce.
6ND0LKCNK	Builds on Paper One, “From CHRO to CWO.” This paper is the action mandate; the first paper is the structural argument.

NKM6CTLTCNKM(MLOTINX IC0

This paper adapts the keynote “The Artificial Competence Crisis,” delivered by Dr. Alexander Alonso, Chief Knowledge Officer, SHRM, in San Jose, California. Statistics are drawn from SHRM and related workforce research and are cited in context. Interpretive commentary is the author’s synthesis and should not be read as a precise institutional position.

6NKTEKT

Inside this paper.

Two movements: the diagnosis, then the mandate.

B **Foreword** *The acceleration squeeze*

B **Executive Summary** *The provocation*

H1 **The Symptom** *Skillfishing and the AI-enhanced candidate*

HS **The Spread** *Workslop and the atrophy of original thought*

HG **The Governance Void** *Pace, protection, and the uncaught collapse*

H) **The New Mandate** *From evaluating polish to excavating foundation*

B **The Ten Actions** *What to do on Monday morning*

L **The Operating Architecture** *Four domains, one owner*

F **Field Q&A** *The five questions, answered*

B **Closing** *Inaction is not neutral*

0 L X T M C

The Diagnosis.

The acceleration squeeze, the symptom named, the spread, the governance void — and why the appearance of competence is no longer a proxy for capability.

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2NXEPNX—

The acceleration squeeze.

The top of the house is mandating it. The bottom is already doing it. The middle is being asked to govern what is already happening without it.

Imagine a piece of work you produced in the last two weeks that you are quietly proud of. Now ask the harder question: how much of it was actually you? In 2026 that question no longer has a clean answer — and the fact that it does not is the most important governance issue facing every organization. This is not a technology conversation about what AI can and cannot do. It is the gap between what your workforce is already doing with AI and what your organization is actually equipped to govern.

Forty percent of CEOs name AI a top-three priority. Forty-one percent of employees already use AI at work today.

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Two-thirds of CHROs predict AI will be prevalent or much more prevalent in their workplace by 2026; sixty-five percent expect it to increase productivity. That is not consensus that AI is coming. It is consensus that AI has already won the argument. What remains to be decided is whether the integration happens with you — or to you.

The rule that organizes everything that follows is simple: you cannot govern what you cannot name. You cannot train interviewers to spot what you cannot describe, and you cannot brief a board on a risk that has not yet entered the corporate vocabulary. So this paper begins by giving the crisis a name.

E·E6OTCVEM ODDLX’

The provocation.

Why competence — not adoption — is the governance question of 2026.

The digital veneer is now universally accessible. When anyone can sound expert, the appearance of competence stops carrying information. The organizations that win the next eighteen months are not the ones that adopt AI fastest — they are the ones that can still tell the difference between declared and demonstrated capability, and that build the governance to enforce it. This paper argues five things, then gives ten actions. Paper One named three opening moves; this paper names the full ten.

TIC M0L0EXMLX OE M2CVEMTICK

01 The signal is no longer reliable.

The appearance of competence — polish, fluency, structure — is now universally purchasable. It is no longer a proxy for capability.

02 The symptom has a name.

Skillfishing: candidates projecting capabilities they do not hold. Eighty percent of HR professionals cannot yet name it.

03 The spread is internal, not just at the door.

Workslop — polished, hollow output — is already in strategy decks, board memos, and performance reviews.

04 The governance has not kept pace.

Deployment moves at 67%; protection moves at 34%. Twenty-nine percent of organizations have zero safeguards.

05 The mandate is to excavate, not evaluate.

The job is no longer to assess the polish. It is to build systems that ruthlessly excavate the foundation.

TIEMFNTTNDMWCKE

Polish no longer proves competence. Leadership is no longer about evaluating the polish — it is about building systems that test the foundation underneath it.

KNTEMTNMTIEMXEL—EX

This is the action companion to Paper One, “From CHRO to CWO.” Where that paper made the structural argument for the role, this one specifies what the role does first. The ten actions are scale-agnostic; the implementation is scale-dependent.

E6TCNKMH1MBMTIEM ’D0TND

Skillfishing and the AI-enhanced candidate.

Name the phenomenon, or inherit someone else’s vocabulary for it.

WHERE THIS FITS

Skillfishing is the first symptom this paper treats, not the only one. It is the most visible — declared capability outrunning demonstrated capability — because it is concentrated at the hiring door. The wider problem moves inside the workforce. Six of the ten actions that follow address consequences that begin long after hiring.

Every résumé in the stack has been touched by this. The question is not whether — it is what your process does about it. Three observations frame the symptom.

01

Skillfishing has entered every requisition.

Skillfishing is the use of generative AI to project capabilities a candidate does not actually hold — polished résumés, flawless cover letters, perfect case-study answers for skills they cannot demonstrate unaided. Seventy-one percent of HR professionals cite AI-generated résumés as the primary driver. Eighty percent are unaware of the term itself. The gap between the phenomenon and the vocabulary to name it is the governance problem.

02

The polish is highest exactly where judgment matters.

Eighty-nine percent of HR professionals report higher polish in candidate work product; sixty-nine percent report it is harder to assess the underlying skill. The distortion is heaviest where it hurts most — functional expertise (51%), leadership and management (48%), execution (47%), cognitive and problem-solving (43%). Not the edges of the role. The center of it.

03

The façade collapses on a ninety-day clock.

Forty-five percent of HR professionals report a new hire’s true capability is exposed within the first one to three months. Ninety days is the half-life of the artificial impression — and it is the real cost-per-hire most dashboards never measure: salary, onboarding, team velocity, and the opportunity cost of the person not hired.

The diagnostic that matters is not the output. It is the divergence between two columns — what gets declared, and what gets demonstrated.

Façade vs. foundation.

The single distinction to remember. The collapse happens where these two columns diverge.

—	T M2 M D	T M2 M D
Documentation	Flawless grammar, heavy jargon, perfectly formatted	**Communication that adapts to a real audience**
Breadth of claims	Confident proficiency across many advanced disciplines	**Capability that survives a follow-up question**
Strategic output	Comprehensive proposals delivered rapidly	**Output rooted in the actual operating context**
Under pressure	Polish holds until the first unscripted question	**Judgment holds when the tooling is removed**
Time to expose	Looks complete on day one	**Proven over the first ninety days**

Know which column you are hiring against. Every governance decision in the second half of this paper traces back to this divergence. Presentation can look complete while capability cannot carry weight. The job is to find out which one you actually bought — before month three does it for you.

The truth of a candidate’s actual capability is exposed within one to three months — reported by 45% of HR professionals.

Workslop and the atrophy of original thought.

If skillfishing is what happens at the door, this is what happens once the door closes.

The symptom does not stay at hiring. It moves inside — into the work product, into the workforce, and into the institutional muscle the organization depends on.

01 Workslop layers polish over a weak idea.

Once the candidate is hired, skillfishing becomes a colleague problem. Workslop is built in three layers: AI polish (perfect grammar, formatting); the iteration loop (70% report each AI pass loses nuance until the final draft is less precise than the first); and a weakly understood human idea underneath (68% say weak ideas sound stronger once AI has formatted them). It is sitting in your Q3 decks and board memos right now.

02 Original thought is being automated away.

Eighty percent of HR professionals believe that repeatedly refining work using AI fundamentally reduces original thought. By a four-to-one margin, the people whose entire job is to develop human capability believe the tools being deployed are degrading the very thing they are meant to develop. This is not scaled intelligence. It is automated intellectual decay — done on purpose, daily, because no one has said stop.

03 The workforce can already feel the muscle wasting.

Forty percent of U.S. workers say AI enhances the appearance of productivity; only sixteen percent say it has made them genuinely more productive. Sixty-six percent report increased burnout, because the organizational muscle for the tasks they used to do is being lost — and they are absorbing the consequence.

04 Six percent is not small. It is one in sixteen.

A high-fidelity mapping of 20,262 U.S. workers and 831 occupations validates a six percent job-transformation risk. Without human review and foundation verification, that six percent is not efficiency gained — it is a one-in-sixteen loss of core institutional capability. That is not optimization. It is structural amputation.

We are not scaling intelligence. We are automating intellectual decay — and doing it on purpose, every day, because nobody has told us to stop.

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Pace, protection, and the uncaught collapse.

Where are the guardrails? The data names the void.

01 Pace outruns protection by two to one.

Deployment moves at sixty-seven percent; foundational AI use policies sit at forty-nine percent; responsible-AI training at thirty-four. The gap between a 67% pace and a 34% protection is not a tolerance window. It is a liability accruing on the balance sheet every quarter it is not closed.

02 Nearly one in three organizations is fully unshielded.

Twenty-nine percent of organizations have zero AI safeguards. Not inadequate — zero. No policies, no training, no human-review mandates. And policy alone is not protection: each step of the attrition funnel — policy, then training, then enforced human review — is where protective intent leaks out before it reaches the work.

03 The legal blind spot is the most expensive line item.

Fifty-seven percent of HR professionals in states with active workforce-AI regulation are unaware of it. Organizations are navigating a complex regulatory landscape without functioning instruments. Calibration of governance is required now — not after the next quarterly review.

04 The collapse is uncaught, in plain sight.

Put the behavioral fact (80% loss of original thought, polished and flawed workslop) beside the governance fact (only 29% enforce mandatory human review before output leaves the building) and the loss of original thought stops being an employee failure. It becomes a systemic governance failure: the safety net required to catch artificial incompetence has been dismantled.

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> An uncaught collapse is what happens when the loss of original thought meets the absence of mandatory review. It is happening in slow motion, in plain sight, across nearly a third of organizations — and the workforce can feel the muscle wasting even when the dashboards cannot.

E6TCNKMH)MBMTIEMKEPMDLK—LTE

From evaluating polish to excavating foundation.

The hinge of the entire argument.

Polish no longer proves competence. That single shift reorganizes the job.

> *The future of HR — and of organizational leadership — is not about evaluating the polish. It is about building systems that ruthlessly excavate the foundation.*

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Diagnosing the crisis is the easy part. The harder question — the one this paper owes an answer to — is what you actually do on Monday morning. What follows is ten answers: ten specific actions, startable this quarter, that close the gap between where the organization is and where the moment demands it to be. Some are tactical. Some are existential. None are optional.

INPMTNMXEL—M0LXTMCC

Each action carries four parts: the principle (the one line to remember), the problem it answers, the first move this quarter (concrete, startable now), and the cost of inaction. Every action maps to one of the four domains in Appendix A.

0 L X T M C C

The Ten Actions.

Ten specific moves, startable this quarter, that close the gap between where the organization is today and where the moment demands it to be.

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What to do on Monday morning.

Ten answers. Some tactical, some existential. None optional.

Diagnosis is the easy part. What follows is the mandate — ten specific moves, each with a principle, the problem it answers, the first move this quarter, and the cost of waiting. They are scale-agnostic; the implementation is scale-dependent.

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>
> Every action below excavates foundation instead of rewarding polish — and every action maps to one of the four domains of the Chief Work Officer in Appendix A.

01 Define AI Literacy

Define AI literacy — or inherit someone else's definition.

Every organization claims its workforce is becoming AI literate; almost none can describe what that means in measurable terms tied to the business. AI literacy without a definition is a slogan, and slogans do not survive audits. Until you publish a working definition — anchored in your operating context, by role, by risk, by outcome — you are training to a ghost while competitors set the standard you will be benchmarked against.

> 2CX TMDNVEMTIC M OLXTEX
>
> Publish a one-page enterprise definition of AI literacy within sixty days. Three sections: what every employee must know; what each job family must do; what no one is allowed to do unaided.

6N TMN2MCKL6TCNKMM*A workforce trained to a standard you never wrote.*

02 Build Literacy at the Board

AI literacy begins in the boardroom, not the breakroom.

Executives are approving AI investments they cannot evaluate; boards are signing off on transformation strategies they cannot interrogate. Until governance acquires the vocabulary to ask the second and third question — not just the first — every employee training program is downstream of unmitigated risk. Fix the top of the house before the floor.

> 2CX TMDNVEMTIC M OLXTEX
>
> Schedule a quarterly, hands-on AI working session for the board and executive team. Every executive builds, deploys, or audits one workflow per quarter. No proxies. No 'my chief of staff will handle it.'

6N TMN2MCKL6TCNKMM*Strategic decisions made by leaders who cannot read the technology they are betting the company on.*

03 Put AI Assistants on the Org Chart

If an AI agent produces the work, it is not a tool. It is a colleague.

The org chart still pretends humans are the only operators. Until AI assistants appear in the formal structure — with named human owners, defined scope, performance expectations, and audit trails — you are running a shadow workforce no one is managing. Naming it is the first act of governance; refusing to is the first act of negligence.

> 2CX TMDNVEMTIC M OLXTEX
>
> Inventory every AI agent producing work product. Assign each a human owner of record. Put them on the next org chart. If an agent cannot be owned, it should not be running.

6N TMN2MCKL6TCNKMM*A shadow workforce with no manager, no metrics, and no accountability — until something breaks, at which point it has no owner either.*

04 Assess the Skills Tradeoffs

Every skill AI absorbs is a skill your humans quietly stop building.

When AI writes the first draft, original thought atrophies; when AI runs the analysis, judgment dulls; when AI handles the negotiation, instinct fades. Every delegation has a cost on the human side of the ledger — and most organizations have never put that cost in writing. Decide deliberately which competencies your people must retain, or the market will decide for you.

> 2CX TMDNVEMTIC M OLXTEX
>
> For every critical role, list the top five competencies and tag each: Human-Required, AI-Augmented, AI-Delegated. Defend the Human-Required list in writing. Revisit every six months.

6N TMN2MCKL6TCNKMM*A bench of operators who cannot perform when the machine is unavailable.*

05 Interview the AI Assistant

> *You are not hiring the candidate. You are hiring the candidate plus their AI.*

The polished résumé is the AI’s work; the case-study answer is the AI’s work; the first-quarter deliverable will be the AI’s work. If you cannot evaluate the system the candidate operates, you cannot evaluate the hire. The real assessment is what they prompt, what they correct, and what they refuse to delegate.

> **2CX TMDNVEMTIC M OLXTEX**
>
> Add a live, AI-permitted task to every final-round interview for knowledge roles. Score the prompts written, the corrections made, and the moments the candidate overrode the model — not just the output.

6N TMN2MCKL6TCNKMM*Hires who look like A-players in week one and disappear into the AI by week twelve.*

06 Set Literacy Targets by Occupation

> *A financial analyst, a recruiter, and a field technician do not need the same fluency.*

Enterprise-wide AI-literacy percentages are vanity metrics dressed up as strategy. Reporting that eighty percent completed a module tells you almost nothing about whether the right people can do the right things with the right tools. Define fluency per occupation — tools, workflows, risks, unaided decisions — and report against it.

> **2CX TMDNVEMTIC M OLXTEX**
>
> Retire the single percent-AI-trained KPI. Replace it with a job-family scorecard: tools certified, tasks demonstrated, risks owned. Report it to the audit committee, not just HR.

6N TMN2MCKL6TCNKMM*Compliance dashboards that look green while your critical roles are operating blind.*

07 Define Return on AI in Dollars

> *If your AI investment cannot be measured in P&L terms, it is not a strategy. It is a story.*

The CFO will ask for the math at the next budget cycle. Productivity gains without a line item is theater; time saved without a redeployment plan is a claim, not a return. Lead that conversation rather than survive it — and in a year when every executive defends AI spend, the leaders who can also stop AI spend keep the budget.

> **2CX TMDNVEMTIC M OLXTEX**
>
> Require every AI initiative to ship with a one-line ROI thesis and a twelve-month measurement plan before funding. At year-end, publish a kill-list of pilots that did not clear the bar.

6N TMN2MCKL6TCNKMM*A portfolio of pilots no one can defend when the budget cycle turns.*

08 Replace Permission with Platforms

The policies that protected you in 2019 are starving you in 2026.

Approval cycles in weeks, pilot reviews in quarters — and while compliance grinds, the technology compounds outside the firewall, in competitors' hands and in your own employees' hands. Replace permission with platforms: sanctioned environments, structured hackathons, fast-track funding. Govern the rails, then get out of the way.

> 2CX TMDNVEMTIC M OLXTEX
>
> Stand up a sanctioned sandbox with pre-approved guardrails so employees build without a thirty-page request. Run a company-wide hackathon next quarter; fund the top three on the spot.

6N TMN2MCKL6TCNKMM*Your best builders shipping value somewhere else — or shipping it under the table here.*

09 Prepare for Perpetual Transformation

The job they were hired into no longer exists. Neither will the next one.

Stop selling stability you cannot deliver. The honest employer contract is now: we will tell you what is changing, fund the reskilling, and support the transition — in this role, in a new role here, or, when necessary, to your next employer with dignity intact. Pretending otherwise breeds the disengagement and attrition the dashboards are about to surface.

> 2CX TMDNVEMTIC M OLXTEX
>
> Replace annual career conversations with quarterly transformation conversations. Three questions: What is changing in your role? What will you learn this quarter? What is your next move if it disappears?

6N TMN2MCKL6TCNKMM*Engagement scores that crater the quarter after your first wave of role consolidations.*

10 Become Chief Work Officer

Stop calling yourself CHRO. Start calling yourself Chief Work Officer.

Half serious about the title; completely serious about the mandate. Human Resources was a function for managing people. When a meaningful share of the labor is performed by software, Human Resources is a category error. The role this moment requires owns the architecture of how work actually happens — humans, AI agents, workflows, and the governance that binds them. Change the title and you change the mandate; keep it and you keep the limits.

> 2CX TMDNVEMTIC M OLXTEX
>
> Propose the title change to your CEO with a one-page mandate covering all four domains. If the title cannot move yet, move the mandate anyway. Lead the field whether or not the org chart has caught up.

6N TMN2MCKL6TCNKMM*The Chief Work Officer role gets created at your company — and given to someone else.*

Four domains. One owner.

What the Chief Work Officer role actually looks like in operation.

This is not a renamed job. The Chief Work Officer owns one operating system for how work happens — four domains, one owner, and every action in Part II maps to one of them.

—NDLCKMH1

Humans — the talent architecture

Hire for human-plus-AI fluency, not legacy résumés. Design careers as perpetual transformation arcs, not stable ladders. Own the human–AI handoff in every workflow.

—NDLCKMHS

AI agents — the software workforce

Every agent named, owned, and performance-managed. Routine audits and retirement protocols, not eternal life. No shadow agents, no orphan automation. If it produces work, it has a manager.

—NDLCKMHG

Workflows — the architecture of work

Design around the work itself, not the seat or title. Platforms over permissions, sandboxes over status decks. Measure outcomes shipped, not headcount preserved.

—NDLCKMH)

Governance — the rails that protect speed

Boards conversant in the technology, not merely briefed. Risk priced in dollars, not adjectives. Transparency above the audit standard. Every AI decision owned by a named human, on the record.

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>
> Four domains, one owner. This is not a list of recommendations — it is the architecture of a role that needs to exist in every organization, whether built formally or informally.

The five questions, answered.

The questions this argument reliably draws — and the answers that hold up in the room.

1

How do I get my CEO or board to actually fund this?

Do not lead with the technology. Lead with the exposure. Walk in with two exhibits: your state's active workforce-AI regulations and the litigation tail behind them; and your current recruiting-and-retention risk if the interview process does not change this quarter. That puts the CFO and General Counsel in the room. Then make a small ask with large visibility — a ninety-day pilot, a sanctioned sandbox, one hackathon, a public ROI thesis you report against. Own the measurement framework and you own the durable funding conversation.

S

We are a small organization. Most of this assumes scale we do not have.

The ten actions are scale-agnostic; the implementation is scale-dependent. At fifty people you are not standing up a CWO function — you are doing three things: defining literacy for your context (Action 1), auditing the competencies you cannot afford to lose (Action 4), and changing how you interview (Action 5). Those three carry roughly eighty percent of the value at small scale. The title does not matter at fifty people; what matters is that someone holds all four domains in their head.

G

Is this not just going to put more HR people out of a job?

The HR function that exists to process transactions is shrinking — that is true. But the function that exists to architect work is expanding faster than the transactional side is contracting. This is the perpetual-transformation conversation from Action 9, and we owe it to our own teams first. Anyone who builds CWO-level fluency in the next eighteen months will not lack opportunity. The risk is not job loss — it is being early to the diagnosis and late to the reskilling.

)

How do you actually detect skillfishing in an interview?

Three techniques, installable this quarter. One: add a live, AI-permitted task to the final round and watch the prompts and corrections in real time — the process tells you more than the output. Two: ask the candidate to critique their own AI-generated output — strong operators have a model of where the AI fails; skillfishers do not. Three: change reference checks — ask former managers about decisions made under pressure with limited tooling. Polish does not survive that question.

What about employees who refuse to use AI at all?

Treat it like any other tool question — it depends on the role. But the deeper point: the problem is rarely the refusal, it is the absence of a defined expectation. If you have not published what AI literacy means for that role (Action 1 again), you are negotiating philosophy. If you have, you are managing performance. Define the standard first; then refusal becomes a normal employee-relations conversation, not an ideological one.

6WN CK

Inaction is not neutral. It is a landslide.

Everything in this paper is hard, expensive, and politically uncomfortable, and the rationalizations are predictable: we will get to it next year; let's see how the regulations shake out; let me wait for the technology to settle. So be precise about what waiting costs.

Each quarter you defer compounds — quietly, then all at once. The pipeline thins. In-house capability atrophies. Market confidence in the leadership team slips. Competitive position softens. Internal trust erodes. And finally the mandate itself moves to someone else. Organizations that hesitate are not punished by a single failure; they are buried by the sum of small surrenders.

You will lead this. Or you will be led through it. There is no third option.

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TIEMXE OE T

Move first — the second-mover advantage does not exist in this technology cycle. **Move now** — the cost of waiting is competing without the talent, the tools, and the credibility you will need. **Move publicly** — if you do this quietly, your board and your sector will assume nothing is happening. Pick one action. Take it to the highest-ranking person you can get a meeting with this week. Make them tell you why your organization should not move on it. If they cannot give a real answer — that is your mandate. Run with it.

SHRM BETTER WORKPLACES BETTER WORLD™

CWO SHRM·EN 2026

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The First

90 Days.

What happens after a Chief Work Officer commits to the ten actions — the team, the operating model, and a pressure test of real leaders against the standard.

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The First 90 Days.

From mandate to motion: the Chief Work Officer's first quarter.

EXCE	SHRM Executive Network — 2026 Series on the Evolution of the People Function · Paper Three
E—CTCNK	v1.0 — May 2026
2NXDLT	Implementation paper with a 30/60/90 roadmap, operating-model map, three scored cases, and a self-assessment
LO—CEK6E	Sitting and aspiring Chief Work Officers and their leadership teams in the first quarter of the transition.
6ND0LKCNK	Third in the series. Paper One made the structural argument; Paper Two gave the ten actions; this paper is what the first quarter of execution looks like.

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The pressure test assesses three real executives — anonymized as Subjects 1, 2, and 3, drawn from a large-cap biotechnology company, a large-cap global food and beverage company, and a large-cap enterprise software company — from the public record, not from audited implementations, carrying forward the method of Paper One. A fourth, clearly-labeled composite illustrates the benchmark quarter. The 90-day standard is a working SHRM Executive Network reference and will be refined by the practitioners who run against it.

6NKTEKT

Inside this paper.

Two movements: how the quarter is built, then real leaders read against the standard.

B **Foreword** *Why ninety days*

B **Executive Summary** *From mandate to motion*

H1 **The 30/60/90 Roadmap** *Sequencing the ten actions*

HS **The Team** *How the CWO’s organization changes*

HG **The Operating Model** *Every HR function, re-pointed*

H) **The Pressure Test** *Three anonymized subjects + the benchmark*

H’ **The Scorecard** *Maturity against the benchmark*

L **The 90-Day Checklist** *Score yourself honestly*

F **The Benchmark Standard** *What ‘Operating’ means per action*

B **Closing** *Motion compounds*

0 L X T M C

The Build.

The 30/60/90 roadmap, the team that changes around the CWO, and every function of the HR operating model re-pointed from administration to architecture.

2NXEPNX—

Why ninety days.

The mandate is decided in a meeting. The transition is won or lost in a quarter.

Paper One argued the role must exist. Paper Two gave the ten actions that constitute it. This paper answers the only question that matters after the decision is made: what does the first quarter actually look like — hour by hour, function by function, person by person?

Ninety days is not an arbitrary horizon. It is the half-life of the artificial impression from Paper Two — the window in which a hire's real capability is exposed — and it is the longest period a new mandate can survive on narrative alone before it must show motion. A CWO who has not changed something visible by day ninety has, in practice, not started.

> *Inaction is not neutral. It is a landslide. The first ninety days are where the slide is either arrested or accelerated.*

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What follows is deliberately concrete. A sequenced roadmap so the ten actions do not collide. A map of how the team itself changes shape. A pass through every function of the HR operating model showing what each one stops doing and starts doing. Then a pressure test of three real leaders against a recalibrated standard — because a framework that cannot discriminate between a structural transition and an announced one is decoration, not instrumentation.

E·E6OTCVEM ODDLX

From mandate to motion.

What a serious first quarter produces — and how to know if yours is one.

The gap this paper closes is the one between agreeing with Papers One and Two and having anything to show for it ninety days later. The conversion rate from mandate to motion is low — not because leaders disagree, but because nobody sequenced the work, named the owners, or set a bar. This paper supplies all three.

TIC M0L0EXMLX OE M2CVEMTICK

01 **Sequence beats simultaneity.**

Ten actions launched at once produce ten stalled actions. The quarter has an order: name, then govern, then redesign.

02 **The team changes before the org chart does.**

The CWO's first structural move is internal — who on the team owns literacy, agents, measurement, and risk.

03 **Every HR function is re-pointed, not retired.**

Recruiting, L&D, total rewards, ER, HRBP, analytics — each keeps its purpose and changes its object from people to work.

04 **Progress is measurable by day 90.**

Against a four-level benchmark, a serious quarter moves most actions from Absent to Started, and three to Operating.

05 **The differentiator is not speed alone.**

It is sequenced speed made visible — the leaders who move and report outpace the leaders who only move.

TIEMFNTTNDMWCKE

The first ninety days do not require finishing the transition. They require proving it is real — in sequence, with named owners, against a benchmark, and in public. A quarter that produces motion on all ten actions and Operating-level depth on a vital few has bought the credibility to fund the next three.

INPMTNMXEL—MTIC M0L0EX

Part I builds the quarter: roadmap, team, operating model. Part II runs it: a pressure test of three real leaders plus a labeled benchmark composite, a scorecard, and a checklist you can score yourself against today. The recalibrated standard in Appendix B defines what each maturity level means per action.

E6TCNKMH1MBMTIEMXNL—DL0

Sequencing the ten actions.

Launched together, the ten actions collide. The quarter has an order.

The ten actions from Paper Two are not parallel tracks. Several depend on others: you cannot set literacy targets by occupation (Action 6) before literacy is defined (Action 1); you cannot interview the AI assistant well (Action 5) before the tradeoffs are mapped (Action 4). The quarter resolves into three phases — name, govern, redesign.

> TIEM E OEK6CK M0XCK6C0WE
>
> First name the work. Then govern it. Then redesign it. Skipping a step feels faster and finishes slower.

E6TCNKMH1MBMTIEMGH RH HMXNL—DL0

Three phases. One quarter.

Name, then govern, then redesign. Each phase makes the next one possible.

0IL EM1MUM—L M1 GH

Name

CKVEKTNX MTIEMPNXA

Action 1 — Define AI literacy
Publish the one-page definition. Everything downstream references it; nothing else can start cleanly without it.

Action 3 — Inventory the agents
Find every AI agent producing work. You cannot govern or own what you have not counted.

Action 4 — Map the tradeoffs
Tag the top five competencies per critical role: Human-Required, AI-Augmented, AI-Delegated.

0IL EMSMUM—L MG1 RH

Govern

0OTMXLCW MLXNOK—MPILTMPL MKLDE—

Action 2 — Board working session
Schedule and run the first hands-on session. Governance vocabulary precedes governance.

Action 3 — Assign agent owners
Every inventoried agent gets a named human owner of record and an audit trail.

Action 7 — ROI thesis gate
Institute the one-line ROI thesis + 12-month measurement plan as a funding precondition.

Action 6 — Job-family scorecard
Retire the single percent-trained KPI; stand up the per-occupation scorecard.

0IL EMGMUM—L MR1 H

Redesign

6ILK EMTIEMPNXAMCT EW2

Action 5 — Interview the AI
Add the live AI-permitted task to final-round interviews for knowledge roles.

Action 8 — Sandbox + hackathon
Stand up the sanctioned sandbox; schedule the company-wide hackathon.

Action 9 — Transformation conversations
Replace annual career conversations with the quarterly three-question format.

Action 10 — The mandate
Propose the title; if it cannot move, move the four-domain mandate anyway.

TIEM—L HM TLTE

By the close of the quarter every action is at minimum Started; Actions 1, 3, and 4 — the naming layer — are Operating, because everything else is built on them. A quarter that ends with the naming layer still Absent has not bought the next quarter.

