

HR Leaders Quarterly

Third Quarter 2025

Leading Through **Ungovernable Change**



Gartner®

Editor's Note

Change management has always been an important leadership skill. But, as change today has become ungovernable, it is more essential now than ever before. Change in the workplace is constant, increasingly complex and driven by factors outside leaders' control, and the risks of failing to adapt are ever greater. Today's business environment requires leaders who can lead their teams through a continuous series of changes that often overlap and intersect while overseeing a workforce that has grown increasingly weary of change and skeptical of their employer's ability to handle it effectively.

This new change environment — combining continuous, layered and complex change with low levels of employee trust in change — demands a new approach to change leadership, which is the focus of our latest research. Trying to inspire employees' confidence and get them excited about change is no longer an effective strategy; instead, leaders must routinize change by building employees' skills at responding to constant change and embracing progress, not perfection, as a goal. HR plays an integral role in guiding leaders toward this new approach and developing a more change-resilient workforce.

This issue of HR Leaders Quarterly highlights this new research, showcasing our findings on how and why leaders

must embrace the routinizing approach to change, how to build employees' change reflexes and how CHROs can avoid missteps in adjusting their organization's approach to change.

This issue also includes insights into how CHROs can best support their CEO's top priorities and how they can apply the lessons of the pandemic to today's challenges.

Additionally, as part of our Executive FastStart series for new-to-role CHROs, we feature a panel discussion with five former CHROs about how incoming CHROs can best plan for their transition, make an early impact and set themselves up for long-term success.

Jonah Shepp

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Executive Sponsor Peter Aykens
Editor in Chief Jonah Shepp
Managing Editor Carolina Valencia
Associate Editor Tess Lawrence
Contributing Editor Maia Call

Authors
KaJaiyai Hopkins
Piers Hudson
Aanya Jain
Eva Johnson
Atif Raza Khan
Alexander Kirss
Nandini Raghav
Satyanshu Sapra
Carolina Valencia
Kayla Velnoskey

Design
Katelyn Chiedi
Brittany Hoover
Suejung Kim

Editor
Meghan Cortez

Project Managers
Lindsay Kumpf
Lauren Abel

HR Must Help Leaders **Routinize Change to Bolster Adoption**

by Carolina Valencia, Kayla Velnoskey

Most leaders unsuccessfully try to inspire change adoption by painting a vision of a better future. To reap the benefits of change adoption, CHROs — the key facilitators of change — must encourage leaders to routinize change instead, making it second nature for employees to adopt frequent changes.



Change has become ungovernable for leaders. For instance, in the last year:¹

- 63% of HR employees tell us that their organization expanded to a new geographic region or market.
- 79% made a significant technology platform change.
- 75% experienced one or more senior leader transitions.

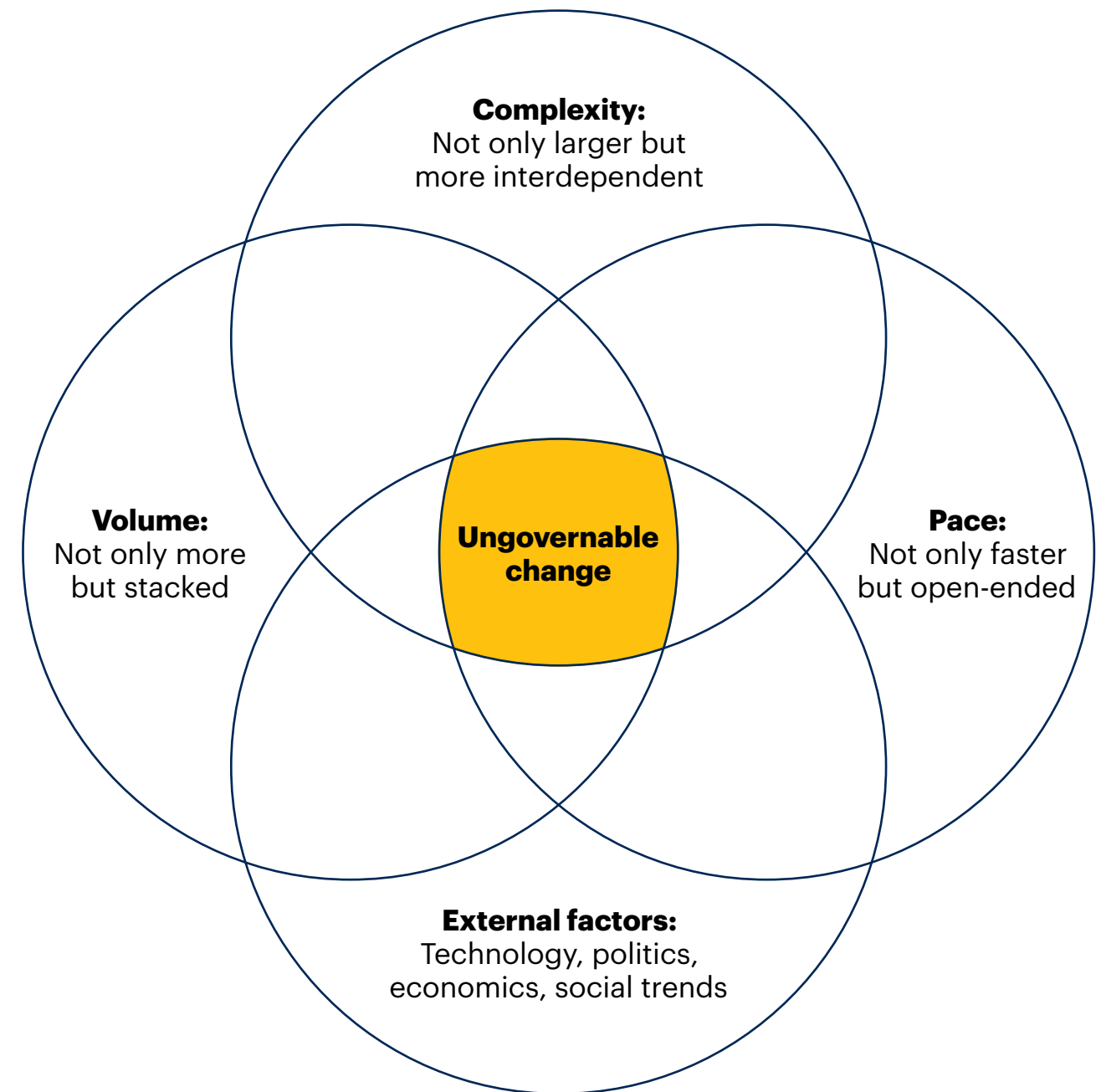
These are just a few of the many changes organizations have faced lately, and more and faster changes are coming. Sixty percent of HR leaders tell us their organization is implementing a greater number of changes than two years ago, and 65% say executives want employees to adopt changes faster.²

While leading change has always been difficult, today's change has become ungovernable for leaders.

This is due to the convergence of four factors: complexity, volume, pace and the impact of external factors (see Figure 1):

- **Volume** — Not only is there a larger volume of changes, but these changes are stacked — one happening on top of another.
- **Pace** — Not only are changes faster, but they are also continuous, without a clear start or end date.
- **Complexity** — Changes are not only larger, but they also have multiple interdependencies.
- **External factors** — Change is more externally driven, with impacts coming from all sides: technology, politics, economic uncertainty, societal trends, etc.

» Figure 1: Factors Making Change Ungovernable



Source: Gartner

Ungovernable change: Change that keeps changing due to factors that cannot be fully controlled by leaders or their organizations.

This new world, in which changes keep changing, has two negative consequences:

1. It has made it harder for business leaders to get employees to adopt changes on time and without causing undue harm.
2. It has eroded employees' trust in the organization's ability to change effectively.

One in three HR leaders agrees that midlevel to senior-level leaders struggle more to get employees to adopt changes today compared to just two years ago.² Meanwhile, 79% of employees exhibit low change trust, which means they believe their organization has made poor change decisions in the past and is unlikely to make good change decisions in the future.⁴

As business leaders struggle to get employees to adopt changes, the CHRO — the key facilitator of change — must develop a new approach through which HR can support leaders in this struggle. After all, only 35% of HR leaders have confidence in senior leaders' ability to lead change today, and only 15% have confidence in midlevel leaders.² To help CHROs, we investigated how midlevel to senior-level business leaders can drive healthy change adoption when trust in change is low and how HR can best support them.

How to Promote Healthy Change Adoption

Healthy change adoption means employees do what is asked of them, in the desired time frame, without the change causing them undue harm. We found that only 32% of midlevel to senior-level leaders throughout organizations worldwide were able to get employees to exhibit healthy change adoption during the last change initiative they led.³

This is problematic because healthy change adoption is not only good for employees but primarily good for business. Organizations that were above average on our healthy change adoption metric reported a year-over-year revenue growth rate that was two times higher than those who were below average.²

Organizations with above average healthy change adoption reported **two times higher annual revenue growth rates** than those with below average healthy change adoption. For companies with 50,000 employees, we determined this **can equal up to \$2.2 billion annually.**²

To identify what midlevel to senior-level leaders can do to achieve healthy change adoption, we looked at three fundamental ways leaders influence change, by shaping:

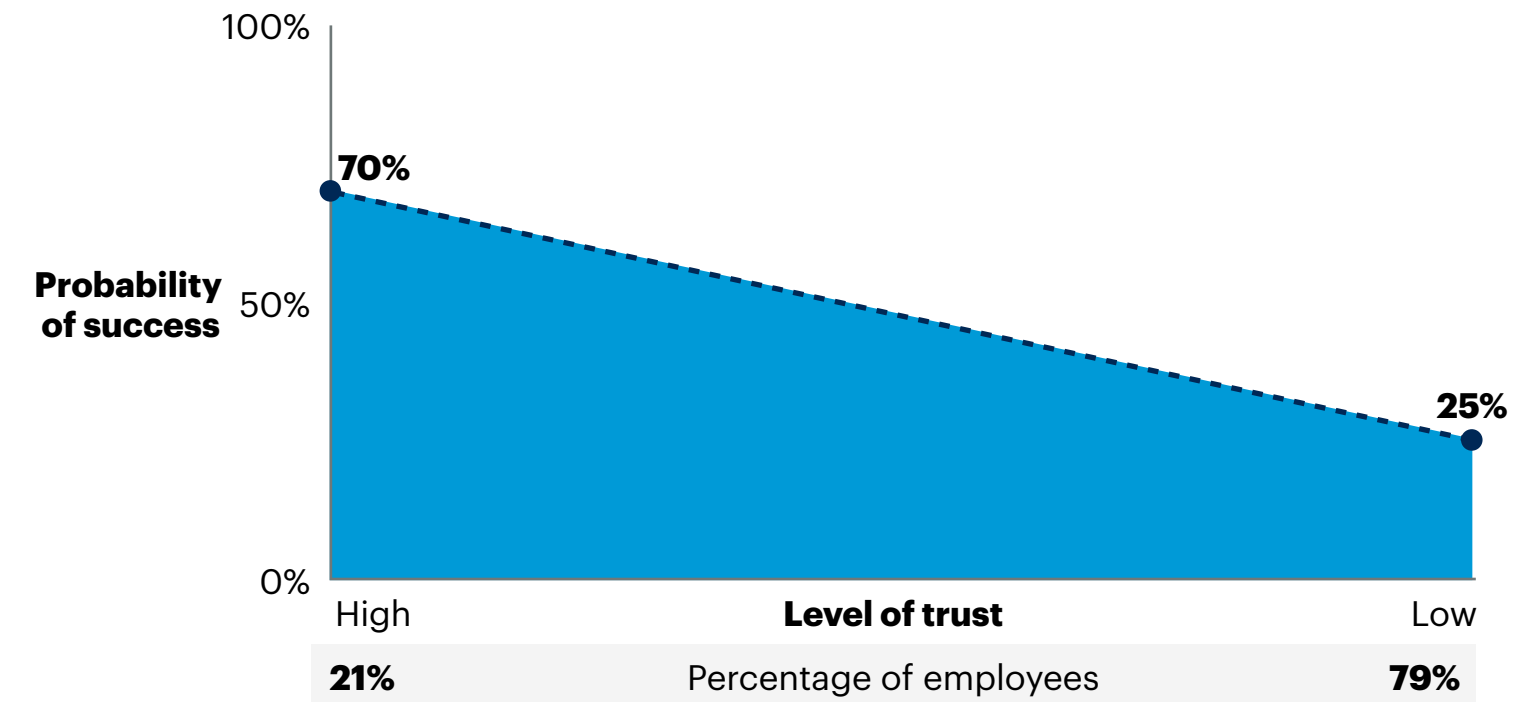
- What employees **think** about change
- How employees **feel** about change
- What employees **do** during change

We learned that the majority of midlevel to senior-level leaders use an **inspirational approach** to encourage healthy change adoption. This approach is anchored on the idea that if employees understand why a change is happening and believe the change will result in positive outcomes, then they will be willing to adopt it. When implementing this approach, leaders shape:

- How employees think by **promoting the aspirational vision** of each change
- How employees feel by **listening empathically to employee concerns** about each change and overcoming them by **pitching the benefits** the change will bring
- What employees do by **guiding employees through specific action steps** for each change

When employees had high trust in change (not trust in individual leaders or in the organization generally but rather trust that the organization has made and will make good change decisions), this approach made sense. However, today, when employees' trust in change is low, this approach fails. When midlevel to senior-level leaders implement this approach today, our model predicts that only one out of every four employees will exhibit healthy change adoption (see Figure 2).

» **Figure 2: Predicted Probability of Healthy Change Adoption Using the Inspiration Approach**



The vast majority of employees have low change trust.

n = 987 midlevel to senior-level leaders

Source: 2025 Gartner Change Leadership Business Leader Survey

Note: Change trust includes: My team has a history of effectively implementing change initiatives; team members generally believe that future changes we implement will be successful; I generally believe that future changes we implement will be successful.

This result might seem surprising, but it shouldn't. After all, this approach is highly dependent on trust. When trust is low, three things happen that make the inspirational approach ineffective:

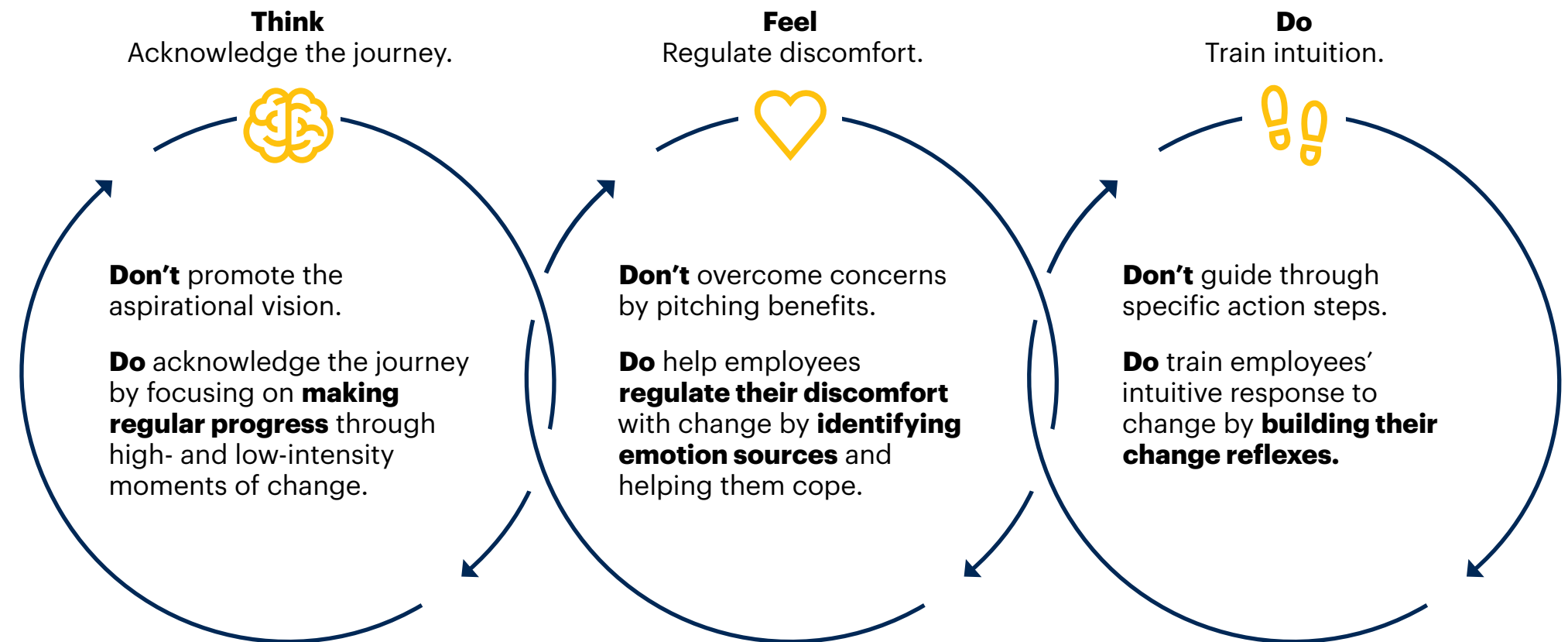
- When leaders promote the vision they have for a change, employees don't trust that vision will match the outcome.
- When leaders try to downplay the emotional discomfort that comes with change by pitching its future benefits, employees don't trust that the benefits will be worth the present discomfort — or that these benefits will even materialize at all.
- When leaders guide them through specific implementation steps during the change, employees don't trust that this guidance will match what they actually need to do.

Since trust is the source of the change adoption problem, leaders may be tempted to respond by trying to rebuild employee trust, but that won't work. Building trust in change isn't the same as building trusting relationships between leaders and their teams: Even trustworthy leaders aren't seen as credible on change due to its uncertainty.

