



The 2026 CUPA-HR CHRO Survey: Challenges for the Year Ahead and the Current State of AI Adoption and Remote/Hybrid Work

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Introduction

Chief human resources officer (CHRO) roles are among the most challenging in any organization. This is particularly true in higher education, as CHROs work through complex workforce challenges while navigating issues unique to colleges and universities, including internal campus governance structures and external political pressures. We periodically see lists that highlight the top issues and challenges of other campus leaders. Through this report, we amplify the voice of higher education CHROs from across the country.

The challenges identified by higher education CHROs are among the top challenges of our colleges and universities, demonstrating once again that there is no such thing as “just” an HR challenge. The responses also emphasize that higher ed HR leaders are striving to align the work of HR and their teams to the work of their presidents, provosts, and other campus leaders while ensuring that the importance of employee experience, engagement, and morale are not lost in the shuffle.

It is no surprise that budget constraints/economic uncertainty emerged as the greatest challenge, with healthcare costs, employee well-being/morale, student enrollment, and leadership/management development identified as the other top challenges. Of importance and concern is that CHROs reported an overall lack of confidence that their institutions were invested in resolving these challenges.

This lack of confidence is not surprising, as many factors outside the control of the institution are creating or exacerbating these challenges. Uncertainty regarding federal funding has far-reaching implications impacting academic research,¹ graduate programs,² student access,³ and administrative programs and infrastructure.⁴ Healthcare costs continue to skyrocket,⁵ with some organizations predicting the highest increase in approximately 15 years.⁶ These escalated healthcare costs will require additional institutional funding which competes with needed funding for pay increases and retention programs and incentives. Other benefits may also be casualties of funding priorities, which pass along additional costs to employees.

¹ Agarwal, K. (2026, June 5). [OMB Proposes Major Changes to How the Federal Government Funds Scientific Research](#). Association of American Universities.

² Palmer, K. (2026, July 7). [Top Ph.D. Programs Shrink Amid Federal Funding Uncertainty](#). *Inside Higher Ed*.

³ Blake, J. (2026, March 17.) [What Will It Take to Address the Pell Shortfall?](#) *Inside Higher Ed*.

⁴ Pyati, A. (2026, July 8). [OMB's Proposal Creates Fiscal Uncertainty for States, Localities, and Nonprofits and the People They Serve](#). Association of American Universities.

⁵ Cotter, L., et al. (2026, March 17). [Eight Trends Shaping 2026 Healthcare Costs](#). Peterson-KFF.

⁶ Mercer. (2025). [Focusing on Affordability While Managing High Cost Growth](#).

This report also provides an overview of the current usage and adoption of AI by higher ed CHROs, their HR teams, and their institutions. An alarming 26% of CHROs indicated they are not at all involved in campus-wide AI policies, yet AI is transforming work across campus and around the world. We must view AI as a workforce and student learning transformation tool instead of an “initiative” led by IT or faculty. HR leaders who resist or choose not to immerse themselves in the use of AI may find themselves obsolete or out of touch with the reality of work in 2026 — not that AI is replacing jobs as much as it is helping us meet increasing demands with fewer people to manage and implement the work.

As budgets continue to constrict and healthcare costs continue to escalate, higher ed HR leaders must not only embrace but champion the use of AI to create efficiency and innovation that helps our institutions and our employees be successful now and into the future. Our hope is that the outcomes and recommendations from this report serve as catalysts for action by CHROs, their teams, and other campus leaders.

Respondents

A total of 236 higher education CHROs responded to the survey.⁷ Respondents represented institutions from 45 states and Puerto Rico (Figure 1).

⁷ The abbreviation CHRO as used in this report refers to those individuals who hold the topmost human resources position at their institution. The response rate for the survey was 10%. The data collection period ran June 16-30, 2026.