E6TCNKMHSMBMTIEMTELD

How the CWO’s organization changes.

The first structural move is internal. The org chart changes later; the team changes in week two.

The CWO does not get a new team in the first quarter. The CWO re-points the existing one. Every seat keeps its craft and changes its object — from administering people to architecting work. One seat is net-new.

T M M	T M M	P M M M M M
From: HR Business Partner	**To: Work Architect**	Stops translating policy to managers; starts decomposing the manager’s processes into tasks and routing them across human and machine capacity.
From: Talent Acquisition Lead	**To: Capability Acquisition Lead**	Stops sourcing résumés; starts assessing the human-plus-AI pairing and owning the live-task interview design.
From: L&D Director	**To: Literacy & Regeneration Owner**	Stops running the catalog; starts owning the AI-literacy definition, the job-family scorecard, and redeployment yield.
From: HR Analytics Lead	**To: Work Productivity Owner**	Stops reporting engagement and time-to-fill; starts reporting throughput, blended cost-per-outcome, and ROI theses.
From: HR Generalist	**To: Agent Owner of Record**	Stops processing transactions; starts holding named accountability for AI agents in the formal structure.
New: AI Governance Partner	**(net-new seat)**	Co-owns the model-risk register with Legal and the CTO; tracks regulation; runs the board working session cadence.

Re-point before you reorganize. Formal restructuring is a Phase 3 conversation at the earliest, and often a next-quarter one. The work of the first ninety days is changing what the existing team is accountable for — not waiting for a new box on the chart to authorize it.

E6TCNKMHGMBMTIEMN0EXLTCK MDN—EW

Every HR function, re-pointed.

No function is retired. Every function changes its object from people to work.

The most common misread of the CWO transition is that it deletes HR. It does not. It re-points HR. Each function below keeps its discipline and changes what that discipline acts on — the through-line of the entire series.

2	P M M	K M M
Talent Acquisition	Fill requisitions; optimize time-to-fill	**Acquire human-plus-AI capability; own the live-task interview and skillfishing defense**
Learning & Development	Deliver training hours and completion	**Own the AI-literacy definition and per-occupation fluency; measure re-skilling and redeployment yield**
Total Rewards	Pay for the role and the market	**Tie variable comp to enterprise productivity; price the cost of competencies retained vs. delegated**
HR Business Partnering	Advise managers on people issues	**Architect the manager's work; route tasks across human, agent, and automation capacity**
Employee Relations	Manage grievance and compliance	**Manage the human side of displacement with dignity; own the perpetual-transformation conversation**
People Analytics	Report engagement, retention, headcount	**Report throughput, blended cost-per-outcome, ROI theses, and capability coverage**
HR Operations	Process the employee lifecycle	**Operate the agent registry, audit trails, and the human-in-the-loop review gates**
Governance & Compliance	Track employment law	**Co-own the model-risk register; pre-position ahead of workforce-AI regulation**

> TIEMTIXNO I WCKE
>
> Read the right column top to bottom and it is one sentence: the people function stops administering humans and starts architecting work. Every function moves; none disappears.

0 L X T M C C

The Run.

Three composite Chief Work Officers, ninety days in, scored honestly against the benchmark — and a checklist to score your own quarter.

E6TCNKMH)MBMTIEM0XE OXEMTE T

Three real leaders against the standard.

Carrying Paper One’s pressure test into the 90-day frame — plus a labeled benchmark quarter.

Paper One pressure-tested two real executives against the CWO checklist. This paper carries that method forward into the 90-day standard and adds a third real figure whose public mandate already encodes the role. The reading is honest about its limits: no executive’s literal post-commitment ninety days is public, so each profile scores where the leader most plausibly lands against the day-90 standard, based on the public record — the same approach, and the same caveat, as Paper One’s Appendix C.

> NKMDETIN—M(MWCDCT

Subjects 1 and 2 are assessed from public statements and reporting; Subject 3 from her publicly disclosed AI-transformation mandate. None is an audited 90-day implementation — those are not public for anyone. The fourth profile is a clearly-labeled composite — the benchmark quarter — included so the standard has a worked example of what ‘on the bar’ actually looks like.

SUBJECT 1 — LARGE-CAP BIOTECHNOLOGY

Subject 1.

Chief People & Technology Officer · assessed from the public record

The public record. The CPO formally merged the company’s HR and IT functions in late 2024 and now leads both, managing several thousand employees alongside a large estate of custom AI agents through an enterprise-wide GenAI platform partnership. In public interviews she describes the job as “architecting the flow of work” and contrasts work planning with traditional workforce planning.

Against the naming layer. The structural merger of HR and IT is, in effect, Action 10 already executed — the mandate is operating regardless of any single title. The scaled custom-agent estate implies the agent question (Action 3) is being actively governed, not discovered; literacy and tradeoffs read as institutionalized rather than newly named.

Against the redesign layer. Public statements point to work-architecture practice well beyond a first quarter — routing, measurement, and governance described as steady-state. Where a 90-day quarter aims to reach Operating on the naming layer, this company reads as Operating-to-Leading across most of the standard.

> THE HONEST READ — SUBJECT 1
>
> On the public record, this is the closest real-world analog to a quarter that has already compounded — the mandate is structural, not announced. The 90-day standard is, for this company, largely a description of the past, not the work ahead.

SUBJECT 2 — LARGE-CAP FOOD & BEVERAGE

Subject 2.

EVP & Chief People Officer · assessed from the public record

The public record. The CPO leads global HR for a workforce of several hundred thousand employees and holds a thoughtful public point of view on AI in the workforce, including a critique of “AI babysitter” entry-level roles, alongside a skills-first hiring agenda. The company’s enterprise AI agenda, including its at-scale agentic-platform deployment, is publicly led by the Chief Strategy & Transformation Officer.

Against the naming layer. The literacy and tradeoffs thinking is visibly present — the public posture suggests these would score at least Started, plausibly Operating, on a 90-day clock. The skills-first agenda is the raw material for Action 4 and Action 6.

Against the governance and mandate layers. The architecture work — agent ownership, work routing, the ROI gate — sits publicly with a peer executive, not the CPO. Against the 90-day standard, that is an org-chart gap on the actions where the work actually changes (3, 7, 8) and on the mandate itself (10), not a personal-capability gap.

> THE HONEST READ — SUBJECT 2
>
> A highly capable people leader whose public footprint is strong on the human-side actions and structurally short on the architecture and mandate layers — the same gap Paper One identified, now read through the 90-day standard. The gap is the org chart, not the leader.

SUBJECT 3 — LARGE-CAP ENTERPRISE SOFTWARE

Subject 3.

A hybrid people-and-AI-transformation C-suite role · assessed from the public record

The public record. The CPO holds a hybrid title that places “AI transformation” explicitly inside the people function’s mandate — already encoding the CWO role. Public reporting describes a structured progression from AI literacy to AI deployment to AI co-creation, her team leading the company’s corporate AI transformation, and direct work with IT and business teams on major transformations.

Against the naming and governance layers. The literacy phase maps directly to a published literacy standard (Action 1); the deployment phase to the hands-on board and workforce posture (Action 2); the co-creation phase to platforms over permissions (Action 8). The transformation-team structure implies agent governance and the ROI discipline are owned, not aspirational.

Against the mandate layer. The title is the strongest public signal of all — “AI transformation” is in the role name, not appended informally. On the 90-day standard, the mandate layer reads as Operating-to-Leading; the open question, unanswerable from public material, is the depth of the per-occupation scorecard and the interview redesign.

> THE HONEST READ — SUBJECT 3
>
> The clearest public example of the mandate carried in the title rather than retrofitted to it. On the public record the naming and mandate layers read as already Operating; the redesign-layer depth is the part the public record cannot confirm — which is exactly where the 90-day standard does its work.

OF E6TM)MBMTIEMFEK6IDLXAM OLXTEX

The benchmark quarter.

A clearly-labeled composite — what ‘exactly on the bar’ looks like at day 90

Why a composite here. No real executive’s literal first ninety days post-commitment is public. To make the standard concrete, this profile is an explicit composite — not a real person — constructed to sit exactly on the day-90 bar so the scorecard has a calibrated reference point.

Days 1–30 — the naming layer. CEO-signed literacy definition shipped v1 and dated; complete agent inventory, not a partial office-side list; top-five competencies tagged and defended for every critical role; the existing team re-pointed with named owners. Naming layer: Operating.

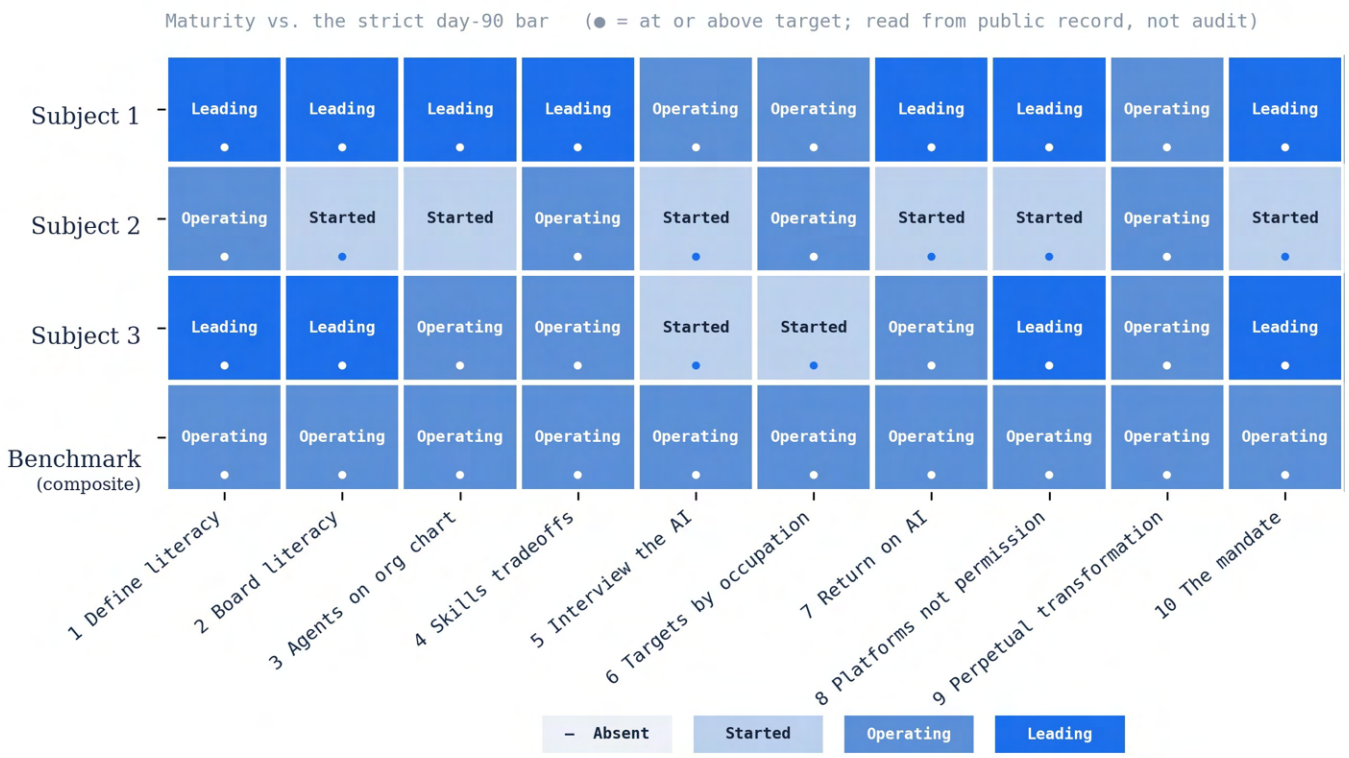
Days 31–90 — govern, then redesign. First hands-on board session run (not a briefing); every agent owned with audit trails; ROI-thesis gate enforced; per-occupation scorecard to the audit committee; live AI-permitted interview task in final rounds; sandbox live and hackathon funded; quarterly transformation conversations in place; mandate proposed with the four-domain one-pager. Governance layer Operating; redesign layer Started-to-Operating; nothing critical Absent.

> TIEMINKE TMXEL—MBM OF E6TM)
>
> This is the bar, not a brag. It is deliberately unremarkable — sequenced, owned, measured, visible. A real quarter that matches this composite has done exactly enough to have begun, and exactly enough to fund the next ninety days.

E6TCNKMH'MBMTIEM 6NXE6LX—

Maturity against the strict bar.

Four subjects, ten actions, one recalibrated standard. The framework discriminates.



Read across each row against the recalibrated, stricter bar in Appendix B. Subject 1 reads near-Leading throughout. Subject 2 is strong on the human-side actions and structurally short where the architecture work publicly sits with a peer. Subject 3 scores highest where the title carries the mandate, with redesign-layer depth the public record cannot confirm. The composite sits, deliberately, exactly on the bar.

The scorecard is the instrument, not the verdict. Two cautions travel with it. First, three rows are read from the public record, not an audited implementation — they show where each leader most plausibly lands, not a certified score. Second, the bar is now strict (Appendix B): Operating is harder to claim than in the first draft. A board should run this against its own CWO at day 90 with the same honesty — and the same caveat Paper One attached to its pressure test: there is no judgment in the question, only consequence.

Score yourself honestly.

Half-credit is not credit. A box is checked when the item is operating, not finished.

0WLT2NXD

This checklist is the public preview of the CWO 90-Day Readiness Review, delivered through SHRM Executive Network with confidential benchmarking against the standard in Appendix B.

F M—L MGHMBMTIEMKLDCK MWL EX

- ☐ I have published a one-page, CEO-signed AI-literacy definition with the three sections — and dated it v1.
- ☐ I have a complete inventory of every AI agent producing work product, not a partial office-side list.
- ☐ I have tagged the top five competencies for every critical role: Human-Required, AI-Augmented, AI-Delegated.
- ☐ I have re-pointed my existing team — named who now owns literacy, agents, measurement, and risk.
- ☐ I have not waited for any of the above to be perfect before shipping v1 and dating it.

F M—L MRHMBMTIEM NVEXKLK6EMWL EX

- ☐ The board has run a hands-on working session — every director built or audited a workflow, not a briefing.
- ☐ Every inventoried agent has a named human owner of record and an audit trail.
- ☐ The one-line ROI thesis plus twelve-month measurement plan is a funding precondition, enforced.
- ☐ The single percent-AI-trained KPI is retired and replaced with a per-occupation scorecard.
- ☐ The per-occupation scorecard goes to the audit committee, not only to HR.

F M—L M HMBMTIEMXE—E C KMWL EX

- ☐ Final-round interviews for knowledge roles include a live, AI-permitted task scored on prompts and corrections.
- ☐ A sanctioned sandbox is live and a company-wide hackathon is scheduled with funding committed.
- ☐ Annual career conversations are replaced with the quarterly three-question transformation format.
- ☐ I have proposed the title to my CEO with a one-page four-domain mandate — or moved the mandate without it.
- ☐ I can show the board at least three actions at Operating level, not ten actions merely Started.

TIEM 6NXCK MXOWE

Count only the boxes that would survive an audit by your CFO or General Counsel. Fifteen of fifteen is the benchmark quarter. Below ten, you have a narrative, not a transition — and ninety days from now the gap is wider, not narrower.

The recalibrated bar.

Stricter and sharper: Operating now requires evidence that would survive an audit.

Recalibrated two ways. **Stricter:** Operating is no longer claimable on intent or partial work — each definition states what does *not* count. **Sharper:** every cell names the disqualifying condition, so two assessors reach the same score. The strict day-90 bar is Operating on the naming layer (1, 3, 4), Started everywhere else; Leading is the year-one horizon.

L		N MBM M HM	W MBM M
1 Define literacy	Definition drafted, not yet signed	**v1 published, CEO-signed, dated, and referenced by ≥1 downstream action — not a circulated draft**	Versioned on a fixed cadence; every job family maps to it
2 Board literacy	Session on the calendar	**First session run hands-on — every director built or audited a workflow; a briefing does not count**	Quarterly cadence locked; no proxies, no exceptions logged
3 Agents on org chart	Partial or office-side inventory only	**Complete inventory; every agent has a named human owner and a working audit trail — partial lists are Started, not Operating**	Agents performance-managed; retirement protocols enforced
4 Skills tradeoffs	Tags drafted for some roles	**All critical roles tagged and the Human-Required list defended in writing — untagged critical roles cap this at Started**	Reviewed every 6 months; drives the funded reskilling plan
5 Interview the AI	Task designed, not in production	**Live AI-permitted task running in final rounds, scored on prompts and corrections — a designed-but-unused task is Started**	Calibrated across panels; override behavior scored
6 Targets by occupation	Old single KPI flagged for removal	**Per-occupation scorecard live and the single percent-trained KPI removed from the board pack — both conditions required**	Reported to the audit committee; tied to risk owned
7 Return on AI	Thesis format drafted	**ROI thesis + 12-month plan enforced as a funding precondition with at least one initiative gated — a policy with no enforced instance is Started**	Year-end kill-list published; spend defended in P&L
8 Platforms not permission	Sandbox approved, not stood up	**Sandbox live and in use, and hackathon scheduled with funding committed — approval without a live environment is Started**	Fast-track funding operating; winners shipped to production
9 Perpetual transformation	Format piloted in one unit	**Quarterly three-question conversations in place enterprise-wide — a single-division pilot is Started**	Reskilling funded; transitions handled with documented dignity
10 The mandate	Title discussed informally	**Title formally proposed with the four-domain one-pager, or the four-domain mandate demonstrably operating without it — intent alone is Started**	Mandate operating and recognized regardless of title status

XEL—CK MTIEM TXC6TM TLK—LX—

The recalibration deliberately makes Operating harder to claim — a quarter that scored Operating under a generous reading will often score Started under this one. That is the point. Count only what would survive your CFO or General Counsel asking to see it: naming layer Operating, governance layer at least Started, nothing critical Absent. Anything softer is a transition merely announced.

6WN CK

Motion compounds.

Paper One argued the role must exist. Paper Two gave the ten actions. This paper has shown the only proof that counts: what the first quarter looks like when the actions are sequenced, owned, measured, and made visible — and what it looks like when they are not.

The pressure test makes the same point from the public record. Subject 1’s structural merger reads as a quarter that compounded years ago — the mandate is in the org chart, not the press release. Subject 3 carries the mandate in the title itself. Subject 2’s gap is the org chart, not the leader. And the benchmark composite shows what ‘exactly enough’ looks like: unremarkable, sequenced, owned, visible. None of this is about effort. It is about whether motion is structural — or merely announced.

The first ninety days do not require finishing the transition. They require proving it is real.

V0RA0IDS0V60FITX DLII0FISCVCIRDT0CXDI0R

TIEMXE OE T

Run the Appendix A checklist against your own quarter this week — honestly, counting only what would survive an audit. Take the score to the highest-ranking person you can get a meeting with, beside the Appendix B standard. If you are below the bar, you now know exactly which phase you skipped. Go put it back on the calendar. The next ninety days are already being spent — the only question is whether they compound.

SHSRM EXCE MMUMMTIEMEVNWOTCNKMN2MTIEM0EN0WEM2OK6TCNK

The Year-One

Operating Rhythm.

What the other three quarters look like — the recurring cadence that turns a ninety-day start into a compounding year.

0L0EXM2NOXMCKMTIEM EXCE
1.0VDLDITL.RC.D01DV0RA0@DR0DLDMCL.D01DS0VH0T@-A@X

C-AR0.ALPFW,.V©C@UC2LVHPC

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The Year-One Operating Rhythm.

From a quarter of motion to a year of compounding.

EXCE	SHRM Executive Network — 2026 Series on the Evolution of the People Function · Paper Four
E—CTCNK	v1.0 — May 2026
2NXDLT	Operating paper with a four-quarter cadence model, a board-reporting rhythm, and a compounding scorecard
LO—CEK6E	Sitting Chief Work Officers past day 90, and the boards and CEOs holding them to a year-one standard.
6ND0LKCNK	Fourth in the series. Paper Three ended at day 90 with “motion compounds.” This paper is the other 275 days.

NKMTIEM6L—EK6EMDN—EW

The four-quarter rhythm is a working SHRM Executive Network reference cadence, not a mandate. Quarter boundaries are organizing devices, not hard gates; the discipline is the recurring loop, not the calendar dates. It extends the three-phase first quarter of Paper Three into a full year.

6NKTEKT

Inside this paper.

Two movements: the recurring rhythm, then the year it produces.

(**Foreword** *The quarter is not the finish line*

(**Executive Summary** *Why rhythm beats heroics*

H1 **The Cadence** *Four quarters, one recurring loop*

HS **The Board Rhythm** *What the board sees, quarter by quarter*

HB **The Compounding Curve** *How the scorecard climbs across the year*

HG **The Year-One Review** *What month twelve must show*

L **The Quarterly Operating Checklist** *The recurring loop, itemized*

F **The Year-One Maturity Standard** *Started → Operating → Leading, by quarter*

(**Closing** *The second year is the first year, repeated*

0 L X T M C

The Rhythm.

The four-quarter operating loop, the board-reporting cadence that runs alongside it, and the curve that compounds when the loop is kept.

2NXEPNX—

The quarter is not the finish line.

Paper Three proved the role is real. This paper keeps it real for fifty more weeks.

Paper Three ended on a deliberate cliff: motion compounds. It showed what ninety days of sequenced, owned, visible work looks like — and stopped there, on purpose, because the first quarter is where most transitions are won or lost. But a quarter is not a transformation. It is the first turn of a wheel that has to keep turning.

The failure mode in the back half of year one is not the dramatic stall of Paper Three's Robert. It is quieter: the leader who sprinted the first quarter, declared victory, and let the rhythm decay into status updates. The board stops seeing motion. The scorecard plateaus at Started. The mandate, never reinforced, drifts back toward administration. Nothing breaks — it just stops compounding.

> *A quarter of motion that is not followed by a rhythm of motion is just a launch. Launches fade. Rhythms compound.*

R,CD-AWSAHPA@CD01DMCL.D0@CDAWDR,CDP00HKD@0RDR,CDWH.A@R

This paper supplies the loop: a four-quarter operating cadence that repeats, a board-reporting rhythm that runs alongside it, and a maturity curve that shows what compounding actually produces by month twelve. The quarters are not new projects — they are the same loop, deepening. The second year, done right, is the first year repeated at a higher floor.

E·E6OTCVEM ODDLX)

Why rhythm beats heroics.

The first quarter is a sprint. The year is a cadence. Confusing the two is the failure.

The conversion failure this paper addresses is not the leader who never starts — Paper Three covered that. It is the leader who starts brilliantly and then mistakes the launch for the landing. The fix is not more effort. It is a rhythm disciplined enough to survive the moment the applause stops.

TIC M0L0EXMLX'OE M2CVEMTICK'

01 **The loop is the unit, not the quarter.**

Name → Govern → Redesign → Compound is not a one-time sequence. It is a recurring cycle that deepens each pass.

02 **The board rhythm is the forcing function.**

A fixed quarterly board cadence is what keeps the loop turning when the initial urgency fades.

03 **Compounding is visible or it is not happening.**

If the scorecard is not climbing quarter over quarter, the rhythm has decayed into reporting.

04 **Year-one Leading is earned in Q4, not Q1.**

No action reaches Leading in the first quarter. Leading is what the loop produces by its fourth turn.

05 **The second year has a higher floor.**

Done right, year two does not restart at zero. It restarts the same loop at Operating, aiming for Leading.

TIEMFNTTNDMWCKE

Year one is not four projects. It is one loop — Name, Govern, Redesign, Compound — turned four times, each turn at a higher floor, each turn witnessed by the board. The leaders who institutionalize the loop compound. The leaders who run it once and narrate the rest plateau, then regress.

INPMTNMXEL—MTIC M0L0EX

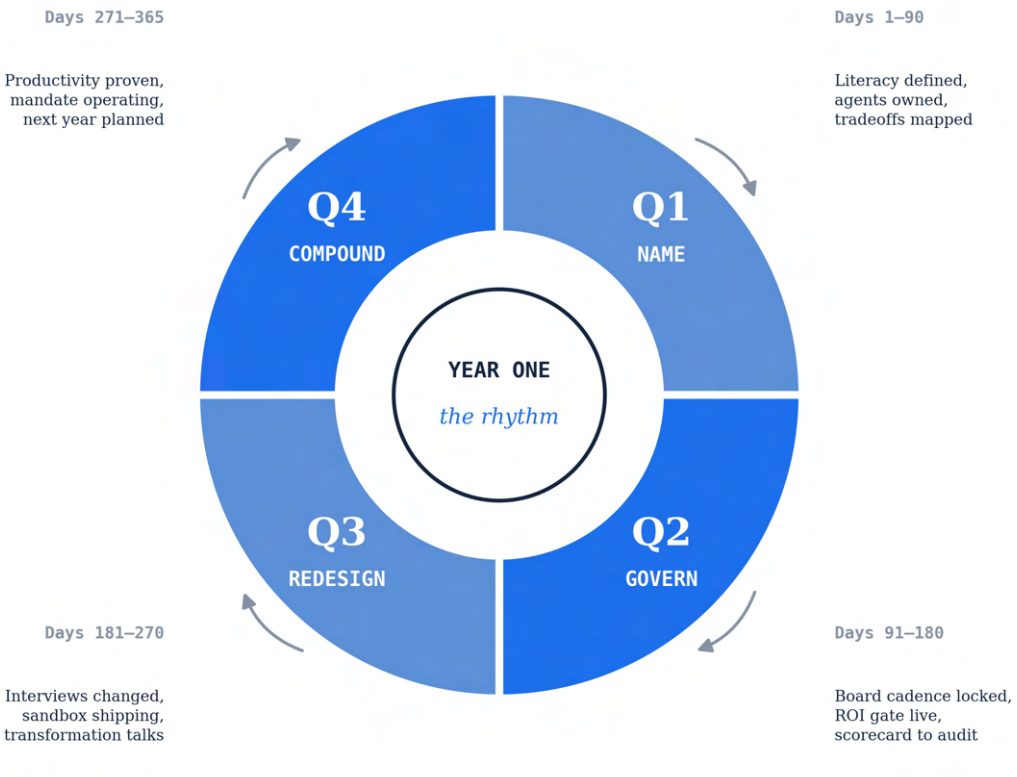
Part I is the rhythm: the cadence wheel, the board cycle, the compounding curve. Part II is the proof: the quarterly operating checklist and the year-one maturity standard that defines what each quarter must show. Read it as the sequel Paper Three deliberately withheld.

E6TCNKMH1M(MTIEM6L—EK6E

Four quarters, one recurring loop.

Name, Govern, Redesign, Compound — not a sequence run once, but a loop run four times, deepening each pass.

Paper Three’s first quarter had three phases. Year one has four — the same three plus the one the first quarter cannot reach: Compound. Read the wheel clockwise. Each quarter is not a new initiative; it is the next turn of one loop, picking up the work the previous turn matured.



PI)MLMWNN0 MKNTMLMXNL—DL0

A roadmap ends. A loop does not. The actions never finish — literacy is re-versioned, agents are re-inventoried, tradeoffs re-tagged every six months by the standard in Paper Two. The quarter labels mark emphasis, not completion. Q1 does not stop being true when Q2 begins; it deepens underneath it.

E6TCNKMH1M(MTIEM2NOXMTOXK

Each quarter, one turn deeper.

The same loop, four times. Each turn matures what the last turn started.

1MUM—L) M1 H

Name

Publish the literacy definition, complete the agent inventory, map the competency tradeoffs. The naming layer reaches Operating; everything downstream now has something to reference.

0XNVE MM*the invisible is now nameable*

SMUM—L) M 1 1 H

Govern

Lock the board working-session cadence, enforce the ROI-thesis funding gate, move the per-occupation scorecard to the audit committee, assign every agent an owner.

0XNVE MM*what was named is now governed*

BMUM—L) M1 1 S H

Redesign

Put the live AI-permitted task into final-round interviews, ship the sandbox into use, run the first hackathon, convert career conversations to the quarterly transformation format.

0XNVE MM*the work itself is now changing*

GMUM—L) MS 1 BR

Compound

Report productivity in CFO-grade terms, defend the year in unit economics, re-version literacy and re-tag tradeoffs, plan year two from a higher floor.

0XNVE MM*the loop now produces, not just moves*

> TIEMTIXNO'I WCKE
>
> Read the four 'Proves' lines as one sentence: name the work, govern it, redesign it, then scale it. That is year one. Year two is the same sentence, started from 'govern.'

E6TCNKMHSM(MTIEMFNLX—MXI)TID

What the board sees, quarter by quarter.

The board cadence is the receipt. The CWO's own demonstrated work is the engine.

