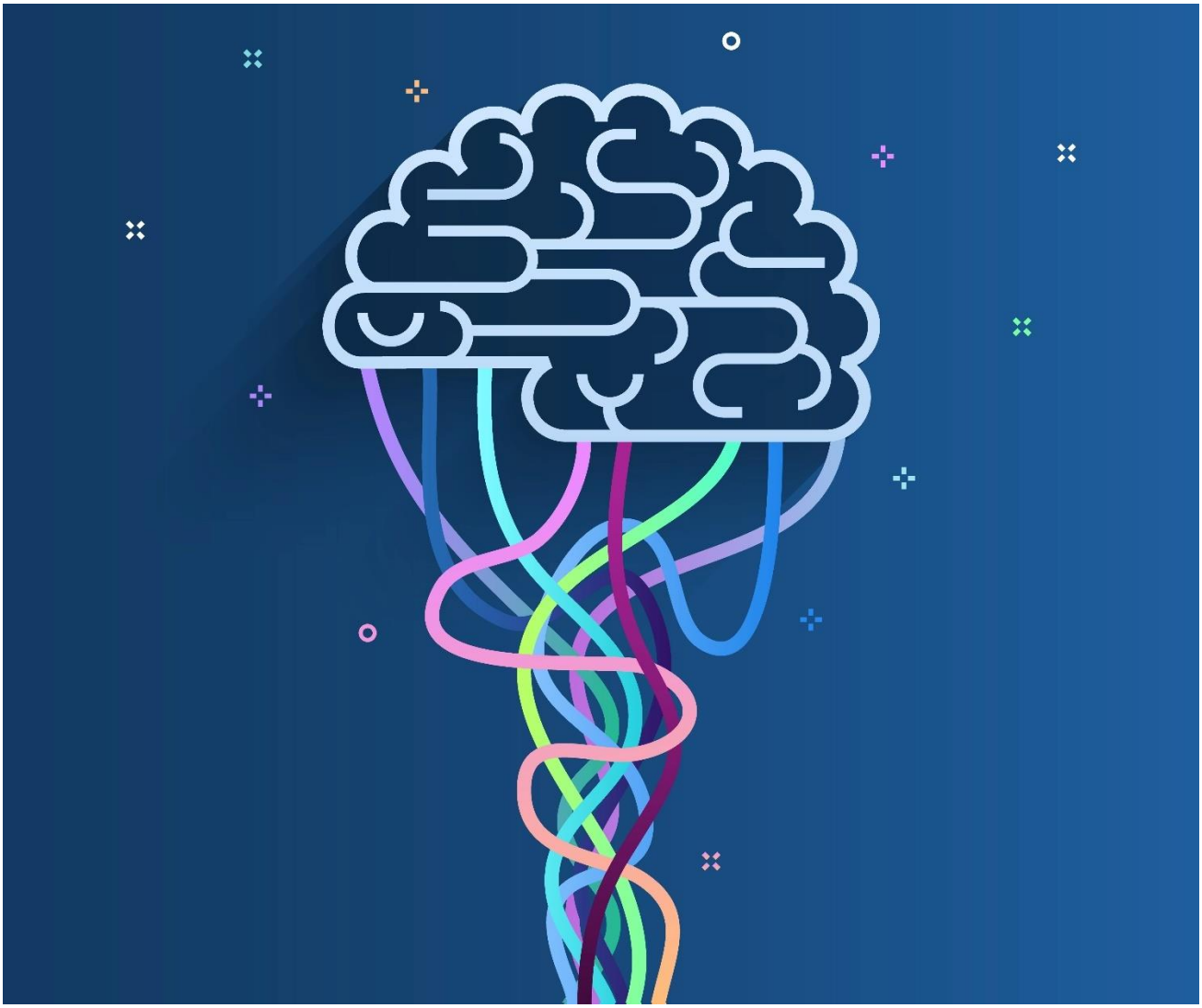
Chief People Officer Roundtable Series

Q2 2024 Summary



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Overview

In May 2024, FlemingMartin organized roundtable discussions with more than 100 Chief People Officers (CPOs) from leading Technology and Life Science companies.

Topics included:

- Trust in engagement surveys
- Strategies for enabling human connections and digital wellness
- Upskilling the workforce for AI
- Guidelines for political conversations in the workplace; and
- Internship programs

We have summarized key learnings from these discussions below and provided suggested resources (vendors, articles, books, subject matter experts, etc.) shared by the attendees.

Do Your Employees Trust Your Engagement Surveys?