However, our research shows the best change leaders don't inspire; instead, they **routinize change**. As part of this approach, midlevel to senior-level leaders shape (see Figure 3):

- How employees think by **acknowledging that change is normal** and **promoting regular progress** along the change journey
- How employees feel by helping employees **regulate discomfort**, using tools to identify the sources of their discomfort and cope with it
- What employees do by guiding employee actions through **building change reflexes** in everyday moments, training employees' intuitive response to change and preparing them for any future reality

» **Figure 3: Actions Leaders Take to Routinize Change Adoption Instead of Trying to Inspire It**

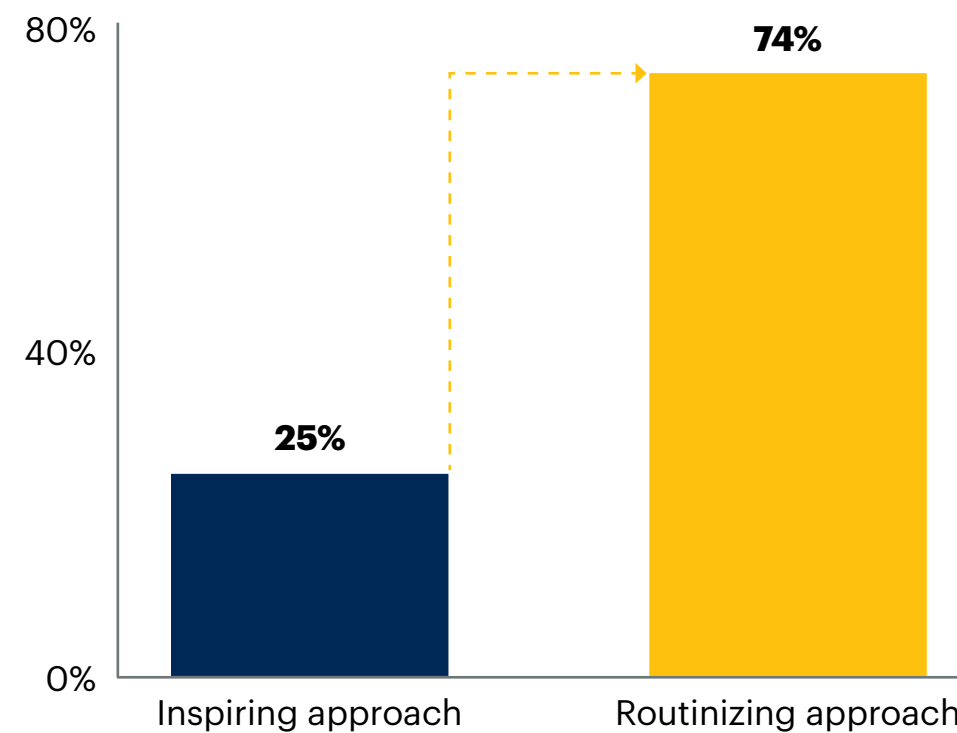


Source: Gartner

Midlevel to senior-level leaders who use the routinizing approach to lead change are three times more effective at achieving healthy change adoption, compared to leaders who use the inspirational approach. In an environment of low employee trust in change, our model predicts that leaders who implement the routinizing approach have a 74% chance of achieving healthy change adoption by their teams (see Figure 4).^{3,4}

» **Figure 4: Predicted Probability of Healthy Change Adoption With Low Change Trust**

Routinizing change results in a **3x higher probability** of healthy change adoption in today's low-trust environment.



n = 987 midlevel to senior-level leaders; 2,889 employees

Source: 2025 Gartner Change Leadership Business Leader Survey; 2025 Gartner Change Leadership Employee Survey

Note: Change trust includes: My team has a history of effectively implementing change initiatives; team members generally believe that future changes we implement will be successful; I generally believe that future changes we implement will be successful.

The routinizing approach requires three adjustments to the current change management approach:

1 **Think: Make Progress the New Norm**

Instead of promoting a change vision that will never become a reality, the routinizing approach resets change expectations by focusing on **making progress the new norm**, rather than focusing on the final destination (the vision). To do this, CHROs should:

- Realign culture to one focused on making progress, not necessarily reaching an end state.
- Ask HR leaders to provide business leaders with sample communications that prioritize making progress and acknowledge the change journey.

2 Feel: Make Employees Comfortable With Discomfort

Since leaders can no longer predict whether or how employees will benefit from change, the routinizing approach regulates change discomfort by **making leaders and employees comfortable with the discomfort** that change brings, rather than trying to overcome it. CHROs must ensure their teams equip leaders with emotional regulation tools. Most HR functions already have emotional well-being resources or simple tools to help employees self-reflect on work situations. HR leaders should immediately see how they can be adapted to help regulate change emotions.

CHROs can take a few other actions to make leaders successful at emotional regulation during change, including:

- Asking their teams to include tools leaders and employees can use to identify change emotions in change management offerings
- Ensuring the organization has training on how to coach on emotional regulation techniques
- Clarifying employees' responsibilities for managing their emotional reactions to change
- Giving leaders permission to escalate change concerns only when necessary
- Establishing training for leaders and employees on when to escalate change concerns

3 Do: Practice Core Skills Until They Become Reflexive

The routinizing approach accounts for how reality will differ from the change "playbook," so it requires employees to **practice core change skills in everyday moments** until they become second nature, rather than guiding them on what specific actions to take. HR must teach leaders to build change reflexes.

A natural starting point for HR to help leaders identify core change skills is conducting an audit of the most recent change initiative and determining the skills that enabled employees to adopt the change successfully. Other actions HR can take include:

- Defining core change skills and identifying critical change skill gaps
- Providing leaders with templates or change messages that highlight the risks of staying the same to motivate employees to learn change reflexes
- Giving leaders tools that help identify the risks of staying the same

Conclusion: Leading When Change Is Ungovernable

In an environment where changes are stacked, continuous, interdependent and externally driven, no point where things stop changing exists. Employees can see that change is happening all around them, and they don't trust promises of a clear path forward and a final destination. Employees need their leaders to help them get comfortable with the discomfort of constant change, embrace progress as a core value and build core change skills. Routinizing change is a more honest, realistic and effective way to get employees to adopt the continuous changes their organizations are going through today and in the foreseeable future.

¹ **2024 Gartner Organizational Structure and Leadership Trust Survey.**

This survey was conducted to understand employee experiences with organizational change and trust in organizational leadership. The research was conducted online from 15 June through 11 July, 2024 and contains responses from 3,529 employees with representation from various regions, industries, and functions.

² **2025 Gartner Change Leadership HR Leader Survey.**

This survey was conducted to understand HR leader perspectives on change leadership approaches and challenges. The survey was conducted online from 17 February 2025 through 1 April 2025 and contains responses from 152 HR leaders with representation from various regions and industries.

³ **2025 Gartner Change Leadership Business Leader Survey.**

This survey was conducted to understand change leadership approaches, challenges, effectiveness, and support provided by HR. The survey was conducted online from 10 March 2025 through 27th March 2025 and contains responses from 987 business leaders (managers of managers not belonging to the C-suite), with representation from various regions, industries and functions.

⁴ **2025 Gartner Change Leadership Employee Survey.**

This survey was conducted to understand the volume of changes in the past year, employee perceptions of change leadership today, what approaches leaders take to lead change and employees' effectiveness on change-related reflexes. The research was conducted online from 14 March through 14 April 2025 and contains responses from 2,889 employees from various geographies, industries and functions.

Disclaimer: The results of these surveys do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

AI Agents' Role in the Blended Workforce

by Satyanshu Sapra and Aanya Jain

AI agents – autonomous or semiautonomous software entities that use AI techniques to perceive, make decisions, take actions and achieve goals in digital or physical environments – are projected to change the way work gets done.

The rapid growth in AI agents' capabilities has presented an opportunity for organizations to create a blended human/machine workforce. HR leaders seek to leverage the blended workforce for improved productivity and cost efficiency. To do so, they are planning their talent strategy for the future around both humans and machines and envisioning AI agents' role in HR workflows.

Sixty-two percent of CEOs believe that **AI will define the next business era.**³

Why is it concerning?

Only 8% of HR leaders are prepared to manage a blended workforce of humans and machines. In fact, 23% of HR leaders say that they are not at all prepared.¹



91% of HR leaders see a **machine workforce in their talent strategy** by 2028. While 65% of them believe their talent strategy will be directed at mostly humans and some machines, 24% expect it to be directed equally at both.¹

CHROs will need to help their employees transform the way that work is done in a human-AI agent workforce. This new augmented workforce will shift from humans directly delivering services and workflows to end-users, to humans building and maintaining AI agents, which will deliver services on their behalf.

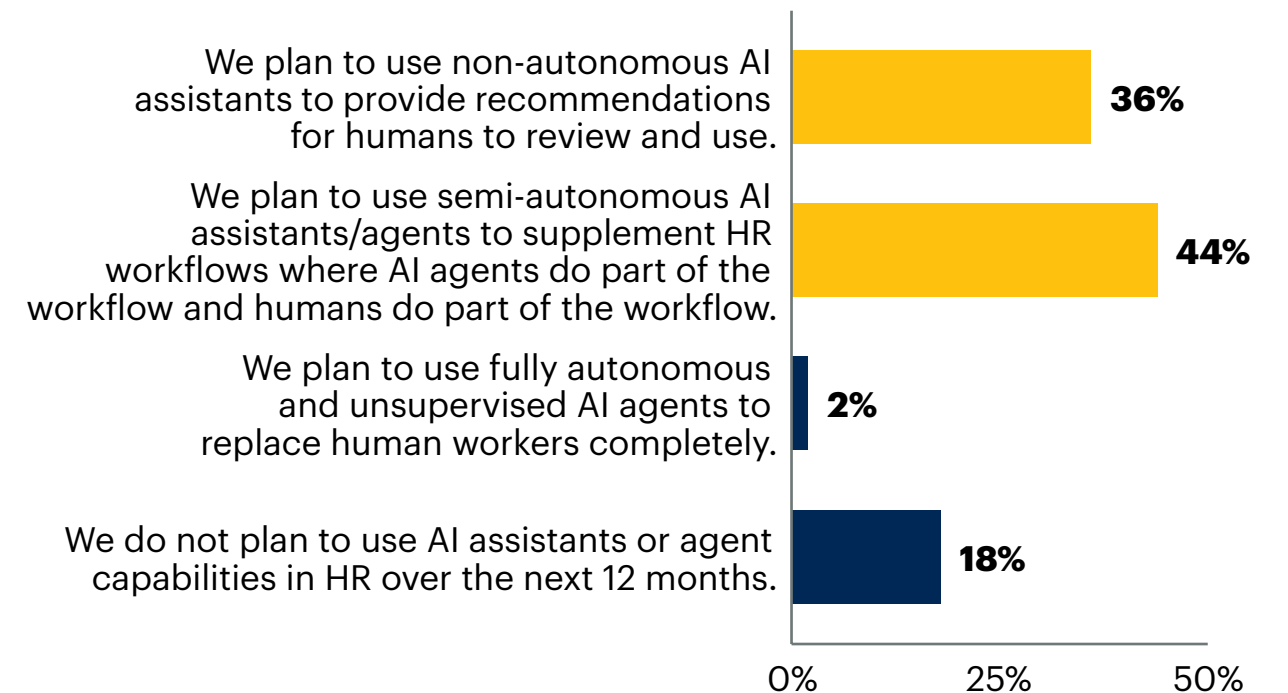


Eser Rizaoglu
Senior Director Analyst
Human Resources

How are HR leaders responding?

- Sixty-six percent of HR leaders trust AI agents to take actions that benefit the employee experience.²
- Eighty percent of them primarily plan to use AI assistants and agent capabilities to support humans in HR workflows.²

HR Leaders' Approach to AI Assistants and/or Agent Capabilities Use Within Next 12 Months (Percentage of HR Leaders)



n = 39-109 HR Leaders

¹Source: Benchmark with Gartner: Calibrate Talent Strategy Amid Market Shocks & Navigate Culture Tensions (June 2025)

²Source: Benchmark with Gartner: Mitigating Talent Strategy Risk Amid U.S. Policy Shifts & Tackling Skill Gaps (May 2025)

³Source: 2025 Gartner CEO and Senior Business Executive Survey, n = 456 CEOs and other senior executives.

How to Calibrate Talent Strategy Amid Market Shocks

by Satyanshu Sapra and Aanya Jain

Adapting and managing talent strategy in alignment with business objectives becomes even more challenging for HR leaders during times of market volatility and organizational change.

HR leaders should incorporate scenario planning to identify the business impacts of market shifts and plan actions in advance. They should also partner with business unit leaders on talent strategy and focus on leadership development.

Seventy percent of HR leaders say market shifts such as the slowdown in global growth, the advent of agentic AI and U.S. policy changes have **put the ability of their talent strategy to deliver desired outcomes at risk.**²

Why is it concerning?

- While scenario planning is critical for adapting talent strategies, almost all HR leaders (98%) face barriers doing it.¹
- Engaging stakeholders (32%) is the most common barrier to effective scenario planning.¹



Only 36% of HR leaders say they are **confident in their organization's ability to effectively adapt its talent strategy** in response to market shifts.²

Most organizations have talent strategies that are not flexible and not evolving at the speed of business transformation, which can lead to wasted resources. Leading organizations ensure talent strategies get adjusted at the pace of change, e.g., by integrating talent planning into ongoing business planning.



Chantal Steen
Vice President, Advisory
Human Resources

How are HR leaders responding?

- Forty-five percent of HR leaders say they use scenario planning to sense and respond to potential future events that can put talent strategy outcomes at risk.¹
- Most HR leaders (84%) consider business unit leaders to be one of their CHRO's most critical partners outside of HR in developing their talent strategy.¹

Actions HR Leaders Are Prioritizing in Response to Recent Market Shocks¹

Percentage of HR leaders



n = 50-104 HR Leaders

¹ Source: Benchmark with Gartner: Calibrate Talent Strategy Amid Market Shocks & Navigate Culture Tensions (June 2025)

² Source: Benchmark with Gartner: Mitigating Talent Strategy Risk Amid U.S. Policy Shifts & Tackling Skill Gaps (May 2025)

Note: Responses not shown include – Increasing recruitment to fill skills gaps (20%), Using rewards to incentivize high performance (17%), Our organization is not responding to recent market shocks (6%), Other (4%).

How CHROs Can Prevent Common Change Missteps

by KaJaiyai Hopkins

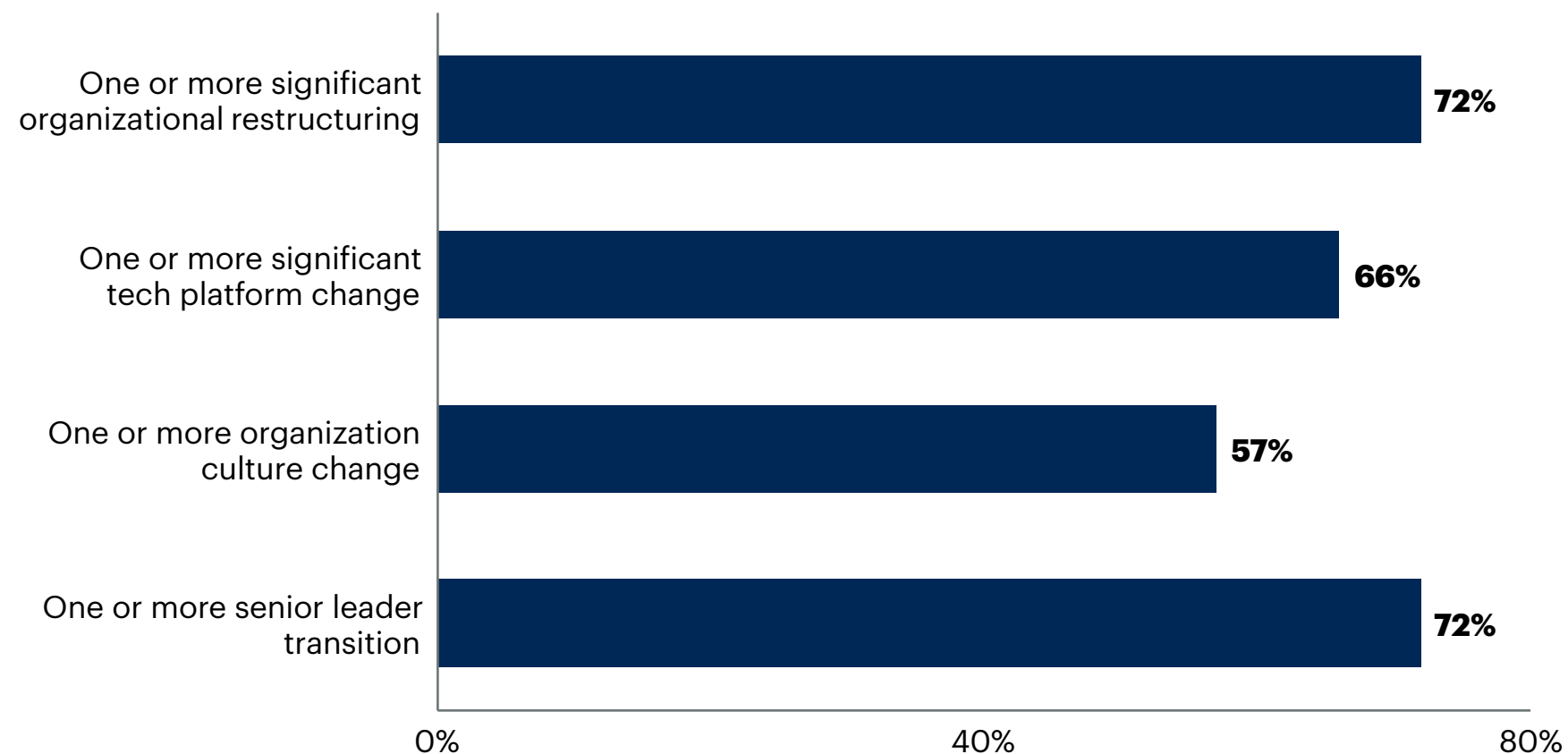
The unique combination of challenges in today's change environment have fundamentally altered key assumptions CHROs and their teams can make about supporting change. To avoid missteps, CHROs should guide leaders to focus on making progress, helping employees cope with discomfort and building their general change skills.