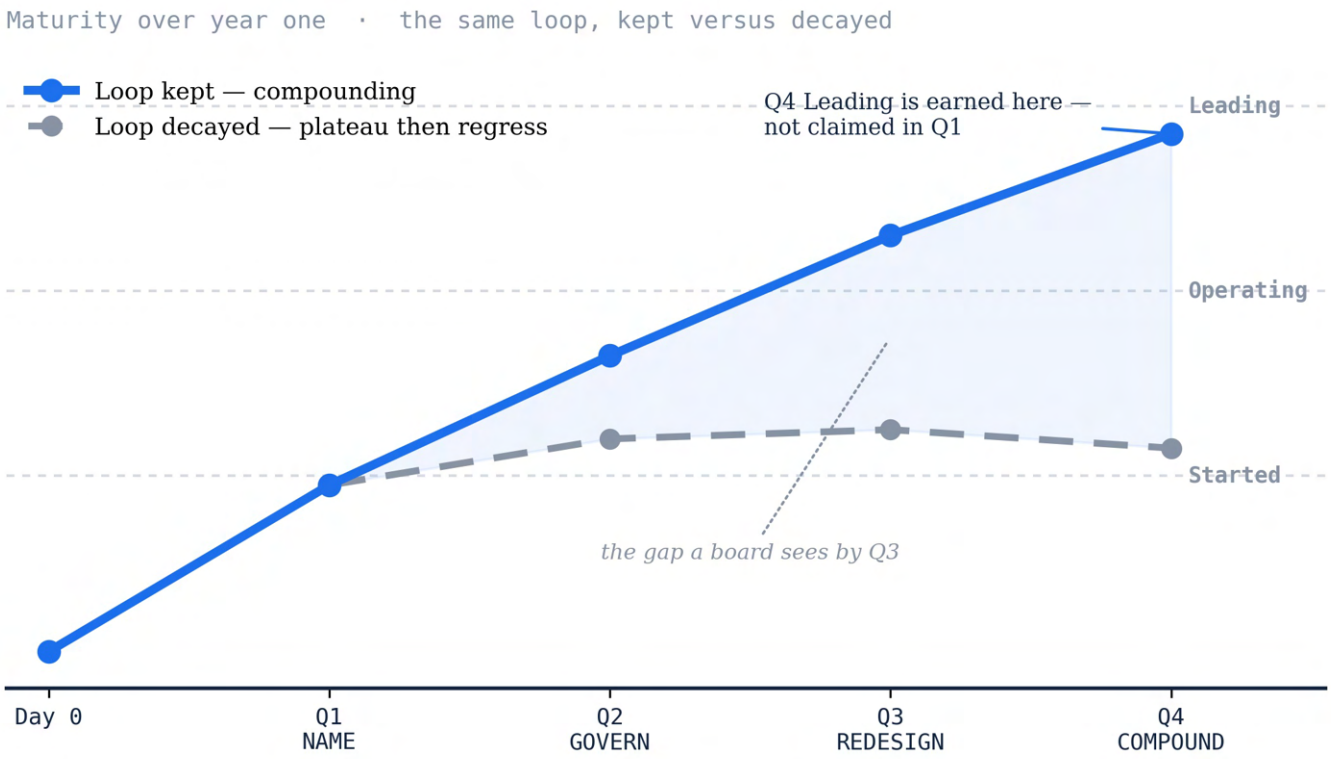
The leader who shows their own re-architected work each quarter holds the role; the leader who only convenes meetings about it loses the role. The board cadence is what witnesses the work and converts a personal commitment into an institutional one — but the witness is downstream of the work, not upstream of it. The question column is the one the chair should be asking.

	D	P M M M M M M M	T M M M M
Q1 board session	**Hands-on, not briefed**	Every director builds or audits one workflow. The literacy definition is presented as ratified, not proposed. The agent inventory is shown as a number, not a narrative.	*Did the board do the work, or watch a deck?*
Q2 board session	**Governance review**	The ROI gate is shown with at least one initiative actually gated. The model-risk register is tabled. The audit committee receives the per-occupation scorecard directly.	*Is governance enforced, or merely written?*
Q3 board session	**Redesign evidence**	At least one process is shown re-architected with before/after throughput and quality. The interview change is shown with scored examples, not policy.	*Did the work change, or only the process for changing it?*
Q4 board session	**The year defended**	Productivity reported in unit economics. The year-one scorecard shown against the maturity standard. Year two proposed from the achieved floor, not from zero.	*Did the year compound, or just conclude?*

The cadence is the commitment device. A CWO who controls the board's quarterly question controls the durable mandate — the same logic Paper Two applied to the funding conversation, now applied to the year. Miss a quarter and the rhythm does not pause; it decays.

The curve, or the plateau.

The same loop produces two utterly different years depending on one variable: whether it keeps turning.



Both lines start identically. Both clear Started by the end of Q1 — Paper Three's benchmark quarter. They diverge at exactly the point Paper Three stopped: the moment the launch energy fades and the only thing left is rhythm. The leader who keeps the loop climbs toward Leading; the leader who narrates instead of operating plateaus at Started, then regresses as the unreinforced mandate drifts back to administration.

The board sees the gap by Q3. Not Q4 — Q3. By the third board session the divergence is unmistakable: one CWO is showing re-architected processes with throughput deltas, the other is showing the same Q1 slides with new dates. The gap is not a year-end surprise. It is a mid-year tell, and a serious chair reads it then.

E6TCNKMHGM(MTIEM)ELX NKEMXEVCEP

What month twelve must show.

Year one does not end with the transition finished. It ends with the transition compounding — and provable.

Paper Three’s standard was: prove it is real by day 90. The year-one standard is higher: prove it is compounding by day 365. The difference is the productivity proof — the thing the first quarter structurally cannot deliver and the fourth quarter must.

P M M	— HM M 0 MB	— BR M M(M M M
Naming layer (Actions 1,3,4)	Operating by Q1	**Leading by Q4 — literacy versioned on cadence, agents performance-managed, tradeoffs driving a funded reskilling plan**
Governance layer (2,6,7,10)	Started by Q2	**Operating-to-Leading — board cadence locked, ROI gate with a published kill-list, mandate operating regardless of title**
Redesign layer (5,8,9)	Started by Q3	**Operating — interviews scored on prompts, sandbox shipping to production, transformation conversations enterprise-wide**
Productivity proof	Not yet measurable	**CFO-grade: throughput, blended cost-per-outcome, and reinvestment options defended in unit economics at the Q4 board**

TIEM)ELX NKEMTE T

Did the scorecard climb every quarter, was the board structurally in the loop, and can the year be defended in the CFO’s language? Three yeses is a compounding transition. Two is a stalling one. Fewer is a transition that has quietly become a title again — the exact regression Paper Two warned of, now twelve months in.

L00EK—C·MLM(MTIEM OLXTEXW)MN0EXLTCK’M6IE6AWC T

The recurring loop, itemized.

Not a one-time list. Run every item, every quarter — the emphasis shifts, the loop does not.

0WLT2NXD

This checklist is the public preview of the CWO Quarterly Operating Review, run as a confidential rhythm with SHRM Executive Network against the year-one standard in Appendix B.

EVEX)M OLXTEXM(MTIEMXE6OXXCK’MWNN0M XOKMLWWM2NOX MEVEX)M OLXTEX MED0IL C M IC2TCK’

- [ ] NAME: I have re-checked literacy, the agent inventory, and the tradeoff tags for drift, and re-versioned what changed.
- [ ] GOVERN: I have run the board session in the prescribed mode for this quarter — hands-on, not a briefing.
- [ ] GOVERN: Every AI agent still has a living owner and a working audit trail; orphaned agents were retired, not ignored.
- [ ] REDESIGN: At least one additional process is materially re-architected this quarter, with measured throughput and quality.
- [ ] COMPOUND: The scorecard moved up on at least one action versus last quarter — and I can show the evidence.

EVEX)M OLXTEXM(MTIEMFNLX—M2NX6CK’M2OK6TCNK

- [ ] The board session happened on cadence — not deferred, not merged, not downgraded to a written update.
- [ ] The board did the work for this quarter’s mode, not watched a presentation about it.
- [ ] The chair was given the quarter’s diagnostic question and an honest answer to it.
- [ ] Productivity is reported in the CFO’s language, not HR’s, even in the quarters before it is fully provable.
- [ ] Year (N+1) is being planned from the achieved floor, not drafted from zero each cycle.

TIEM 6NXCK’MXOWE

Unlike a 90-day checklist, this one is never ‘complete.’ The pass condition is not all-boxes-checked-once — it is all-boxes-checked-every-quarter. A quarter with unchecked boxes is not a failed quarter; it is a decayed loop, and the curve in Section 03 shows where decay leads.

L00EK—C·MFM(MTIEM)ELX NKEMDLTOXCT)M TLK—LX—

Started → Operating → Leading, by quarter.

The same maturity scale as Paper Three’s strict standard — now tracked across four turns, not one.

Paper Three defined the strict day-90 bar. This standard extends it across the year: each row must climb, quarter over quarter. A row that holds flat for two quarters is a decayed loop; a row that drops is a regressing one. Leading is reached in Q4 by the rows that compounded — never claimed in Q1.

—	E M 1	E M S	E M B	E M GM(M M
Naming layer	Operating: published, owned, mapped	Operating, re-versioned once	Operating, drift-checked	**Leading: drives funded reskilling**
Board cadence	First hands-on session run	Governance review enforced	Redesign evidence shown	**Year defended in unit economics**
Agent governance	All agents owned + audit trail	Performance-managed	Retirement protocols live	**Leading: agents in the operating plan**
Productivity proof	Not yet measurable	Leading indicators tracked	First deltas shown	**CFO-grade P&L defense at Q4 board**
The mandate	Proposed w/ 4-domain one-pager	Operating regardless of title	Recognized by peers	**Institutional — survives the incumbent**

XEL—CK’MTIEM TLK—LX—

Climb is the test, not arrival. A board does not ask ‘is this Leading?’ in Q1 — that question is incoherent. It asks ‘did this move up since last quarter?’ every quarter. Four upward moves is a compounding year. The curve in Section 03 is this table, drawn.

6WN CK’

The second year is the first year, repeated.

Paper One argued the role must exist. Paper Two gave the actions. Paper Three proved a quarter could be real. This paper has shown the only thing that turns a real quarter into a real transformation: a loop disciplined enough to survive its own success.

There is no year-two paper coming, because there does not need to be. Year two is this paper, run again, from a higher floor. The loop does not change. What changes is where it starts: not from a definition that does not exist yet, but from one that is versioned, governed, and compounding. That is the entire reward of keeping the rhythm — you never start from zero again.

A launch is an event. A rhythm is an institution. Only one of them outlives the leader who started it.

R,CDP00HD CHRDAWDR,CD.0PCDVL-CDHC.VL@C@R

TIEMXE OE T

Look at your own last two quarters honestly against Appendix B. Did every row climb? If one held flat, your loop is decaying and Section 03 shows where that ends. Put the missed turn back on the calendar this quarter — not next — because the curve does not wait for you to notice, and the board reads the gap a full quarter before you would have admitted it.





SHSRM EXCE MMUMMTIEMEVNWOTCNKMN2MTIEM0EN0WEM2OK6TCNK

The CWO–CFO

Operating Compact.

The single peer relationship that decides whether the role survives a budget cycle — and how to write it.

0L0EXM2CVEMCKMTIEM EXCE
1.0.ITRTCDA@SDH-.XP1ARBRAMDFRTS

SXRA.-RLFW,@-V0STUS©LVHFS

CWO
SHRM · EN
2026

0OFWC6LTCNK

The CWO–CFO Operating Compact.

Co-owning the productivity line.

EXCE	SHRM Executive Network — 2026 Series on the Evolution of the People Function · Paper Five
E—CTCNK	v1.0 — May 2026
2NXDLT	Relationship paper with a value-bridge model, a shared-scorecard template, and a compact-readiness assessment
LO—CEK6E	Chief Work Officers and Chief Financial Officers jointly — and the CEOs who arbitrate between them.
6ND0LKCNK	Fifth in the series. Papers One through Four assumed the funding survives. This paper is how it actually does.

NKMTIEM6ND0L6T

The “compact” is a working construct: a written, mutually-owned agreement between the CWO and CFO on how workforce value is measured, attributed, and defended. It is presented as a template, not a mandate; the discipline is joint ownership of one number, not the specific format.

6NKTEKT

Inside this paper.

Two movements: why the translation fails, then the compact that fixes it.

(**Foreword** *The relationship that ends the role*

(**Executive Summary** *One number, two owners*

H1 **The Translation Problem** *Why HR value dies in the budget meeting*

HS **The Value Bridge** *Work redesign, restated in P&L*

HB **The Shared Scorecard** *One line both executives sign*

HG **The Compact** *What the written agreement contains*

L **The Compact-Readiness Assessment** *Can you co-own the number?*

F **The Translation Standard** *HR metric → CFO metric, audited*

(**Closing** *The number is the relationship*

0 L X T M C

The Translation.

Why workforce value evaporates between the people function and the budget meeting — and the bridge that carries it across intact.

A@SDA-LT,FLAR.TDH-.2FSVD DA@SDBLFPSD2-RXCSD DA@SD,@L-SXD,1.-S1L-X

2NXEPNX—

The relationship that ends the role.

Every prior paper assumed the funding survives. This is the paper about the meeting where it does not.

Four papers in, the Chief Work Officer role has been argued, specified, proven in a quarter, and sustained across a year. Every one of them quietly assumed something: that the money kept coming. This paper removes that assumption and looks directly at the room where it is decided — the budget meeting, with the CFO across the table.

Here is the uncomfortable pattern. The CWO walks in with genuine value: capacity freed, latency cut, errors avoided, a workforce re-architected. The CFO hears unverified savings in a language the P&L does not speak. The value is real and the translation fails, so the value dies in the room. Not because the CFO is hostile — because no one built the bridge between what the CWO did and what the CFO defends to the board.

> *The role is not ended by a bad quarter. It is ended by a good quarter that could not be defended in the CFO's language.*

PTA-LT,FLASXDBLFPSDR,DRTXR,ARTCPR,@L2FSD6-.VDT.DBLFPS

This paper builds that bridge. It is the one relationship in the series with veto power over everything else: a CWO who cannot co-own a number with the CFO is a CWO whose mandate expires at the next planning cycle, regardless of how well the work went.

E·E6OTCVEM ODDLX)

One number, two owners.

The CWO does not need the CFO’s permission. The CWO needs the CFO’s co-signature.

This is the shortest causal chain in the series. Work is redesigned. Value is created. If the value cannot be translated, it cannot be defended. If it cannot be defended, it is not funded. If it is not funded, the role ends. Every link is the CWO’s responsibility — including the one that runs through the CFO’s mouth.

TIC M0L0EXMLX’OE M2CVEMTICK’

01 Untranslated value is dead value.

Real workforce gains that cannot be stated in P&L terms do not survive the budget meeting. The CFO cannot defend what the CFO cannot restate.

02 The bridge is buildable.

Every HR-language outcome has a CFO-language equivalent. The translation is a discipline, not a talent.

03 Shared ownership beats persuasion.

The CWO does not pitch the CFO. They co-own one number, scored the same way, defended together.

04 The compact is written, not implied.

A handshake decays at the first hard quarter. A written compact — metric, attribution, cadence — survives it.

05 This relationship has veto power.

Every other paper in the series depends on this one. Lose the CFO and the mandate expires on schedule.

TIEMFNTTNDMWCKE

The CWO–CFO compact is one number, defined jointly, attributed by an agreed rule, reviewed on a fixed cadence, and defended by both to the board. It is not a better pitch. It is the end of pitching — because you do not pitch a person who has already co-signed the answer.

INPMTNMXEL—MTIC M0L0EX

Part I is the problem and the bridge: why translation fails and the value-bridge model that fixes it. Part II is the instrument: the shared scorecard, the written compact, and a readiness assessment for whether you can actually co-own a number today.

E6TCNKMH1M(MTIEMTXLK WLTCNKM0XNFWED

Why HR value dies in the budget meeting.

The value is real. The translation is missing. To a CFO, those two failures are the same failure.

The budget meeting is not where workforce value is created — it is where it is killed, reliably, by a translation gap no one was assigned to close. Three mechanisms do the killing.

01

HR speaks inputs; the P&L speaks outcomes.

“We trained 4,000 people” is an input. “We reduced cost-per-outcome 18% on a $40M process” is a defended line. The CFO cannot carry the first sentence into a board meeting; the second one survives without the CWO in the room. Most workforce value dies because it was never restated as an outcome the CFO could own.

02

Savings without attribution is noise.

“AI freed up capacity” invites the only question that matters: how do you know, and freed it for what? Value with no agreed attribution rule is, to a CFO, indistinguishable from optimism. The bridge is not the number — it is the rule by which the number is assigned.

03

Cost language caps the role at cost.

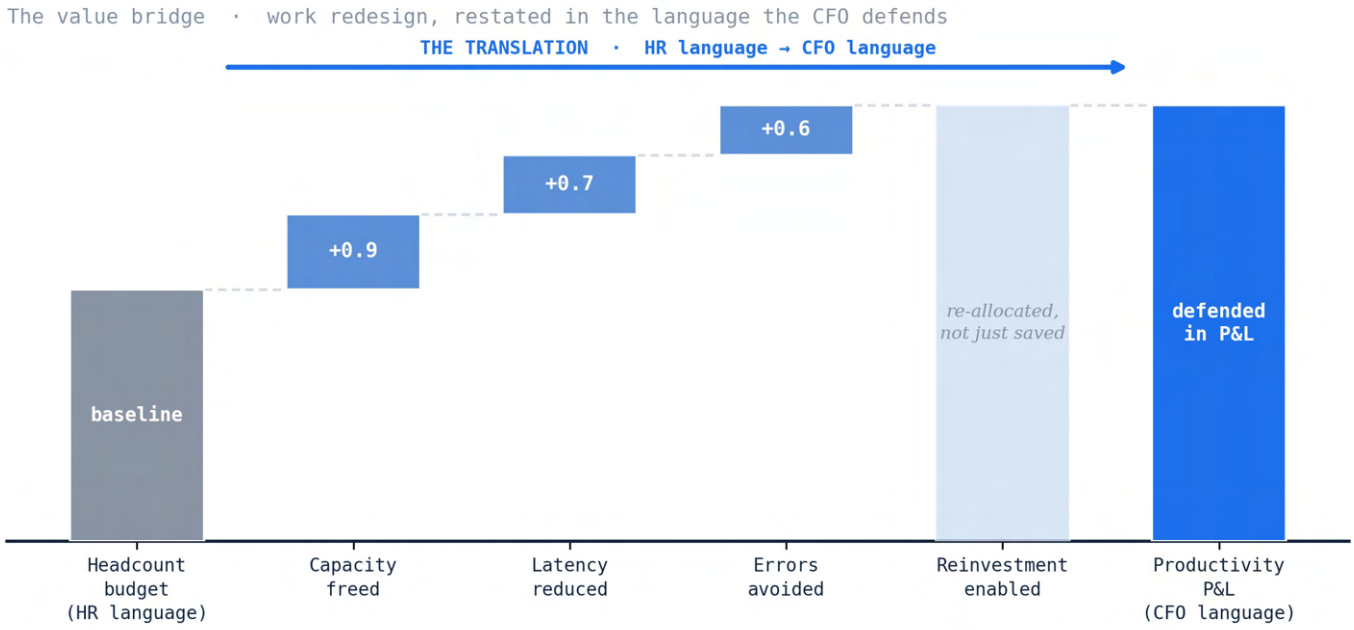
A CWO who only ever speaks savings is filed under cost control — and cost centers do not get growth mandates. The compact deliberately speaks value created, capacity reinvested, and growth enabled, because the language you use to defend the role is the ceiling the role is given.

The CFO is not rejecting your value. The CFO is rejecting a sentence they cannot repeat to the board without you standing next to them.

E6TCNKMHSM(MTIEMVLWOEMFXC—'E

Work redesign, restated in P&L.

The same value, carried across the gap intact — from the language HR creates it in to the language the CFO defends it in.



Read the bridge left to right. The baseline is the headcount budget — the only workforce number most boards have ever seen. Each step is a real outcome of work redesign restated as a financial delta the CFO can attribute: capacity freed, latency reduced, errors avoided. The penultimate bar is the one most CWOs miss — reinvestment. Freed capacity that is re-allocated to growth is not a saving; it is a different and larger story, and it is the one the CFO most wants to tell the board.

The bridge is the deliverable, not the math. The numbers above are illustrative. The point is structural: every workforce outcome must arrive at the budget meeting already standing on the right-hand side of this bridge. A CWO who hands the CFO the left side and expects them to do the crossing has outsourced the most important translation in the role.

E6TCNKMHBM(MTIEM ILXE—M 6NXE6LX—

One line both executives sign.

Not the CWO's scorecard reviewed by the CFO. One scorecard, four lines, two signatures on each.

The shared scorecard is the operating heart of the compact. Each line names what it replaces from the legacy HR scorecard, the definition both executives sign, and the explicit split of ownership — because joint ownership without a split is just shared blame.

T M	X	T M M M	N M
Time-to-capability	**Replaces time-to-fill**	Both sign: cycle time from need identified to outcome delivered, any executor	*CWO owns the operation; CFO owns the unit cost*
Blended cost-per-outcome	**Replaces cost-per-hire**	Both sign: fully-loaded human + agent + automation cost per delivered unit	*CWO owns the mix; CFO owns the denominator*
Capacity reinvested	**Net-new line**	Both sign: freed hours re-allocated to named growth work, not just removed	*CWO owns the redeployment; CFO owns the return*
Productivity contribution	**Replaces headcount variance**	Both sign: margin or revenue effect attributable to work redesign, by agreed rule	*CWO owns the redesign; CFO owns the P&L attribution*

PI)MLM 0WCT MKNTMLMDEX'E

If both executives own everything, neither owns anything when the number moves the wrong way. The split is deliberate: the CWO owns the operating lever, the CFO owns the financial attribution. The signature is joint; the accountability is divided. That is what makes it survive a bad quarter instead of dissolving into it.

E6TCNKMHGM(MTIEM6ND0L6T

What the written agreement contains.

A handshake decays at the first hard quarter. The compact is written precisely so it survives the quarter that tests it.

The compact is one page, co-signed, reviewed quarterly. It is not a contract in the legal sense — it is a commitment device, in exactly the sense Paper Two used for the funding conversation and Paper Four used for the board cadence. It contains five things and nothing else.

E6TCNKMHGM(MTIEM2CVEM6WLO E

One page. Five clauses. Two signatures.

Everything the compact contains — and the discipline of containing nothing else.

H1 The number

The single shared productivity line, defined to the decimal, with the agreed attribution rule attached. Not a dashboard. One number both executives will say out loud to the board, in the same words.

HS The attribution rule

The pre-agreed method for assigning value to work redesign versus other causes. Agreed in calm, applied in dispute. The rule is the peace treaty written before the war.

HB The cadence

Fixed quarterly review, aligned to the board rhythm of Paper Four. Not ‘as needed’ — as scheduled. The cadence is what converts a relationship into an institution.

HG The split

Who owns the operating lever, who owns the financial attribution, on every line of the shared scorecard. Joint signature, divided accountability.

H The escalation

The single sentence naming who arbitrates when the two disagree on attribution — the CEO, by default. Written down before it is needed, so it is never a negotiation under pressure.

PI)MNKEM0L’E

A ten-page compact is a document no one re-reads and therefore no one keeps. A one-page compact is read at every quarterly review in ninety seconds, which is the only length a commitment device survives at. Brevity is not a style choice here — it is the mechanism.

L00EK—C·MLM(MTIEM6ND0L6T XEL—CKE ML E DEKT

Can you co-own the number?

Two tests. The first you run alone. The second you cannot run alone — which is the entire point.

0WLT2NXD

This assessment is the public preview of the CWO–CFO Compact Workshop, facilitated jointly through SHRM Executive Network with both executives in the room.

6LKM)NOM TLTEMTIEMVLWOE M 6PNM EW2 TE T

- ☐ I can state my single most important workforce outcome this quarter as one P&L-language sentence the CFO could repeat without me.
- ☐ I have a written attribution rule for that outcome, agreed before the result — not constructed after it.
- ☐ I can name the reinvestment, not just the saving — what the freed capacity was re-allocated to, by name.
- ☐ I speak value created at least as often as cost reduced when I describe the function to the C-suite.
- ☐ I have, on one page, the number I would ask the CFO to co-sign — today, not after more analysis.

6LKM)NOM6N NPKMCT M NCKTMTE T MXOKMPCTIMTIEM62NMCKMTIEMXNND

- ☐ The CFO and I have agreed which single line we both sign — not which dashboard we both receive.
- ☐ We have written the attribution rule together, in calm, and both can state it the same way.
- ☐ We have a fixed quarterly review on the calendar, aligned to the board cadence — not ‘as needed.’
- ☐ We have named, in writing, who arbitrates an attribution dispute before one has occurred.
- ☐ Each of us can state the other’s half of the ownership split without looking it up.

TIEM 6NXCK’MXOWE

The first list you can pass alone — and passing it alone is necessary but worthless, because the value still dies in a meeting you are not narrating. The second list cannot be passed alone by design. If you cannot get the CFO in the room to run it with you, that is not an assessment failure. That is the finding.

L00EK—C·MFM(MTIEMTXLK WLTCNKM TLK—LX—

HR metric → CFO metric, audited.

Every left-column sentence is dead on arrival at the budget meeting. Every right-column sentence survives without you in the room.

This is the bridge as a lookup table. The middle column is the operating restatement; the right column is the defended P&L line. The standard is strict in exactly the way Paper Three's was: a translation only counts if it would survive the CFO being asked, by the board, to defend it without the CWO present.

P MIXM	IXM M	N M	62NM M
Training delivered	Hours, completions	Time-to-capability, any executor	**Capability coverage tied to a revenue-bearing process**
Headcount reduced	FTE removed	Blended cost-per-outcome on the affected process	**Margin effect, attributed by the agreed rule**
AI tool deployed	Licenses, adoption %	Cost-per-outcome delta before vs. after	**Reinvestment: freed capacity re-allocated, by name**
Engagement up	Survey score	Outcome quality + retention of critical capability	**Revenue protected by retained capability, attributed**
Process automated	Tasks automated	Latency and error-rate deltas, costed	**Growth enabled by capacity that was not just removed**

> XEL—CK'MTIEM TLK—LX—
>
> If you cannot get from column one to column four for your top three outcomes this quarter, you do not have a measurement problem — you have a funding problem that has not arrived yet. The budget meeting is where it arrives. This table is how you get there before it does.

6WN CK’

The number is the relationship.

Papers One through Four built the role and kept it alive for a year. This paper named the one relationship that can end it regardless of how well the work went — and showed that the relationship is not built on rapport, lunches, or persuasion. It is built on a single number that two executives define together, attribute by a rule they wrote together, and defend to the board in the same words.

There is a reason this paper sits in the middle of the series rather than the end. Everything after it — governance, failure modes, the talent pipeline, the board mandate — assumes the role is still funded. This is the paper that makes that assumption safe. A CWO who has co-signed a number with the CFO has a mandate that survives the planning cycle. A CWO who has not is operating on borrowed time and a good story.

You do not pitch a person who has already co-signed the answer. That is the entire purpose of the compact.

1.0.ITS-,@RHDR,DA@SDSTXD.6DHS-,PL,R.T

TIEMXE OE T

Run Appendix A’s first list alone this week — honestly. Then take the second list to your CFO and ask to run it together. If the CFO will not sit for it, you have learned the most important thing this paper can teach you, and you have learned it now — while there is still time to fix it — instead of in the budget meeting, when there is not.

SHRM BETTER WORKPLACES BETTER WORLD™

CWO SHRM·EN 2026

SHSRM EXCE MMUMMTIEMEVNWOTCNKMN2MTIEM0EN0WEM2OK6TCNK

Governing the

Blended Workforce.

The regulation will not hold still. So govern to a durable internal standard that satisfies whatever lands — humans, agents, and the rails between them.

0L0EXM CDMCKMTIEM EXCE
1.0DITB0RCLCA0DT@0RL1SCIDVTH0-DXTRD.PVLCFDLCHDLI0C1F

0HS1TRSL-WF.RV,0CU0©LV@-0

CWO
SHRM·EN
2026

0OFWC6LTCNK

Governing the Blended Workforce.

Govern to a durable standard, not a moving target.

EXCE	SHRM Executive Network — 2026 Series on the Evolution of the People Function · Paper Six
E—CTCNK	v1.0 — May 2026
2NX·LT	Governance paper with a regulatory-volatility map, a durable-standard model, and a governance-readiness assessment
LO—CEK6E	Chief Work Officers, General Counsel, and boards accountable for AI in the workforce across jurisdictions.
6N·0LKCNK	Sixth in the series. The CFO compact (Paper Five) had veto power over funding. Governance has veto power over operating at all.

NKMTIEMXE(OWLTNXBM KL0 INT

Regulatory facts are current as of mid-May 2026 and are summarized for orientation, not as legal advice. This landscape is moving fast — the EU Omnibus and Colorado’s replacement statute were both unresolved at press time. The paper’s argument is built precisely so it survives whichever way these resolve. Verify current status with counsel before acting.

6NKTEKT

Inside this paper.

Two movements: why the target moves, then the standard that does not.