The engagement survey has come a long way and while some companies still have trust issues, the vast majority of our attendees reported strong participation rates and management buy-in when it comes to sharing feedback and responding to the results of their surveys. Sub-themes included survey fatigue and questioning whether anonymity is necessary/optimal.

Balancing Workplace Tech with Human Connection and Digital Wellness

Nearly everyone attending commented that their companies had digital wellness challenges. The cost of bringing remote employees together was an obstacle for some and an expensive priority for others. While no silver bullet solution emerged from our roundtables, we did discuss quite a few creative ideas and resource suggestions.

How Are You Upskilling/Reskilling Your Workforce to Enhance AI Expertise?

Based upon our conversations, it appears that most companies are still very much in the early days of rolling out AI training. Addressing employee concerns and fears related to AI are an even more pressing priority. Many participants felt that they were falling behind in using AI and developing employees for the AI workplace of the not-too-distant future. AIFOMO (AI Fear of Missing Out) seemed ever present. Anecdotally, we did notice that the majority of tech company participants now have a designated executive in charge of AI at their organization, whereas two quarters ago, only one participant company had a designated AI leader in place.

Corporate Policies to Address Political Discourse in the Workplace

Only one attendee had a formal policy in place and most companies are choosing not to take a public stand on political issues. Global politics are presently creating more issues in the workplace than domestic U.S. politics but that may change with the U.S. Presidential Election just five months away. Attendees reported struggling with how to balance the desire to provide a forum for people to speak about how political issues may be affecting them with the perception that the company may be taking a public stance on a particular political issue.

Ensuring Impactful Internship Programs

Some of our attendees were forced to cut their company's internship programs in order to keep the focus on employee engagement following headcount reductions. Most attendees agreed that quality internship programs are a significant resource investment, can take several years to optimize and can be a great vehicle for providing opportunities to underrepresented groups.

Select Highlights

Topic 1: Do your employees trust your engagement surveys and feel their feedback can bring about positive organizational change? Why or why not?

In my experience the two big concerns are whether the survey is truly anonymous and whether leadership will follow through on the results of the survey.

Half of our organization is under age 35. I have stressed that they could be a part of the solution, and I find that messaging has been incredibly valuable. I then sit down and do 1-1s – "what keeps you here?" I feel like the only way to have people buy into something is to give them complete visibility.

We have survey fatigue as we also conduct a Great Place to Work survey.

I am not a fan of annual surveys; I prefer one every 18 months. I like to set up focus groups that can focus on the problems and then present solutions to peers. This helps employees to feel a part of the decision making. People are proud they are a part of the solution.

Maybe our employees feel over-surveyed? Being at a larger company, there are lots of different functions to survey. We really had to turn up the noise to get a 50% participation rate. But I do generally feel that surveys create expectation and employees do see our surveys as being listened to. I haven't really experienced trust issues.

Why are we talking about confidentiality? We try to be these safe places, but if you are going to create change, people need to be brave and speak up. So, I see it differently. For us, it is about how to develop a "speak up" culture -- this is culture by design and not by default.

The hourly workforce has some concerns about confidentiality. Not sure you can completely get rid of it.

We had a bunch of issues before I came in [around] access to responses. Managers were able to figure out who wrote what based on the situation. They were actually taking screenshots and putting it in warnings which is terrible. It just takes one or two of those [incidents] for people not to trust.

Sometimes trust is very regional. We used to get all 5s in some regions because obviously they didn't trust the survey. When we started getting 3s and 4s, it was a success because we were finally getting real data.

When the actions items come out, they're… from the CEO which shows commitment and that [we're] listening to the feedback. Handing the mic over to the CPO is not as successful as the CEO standing up there and speaking about the results.

Employees want to understand why they should stay, not just transparency. To solve this, leaders are sharing their own "why" which has helped drive healthy engagement, but you get flack no matter what approach you take!

Our engagement and scores around the question "I'm excited about the future prospects of the company" have seen gradual decline for employees with longer tenure bands. So, we are focusing on designing programs that enhance the quality of their equity programs.

I see value, but it is important to remember that a survey is a point-in-time sentiment and results often reflect what just happened.

Our challenge has been too much action/overcorrection before understanding what the data is really saying. I think talking with folks about the results and what they mean is more important [than a quick response].

We manage expectations on the topline survey and consider the results more directional. The last two years, we have had cross-functional focus groups discuss survey results -- the groups can go a couple of levels deeper on the issues… to the second and third layers. Then, we capture the notes from those groups to act. Individuals are identified by leaders and asked to join the focus group and only one person has ever turned down joining a focus group.