Introduction

Organizations continue to face abundant changes, many of which are significant and transformational (see Figure 1).¹ Chief HR officers (CHROs) must create a change culture at their organizations that enables leaders and employees to meet the constant transformation demands that are inherent to today's business environment.

» Figure 1: Prevalence of Significant Organizational Changes

Significant changes experienced in the past year, percent of employees



n = 2,889 employees

Source: 2025 Gartner Change Leadership Employee Survey

Our latest research on reinventing change leadership uncovered several deeply held but ultimately incorrect assumptions CHROs make about change that could derail their efforts to create a change-ready culture. These assumptions fall into three categories: change messaging, change feelings and change implementation (see Table 1).

» **Table 1: Incorrect Change Assumptions**

Category	Incorrect assumption	How to prevent missteps
Change Messaging (the communications and signals that leaders and the organization give about change)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees need to understand why a change is happening to act on it. • If leaders communicate openly about change, employees will believe them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on the need to make progress. • Give employees the information they need to act on change.
Change Feelings (employees' emotional reaction and how employees feel when they are asked to implement a change)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees feel better about change if leaders are empathetic to their discomfort. • It's possible to reduce the discomfort change brings to employees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Push back when change concerns are personal, not operational. • Acknowledge the inevitability of change discomfort.
Implementation (the things employees need to do to implement a change)	Every change is unique, so leaders need to lead each change with a unique approach.	Develop general change skills in the workforce.

Source: Gartner

How to Prevent Change Messaging Missteps

Focus on the Need to Make Progress

As stewards of the workforce during change, CHROs and their teams invest heavily to get employees to adopt changes. To do this, they often overemphasize the *why* in communications and messaging about change. In fact, 78% of HR leaders believe employees need to understand why a change is happening to be willing to adopt it.² However, this assumption is incorrect. We found that when leaders ensure employees know why a change is happening, it did not lead to any statistically significant reduction in rates of change failure.³

Employees do not need to know the *why* of change; rather, they need to be able to respond reflexively to change so adopting today's continuous and increasingly complex changes becomes second nature to them. CHROs can prevent overemphasizing the *why* in change messaging by explaining the *how* of change instead as well as the importance of making progress on changes.

Give Employees the Information They Need to Act on Change

Change messaging strategy is often shaped by the assumption that if HR can help leaders communicate transparently about change, then employees will be more likely to believe them. HR has made progress in reinforcing transparent communication to build trust between leaders and employees in the context of change. Fifty-six percent of business leaders believe they need to share as much information as possible for employees to be willing to adopt a change.³ In theory, this would generate employee buy-in and trust in change.

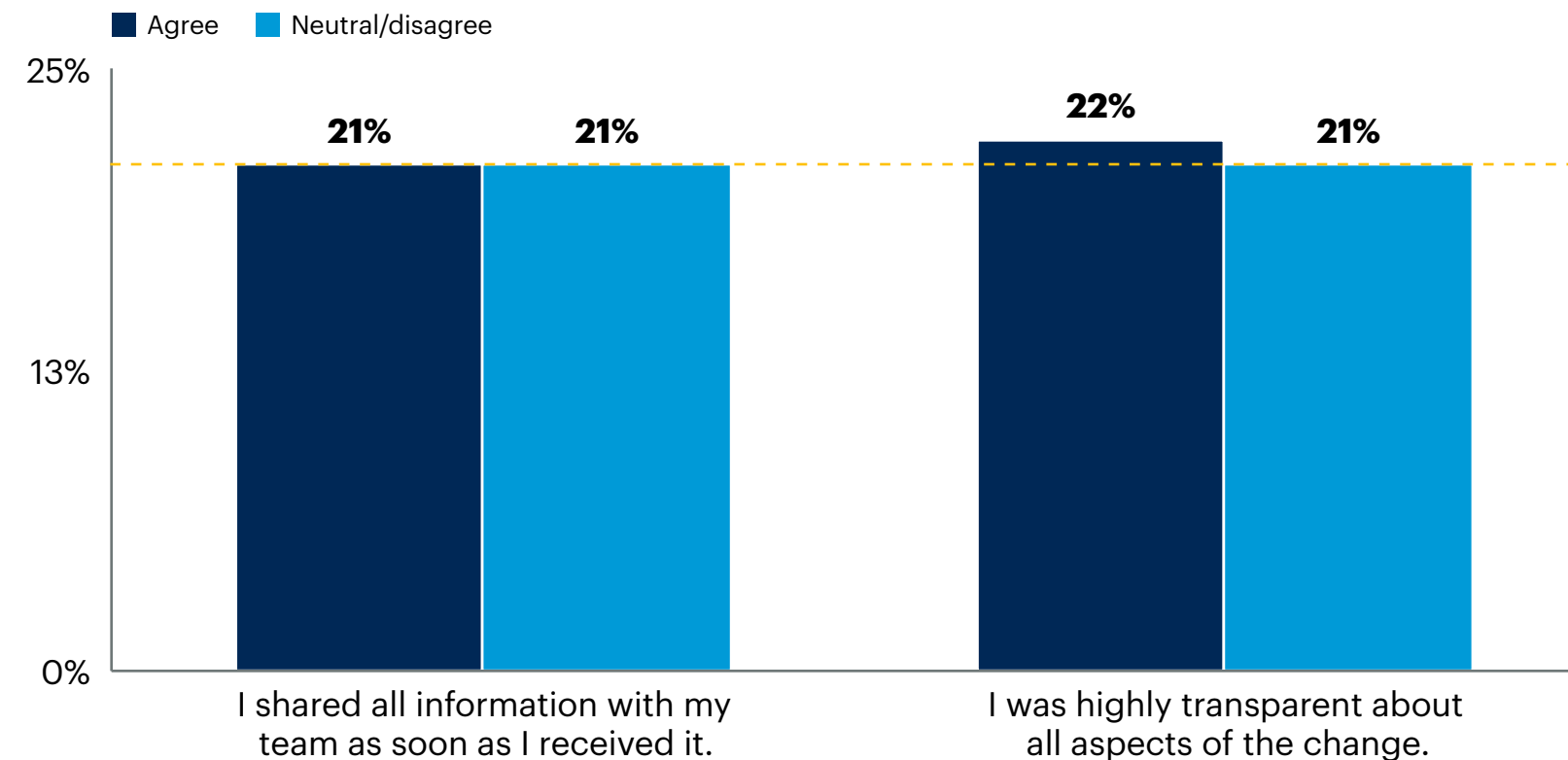
Unfortunately, even if employees trust their leaders, they remain deeply skeptical about change information. Only 28% of employees believe leaders share the genuine reasons why the organization wants to change, and only 21% of employees have high trust in change at their organization.¹

Change failure was defined as change initiatives that do not meet their initial goals or are not fully adopted within the expected time frame.

Transparent communication is not bad, but it does not lead to any reduction in change failure rates (see Figure 2).³ Understanding that employee buy-in to change is unlikely, CHROs and their teams should redirect change messaging effort to focus on giving employees *only* the information they need to act.

» **Figure 2: Impact of Leader Transparency on Change Failure Rate**

Average leader reported change failure rate



The **change failure rate** holds steady at around 21%, regardless of whether leaders report being transparent about the change.

n = 987 midlevel to senior-level leaders

Source: 2025 Gartner Change Leadership Business Leader Survey

Note: Change failure was measured using the following question: "What is your best estimate of the percentage of change initiatives at your organization that fail? In other words, what is the approximate percentage of change initiatives that do not achieve their initial goals or are not fully adopted in the expected timeframe?"

How to Prevent Change Feelings Missteps

Push Back When Change Concerns Are Personal, Not Operational

As organizations have been updating their people strategy to consider employees as whole humans, HR has led the shift by developing more empathetic leaders. This approach also extends to change; 82% of HR leaders believe when midlevel to senior-level leaders address employee concerns about change with empathy, employees will adopt changes more readily.² However, we found that when leaders respond to all change concerns empathetically, it was actually associated with a three-percentage-point decrease in healthy change adoption.³

Healthy change adoption means the change was acted on in a timely manner, without undue stress to employees.

This happens because most employees' concerns about change have little to do with the change itself and more to do with their personal discomfort with change. CHROs should feel empowered to push back against the flood of personal feelings about change and teach leaders to do the same.

Acknowledge the Inevitability of Change Discomfort

No matter if change is big or small, it's often uncomfortable for employees. Many CHROs and their teams believe they can reduce the change discomfort employees feel, so they train leaders to look for adjustments they can make to eliminate discomfort. We found that, regardless of which approach CHROs and their teams use for change leadership, leaders are unable to alleviate employees' discomfort.³ This phenomenon persists because discomfort is an inherent element of change that cannot be eliminated.

Understanding this, CHROs should openly acknowledge the discomfort everyone feels about change and proactively equip leaders and employees with the tools to

cope with their change discomfort. When CHROs and their teams take decisive action to help themselves and others cope with change discomfort, this normalizes making progress despite discomfort, rather than trying to reduce it.

How to Prevent Implementation Missteps

The HR function has a key role in shaping leaders' approach to each change initiative. HR typically does this by investing in customized approaches for leaders to follow for each initiative. As a result, 60% of business leaders also incorrectly believe that each change is unique and requires its own unique approach.³

However, we have found that most changes require similar skills and behaviors to implement them. To increase the likelihood of healthy change adoption, leaders should not just give employees the opportunity to practice the following six change skills but also ensure these skills can be reflexively applied to any change scenario:¹

- Being open to new experiences
- Effectively managing their time
- Understanding the context in which their business operates
- Using technology effectively
- Working well with anyone, regardless of if they have worked together before or not
- Regulating their emotions

Therefore, to improve change adoption, CHROs and their team should update the change strategy to include developing general change skills in the workforce that can help employees implement any change reflexively.

Conclusion

The unique combination of challenges in today's change environment have fundamentally altered key assumptions CHROs and their teams make about supporting change. This new environment has the potential to turn mainstays of change management into missteps. But CHROs can prevent these missteps by reevaluating their assumptions about change and updating their strategy to include best practices for navigating today's context.

¹ **2025 Gartner Change Leadership Employee Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand the volume of changes in the past year, employee perceptions of change leadership today, what approaches leaders take to lead change and employees' effectiveness on change-related reflexes. The research was conducted online from 14 March through 14 April 2025 and contains responses from 2,889 employees from various geographies, industries and functions.

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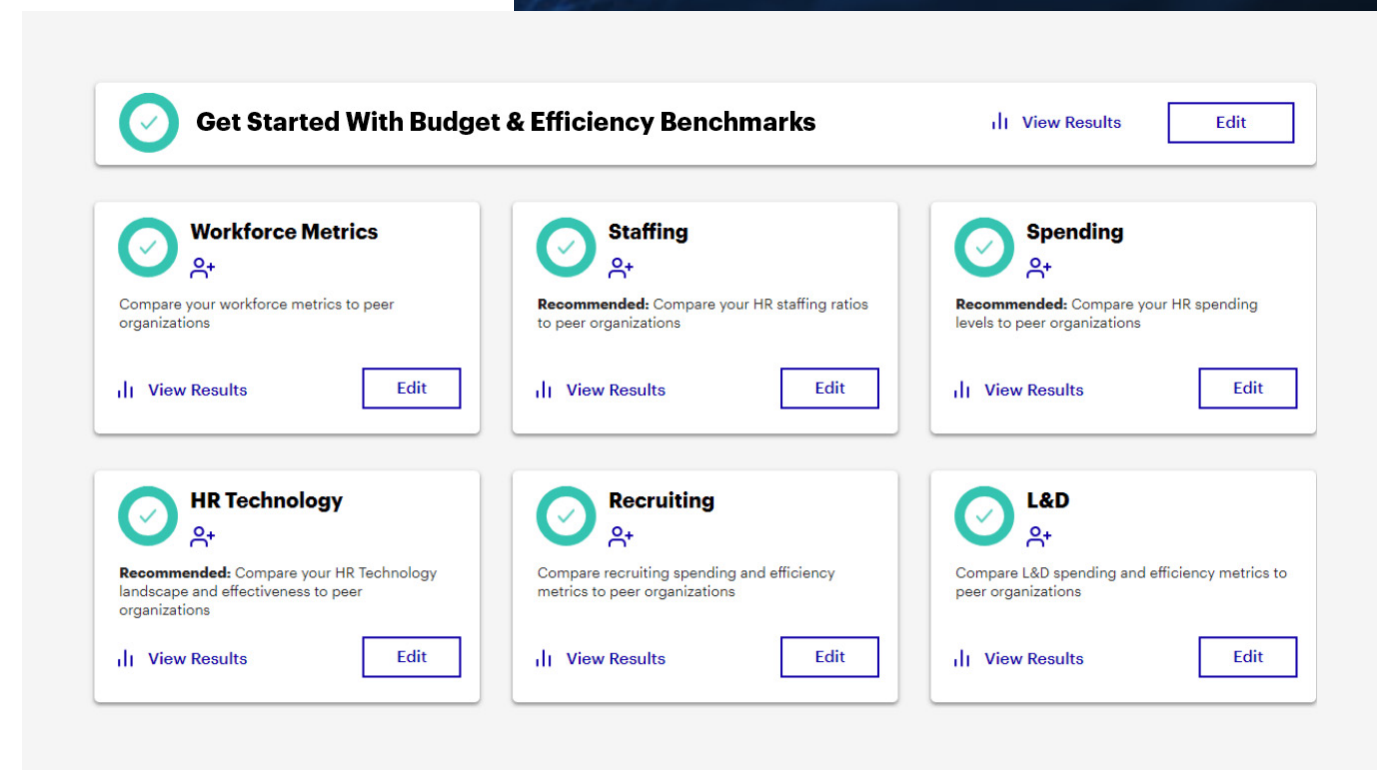


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Help Leaders Build Employees' Change Reflexes to Create a **Change-Ready Workforce**

by Kayla Velnoskey

CHROs and their teams can help employees respond more effectively to change by creating a strategy to develop employees' change reflexes — core change skills that have been practiced until they become second nature. This article explores which skills matter most and how to build them.

Helping employees adopt change has always been a difficult task for leaders, but it is arguably even more difficult today. One in three HR leaders agrees that midlevel to senior-level leaders struggle more to get employees to adopt changes today compared to just two years ago.¹ Specifically, leaders report experiencing challenges getting employees to move forward with the fast-moving, complex and interdependent changes that have become the new reality of organizational change.²

In this difficult change environment, only 32% of midlevel to senior-level leaders report achieving healthy change adoption, which is a measure of employees acting on change in the desired time frame without experiencing undue harm, on the last change they led.² Achieving healthy change adoption today requires reinventing leaders' approach to change leadership to focus not on inspiring employees to change but on routinizing change. Leaders must treat continuous change as a normal business process and help employees adopt the right mindsets and skills so that adopting change becomes second nature.

A key part of the routinizing change approach involves enabling employees to act on change more intuitively by building employees' change reflexes.

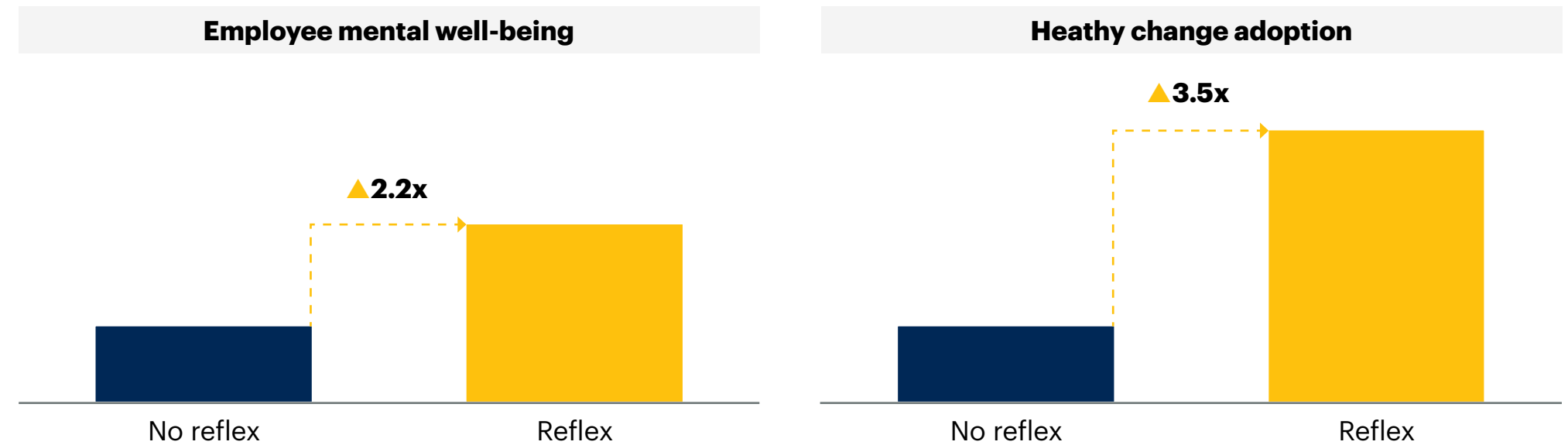
Change reflex: A core skill that is applicable to multiple change scenarios, practiced with enough repetition to become intuitive

When employees have change reflexes and are able to apply them to the changes they experience, they are 3.5 times more likely to report achieving healthy adoption during the last organizational change they experienced. Yet, reflexes are not just good for getting change adopted; they are particularly effective at the “healthy” part of healthy change adoption. Employees who apply reflexes are 2.2 times more likely to report high mental well-being (see Figure 1).³

To incorporate the concept of change reflexes into their change leadership strategy, CHROs and their teams must understand:

- What makes a change skill a change reflex?
- Which change reflexes matter most for success?
- How can HR help leaders build employees’ change reflexes?

» Figure 1: Impact of Having a Relevant Reflex for a Given Change Scenario on Outcomes



n = 2,555 employees who encountered a specified change scenario as a result of last organizational change

Source: 2025 Gartner Change Leadership Employee Survey

Note: “No Reflex” refers to employees who encountered a change scenario but did not report practicing a specific related reflex associated, while “Reflex” refers to employees who both encountered a change scenario and reported practicing the specific related reflex.