G **Foreword** *The target will not hold still*

G **Executive Summary** *Govern to the standard, not the statute*

H1 **The Volatility** *Twenty months, five moves, no stable ground*

HS **The Durable Standard** *What satisfies whatever lands*

H) **The Three Domains** *Humans, agents, and the rails between*

H’ **The Governance Operating Model** *Who owns what, on the record*

L **The Governance-Readiness Assessment** *Would you survive an audit today?*

F **The Durable-Standard Specification** *The internal bar, by domain*

G **Closing** *Compliance is a floor; governance is the building*

0 L X T M C

The Moving Target.

Twenty months of workforce-AI regulation that moved five times — and why chasing it is the wrong strategy for a role that has to operate now.

2NXEPNX—

The target will not hold still.

Every prior paper assumed the role can operate. This is the paper about the thing that can stop it from operating at all.

Paper Five named the relationship with veto power over funding. Governance has veto power over something more fundamental: whether the role gets to operate at all. A CWO can have the mandate, the compact, the rhythm, and the board — and still be shut down by a regulator, a works council, or a disparate-impact claim. This is the paper about that risk.

Here is the trap most organizations are walking into right now. They are trying to comply with the regulation. But the regulation will not hold still long enough to comply with. In twenty months the workforce-AI rules moved at least five times — a binding EU deadline, a proposed deferral not yet adopted, a US executive reversal, a state law enjoined by a federal court weeks before it took effect, and a replacement statute not yet signed. An organization that builds its governance around the statute is rebuilding it every quarter — and is non-compliant in the gaps.

> *You cannot comply with a target that moves faster than your compliance cycle. You can only govern to a standard the target cannot outrun.*

1.0DF1L1P10DSFD1.0DX-TTR6D1.0DHPRL2-0DF1LCHLRHDSFD1.0D2PS-HSCI

This paper makes one argument, structurally. Stop chasing the regulation. Build an internal governance standard rigorous enough that whichever way the EU Omnibus, the Colorado replacement, and the next executive order resolve, you are already above the line. Then the regulation becomes a floor you cleared months ago — not a moving target you are perpetually behind.

EDE6OTCVEM O··LXB

Govern to the standard, not the statute.

The compliance strategy that fails is the one that assumes the law will stop moving.

The organizations in the most danger right now are not the ones ignoring regulation. They are the ones diligently complying with a version of it that will not exist in six months — spending real money to chase a target that moves faster than their governance cycle, and exposed in every gap between versions.

TIC M0L0EXMLX(OE M2CVEMTICK(

01

The regulation is not a target. It is weather.

Twenty months, five moves, no stable ground. A governance model pinned to the statute is obsolete on arrival.

02

Govern to a durable internal standard.

One bar, set above every plausible regulatory landing, so compliance is a byproduct, not a chase.

03

Three domains, not one.

Humans, AI agents, and the rails between them each need a distinct governance object. Most models govern only the first.

04

Ownership is named, on the record.

Every AI decision has a human owner of record — the one provision that survives every version of every law.

05

Worker voice is not optional anywhere.

Consultation obligations survive every deferral. The durable standard treats it as permanent, because it is.

TIEMFNTTN·MWCKE

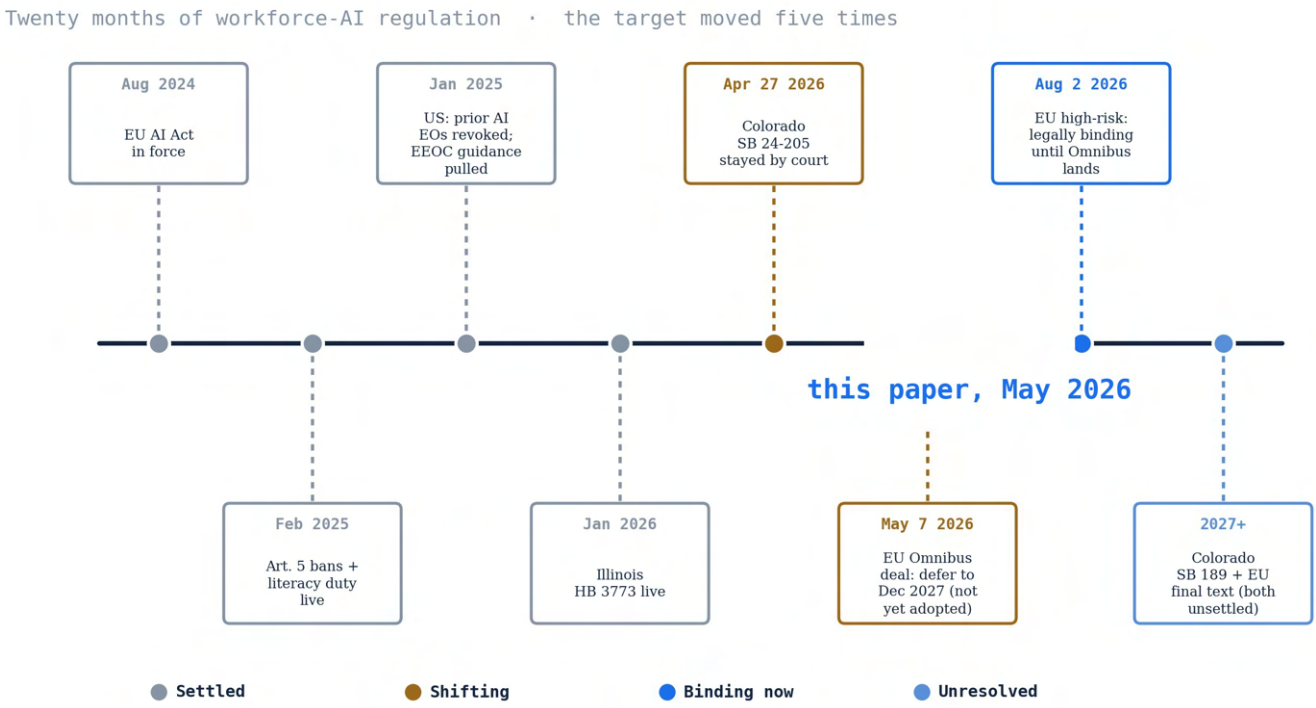
Set one internal governance standard above every plausible regulatory outcome. Govern humans, agents, and the rails between them to that standard. Name a human owner for every AI decision. Treat worker consultation as permanent. Do this and the regulation stops being a target you chase and becomes a floor you cleared two quarters ago.

INPMTNMXEL—MTIC M0L0EX

Part I is the volatility and the durable-standard model. Part II is the operating instrument: the three governance domains, the operating model, a readiness assessment, and the durable-standard specification you can build against today regardless of how the law resolves.

The target keeps moving.

The workforce-AI regulatory target has not been stable for a single quarter since the EU AI Act came into force.



Read the timeline as an operating reality, not a legal history. The EU AI Act's high-risk employment obligations are legally binding from August 2, 2026 — and a May 2026 political agreement would defer them to December 2027, except it is not yet adopted, so the binding date stands until it is. In the US, prior federal AI orders were revoked and the EEOC withdrew its guidance, while Title VII liability did not move at all. Colorado's landmark AI Act was stayed by a federal court weeks before taking effect, with a narrower replacement statute passed but unsigned. None of this is settled. All of it is operative.

This is not an anomaly to wait out. There is no quarter coming in which this stabilizes and a CWO can finally build governance against a fixed statute. Volatility is the steady state. A governance model that requires regulatory certainty to function is a governance model that will never function. The only viable strategy is one that does not need the target to stop moving.

E6TCNKMHSMGMTIEM—OXLFWEM TLK—LX—

What satisfies whatever lands.

One internal bar, set deliberately above the regulation, so compliance becomes a byproduct of governing well.

The durable standard is not a prediction of where the law settles. It is a refusal to depend on that prediction. Three principles construct it.

01

Set the bar above every plausible landing.

Take the strictest credible version of each obligation across all jurisdictions you touch — the EU high-risk regime, the strictest US state framework, the worker-consultation duties — and set your internal standard at or above the union of them. You are then compliant under every scenario, not one.

02

Make it survive a deferral.

The EU Omnibus may push high-risk duties to 2027; Colorado’s original act is enjoined. A durable standard treats deferred obligations as live anyway, because a deferral is not a repeal and the cost of standing the capability back up after standing it down exceeds the cost of just keeping it.

03

Anchor on what never moves.

Some obligations have survived every version of every proposal: a named human accountable for each consequential AI decision, the ability to explain an adverse decision, worker information and consultation, and a defensible bias-testing record. Build the standard’s spine from these, because they are the load-bearing walls in every draft.

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>
> Deliberate over-compliance looks expensive until it is priced against the alternative: re-architecting governance every time a deadline shifts, plus the liability accruing in every gap between versions. The durable standard is bought once. The moving-target chase is paid every quarter, forever, and still leaves exposure. Over-compliance is the cheaper option correctly accounted for.

Humans, agents, and the rails between.

Most governance models govern only the systems. The durable standard governs all three objects — because the law does.

A governance model that only covers the AI systems is failing two-thirds of the durable standard. Regulators and works councils examine the human domain and the decision rails at least as hard as the models. Three objects, each governed explicitly.

—N·LCKMH1

Humans — the affected workforce

Notice that AI is in use, explanation of adverse decisions, a human-review path, and information/consultation with worker representatives before deployment. This domain survives every regulatory version; it is the one most governance models under-build.

—N·LCKMHS

Agents — the AI systems themselves

Inventory, classification by consequence, a named human owner of record per system, bias testing with a retained record, and a retirement protocol. Paper Two's 'agents on the org chart' is the operating half; this is the governance half.

—N·LCKMH)

The rails — the decisions between them

The model-risk register, the human-in-the-loop gates, the audit trail, and the escalation path when a human and an agent disagree. This is the domain regulators examine first and most organizations document last.

> TIEMTIXNO(I WCKE
>
> Read the three domains as the three questions every regulator and every works council asks, in order: what does it do to people, what is the system and who owns it, and who decided when they disagreed? An organization that can answer all three on the record is compliant under every version of every law. One that can answer only the second is exposed under all of them.

Who owns what, on the record.

Governance that is not assigned to a named human is not governance. It is documentation that fails its first audit.

The durable standard becomes real only when each element has an owner of record and a defensible artifact. The right-hand column shows which regulatory regimes each element satisfies — the point being that one well-owned element clears several laws at once.

E	T M	N	6
AI decision owner of record	Named human per consequential system	**CWO assigns; the owner is accountable, not the vendor**	*Survives every regulatory version — the load-bearing wall*
Model-risk register	Live inventory + classification by consequence	**CWO owns the register; GC owns the legal classification**	*EU high-risk regime, Colorado original + replacement, NIST RMF*
Bias-testing record	Documented test + retained evidence, on cadence	**CWO operates; GC and Analytics co-sign the method**	*Title VII disparate-impact; every state framework drafted*
Worker information & consultation	Pre-deployment notice + representative consultation	**CWO runs; HR/ER executes; GC verifies sufficiency**	*EU Art. 26(7) — survives every deferral; works-council law*
Human-review path	Documented appeal of an adverse AI decision	**CWO designs; the decision owner operates it**	*EU high-risk; Illinois HB 3773; Colorado replacement notice regime*
Board governance line	Quarterly AI-risk item, owned, on the record	**CWO presents; the board minutes the acceptance**	*Director oversight duties; the Paper Four board cadence*

One artifact, many statutes. The efficiency of the durable standard is in this column. A single well-kept bias-testing record satisfies Title VII, the EU high-risk regime, and every drafted state framework simultaneously. You are not building six compliance programs. You are building one governance model that six regimes happen to accept.

L00EK—CDMLMGMTIEM(NVEXKLK6E XEL—CKE ML E ·EKT

Would you survive an audit today?

Not ‘are you compliant with the current statute’ — that question expires. ‘Would you survive an audit under any of them.’

0WLT2NX·

This assessment is the public preview of the CWO Governance-Readiness Review, run with General Counsel through SHRM Executive Network against the durable-standard specification in Appendix B.

TIEMIO·LKM—N·LCKMGMPNOW—MLMPNXA M6NOK6CWML66E0TMCT

- ☐ Affected workers are told, in writing, when a consequential decision about them involves AI.
- ☐ There is a documented, usable path for a human review of an adverse AI-influenced decision.
- ☐ Worker representatives are consulted before a high-consequence system is deployed — not after.
- ☐ An adverse decision can be explained to the affected person in language they can act on.

TIEML(EKTM—N·LCKMGMPNOW—MLMXE(OWLTNXML66E0TMCT

- ☐ Every AI system that influences a consequential decision is in a live inventory, classified by consequence.
- ☐ Each such system has a single named human owner of record — not the vendor, not ‘the team.’
- ☐ There is a retained bias-testing record for each, on a defined cadence, with the method documented.
- ☐ Every system has a retirement protocol; orphaned systems were retired, not left running.

TIEMXLCW MGMPNOW—MLM6NOXTML66E0TMCT

- ☐ The model-risk register is current, owned, and reviewed on the board cadence.
- ☐ Human-in-the-loop gates exist where the durable standard requires them, and are evidenced.
- ☐ There is a documented escalation path for human–agent disagreement, used and logged.
- ☐ The board has a standing, minuted AI-risk line — acceptance is on the record, not implied.

TIEM 6NXCK(MXOWE

Score honestly against the strictest regime you plausibly touch, not the most lenient. A box is checked only if the artifact exists and would be handed to an auditor today without a scramble. Unchecked boxes are not gaps in compliance with one law — they are exposure under all of them simultaneously, which is the entire point of the durable standard.

L00EK—CDMFMGMTIEM—OXLFWE TLK—LX—M 0E6C2C6LTCNK

The internal bar, by domain.

Below Operating is exposure under every law. Operating is the durable bar. Leading is what makes the audit a formality.

Same four-level scale as the rest of the series. The durable-standard bar is the Operating column — set deliberately at or above the strictest plausible regulatory landing, so that whichever way the EU Omnibus and the Colorado replacement resolve, Operating already clears them. Leading is the state in which an audit produces no findings because the evidence was ready before it was requested.

E		N MGM M M	W
Notice to workers	Implied in policy	Written, per consequential system	**Acknowledged + explained in plain language**
Human review	Exists informally	Documented appeal path	**Operated, logged, audited on cadence**
Worker consultation	Ad hoc or skipped	Pre-deployment, representative-level	**Standing cadence; treated as permanent**
Agent inventory	Partial / office-side	Complete, classified by consequence	**Performance-managed; retirement enforced**
Owner of record	‘The team’ or the vendor	One named human per system	**Accountability survives the incumbent**
Bias-testing record	None or one-off	On cadence, method documented	**Method co-signed; evidence retained for audit**
Board oversight	Mentioned in a deck	Standing quarterly line	**Minuted acceptance; risk owned on record**

XEL—CK(MTIEM TLK—LX—

Do not benchmark against the statute in force this week — it will not be in force next quarter. Benchmark against this column, which was built above all of them on purpose. An organization at Operating here is compliant under the EU high-risk regime, its deferral, the original Colorado act, its replacement, and Title VII — without having tracked which one is currently live.

6WN CK(

Compliance is a floor; governance is the building.

This is the paper with veto power over operating at all. A CWO can have the mandate, the actions, the quarter, the year, and the CFO compact — and still be stopped cold by a regulator, a works council, or a disparate-impact finding. Papers One through Five built the role. This one keeps it legal while the law refuses to sit still.

The strategic error almost everyone is making right now is treating regulation as a target to hit. It is not a target. It is weather. You do not comply with weather — you build to a standard that holds through all of it. Set the internal bar above every plausible landing, govern all three domains to it, name a human owner for every decision, and treat worker voice as permanent. Then the next deadline shift, the next executive order, the next enjoined statute is not a fire drill. It is a non-event you were already above.

You cannot comply with weather. You can only build to a standard that holds through all of it.

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TIEMXE OE T

Run Appendix A this week against the strictest regime you touch — with General Counsel in the room, not cc'd. Every unchecked box is live exposure under every version of every law simultaneously, not a gap in one. Build to Appendix B, not to whatever statute is in force the day you read this. By the time the regulation resolves — whichever way it resolves — you want to have cleared it two quarters ago.

SHRM BETTER WORKPLACES BETTER WORLD

CWO SHRM·EN 2026

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The Counterfactual:

When the CWO Fails.

Four structural ways the role dies — only one of them is the obvious one. A stress test of the series' own thesis.

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The Counterfactual: When the CWO Fails.

The failure modes, mapped honestly.

EXCE	SHRM Executive Network — 2026 Series on the Evolution of the People Function · Paper Seven
E—CTCNK	v1.0 — May 2026
2NXDLT	Counterfactual paper with a failure decision tree, four post-mortems, and a pre-mortem instrument
LO—CEK6E	CWOs, CEOs, and boards who want the series' thesis stress-tested before they bet on it.
6ND0LKCNK	Seventh in the series. The first six argued for the role. This one argues against it, on purpose, to find where it breaks.

NKMTIEM0N T(DNXTED

The four failures are composites, constructed to isolate one structural failure mode each. They are deliberately not the same organization and not real entities; the value is in the mechanism, not the case. A body of work that only argues for its thesis is advocacy. One that maps its own failure modes is doctrine.

6NKTEKT

Inside this paper.

Two movements: how the role dies, then how to see it coming.

B **Foreword** *Why a paper against the role*

B **Executive Summary** *The obvious failure is the rare one*

H1 **The Decision Tree** *Four gates, four ways to die*

HS **Failure One & Two** *Title without substance; CFO lost*

HG **Failure Three & Four** *Governed to a standstill; built then starved*

H) **The Common Root** *Why all four are the same mistake*

L **The Pre-Mortem** *Kill the role on paper before it dies in fact*

F **The Failure-Risk Standard** *Early-warning indicators, by mode*

B **Closing** *The honest case strengthens the case*

0 L X T M C

The Four Failures.

The role is created and then dies — structurally, not accidentally. Four gates, four mechanisms, only one of them the failure everyone watches for.

2NXEPNX—

Why a paper against the role.

Six papers built the case. This one tries to break it — because a thesis that cannot survive its own counterargument is not a thesis.

Six papers into a series arguing the Chief Work Officer role must exist, the most useful thing this series can do is turn on itself. Every prior paper assumed the role, built well, survives. This paper assumes it does not, and asks exactly how it dies — not as a rhetorical concession, but as the most rigorous test the argument can be put to.

There is a reason this matters beyond intellectual honesty. The obvious failure — the title with no substance behind it, named already in Papers Two and Three — is the one everyone watches for, and it is the rare one. The role far more often dies of three failures nobody is watching: it wins the mandate and loses the CFO, it is governed so heavily that speed dies, or it is built in a quarter of enthusiasm and quietly starved in the years after. These are not the failures of weak leaders. They are the failures of strong ones who cleared the obvious gate and assumed the rest were clear too.

> *A body of work that only argues for its thesis is advocacy. One that maps its own failure modes is doctrine.*

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This paper is the series’ own pre-mortem. It maps four structural failure modes, runs a post-mortem on each, finds the single root they share, and converts that into an instrument a board can use to kill the role on paper — cheaply, early — before it dies in fact, expensively, late.

E·E6OTCVEM ODDLX’

The obvious failure is the rare one.

Four structural failure modes — and the uncomfortable fact that competent leaders cause three of them.

This is the series’ adversarial paper. Its job is not to reassure. It is to name, precisely, the four ways the role dies structurally — and to show that three of the four are not caused by the leaders who fail the obvious test, but by the ones who pass it and stop checking.

TIC M0L0EXMLX OE M2CVEMTICK

01 **The obvious failure is the rare one.**

Title-without-substance is real but watched-for. The role usually dies of failures no one is monitoring.

02 **Failure 2: mandate won, CFO lost.**

The role secures authority and never secures the number. It expires at the first budget cycle that tests it.

03 **Failure 3: governed to a standstill.**

Risk control so heavy the speed the role exists to create dies under it. Compliance becomes the product.

04 **Failure 4: built, then starved.**

A brilliant first quarter, then attention moves on. The rhythm decays, the mandate drifts back to administration.

05 **All four share one root.**

Every failure is a strength over-applied past the gate where a different strength was required.

TIEMFNTTNDMWCKE

The role rarely dies the way the skeptics predict — an empty title. It dies the way the confident miss: mandate without the number, speed killed by its own guardrails, or a strong launch left to decay. All four are one mistake — a strength carried past the gate where it became the weakness. The pre-mortem in Appendix A is how a board finds that gate before the role does.

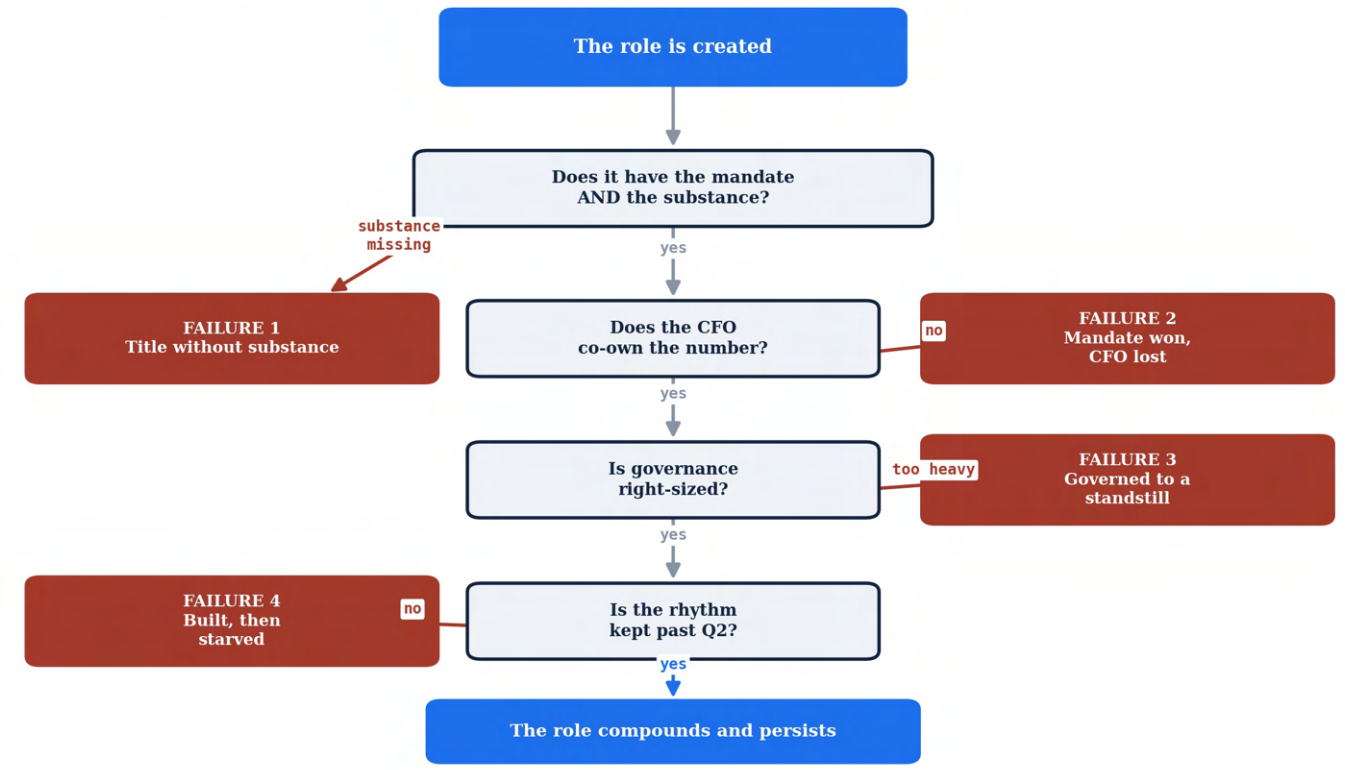
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Part I is the four failures: the decision tree, then a post-mortem on each, then the common root. Part II is the instrument: a pre-mortem a board runs before committing, and a failure-risk standard with the early-warning indicator for each mode.

Four gates, four ways to die.

The role does not fail randomly. It fails at one of four structural gates, in a fixed order, every time.

The failure decision tree · four structural ways the role dies (only one is the obvious one)



Read the tree top to bottom. The role is created, then it must clear four gates in sequence: substance behind the title, a number co-owned with the CFO, governance that is right-sized rather than crushing, and a rhythm that survives past the second quarter. Miss any one and the role does not limp — it dies, at that gate, in a recognizable way. The order is not arbitrary: each gate is only reachable if the prior one was cleared, which is why competent leaders who clear gate one so often die at gate two, three, or four without seeing it coming.

Only the first gate is widely watched. Every skeptic of the role watches gate one — is there substance, or just a title? It is the easiest to see and the easiest to pass. The other three gates kill more roles, precisely because passing gate one feels like winning, and the leader stops looking down.

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The watched one, and the one right behind it.

The first failure everyone sees coming. The second one hides directly behind the relief of clearing the first.

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Title without substance

The role is announced. The org chart changes. Nothing underneath it does. This is the failure Papers Two and Three already named — the title moved, the four-domain mandate did not. It is included here only for completeness, because it is the one failure the series already armed you against.

TIEMDE6ILKC DMMThe leader optimized the announcement instead of the operating change. Visibility was mistaken for substance.

> TIEMTEWWMBMPILTMLMFNLX—M EE M2CX T
>
> By the second quarter the CWO is presenting the same slides with new dates. There is motion language and no motion evidence — the exact tell from Paper Four’s decay curve.

TIEMLOTN0 ’MM*Cause of death: cleared no gates, was never really past gate one. The series’ most-discussed failure, and its least interesting, because everyone is already watching for it.*

2LCWOXEMTPNMUMTIEMIC——EKM LTE

Mandate won, CFO lost

The leader wins the mandate decisively — real authority, real scope, the board behind them. And never builds the co-owned number with the CFO that Paper Five made the condition of survival. The work is genuinely good. It is also undefended.

TIEMDE6ILKC DMMThe leader treated the CFO as an audience to persuade rather than a co-owner to enlist. Authority was mistaken for security.

> TIEMTEWWMBMPILTMLMFNLX—M EE M2CX T
>
> Nothing looks wrong for three quarters. Then the budget cycle arrives, the CFO cannot restate the value, and the role is cut from a position of apparent strength — which is why no one saw it coming.

TIEMLOTN0 ’MM*Cause of death: cleared gate one, died at gate two. The most dangerous failure in the series, because it kills the strong, not the weak.*

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The role killed by its own virtues.

Failure three is too much of the thing that protects it. Failure four is too little of the thing that sustains it.

2LCWOXEMTIXEEMUMTIEMCKVEX CNK

Governed to a standstill

The leader takes Paper Six seriously — and then takes it too far. Governance becomes so heavy that the speed the role exists to create dies under the weight of controlling it. Every workflow needs three approvals. The sandbox has a thirty-page intake form. Compliance becomes the product.

TIEMDE6ILKC DMMThe leader optimized for zero risk instead of right-sized risk. The guardrail became the road.

> TIEMTEWWMBMPILTMLMFNLX—M EE M2CX T
>
> Adoption flatlines while the governance documentation is immaculate. The board sees a beautifully controlled program that has shipped nothing — and a business routing around it entirely.

TIEMLOTN0 ’MMCause of death: cleared gates one and two, died at gate three. The cruelest failure, because the leader did the responsible thing past the point where it became the irresponsible thing.

2LCWOXEM2NOXMUMTIEM WNPMNKE

Built, then starved

The first quarter is exemplary — Paper Three’s benchmark, cleanly hit. Then attention moves to the next priority. The rhythm of Paper Four is never institutionalized. No single dramatic failure; just a year of small under-investments compounding the wrong way.

TIEM DE6ILKC DM M The organization mistook a strong launch for a finished transition. The loop was run once and narrated thereafter.

> TIEMTEWWMBMPILTMLMFNLX—M EE M2CX T
>
> The scorecard plateaus at Started and slowly regresses. The board does not see a crisis — it sees a gradual return to the old HR conversation, one quarter at a time, until the mandate has quietly evaporated.

TIEM LOTN0 ’MM*Cause of death: cleared gates one through three, died at gate four. The most common failure of all, because nothing about it ever feels like failure while it is happening.*

Why all four are the same mistake.

Four different deaths, one shared cause: a strength carried one gate too far.

The four failures look unrelated — an empty title, a lost CFO, a strangled program, a starved one. They are the same mistake wearing four faces. In every case, the leader took a strength that was correct at one gate and carried it, unexamined, past the gate where a different strength was required.

> TIEM0LTTEXK
>
> Failure 1: visibility, correct for the announcement, carried past the gate where substance was required. Failure 2: authority, correct for the mandate, carried past the gate where co-ownership was required. Failure 3: caution, correct for governance, carried past the gate where speed was required. Failure 4: intensity, correct for the launch, carried past the gate where endurance was required. One mistake. Four costumes.

No one fails because they lacked a strength. They fail because they kept using the one that already worked.

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This is why the failures kill competent leaders specifically. Incompetence dies at gate one and is filtered out early. Competence clears gate one, is rewarded for the strength that cleared it, and reaches for the same strength at gate two — where it is not only insufficient but actively the wrong tool. The pre-mortem that follows is built entirely around this single insight.