Everyone wants to convey feedback via Slack. My goal is to channel that feedback more to the survey itself.

When I first arrived, we were doing surveys via SurveyMonkey, and we chose to switch to Gallup to ensure confidentiality.

We are moving from Gartner to Peakon (Workday). With Peakon, managers can respond to anonymous comments in a conversation, so that makes me a little nervous.

We use Google Forms and allow employees to complete them anonymously or not. Anonymous and non-anonymous results do not seem different.

Other resources mentioned: *Culture Amp, Emtrain, Officevibe, Lattice, Viva Engage (fka Glint), WorkSense, Energage.*

Topic 2: How are you balancing workplace technologies with strategies that prioritize human connections and digital wellness?

There are so many [communications] technologies out there now. Can we stick to one? It's hard. Then you bring in the clients and they have their own.

Our remote employees are more engaged than our local employees, which is the opposite of what we expected. I am wondering, are leaders of remote teams more intentional with outreach and feedback?

It seems that more employees are complaining about how they are treated by their managers, and we've found that the issue is often around feedback being given digitally (via email or chat) instead of live. I think a lot of employee relationship issues could be avoided if people talked to one another live first. I'm trying to encourage more direct one-on-one communication instead of waiting for scheduled meetings.

We're primarily a remote workplace, and when we've had tough situations (stock drop, layoffs, etc.), my mind starts going to all sorts of negative places when I'm alone in my home. It's important to get people together to remind ourselves that we have a future together and we like each other and can get through [tough] things together. We feed off of each other.

We did something [to address this] in the metaverse, branded with our company logo on everything. We created a series of videos transporting employees from one room to another. They could sit in a collaboration area and we had participants from all over the world. It was a really cool way to interact. People want to have more meetings in the metaverse. We used www.hyperspace.mv.

Cost is also an issue when it comes to connectivity. Connectivity didn't cost very much when everybody worked in the same space.

There are often great technologies out there but at a price. We have to put dollars behind these. We had the Premium cost level for Donut and we dropped it to Standard . Our leadership refuses to spend even $2000 a year to enhance connectivity. A competitor to Donut (Alphy) now offers the same thing at 20% of the cost.

We use Roam. It creates a virtual office setting where you can engage virtually in a way that is similar to how you might connect in the office. It's $10/seat/month.

We tried to roll out Airspeed to help people connect but it created a lot of notifications. Employees appreciated the experimentation but asked us to turn it off. We haven't found a tool for everyday connection.

We put an SLA (service-level agreement) guidance together giving instructions on how to use Slack, email, and even Calendars (default to 25-minute meetings, reset all standing meetings every quarter, etc.).

This seems basic, but we implemented a few calendaring reminders based on our executive team's feedback. We asked the organization to build in time on the calendar so people can decompress or catch up – ending all meetings 5 minutes early (at the :25 or :55 marks). We also block off Fridays from meetings, lunch times are blocked off, and then again from 4-5pm daily.

We created a company newsletter. We ask for photos of what people did on their wellness days and conduct interviews. We want a place where people can see what others are doing with a more community feel.

We are all remote, so we encourage our managers not to do everything on zoom. Example: Do a walk through the park and talk on the phone instead of using Zoom.

We created a DailyWalk Slack Channel. People will take a picture of their daily walk and upload it with a comment.

We kicked off a workplace wellness group. We are a small company and try to be scrappy. We designed a program for the next year with a new theme every 2 months. Examples: Movement, Sleep, etc. We are doing some running clubs and bringing in an outside meditation expert for a lunch hour too.

We are having a Company Olympics. Employees form a team and donate winnings to their charity of choice. People like coming together as a team to win. Usually it's all about exercising and we are focused on consistency. We use SmartSheet to track. I don't love the manual element, but the price is right.

We believe each employee's health and wellness is individualized. We offer One Medical as a benefit and we've tried to address over-stimulation by creating avenues for people to get help.

***Other resources mentioned:** Glue (for communications) Wellable (for wellness challenges), Degreed.com (training).*

Two Book Recommendations

- *A Minute to Think: Reclaim Creativity, Conquer Busyness, and Do Your Best Work by Juliet Funt.*
- *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World by Cal Newport.*

Topic 3: How are you upskilling/reskilling your workforce to enhance AI expertise?

