

# Episode 389: CHRO Series – What Skills and Experience Do You Believe Are Absolute Requirements for a CHRO Role?

## Part 3



Lisa Novak: [00:00:00.35] What will trip people up in the world is by petitioning ourselves into HR functions. Hr operations like recruiting or benefits or payroll. When the reality is human resources is best served. Being a business partner, really understanding the business. So, foundationally, I think it's most important to understand how businesses work and operate.

Intro: [00:00:28.66] 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: [00:00:54.01] Welcome to the Workology Podcast sponsored by Upskill HR, which is personal development for HR leaders at UpskillHR.com. We also have re-certification resources at AceTheHRExam.com. This podcast on the Workology Podcast is part of a series where we focus on the roles and responsibilities for 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 on Workology is powered by HR Benchmark Survey. Take your survey. Join us at [www.HRBenchmarkSurvey.com](http://www.HRBenchmarkSurvey.com). One of the reasons I continue to do this series is just because there's a lot of mystery around that CHRO-level role, and I want aspiring CHROs to know the types of skills and experiences they need to promote into that role in the future. But it's also great to hear from senior HR leaders what's important to them, how they're partnering and collaborating with their executive peers. And we have talked to CHROs from all types of organizations and their answers were very varied and insightful. Before we get to the podcast, I want to hear from you. Text the word "PODCAST" to 512-548-3005. Ask questions, leave comments, make suggestions for future guests. This is my community text number and I want to hear from you.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:02:34.46] In this podcast episode, we are listening to excerpts of some of our best interviews from the Workology Podcast series on CHROs and we've talked with CHROs, Vice Presidents of People and Culture, and we've asked them about what skills and experiences they believe are absolute requirements for that CHRO-level role. So if you're starting out in the industry or you want to promote in, pull up a chair and listen in. We are talking with Cindy Strong. She's the Vice President of People for Outdoorsy.. Jill Waite, Chief People Officer at Portillo's Hot Dogs. Lisa Novak. Vice President of Employee Experience for data.world. And Matt Brown. Chief People and Culture Officer with Schoox. Full podcasts are linked in the show notes so you can listen in if you want to hear more from any of our guests. Let's get to our first

excerpt. Our first excerpt comes from my friend Cindy Strong. She's the Vice President of People for Outdoorsy. Cindy is a human resource leader with nearly 20 years of experience in HR, specializing in leadership development, talent management solutions and training experiences 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. This is the third straight year Outdoorsy has been recognized by Forbes on this exclusive list of the 500 best startups to work for in the US. So let's listen in.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:07.01] What skills and experiences do you believe are absolute requirements for that Chief People Officer role? And I want you to think about this maybe in terms of someone who's just starting out in our industry.

Cindy Strong: [00:04:21.46] Yes, I would encourage them that I don't think it's much different than any other senior leader. I believe two primary requirements are a head for business and a heart for people. I'll give you an example of maybe a head for business and start in my current role. I scheduled 101 meetings until I felt like I had all the answers with the CFO. Asked him to explain the financial reporting. What are our key metrics? What are the market? The threats to the marketplace? What are our opportunities and strengths? This, I could continue to, and then I continue to lean into perspective of functional leaders to round out the people team. And then second, a heart for people to come into focus, a true care and empathy on the well-being for your team. That research is a little different and can take multiple forms. Currently, we are using Lattice for our people's success platform and we're midway through that implementation. But so far I'm really excited about the possibilities for us to lean into our teams and where, what their needs might be or where their sentiments are.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:05:31.68] And no lie. Cindy and I were talking before we started recording and we talked about empathy as a leader, and then we also talked about EBITDA. So I feel like your answer covered all the bases for HR professionals. We can't just be HR experts. We really need to understand the business, but also think about everything we do from that people perspective as well.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:05:53.86] Wasn't that great? Our next excerpt comes from Jill Waite. She's the Chief People Officer at Portillo's Hot Dogs, a restaurant chain with more than 60 locations headquartered in Oak Brook, Illinois. Prior to joining Portillo's in 2019, Jill has served and held several HR positions, also operation roles in retail, grocery and fitness 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's growth.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:06:29.62] YJessica Miller-Merrell: u've been in HR for a period of time. You have this amazing role leading, this really growing, fast-moving organization as you were thinking about future CHROs or maybe HR leaders who were thinking about their career paths into that Chief HR position, what skills and experiences do you believe are absolute requirements for a CHRO?

