

# Episode 376: CHRO Series – How Did You Start Your Career in HR? Part 3



Cindy Strong: [00:00:00.09] There is unprecedented interest in HR roles right now, and the journey to it as a career focus is as multidimensional as those that serve the industry in orgs across the globe. Jessica, I'm sure you find it too. It brings together such a unique skill set, experiences, perspectives, education levels that you don't see in all disciplines.

Intro: [00:00:23.91] Welcome to the Workology Podcast, a podcast for the disruptive workplace leader. Join host Jessica Miller-Merrell, founder of Workology.com as she sits down and gets to the bottom of trends, tools, and case studies for the business leader, HR, and recruiting professional who is tired of the status quo. Now here's Jessica with this episode of Workology.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:00:49.73] Welcome to the Workology Podcast, sponsored by Upskill HR and Ace the HR exam , personal development certification prep for HR Leaders. Learn more at Learn.Workology.com. This podcast is part of a series on the Workology podcast that's focused on the roles and responsibilities of the Chief Human Resources Officer or CHRO. The CHRO is sometimes called the VP of People or the Chief People officer, and it is an executive or C-level role that deals with managing human resources as well as with organizational development and implementing policies of change to improve the overall efficiency of the company. The CHRO Podcast series, this whole series on Workology is powered by HR Benchmark survey. Join us, share your benchmarks at HRBenchmarkSurvey.com. One of the reasons I continue to do this series is because there is so much mystery and so many differences around that CHRO role. Every organization is different. I also want aspiring CHROs to know about the types of skills and experiences they need to promote into that future CHRO role, while also hearing from senior HR leadership how they're partnering and collaborating with their executive peers. If you are a CHRO, this is a great podcast cast for you to hear from others and what they're doing. I also want to hear from you. Text "PODCAST" to 512-548-3005. You can ask me questions, leave comments and make suggestions for future guests. This is my community text number and I want to hear from you.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:02:26.87] Now, throughout the podcast series, we have asked each and every guest how they began their careers in HR and how it evolved into that Chief-HR-Officer-level role. Their answers are really interesting and all very different. In this episode, you're going to listen to excerpts from some of our best interviews on the podcast with CHROs, VPs of HR, Chief People Officers on how some of the most successful professionals in the HR industry started their careers with an eye on the leadership position. So in this episode, you'll hear from Nikki Salenetri. She's the VP of People at Gympass. Jessica Williams, the VP of People at Refine Labs. Cindy Strong, VP of People at Outdoorsy. And Jill Waite, Chief People Officer at Portillo's Hot Dogs. Before I introduce our first guest, I want to hear from you. Text

"PODCAST" to 512-548-3005. Ask me questions, leave comments, make suggestions. This is my community text number. So, let's get started. Our first excerpt comes from Nikki Salenetri. She's the Vice President of People at Gympass. With more than a decade of experience in HR, Nikki has worked in areas such as employee relations, leadership development, training, talent management, and recruitment. She holds a Talent Acquisition Strategic Certification from the Human Capital Institute and Behavioral Interviewing Certification from ZERORISK HR, Inc. Previously, she worked at Rodale Inc, a global health and wellness content company as a senior director of HR, and she has spent more than two years working at Equinox as a regional director of HR. She graduated from New York University with a Master's Degree in industrial and organizational psychology and received her Bachelor's Degree from Franklin & Marshall College in Biological Foundations of Behavior. Interesting. Let's hear from Nikki.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:20.09] I love hearing about all these different backgrounds of how individuals fell into human resources, and yours is no exception. I just, I just think it's really intriguing and fascinating.

Nikki Salenetri: [00:04:31.64] Yeah, absolutely. I also find these stories interesting. I think a lot of us have kind of fallen into it by chance, but have ended up loving it and staying. So the stories are super interesting to me as well.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:44.06] Well, you've worked in HR leadership in the health and wellness space for, for nearly ten years. Let's talk about how your early experience led you to your current role.