*Matt Poladian at LifeRay shared this message to his company on the topic of AI: **"If you're afraid of it, you'll miss the opportunity of it. If you embrace it, you'll be made better by it. If you ignore it, you probably won't notice that you're left behind until it's too late. If you make too much of it, then you will get distracted."***

We have a company-wide policy to encourage people to use AI across the business. Our security team is very stressed. A couple teams like HR do have a ChatGPT license but you could be exposed because OpenAI is not necessarily focused on the security piece. I plan to automate some of HR carefully, so we're looking at tools. We considered using Google's Gemini but our security team has not approved it.

At our HR offsite in April, we did an innovation session. Everyone discussed an AI tool they had been curious about.

On the scientific side, we are building out AI-focused teams. It's a huge focus of investment and we have built a new comp structure since (the org) needs more money for these types of positions. In partnership with (our sister company), we are building learning programs for employees. It's basic AI training for G&A and more specific training for those on the tech side. Our HR team has been using AI for writing policy and job descriptions. You must read everything over, but it gives you a starting point.

I just had a request yesterday from our CIO to create a job for a position called "10x-er" to transform processes using AI. The cost for someone with this skillset could be $250,000 a year, and we may put a group together to house people with this skillset. The idea is that the return on investment is quite high. We certainly do use AI in HR for job descriptions.

I reached out to our CTO recently offering to partner with him on (AI upskilling), because it's going to have a big impact on employees. I want to ensure HR has a seat at the table with the rollout of AI.

I was at the Irresistible 2024 Conference led by USC and Josh Bersin. They started talking a lot about Galileo (an AI-powered assistant for HR) since it's all built from their database and from other L&D vendors. It seems like an AI resource with pretty clean data.

Interestingly, we are in the middle of a fundraise and some investors specifically asked whether our people and departments were using AI and how that was being monitored.

We are doing monthly learning and have an AI Council. We are trying to create a playground to experiment with it. We have some thought leaders coming in to speak with the team. It is all about inspiring curiosity rather than fear.

We unlock AI features within existing tools -- Greenhouse is an example. I like to ask my current software providers, "What am I not using?"

Our product delivery team is running an ["in house"] AI Exchange. Teams will volunteer a problem they're trying to solve. For example, we have a bunch of data in Salesforce. Our business ops team took it on as a project and used AI to analyze the data and draw conclusions about our customer interactions.

We are looking at piloting Gemini or ChatGPT -- we're comparing prices. Google Gemini is the most reasonable cost-wise because we already use many other Google tools: it's $10 per employee per month. ChatGPT is $150 per employee per month for the trial. Our procurement group is running this effort.

We have a smaller category of employees questioning "Why is [AI] so expensive and how do you justify the cost?" We are trying to get our employees more informed around that.

[Unless you opt out], Slack is using your conversations for their learning model…this is making people antsy. [https://slack.com/trust/data-management/privacy-principles]

We just completed a round of performance reviews. A lot of the write-ups were really rambling and unclear, just not our standard. I asked people to download the free version of Grammarly to improve their write-ups, and it was great.

We started AI Academy with NC State University. It is all online and our employees enter as cohorts. It is free if you are based in the U.S.

Glint's copilot capability saved us 50-60 hours' worth of reading employee surveys. It's good at summarizing but make sure it's in a lockdown environment. Saves a ton of time!

***Other resources mentioned:** Moveworks, Scribe (documents processes), Paradox (for scheduling), Copilot, MeBeBot, Glean (intranet solution for document tagging search).*

From Fortune CHRO Daily…How PwC is tapping into a small group of volunteer 'super users' to boost employee engagement with AI

From PYMNTS: JPMorgan: All New Employees Will Receive AI Training

Topic 4: Does your company have a policy in place to address political discourse in the workplace? What does the policy allow and what does the policy prohibit?

We don't have a policy, but we have an email that we're waiting to send out [for this topic] about our values. Just trying to determine the right time to send it.

It's a difficult one. People feel like, based on tools we use or speakers we bring in, that we are choosing sides. We try our best to keep it out of the company but also respect everybody's views.

There have been several asks from employees about whether there's going to be a companywide email from our CEO taking a stance on certain political issues. As an executive team, unless it has a direct impact on employees, we won't be taking any political stance. Although, our CEO does post about issues personally a lot on LinkedIn; we haven't reconciled that piece.

We set a north star: employee health and well-being is our entire focus. Every now and then, people will ask a question but have not had any pressure to take a stance. Our only stance is our concern for the health and well-being of employees.

We are remote and sometimes it is a good thing that employees cannot have watercooler talk!

We're clear about the parameters for our (corporate) statements and unapologetic about not getting in on every cause. It's hard to be everything for everyone.