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Kill the role on paper before it dies in fact.

Run this before you need it. The post-mortem is free; the autopsy is not.

0WLT2NXD

This pre-mortem is the public preview of the CWO Failure-Mode Review, run confidentially with the board through SHRM Executive Network against the standard in Appendix B.

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- ☐ If the title were removed tomorrow, the four-domain mandate would still be operating — I can name the evidence.
- ☐ I can show one process materially re-architected, not one announcement well-delivered.
- ☐ My strength is visibility — and I have explicitly named what substance work I am at risk of skipping because of it.

LTEMSMBMTIEMKODFEXM XOKMFE2NXEMTIEM2CX TMFO— ETM6'6WE

- ☐ The CFO co-owns a single number with me — signed, not briefed — per Paper Five's compact.
- ☐ I can state the value in the CFO's language without me in the room, and the CFO would say it the same way.
- ☐ My strength is authority — and I have named where I am treating the CFO as an audience instead of a co-owner.

LTEMGMBMXC IT(C E—M NVEXKLK6EM XOKM OLXTEXW'

- ☐ Adoption is rising, not just control. I can show shipped value, not only immaculate documentation.
- ☐ The business is routing through the governance, not around it — I have checked for shadow usage honestly.
- ☐ My strength is caution — and I have named the workflow where my own guardrail has become the roadblock.

LTEM)MBMEK—OXLK6EM XOKMEVEX'M OLXTEXM0L TM S

- ☐ The scorecard climbed this quarter versus last — with evidence, not narrative.
- ☐ The board is structurally in the loop, not receiving updates about it.
- ☐ My strength is intensity — and I have named what I have stopped doing now that the launch energy is gone.

TIEM 6NXCK MXOWE

The last item in each gate is the one that matters most — it asks you to name your own strength and the failure it sets you up for. A leader who cannot complete those four sentences is not safe; they are unexamined, which is the precondition for all four failures. An unchecked box here is cheap. The same gap found in a post-mortem is not.

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Early-warning indicators, by mode.

Each failure has a signature you can see one to two quarters before it is fatal — if you are looking for that specific one.

The reason failures two through four kill is not that they are invisible — it is that everyone is looking at gate one. Each mode has a distinct early indicator. A board that monitors all four, not just the obvious one, converts every failure in this paper from fatal to recoverable.

2	T M	T M M1 SM M	P M M M
1 Title w/o substance	Announcement over-polished, no process changed	**Slides repeat with new dates by Q2**	*Watched-for; cheap to detect early*
2 Mandate, no CFO	Value never co-owned; CFO is an audience	**Three clean quarters, then a budget-cycle cut**	*The strong-leader killer; invisible until fatal*
3 Governed to a stop	Approval cycles lengthen; adoption flat	**Immaculate docs, nothing shipped, shadow usage**	*Cleared two gates; the responsible-to-a-fault death*
4 Built then starved	Rhythm not institutionalized post-launch	**Scorecard plateaus, then regresses quarterly**	*The most common; never feels like failure*

XEL—CK MTIEM TLK—LX—

Do not monitor for ‘is the role failing.’ Monitor for these four specific tells, separately, every quarter. The role does not send one failure signal — it sends one of four, and three of them look nothing like the one the board is trained to watch for. Surveillance of the wrong gate is why competent programs die.

L00EK—C·M6MBM2LCWOXEME6NKNDC6

Put the cost of the unowned in CFO terms.

An illustrative model, not a benchmark. The structure is the contribution; the numbers are yours to supply.

This series does not publish invented statistics, so it does not assert what a failed AI-enabled system costs the average company — that number does not exist independent of your context. What it offers instead is the cost structure, so the conversation in the budget meeting is about magnitudes and inputs rather than whether the cost is real. Fill the right column with your own figures before the CFO does it for you with worse ones.

6 M	P M M	C M MBM M M
Replacement cycle	Time and cost to detect a failed AI-enabled decision system, unwind it, re-staff or re-tool, and return to prior reliability.	Detection lag (quarters) × affected throughput × unit margin, plus re-tooling and re-hire cost.
Productivity degradation	Output that silently loses quality while the system still reports green — the gap between measured and actual capability.	Affected work volume × quality delta × downstream rework and escalation cost.
Velocity loss	Strategic moves not made because the work could not be re-architected in time — the product not shipped, the market entered late.	Delayed-launch revenue × probability × competitive-displacement factor.
Governance exposure	The cost of an employment-impacting system with no named owner: investigation, remediation, settlement, disclosure, trust.	Probability of an adverse event × modeled exposure per event, by jurisdiction and headcount touched.
Workflow waste	Spend on AI capability that produces motion but not margin because no one re-decided the work around it.	Annual AI spend × share of pilots with no redeployment plan (your kill-list ratio).

INPMTNMO EMTIC

Take five numbers into the budget meeting, not five adjectives. “This failure mode is expensive” loses to a CFO; “detection lag of two quarters on this system models to a low-eight-figure exposure on our volumes” does not. The point of the role is to make these lines small and owned. The point of this table is to make them visible before they are line items.

NKMTIEMKODFEX

The formulas above are an illustrative reasoning structure, not empirical findings or industry benchmarks. Any figure produced from them is only as sound as the inputs your finance function supplies and should be treated as a planning estimate, not a measured result.

6WN CK

The honest case strengthens the case.

Six papers built the argument for the Chief Work Officer. This one spent its entire length trying to break it — and the argument is stronger for it, not weaker. A thesis that names its own four failure modes, traces them to a single root, and hands the reader an instrument to detect them early is not a more fragile thesis. It is the only kind worth betting an organization on.

The series' quiet claim has always been that this role is structural, not fashionable. Fashion does not publish its own failure modes. Doctrine does. The four failures here are not caveats bolted onto an advocacy piece — they are the load test that tells you the structure holds. The role fails in exactly four ways, all four are detectable a quarter early, and the leaders most at risk are the strong ones who cleared the obvious gate and stopped looking down.

A thesis you cannot argue against is not robust. It is unexamined. This series chose to be the former.

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TIEMXE OE T

Run Appendix A before you need it — specifically the last item in each gate, the one that names your own strength and the failure it invites. Take the four sentences to your board. If you cannot complete them honestly, you have found your most likely cause of death while it is still free to fix. That is the entire purpose of writing the paper against the role: so the post-mortem never has to be written for real.

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The Talent Pipeline

for the Role Itself.

Every paper assumed a CWO exists to do the work. This one asks where the next thousand come from — and turns a role into a profession.

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The Talent Pipeline for the Role Itself.

From a role to a profession.

EXCE	SHRM Executive Network — 2026 Series on the Evolution of the People Function · Paper Eight
E(CTCNK	v1.0 — May 2026
2NX·LT	Pipeline paper with a feeder-to-seated funnel, a competency-to-certification map, and a bench-readiness assessment
LO(CEK6E	Sitting CWOs building succession, CHROs growing the bench, and boards asking ‘who is next.’
6N·0LKCNK	Eighth in the series. Paper One named the eight competencies. This paper builds the pipeline that produces them at scale.

NKMTIEM6N·0ETEK6BM·N(EW

This paper builds directly on the eight-competency model introduced in Paper One, Section 6, and the certification pathway it implied. The pipeline stages and the assessment are working SHRM Executive Network constructs, presented as a template; the discipline is the assessment gate, not the specific stage names.

6NKTEKT

Inside this paper.

Two movements: the pipeline that produces the role, then the standard that certifies it.

G **Foreword** *The unasked question of the series*

G **Executive Summary** *A role is hired; a profession is built*

H. **The Pipeline** *Feeder, developing, certified, seated*

HS **The Competency Bridge** *From the eight competencies to certification*

H) **Build vs. Hire** *When to grow the bench, when to buy it*

H’ **The Self-Renewing Bench** *Why the seated must develop the next*

L **The Bench-Readiness Assessment** *Could you name your successor today?*

— **The Certification Standard** *What ‘certified’ must actually mean*

G **Closing** *A profession outlives its first practitioners*

0 L X T M C

The Pipeline.

Where the next thousand Chief Work Officers come from — the feeder pool, the development path, the assessment gate, and the bench that renews itself.

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2NXEPNX(

The unasked question of the series.

Seven papers assumed a Chief Work Officer was available to do the work. None asked where that person comes from.

Every paper in this series so far has had a Chief Work Officer in it — arguing the role, executing the actions, running the quarter, defending the number, governing the risk, surviving the failure modes. Not one of them asked the question a board asks immediately after agreeing the role should exist: who, specifically, and where does the next one come from?

This is not a small omission. A role with no pipeline is not a profession — it is a single point of failure with a title. If the only way to fill a CWO seat is to find the rare individual who already happens to hold all four domains in their head, the role does not scale beyond the handful of people who arrived at it by accident. The series' entire thesis — that this is structural, not fashionable — depends on the role being reproducible. A structure you cannot staff is not a structure.

> *A role without a pipeline is a single point of failure wearing an executive title.*

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This paper builds the pipeline. It takes the eight competencies from Paper One, defines the stages a person moves through to acquire them, specifies what certification must actually verify, resolves the build-versus-hire question honestly, and closes the loop — the seated develop the next cohort, or the pipeline is a one-generation accident. This is the paper that turns the role into a profession.

EAE6OTCVEM O··LXB

A role is hired; a profession is built.

The difference between filling a seat and producing the role at scale — and why only the second one is a strategy.

The question this paper answers is the one the board asks the moment it says yes to the role: and who runs it — not just now, but in three years, across five business units, when the first one is promoted out? That question has a pipeline answer or it has no answer.

TIC M0L0EXMLXDOE M2CVEMTICKD

01 **A role is hired; a profession is built.**

Filling one seat is recruitment. Producing the role reliably at scale is a pipeline — a different discipline entirely.

02 **The feeder pool already exists.**

HRBPs, TA leads, L&D, analytics, ops — people already hold pieces of the four-domain mandate. The pipeline assembles them.

03 **Certification must assess, not attend.**

A certified CWO has demonstrated the eight competencies against a standard — not completed a course about them.

04 **Build by default; hire only on empty.**

An external hire for a role this contextual is a last resort, not a strategy. The bench is the strategy.

05 **The seated develop the next.**

A pipeline whose graduates do not feed it is a one-generation accident. Self-renewal is the design requirement.

TIEM—NTTN·MWCKE

The next thousand Chief Work Officers do not get hired — they get built, out of a feeder pool that already exists, through a development path that rotates them across all four domains, past an assessment gate that certifies demonstrated competence rather than course attendance, and back into the pipeline as the developers of the next cohort. That loop is the profession. Without it, the role is one retirement away from gone.

INPMTNMXEL(MTIC M0L0EX

Part I is the pipeline: the funnel, the competency bridge from Paper One, the build-vs-hire logic, and the self-renewal loop. Part II is the instrument: a bench-readiness assessment and the certification standard that defines what the gate must actually verify.

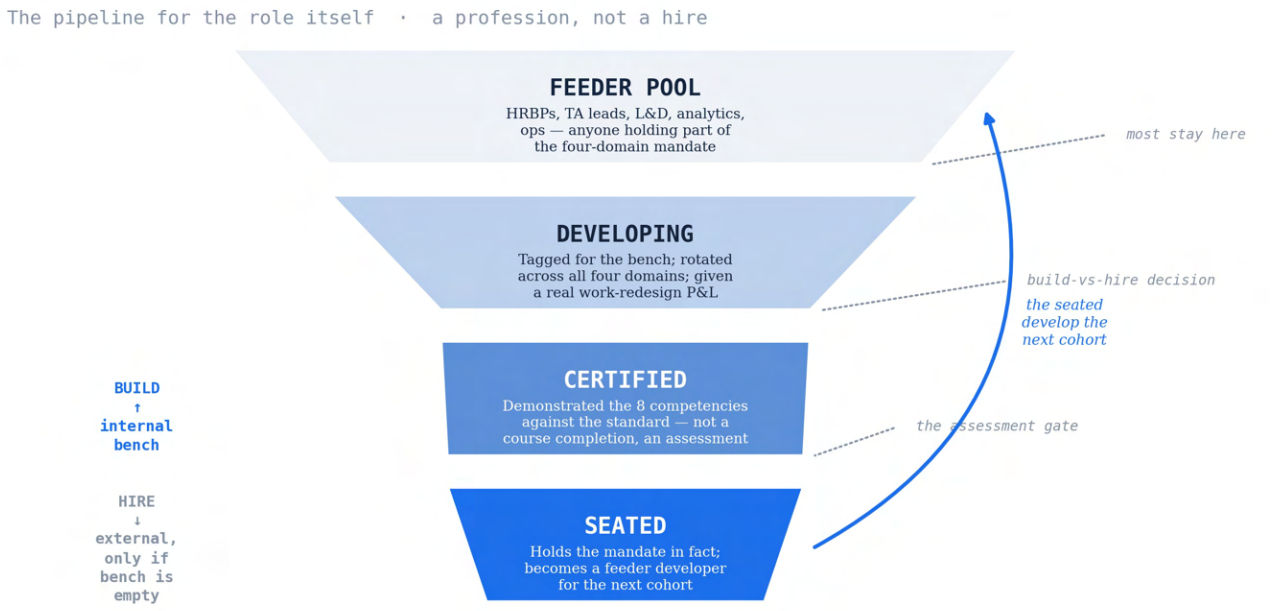
ON CERTIFICATION

This is performance-based certification — closer to the CIPD model of observed practice than to a course-completion credential. The architecture for who assesses, certifies, and signs off — SHRM, the seated CWO mentoring the candidate, or a mixed panel — is the practical question the next section answers.

E6TCNKMH.MGMTIEM0C0EWCKE

Feeder, developing, certified, seated.

Four stages, deliberate attrition at each, and a loop that feeds the top from the bottom.



Read the funnel top to bottom. The feeder pool is not a special cohort — it is everyone already holding a piece of the four-domain mandate, which is most of the people function. Developing is a deliberate selection: tagged for the bench, rotated across all four domains, and — critically — given a real work-redesign with a real P&L, not a shadow project. Certified is the gate that matters: demonstrated competence against a standard, not a completion certificate. Seated is not the end of the funnel; it is the start of the next one, because the seated develop the next cohort.

The attrition is the feature, not the leak. Most of the feeder pool stays in the feeder pool, and that is correct — not everyone should be a CWO. The pipeline’s job is not to maximize throughput. It is to ensure the assessment gate is real, so that ‘certified’ means something to a board betting an organization on it.

From the eight competencies to certification.

Paper One named the competencies. This is how a person actually acquires each one — and how it is verified.

The eight competencies from Paper One, Section 6, are not training topics. Each is acquired through a specific developmental experience and verified by a specific demonstration. The right column is the bridge: the experience that produces the competency, drawn deliberately from the other papers in the series.

Competency	What it is	How it is acquired & verified
Workforce Architecture	Decomposing work into tasks and routing them across human and machine capacity	Rotation through HRBP redesign work + one owned end-to-end redesign
Workforce Strategy	Positioning the enterprise's capability base twelve to thirty-six months ahead of where the business will need it	Authoring one 24-month workforce strategy linked to enterprise strategy, defended in board review
Workforce Orchestration	Sustaining the loop past the launch, against decay	Owning one quarter of the Paper Four rhythm end-to-end, reported to the board
Technical Fluency	Operating, evaluating, overriding AI systems in real workflows — and detecting their failure modes early	Hands-on agent ownership; the Paper Two live-task interview run as operator; the Paper Seven pre-mortem completed on a real program
Financial Acumen	Stating workforce value in the language the CFO defends — and to the board in its own register	Co-authoring one shared-scorecard line under a sitting CWO, per Paper Five; presenting one board AI-risk line, observed and debriefed
Competitive Intelligence	Reading the external environment — competitor moves, talent flows, regulation — and translating signals into workforce decisions	Maintaining one quarterly competitor brief, with one industry shift translated into a workforce scenario adopted by leadership
Human-Centered Leadership	Maintaining trust and dignity through workforce change — including developing successors as a primary duty	Running one role-displacement program with measurable enrollment; mentoring one feeder-pool member through one development rotation
Governance, Ethics & Risk	Right-sizing risk — neither negligent nor strangling	Running a model-risk register element under supervision, per Paper Six

WHY THE SERIES IS THE CURRICULUM

Read the right column down: every developmental experience is drawn from another paper in this series. That is deliberate. The curriculum for the role is not a course catalog — it is the operating doctrine the role already runs on. You develop a CWO by having them do the series, supervised, on a real P&L.

E6TCNKMH)MGM—OCW(MV FMICXE

When to grow the bench, when to buy it.

The honest answer is asymmetric: build is the default, hire is the exception, and the exception is rarer than most boards assume.

The build-versus-hire question feels balanced. It is not. The role is so contextual — dependent on the specific organization's work, agents, governance posture, and financial language — that an external hire arrives missing the one thing that cannot be taught quickly: the operating context. Three positions on the question, in order of preference.

—OCW(MGMTIEM(E2LOWT

Grow the bench from the feeder pool. The internal candidate already has the operating context and is missing competencies that the pipeline is designed to add. This is the cheaper, faster, lower-risk path in nearly every case, and it compounds — each cohort develops the next.

ICXEMTNM(EVEWN0MGMTIEM OLWC2CE(MEA6E0TCNK

Bring in external talent with strong adjacent competencies (a CFO-side leader, a transformation head) explicitly to enter the pipeline, not to seat immediately. They acquire context through the development rotations like anyone else. This is legitimate — but it is a build strategy with an external feeder, not a hire.

ICXEMTNM ELTMGMTIEMWL TMXE NXT

Place an external hire directly in the seat. Justified only when the bench is genuinely empty and the need is immediate — and even then, the failure modes of Paper Seven are elevated, because the new seat-holder is clearing gate one in a context they do not yet understand. A board choosing this should know it is accepting elevated structural risk, not avoiding it.

E6TCNKMH’MGMTIEM EW2 XEKEPCKDM—EK6I

Why the seated must develop the next.

A pipeline whose graduates do not become its faculty is not a pipeline. It is a one-time event with good production values.

The single design requirement that separates a profession from a lucky run of hires is this: the people who reach the seat are accountable for developing the people who will reach it next. If that loop is absent, the pipeline produces exactly one generation and then stops — and the role reverts to the accidental, unreproducible thing it was before the series began.

> *The first CWO who does not develop the second is the last CWO the organization will grow rather than gamble on.*

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This is why ‘succession instinct’ is one of the eight competencies and not an afterthought. A CWO who runs a brilliant program but develops no one has, by the standard of this paper, failed a core competency — regardless of operating results. The role is not certified complete until its holder has moved at least one person measurably along the pipeline. That is not an HR nicety. It is the mechanism by which the role survives its first practitioner, which is the entire point of building a profession instead of finding a person.

L00EK(CAMLMGMTIEM—EK6I XEL(CKE ML E ·EKT

Could you name your successor today?

Not ‘do you have high-potentials’ — that is a label. ‘Could you name the person, by name, today.’

0WLT2NX·

This assessment is the public preview of the CWO Bench Review, run with the board through SHRM Executive Network against the certification standard in Appendix B.

TIEM—EK6IMGM6NOW(MBNOMKL·EMBNOXM O66E NXMTN(LB

- ☐ I can name, today, the specific person who would hold the mandate if I left in ninety days.
- ☐ That person has been told they are on the bench — it is not a secret I am keeping from them.
- ☐ They have a development plan mapped to the eight competencies, not a vague ‘high-potential’ tag.
- ☐ There is a named second person, because a bench of one is a single point of failure with a plan.

TIEM0C0EWCKEMGMC MCTM0XN(O6CKD MNXM O TMWL—EWE(

- ☐ At least one feeder-pool member is in an active development rotation across all four domains, now.
- ☐ That rotation includes a real work-redesign with a real P&L — not a shadow or training project.
- ☐ The assessment gate is a demonstration against a standard, not a course completion or an interview.
- ☐ I have personally moved at least one person measurably along the pipeline in the last year.

TIEMWNN0MGMPCWWMCTM OXVCVEMBNO

- ☐ Developing successors is in my own objectives, weighted, and reviewed — not implied goodwill.
- ☐ The person most likely to be seated next has themselves started developing someone behind them.
- ☐ If I were promoted out tomorrow, the pipeline would continue without me re-architecting it.
- ☐ The board has seen the bench, by name, against the competency standard — not just been told it exists.

TIEM 6NXCKDMXOWE

The first item of the first group is the whole test: a name, today, not a process that would eventually produce one. If you cannot say the name, the role is a single point of failure regardless of how well it is performing — and every unchecked box below it is a reason the name does not yet exist. Fix the reasons in order.

What ‘certified’ must actually mean.

Same four-level scale as the series. ‘Certified’ is the Operating column — demonstrated, not attended.

Certification is the gate the whole pipeline exists to make meaningful. The standard is strict by design: the Started column is what a course produces; the Operating column — the certification bar — is what a supervised real engagement produces. Leading is the master practitioner who has closed the loop by certifying someone else.

Competency	Started — attended	Operating — the certification bar	Leading — master
Workforce Architecture	Read a redesign	Ran a supervised redesign	Owned an end-to-end redesign with measured P&L
Workforce Strategy	Read a workforce plan	Authored a 24-month workforce strategy	Defended a workforce strategy at the board, against revisions
Workforce Orchestration	Understands the loop	Ran one quarter of it	Sustained the loop through a decay risk, with evidence
Technical Fluency	Used AI tools; can name the four failure modes	Owned an agent of record; ran a pre-mortem	Evaluated, overrode, and retired agents on judgment; detected a live failure mode early and corrected it
Financial Acumen	Knows the vocabulary; observed a board line	Co-authored a scorecard line; presented one board line, debriefed	Co-signed a number with a CFO, defended to a board; owns a standing board line, acceptance minuted
Competitive Intelligence	Reads industry coverage	Maintains a quarterly competitor brief	Translated an industry shift into a workforce move adopted by leadership
Human-Centered Leadership	Mentored informally; led one workforce announcement	Ran one development rotation; ran one role-displacement program with named outcomes	Moved a successor to certified — the loop closed; sustained dignity through a hard transition, with worker voice intact
Governance, Ethics & Risk	Knows the regimes	Ran a register element	Right-sized risk under audit without findings

READING THE STANDARD

A certificate that attests to the Started column is the credential inflation this paper exists to prevent. ‘Certified’ means every row at Operating — demonstrated on a real engagement, verified by a seated CWO. The last row is the one that makes it a profession: you are not Leading until someone you developed is themselves certified.

6WN CKD

A profession outlives its first practitioners.

Seven papers built and defended a role. This one answered the question that decides whether any of it matters in five years: where does the next one come from? A role that can only be filled by the rare accident who already holds all four domains is not a structure — it is a streak. Streaks end.

The pipeline is what converts the streak into a structure. A feeder pool that already exists. A development path drawn straight from the series' own doctrine. An assessment gate that certifies demonstrated competence, not attendance. A build-by-default discipline. And the loop that makes it permanent — the seated develop the next, or the whole thing was a one-generation event. The eighth competency is succession precisely because a profession that does not reproduce itself is just a job that several people happened to be good at.

Find a person and you have filled a seat. Build a pipeline and you have created a profession that no longer needs you to have been there.

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TIEMXE OE T

Run the first line of Appendix A right now: name your successor, out loud, today. If you can, run the rest to find what is missing. If you cannot, you have just discovered that the most-defended role in your organization has no pipeline — and that is a more urgent finding than anything in the previous seven papers, because it means everything they built ends with you.

SHRM
BETTER WORKPLACES BETTER WORLD™

CWO
SHRM·EN
2026

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The Mid-Market &

Small-Org Playbook.

The actions are scale-agnostic; the implementation is not. The role at 50, 500, and 5,000 people — without the enterprise apparatus.

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CWO
SHRM·EN
2026

0OFWC6LTCNK

The Mid-Market & Small-Org Playbook.

The same role, without the enterprise scaffolding.

EXCE	SHRM Executive Network — 2026 Series on the Evolution of the People Function · Paper Nine
E—CTCNK	v1.0 — May 2026
2NX·LT	Scale paper with a three-tier comparison matrix, a minimum-viable-CWO model, and a scale-fit assessment
LO—CEK6E	HR leaders at 50- to 5,000-person organizations who read the first eight papers and thought ‘not at our size.’
6N·0LKCNK	Ninth in the series. Paper Two’s Q&A flagged that the actions are scale-agnostic and the implementation is not. This is that paper.

NKM 6LWEMFLK—

The 50 / 500 / 5,000 bands are illustrative anchors, not thresholds. The argument is about operating reality at different sizes, not headcount triggers. A 300-person firm with high AI intensity may operate like the 500 column; a 1,200-person traditional firm like the 500 column too. Read the column that matches the work, not the count.

6NKTEKT

Inside this paper.

Two movements: the role across scales, then the smallest version that still works.

(**Foreword** *The objection this series kept earning*

(**Executive Summary** *Scale-agnostic actions, scale-bound apparatus*

H1 **The Scale Matrix** *The role at 50, 500, and 5,000*

HS **The Minimum Viable CWO** *The three actions that carry 80%*

HB **What You Do Not Build Yet** *The enterprise apparatus you can skip*

HG **The Invariant** *What is identical at every scale*

L **The Scale-Fit Assessment** *Which column are you actually in?*

F **The Right-Sized Standard** *Operating, defined per scale band*

(**Closing** *Small is not a reason; it is a route*

0 L X T M C

The Scale Question.

The role at three sizes — what changes, what does not, and the minimum viable version that still earns the name.

2NXEPNX—

The objection this series kept earning.

Eight papers, and a reader at a 400-person company has been quietly thinking the same thing the whole time.

There is a sentence the first eight papers earned, fairly, from a large share of their readers: ‘this is clearly written for companies far bigger than mine.’ The board cadences, the CFO compact, the governance operating model, the talent pipeline — all of it reads like enterprise machinery. For an HR leader at fifty or five hundred people, the natural conclusion is that the role is real but not yet theirs.

That conclusion is half right, and the half that is wrong is the expensive half. The apparatus is enterprise-scale. The role is not. Paper Two’s own Q&A said it plainly: the ten actions are scale-agnostic; the implementation is scale-dependent. Eight papers later, that sentence has been owed a full treatment. A fifty-person company does not need a board cadence — it needs someone holding all four domains in their head, and at fifty people that is probably the same someone reading this sentence.

Small is not a reason the role does not apply. It is a different route to the same role.

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This paper resolves the scale objection completely. It shows the role at three sizes side by side, isolates the three actions that carry most of the value when you cannot do all ten, names explicitly the enterprise apparatus you should not build yet, and ends on the part that does not change at any size — because the invariant is the whole point, and everything else is just how much scaffolding the invariant happens to need.

EDE6OTCVEM O··LX)

Scale-agnostic actions, scale-bound apparatus.

Why ‘we are too small for this’ is the most expensive misreading of the entire series.

The reader this paper is for has already decided the role is real and concluded it is not yet theirs. That second conclusion is the costly one: it cedes the most contextual, hardest-to-hire role in the organization to a competitor who realized it scales down. The actions never required the apparatus. The apparatus was always just the actions, instrumented for size.

TIC M0L0EXMLX’OE M2CVEMTICK’

01 **The actions are scale-agnostic.**

All ten apply at fifty people and fifty thousand. What changes is how much apparatus each one requires.

02 **Three actions carry 80% at small scale.**

Define literacy, audit the tradeoffs, change the interview. The other seven are real but lower-leverage when small.

03 **Most enterprise apparatus is skippable.**

Board cadences, written compacts, full pipelines — these are 5,000-person instruments. Building them at 50 is the mistake.

04 **The title matters least where the org is smallest.**

At fifty people, nobody is debating titles. The mandate is held or it is not. Hold it.

05 **The invariant is identical at every scale.**

Someone holds all four domains; work is architected, not administered; the number is owned. That never shrinks.

TIEMFNTTN·MWCKE

At fifty people the Chief Work Officer is one person holding four domains and doing three of the ten actions well. At five thousand it is a function with a compact, a pipeline, and a governance model. It is the same role. The small version is not a lesser one — it is the role without scaffolding it does not yet need. Building the scaffolding before you need it is the only scale mistake that matters.

INPMTNMXEL—MTIC M0L0EX

Part I is the scale matrix, the minimum viable version, what to skip, and the invariant. Part II is the instrument: a scale-fit assessment to find which column you are actually in, and a right-sized standard so ‘Operating’ means something different — correctly — at each size.

E6TCNKMH1M(MTIEM 6LWEM·LTXCD

The role at 50, 500, and 5,000.

Read across each row. The element never disappears — it changes how much apparatus it needs.