A Change Reflex Is a Skill Practiced Until It Becomes Effortless

Breaking down the definition of a change reflex reveals three key elements that take an ability from just a skill to a reflex:

- First, a reflex starts with “a core skill that is applicable to multiple change scenarios.” This means that employees must first be **effective** at a skill that helps them adopt change.
- Second, the skill must next be “practiced with enough repetition,” meaning that employees must have the **opportunity to practice** the skill regularly.
- Finally, applying the skill must “become intuitive.” Employees must be able to automatically apply their skills in response to triggers in their environment so the action **becomes second nature**.

When employees are effective at a core change skill, when they have had the opportunity to practice it regularly and when they report knowing when to apply the skill feels second nature, that skill becomes a change reflex.

While many organizations seek to make their workforce more “change ready,” it can be difficult to define in practice. The concept of change reflexes gives CHROs a way to operationalize the concept and build a strategy that enables midlevel to senior-level leaders to take concrete steps toward building a more change-ready workforce.

Which Reflexes Matter Most Varies by Type of Change

Once the concept of a change reflex is defined, the natural next question for both HR and midlevel to senior-level leaders is which core change skills are the most important to build. Sixty percent of midlevel to senior-level leaders believe every change is unique and requires unique guidance.² However, in reality, many different changes share common change scenarios, and these scenarios result in a limited number of particularly impactful change skills.

We examined four categories of organizational change:

- Organizational restructuring/merger and acquisition (M&A)
- Organizational culture changes
- Technology platform changes
- Strategic changes (i.e., branding, strategy or expansion-related changes)

When employees reported on the impacts they personally experienced as a result of these changes, the following change scenarios were particularly common across all four change types:³

- Using a new process in day-to-day work
- Taking on different job responsibilities
- Using new technology
- Working closely with new people

Overall, employees reported experiencing 12 common change scenarios at varying rates across the four types of change tested. We identified a set of global change skills that apply to any change, as well as specific skills that apply to common change scenarios. We then used these findings to create a list of change reflexes, all of which were revealed to have a measurable impact on achieving healthy change adoption (see Table 1).³

For all types of change, increasing employee effectiveness on these skills generally has a positive impact on healthy change adoption. However, six skills are most critical to success. When employees

are not only effective at the following skills, but have practiced them until applying them has become second nature, employees are between 1.3 times and 1.7 times more likely to achieve healthy change adoption when looking at all types of change together:³

- Being open to new experiences
- Effectively managing time
- Understanding the context in which the business operates
- Using technology effectively
- Working well with anyone, regardless of prior experience
- Regulating emotions

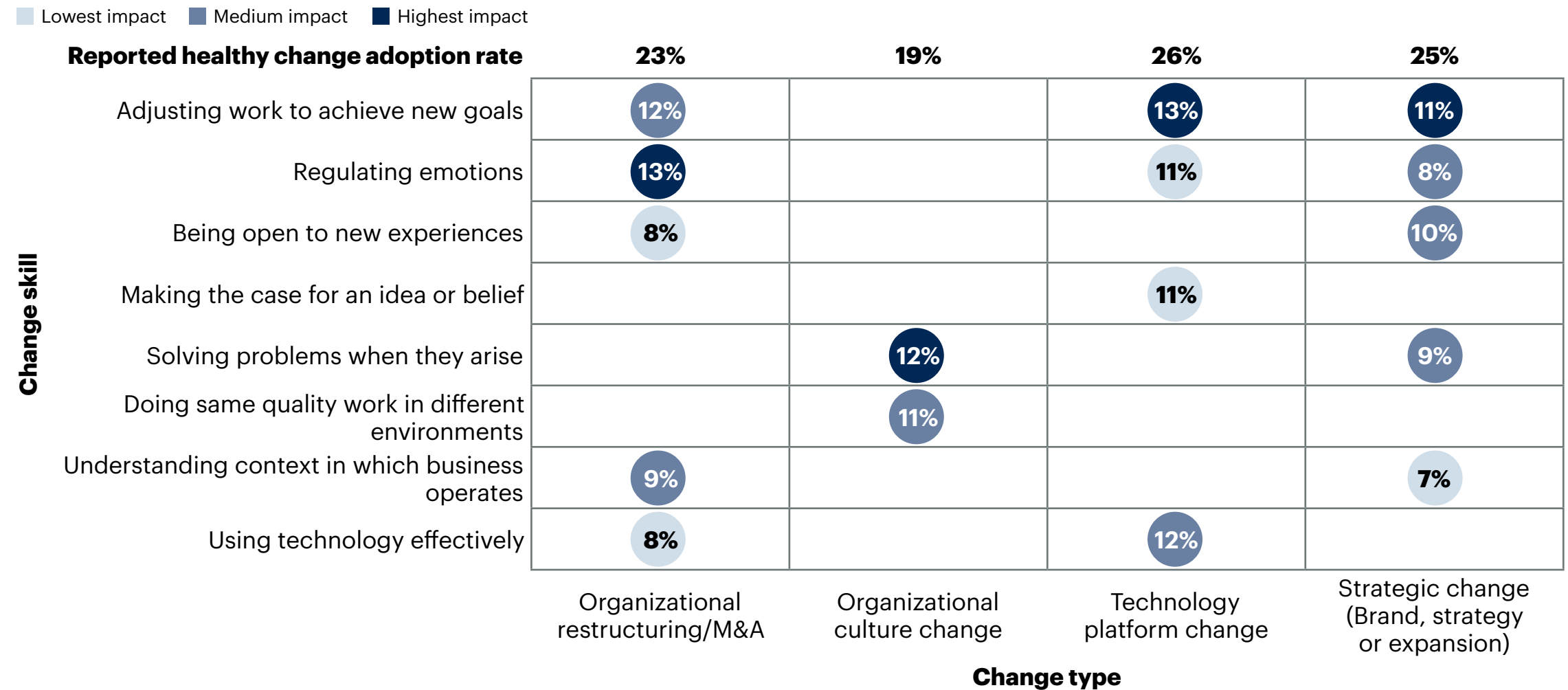
» **Table 1: Common Change Scenarios and Associated Change Reflexes**

Common change scenario	Associated change reflex
(Global)	Understanding the context in which the business operates
(Global)	Being open to new experiences
Using a new process in day to day work	Learning how to do new things
Taking on different job responsibilities	Learning how to do new things
Using a new technology	Using technology effectively
Working closely with new people	Working well with anyone, regardless of prior experience
Shifting how I spend time on my tasks	Effectively managing time
Shifting my performance goals	Adjusting work to achieve new goals
Reporting to a different manager	Working well with anyone, regardless of prior experience
Troubleshooting implementation challenges	Solving problems when they arise
Working through negative emotions	Regulating emotions
Adjusting my expected career path	Adjusting work to achieve new goals
Working from a new physical location	Doing same quality work in different environments
Advocating for personal needs	Making the case for an idea or belief

Source: 2025 Gartner Change Leadership Employee Survey

These six change reflexes can help make employees more change ready regardless of the types of change they experience. However, for particular types of change, employees must be effective in certain unique change skills. Returning to our four broad categories of organizational change reveals that the most critical skills vary by change type (see Figure 2).

» **Figure 2: Reported Healthy Change Adoption Rate and Most Impactful Change Skills by Change Type**



n = 2,689 employees

Source: 2025 Gartner Change Leadership Employee Survey

Note: Impact refers specifically to the maximum impact of employee effectiveness in specific skills on healthy change adoption. This analysis does not include opportunity to practice or employee perception of application feeling second nature in calculations.

Effectiveness on different change skills is most associated with healthy change adoption for the following types of change:

- **Organizational restructuring/M&A:** Employees reported healthy change adoption on 23% of recent restructures or M&As.³ Greater success was most associated with effectiveness at regulating emotions, adjusting work to achieve new goals, understanding business context, using technology effectively and being open to new experiences.
- **Organizational culture changes:** Employees reported healthy change adoption on only 19% of recent culture changes, making them the least successful changes on average.³ Greater success was most associated with effectiveness at solving problems when they arise and doing the same quality of work in different environments.

- **Technology platform changes:** Employees reported healthy change adoption on 26% of recent technology platform changes.³ Greater success was most associated with effectiveness at adjusting work to achieve new goals, using technology effectively, making the case for an idea or belief and regulating emotions.
- **Strategic changes:** Employees reported healthy change adoption on 25% of recent strategic changes, which include rebranding, new strategies and expansion into new markets or geographies.³ Greater success was most associated with effectiveness at adjusting work to achieve new goals, being open to new experiences, solving problems when they arise, regulating emotions and understanding business context.

While the most important skills vary among different types of change, the overarching strategy for building these skills into reflexes remains the same and involves leaders playing a key role in identifying opportunities for practice.

Leaders Must Build Change Reflexes in Everyday Moments

Employees need opportunities to practice core change skills consistently over a period of time to become more effective and to make applying them second nature. Carving out dedicated time for this activity is not an option in today's busy work environment, as the time can quickly be consumed by tasks that feel more urgent or even simply more interesting. On the other hand, trying to practice them during intense moments of change will be too overwhelming or risky for leaders and employees.

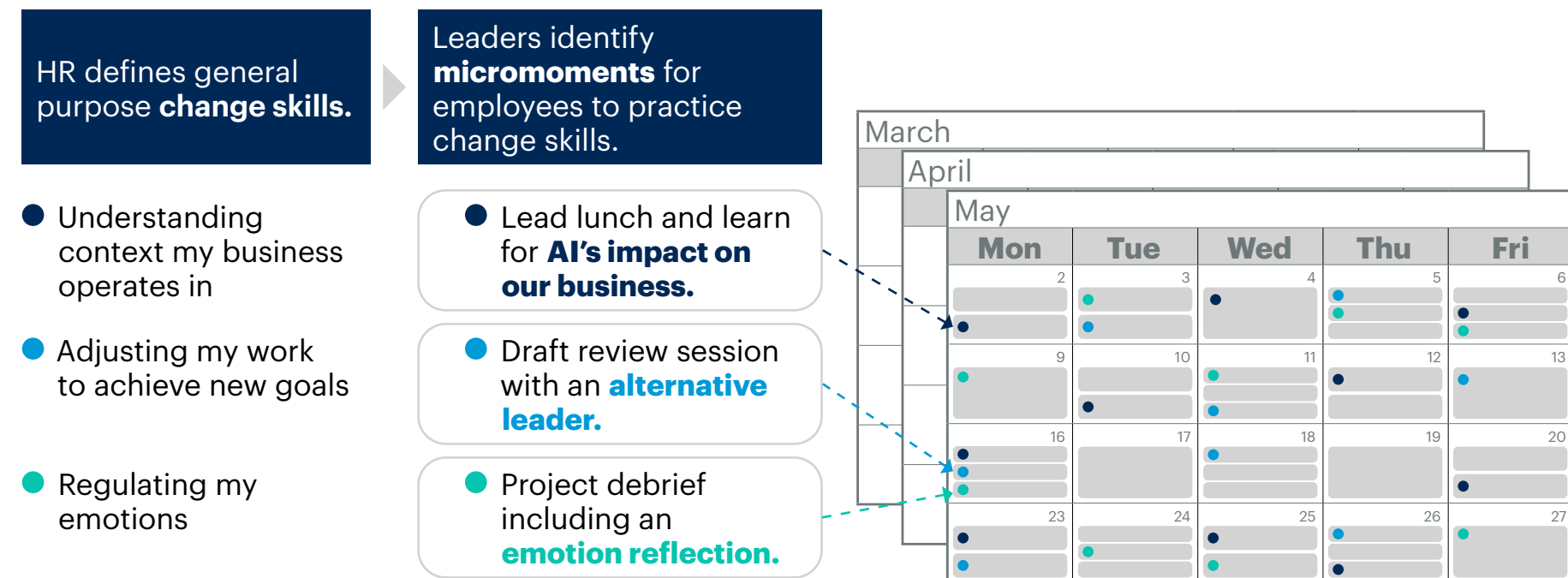
The best moments for developing and practicing change reflexes are micromoments within daily workflows. These are tasks in the regular course of work that either naturally resemble moments that happen during big changes or, with a little adjusting by leaders, can resemble these moments. This intentionally creates a scenario to practice a change reflex but does so in the flow of regular work without creating additional burden on the employee.

To help leaders build employees' change reflexes, HR must teach leaders to identify and leverage these micromoments. Midlevel to senior-level leaders are best positioned to implement this approach as they are the closest to employees' work and their trusted coaches for developing and practicing skills.

Jack Henry’s Employee Skill Development to Build Change Readiness

The HR team at fintech organization Jack Henry helps leaders first identify core skills for preparing for and adopting any type of change. HR then coaches leaders to find micromoments within employees’ daily work to practice and develop these skills (see Figure 3). For example, to help a team member practice and develop their ability to adjust their work given their new goals, a leader might ask them to review a draft proposal with another leader. Working with a different leader who has their own unique perspective and experience will help the employee learn how to reprioritize their work and maybe even improve some other core change skill. Jack Henry’s approach also focuses on frequency because it takes practice and repetition to turn a skill into a reflex.

» **Figure 3: Change Skill Development Micromoments**
Illustrative



Source: Adapted From Jack Henry



Case in Point

Jack Henry *continued*



Once employees have developed the reflexes, they also need to anticipate when to use their core change skills. At Jack Henry, leaders assign employees responsibility for learning and teaching back relevant external business context that may cause a future change. This starts with an external trigger: something that happens outside the team or even the organization that the leader suspects may have a future change implication. For example, AI could prompt further digital transformation for the team and the organization. The leader assigns each trigger and future change implication to an employee, who is responsible for learning about that trigger and engaging team members in a collaborative dialogue about what it could mean for them.

This is not a hypothetical conversation. They try to determine how they can best prepare for that future change, what core change skills are needed and what they need to do to further practice and develop. This exercise not only improves their business acumen and builds change reflexes, but it gives employees a sense of empowerment that's different from the typical open-source change approach.

Get Started With Your Organization's Change Reflex Strategy

Using these insights on what a change reflex is, which ones matter most and how HR can help leaders build employees' change reflexes, CHROs and their teams can start incorporating the concept of change reflexes into their change leadership strategy.

CHROs can embrace their role as enterprise leaders of change by educating their teams on the value of a change reflex strategy and creating a reflex-building plan for their organization. To get started:

- Make the business case for this new strategy to key stakeholders.
- Evaluate processes such as critical skills identification, leadership development and change management for opportunities to incorporate the principles of change reflexes.

Additionally, CHROs should work with their teams to begin implementing this approach across related HR processes. A natural starting point for HR to help leaders identify core change skills is conducting an assessment of your most recent change initiative and determine the skills that enabled employees to adopt the change successfully.

Other actions HR can take include:

- Defining core change skills and identifying critical change skill gaps
- Refreshing experiential learning coaching for leaders
- Incorporating the concept of micromoments for building change reflexes into change leadership development

¹ **2025 Gartner Change Leadership HR Leader Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand HR leader perspectives on change leadership approaches and challenges. The survey was conducted online from 17 February 2025 through 1 April 2025 and contains responses from 152 HR leaders with representation from various regions and industries.

² **2025 Gartner Change Leadership Business Leader Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand change leadership approaches, challenges, effectiveness, and support provided by HR. The survey was conducted online from 10 March 2025 through 27 March 2025 and contains responses from 987 business leaders (managers of managers not belonging to the C-Suite,) with representation from various regions, industries, and functions.

³ **2025 Gartner Change Leadership Employee Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand the volume of changes in the past year, employee perceptions of change leadership today, what approaches leaders take to lead change and employees' effectiveness on change-related reflexes. The research was conducted online from 14 March through 14 April 2025 and contains responses from 2,889 employees from various geographies, industries and functions.

Disclaimer: The results of these surveys do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

Routinizing Change Sparks Greater Innovation and Well-Being

by Atif Raza Khan and Nandini Raghav

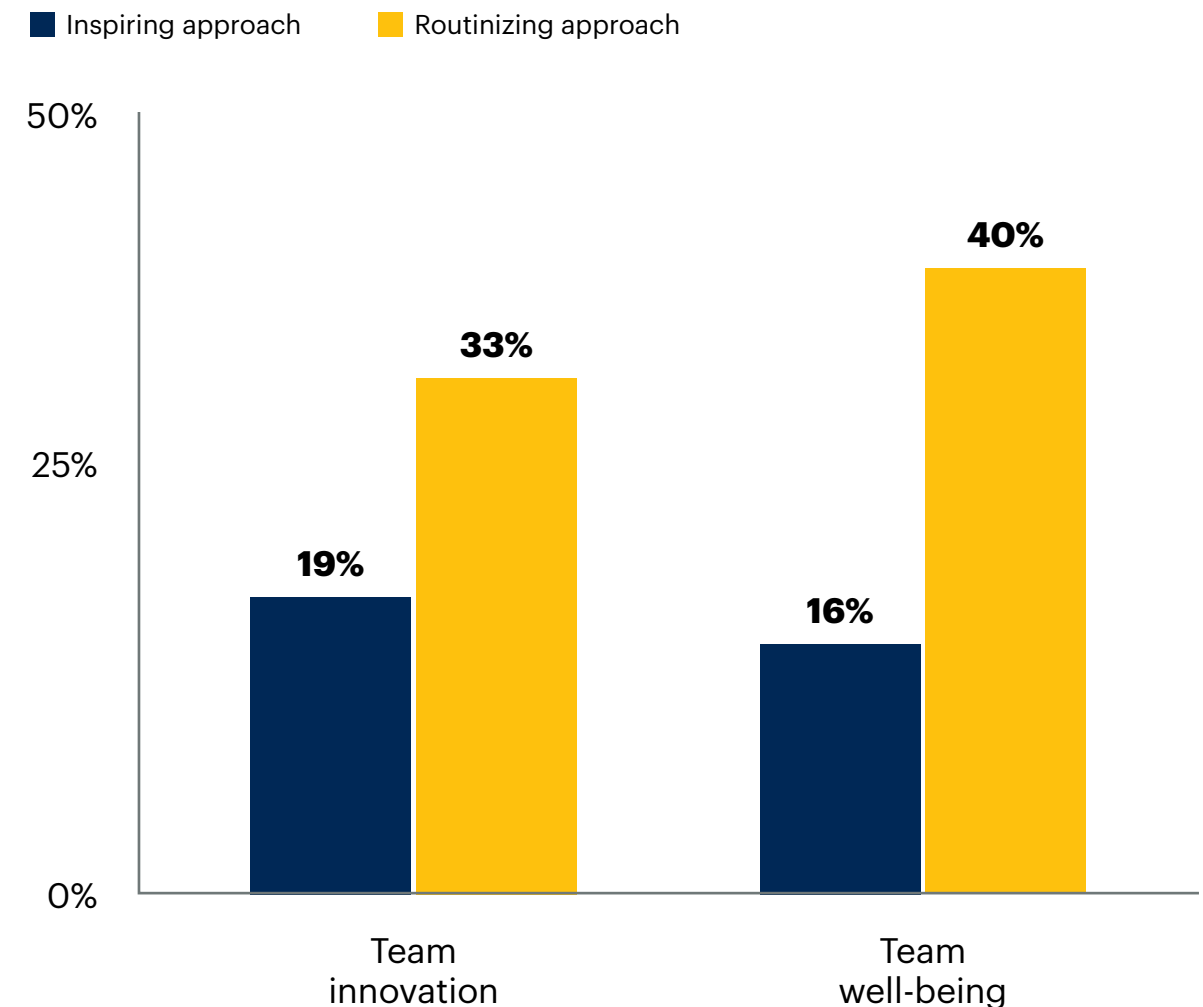
Team innovation and employee well-being are key elements enabling organizations to thrive in times of change and disruption. For CHROs today, prioritizing both well-being and innovation is essential, not only to manage change but also to turn it into a catalyst for sustained organizational success.