Jill Waite: [00:06:53.71] Jill Waite: Yeah, so I think, I think it comes back to the foundation I received early on in my career and that is really understanding the business. I was given advice early on that said, if you want to be a successful Chief People Officer, you have to understand the business because at that point you have to earn the respect of your business partners. And so having curiosity for the business that you're in the industry by really trying to understand the levers that go along with how to help the company be successful in addition to understanding and having a passion for people when you bring those two things to get together is when I've seen the most successful heads of HR really thrive in their organization.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:07:44.00] I love that. And I agree with you. I feel like. Anyone and I'm biased here, but anyone who works in retail or restaurant and has multiple locations and they have to understand the business and the business acumen of each of those locations. I feel like has a competitive advantage in my mind over other HR leaders, because when you walk into a store or a restaurant, you really have to understand in that little echo chasm of that store or that restaurant what is happening and maybe how the business or the people are impacting the business.

Break: [00:08:19.19] Before we get to our next excerpt, 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. We are sharing in this episode some of our best responses from podcast guests on the skills and experiences they believe are absolute requirements for a Chief Human Resources Officer role. The CHRO podcast series on Workology is powered by HR Benchmark Survey. You can take our survey by going to [www.HRBenchmarkSurvey.com](http://www.HRBenchmarkSurvey.com). Before we get back, I want to hear from you. Text the word "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: [00:09:07.58] 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](http://HRBenchmarkSurvey.com), you're signing up to get comprehensive quarterly results. Whitepapers and other research from the survey right to your inbox. It takes ten minutes or less to complete. Visit [HRBenchmarkSurvey.com](http://HRBenchmarkSurvey.com).

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:09:33.50] Our next interview excerpt is with Lisa Novak. She's the Vice President of Employee Experience for data.world. What an interesting job title, right? Lisa has over 20 years of experience in staffing and human resources leadership, primarily in the tech industry for companies as they ramp up for significant growth and organizational change. In her current role at data.world, Lisa is responsible for driving the organizational strategy for acquiring, developing and retaining a diverse team of Austin, Texas, my hometown now, where they have the best talent in this highly competitive marketplace. It's crazy here, y'all. Prior to joining data.world, she served on the executive team for a number of organizations and has led HR organizations for companies including RenewData, SigmaTel, and Brooktree through extensive and rapid growth and has helped create positive and motivated cultures in the organizations she has served.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:10:31.40] As you have moved into this CHRO role yourself or VP of employee experience, what skills do you feel like are essential for CHROs or VPs of Employee Experience? And maybe we just think about somebody who's starting out like, is it recruiting? Is it something else? What things are absolutely essential?

Lisa Novak: [00:10:50.54] What will trip people up in the HR world is by pitching ourselves into HR functions, HR operations like recruiting or benefits or payroll, when the reality is human resources is best served being a business partner, really understanding the business. So foundationally, I think it's most important to understand how businesses work and operate, because ultimately that shift from your HR generalist or your HR leader role into the, the deeper lever leadership into that CHRO level is about that ability to be an advisor across the executive team, across the rest of the leadership and management team. And to have that, to be able to really provide that, you have to understand their pieces of the business. And so when, when as a recruiter, I was not just looking to understand the role I was trying to fill, but rather understand how that fit into the business, what the actual business need was, what that departments goals were, etc. And recruiters talk about that on the regular, you know, the more we understand, the better will be at recruiting. But are we really understanding why that's the case? And I think that's what, that's the key that led me into my growth across my career, is that curiosity, that desire to understand the why and the purposes behind and the kind of the business need and business understanding. If I had a nickel for every time someone told me for a recruiter, you really understand the product or for a recruiter, you really understand the business history. I think that's what separates or sets us apart, is that ability to kind of take in the bigger picture because that makes us stronger advisors. And that's really the key to me of the CHR role is to provide that advisorship.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:12:52.19] I think it's interesting. I mean, I'm not surprised about the business aspect of it, but do you think that they can stay in HR or do they need to leave HR to go into like a role that's not HR related? Like maybe go into IT or be a manager, maybe in like logistics or something?

Lisa Novak: [00:13:12.17] I absolutely think that you can do this from with an HR or just like a product manager needs to understand their business and their market. They don't have to go into marketing to understand their market. That's just a piece of their role. So understanding your own market, your own customer, your own space, I think anyone can do. It's a matter of your own curiosity. And sometimes it's also a matter of the business or the company you're in. Do you have the, are your, are your coworkers or your peers cross-functionally in the other departments willing to lean in with you and help educate you? And do you have a strong enough curiosity to go out there and seek that knowledge? I do the research about the space that I'm in, the new industry, that I'm joining the new tool, or what does Gartner say about our competitors, etc. It's going out there and putting in that effort so you can do that from any seat in the house.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:14:03.33] I agree. I like the curiosity component because really there's so much information and knowledge and training out there that you can really absorb that in through questions and shadowing. You can learn about almost anything. It's, I love that.