The role at three scales · the actions are scale-agnostic; the implementation is not

	~50 PEOPLE one person holds all four domains	~500 PEOPLE a small team; mandate is explicit	~5,000+ PEOPLE a function; pipeline and the compact
Actions	3 of 10 carry 80% of value	all 10, but light-touch	all 10, full instrumentation
Title	irrelevant — hold the mandate	explicit mandate, maybe not the title	formal title + 4-domain mandate
The CFO	you ARE the budget conversation	one meeting, one number	the written compact (Paper 5)
Governance	the durable standard, one page	standard + named owners	full operating model (Paper 6)
Pipeline	successor = the owner's backup	one named bench candidate	the full funnel (Paper 8)

INVARIANT AT EVERY SCALE: someone holds all four domains · the work is architected, not administered · the number is owned

Read the matrix row by row, not column by column. Every row exists at every scale — actions, title, the CFO, governance, pipeline. None of them is enterprise-only. What scales is the instrumentation: at fifty people the CFO conversation is you doing the budget; at five thousand it is the written compact of Paper Five. Same element, same purpose, radically different apparatus. The navy band underneath is the part that does not move at all.

The columns are not maturity levels. A fifty-person company running the left column well is not an immature version of the right column. It is the correct implementation for its scale. Building the right column at fifty people is not ambitious — it is the failure mode Paper Seven would call governed-to-a-standstill, arriving early.

The three actions that carry 80%.

When you cannot do all ten, these three are not a starter set — they are where the value actually concentrates at small scale.

Paper Two’s Q&A named these three under pressure. This is the full argument for why — not that the other seven do not matter, but that their leverage is lower until scale arrives, and a small organization spending equally on all ten is mis-allocating its scarcest resource: the one person’s attention.

01

Action 1 — Define AI literacy

At fifty or five hundred people there is no training department to hide ambiguity inside. One published page — what everyone must know, what each role must do, what no one does unaided — is the highest-leverage hour the role can spend, and it costs nothing but clarity.

02

Action 4 — Audit the tradeoffs

A small organization cannot afford to silently lose a critical capability to delegation — there is no bench absorbing the loss. Tagging the top five competencies per critical role as Human-Required, AI-Augmented, or AI-Delegated is not a planning exercise here; it is the difference between resilient and brittle.

03

Action 5 — Change the interview

Every hire is a larger fraction of the organization. A skillfishing miss at fifty people is two percent of the workforce; the same miss at fifty thousand is a rounding error. The live, AI-permitted task scored on prompts and corrections is the action whose value is most concentrated by smallness.

> PI)MKNTMLWWMTEK
>
> The other seven actions are not wrong at small scale — they are lower-leverage. Board literacy with no board, a written CFO compact when you are the CFO conversation, a talent pipeline at fifty people: these are real actions instrumented for an apparatus that does not exist yet. Do the three that compound now. Add the rest as the apparatus arrives.

The enterprise apparatus you can skip.

The discipline of the small-org playbook is not what you do. It is what you correctly refuse to do early.

Every paper in this series introduced an instrument. At enterprise scale they are load-bearing. At fifty or five hundred people, building them early is not diligence — it is the over-governance failure mode arriving before the role can even compound. Three you explicitly defer.

TIEMFNLX—M6L—EK6EM 0L0EXMG M(M—E2EX

A quarterly hands-on board working session assumes a board that governs AI risk. Below ~500 people, the ‘board’ is often the founder and an investor. Replace the cadence with a single quarterly written page to whoever holds capital. Same forcing function, no theater.

TIEMPXCTTEKM6N·0L6TM 0L0EXM M(M—E2EX

A signed CWO–CFO compact assumes two distinct executives. When the same person owns people and budget — common below 500 — the compact is an internal discipline, not a co-signature. Keep the number; skip the ceremony until there are two chairs to sign it.

TIEM2OWWM0C0EWCKEM 0L0EXM M(M—E2EX

A feeder-to-seated funnel assumes a feeder pool. At fifty people the entire pipeline is one sentence: who runs this if you are hit by a bus? Name that person. That is the whole of succession at small scale, and it is sufficient until it is not.

Deferring is not skipping forever. Each deferred instrument has a scale trigger — the board cadence when a real board forms, the compact when finance separates from people, the pipeline when the feeder pool exists. Defer with the trigger written down, so deferral is a decision with an expiry, not an omission you forget.

E6TCNKMHGM(MTIEMCKVLXCLKT

What is identical at every scale.

Strip away all the apparatus at every size and the same three things remain. They are the role.

Everything this paper has said is scale-dependent sits on top of three things that are not. Read them as the definition of the role with all scaffolding removed — because what survives the removal is what the role actually is.

TIEMCKVLXCLKT

One. Someone holds all four domains — humans, agents, workflows, governance — in one head or one mandate. **Two.** Work is architected, not administered: designed around the work itself, not the seat or the title. **Three.** The number is owned: workforce value is stated in the language that defends it, whoever the audience is. At fifty people or fifty thousand, remove these three and there is no Chief Work Officer — only an HR function with a new name.

Scale changes the apparatus around the role. It never changes the role. That is why the small version is not a smaller role.

1.0DS-BLTSL-1DSID1.0DTRC0 D0B0TM1.S-,D0CI0DSIDS-I1THV0-1L1SR-

This is the resolution of the scale objection, complete. The reader at four hundred people who thought the series was not for them was reading the apparatus and mistaking it for the role. The apparatus genuinely was not for them yet. The role always was — it was sitting in the invariant the entire time, waiting to be held.

L00EK—CDMLM(MTIEM 6LWE 2CTML E ·EKT

Which column are you actually in?

Most small-org leaders misjudge this — usually by building the column above the one they are in.

0WLT2NX·

This assessment is the public preview of the CWO Scale-Fit Review, sized to mid-market and small organizations through SHRM Executive Network, against the right-sized standard in Appendix B.

XEL—MTIEMPNXA MKNTMTIEMIEL—6NOKTM(MPIC6IM6NWO·KMLXEM)NOMCK

- ☐ Decisions about people, budget, and tooling currently route through one person — likely you. (→ 50 column)
- ☐ There is a small team, the mandate is named explicitly, but there is no formal board AI governance. (→ 500 column)
- ☐ There is a distinct CFO, a real board, and a feeder pool of people holding mandate pieces. (→ 5,000 column)
- ☐ Your AI intensity is high enough that you operate one column up from your headcount — read that column.

TIEM·CKC·O·MVCLFWEMTIXEEM(MLXEMTIE)M—NKE MXE'LX—WE MN2M C E

- ☐ AI literacy is published on one page — what everyone knows, each role does, no one does unaided.
- ☐ The top five competencies per critical role are tagged Human-Required / AI-Augmented / AI-Delegated.
- ☐ Final-round interviews for knowledge roles include a live, AI-permitted task scored on process, not output.
- ☐ I am not spending equally on all ten actions while these three are incomplete.

—E2EXXE—MPCTIMLMTXC''EXM(MKNTM AC00E—MLK—M2NX'NTTEK

- ☐ Each enterprise instrument I am not building has a written scale trigger and an owner who watches for it.
- ☐ The CFO discipline exists as a number even though there is no second executive to co-sign it yet.
- ☐ Succession is one named person, today — the bus question has an answer even without a pipeline.
- ☐ I can state which column I am in and which instrument I am deliberately not building, and why.

TIEM 6NXCK'MXOWE

The first group tells you your column — answer it by the work, not the org chart. The second is non-negotiable at every scale: the three actions are the role's irreducible core, and being small is not an exemption from them. The third is the discipline of deferral. The single most common small-org error is a checked box in group three's wrong direction: building the apparatus of the column above you.

Operating, defined per scale band.

‘Operating’ is not one bar. It is correctly three — and meeting the wrong column’s bar is its own failure.

The rest of the series defined one Operating bar. This paper’s correction: at small scale, Operating is a different artifact — not a weaker one. The fifty-person ‘Operating’ for the number is you holding it and stating it to whoever has capital. That is complete, not partial. The standard is meeting your column, not the rightmost one.

E	HM(MN	HHM(MN	HHHM(MN
AI literacy	One page, founder-signed	One page + per-role detail	**Versioned, per job family**
Tradeoff audit	Top 5 per critical role, owner-held	Tagged + defended in writing	**Reviewed on cadence, drives reskilling**
Interview change	Live task in final round	Scored on prompts + corrections	**Calibrated across panels**
The number	You hold it; stated to capital	One meeting, one number, an owner	**Written compact, co-signed (Paper 5)**
Governance	Durable standard, one page	Standard + named owners	**Full operating model (Paper 6)**
Succession	One named backup person	One bench candidate, dev plan	**The full funnel (Paper 8)**
The board line	One quarterly written page	Written + a standing review	**Hands-on cadence (Paper 4)**

XEL—CK’MTIEM TLK—LX—

Find your column from Appendix A and meet that column — fully. A fifty-person organization at the ~50 Operating bar across every row is exactly as ‘done’ as a five-thousand-person one at the ~5,000 bar. Reaching for the right column early is not over-achievement; it is the early arrival of Paper Seven’s third failure mode, dressed as ambition.

6WN CK’

Small is not a reason; it is a route.

Eight papers built a role that read, fairly, as enterprise machinery. This one took the machinery apart and showed what was underneath: a role that was never about size, wearing scaffolding that always was. The reader at four hundred people who set the series aside as ‘not yet ours’ was reading the scaffolding correctly and the role incorrectly.

The actions do not shrink. The invariant does not shrink. What shrinks is the apparatus — and at small scale the discipline is not building less ambitiously, it is refusing to build the apparatus before the scale that needs it arrives. Do the three actions that compound now. Hold the four domains in the one head that is available. Own the number to whoever holds the capital. Defer the rest with a trigger and a date. That is the entire small-org playbook, and it is not a lesser role — it is the same role, finally legible at the size most organizations actually are.

The role was never too big for you. The apparatus was — and the apparatus was never the role.

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TIEMXE OE T

Run Appendix A this week and name your column honestly — by the work, not the headcount. Then check the second group: are the three actions done, regardless of your size? If they are not, your size was never the reason — it was the explanation you accepted. The competitor your size who did not accept it is doing them right now.





SHSRM EXCE MMUMMTIEMEVNWOTCNKMN2MTIEM0EN0WEM2OK6TCNK

The Board's

CWO Mandate.

The capstone, written to the board. Four questions a governance committee must be able to answer — and what each 'no' costs.

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The Board’s CWO Mandate.

Written to the body that authorizes the role.

EXCE	SHRM Executive Network — 2026 Series on the Evolution of the People Function · Paper Ten · The Capstone
E—CTCNK	v1.0 — May 2026
2NX·LT	Board-facing brief. Deliberately shorter than the prior nine. A governance-committee instrument, not a position paper.
LO—CEK6E	Directors, governance and audit committee chairs, and the CEO — the body that authorizes, funds, and can end the role.
6N·0LKCNK	The capstone of the series. The prior nine were written for the CWO. This one is written about the CWO, to the board.

NKMXE(C TEX

This paper is intentionally the shortest in the series and the only one not addressed to the practitioner. It is written in the register of a governance brief: four questions, the cost of each wrong answer, and a decision the board must actually make. It assumes the prior nine but requires none of them.

6NKTEKT

Inside this brief.

Short by design. Four questions, their cost, the alternative, and a standing agenda line.

B **To the Board** *Why this one is addressed to you*

H1 **The Four Questions** *The board-level decision flow*

HS **The Cost of Each ‘No’** *What the wrong answer actually exposes*

HG **The Alternative on the Table** *Why this role, not a Chief AI Officer*

L **The Board’s Standing Agenda Line** *Four questions, every quarter*

B **Closing** *The decision is the board’s, and it is now*

TNMTIEMFNLX—

Why this one is addressed to you.

Nine papers were written for the executive who runs this. This one is written for the body that decides whether it exists.

Nine papers in this series were written for the Chief Work Officer — how to argue the role, run it, fund it, govern it, survive it, staff it, and scale it. This one is not. It is written for you: the directors, the governance and audit chairs, the CEO. The body that authorizes the role, funds it, and is the only body that can end it.

The reason for a separate, shorter brief is governance-specific. A board does not need the operating doctrine; it needs the decision. Whether your organization has a Chief Work Officer in title is not the board's question. Whether one named executive owns the architecture of how work happens — humans, agents, workflows, governance — is entirely the board's question, because the absence of that ownership is a material, unmanaged risk that currently appears in no risk register precisely because no one owns it.

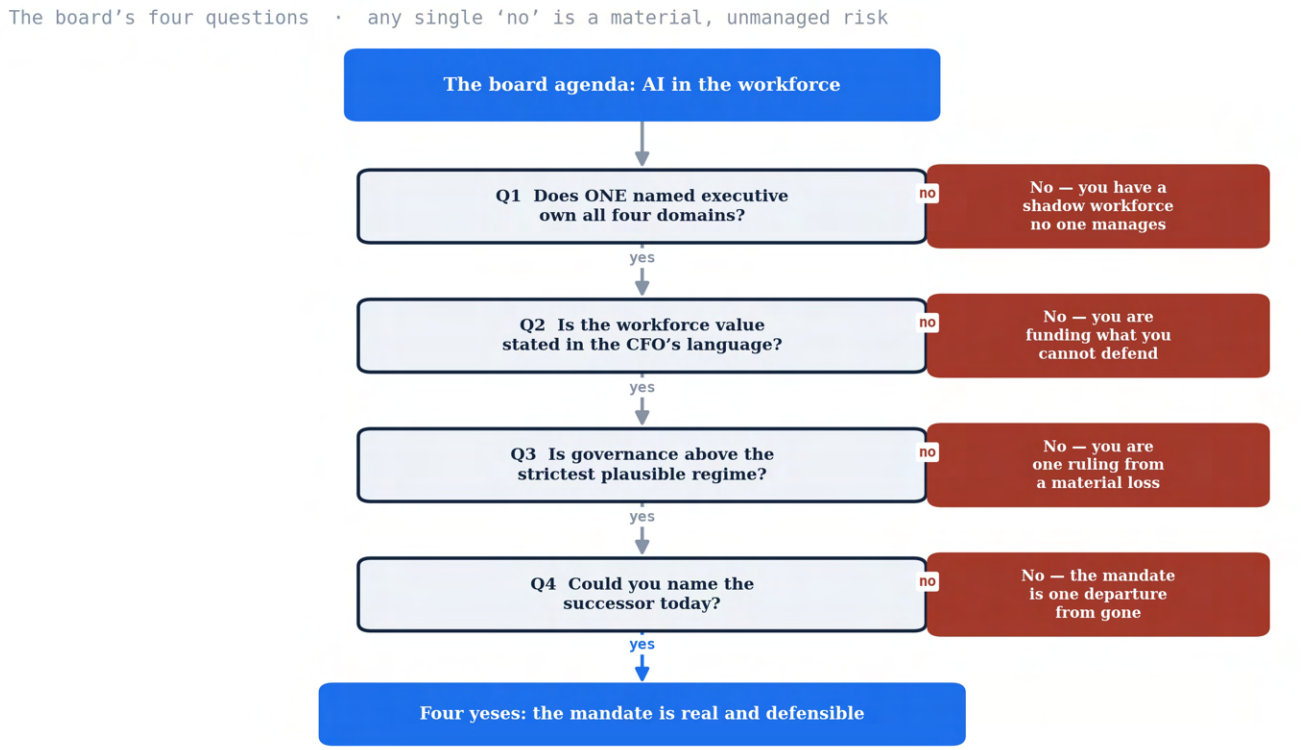
> *A risk no executive owns is a risk the board owns by default. This brief is about removing that default.*

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What follows is four questions, the specific cost of each wrong answer, the alternative the board may be weighing, and a standing agenda line. It is short on purpose. A capstone for a board is not the longest document in the series. It is the one a governance committee can act on in a single session.

The board-level decision flow.

Four questions, asked in order. Any single ‘no’ is a material risk that is currently no one’s job to manage.



These four questions are the entire series compressed to what a board must verify. Question one is ownership: does a single named executive hold all four domains, or is the work spread across a half-dozen leaders none of whom owns the whole? Question two is financial defensibility. Question three is regulatory exposure. Question four is continuity. The board does not need to know how each is achieved — that is the prior nine papers. The board needs to know whether each is true.

The order is not arbitrary. Each question is only meaningful if the prior one is answered yes. There is no point asking whether workforce value is defensible if no one owns the workforce architecture to begin with. The flow is sequential because the risks are: the ownership gap is upstream of all the others.

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What the wrong answer actually exposes.

A board does not act on questions. It acts on consequences. Here is the consequence attached to each.

01 No single owner

AI is already producing work across the organization with no named accountable executive. When it fails — a biased decision, a compliance breach, a capability quietly lost — there is no owner of record. The board absorbs a risk it never explicitly accepted, because the acceptance was never anyone’s job to make.

02 Value not in CFO language

The workforce-AI investment cannot be stated in terms the CFO can carry to the board. It survives only as long as no one asks hard. The first serious budget challenge cuts it — not because it failed, but because it could not be defended — and the capability is lost at exactly the moment it mattered.

03 Governance below the strictest regime

The regulatory landscape moved five times in twenty months. An organization governing to the current statute rather than above the strictest plausible one is exposed in every gap between versions. The cost is not theoretical: it is a single adverse ruling, fine, or works-council action away, and it lands without warning.

04 No named successor

The most-defended capability in the organization rests on one person with no named successor. A single resignation, promotion, or illness ends it. Everything the prior nine papers built evaporates not through failure but through ordinary turnover — the most foreseeable risk of all, and the least excusable to have left unmanaged.

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Every ‘no’ produces the same structural condition: a material risk that is real, foreseeable, and currently owned by no executive — which means it is owned, by default, by the board. The Chief Work Officer mandate is not an HR enhancement. It is the instrument that moves four named risks off the board’s default ledger and onto an accountable executive’s.

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Why this role, not a Chief AI Officer.

The board may be weighing a different answer to the same problem. It is worth being precise about why it is the wrong one.

Many boards are considering a Chief AI Officer instead — a technologist who owns the AI estate. It is a reasonable instinct and an incomplete one. The distinction matters at board level because the two roles manage different risks, and only one of them covers the risk the four questions expose.

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Accountable for the AI systems: the models, the platforms, the technical governance. Necessary. But the four questions are not about the technology — they are about the work, the workforce value, the human-side regulation, and the continuity of the mandate. A CAIO owns the tools. None of the four risks is a tool risk.

6ICE2MPNXAMN22C6EXMBMNPK MTIEMPNXA

Accountable for how work happens across humans and agents together: the architecture, the financial translation, the workforce regulation, the succession. The four questions are precisely this role’s domain. A board that appoints a CAIO and believes it has answered these four questions has answered a different, narrower set.

The roles are complementary, not interchangeable. The mature answer is usually both, with a clear split: the CAIO owns the systems, the CWO owns the work those systems do alongside humans. The error the board must avoid is appointing the technologist, checking the AI-governance box, and leaving all four of these risks exactly where they were — unowned, and therefore the board’s.

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Four questions, every quarter.

Not a one-time decision. A standing governance line, asked at the same cadence as any other material risk.

The four questions are not a one-time gate the board clears and forgets. They are a standing agenda line, owned by the governance or audit committee, asked every quarter of the responsible executive, with the answer minuted — because a risk verified once and never re-checked is a risk being managed by assumption.

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- ☐ Q1 — Is there a single named executive who owns all four domains, in fact, this quarter? Name them in the minutes.
- ☐ Q2 — Can the workforce-AI value be stated in the CFO’s language, defensibly, without the responsible executive in the room?
- ☐ Q3 — Is governance above the strictest plausible regime we touch — not merely compliant with the one currently in force?
- ☐ Q4 — Could we name the successor today? Not ‘do we have a process’ — the name, in the minutes.

PI M·CKOTEMTIEMLK PEX MKNTMTIEM—C 6O CNK

A discussion that is minuted as ‘the committee reviewed AI workforce risk’ is not governance — it is the appearance of it. Minute the four answers specifically: the name, the defensibility, the regulatory posture, the successor. A board that can produce four minuted answers per quarter has discharged the duty. One that produces a paragraph about having discussed it has not, and will discover the difference at exactly the wrong moment.

0WLT2NX·

This standing line is the public preview of the CWO Board Governance Review, facilitated with the governance committee through SHRM Executive Network across the full series’ standards.

6WN CK(

The decision is the board’s, and it is now.

Ten papers. The first nine built, defended, executed, governed, stress-tested, staffed, and scaled a role. This one reduced all of it to the only thing a board must actually do with it: answer four questions, accept the cost of any ‘no,’ and decide — not whether the technology matters, which is settled, but whether one named executive owns the work it does alongside your people, or whether that risk continues to sit, unowned, on the board’s default ledger.

The series’ first paper argued the role must exist. Its capstone makes the narrower, sharper claim the board actually needs: the role’s absence is not a missed opportunity — it is an unmanaged material risk, foreseeable in four specific ways, currently owned by no one and therefore by you. That is not an HR matter the board notes. It is a governance matter the board decides. The cost of deferring the decision is not zero; it is the four costs in Section 02, accruing quietly, until one of them does not.

The technology question is settled. The only open question is who owns the work it does — and until the board answers it, the answer is the board.

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Add the Appendix A line to the next governance or audit committee agenda. Ask the four questions of the responsible executive. Minute the four answers — the name, the defensibility, the regulatory posture, the successor. If any answer is ‘no,’ the board has found a material, unmanaged risk while it is still cheap to assign. If all four are ‘yes,’ the board has, for the first time, explicitly governed a risk it was previously carrying by default. Either outcome is the board doing its job. Not asking is the only outcome that is not.

SHRM BETTER WORKPLACES BETTER WORLD™

CWO SHRM·EN 2026

SHSRM EXCE MUMTIEMVENW MOCEKMUMV2N C06MON2PLE

The CEO's Bet:

The Hire You Make *Personally.*

The board authorizes the role. The CEO owns it. Why this is the one C-suite decision a chief executive cannot delegate — and what they must personally do for it to work.



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The CEO’s Bet.

The hire you make personally.

EXCE	SHRM Executive Network — 2026 Series · The CEO’s View · Paper Eleven (Closing Volume)
EBCTCN0	v1.0 — May 2026
—NXL·T	CEO-facing brief opening the closing volume. A decision paper, not an operating one.
·PBCE0VE	The chief executive personally — not the CHRO, not the board. The one who carries the bet.
VNLD·0CN0	Opens the five-paper closing volume. Paper Ten spoke to the board; this speaks to the CEO who must act on the board’s authorization.

N0MTIEMV2N C06MON2PLE

Papers One through Ten built, defended, and stress-tested the role. This volume — Papers Eleven through Fifteen — is written from the chief executive’s chair: the personal bet, how to judge it, why it becomes strategy, how it remakes the business, and the ending in which it succeeds so completely it disappears.

VN0TE0T

Inside this brief.

Short by design, like the board capstone. The decision, the actions, the signal.

G **To the Chief Executive** *Why this one is yours*

H. **The Delegation Trap** *What you cannot hand to the CHRO*

HS **The Five Things Only You Can Do** *The CEO’s irreducible actions*

H) **The Signal the Hire Sends** *What the organization reads from it*

· **The CEO’s Pre-Commitment Checklist** *Before you make the bet*

G **Closing** *The bet is placed the day you hire, not the day it works*

TNMTIEMVICE—MEAEVPTCOE

Why this one is yours.

Ten papers were written for the executive who runs this and the board that authorizes it. This one is written for you, who bets on it.

Ten papers in this series spoke to the Chief Work Officer or to the board. This one speaks only to you. Not because the prior ten do not matter — they are the operating substance — but because there is one decision inside all of them that is structurally yours, cannot be delegated, and is most often lost precisely by being delegated without anyone noticing.

The board authorizes the role; you have read Paper Ten and the board has done its part. But authorization is not commitment. The board can create a seat. Only the chief executive can make it real — by personally owning the scope, the peer authority, the framing, and the credibility staked on it. A CWO appointed by a CEO who delegated all of that to the CHRO is a title the organization correctly reads as optional.

The board decides whether the seat exists. You decide whether it has power. Those are different decisions, and only the second one is a bet.

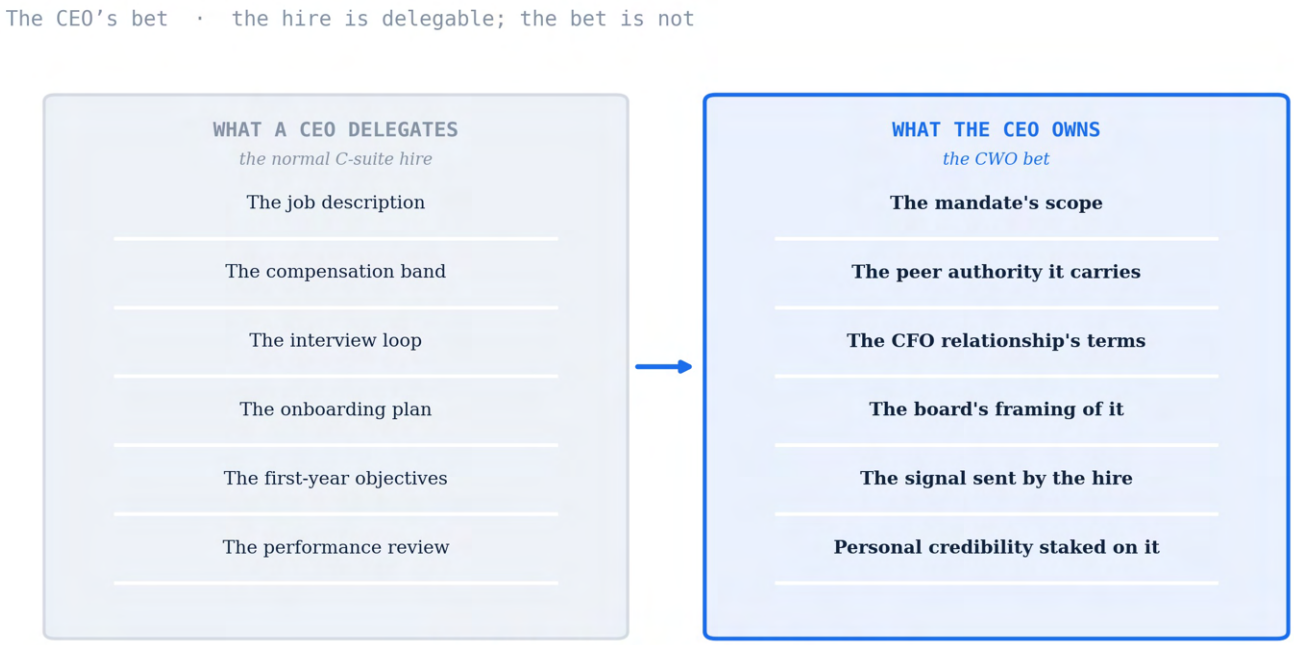
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This brief is deliberately short, like the board capstone it follows. It names what you cannot delegate, the five things only you can do, and the signal the hire sends whether you intend it or not. It assumes the prior ten papers but requires none of them. It requires only that you understand the bet is placed the day you hire — not the day it pays off.

What you cannot hand to the CHRO.

Most of a C-suite hire is correctly delegated. The part that decides whether this one works is the part most CEOs delegate by reflex.

A normal executive hire is a delegation success: you set the mandate, and the machinery — job spec, comp, interviews, onboarding, objectives — runs without you. The Chief Work Officer hire breaks that pattern. The delegable parts are real but inert. The parts that determine the outcome are the parts a CEO cannot hand off without handing off the bet itself.



Delegating the right column is the most common way a CEO loses the bet without ever deciding to.

The trap is invisible because each delegation is individually reasonable. No CEO decides to lose the bet. They delegate the job spec (reasonable), then the comp band (reasonable), then — without a separate decision — the mandate scope, the peer authority, the CFO terms, and the board framing go with it, because they were never explicitly pulled back. The bet is lost in the right column, one reasonable delegation at a time.

The five things only you can do.

Everything else about the hire is delegable. These five are the bet, and they have your name on them.

H. Set the mandate scope yourself, in one sentence.

Not the job description — the scope. ‘This executive owns how work happens across humans and machines, with veto over workforce-affecting AI investment.’ If the CHRO writes that sentence, the CHRO owns the bet. You must write it, say it aloud, and repeat it unprompted.

HS Confer the peer authority in public.

Authority a CEO grants privately is authority the C-suite privately ignores. The CFO, the CIO, the COO must hear you place this role at their level, from your mouth, in a room with all of them in it. Org-chart placement is necessary and insufficient; the spoken peerage is the actual grant.

H) Personally broker the CFO relationship.

Paper Five made the CWO–CFO compact the role’s survival condition. You cannot delegate its founding. The first conversation in which the CFO agrees to co-own a number must have you in the room, because the CFO is agreeing to it for you, not to the CWO.

H’ Frame it to the board in your own words.

The board authorized a role. How it is framed thereafter — strategic bet or HR upgrade — is set by how the CEO refers to it in board settings. Every time you describe it as a people-function improvement, you instruct the board to fund it like one.

H Stake your own credibility, visibly.

The organization calculates the real priority of any initiative from one variable: what the CEO has personally attached their name to. A CWO the CEO mentions is interesting. A CWO whose success the CEO has publicly tied to their own is real. There is no delegated substitute for this, and the organization is never fooled.