In today's environment, the traditional approach to change management — inspiring employees to adopt change by convincing them of its benefits — is not enough to drive these critical outcomes. Our research shows this approach delivers only modest gains: up to a 19% increase in team innovation and up to a 16% boost in employee well-being.

By contrast, leaders who routinize change by integrating it into daily work and making it a predictable part of the employee experience see far greater results. Leaders utilizing the routinizing change approach report up to a 33% increase in team innovation and up to a 40% improvement in employee well-being.

These findings underscore the importance of shifting away from singular motivational efforts for each change and instead building consistent systems and routines that make change a regular part of everyday work. By embracing this evidence-based approach, CHROs can drive greater team creativity, resilience, and satisfaction, positioning their organizations for long-term success in an ever-changing environment.

» Maximum impact of change approaches on team innovation and well-being



n = 987 mid to senior level business leaders
Source: 2025 Gartner Change Leadership Business Leader Survey

How CHROs Can Support CEOs' Top Priorities for 2025 to 2026

by Alexander Kirss

CHROs can use this research to support five CEO strategic priorities for 2025 to 2026: growth through geographic expansion; business and operating model agility; new, compelling customer value propositions; disciplined risk management and realigned talent, management and leadership strategies.

For the 15th year in a row, CEOs surveyed by Gartner say that growth is their top organizational priority for the next two years (see Figure 1).¹

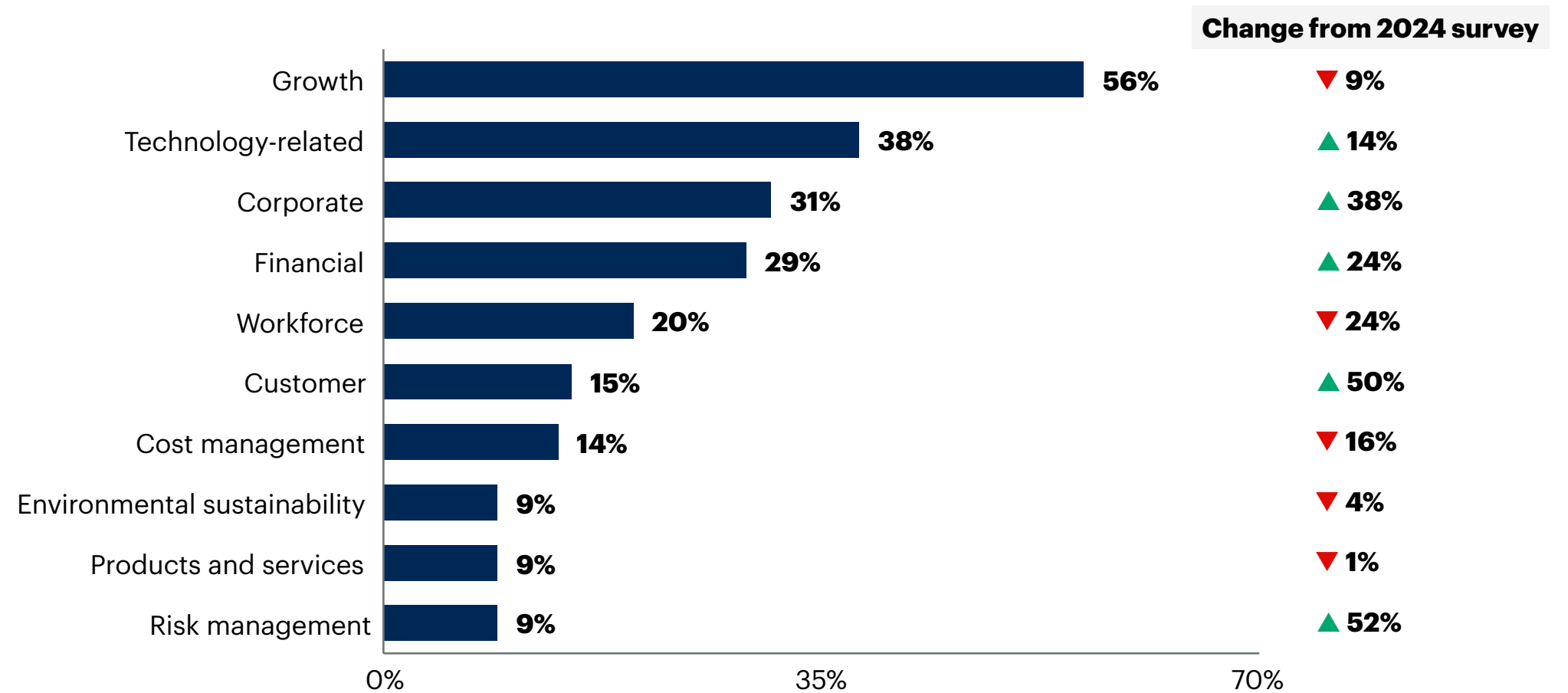
While CEOs' interest in growth is consistent, how they hope to achieve that growth has shifted. Specifically, Gartner has identified five common CEO strategic priorities for 2025 to 2026 that CHROs must support in order to drive growth:

- Growth through geographic expansion
- Business and operating model agility
- New, compelling customer value propositions
- Disciplined, comprehensive risk management
- Realigned talent, management and leadership strategies

Partnering with the CEO on these strategic priorities is more essential than ever for CHROs as CEOs' workforce prioritization is slipping. Only 20% of surveyed CEOs rank the workforce as one of their top three strategic business priorities for 2025 and 2026. This is down 24% from 2024 and 35% percent from a peak in 2022 when 31% of CEOs ranked the workforce as a top priority, making it the third most reported priority.¹

» **Figure 1: CEOs' Strategic Business Priorities for 2025 to 2026 — Top 10**

Summary top three mentions, coded responses



n = 456, all respondents

Q. To start, please tell us about your organization's top five strategic business priorities for the next two years (2025/2026).

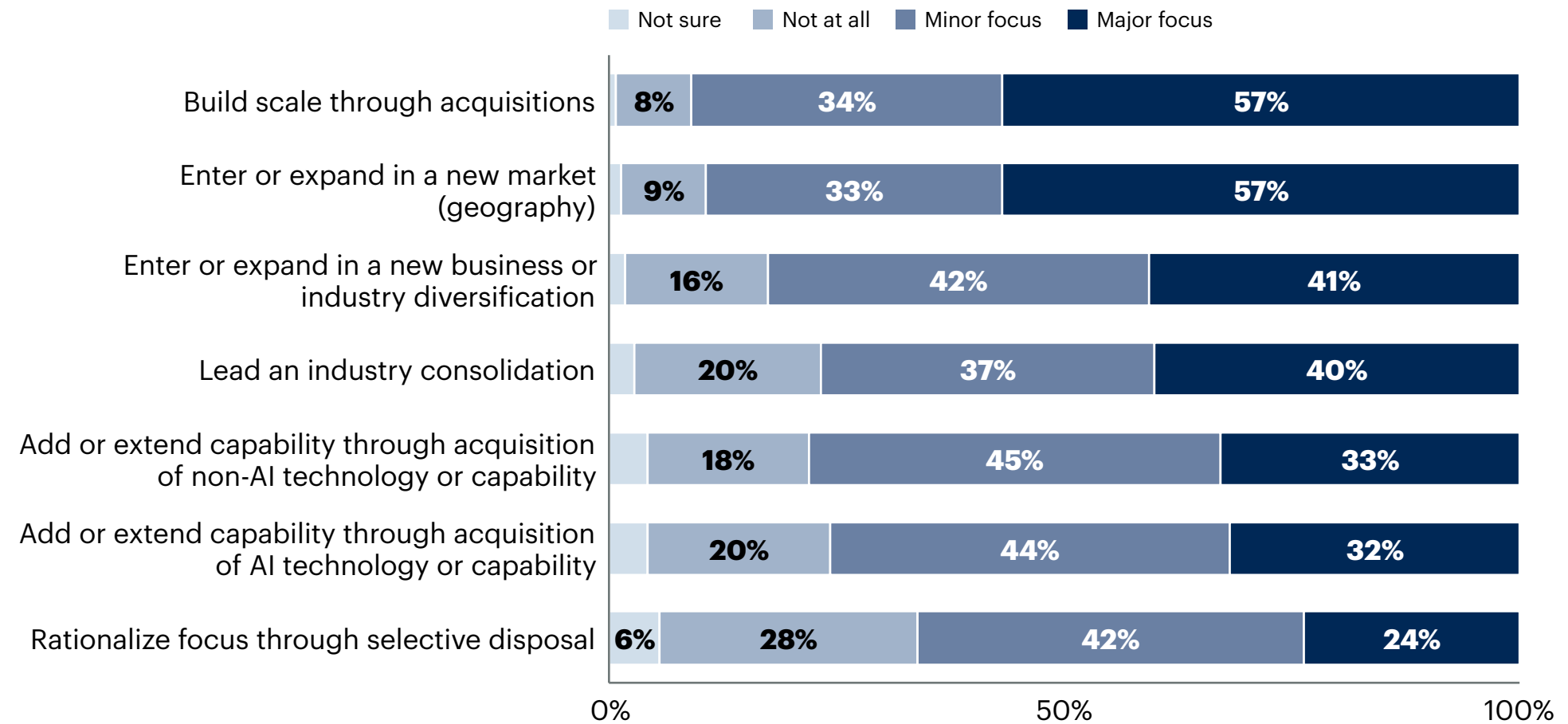
Source: 2025 Gartner CEO and Senior Business Executive Survey

Priority 1: Growth Through Geographic Expansion

About one-quarter of CEOs (27%) say their main strategy to capture growth is to expand their markets and strategically diversify.¹ Building geographic capacity organically is only one option for CEOs. Another option is mergers and acquisitions (M&A). More than half of CEOs that expect some proportion of top-line growth through M&A (57%) anticipate building additional business capacity through M&A. The same percentage (57%) will focus their M&A strategies on entering or expanding in a new geography (see Figure 2).¹

» Figure 2: Focus of M&A Activity

Organizations' M&A strategy over next five years



n = 396, organizations that expect some proportion of top-line growth through M&A

Q. To what extent are each of the following a focus of your organization's M&A strategy over the coming five years?

Source: 2025 Gartner CEO and Senior Business Executive Survey

Note: Percentages below 5% are not mentioned. Percentages may not add up to 100% because of rounding.

Expansion often requires significant cultural changes, and culture misalignment is a key risk. New divisions and geographical areas may have cultural friction due to the preexisting culture at an acquisition or the local norms around work and workplace dynamics. Cultural distance between merged companies can raise the cost of acquisition and decrease subsequent organizational performance in key areas such as innovation.²

Next Steps for CHROs

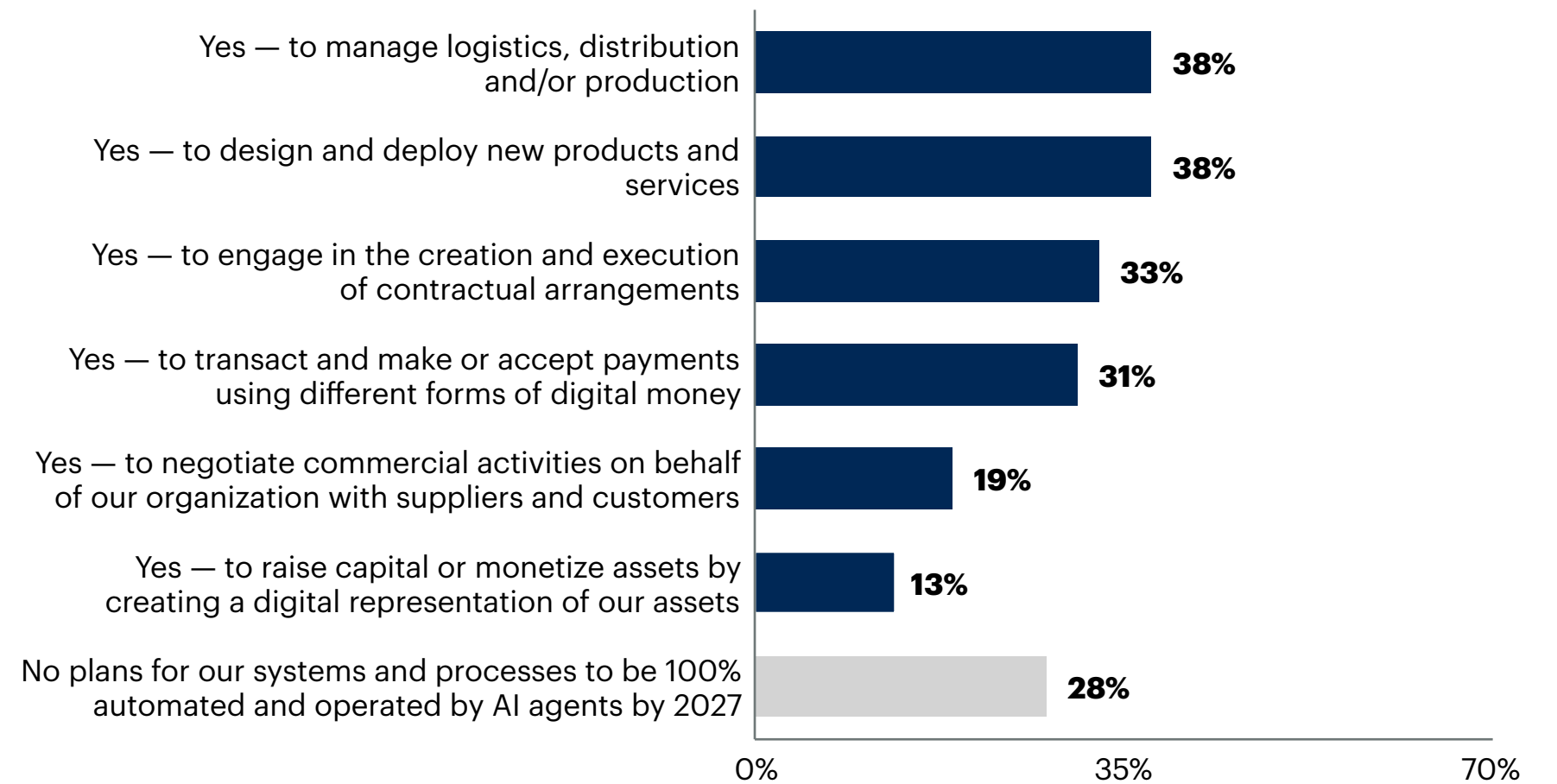
- Understand your CEO's plans to geographically expand or otherwise scale the enterprise as well as the strategic logic that underpins these plans.
- Assess the potential risks of your CEO's plans, with a particular eye toward cultural friction.
- Embed yourself — and your HR team — in the early stages of M&A and geographic expansion planning to define talent opportunities and raise potential cultural and workforce risks.

Priority 2: Business and Operating Model Agility

CEOs are clearly betting on AI and related technology to support more flexible and adaptable organizations, but most see significant work ahead. About one-third of CEOs report they have an operating model and business model fit for an AI-driven world, but roughly two-thirds do not.¹ To transition to an AI-fit-for-purpose operating model, CEOs are prioritizing a variety of operational areas, including managing logistics, distribution and production and designing and deploying new products and services (see Figure 3).¹

» **Figure 3: CEOs' Plans to Deploy and Use Systems and Processes That Can Be 100% Automated**

Multiple responses allowed



n = 445, all respondents, excluding “don’t know”

Q. Within the next three years (by 2027), do you plan to deploy and use systems and processes that can be 100% automated and operate without human involvement such as AI agents?

Source: 2025 Gartner CEO and Senior Business Executive Survey

Successfully automating operational processes will require focused change management, and unfortunately, leaders across all levels report they are underprepared. Only 30% of executive leaders and 26% of senior leaders report change agility as a strength.³ Although CHROs should consider how they can improve individual executives' change agility — through coaching or, at an extreme, replacing the executive — they must also focus on boosting executive leadership and C-suite collaboration.