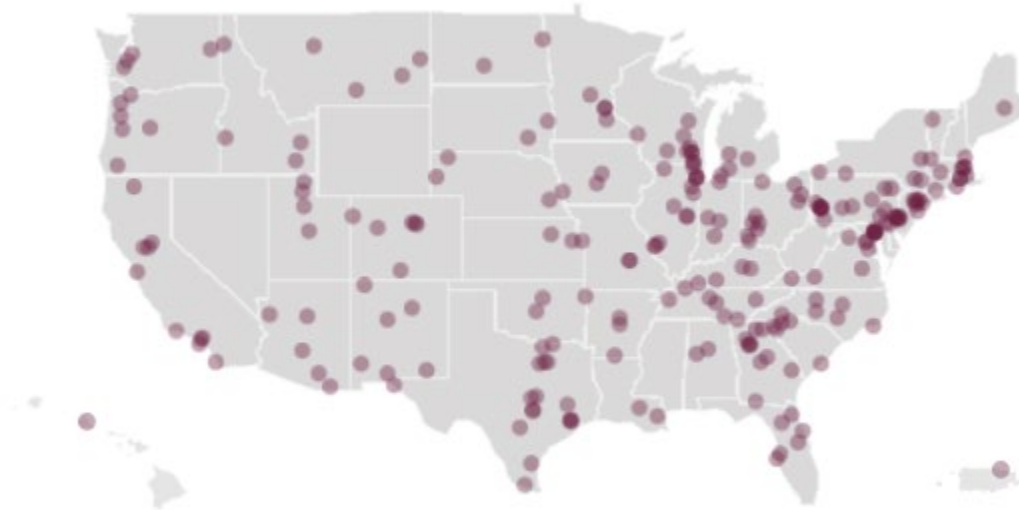


Figure 1. CHRO Survey Participants

Respondents represented a cross-section of institutions in regard to control (public, private), classification (highest degree awarded), and institution (student) size (Figure 2).⁸

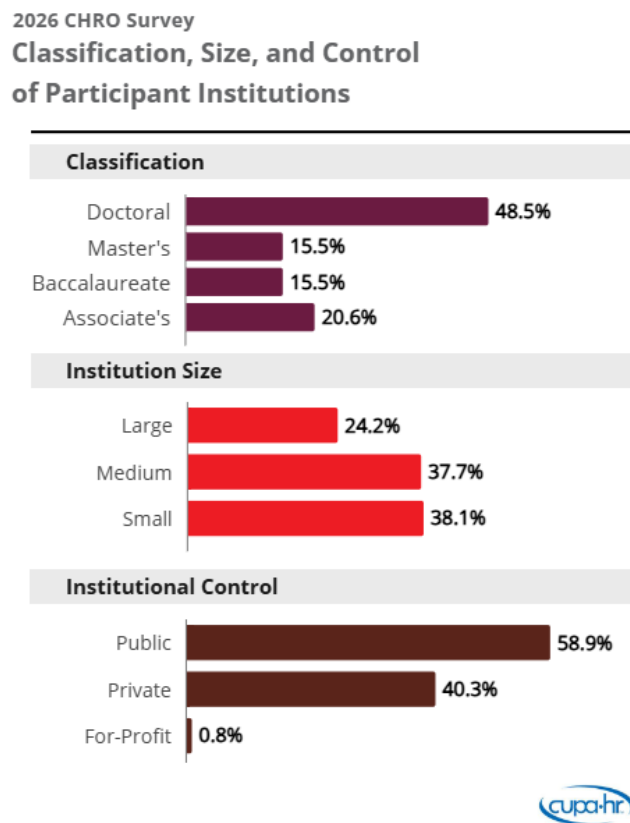
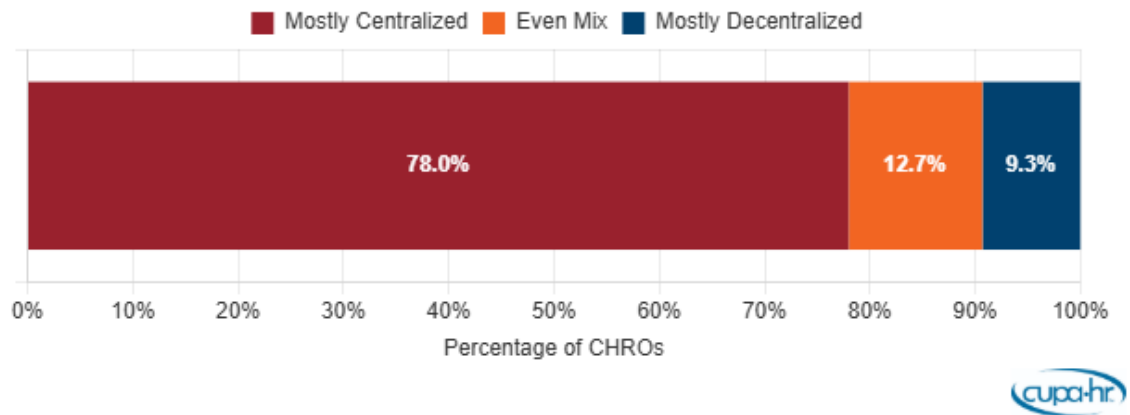