Nikki Salenetri: [00:04:53.51] Yeah, absolutely. From an HR perspective, throughout my career, I've always known that I wanted to grow in a role where I was leading the HR function. And so from the time I started my career in HR, I focused on trying to get as broad experience as possible. And so, for me, this has looked like always just putting my hand up to work on any new initiative or project that came up, regardless of if it was an area that I already had experience in or was even interested in learning. I felt that no matter what the project was, there was always something for me to learn and a new skill set for me to develop that would help serve me well in the future. So I always tried to pursue those options. And as far as working in the health and wellness space, I've been an athlete my entire life and so it's something I'm personally passionate about and I was lucky enough to make that transition into the industry at my role at Equinox. And so since then, I've made it a priority to continue to pursue roles in this space, as I just really love having the ability to marry what my personal passion is with my career. It's really fulfilling and it's something that I think I'll continue doing for as long as I'm working in HR.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:06:02.83] Our next excerpt comes from Jessica Williams. She's the Vice President of People at Refine Labs. With an educational background in psychology and sociology, Jessica applies her experience in DEI leadership, development and people management to help employees seeking upward career mobility or new employment opportunities. She is also the founder of Hidden Gem Career Consulting, where she utilizes a consulting approach to understand the candidate's past and future in order to showcase their abilities as a hidden gem in corporate America.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:06:39.04] Talk a little bit about your background. Talk to us about how you got your start in HR, and how has your work evolved over time into your current role?

Jessica Williams: [00:06:46.75] Absolutely. So in my current role, as you said, I'm a Vice President of People. I've been in the HR people ops space for about ten years. So ironically, I had no clue what HR was when I got into it. I actually signed a six-month contract to be a recruiter when I decided I wanted to defer my medical school entrance and for six months I said, okay, I'm going to do this job. And I had moved to Houston and I decided this was going to be just a placeholder, but that was not the case. Ten years later, I'm still doing it. And so I had an amazing mentor in my first job who basically sat me down and said, I can make you a generalist. I'm going to teach you everything that I know. In this way, when you want to move into management, you will have a knowledge of a little bit of everything. And that's what she did over the next three years. I stayed there and when it was time to leave, she actually was the one to tell me, You should apply to be a manager, but it's not going to happen here because it's it was a small HR team of two, which still is to this day. And so I moved up. To move up I had to move out. And so I did and I've progressed since then. Most of my roles have been one and only so being the one and only HR department, department of one, which has its own challenges. And here recently, in my last couple of jobs, my newest, I think, the niche for me is startup early stage companies being that first HR hire to build out the team, build out all the processes and procedures really excites me because I, I consider myself to be a disruptor in the HR space, and I don't want to do things like they've always been done. So I have a whole quote on, like, burn it all down and let's rebuild it

Break: [00:08:29.53] Let's take a reset. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell and you're listening to the Workology Podcast sponsored by Upskill HR and ACE the HR exam. In this episode, we're sharing some of the best responses from previous Workology Podcast guests on how they started their HR careers. The CHRO podcast series, which is what this episode is part of, is powered by HR Benchmark Survey. Visit [HRBenchmarkSurvey.com](https://HRBenchmarkSurvey.com). Before we get back to it, I want to hear from you. Text "PODCAST" to 512-548-3005. Ask me questions, leave comments, and make suggestions for future guests. This is my community text number and I want to hear from you.

Break: [00:09:10.24] Benchmarking and data is crucial to HR leaders. Workology's HR Benchmark Survey is an always-on survey and just by taking the survey at [HRBenchmarkSurvey.com](https://HRBenchmarkSurvey.com), you're signing up to get comprehensive quarterly results, white papers, and other research from the survey right to your inbox. It takes 10 minutes or less to complete. Visit [HRBenchmarkSurvey.com](https://HRBenchmarkSurvey.com).

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:09:36.28] Our next interview is with Cindy Strong. She's the Vice President of People for Outdoorsy. Cindy is a human resources leader with nearly 20 years of experience in HR focusing in leadership development, talent management solutions, and training experience focused on high-performing teams. Outdoorsy is a global online RV rental and outdoor travel marketplace that has been named one of America's Best Startup Employers in 2022 by Forbes, making the third straight year Outdoorsy

has been recognized on Forbes' exclusive list of the 500 best startup companies to work for in the US. How cool is that?

