The role of the CPO
in times of uncertainty

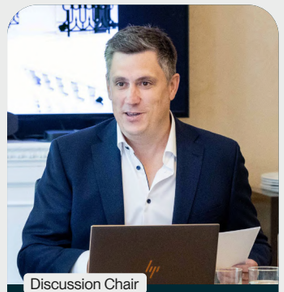
In turbulent times, is HR leading the business or merely keeping up with it?

Compass Carter Osborne

Award winning executive search
for the investor backed healthcare and life sciences sectors

Attendees

Chair



Discussion Chair

Sam Leighton-Smith
Group Managing Director,
Compass Recruitment Solutions

Abigail Bàda
Director - People & Culture,
Compass Carter Osborne

Jamie Barker
Principal Consultant,
Compass Carter Osborne

Hannah Davis
Former People Experience
Director, Ted Baker

Alex Dummer
Global Talent &
Development Director
(Oncology), AstraZeneca

Genevieve Glover
Chief People Officer,
Barchester

Georgina Hayes
HR Director,
Alliance Medical

Tania Holcroft
Group Chief People Officer,
The Go Ahead Group

Dan Kiely
Director,
Compass Carter Osborne

Sara Knight
Chief People Officer,
The London Clinic

Claire Leake
Chief People Officer,
National Care Group

James Westwood-Beere
Chief People Officer,
Lifeways

Introduction

The UK healthcare and life sciences sectors continue to face unprecedented challenges. As the immediate aftershocks of the pandemic begin to subside, new headwinds are emerging in the form of shifting attitudes among the workforce, rapid technological disruption, and a raft of tax hikes and policy changes. For chief people officers (CPOs) and HR directors, the challenge is stark: how to guide organisations through a wave of transformation and resource pressures without losing the human connection and sense of purpose that defines care.

Uniquely placed to gather insight into the pressures, as well as the prospects, Compass Carter Osborne brought together HR professionals from across the broad spectrum of health and social care at a recent roundtable to discuss the role of the CPO in these uncertain times. Joined by HR leaders from retail, pharmaceuticals and transport, the conversation revealed a sector caught between the urgency to modernise and the practical limits imposed by legacy systems and resource constraints.

Health and social care is a people-intensive business. Staff costs can account for upwards of 70% of operating budgets in many organisations, making workforce strategy inseparable from financial performance. Meanwhile, customer expectations are rising, regulatory scrutiny is intensifying, and wage bills are increasing. Coupled with the rapid acceleration of AI technology and the impending Employment Rights Bill, CPOs are finding themselves in roles that demand more commercial acumen, technological awareness and cultural leadership than ever before. The big question for panellists was how they can rise to the challenges while bringing not only the workforce, but also the leadership, with them.

As one participant aptly summed up:

“In the CPO role nothing is still. Now, everything is constantly shifting and that creates a cultural dynamic that requires you to constantly look at and revisit everything you do.”

Shifting culture

Perhaps more than other sectors represented at the roundtable, healthcare and life sciences businesses have invested heavily in culture over the last decade. But changing attitudes to work in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and as a new digital-native, and perhaps more purpose-driven, generation join the workforce mean cultural dynamics are shifting yet again.

A 2023 study by the Workplace Research Foundation found that 75% of Millennials prefer digital communication over face-to-face interactions in the workplace. Meanwhile, research published earlier this year revealed that one in five 18 to 27-year-olds would like to work from home all of the time and almost a quarter (24%) would like to most of the time.

At the same time, according to Deloitte's 2025 Gen Z and Millennial Survey, four in ten younger workers believe managers have a responsibility to foster a positive and inclusive workplace culture but only around of a fifth of them believe this is actually happening.

"The 20-somethings coming into the workplace are saying that they trust AI more than they trust HR, that they trust AI more than they trust the hierarchy in the organisation because they don't trust people. I think that's the biggest missing piece that the CPOs around the table are going to have to think about in the next ten to fifteen years," said one panellist.

Several participants felt that changes in the workplace landscape are accelerating, driven by emerging groups such as "Generation P" or the "Perfect Generation" - defined less by age than by a tendency to question their role and status within organisations.

The Deloitte research found that 44% of Gen Zs and 45% of Millennials had left a role they felt lacked purpose, while 40% of both groups had rejected an assignment, project or employer based on their personal ethics or beliefs.

In many respects, this change in mindset bodes well for the health and social care sector, which by its nature is people-orientated and purpose-driven.

As one panellist observed of the workforce: "They are actually quite miserable on one level because there is the demand for so much change all at once. But on another level, they are happy because they are there to deal with something they can have impact on, which is somebody's life, and that gives them purpose. And I feel quite fortunate to be in a sector where that happens on a daily basis."

However, as another participant pointed out, there is also now a need to reconcile the fact that many organisations have experienced, but often older, management teams making decisions who are not necessarily in tune with the expectations of a younger workforce.

"We are all adopting new technologies, but actually do we want to be dehumanising our organisations in such a way that we are sending everyone a text message rather than having a conversation?"

they said.