Even if individual executive leaders have sufficient change agility, transitioning the organization to an AI-fit-for-purpose operating model without high levels of C-suite collaboration introduces risk and will slow things down. CHROs are uniquely positioned to bolster C-suite collaboration, and doing so can help ensure the transition's success even if some individual executives' change agility is lacking.

Next Steps for CHROs

- Introduce targeted strategies to facilitate collaboration within the executive leadership team, such as visualizing the highest value collaboration opportunities, choosing unconventional project owners and establishing precise expectations for collaboration.
- Embed critical leadership principles for change management at the C-suite level to ensure CxOs possess the necessary mindsets and capabilities — especially change agility — to support a transformation to an AI-fit-for-purpose operating model.
- Introduce change readiness assessments and other tools to help executive leaders prepare employees for, and coach them through, transformational change.

Priority 3: New, Compelling Customer Value Propositions

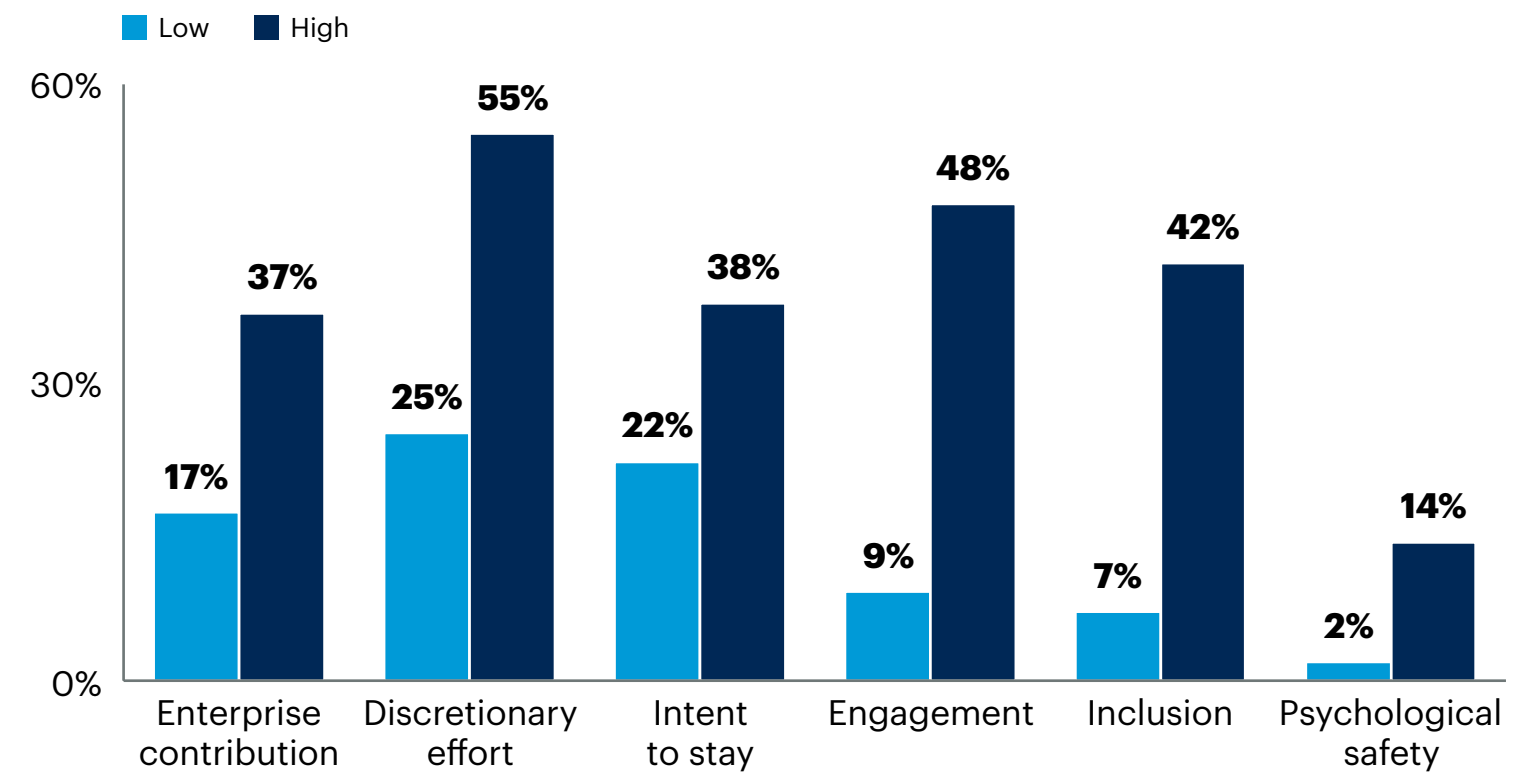
Corporate profit margins grew in recent years as a result of increasing prices coupled with operational cost controls. The question remains: How long can CEOs continue to increase prices, especially as AI opens up more opportunity for personalization, value selection and disintermediation?

CHROs can support margins by delivering new HR solutions that accelerate workforce productivity while meeting cost targets. Specifically, frontline talent engagement and development can lead to higher employee productivity. In turn, these productivity gains are associated with a stronger customer value proposition and customer experience (CX).

Customer-facing employees who are given targeted training, development and tools are significantly more likely to exhibit high levels of discretionary effort, are more engaged and have higher levels of intent to stay. In turn, employees who are highly engaged are also significantly more likely to feel equipped to deliver a good CX (see Figure 4).⁴

» Figure 4: CX Satisfaction Linked to Better EX Outcomes

Percentage of employees



n = 1,683 employees who interact directly with customers or support customer workflows and transactions

Q. Overall, I feel equipped to deliver a good customer experience.

Source: 2024 Gartner Employee Experience Survey

> Next Steps for CHROs

- Recommend establishing a total experience fusion team that includes the CHRO and CX leaders to ensure the CHRO is involved when it comes to CX.
- Prioritize and create short- and long-term initiatives to eliminate points of engagement friction, focusing on outdated technology and process hurdles in the customer-facing employee experience.
- Consider targeted investments in frontline leadership development to ensure customer-facing managers have the skills and capabilities they need to enact a new customer value proposition.

Priority 4: Disciplined, Comprehensive Risk Management

Transforming business and operating models — and accelerating the use of AI — can radically increase enterprise risk thresholds, particularly in an environment marked by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA).⁵ In addition, expanding internationally means potentially engaging with new sourcing partners and infrastructures where adequate due diligence may be difficult.

Although CHROs may also participate in broader organizational-level risk discussions (e.g., those initiated by the head of enterprise risk management or chief risk officer), the responsibility for identifying, communicating and managing human capital/talent risks lies with the CHRO.

This is a critical time for CHROs to raise their profile as the organization's talent risk expert, yet many are underprioritizing human capital/talent risk activities. For instance, only 4% of surveyed CHROs say that risk management is one of the top five topics they spend

the most time discussing with the board.⁶ Unsurprisingly, board directors rate their CHROs' risk management poorly. A little more than half (54%) of surveyed board directors report their CHRO is effective at highlighting potential risks to the board.⁷

> Next Steps for CHROs

- Elevate your role in enterprise-level strategic risk management to help the organization take the “right risks” to drive performance.
- Review best practices for managing geopolitical risk given CEOs' common priority of geographic expansion and M&A.
- Assess and consider reshaping your approach for communicating talent risks to the CEO, board of directors and other stakeholders.

Priority 5: Realigned Talent, Management and Leadership Strategies

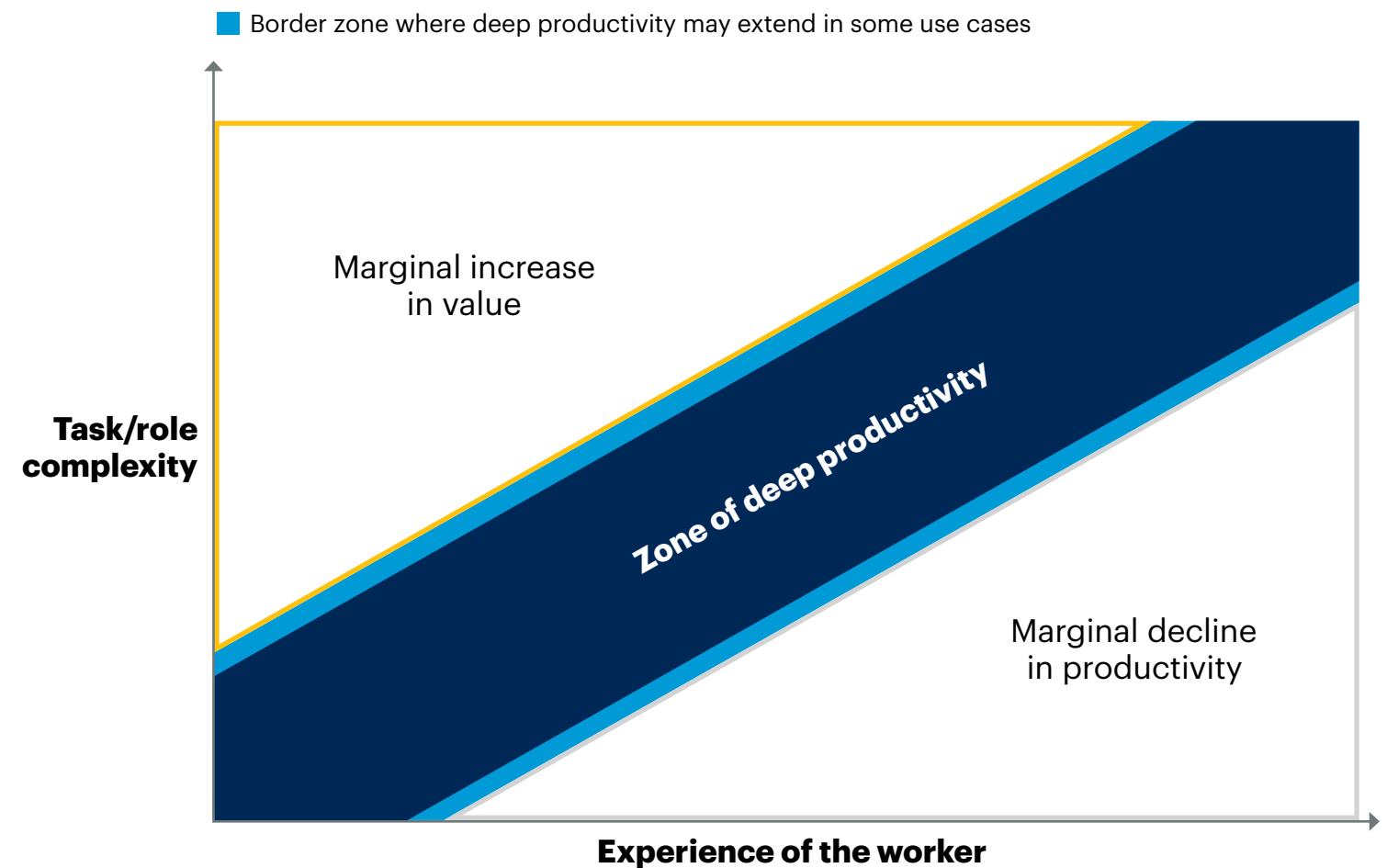
CEOs want to use technologies — especially AI but also robotics — to imagine a whole new workforce and workforce proposition. AI-enabled systems that work alongside, or even instead of, human workers are increasing, and we can now see that an exclusively human workforce is a thing of the past. Sixty-eight percent of CEOs said they are working on a strategy that integrates human employees and machines, including AI agents and robots.¹

CHROs are critical enablers of human-machine workforce integration and must help create an enterprise strategy to meet the organization’s human/tech capability needs. They also must ensure this transition balances the relative strengths of human workers and their technological/machine counterparts. Implementing what Gartner calls a “human-first” AI approach by using an employee-centric lens to prioritize AI deployments and execute implementations can help.

Specifically, Gartner research finds that AI has the highest potential for productivity gains when implemented in areas of the organization where the work complexity and experience level balance each other (see Figure 5).

» Figure 5: Deep Productivity Matrix

Illustrative



Source: Gartner

Implementing AI in complex work environments with inexperienced workers will yield only marginal increases in value. Conversely, in areas where workers are experienced and performing relatively simple tasks, AI can often trigger a decline in productivity because the time and energy required to upskill workers takes away from time they otherwise would be producing results.

CHROs should help ensure AI adoption and impact occurs through human-first implementation. Ensuring the workforce has sufficient time to acclimate to AI through dedicated experimentation periods, or identifying and then accounting for employees' preferences when customizing AI deployment in various roles, can help employees feel comfortable — and competent — in using it.

Next Steps for CHROs

- Remind the CEO and C-suite to maintain long-term momentum when transitioning to human-machine workforce integration rather than maximizing short-term results that threaten longer-term success.
- Discuss the importance of accounting for current workforce perceptions and needs with your CEO/C-suite to increase acceptance of workforce augmentations and effectiveness of AI investments.
- Consider targeted interventions in HR functional processes to pilot human-machine workforce integration, boost AI savviness among HR leaders and begin building a playbook for wider human-machine workforce integration.

Conclusion: Customize Your Approach to CEO Priorities

CHROs should customize their approach to supporting their CEO's strategic priorities in two ways. First, consider what unique strategic priorities their CEO might have above and beyond the common priorities identified above.

Second, align their offers to support their CEO based on their partnership's current state. A CEO-CHRO partnership marked by high levels of collaboration and trust means CHROs can be more assertive in their recommendations and operate more independently. CHROs with a weaker relationship with their CEO, however, can use collaboration on these priorities to strengthen the partnership.

¹ **2025 Gartner CEO and Senior Business Executive Survey.** This survey was conducted to examine CEO and senior business executive views on current business issues, as well as some areas of technology agenda impact. The survey was conducted from June 2024 through November 2024, with questions about the period from 2024 through 2026. One-quarter of the survey sample was collected from June through July 2024, and three-quarters was collected from October through November 2023. In total, 456 actively employed CEOs and other senior executive business leaders qualified and participated. The research was collected via 421 online surveys and 35 telephone interviews. The sample mix by role was CEOs (n = 303); CFOs (n = 95); COOs or other C-level executives (n = 39); and chairs, presidents or board directors (n = 19). The sample mix by location was North America (n = 194), Europe (n = 118), Asia/Pacific (n = 91), Latin America (n = 35), the Middle East (n = 15) and South Africa (n = 2). The sample mix by size was \$50 million to less than \$250 million (n = 32), \$250 million to less than \$1 billion (n = 122), \$1 billion to less than \$10 billion (n = 200) and \$10 billion or more (n = 102). Disclaimer: Results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

² [Mind the Gap: The Effect of Cultural Distance on Mergers and Acquisitions — Evidence From Glassdoor Reviews](#) (PDF), Review of Managerial Science.

³ **2024 Gartner Role of HRBPs in Key Talent Management Areas Employee Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand the experience of employees as well as HRBPs' responsibilities in key talent management areas like career management, HIPO management, mergers and acquisitions, talent review processes, performance management and organizational culture. The research was conducted online from 11 March 2024 through 5 April 2024 and contains responses from 3462 employees with representation from various regions, industries and functions.

⁴ **2024 Gartner Talent Management HRBP Survey (1Q).** This survey was conducted to understand roles and responsibilities of HRBPs in key talent management areas like HIPO management, mergers and acquisitions, talent review processes and organizational culture. The research was conducted online from 26th March 2024 through 30th April 2024 and contains responses from 140 HRBPs with representation from various regions and industries.

⁵ **2024 Gartner Leadership Bench Strength and Leader Learning HR Leader Survey.** This survey was conducted to get insights on the initiatives that various organizations are taking to develop their leaders and succession planning strategies. The research was conducted online from 27 February 2024 through 8 April 2024 and contains responses from 162 HR leaders with representation from various regions and industries.

⁶ **2024 Gartner Leadership Development Leader Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand the development methods, experiences and other factors that play a role in creating successful leadership development programs. The survey was conducted online from 17 April 2024 through 15 May 2024 and contains responses from 985 senior leaders and mid-level managers with representation from various regions, industries, and functions.

⁷ **2024 Gartner Board of Directors Talent Survey.** This survey was conducted to understand boards' interaction with the CHRO and other C-suite members, critical talent issues that are important to boards, how boards are managing CEO succession, how effective are boards and what drives their effectiveness. The research was conducted online from 30 July 2024 through 3 September 2024 and contains responses from 200 board of directors with representation from various regions and industries. Disclaimer: The results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

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Keyia Burton
Senior Principal, Advisory



From Surviving to Thriving as a New CHRO: Ex-CHROs Q&A

by Piers Hudson

Close to one-third of executive leaders either change companies or roles each year, but over 50% fail in their first 18 months. HR Leaders Quarterly sat down with Gartner's Executive Partners — all of them ex-CHROs with experience of multiple transitions into the role — to share what they did to make their transitions a success.

Q&A

All of our panelists are Executive Partners in Gartner's HR practice, with Rich Cober heading this group as managing vice president. Their past experience includes:



Rich Cober was the CHRO at HITT Contracting and MicroStrategy and VP of HR at Marriott.



Michelle Hairston was the CHRO at PulteGroup.



Michael Jones was chief people and culture officer at LumiraDx and American AgCredit, as well as working for Medtronic.



Steve Miranda was deputy director for the Federal Reserve System, as well as executive director at Cornell University, CHRO at SHRM and HR VP at Lucent Technologies.



Steve Parsons was the CHRO at Newell Brands, Stage Stores and OfficeMax.

Gartner recently launched our Executive FastStart support for HR clients, including specialized content sessions at our upcoming London and Orlando HR Symposiums tailored for new-to-role chief HR officers (CHROs). As part of this new initiative, we sat down with five Gartner Executive Partners to discuss what they have learned from their own transitions in CHRO roles, as well as their conversations with scores of incoming Gartner client CHROs.

In this conversation, our panelists emphasized the need for incoming CHROs to establish a formal transition plan, taking into account organizational strategy and senior leaders' priorities as well as employees' perspectives. They also discussed strategies for making an early impact by identifying HR's key customers, high-priority issues to address right away and the desired outcomes.