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:10:13.93] Well, let's start with your background. I wanted to ask how you got your start in HR and how has your work evolved over time into your current role?

Cindy Strong: [00:10:22.21] Yeah, thank you for the question. There is unprecedented interest in HR roles right now, and the journey to it as a career focus is as multidimensional as those that serve the industry in orgs across the globe. Jessica, I'm sure you find it too. It brings together such a unique skill set, experiences, perspectives, education levels that you don't see in all disciplines. For me, I personally had two primary influencers. First, my mom was an HR professional and a total boss. At an early age, I was able to identify with a successful woman in the workplace, which I believe has served me well throughout my career. Second, I've just had this curiosity about lessons and inspiration that come from a group of people. I never saw it as accomplishment of a brand or an org, but rather people coming together to accomplish hard things. The dynamic of synergy and healthy workplaces has always held my attention to answer the second half of your question. My work has evolved through a progressive career like most. What has remained consistent is an application of an operations mindset. I connect dots linking people programs to business imperatives in times of starting any new role or even my season as a consultant. My first question is to leaders and to the org, what's giving you heartburn? Like what are the gaps in, in our strategic imperatives in accomplishing our strategic imperatives or employee well-being? And then from there, we work to design a roadmap for people operations. There is basic foundational best practices. A lot you share with your audience through Workology that guide us, but it's not a plug-and-play endeavor there. This strategy must link to the people and to the business.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:12:28.75] Our final interview excerpt is with Jill Waite, Chief People Officer at Portillo's Hot Dogs, a restaurant chain with more than 60 locations headquartered in Oakbrook, Illinois. Prior to joining Portillo's in 2019, Jill held several HR and operations roles in retail, grocery and fitness industries with companies such as Sephora and 24-Hour Fitness. Jill was hired to reinvigorate Portillo's culture for its 6000+ team members and is responsible for building the talent pipeline to support the company growth.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:12:59.74] Let's start with some background. How did you get your start in HR and how has your work evolved over time into your current role?

Jill Waite: [00:13:07.99] Yeah, so similar to you. I started off in the retail industry, worked for a company called Circuit City back in the day, the largest consumer electronics retailer that was out there. And I worked in customer service at the time and was taken under the wing of the general manager of the location I worked in. And during that time he really taught me all things business. And as I was going to school at the University of Florida, I still worked full-time both for Circuit City, but also as getting my degree in management. Upon graduation, I was approached by the regional HR manager for Circuit City and said, Hey, would you have any interest in coming into HR? And I said, Absolutely. I love people. I love Circuit City and

was really passionate about helping the company grow. And so it was my passion for retail, the organization I was working in, as well as people that I was able to migrate into my career today in HR.

Closing: [00:14:16.45] It is so interesting to delve into how like a role of the CHRO, how their job connects to the business strategy and operations. I'm such a nerd and how HR works with the rest of the company as well as the leadership team. Hearing stories like this help you be inspired and understand how HR leaders got their start in HR and what led them to that Chief HR Officer level role. There are so many ways to grow your career in HR, that is for certain. I am so inspired by these stories and I hope that you are too. This podcast is powered and sponsored by our HR Development courses. We have one for HR certification called ACE the HR Exam and another for personal development and recertification at Upskill HR. Go to [Learn.Workology.com](https://Learn.Workology.com) to learn more.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:15:04.39] Before we close, I want to hear from you. Text "PODCAST" to 512-548-3005. Ask questions, leave comments, make suggestions. I need your feedback. This is my community text number and I want to hear from you. Thank you for joining the Workology Podcast again. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. It is sponsored by HR Benchmark Survey. HR Benchmark Survey is the place to go, .com, to leave your insights research, what's going on with you in HR. This podcast is for the disruptive workplace leader. That's me. That's you. Let's disrupt the workplace together. I don't know about you, but I'm tired of the status quo, so let's change it. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell. Until next time, visit [Workology.com](https://Workology.com) to listen to all our previous Workology Podcast episodes.