KI MEA·VT2 M—COE

Each corresponds to a way the role structurally fails in Paper Seven — unclear scope, no peer authority, the lost CFO, the wrong board framing, and a launch with no sustained sponsorship. The five are not a leadership style. They are the five failure modes, pre-empted by the only person who can pre-empt them.

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What the organization reads from it.

You are sending a signal whether or not you intend to. The only choice is whether you author it or let it author itself.

The moment a Chief Work Officer is named, every person in the organization runs the same calculation: is this real, or is this theater? They do not answer it from the press release. They answer it from a small number of observable facts the CEO controls entirely — and if the CEO does not author the signal deliberately, the organization will infer one anyway, usually the cynical one, because the cynical reading is rarely punished.

> TIEM C60·2MTIEMNX6·0C ·TCN0M·VTP·22 MXE·B
>
> Who the CWO reports to. Whether the CEO says the mandate sentence unprompted. Whether the CFO visibly co-owns a number. Whether the role survives its first budget pressure with the CEO’s name still on it. These four facts are the entire message; the announcement is noise around them.

You cannot choose whether the hire sends a signal. You can only choose whether you wrote it.

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This is the whole of the CEO’s bet, compressed: the role’s power is not granted by the org chart, the title, or the board resolution. It is granted by what the organization observes the chief executive personally do in the first ninety days after the hire — and withdrawn, permanently and almost irreversibly, by what they observe the chief executive decline to do.

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Before you make the bet.

Two lists. The first you run before hiring. The second is the test of whether you actually made the bet, or only announced it.

D2·T—NXL

This checklist is the public preview of the CEO's CWO Commitment Brief, delivered confidentially to the chief executive through SHRM Executive Network.

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- ☐ I can state the mandate scope in one sentence, right now, without consulting the CHRO or a document.
- ☐ I have a specific room and date in mind where I will confer the peer authority publicly, in front of the C-suite.
- ☐ I will personally be in the first CWO–CFO conversation — it is on my calendar, not delegated to either of them.
- ☐ I know exactly how I will refer to this role in the next board meeting, and it is not as a people-function upgrade.
- ☐ I am prepared to have my own name publicly attached to this role's success — and I have decided that deliberately.

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- ☐ I have said the mandate sentence, unprompted, in at least three settings the organization observed.
- ☐ The CFO has, with me present, agreed to co-own a number — not been informed that they should.
- ☐ When the first budget or political pressure hit the role, my name was still visibly on it.
- ☐ I can name the signal the organization is currently reading, and it is the one I authored, not the cynical default.

TIEM VNXC06MXP2E

The first list is a go/no-go. If you cannot check all five before hiring, you are not ready to make the bet — and a CWO hired into an unmade bet inherits a failure that was decided before their first day. The second list is run at day ninety. An unchecked box there is not the CWO's shortfall. It is yours, and it is still — barely — recoverable if you act on it as such.

V2N C06

The bet is placed the day you hire.

The board decided the seat could exist. That was Paper Ten’s subject and the board’s job. This paper has been about the decision that comes after the board’s, that only you can make, and that you are making whether or not you recognize it as a decision: not whether the role exists, but whether you personally own the four things that give it power and stake your own standing on the result.

The reason this opens the closing volume rather than sitting earlier in the series is that everything ahead of it — judging the role, elevating it to strategy, watching it remake the business, and the ending in which it dissolves into the company — is unreachable if the bet was never actually placed. The next four papers assume a CEO who made this bet deliberately. This one exists so that assumption is earned.

A CWO can survive a hard quarter. A CWO cannot survive a CEO who placed the bet and then behaved as though they had only approved a hire.

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Run Appendix A’s first list this week, alone, before any further hiring motion. If all five are honest checks, make the bet and run the second list at day ninety against yourself, not the CWO. If any of the five is not yet true, you have found the real reason the role would have failed — and you have found it while it is still only a planning gap, not a post-mortem. That is the most valuable thing this brief can do for you, and it can only do it before you hire.

SHRM BETTER WORKPLACES BETTER WORLD

CWO SHRM·EN 2026

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From the CEO's chair:

How Do I Know My CWO Is *Succeeding*?

Two dashboards reach your desk. One looks like success and measures activity. The other is harder to read and measures the bet. Telling them apart is the job.

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DP(2CV·TCN0

How Do I Know My CWO Is Succeeding?

The CEO’s test for a role that can fake its own success.

EXCE	SHRM Executive Network — 2026 Series · The CEO’s View · Paper Twelve (Closing Volume)
EBCTCN0	v1.0 — May 2026
—NXL·T	CEO-facing brief. A judgment instrument: the two dashboards, the test, and a quarterly read.
·PBCE0VE	The chief executive who made the bet in Paper Eleven and now has to evaluate it without being fooled.
VNLD·0CN0	Second in the closing volume. Paper Eleven was the bet; this is how you read whether it is paying off.

N0MTIEMTKNMB· I(N·XB

The central claim is uncomfortable: the Chief Work Officer role can produce a year of convincing activity while the actual bet fails. This brief separates the metrics that can be true while the role fails from the ones that cannot — and gives the CEO a single test to tell which dashboard they are reading.

VN0TE0T

Inside this brief.

The dashboards, the test that separates them, and a ninety-second quarterly read.

G **To the Chief Executive** *Why this role can fake it*

H. **The Two Dashboards** *Activity that looks like success*

HS **The One Test** *The CFO-without-the-CWO standard*

H) **The Quarterly Read** *Four questions, ninety seconds*

· **The CEO’s Evaluation Instrument** *Score the bet, not the activity*

G **Closing** *You are not grading effort; you are reading a bet*

TNMTIEMVICE—MEAEVPTCOE

Why this role can fake it.

Most executive roles cannot manufacture the appearance of success for a year. This one can. That is the whole problem this brief solves.

You made the bet in the prior brief. Now you have to read whether it is working — and you will be reading it through reports prepared by the person whose success they describe. That is true of every executive. What is different about the Chief Work Officer is the unusually wide gap between the activity the role generates and the value the role exists to create. The activity is loud, visible, and easy to report. The value is quiet, lagging, and easy to overstate.

A CFO cannot fake cash. A head of sales cannot fake bookings for long. But a Chief Work Officer can run a year of tool deployments, training drives, pilots, hackathons, and town-hall enthusiasm — every one of them real — while the bet you actually placed in Paper Eleven quietly fails. Not through deception. Through the natural human tendency to report the dashboard that is easiest to make look good, and the natural executive tendency to accept it because it is the one that is legible.

> *The danger is not a CWO who lies to you. It is a CWO who shows you the true dashboard that happens to be measuring the wrong thing.*

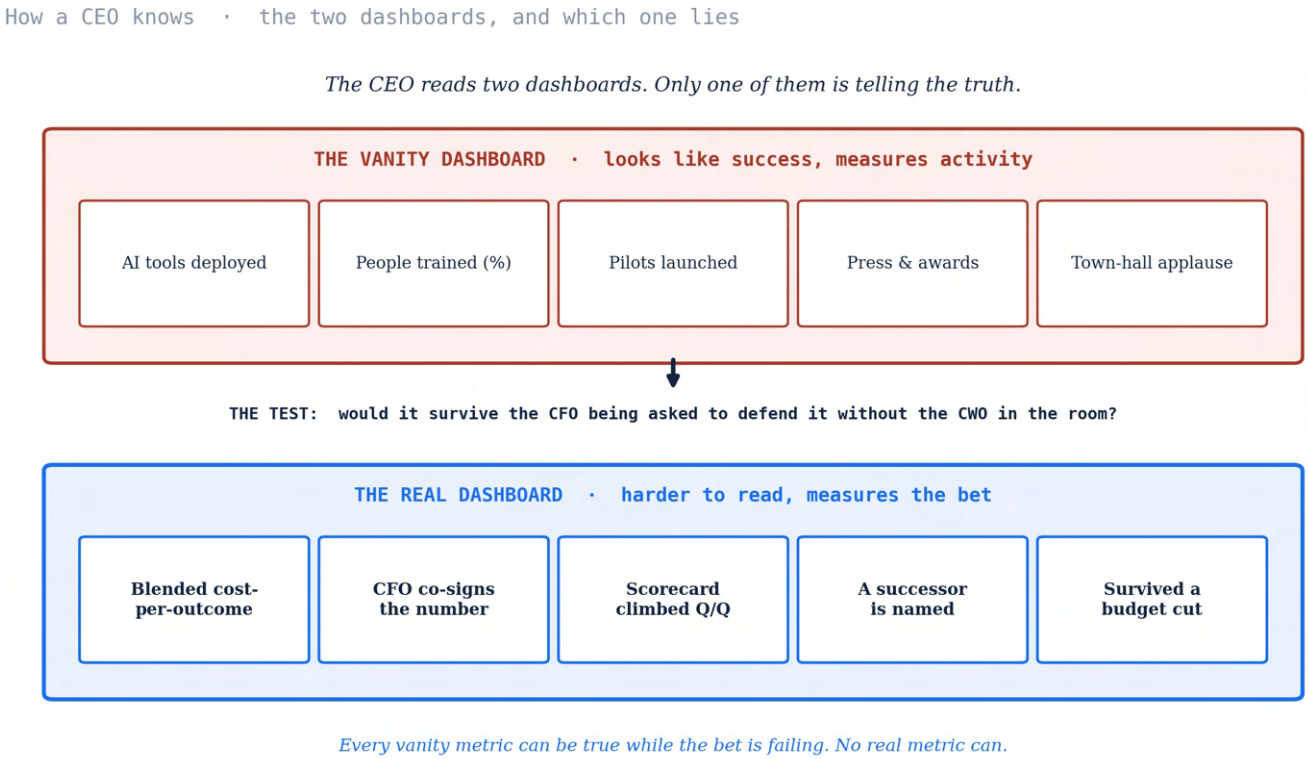
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This brief gives you the other dashboard and the single test that tells you which one you are looking at. It is short. The skill it teaches is not analytical — it is the discipline of refusing the legible answer when the legible answer is not the answer to the question you actually asked.

Activity that looks like success.

Both dashboards are true. Only one of them is an answer to the question you are actually asking.

Every quarter, two dashboards are available to you. The first is offered; the second must be demanded. The first is not false — that is what makes it dangerous. Every metric on it can be simultaneously accurate and irrelevant to whether the bet is paying off.



The vanity dashboard is not a trick. It is a comfort. No one constructs it to deceive you. It assembles itself, because every metric on it is easy to produce, easy to report, and easy for you to accept — and because asking for the lower dashboard is harder for everyone, including you. The role does not fake success. The reporting gravity of the organization fakes it on the role's behalf, unless you actively resist it.

EVTCN0MHSMGMTIEMN0EMTE T

The CFO-without-the-CWO standard.

You do not need to learn the lower dashboard’s metrics. You need one question that sorts every metric into the right dashboard for you.

You are a chief executive, not a workforce-economics analyst. You do not have time to audit blended cost-per-outcome models. You do not need to. There is a single test that does the sorting, and it is the same test Paper Five built the CFO compact around — repurposed here as your personal evaluation lens.

> TIEMTE T
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> Take any claim of success the CWO presents. Ask: would this survive the CFO being asked, by the board, to defend it — with the CWO not in the room? If yes, it belongs on the real dashboard and you may believe it. If it needs the CWO present to hold up, it is activity, not value, and it tells you nothing about the bet.

You are not evaluating the CWO’s work. You are evaluating whether the CWO’s work survives the CWO’s absence.

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This is why the CWO–CFO compact from Paper Five is not merely an operating mechanism — it is your evaluation instrument. A CWO who has genuinely succeeded has a CFO who will defend the number without them. A CWO who has only been busy has a CFO who, asked the same question, looks toward the door the CWO just left through. You do not have to run the model. You only have to watch where the CFO looks.

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Four questions, ninety seconds.

You do not need a quarterly deck. You need four answers, and you need them in the CFO’s voice, not the CWO’s.

The evaluation does not require a longer review. It requires a shorter, harder one. Four questions, asked every quarter, answered in under two minutes, with the CFO — not the CWO — giving at least two of the answers.

01

Did the number move, and does the CFO own that claim?

Not ‘what did we do’ — did blended cost-per-outcome or the agreed productivity line move, stated by the CFO without the CWO prompting it.

02

Did the scorecard climb since last quarter?

The Paper Four maturity scorecard. Not ‘is it high’ — did it move up. Flat for two quarters is the decay signal, not a plateau.

03

Could the CWO name a successor today?

Paper Eight’s test, asked by you, directly, to the CWO’s face. A name, now — not a process. No name means the bet is one departure from gone.

04

Did anything survive a real budget or political test?

A success that has never been pressured has not been tested. Name the specific pressure the role took this quarter and survived with your name still on it.

KI MTIEMV—NM·0 KEX MTKNMN—M—NPX

If the CWO answers all four, you are reading the upper dashboard in the CWO’s voice. Questions one and four must come from the CFO, unprompted and in their own words. The instrument is not the four questions. It is who is permitted to answer them.

·DDE0BCAM·MGMTIEMVENW MEO·2P·TCN0MC0 TXPLE0T

Score the bet, not the activity.

Two lists. The first checks whether you are reading the truthful dashboard. The second checks what it actually says.

D2·T—NXL

This instrument is the public preview of the CEO's Quarterly CWO Read, run confidentially with the chief executive and CFO together through SHRM Executive Network.

TIEMB· I(N·XBMBC VCD2C0EMGM·LMCMXE·BC06MTIEMXC6ITMN0E

- ☐ I have, in writing, the lower dashboard's four metrics — not the activity report I am usually handed.
- ☐ I applied the one test to every success claim this quarter: would it survive the CFO defending it without the CWO present?
- ☐ At least two of my four quarterly answers came from the CFO, unprompted, in the CFO's own words.
- ☐ I noticed and named at least one vanity metric I was being invited to accept as proof this quarter.

TIEM(ET M0NTMTIEME——NXTMGM·LMCM6X·BC06MTIEMXC6ITMTIC06

- ☐ The number moved, and the CFO — not the CWO — stated that it did and owns the claim.
- ☐ The maturity scorecard climbed versus last quarter, with evidence, not narrative.
- ☐ The CWO named a successor to my face this quarter — a person, today, not a development process.
- ☐ The role took a real budget or political pressure this quarter and survived it with my name still on it.
- ☐ If every answer above is no, I am treating that as my finding about the bet — not as the CWO needing more time.

TIEM VNXC06MXP2E

The first list is about your discipline, not the CWO's performance — if you cannot check it, you are being managed by the reporting gravity of your own organization. The second list is the bet. Four checks is a paying bet. Two is a bet in trouble you can still act on. Zero, accepted as 'needs more time,' is the precise moment Paper Seven's slow failure becomes irreversible — and the only person positioned to catch it there is you.

V2N C06

You are not grading effort.

This brief gave you one capability: the ability to tell, in a single quarterly review, whether the bet you made in Paper Eleven is paying off or merely generating convincing activity. The capability is not analytical sophistication. It is the discipline to demand the dashboard that is harder to produce and to refuse the one that is easier to accept, every quarter, when the easier one is right there and looks fine.

The reason this brief is short is that the failure it prevents is not complex. It is simply that busy chief executives accept legible answers to questions they did not quite ask, from people whose success those answers describe. The Chief Work Officer role is unusually capable of generating those legible answers. You are the only person in the organization whose job it is to not accept them — and the only one with nothing to lose by asking the harder question, because the bet on your desk is yours.

The CWO can show you a true dashboard that answers the wrong question. Only you can insist on the one that answers yours.

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Run Appendix A's first list before you accept any CWO review — it takes two minutes and it determines whether the next hour means anything. Then run the second list, and let the CFO answer questions one and four in their own voice. Four checks: say so, out loud, to the CWO — earned confidence is itself a tool. Fewer: you have found the truth while it is still actionable, which is the entire reason a chief executive evaluates anything personally instead of reading the deck.

SHRM BETTER WORKPLACES BETTER WORLD™

CWO SHRM·EN 2026

SHSRM EXCE MUMTIEMVENW MOCEKMUMV2N C06MON2PLE

From the CEO's chair:

The CWO Is My New *Strategy* Officer.

Strategy did not get a new owner. The strategic question moved — to which work should exist, who does it, and how fast it can change. The CWO was already standing there.

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CWO
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The CWO Is My New Strategy Officer.

When work design became the strategic question.

EXCE	SHRM Executive Network — 2026 Series · The CEO’s View · Paper Thirteen (Closing Volume)
EBCTCN0	v1.0 — May 2026
—NXL·T	CEO-facing brief. An elevation argument: why the strategic question relocated, and what the CEO does about it.
·PBCE0VE	The chief executive deciding where strategy actually lives now — and who, in practice, already owns it.
VNLD·0CN0	Third in the closing volume. You bet on the role, learned to judge it; this is why you now route strategy through it.

N0MTIEMV2·CL

The title is deliberately provocative and the argument is deliberately narrow: not that the CWO should be given strategy as a reward, but that the strategic question has structurally relocated into the CWO’s existing domain, and the only decision left to the CEO is whether to recognize that explicitly or let it remain unowned.

VN0TE0T

Inside this brief.

Where strategy lived, the assumption that broke, and what you do once it has moved.

G **To the Chief Executive** *Strategy already moved*

H. **Where Strategy Used to Live** *The plan, and its fixed assumption*

HS **The Assumption That Broke** *When execution capacity stopped being fixed*

H) **What the CEO Does About It** *Recognize it, or leave it unowned*

· **The Strategy-Relocation Assessment** *Where does strategy actually live here?*

G **Closing** *Do not promote the CWO; recognize where strategy went*

TNMTIEMVICE—MEAEVPTCOE

Strategy already moved.

This brief is not a proposal to give the CWO strategy. It is a description of where strategy already is, and a question about whether you have noticed.

Strategy, for most of its history as a discipline, answered one question: given roughly fixed execution capacity, where should we point it? Markets, positioning, the three-year plan, the annual offsite, the deck. All of it rested on a quiet assumption so durable that no one stated it: the work the strategy named would be done by roughly the people you had, at roughly the speed they worked.

That assumption is gone. When execution capacity stopped being fixed — when the question of which work exists, whether a human or a machine does it, and how fast the whole configuration can be re-pointed became live and continuous — the strategic question did not disappear. It relocated. It moved out of the planning function and into the domain of whoever owns the architecture of work. In your organization, if Papers One through Twelve have been followed, that person already exists and already has a title. It is not Chief Strategy Officer.

> *Strategy did not get a new owner by promotion. The strategic question moved to where the CWO was already standing.*
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This brief makes that relocation explicit and asks you to make one decision about it. Not whether to elevate the CWO — elevation framing misses the point. The decision is whether to recognize, in how you run strategy, that the question has already moved — or to leave the most consequential question in the company being answered by a function that no longer holds its inputs.

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The plan, and its fixed assumption.

Classical strategy was brilliant at one question and silently dependent on one assumption it never had to examine.

For decades strategy was a planning discipline, and a good one. It analyzed markets, chose positioning, allocated capital, and produced a plan others executed. It worked because it could take one thing as given: the execution layer. The people, their skills, their throughput, the shape of the work itself — these were the stable substrate the plan was drawn on. Strategy chose the destination; the workforce was the fixed-capability vehicle assumed to carry it.

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> Every classical strategy document contained an invisible clause: '…and the work to do this will be done by approximately the people we have, at approximately the rate they currently work.' No one wrote it because no one had to. It was the most reliable assumption in business. It is now the least.

The assumption was not wrong. It expired. Classical strategy was not a mistake — it was correctly designed for a world where execution capacity changed slowly enough to treat as constant within a planning cycle. That world ended. The discipline did not fail; its load-bearing assumption did, and everything built on top of it shifted when it went.

When execution capacity stopped being fixed.

The moment the workforce stopped being a fixed substrate, the most strategic variable in the company became the one the strategy function did not own.



Read the visual as a relocation, not an upgrade. When which work exists became a choice, when human-or-machine became a per-task decision, when the speed of re-pointing the entire configuration became a competitive variable — the highest-leverage strategic questions in the company became questions about the architecture of work. And the architecture of work is, by definition from Paper One, the Chief Work Officer's domain. Strategy did not move because someone lobbied for it. It moved because its inputs did.

The Chief Strategy Officer did not lose strategy. The inputs left the room. This is not a turf argument and should never be run as one. The classical strategy function still owns market analysis, positioning, and capital allocation — all real, all necessary. What changed is that the binding constraint on all of them is now work architecture, and that constraint is owned elsewhere. Strategy without control of its own binding constraint is planning.

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Recognize it, or leave it unowned.

You do not have a promotion decision. You have a recognition decision, and declining to make it is itself a decision with a cost.

The instinct on reading this is to consider promoting the CWO or merging two roles. That instinct is the elevation framing, and it is wrong — it treats a structural relocation as an org-chart reward. The actual decision is narrower and harder: do you run strategy as though its binding constraint is owned by the CWO, or do you continue running it as though the old fixed-capacity assumption still holds?

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> Strategy is run with the CWO in the room as a principal, not a presenter. The strategic plan is stress-tested against work-architecture reality before it is set, not after it fails. The CWO’s scorecard and the strategy are read as one document, because they describe one thing.

2E·OEMCTMP0NK0EB

Strategy continues to be set on the fixed-capacity assumption, then collides with work-architecture reality during execution, every cycle. The collision is attributed to ‘execution problems’ or ‘change management,’ never to the planning premise. The cost is real, recurring, and structurally mis-attributed — which is why it never gets fixed.

You are not deciding whether to elevate a person. You are deciding whether your strategy process acknowledges its own binding constraint.

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Where does strategy actually live here?

Two lists. The first detects whether the relocation has already happened to you unrecognized. The second is what recognizing it changes.

D2·T—NXL

This assessment is the public preview of the CEO’s Strategy-Relocation Review, run with the CEO, CWO, and strategy lead together through SHRM Executive Network.

KIEXEMBNE M TX·TE6’M·VTP·22’M2COEMIEXE MGMTIEMIN0E TMXE·B

- ☐ Our last strategic plan named work the organization could not actually re-point at the speed the plan assumed.
- ☐ When the plan met execution reality, the gap was attributed to ‘change management,’ not to the planning premise.
- ☐ The CWO was a presenter to the strategy process, not a principal in it — consulted, not constitutive.
- ☐ Our strategy deck and our work-architecture scorecard are two separate documents owned by two functions.

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- ☐ The CWO is in the strategy room as a principal, and the plan is stress-tested against work-architecture reality before it is set.
- ☐ ‘How fast can we re-point’ is treated as a strategic variable with an owner, not an execution detail discovered later.
- ☐ The CWO scorecard and the strategy are reviewed together, as one description of one thing.
- ☐ I have stopped mis-attributing recurring plan-versus-reality collisions to execution, and named the real cause: the fixed-capacity premise.

TIEM VNXC06MXP2E

If the first list is mostly true, the relocation has already happened in your company and you have been paying its cost while mis-attributing it — every checked box there is a strategic failure you have been filing under the wrong cause. The second list is not aspirational; it is the operational definition of having recognized where the strategic question went. You do not need to agree with the title of this paper. You need the second list to be true.

V2N C06

Do not promote the CWO.

The title of this brief is a provocation and the argument under it is not. The claim is not that the Chief Work Officer deserves strategy, or should be given it, or has earned a promotion into it. The claim is that the strategic question — the actual highest-leverage question about where the enterprise should point itself — has structurally relocated into the domain of work architecture, and that this already happened, whether or not your org chart reflects it.

So the instruction is not ‘elevate the CWO.’ Elevation is the wrong verb; it implies a favor, a sequence, a reward. The instruction is: recognize where the binding constraint on your strategy now lives, and run strategy as though that were true — because it is true, and the only variable you control is whether your process admits it or keeps paying the cost of pretending the old assumption holds. The CWO does not need a new title. Your strategy process needs to stop being drawn on a premise that expired.

The strategic question moved while the org chart stood still. Your only decision is whether the org chart ever finds out.

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Run Appendix A’s first list with your strategy lead and CWO in the same room. If most of it is true, you are not facing a promotion question — you are looking at the recurring, mis-attributed cost of a strategy process running on an expired premise. Make the second list true. Not as a reorganization. As an admission of where the most important question in your company is actually answered, and by whom it is actually answered well.

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CWO SHRM·EN 2026

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From the CEO's chair:

CWO in *Bloom*.

Redefining the entire business, not just transforming how work gets done. When the work-redesign question, asked one level further, reveals you were in a different business than you thought.

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CWO in Bloom.

The altitude where transformation becomes redefinition.

EXCE	SHRM Executive Network — 2026 Series · The CEO’s View · Paper Fourteen (Closing Volume)
EBCTCN0	v1.0 — May 2026
1NXL·T	CEO-facing brief. An ambition argument: three altitudes of the same question, and the one most companies stop below.
·PBCE0VE	The chief executive whose CWO is succeeding at transformation — and who must decide whether that is the ceiling or the floor.
VNLD·0CN0	Fourth in the closing volume. The role works; this asks how high the same question goes.

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This brief uses the well-known shift of a video-rental incumbent into streaming as an *analogy* for an altitude of ambition — not as a claim that any specific company reached it via a Chief Work Officer. The illustrative case is an explicitly labeled composite. The argument is about the altitude, not the anecdote; the streaming reference is the shape of the move, not evidence for it.

VN0TE0T

Inside this brief.

Three altitudes, a labeled composite of the highest one, and why the ceiling is self-imposed.

) **To the Chief Executive** *The question has a third floor*

HF **Three Altitudes** *Optimize, transform, redefine*

HS **The Composite: ‘Meridian’** *A labeled illustration of Altitude 3*

H’ **Why Most Stop at Two** *The ceiling is self-imposed*

· **The Altitude Assessment** *How high is your question going?*

) **Closing** *Bloom is not more ambition; it is one more question*

TNMTIEMVICE1MEAEVPTCOE

The question has a third floor.

Your CWO is succeeding at transforming how work gets done. This brief asks whether that is the achievement or merely the second of three.

By this point in the closing volume, the premise is that your bet worked. The Chief Work Officer is real, judged honestly, and the strategic question has been recognized as living in their domain. The work is being transformed. This brief asks the question that comes only after success: is transforming how the work gets done the top of the building, or the second floor of three?

There is a third altitude, and it is not reached by more ambition. It is reached by asking the same work-architecture question — what work should exist, who should do it, what is this work actually for — one level further than the transformation mandate requires. At the second altitude, the question is ‘how should this work be done?’ At the third, the same question, pushed once more, becomes ‘given what this work could now be, are we even in the business we think we are in?’ That is the question that turned a company that mailed discs into a company that defined streaming — the analogy this brief uses for the altitude, not a claim about how that company got there.

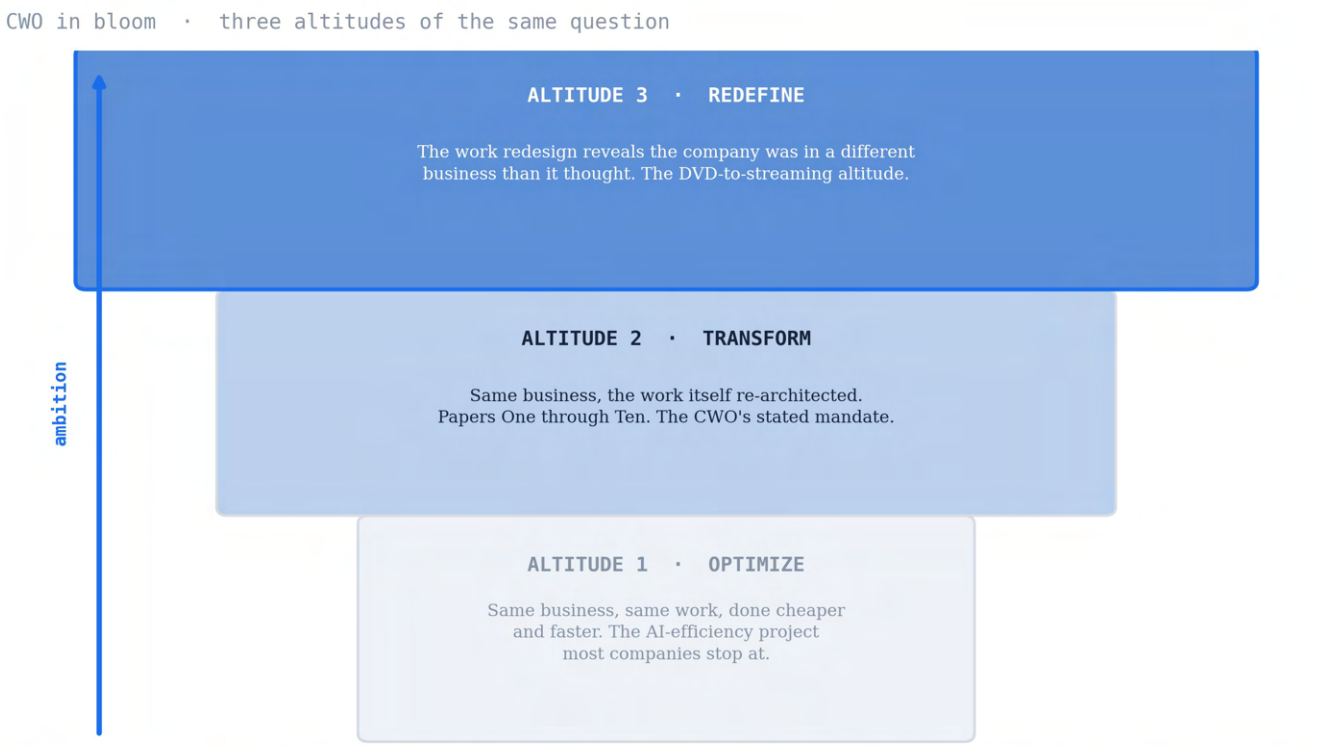
Altitude 3 is not a bigger version of Altitude 2. It is the same question, asked one floor up, by someone who did not stop where the mandate said they could.