Figure 2. Classification, Size, and Control of Participant Institutions⁹

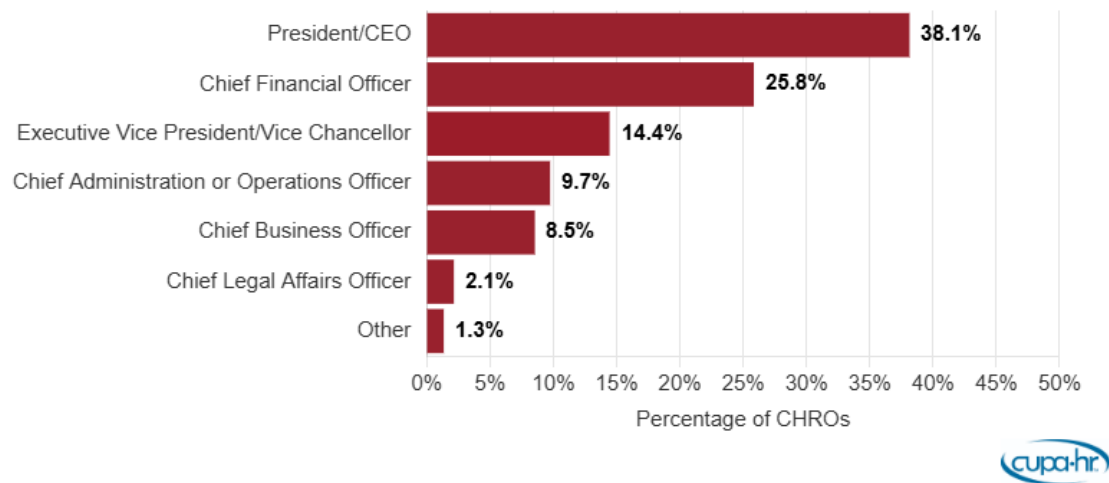
We asked respondents whether the HR functions at their institution were mostly centralized (managed by a single team), mostly decentralized (managed by multiple teams), or pretty much an even mix. More than three-fourths (78%) represent institutions where HR functions are mostly centralized (Figure 3).

⁸ Control, classification (highest degree awarded), and institution (student) size align with the [Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education](#).

⁹ Three of the five system participants do not fall under a single classification because of the varied makeup of their institutions. All five system participants were categorized as large institutions.

HR Functional Organization Model*Figure 3. HR Functional Organization Model*

Respondents were also asked to whom they report. Most commonly, 38% of CHROs report to the president (Figure 4). Other common reporting relationships include the chief financial officer (26%) and the executive vice president or chancellor (14%).

CHRO Reporting Relationship*Figure 4. CHRO Reporting Relationship*

CHRO respondents have a median time in position of 4.0 years, with the most common tenure length being 2-4 years (Figure 5).