The panel discussion has been edited for length and clarity.

Plan Your Transition With Discovery, Not Assumptions

Gartner's research suggests that only 17% of C-suite leaders making a transition to a new role had a formal transition plan. Effective transitions are 2.2 times more likely to have a formal transition plan in place than underperforming transitions.¹ Why is it so important for a new CHRO to have a plan in place?

Cober: There are so many things to find out about that if you don't have a plan coming into the role, then there are things you're just going to miss because you're not thinking of them.

Parsons: You will have heard all sorts of things during the interview process, but you really shouldn't assume anything. Having a balanced plan means you don't overindex on any individual source that may just confirm what you've already heard.

Jones: I agree, but to be clear, the plan needs to be a plan for discovery. I see some incoming CHROs think they're hitting the ground running by having a preformed plan with all the actions to fix all the problems they've heard about during the interview process. But these plans quickly skid sideways when they find that the problems they've been told about aren't actually the right ones to fix at all.

Hairston: It's also important to establish your own transition plan. The CHRO is such a multifaceted role with so many stakeholders involved (executive team, Board, HR team and so on); it's unlikely someone else in the organization will fully understand that and build one for you.

Miranda: It also provides a psychological boost for an incoming CHRO. It is such a complex role to get your arms around, having a plan just helps you chunk up the work so that you can feel like you're getting somewhere in those early days. Think about the job as embarking on a 100-mile drive at night. During this drive, you can maybe see 100 feet ahead of you, never the full 100 miles. By having a plan, you are able to navigate this challenge 100 feet at a time because you know the end destination as well as the likely challenges along the route.

Plan Your Transition With Discovery, Not Assumptions (Continued)

What do you see as the most critical elements to include in that plan?

Jones: There's the HR functional part: What's working today? What's the structure? What's the strategy? Who's the talent? Then, there's the C-suite and board part: Who are the major stakeholders? What's on their agenda? What's keeping them up at night from a business and a workforce perspective? Who do they think their high-potential talent is?

And then, there are the employees, but you can also break that down into the key talent and key leadership roles, but also hearing from frontline employees about what's going on with them. For example, do they know the organizational mission and their own goals in that?

Parsons: You really do have to get out there to employees; get out to the shop floor, the frontline customer service people. This is where you see the gaps in what the senior executives are telling you and also provides an opportunity to connect with employees and for them to see your genuineness in being an HR leader.

Cober: To be clear, though, these early meetings shouldn't just be pleasant "getting to know you" types of affairs; you must bring a polite probing to these conversations. A great way to do that is to bring hypotheses into the conversation and openly test them with people; see what different answers you get, and test the hypotheses from one conversation to another.

Miranda: I agree it's important to go into these conversations with a structure. I've seen new CHROs have great success using Gartner's Model of a World Class CHRO, but you could use any model really, to ask stakeholders just what they think the CHRO's role should be. Sometimes the incoming CHRO assumes there's alignment between them and their C-suite colleagues on the role because they're all talking about similar issues, but until they have a conversation around a common framework and ask them what they think is in or out of the role, or what's the priority ranking, they don't always see the gaps in expectations.

Jones: All of this insight gathering has gotten a lot easier now because with the AI tools available new CHROs can take all the transcripts or notes from these conversations, feed them into the AI and see trends or even spot disparities, without needing to pore over their handwritten notes or try to remember every conversational nuance.

Identify Your Key Customers

These discovery activities all sound good, but there will be a lot of new CHROs who think this sounds like it will take too long — they're under pressure to have early impact. What would you say to them?

Miranda: Well, part of that is about working out who you must meet early versus those who you can take longer to connect with. It's the old story: Among equals, there are always some who need to be treated "more equally" than the others. Don't fool yourself into thinking this political reality doesn't exist.

Hairston: Getting clear on who and where the key customers for HR are is important: I've been at organizations where operational leaders a couple of layers below the C-suite are really key HR customers for example. That's governed by where the critical work gets done, alongside how the organization makes its money.

Jones: I do see some incoming CHROs getting into "analysis paralysis," where they keep looking at issues endlessly. I think this is usually because they don't know the outcome they're trying to fix. Managers will come and tell you, the CHRO, to fix performance management or training, but really they have a productivity, quality of performance problem of some kind. As CHRO, you need to understand that outcome that is desired in order to be able to choose the right solution.

Anchor Your Prioritization in the Business Context

Miranda: I completely agree, and ultimately, the CHRO's urgency on an issue needs to be set by the external business context. If something is a genuine threat to the organization, then of course you need to act quickly. But don't mistake this for feeling internal or personal pressure to act on something that might be annoying to some people but which isn't fundamental to the organization's performance.

Hairston: The board understands that as well. It is important they see the CHRO as a strategic thinker — that the CHRO has identified the right issues and to hear their plan to get to the root causes. So, yes, you do share your early observations in the early board discussions, but then you might be presenting your plan to investigate further and tell the board when you'll bring back your findings and then when they can expect improvements.

Miranda: One thing I'd add, though, is that whenever I avoided acting early on a behavioral issue, I usually regretted it. Technical or experience competency issues with a person can often be addressed over time. But behavioral ones? Not so much. They tend to eat away at your own and your team's success until dealt with. So look carefully at the things that make you feel uncomfortable in people's behavior and consider if you're putting off dealing with them head on.

Manage Your Relationships and Reputation

This all sounds tough for the incoming CHRO. What tips do you have for them to handle the pressure from a personal point of view?

Cober: I think this is the hardest job in the C-suite, maybe other than the CEO's. Most other leaders can be a functional expert in just their area, but the CHRO needs to understand all areas of the business. Plus, you're often caught between difficult competing relationships: the board, the CEO, the C-suite and the employees. And then you're also party to sensitive information that you often can't share with others while simultaneously lacking really good data to back your decisions.

Miranda: This is such an important issue. Simply put, your reputation is what people say about you when you're not around. CHROs need to ensure they have a consistent reputation across the organization, all the way from the CEO to the entry-level employee.

Jones: I think one thing that's important for this is your early "contracting" conversation with the CEO. You need to agree with them on how you will work together because sometimes your role is to challenge them. So you need to establish how they want to get feedback: What format? How often? With other people or solo? And there's a small window for this conversation; if you leave it until, say, nine months into your tenure, then the CEO may become suspicious as to why you are bringing it up and think that something is wrong.

Parsons: Ultimately, you are there to offer the best advice you can to the CEO and your leader colleagues. If they disagree, that's okay, but I usually slept okay at night when I was satisfied I'd given my best advice. One other thing that can help here is to have someone in the C-suite you trust to check in with, who can give you their feedback on how they think you're doing or tell you what others are saying.

Hairston: I'd also say that it is critical that you don't neglect your own personal growth. There is no way you can know everything about HR when you first come in. I was very deliberate about getting into networks where others knew about the areas I had gaps. Some of those people then also became a great emotional support.




Cober: Finally, I think at times, as a new CHRO you need to cut yourself some slack. I mean everyone wants approval ratings of 80%, but sometimes aiming for 51% may have to be enough.

¹ **2022 Gartner Algorithm of a Successful Executive Transition Survey.** This survey was conducted online from 8 through 28 November 2022 to understand how to measure the success of an executive transition. In total, 82 executive leaders new to their role participated. Twenty-two are members of Gartner's ITL and CIO Research Circle, a Gartner-managed panel, and 60 are from an external expert panel. Participants are from North America (n = 40), EMEA (n = 27), Asia/Pacific (n = 12) and Latin America (n = 3). Disclaimer: The results of this survey do not represent global findings or the market as a whole, but reflect the sentiments of the respondents and companies surveyed.

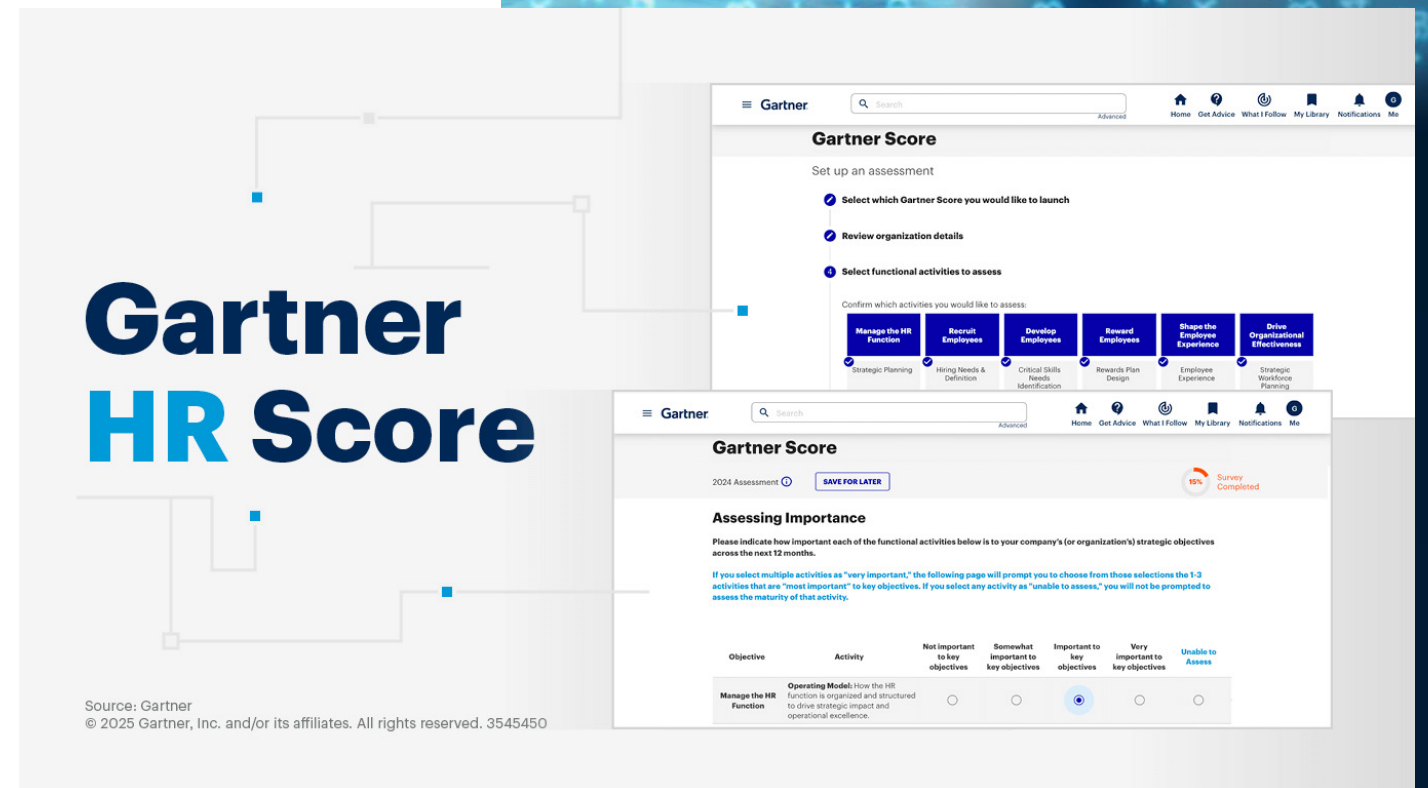
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CHROs Should Apply These 5 Pandemic-Era Lessons in Today's Uncertain Times

by Eva Johnson

Increasing macroeconomic uncertainty has made it vital for organizations to build and maintain their resilience through disruption. CHROs can leverage five key pandemic-era lessons to drive innovation, sustain growth and prepare their organizations to respond effectively to future change.



The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed the landscape of work — and the expectations of leaders. For CHROs, the crisis provided powerful insights, accelerating transformation, breaking traditional paradigms and identifying new imperatives for leadership. What emerged was a blueprint for resilient, people-centered organizations.

Now, as businesses around the world face mounting uncertainty — from macroeconomic pressures to geopolitical conflict to increasingly rapid technological change — those same pandemic-era lessons are proving vital once again. CHROs can use these five lessons learned during the pandemic era to succeed in today’s volatile and uncertain business environment:

1

Adaptability must be embedded into the fabric of work.

2

Empathy is a strategic capability, not a soft skill.

3

Digital fluency is a core leadership competency.

4

Scenario thinking beats predictive planning.

5

Purpose is a retention lever.

Lesson **1**

Adaptability Must Be Embedded Into the Fabric of Work

During the pandemic, rigid hierarchies and long planning cycles gave way to rapid experimentation and decentralized action. Adaptability is no longer a luxury, and CHROs are embedding it into the foundation of how work gets done.

How CHROs should apply it today:

- **Implement strategic workforce planning (SWP):** Scenario-based SWP helps enable organizations to pivot talent investments as priorities change. Leading practices now include data-rich assessments of current workforce capabilities, identifying skill gaps and co-developing talent strategies with business leaders that remain agile in the face of market shifts.
- **Redesign decision-making models:** Organizations are reassessing governance structures to empower faster decision making closer to where the work gets done. CHROs are helping shift from top-down approvals to more principles-based delegation, where frontline leaders are equipped to act, emphasizing trust, judgment and accountability.
- **Equip frontline managers with real-time tools:** Investments in workforce analytics, mobile-enabled dashboards and just-in-time learning allow people leaders to respond more nimbly to changing team dynamics, performance trends and organizational shifts. This builds a stronger middle layer of leadership that can translate priorities into action more quickly.

Lesson **2**

Empathy Is a Strategic Capability, Not a Soft Skill

What began as crisis-induced compassion has evolved into something more strategic: empathy informed by data, guided by systems and embedded into leadership expectations. Today's CHROs know that empathetic cultures are more productive, innovative and resilient.

How CHROs should apply it today:

- **Elevate employee listening to a strategic capability:** Rather than relying on annual engagement surveys, organizations are deploying real-time, AI-powered listening tools that continuously capture sentiment, flag emerging issues and allow leaders to respond in real time. These insights are tied to key talent metrics like retention, burnout risk and manager effectiveness and are used to coach leaders at every level.
- **Make mental health central to performance:** Invest in integrated well-being strategies that include mental health services, workload management, digital detox policies and burnout prevention. CHROs measure and report the outcomes of these programs alongside traditional performance indicators, connecting well-being to business priorities.
- **Embed empathy into leadership development:** From onboarding to executive coaching, organizations are redefining leadership as the ability to connect, relate and contextualize. This includes active listening, empathy in conflict and leading through ambiguity — not just in workshops, but through immersive simulations, role play and peer feedback mechanisms.

Lesson **3**

Digital Fluency Is a Core Leadership Competency

The pandemic launched every CHRO into the digital transformation conversation, sometimes overnight. It also revealed critical gaps in digital acumen within the HR function at all levels. Today, CHROs are closing that gap, redefining HR as tech-enabled, data-informed and not simply a consumer of tech strategy but a co-architect.

How CHROs should apply it today:

- **Use AI and automation for talent optimization:** Deploy intelligent automation in areas such as talent acquisition (e.g., résumé screening, interview scheduling), workforce planning (e.g., predictive attrition models) and mobility (e.g., skill matching and internal gig platforms). This reduces manual work while improving talent decisions and the candidate experience.
- **Reimagine the employee experience:** Digital-first doesn't just mean apps; it means designing every stage of the employee life cycle to be intuitive, personalized and frictionless. Inspired by consumer-facing product development, CHROs are championing iterative design processes to build experiences that evolve based on real employee feedback.
- **Build digital acumen into every HR role:** Development programs for HR professionals now emphasize data literacy and digital storytelling. HR business partners are expected to interpret dashboards and use data to influence decisions. Centers of excellence are evolving into agile squads, blending analytics, user experience and design thinking skills into HR's core structure. HR is moving beyond data delivery to connecting dots and contextualizing.

Lesson 4

Scenario Thinking Beats Predictive Planning

If the pandemic taught us anything, it's that predictability is a luxury. CHROs are now embracing scenario thinking, not as a contingency plan but as a disciplined practice to build future-ready organizations. Unlike static workforce planning, which relies on forecasts that can quickly become obsolete, scenario planning enables HR leaders to explore multiple possible futures and develop flexible strategies that are adaptable to different outcomes. This means modeling various economic, organizational, industry and talent scenarios to understand the potential impact and inform decisions in areas like workforce composition, talent development and organizational design.

How CHROs should apply it today:

- **Lead C-suite scenario workshops:** Take the lead in shaping discussions on future-of-work scenarios, integrating variables like AI adoption, demographic shifts, regulatory changes and workforce preferences to prepare leadership teams for multiple possible futures.
- **Link talent strategy to external risk models:** Partner with finance, risk and strategy teams to embed talent implications into geopolitical, economic and supply chain models. This enables more integrated and responsive talent planning, especially in industries facing geopolitical complexity or regulatory flux.
- **Design surge-readiness models:** As part of broader SWP, organizations are creating on-demand talent pools — including contractors, alumni networks and gig platforms — that can be activated rapidly to meet spikes in demand or respond to supply shortages, seasonality or project surges.

Lesson 5

Purpose Is a Retention Lever

In a world of increasingly transactional work relationships, purpose is a competitive differentiator. CHROs are making purpose actionable, not aspirational, by connecting it directly to how employees are recruited, managed and developed.

How CHROs should apply it today:

- **Infuse purpose into the employee value proposition (EVP):** Rather than limiting purpose to branding materials, CHROs are integrating it into the EVP by emphasizing how the company's mission connects to the work people do, the career opportunities they offer and the communities they impact.
- **Operationalize values in decision making:** Reinforce purpose by integrating core values in how decisions are made, including promotion and rewards decisions. Values can be used as decision criteria in performance reviews, policy design and leadership accountability.
- **Coach leaders to connect work to the mission:** Managers should reinforce purpose in everyday conversations, from team meetings to goal-setting sessions, so employees see the link between their daily efforts and the company's broader impact. This builds connection in times of uncertainty.

Conclusion: The CHRO's Elevated Role

The pandemic was a redefining chapter for HR, elevating CHROs from functional experts to essential strategic leaders who shape the organization's direction, culture and long-term success.