Lisa Novak: [00:14:18.93] Curiosity is one of our core values at data.world, as a matter of fact. We have a really unique set of values, curiosity being one of them, and that's, we embrace that in our candidates for exactly that reason. And primarily, I've worked at high-growth startup going into scale, scale up and high-growth companies, and that curiosity is really critical because we don't necessarily always have the, the tools, the education, the path in place where you've really got to have that drive to kind of learn yourself and find your way around the organization.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:14:50.46] Our final interview today is with Matt Brown. He's the Chief People and Culture Officer with Schoox. Matt has 15+ years of experience in IT, HR, L&D, and talent management across multiple industries, primarily in the hospitality and restaurant spaces. Today he blends people, processes, and technology to connect better HR with learning and development, and helping and organize as well as to create cultures and experiences that have a lasting impact. If you are from the retail or hospitality space trying to make a transition into a different industry. Matt is someone who has been there, done that, so I hope you enjoy this.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:15:29.64] So let's kind of focus a little bit on skills and experiences. What do you think are the absolute requirements for somebody stepping into a Chief Human Resources Officer role in terms of experience? And, and this is thinking also to maybe somebody who's just starting out in the industry.

Matt Brown: [00:15:47.82] Yeah, there's a lot of different ways that I could answer this question. But as you, as you stated when we first started, Chief HR Officer, HR in general is different from one company to the next. And the reason, because of that, the reason why is because we're focused on people and no two people are the same, so when you get a group of people together in an organization, you really have to understand the dynamic at play and not just coming straight from a place and here's what the book tells us to do. So I think, of course, there is a requirement to have a really comprehensive understanding of the HR domain, meaning functionally understand all of the elements that go into HR or understand that HR looks a little different at some companies. Sometimes it contains an operation slice, sometimes it contains training, sometimes it's nested under operations. I've been, I've reported into legal, I've reported it to finance. I've reported in a lot of different places. So it's, spend time really just understanding contextually what the function of HR is comprised of and then go a step beyond. And this is really the next piece that I'm going to share is something I think that's highly relevant for where we are today.

Matt Brown: [00:16:58.56] It may make some people uncomfortable, but I do that sometimes. So I think over and beyond that, it's really mastering how you show up in the workplace with compassion, with empathy, and with patience. I think those three things are absolutely critical to be a successful HR leader, especially in 2023 and beyond. Self awareness, transparency and vulnerability are also highly critical in my opinion. These are some of the things that have served me very well. I have been on a lifelong journey. I've never been satisfied that I am fully self aware, so I'm constantly seeking to learn more about myself. I am constantly trying to create an environment of open, honest feedback, but also I am perfectly happy to let the facade down. I'm not going to show up and be the perfect leader. I'm human just like everybody else, which means I've got life problems, I've got work problems, I've got things I don't quite know, and it's okay to put those

things out there. And it creates a level of respect that really can help fuel what you need when you're driving the people portion of the business.

Closing: [00:18:10.20] I love this series. I also love, like, slicing and dicing it so you can hear directly like one consecutively after the other, insights from other people who have been there and done that. They've been in that senior HR level role, they have moved through the organizations and in different positions throughout their career. I find it fascinating and so interesting. I'm such a nerd to hear the different answers and responses from our guests. They're all from different industries and have very different backgrounds. I love the CHRO series on the Workology podcast and I am such a nerd about skills and experiences because they are all unique and different and what our requirements for that CHRO level role. Because it has changed even in the last 15-20 months, it has changed dramatically. Insights from people who have years of experience in our industry and continue to thrive in this role I think are very helpful for us who are just starting out or you're looking to up-level and take your career into that next level, next step.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:19:14.71] This podcast series is powered by our HR development courses, Ace The HR Exam and Upskill HR. You can visit [Learn.Workology.com](http://Learn.Workology.com) to learn more about our HR recertification and certification prep courses. Before we close, I do want to hear from you. Text the word "PODCAST" to 512-548-3005. Ask me questions, leave comments, and make suggestions for future guests and topics. This is my community text number and I want to hear from you. A special thank you to you for joining the Workology Podcast. I have been doing this for, I think, ten years now. It blows my mind. This podcast is sponsored by HR Benchmark Survey. This podcast is for the disruptive workplace leader who's tired of the status quo. That's me. That's you. Let's change the workplace together. My name is Jessica Miller-Merrell. Until next time, visit [Workology.com](http://Workology.com) to listen to all our past Workology Podcast episodes.