We don't have anything formal in place. I think it's coming, and we may need to implement a policy, but so far, we've been okay. I know people want to be heard, which means we need to hear. But the vocal people often don't want to listen/hear opposing views in return. We're trying to teach that to prevent situations from escalating.

In (my native country), we talk about politics 365 days a year, which can cause families, friends, and coworkers to fall apart. In the US, it is very different, and we focus on preserving the culture of the company.

People posting political statements on Slack can really impact (cohesion). At our company, employees in other parts of the country took offense to some posts from employees in the left-leaning states.

I think there's a new social contract with employees and they want to know what the company stands for. If you don't stand for something, you stand for nothing!

No logos or slogans are allowed in our workplace. A small Nike swoosh is fine, but no statements on shirts, hats, etc.

We want opportunities to appreciate all cultures and all beliefs without judgment/being forced to pick a lane. We've used Emtrain, Lyra, and other vehicles to help create safe forums for people to express their views.

Other resources mentioned: *HR Heretics Podcast: Politics in the Workplace is Just Distracting (15 min)*

How to Talk About Politics at Work (4 Guidelines)

We Can't Talk About That at Work! by Mary-Frances Winters

Topic 5: Does your company have a summer internship program for college undergraduates or high school students? How have you ensured the program's impact and success?

We bring in about 60 interns a year, mainly in customer support or in our sales development department for a ten-week period. We aim to hire at least 60% of them and hope to have 90% of them accept the offer. We have about 6000 applicants for 60 positions. We focus on diversity including historically underrepresented groups.

We have a survey to get feedback from the 10-12 weeks [of our internship program]. It ends with a student symposium and there is voting for best overall and other awards. We really measure on their experience in how we did and whether it was meaningful. (e.g., Did the manager have a game plan?)

We have a people team intern who will be here 14 weeks helping us build an AI Agent for onboarding. Projects in the AI space are great for interns because it's an emerging space.

We formalized our internship program last year. We have "lunch and learns" with the functional teams… this includes HR, where we give guidance on interview skills, resumes, LinkedIn profiles, etc. At the beginning of the summer, we do a fireside chat with our CSO to launch the program, and to conclude it, we have a fireside chat with our CEO. Every intern is partnered with a peer mentor and a leader mentor.

We have a BIPOC-focused internship program. Best practices include periodic check-ins during the internship, at the midpoint, and after the program is done. We do a full debrief and recap of the program once it is over.

In the past, we acted like we had an internship program, but it was basically giving jobs to kids of current employees. We implemented a formal process with applications, interviews, a primary project, and an end-of-internship presentation. We want to be inclusive and use relationships with local universities and we are expanding into trade schools as well. LinkedIn has been fantastic to find interns.

We have done internships in the past, but in the current environment, as we've shrunk our employee base, engagement and retention are our biggest issues right now.

Project Onramp, a program of the non-profit Life Science Cares, has done a great job finding us 4 interns.

We really do value our internship program. We've had it in place for ~10 years. It's for college students, and there are eight-week and ten-week programs. We put a lot of investment in the mentoring aspect. We have learning activities and exposure to senior management and our culture. With Peninsula Bridge, we pay it forward to the next generation of aspiring scientists with a focus on students who are the first in their family to go to college. We also use interns in our manufacturing facility. It is a really robust and buttoned-up program. The whole company takes this really seriously. We create these real life-changing opportunities for people… It's a ton of effort but it feels more "get than give."

In the past, we have partnered with NexGeneGirls (a high school program designed to empower girls of color to pursue science) for our internships.

We partner with the Massachusetts Life Science Center for their Internship Challenge. They help fund our interns.

This year, we found our interns via Handshake.

We leverage the Grow RegenMed Internship Program (which provides opportunities for Black students). All interns are at least in their sophomore year of college and have some lab experience.

We partner with GEAR UP, NPower, and Code.org.

I've also focused on bringing in veterans through Wounded Warrior Project.

Miscellaneous:

For California companies looking at the WVPP July 1st requirement deadline.

You can download the state's Model Written Workplace Violence Prevention Plan for General Industry (Non-Health Care Settings) template here: https://www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/PubOrder.asp

Companies can obtain a CA law compliant WVPP template at sixfifty.com (affiliated with Wilson Sonsini). The subscription starts at $250/month.

Other resources mentioned: *Compensia's 2024 Software Sector Equity Report*

WorkLife with Adam Grant: A Company is not a Family with Airbnb CEO Brian Chesky

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