While CHROs may not have expected to draw on these lessons again so soon, many of them are doing so now: leading with intention and foresight, equipped with the experience that has deepened their influence and expanded their ability to drive change at scale.

Whether or not you were an HR leader during the pandemic, you still lived through it. Your teams, your peers and your organization all carry that collective imprint. You're a leader today, and those lessons are now part of your leadership DNA, guiding your decision making, elevating your perspective and helping you lead from a place of experience and confidence in this new era.

Gartner Virtual Events

Gartner regularly hosts virtual events across a variety of Human Resource topics. These webinars present an opportunity for you to gain insights from our research experts on making better decisions for your function and organization.

The Top CHRO Priorities for 2026

HR Leaders, Reinvent Change Leadership for Organizational Success

Improve CHRO Digital Effectiveness to Drive AI Transformation

CHROs, Optimize Costs and Productivity in a Volatile Economy

CHROs: Measure and Maximize Employee Productivity

Strategies for CHROs to Effectively Deliver on Their Employee Value Proposition

3 Steps CHROs Can Take to Initiate a Strategic Workforce Plan

How CHROs Can Help Employees Navigate Constant Change

HR Leaders Look to AI for Cost Optimization Solutions

by Jonah Shepp

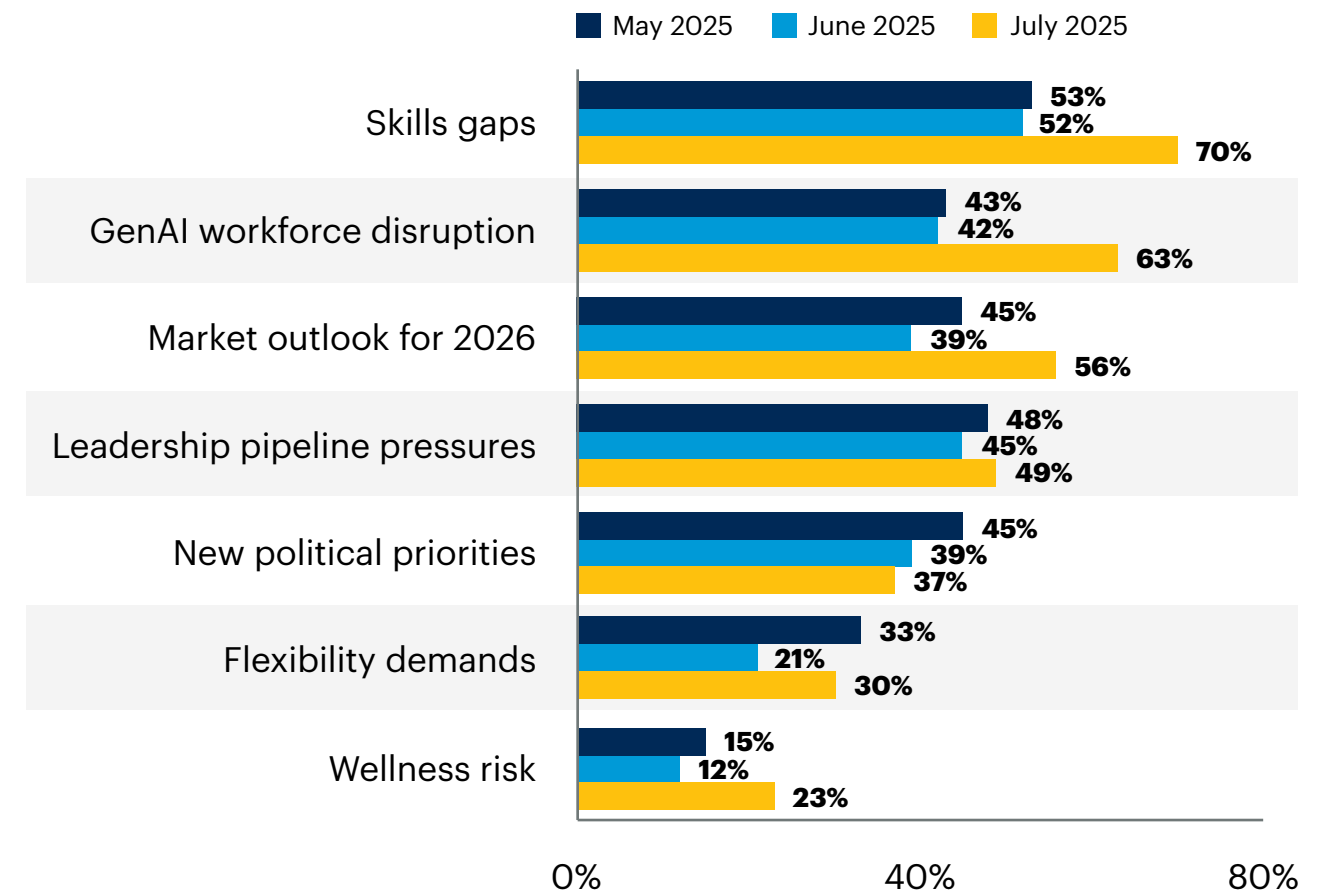
In July's Benchmark with Gartner webcast, skills gaps remained the most common issue HR leaders said were currently affecting their organizations, followed by GenAI workforce disruption. Concern over these challenges is intensifying, however, with the percentage of HR leaders identifying these as current issues for their organization rising sharply from June to July (see Figure 1). This upward trend in concern is consistent among most current issues observed in the survey, particularly the market outlook for 2026.

Our labor market outlook showed signs of softening, with the percentage of HR leaders reporting increased job postings declining for second month in a row, from a year-to-date peak of 46% in May to 30% in July (see Figure 2). This is consistent with an increase in HR leaders saying they anticipate their organizations taking cost-saving measures such as layoffs, freezing or slowing hiring, and reducing budgets for recruiting and HR in general.

In this cost-cutting environment, July's webcast also addressed a key question most HR leaders are asking: How can they leverage AI to optimize their costs and productivity? With only 39% of HR leaders confident in their organization's ability to meet their cost optimization goals in the next 12 months, many see AI investments as a potential solution. Nearly half of HR leaders say they would be willing to replace human employees with AI agents for a cost savings of 40% or less (see Figure 3), but most expect agentic AI to replace no more than 10% of the workforce in their HR function or the broader organization. Meanwhile, only 1 in 4 say the AI investments their HR function has made over the past 12 months have lowered overall HR costs (see Figure 4).

» Figure 1: Current Issues of Concern to HR Leaders

Percentage of HR leaders



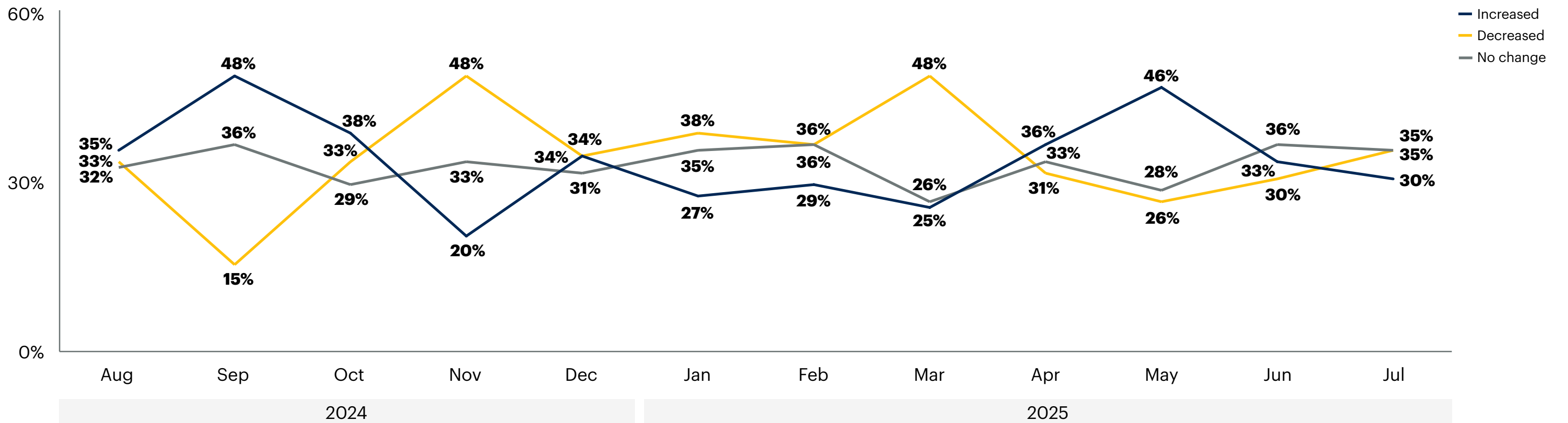
n = 40 (May 2025), 33 (Jun 2025), 43 (Jul 2025)

Q. Which of the following topics are current issues for your organization this month? (Select all that apply)

Source: Benchmark with Gartner: Balance Cost and Productivity With AI & Tackle Flexibility Demands (Jul 2025), Calibrate Talent Strategy Amid Market Shocks & Navigate Culture Tensions (Jun 2025), Mitigating Talent Strategy Risk Amid U.S. Policy Shifts & Tackling Skill Gaps (May 2025)

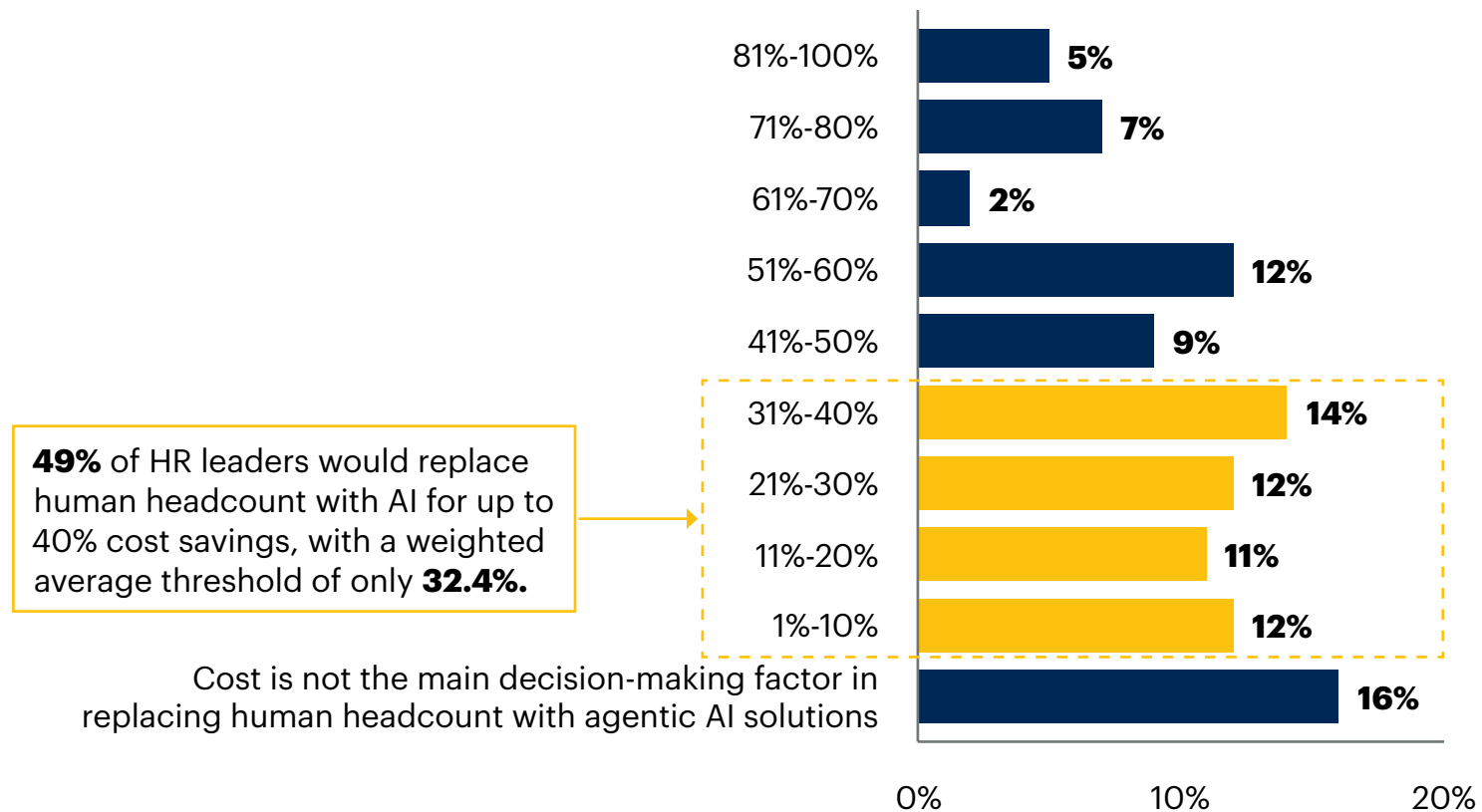
Note: Pay equity expectations, inclusion pressures, and "none of these topics" series not shown

» Figure 2: Trends in Job Postings
Percentage of HR leaders



n = 63 (Aug 2024), 33 (Sep 2024), 45 (Oct 2024), 46 (Nov 2024), 58 (Dec 2024), 88 (Jan 2025), 56 (Feb 2025), 102 (Mar 2025), 81 (Apr 2025), 50 (May 2025), 33 (Jun 2025), 40 (Jul 2025)
 Q: How have your organization's job postings changed this month compared to the average of the last three months? (Select one)
 Source: Benchmark with Gartner

» Figure 3: Cost Savings Needed to Justify Human-AI Replacement
Percentage of HR leaders

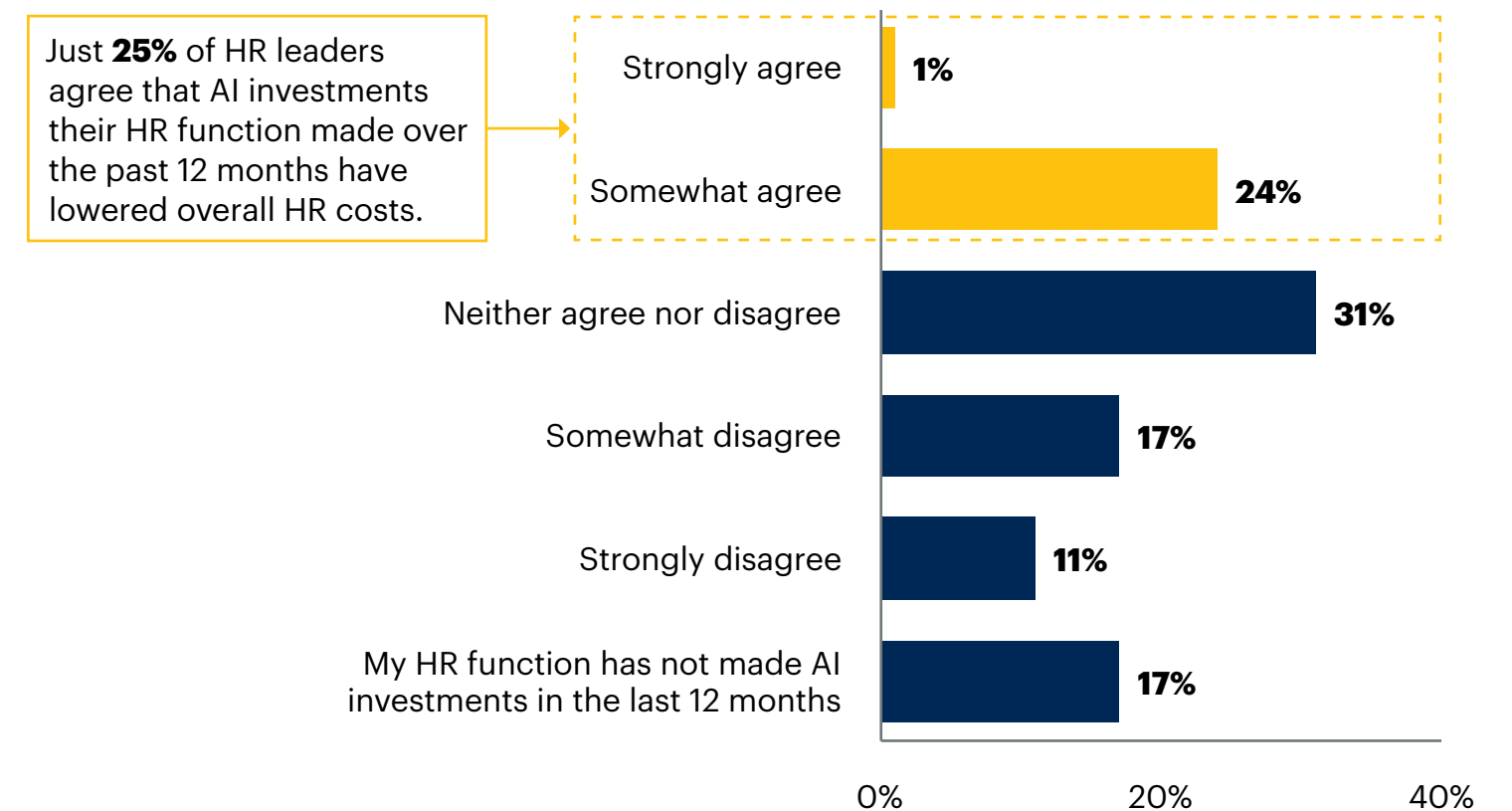


n = 57 (Jul 2025)

Q: What percentage cost savings would the agentic AI solution need to present over the equivalent human headcount costs for your organization to replace human headcount with the agentic AI solution? (Select one)

Source: Benchmark with Gartner: Balance Cost and Productivity With AI & Tackle Flexibility Demands (Jul 2025)

» Figure 4: Strategies to Combat Pipeline Pressures
Percentage of HR leaders



n = 72 (Jul 2025)

Q: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements. (Select one) — “I believe that AI investments my HR function has made over the last 12 months have lowered overall HR costs.”

Source: Benchmark with Gartner: Balance Cost and Productivity With AI & Tackle Flexibility Demands (Jul 2025)

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