

Need A More Strategic HR Function? Focus On These Key Skills, Priorities

HR Executive | Jen Colletta | August 15, 2025

Before Alison Borland assumed the chief people and strategy officer at global workplace mental health platform Modern Health earlier this year, she worked directly with the CEO to develop her new title. It's a nod toward the increasing assimilation of the people and business strategy—and HR's critical role in driving both, she says.

As HR leaders evolve their hard-won seat at the table to be one of the most essential seats, Borland says, it creates significant opportunities for more innovative and strategic HR functions.

"People leaders are ready to do more, and there's increased receptivity for CEOs and other business leaders to pull them in. It's a good time for this to happen," she says.

Borland—whose most recent titles include chief growth officer and chief wellbeing officer at Silvertrain AI and Alight Solutions, respectively—recently spoke with HR Executive about the potential of more strategic HR teams, and how she's using her platform to make employee wellbeing an ongoing priority at Modern Health.

HR Executive: How does having a more strategic focus to the HR function affect the skill sets that chief people officers need today?

Borland: It's more of an external focus and a future-forward focus. It's less about what the company needs today with respect to the people, but it's looking forward at the overall, overarching company strategy—and then designing the people strategy to achieve that corporate strategy. I come from a background with a lot of corporate strategy work, but [that was] adjacent and next to all of the fantastic people-focused work that we did—so, it's a very natural fit.

HR Executive: How can organizations that prioritize strategic HR navigate potential pain points with the rest of the C-suite?

Borland: It's a shift in mindset for the entire C-suite. It's looking at the chief people officer in a different way and engaging them in conversations they may not have typically been in, or they may not have typically been an active contributor to when their role was narrower. The conversations I'm having around what's happening in the external market and how that should impact our product and our go-to market, and our thinking about what our clients are experiencing ... that requires a close collaboration with the go-to market team, not just about the type of salespeople we need to hire and how much we need to pay them, but about how we actually construct their roles, how we think about the solutions we're bringing them and how we deliver them.

In my world, where we serve HR leaders, [collaboration is] probably a little bit easier than it might be in some other industries. So, [product need] is a natural place to start. But when you

get into the actual conversations, it becomes very organic. The needs of our population are so similar and connected to the needs of our client populations. Being able to connect the two is so natural. And, of course, we're a user of our services, so we have that internal experience as well that I can then take externally with my peers to talk about the problems, how we're solving them, what's working, what's not.

We're still early. It's been a couple of months. But when you start down a path like this, people and strategy hadn't often been together before—so, you think it's going to work, but you don't know it's going to work. I'd say early indications are that it's working very well.

HR Executive: What does aligning people, culture and strategy look like in the day-to-day?

Borland: It's very much a balance. As an example, I was at a chief people officer conference with my peers, talking about the problems, the solutions, what we're all doing. Every conversation invariably goes to the issues around global uncertainty, the transformation with AI, burnout, recovery from the pandemic, return-to-office. Those are all a part of core business strategy, as well as people strategy, so you connect those dots. And you do some thinking, and then I come back into the office. I'm talking to my people team about what I heard and what I learned, and how we should be thinking about it differently.

We're undergoing an AI transformation, and what am I learning externally that we can benefit from? How do we then put it into our products and services, and how we show up in the market to actually help our clients solve those same problems that we're solving internally? It's kind of a circular loop. It's a direct connection between what's happening outside in the market, the feedback that we're getting from the organizations we serve and then how we approach our own talent development and talent cultivation internally.

HR Executive: What role does employee listening play in more strategic HR functions?

Borland: We've found surveying very effective, of course. They've been around forever, and we're doing them more frequent than annually, as well as more of a focus group approach. Once you have a survey and get that quantitative feedback, you have to get the right people in a room to really understand, listen and ask follow-up questions to understand the sentiment. Another area that is really helpful is leveraging your employee resource groups or affinity groups, which bring to bear more diverse perspectives. That's another great pool of talent to tap into who will come at things from perhaps a slightly different and very helpful angle.

HR Executive: What are the biggest shifts in how employers think about employee wellbeing today?

Borland: The connectivity across the different dimensions is much more pronounced and recognized than it had been in the past. Before, there was healthcare, retirement, different components and they were all developed in their own bubbles, with benefits designed around it. Now—and part of this is because emerging technology allows us to pull things together and be more personalized—the whole industry is starting to look at each person.

With Modern Health, we can look at your data, we understand you, we can raise everything across the spectrum. If you're having a financial problem or a physical health problem, we can pull it all together for you and tell an integrated story and connect you to support—through a care concierge, through coaching. It's a shift from that very siloed approach to an integrated approach, which has been really pronounced since I've been in the industry.

I'd say another shift is the reduction of the stigma of mental health. I'm a Gen Xer, and I look at what Gen Z has done for the ability to talk about mental health, the ability to support mental health, their expectation that their employer is going to provide support for their mental health. That has been a gift—a gift to the entire industry—and I am grateful for that.

That need for support is critical, and that voice of the need for support is critical. Yet, at the same time, burnout is very high. We did a survey a few months ago, and 40% of people said they had cried at work in the last month. Burnout is still a problem. More than half of Gen Z say they're worse off than they were during the pandemic. These are really disturbing and upsetting facts given how far we've come—or how far we feel like we should have come. There's more to be done, but I think the emergence of the recognition of the reduction of stigma and the need and the availability of mental health support in the workplace has been another significant positive change.

HR Executive: How can strategic HR leaders prevent the ongoing global uncertainty from contributing to lagging employee wellbeing?

Borland: HR [has to work] in partnership with the business. A lot of the evolution of the title is really about connection between the people needs and the broader business strategy. So, when you think about everything that's happening, an important step is just to acknowledge it, to make sure employees feel safe, that they can feel heard. We're all navigating through it together, but if it goes unsaid, or if it's coming from a vacuum of just the people team, it's not going to be as effective. That connectivity across the leadership team, that will state how important it is and will provide the support down through team members throughout the organization. It can't come just from the people team.

AI is another great example. It's like we're all talking about it all the time. How are we approaching it? Are we looking at it department by department? Are we letting it grow organically? Are we trying to solve our biggest problems? When you think about the uncertainty it creates for team members, for employees, how they're thinking about it, how they're acknowledging it—the words that we use and the words that we choose make a big difference. Do employees feel safe? Do they feel confident? Are they engaged? Do they want to be a part of it, or do they feel threatened? Are they going to create barriers? That is an area where HR can lead across the business. And it's an area that has huge implications for the organization overall.