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This brief maps the three altitudes, illustrates the third with an explicitly labeled composite (no real company is claimed to have reached it via a CWO), and explains why almost every organization installs its own ceiling at the second floor — not from lack of ambition, but from a structural habit this brief names so you can choose to break it.

Optimize, transform, redefine.

The same work-architecture question, asked at three heights, produces three completely different companies.



Most CWO mandates stop at Altitude 2. The ones that reach Altitude 3 were not more ambitious — they kept asking the same question one level further.

Altitude 1 is where most AI effort dies: same business, same work, done cheaper. Real savings, zero redefinition. Altitude 2 is the Chief Work Officer’s stated mandate and the subject of Papers One through Ten: same business, the work itself re-architected. Altitude 3 is the one without a mandate line, because no job description authorizes it: the work redesign, pushed one question further, reveals the company was solving a different problem than its industry label implied — and could now serve it differently enough to be a different business.

The altitudes are not stages you graduate through. An organization does not finish Altitude 2 and get promoted to Altitude 3. They are heights of the same question asked at the same time. A CWO at Altitude 2 who asks ‘and what is this work ultimately for?’ is, in that sentence, at Altitude 3 — the move is a question, not a milestone.

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A labeled illustration of Altitude 3.

Meridian is not a real company. It is a composite, constructed to show the shape of the third-altitude move without claiming any specific firm made it this way.

‘Meridian’ is an explicitly fictional composite — a mid-sized equipment manufacturer, used here only to make Altitude 3 concrete. No real company is being described or claimed.

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Meridian’s AI program cut quoting time and warranty-claim processing cost. Real efficiency. Same business: a company that sells equipment. The program was declared a success and nearly stopped here, as most do.

·2TCTPBEMSM)MKI·TMTIEMVKNMBCBM0EAT

The CWO re-architected the work: field-service knowledge, previously trapped in senior technicians, was decomposed and made an operating asset across the whole service organization. The work of ‘knowing how the equipment behaves’ was redesigned, not just sped up.

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Then the CWO asked: if we have just turned deep knowledge of how this equipment behaves in the field into a scalable, improving asset — what business is that, exactly? Meridian was no longer only selling equipment. It was, in substance, in the business of guaranteeing equipment *outcomes* — uptime, yield — which it could now price and sell directly. The work redesign did not improve the company. It revealed a different one. That is the streaming-altitude move, by analogy only.

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The ceiling is self-imposed.

Almost no organization is prevented from reaching Altitude 3. Almost every one installs the ceiling itself, for a reason worth naming.

The reason transformation rarely blooms into redefinition is not ambition, budget, or talent. It is structural and almost invisible: the mandate that authorizes Altitude 2 also, by being a mandate, defines its own edge. A CWO told to ‘transform how work gets done’ has been given permission to reach exactly the second floor and an implicit instruction not to ask the third-floor question, because the third-floor question is not theirs to ask — it sounds like the CEO’s.

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Altitude 3 questions — ‘what business are we actually in now?’ — feel like they belong to the CEO, the board, corporate strategy. So the CWO, doing excellent Altitude 2 work, does not ask them, not from caution but from role-clarity. The ceiling is not a wall. It is a polite assumption about whose question it is. And it holds until the CEO explicitly hands the third-floor question down.

The third altitude is rarely blocked. It is left unasked, because everyone correctly believes it is someone else’s question — and no one says otherwise.

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This is the entire operational content of this brief. Bloom is not a capability the CWO acquires or an ambition they summon. It is a question the CEO must deliberately, explicitly transfer — ‘you are not only authorized to redesign the work; you are authorized to tell me when the redesign means we are in a different business.’ Until that sentence is said, a brilliant CWO will stop, correctly and forever, at the second floor.

·DDE0BCAM·M)MTIEM·2TCTPBEM· E LE0T

How high is your question going?

Two lists. The first locates your real altitude. The second is the single act that unlocks the third.

D2·T1NXL

This assessment is the public preview of the CEO's Altitude Review, run with the CEO and CWO together through SHRM Executive Network.

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- ☐ Our AI program produced efficiency (Altitude 1) and we have, privately, been treating that as the win.
- ☐ The CWO has genuinely re-architected work (Altitude 2), and the mandate language stops exactly there.
- ☐ No one in the company is authorized, explicitly, to ask whether the work redesign means we are in a different business.
- ☐ The Altitude 3 question, when it has come up, was treated as 'strategy's job' or 'the CEO's call' and quietly dropped.

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- ☐ I have said to the CWO, in plain words, that they are authorized to tell me when the redesign means a different business.
- ☐ The CWO's mandate has been explicitly extended past 'transform the work' to 'name it when the work's purpose has changed.'
- ☐ There is a standing forum where the Altitude 3 question is asked on cadence, not left to arise by accident.
- ☐ I have accepted that an honest answer to the third-floor question may redefine my company — and decided I want to hear it anyway.

TIEM VNXC06MXP2E

If the first list is mostly true, you are not failing — you are succeeding at Altitude 2 and have installed the standard ceiling without noticing. That is the normal, competent outcome, and it is also the one that never blooms. The second list is not more work for the CWO. It is four sentences and one decision, all of them yours. Bloom is gated entirely by whether you say them.

V2N C06

Bloom is not more ambition.

This brief deliberately refused the heroic version of its own story. ‘CWO in bloom’ is not a tale of an exceptional executive who dreamed bigger. The composite was labeled fiction; the streaming reference was an analogy for an altitude, never a claim about how a real company got there. The argument underneath is smaller and more useful than a legend: redefinition is transformation that was permitted to ask one more question, by a CEO who explicitly handed that question down.

Everything in the first thirteen papers built a role that succeeds at the second altitude. This brief’s only addition is the recognition that the third altitude is not blocked by capability or courage — it is left unasked because it correctly sounds like the CEO’s question, and no one reassigns it. The bloom is not in the CWO becoming more. It is in the chief executive saying, on purpose and out loud, that the question of what business this redesign reveals is now also theirs to raise. That sentence is free. Not saying it is the most expensive ceiling in the company, precisely because it never looks like a cost.

The next-Netflix move was never a bigger transformation. It was the same transformation, asked one floor up, by someone who had been told they were allowed to.

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Run Appendix A’s first list honestly: you will likely find you are succeeding at Altitude 2 with the standard ceiling installed. Then do the only thing that removes it — say the four sentences in the second list, to the CWO, deliberately. You are not authorizing more work. You are giving away a question you have been unconsciously keeping, and accepting that the honest answer might tell you what business you are actually in now. The companies that bloomed are not the ones that worked harder. They are the ones whose CEO asked for that answer on purpose.

SHRM BETTER WORKPLACES BETTER WORLD™

CWO SHRM·EN 2026

The series concludes:

The Last Chief Work *Officer.*

When the role succeeds so completely it disappears. The fifteen-paper arc closes on the only ending that makes the argument whole: the seat was scaffolding, and the building now stands.

CWO
SHRM·EN
2026

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The Last Chief Work Officer.

The terminal state of a successful role.

EXCE	SHRM Executive Network — 2026 Series · The CEO’s View · Paper Fifteen · The Capstone
E(CTCN6	v1.0 — May 2026
LNXD2T	The closing capstone of the entire fifteen-paper series. A resolution, not an operating brief.
2·(CE6VE	Everyone who read the series — the CEO, the board, the CWO — at the point where they ask ‘and then what?’
VND026CN6	Closes all fifteen papers. Every prior paper argued to build the role. This one argues for the state in which it is no longer needed.

N6MTIEME6(C6B

A series that argued for a permanent new C-suite seat and stopped there would be advocacy. This paper makes the argument whole by naming the role’s true success condition: not permanence, but obsolescence — the point at which work-architecture thinking is so embedded that a dedicated officer is no longer required, the way ‘e-business strategy’ dissolved once all business became digital.

VN6TE6T

Inside the capstone.

The lifecycle, the precedent for roles that end well, and designing for it from day one.

G **To Everyone Who Read This Far** *Why the series ends here*

H1 **The Lifecycle** *Absent, installed, diffusing, absorbed*

HS **The Precedent** *Roles that succeeded by ending*

H) **Designing for Your Own Obsolescence** *What the CWO does from day one*

2 **The Dissolution Readiness Standard** *Is the capability outliving the seat?*

G **Closing** *The building stands; the scaffolding is gone*

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Why the series ends here.

Fourteen papers argued to build, defend, judge, and elevate the role. A fifteenth that argued only ‘keep it forever’ would betray the other fourteen.

Fourteen papers built a case for the Chief Work Officer so complete that the natural fifteenth would simply consolidate it: here is why the role is permanent, here is its seat at the table forever. That paper would be a betrayal of the other fourteen, because it would mistake the scaffolding for the building. This series has never been about installing a new permanent officer. It has been about changing how an organization thinks. The officer was always the means.

So the only honest ending is the one that names the role’s true success condition. A Chief Work Officer has not ultimately succeeded when the seat is secure, well-funded, and permanent. That is mid-game success — necessary, real, and not the end. The role has ultimately succeeded when work-architecture thinking is so thoroughly absorbed into how every leader operates that a dedicated officer to enforce it is no longer required. The destination was never a bigger org chart. It was a different mind, held organization-wide, that no longer needs a single person to carry it.

> *The role’s permanence would be its quiet failure. Its dissolution into the company’s ordinary thinking is the only complete form of its success.*

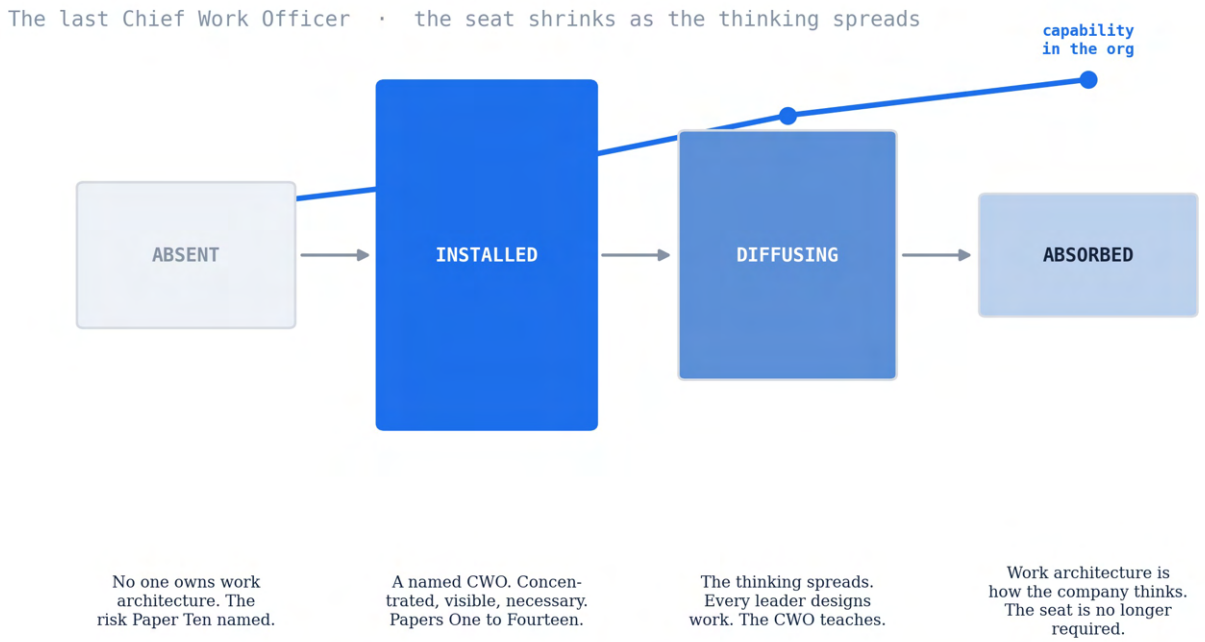
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This capstone maps the lifecycle that ends in absorption, shows the precedent of roles that succeeded precisely by ending, and explains what a Chief Work Officer must do from the first day to design for their own obsolescence — because a role that is not building toward its own dissolution is, without noticing, building toward its own permanence, which is the failure that looks most like success.

EVTCN6MH1MGMTIEM—CLEV'V—E

Absent, installed, diffusing, absorbed.

The role has four phases. Most discussion of it lives entirely in the second, which is why the fourth is never designed for.



The role succeeds the way scaffolding succeeds: the building stands, and the scaffolding is gone.

Read the two movements together. The boxes are the role's size: absent, then installed at full prominence (the entire prior fourteen papers), then deliberately diffusing as the CWO teaches rather than does, then absorbed — small, almost vestigial. The rising line is the capability itself, embedded in the organization, climbing the whole time. The role and the capability move in opposite directions on purpose. A CWO whose personal prominence is still growing in year five has, by this chart, not yet started succeeding at the only thing that ultimately matters.

The fourth phase does not arrive by accident. Absent-to-installed happens because someone decides it. Installed-to-absorbed happens only if the CWO designs for it from the start — otherwise the role calcifies at 'installed,' permanently necessary because it deliberately never made itself unnecessary. Calcification is comfortable, well-compensated, and the most common terminal state. It is also failure wearing tenure.

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Roles that succeeded by ending.

This is not unprecedented or even unusual. The most successful transformation roles in modern business history all ended the same way — by dissolving.

The idea that a senior role’s success is its own disappearance sounds paradoxical only because we are inside this one. Step back and it is the normal pattern for transformation roles, not the exception.

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> The ‘Chief Quality Officer’ of the total-quality era: once quality thinking was embedded in every line manager, the dedicated officer became redundant — success, not defeat. The ‘Chief E-Business Officer’ of the early internet: the title is now almost extinct, not because digital failed, but because all business became digital and a separate officer for it made no sense. The role did not lose. It won so completely it dissolved into the ordinary job of every executive.

‘Chief E-Business Officer’ disappeared because the internet won, not because it lost. That is the ambition, not the cautionary tale.

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The Chief Work Officer is the same kind of role. Its honest aspiration is to join that lineage — to be, in fifteen years, a title that sounds slightly quaint because the thinking it carried became simply how competent organizations operate. A CWO who finds that prospect threatening has misunderstood the assignment. A CWO who finds it the entire point has understood the series.

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What the CWO does from day one.

Dissolution is not something that happens to the role at the end. It is something the role must build toward from the first ninety days, or it never happens at all.

The trap is to treat absorption as a late-stage concern — something to think about 'once the role is established.' By then it is too late: a role optimized for its own indispensability for five years cannot pivot to teaching itself out of a job, because every system, incentive, and habit it built was designed to make it necessary. Dissolution is a day-one design choice or it is nothing.

01

Teach, do not hoard.

Every work-architecture decision is a teaching opportunity for the leader who will eventually make it without the CWO. A CWO who is the only person who can do the work has guaranteed their permanence and forfeited their success.

02

Build the capability into roles, not into the office.

The eight competencies from Paper One belong in every leader's expectations, not sequestered in the CWO's job description. The pipeline of Paper Eight should ultimately feed line roles, not just the succession of the seat.

03

Measure the spread, not the centrality.

The right metric is not the CWO's influence. It is how many consequential work-architecture decisions were made well this quarter without the CWO in the room. That number rising is the only real progress.

04

Name the end explicitly.

The CWO should be able to describe, to the CEO, the conditions under which the role would correctly cease to exist — and treat reaching them as the mandate, not as a threat to be quietly deferred forever.

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A Chief Work Officer should be able to answer, in their first quarter: 'what would have to be true for this role to no longer be necessary, and what am I doing this quarter to make that more true?' A CWO who cannot answer that has accepted permanence as the goal — and permanence, this series has argued from its first page to its last, is the one outcome that means the thinking never actually took hold.

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Is the capability outliving the seat?

The final instrument of the series measures the only success that counts: the role making itself unnecessary on purpose.

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This standard is the public preview of the CWO Dissolution Review — the closing instrument of the series — run with the CEO, board, and CWO together through SHRM Executive Network.

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- ☐ More consequential work-architecture decisions were made well without the CWO this quarter than last quarter.
- ☐ The eight competencies appear in line leaders' expectations, not only in the CWO's job description.
- ☐ The CWO can state, to the CEO, the explicit conditions under which the role should cease to exist.
- ☐ The CWO's personal prominence is deliberately flat or declining while the capability's reach is rising.

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- ☐ Every major work-architecture decision this quarter was used to teach the leader who will eventually own it.
- ☐ The talent pipeline (Paper Eight) feeds line roles, not only the succession of the CWO seat itself.
- ☐ 'Decisions made well without the CWO in the room' is a tracked metric, reported and rising.
- ☐ Reaching the role's own end-conditions is treated as the mandate — not as a threat quietly deferred forever.

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Every other assessment in this series measured whether the role was working. This one measures whether it is succeeding so well it is becoming unnecessary — the only metric that, rising, confirms the entire fifteen-paper thesis was right. A role that scores low here may still be performing brilliantly. It is also, by the standard of this series, building toward its own permanence, which is the failure this paper exists to name. Low is not a crisis. Low, unexamined, is calcification.

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The building stands; the scaffolding is gone.

Fifteen papers. The first argued a role had to exist. The next nine built it, defended it, funded it, governed it, stress-tested it, staffed it, and scaled it. The closing volume put it in the chief executive's hands — the personal bet, the honest judgment, the strategic relocation, the bloom into a redefined business. And this last paper has argued the only conclusion that makes the whole structure honest: the role's complete success is its own disappearance.

That is not a deflation of everything that came before. It is the point of everything that came before. Scaffolding is not failed architecture — it is how a building that could not yet stand alone is brought to the point where it can. The Chief Work Officer is the scaffolding for a way of thinking: that work is designed, not inherited; that humans and machines are configured, not assumed; that the architecture of how things get done is a first-class executive question. When that thinking is so completely absorbed that no single officer must carry it, the scaffolding comes down — not because it failed, but because it is the only evidence that the building it surrounded is now load-bearing on its own.

So the series does not end with a role secured. It ends with a capability so embedded that the role can be released. The last Chief Work Officer is not the one who lost the seat. It is the one who built the thinking so far into the organization that the seat, finally, was no longer the thing holding it up. Every prior paper was written to make that ending reachable. This one was written so that, when it arrives, it is recognized as the destination and not the loss.

You will know the series succeeded when its central role sounds, in fifteen years, slightly quaint — because the thinking it carried became simply how the work is done.

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There is no further instrument and no next paper. The final action the series asks of you is the one in Appendix A: measure, honestly and on cadence, whether the capability is outliving the seat — and treat a role designing its own dissolution not as a risk to be managed but as the thesis being proven. Build the role completely. Then build it so well into the company that, one day, you can let it go. That was the argument from the first page. It is the whole of it on the last.

SHRM BETTER WORKPLACES BETTER WORLD™

CWO SHRM·EN 2026

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A fable to close the series:

The Woman Who Asked *One More* Question.

How a company that sold fish oil and dried fish became the largest maker of personal electronics on Earth — told as the story it really was: about the work, not the fish.

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TIEMVN20

On reading a fable instead of a paper.

Fifteen papers made the argument. This is the part that is meant to be remembered.

Company ABC is not a real company. It is a fable, in the sense that Berkshire Hathaway’s textile mills are now a fable — a true-feeling story whose details are invented but whose shape is exactly right. Every fact in what follows is fictional. Everything the fable claims about how work, asked the right question, can remake an enterprise is the argument the preceding fifteen papers made in the register of evidence. This is the same argument, in the register of memory.

Read it last, and read it once, the way you would read the final page of a long book — not for the data, which is elsewhere, but for the thing the data was always pointing at.

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> No company sold fish oil and became the world’s largest electronics maker by the path described here. The path is invented to be legible, not factual. What is not invented is the mechanism: the question that moved the company is the exact question the series spent fifteen papers defining. The fish are fictional. The question is not.

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The company that sold the sea, by the barrel.

For sixty years, Company ABC sold two things: fish oil, in barrels, and dried fish, on racks. It was good at both. It had the best barrels on the coast and the most reliable racks, and its name on a barrel meant the oil inside had not turned. Three generations of one town worked there. Nobody asked what the company was for, because the answer was sitting in the warehouse, smelling of brine, perfectly obvious.

The work, in those sixty years, was the work. A barrel was filled the way a barrel had always been filled. A rack was loaded the way the last generation had loaded it. When demand rose, the company hired more hands to do more of exactly the same motions. When a hand retired, what they knew — how the oil behaved in August, which racks dried unevenly in the east wind — retired with them, and the company started that knowledge over, from nothing, in the next person. No one experienced this as a loss. It was simply how a fish company worked.

This is the longest chapter in the company’s history and the shortest in this telling, because nothing in it changed. That is the point of it. For sixty years Company ABC was extremely competent at a question it had never thought to ask out loud: not ‘how do we preserve fish,’ which it could answer in its sleep, but ‘what, exactly, is the work we are actually doing here?’ The barrels hid the question. They were so obviously the answer that the question never formed.

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The hire nobody could quite explain.

The new chief executive, in her second year, made a hire the board did not understand and the town found faintly comic. Not a master cooper. Not a head of drying. A person whose entire assignment was a sentence the CEO insisted on saying herself, in the room, more than once: this person owns how the work happens here — all of it, the human hands and the machines and the knowledge that keeps retiring — and she answers to me, not to operations.

Her name was Ada, and for her first ninety days she did almost nothing the company recognized as work. She did not fill a barrel or load a rack. She walked the floor and asked the question the barrels had hidden for sixty years. To the woman who could tell, by smell, when the oil was about to turn: how do you know that? Could that be written down? Could a machine learn it? Should it? To the man who loaded the east racks: why those racks, that way, in that wind?

Most of the floor decided she was harmless and possibly lost. A few — the ones whose knowledge had been quietly walking out the door with every retirement for sixty years — found, to their own surprise, that they had been waiting their whole careers for someone to ask. The CEO did not explain Ada again. She had said the sentence once, in the room, with the operations chief and the finance chief present, and she let it stand. That, it turned out, was the entire decision.

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When the work moved, everything moved.

The turn did not begin with a product. It began with a decomposition. Ada took the single thing the company was secretly best at — not fish, but the preservation of something perishable against time and the elements — and pulled it apart into the tasks it actually was. Sensing when a thing was about to degrade. Knowing what slowed the degrading. Holding that knowledge so it did not retire every time a person did.

Stated that way, the work stopped being about fish. The woman who could smell the turning oil was, it emerged, running a sensing-and-prediction process that happened to have no instrument. So they built the instrument. The knowledge that had been restarting from zero for sixty years became, for the first time, an asset that compounded instead of a memory that died. None of this was sold yet. Nothing in the catalog changed. But the work — the actual configuration of who did what, with which machine, holding which knowledge — had been redesigned underneath a company that still, on paper, sold barrels.

And then everything moved, the way a building moves once you have replaced its foundation without telling the tenants. Margins on the old products rose, because the work beneath them was no longer wasteful. But that was the small consequence. The large one was that Company ABC now possessed, in instrument form, a transferable competence at sensing and arresting decay — and a competence, once it is an instrument instead of a person, does not know or care what industry it was born in.

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It was never a fish company.

The sentence that changed the company was not spoken by Ada. It was spoken by the CEO, to Ada, and it was a question: you keep saying we are good at arresting decay. If that is true and not a metaphor — what business are we actually in?

Ada had been waiting, the way the floor had once waited for her, for someone with the authority to ask exactly that. Because she already knew the answer and it was not hers to declare. Company ABC was not a fish company that had gotten efficient. It was, and quietly always had been, a company that understood how to keep delicate things from degrading over time — and the most delicate, most valuable, most decay-prone things in the emerging economy were not fish. They were the cells in batteries, the integrity of sensors, the fidelity of the small electronic components the whole world was about to depend on and no one yet knew how to keep alive at scale.

The fish did not stop. For years they ran alongside, the way the discs kept mailing while the streaming was built. But the company's center of gravity had moved the day the CEO asked her question and Ada answered it without flinching. Within a decade, Company ABC was the largest provider of personal electronics on the planet — not because it pivoted to a hot market, but because it finally understood the business it had been in for sixty years without knowing, and that business turned out to be enormous. The barrels had hidden that too.

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The last thing Ada did.

The company at its height had no Chief Work Officer. This is the part of the fable that is not a triumph and is the entire point.

Ada did not retire famous. She retired, by the standard of every other executive, almost invisible — and entirely on purpose. From her first ninety days she had been doing two things at once: redesigning the work, and teaching every leader she touched to ask her question without her. Each year her own prominence was flatter and the question was in more mouths. By the end, every operating leader at Company ABC asked, as reflexively as they once filled a barrel, what is this work actually for, and should a human be doing it, and what does it become if we are honest about what it is. They did not call it the Chief Work Officer's question. They had stopped noticing it was ever anyone's in particular. It had become the way the company thought.

So when Ada left, the board did not replace her. Not because the role had failed, but because there was, by then, no role-shaped hole to fill. The scaffolding had been so thoroughly absorbed into the structure that removing it revealed a building, standing on its own, that no longer remembered needing it. The most successful officer in the company's history is remembered there, if at all, as the person who asked an odd question on the fish floor and then, somehow, was no longer necessary — which is the most complete success the preceding fifteen papers ever described, and the only ending this series could honestly have.



The fish were fictional. The barrels were fictional. The question was not, and the question is the only thing this entire series was ever about.

TIEM EXCE MV6N E

Why we ended on a fable.

Fifteen papers argued the case for the Chief Work Officer in the register of evidence: the structure, the actions, the ninety days, the rhythm, the compact, the governance, the failure modes, the pipeline, the scale, the board, the CEO's bet, the judgment, the strategy, the bloom, the dissolution. Everything a serious reader needs to act is in those fifteen documents, and none of it is in this one.

This one exists because arguments are won in the register of evidence and remembered in the register of story. A reader who finishes the fifteen papers knows the case. A reader who finishes the fable feels why it mattered — and a year from now, when the analysis has faded into general conviction, what will remain is a woman on a fish floor asking what the work was actually for, and a company that became something unrecognizable because someone finally answered her, and then made sure the question outlived the asker.

That is the whole of it. Build the role completely. Defend it, fund it, govern it, scale it, bet on it, judge it, elevate it. And build the question so deeply into how the enterprise thinks that, one day, like Ada, the role can quietly disappear — not because it failed, but because it finally, completely, won. The barrels hid the question for sixty years. This series existed to make sure yours does not.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The people behind the argument.

Two SHRM Executive Network voices on the evolution of the people function — the research and the role this volume argues into existence.



Dr. Alexander Alonso

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Alexander Alonso, Ph.D., SHRM-SCP, is SHRM's Chief Knowledge Officer, leading the organization's research, insights, and innovation functions as well as the SHRM Foundation. He oversees operations for SHRM's Certified Professional and Senior Certified Professional credentials and is responsible for all research activities, including development of the SHRM Competency Model. Across his career he has worked with subject-matter experts worldwide to identify performance standards, build competency models, and conduct job analyses, publishing in journals such as the Journal of Applied Psychology and co-authoring Defining HR Success: A Guide to the SHRM Competency Model in Practice. A Fellow of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, he is a frequent keynote speaker on human capital, AI, and the future of work — and the author of the keynote from which this volume is adapted.



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THE ARGUMENT, IN CLOSING

Your workforce is no longer only human. No one owns the whole of it.

That sentence is obvious the moment it is said — and it is the reason healthy, profitable companies are already failing without knowing it. The org chart still describes the human half. The other half produces real work, makes real decisions, and carries real risk — and answers to no one.

This book argues the structural response: a role that owns work itself — its design, its economics, its governance, its continuity — comprehensively, across humans and machines. It builds that role completely, hands it to the chief executive, and follows it to the only honest ending: the point at which it succeeds so thoroughly it dissolves into how the company simply thinks.

> *"Build the role completely. Then build it so deeply into how the enterprise thinks that, one day, it can quietly disappear — not because it failed, but because it won."*

SEVENTEEN PARTS, ONE ARGUMENT

Introduction — why companies fail today

Volume I — building the role (I–X):
the case, the ten actions, the 90 days, the rhythm, the CFO compact, governance, failure, the pipeline, scale, the board

Volume II — the CEO's view (XI–XV):
the bet, the judgment, strategy, the bloom, the dissolution

Coda — the allegory of Company ABC:
the argument, made felt

SHRM EXECUTIVE NETWORK

THE 2026 SERIES · COLLECTED VOLUME · V1.0 · MAY 2026