Some participants asked whether HR leaders should be taking a bigger role in education, visiting schools and higher education facilities more regularly to help "inject some reality" about what is expected in the workplace into a generation that is growing up with the impression that "they can post a few things on social media and make millions".

According to the Deloitte research, viral trends such as 'quiet quitting' and 'bare minimum Mondays' have given younger workers a reputation for a sense of entitlement and low productivity. These trends were observed more by panellists from outside if the health and social care sectors, but the roundtable heard they were not confined to younger workers.

"With the geopolitical backdrop, there's not the jobs out there," said one panellist. "It's a tough, tough market so people are quietly quitting. They're staying just because they can and they've got an easy ride."

Participants agreed that while data and new technology was making it easier to measure absence and retention rates, hybrid working had made it more difficult for leadership and management teams to recognise inertia among the workforce.

Although many panellists thought businesses and HR leaders needed to be mindful of the changing attitudes towards work and work/life balance, several agreed that it was important for CPOs and organisations to have the confidence to set the culture and for the workforce to adapt.

"I'm quite a big believer in saying I'll take the risk that some employees might not want to work for us, because this is the environment we're creating, and we'd rather build a culture that way than be drawn into what feels popular today,"

The digital catch-up

Against this backdrop of cultural change, the conversation turned to how technology is reshaping the sector. The pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in health and social care infrastructure and outdated IT systems. For HR leaders, the task has become not only to fix those gaps but to future-proof their organisations for an increasingly digital age.

However, while perhaps overdue in the sector, the rapid pace and scale of digital transformation is creating what some panellists described as "change fatigue" among the workforce. At the same time, leadership teams are trying to implement the changes needed to keep up with advancements in technology, without always having a clear digital strategy or the skillset needed to understand its benefits and limitations.

"We were driven to start digital transformation because we had a number of systems that were end of life, so in a sense we had no choice. Then, once we got going we realised how far behind we were. For example, the people data was being kept on spreadsheets and paper files. But in terms of the end goal, I don't think we are looking strategically yet, it's very much out of necessity," one participant revealed.

In some organisations, the sense of urgency has sparked ambitious technological overhauls. However, the

panel heard how, combined with other pressures, these programmes can also create a sense of instability for frontline staff and add to the strain on already overstretched management teams.

“Our amazing operational colleagues are not only delivering business as usual, but also managing the changes taking place at the top of the business,”

said one participant.

While some providers have developed clear digital roadmaps, participants agreed that social care, in particular, is still lagging behind other sectors in its digital transformation. The challenges of implementation are compounded in a sector with a largely vocational workforce focused on care delivery, and where privacy and safeguarding considerations mean workers are often being asked to adopt new technologies but, as one panellist pointed out, “are not allowed a mobile phone with them for their 12-hour shifts.”

The talent challenge

Underpinning these digital ambitions is a stark reality: technology alone is not enough. Several panellists stressed that making AI - or any digital solution - work in practice depends on having people with the right skills to interpret, implement and integrate these tools effectively. But those people are in short supply.

“We’re looking for data analysts to come into the business, but what we are really looking for are unicorns,”

said one participant. “We want people who have some sector background but also have the IT capability. And I don’t think those individuals are out there, so we have to grow them ourselves if we are going to bring in that digital expertise overlaid with understanding of the sector.”

One participant argued that becoming a digital organisation isn’t just about adopting new tools - it fundamentally reshapes how people think, work and interact. They warned against the idea that a quick course in data or AI is enough, stressing that true digital transformation demands rethinking learning strategies, adapting continuously, and approaching daily work in entirely new ways. As they put it, it’s a cultural shift that many organisations are still struggling to catch up with.

Indeed, some participants felt that the debate needed to be flipped, and that organisations should focus on culture change first and foremost to prepare their workforce for digital evolution.

“Whatever you do with technology, whether you're in an IT function or outside of an IT function, your cultural mindset is absolutely critical to the success of the change that you're looking to drive towards,” said one panellist.

Workforce resilience and data storytelling

Building a digital organisation also demands resilience from the workforce. Panellists stressed the importance of investing in staff wellbeing and adaptability, particularly as new technology reshapes how work is done.

The Deloitte survey found that roughly three-quarters of younger workers thought AI would impact the way they work within the next year, and while more than half already use it to some extent on a day-to-day basis, they have significant concerns over both how it will impact their work and their job prospects.

“We need to be investing in the wellbeing and the resilience of the workforce to be able to adapt and respond to new technology,” said one panellist. “People might be turning up for work every day, but is that actually the resilience we want to see within an organisation or do we need people to be demonstrating much more adaptable resilience?”

Meanwhile, advancements in technology mean HR leaders have more metrics than ever at their disposal. Yet the panel agreed there has been insufficient focus on what this data reveals about the workforce and how it can be used to drive decision-making.

Several panellists mentioned “staff survey fatigue” - not just among the workforce but in leadership teams. Results are frequently ignored and disappointing staff feedback is often dismissed by the executive as “people just having a bad day,” said one participant.

Others felt that HR teams needed to focus more on how to communicate information to the C-suite in a way that speaks to them.

