

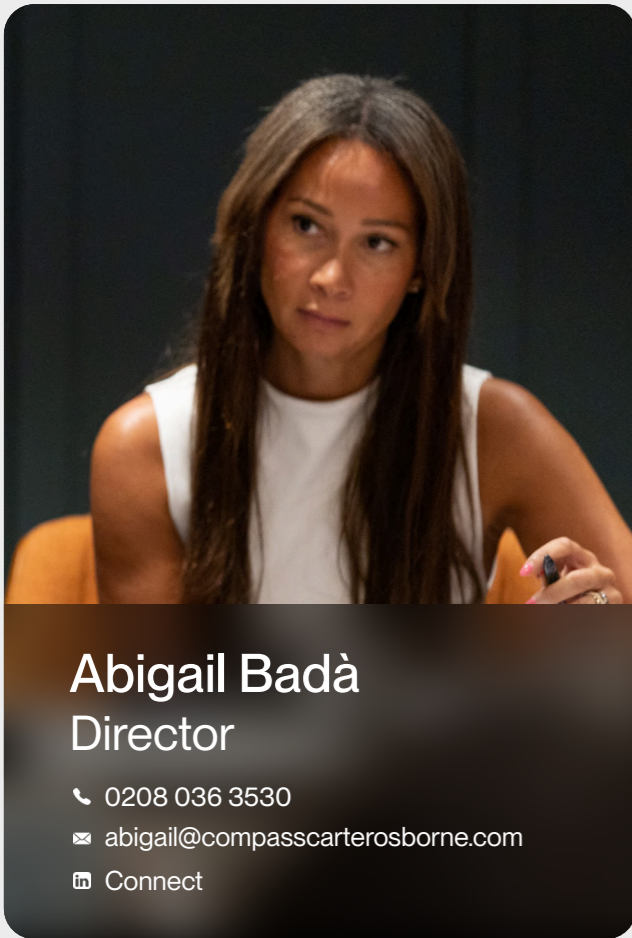


# From reaction to discipline

*how Chief People Officers' priorities have shifted in 2026*

How thinking has evolved across private equity-backed healthcare and life sciences over the past nine months





## Executive summary

Over the past nine months, the focus of Chief People Officers across private equity-backed healthcare and life sciences businesses has shifted meaningfully.

What began in 2025 as a period defined by pressure, pace, and constant response has moved into something more deliberate. As of April 2026, the conversation is less about managing through disruption and more about refining the organisational levers that drive performance.

This reflects ongoing dialogue with CPOs from our July 2025 roundtable through to more recent discussions this year. While the underlying challenges remain familiar, the way organisations are responding to them has become more targeted, more commercial, and more closely aligned to value creation.

When we last brought this group together in mid-2025, the agenda was dominated by immediacy. Talent gaps, leadership stretch and rising expectations from investors and boards were creating sustained pressure across organisations.

Today, those pressures have not disappeared but the response has matured. The conversation has moved on from what is happening to what needs to be fixed, strengthened, or rethought to deliver against increasingly demanding growth plans.

What is emerging now is not a new set of priorities, but a more disciplined approach to the same challenges shaped directly by the realities of the past year.

### Capability over capacity

The rapid hiring and reactive workforce decisions made during 2025 have left many organisations with uneven capability. That is now being addressed more directly.

CPOs are focusing on where capability is misaligned to the needs of the business particularly in critical clinical, regulatory, and commercial roles and making more deliberate decisions about where to invest, upgrade, or restructure.

Workforce planning is becoming more closely tied to value creation plans, with a clearer view on which roles genuinely drive performance and which do not.

### Leadership as a point of intervention

The leadership strain experienced throughout 2025 has brought leadership effectiveness into sharper focus not as a broad development theme, but as a critical performance variable.

CPOs are increasingly diagnosing where leadership is enabling delivery and where it is creating

drag. In some cases, this is leading to more targeted development; in others, more decisive change.

The emphasis is on leadership that can operate effectively under pressure, make sound decisions with incomplete information, and maintain alignment in fast-moving environments.



### Operating models with greater clarity

Tensions around flexible working were a defining feature of 2025. What has followed is a more

practical focus on how work actually gets done.

CPOs are introducing greater clarity around expectations particularly in businesses where collaboration, quality and regulatory oversight are critical.

The shift is towards operating models that are less ambiguous, more consistent and better aligned to the realities of healthcare and life sciences delivery.

### Technology: from adoption to accountability

The rapid adoption of HR technology and AI during 2025 has prompted a more measured response. Attention has shifted to whether these tools are delivering meaningful value.

CPOs are now focusing on utilisation, governance, and outcomes ensuring that systems are not just in place, but are improving decision-making and efficiency.

In regulated environments, this also includes a sharper focus on risk, data integrity, and transparency particularly where AI is influencing people-related decisions.

### Simplification as a performance strategy

In response to the proliferation of initiatives introduced over recent years, many organisations are now prioritising simplification.

CPOs are reducing complexity, aligning messaging and ensuring that managers are focused on what truly drives performance.

There is less emphasis on introducing new interventions, and more on making existing ones work effectively recognising that sustainable performance is built through clarity and consistency, not volume of activity.

### Culture under greater scrutiny

The pace of change experienced during 2025 particularly in investor-backed environments has increased the risk of cultural fragmentation.

CPOs are responding by focusing more explicitly on the behaviours that enable execution and holding leadership teams accountable for reinforcing them.

In this context, culture is increasingly seen as something that can either accelerate or

hinder delivery particularly in complex or rapidly scaling organisations.



### A more commercially anchored CPO role

The commercial pressures of 2025 have accelerated the evolution of the CPO role.

There is now a stronger expectation that people strategy is directly linked to business outcomes whether that is growth, productivity, or operational performance.

As a result, CPOs are working more closely with CEOs, CFOs, and investors, bringing data and insight to inform decisions on structure, capability, and investment. The role is becoming more explicitly tied to value creation.

### Where the conversation has moved to

Taken together, these shifts point to a change in emphasis rather than a change in direction.

The challenges facing organisations remain broadly consistent. What has evolved is the level of discipline in how they are being addressed shaped by the lessons, and in many cases the consequences, of decisions made during 2025.

As of April 2026, the conversation is less about reacting to pressure and more about making deliberate, and often more difficult, choices, focusing effort where it will have the greatest impact on performance.

For Chief People Officers in private equity-backed healthcare and life sciences businesses, that means operating with greater precision, stronger commercial alignment, and a clearer line of sight to value creation.



## Placement Highlights

Q4 FY25-26

Chief People Officer  
Specialist Services

Chief People Officer  
Elderly Care

Chief People Officer  
Specialist Services NFP

Director of People  
Children's Services

Chief People Officer  
Nurseries Group



## The role of the CPO in times of uncertainty

### Report

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