“We chuck a load of numbers round in HR, but the key thing missing for me is what's the story?” said one panellist. “The amount of people dashboards we have now, but it's not just about the quality and gathering of data, it's what that data is informing us and how we are using it to make commercial decisions.”

Some organisations are starting to connect the dots with the huge volumes of data they hold, but most panellists agreed there’s still significant untapped potential in using that data to make forecasts.

“It's one thing having the data. It’s another thing having the story, and it’s a totally other thing then looking at what it says about what we need to do next,”

said one panellist.

“A lot of the data is action-specific so it’s thinking about how we can transform that to ensure we're telling the story about what might happen in the future.”

The rapid acceleration of AI technologies is opening up new possibilities for turning static data into narrative and predictive insights. Alongside the potential clinical and customer-facing applications, the roundtable heard examples of AI being used to help sift through applications, streamline communications and analyse metrics.

However, some panellists felt that while AI has transformative potential, it still has a long way to go before it is fully formed, making early adoption a risk. Others questioned whether AI, alongside other digital developments, could prove a distraction for leadership teams.

“I think we are all trying to get our heads around it, and that’s the distraction,” said one participant. “We are all trying to work out how we leverage it for the benefit of the business, without distracting the business from its purpose.”

Policy challenges

All of these technological and cultural challenges sit against the backdrop of significant legislative change. Ministers recently set out a two-year timeframe for the Employment Rights Bill, which will include the launch of the new Fair Work Agency and further consultation. However, as it currently stands, the plan is to introduce a raft of new measures including ‘day one’ employment rights, an obligation on employers not to permit the harassment of their employees by third parties, improved access to flexible working, and strengthened union protections, to name but a few.

This will mark the biggest shake-up of employment rights in a generation, but the roundtable heard that it wasn’t even on the radar of most CEOs.

"I am doing quite a lot of work at the moment to educate our exec that this is not just an HR problem, and that they really need to understand the potential implications in terms of behaviour and costs," said one panellist.

However, several participants saw the Bill as an opportunity for CPOs to step up as trusted advisers, helping leaders navigate the detail and, in the process, shape how organisations respond both culturally and commercially.

The Bill will demand a "huge mindset shift in our leaders," said one panellist. Yet with that challenge, they said there was an opportunity for HR to bring Boards on a more informed and collaborative journey.

"The labour legislation out there is changing significantly, which means the business is going to have to pivot, and think about things slightly differently," said one panellist. "It's not just what does it mean to us because it's a change in law - it's what does it mean to us from a cultural perspective?"

This raised a broader question: with shifts in worker expectations, technology and policy, has culture become so vital to business performance that more HR leaders should be making the leap into C-suite roles?

The panel heard examples where this is happening, both in cases of CPOs moving into CEO and COO positions, and in instances of CPOs being appointed to boards as strategic advisors.

"If there are cultural issues, you need someone who is assessing that from the very top down," said one panellist. "And if their focus is just on processes and numbers, that's not going to be enough to drive change though an organisation. If you want cultural change, you stand a much better chance of embedding it if it's coming down from a people line."

Despite the recognition of HR's potential strategic value, panellists agreed that it was still relatively rare for HR leaders to make this kind of move. However, some pointed out that for many organisations, HR is increasingly coming front and centre.

Conclusion

Throughout the roundtable discussion, it was clear that HR's role in healthcare and life sciences is evolving at pace - and facing significant tests. Few sectors are as deeply tied to human capital as health and social care. Yet for all the investment, HR leaders still face the challenge of proving their function's strategic value in the boardroom.

The reality is that boards and CEOs often continue to see HR through an operational lens -focused on compliance, policies, and headcount management - rather than as partners in shaping commercial and cultural strategy.

However, participants were optimistic about HR's role in driving change. Rapidly advancing technology, from data analytics to AI, has given HR new tools to deliver insights that could fundamentally reshape business decisions. And at a time of unprecedented changes in employment legislation, Boards will need to lean heavily on the expertise of CPOs to guide them through the cultural change.

As one participant summed up:

"There are a lot of challenges and things happening around us, so it's incumbent on people leaders to ensure the messaging to the workforce is really on point in terms of what organisations are looking to achieve - whether that's tech innovation, vision and values or what success looks like. And it seems to me that the winners are going to be the ones that are less reactive and more proactive in that agenda."

Enquiries

Abigail Bàda
Director

+44 (0) 208 036 3530
abigail@compasscarterosborne.com

Media Enquiries

David Bland
Director of Marketing (CRS)

+44 (0) 208 036 3530
david@compasscarterosborne.com

Award winning executive search
for the investor backed healthcare and life sciences sectors

HealthInvestor Awards 2024
WINNER
Executive Search Firm of the Year

The evolving role of the Chief People Officer
Report
Read →

Transitioning from Executive to Non-Executive
Report
Read →

Health Tech Roundtable
Report
Read →

London
Head Office

0208 036 3530

info@compasscarterosborne.com

Follow Compass Carter Osborne

78 Pall Mall, St James's London SW1Y 5ES