2026 CHRO Survey

Years in Position

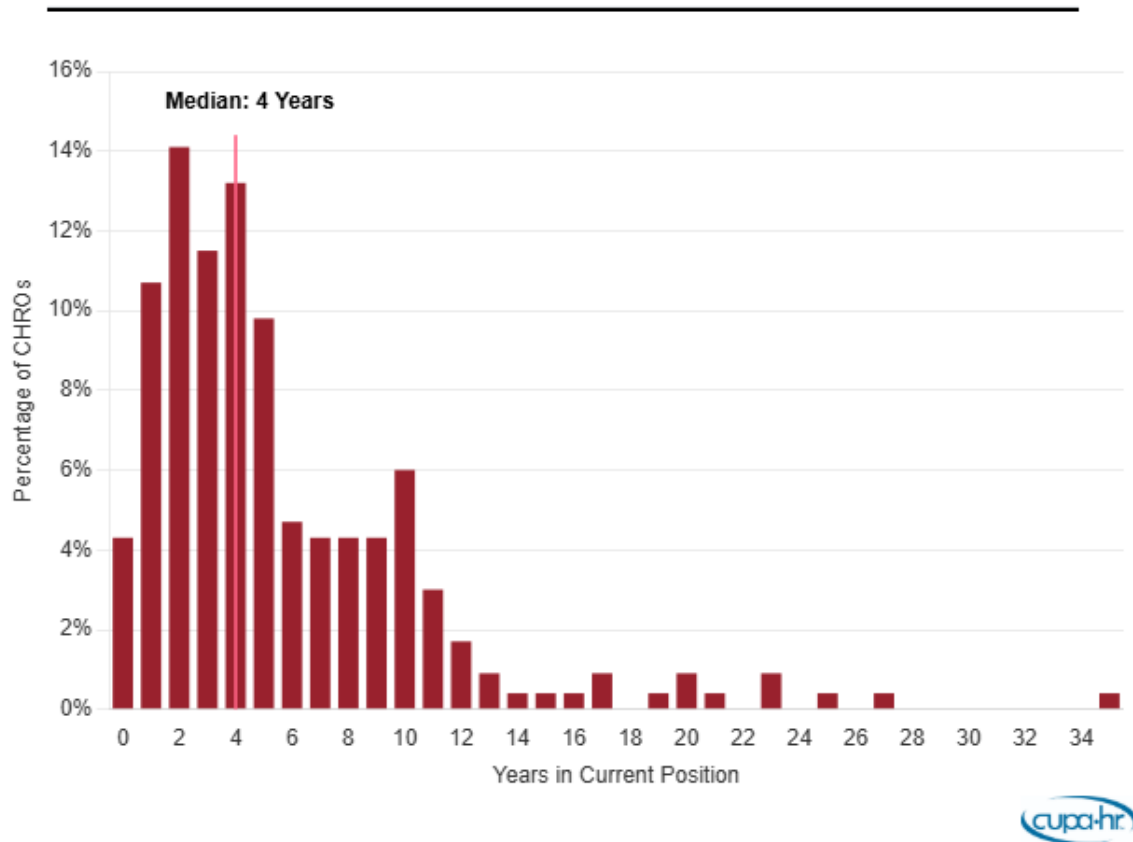
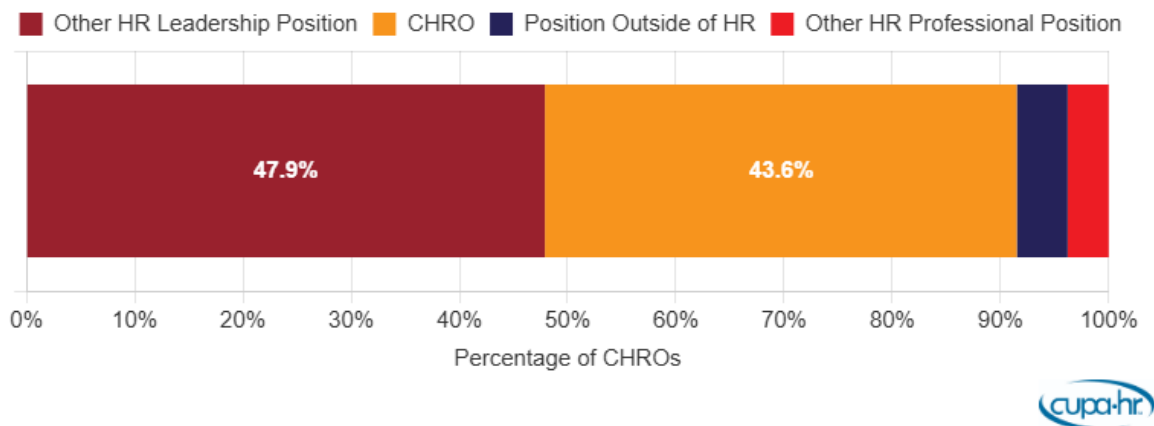
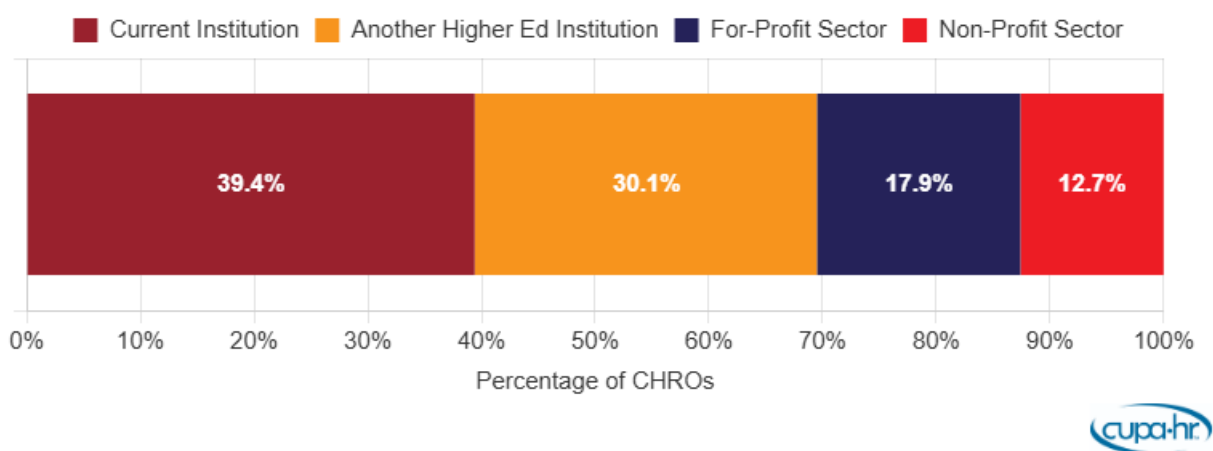


Figure 5. Years in Position

Nearly half (48%) of CHRO respondents held another HR leadership position immediately prior to their current CHRO position (Figure 6). Another 44% held a different CHRO position prior to their current position. Only 5% of CHROs held a position outside of HR immediately prior, and only 4% made the leap to CHRO from an HR professional position.

Previous Position of CHROs*Figure 6. Previous Position of CHROs*

The most common previous place of employment for CHRO respondents was their current institution (39%; Figure 7). Another 30% were hired from another higher ed institution. Fewer were hired from outside of higher ed in either the for-profit (18%) or non-profit (13%) sectors.

Previous Place of Employment of CHROs*Figure 7. Previous Place of Employment of CHROs*

Challenges, Priorities, and Predictions for Next Year

Confidence in Institutional Investment Does Not Match the Magnitude of Top Challenges

CHROs were asked to rate a number of items (from 1 = “not a challenge” to 5 = “critical challenge”) in terms of how much of a challenge they expected each would pose to their institution in the 2026-27 academic year. They were then asked to rate their confidence (from 1 = “not at all confident” to 5 = “completely confident”) that their institution would sufficiently invest in or prioritize those same items. The mean challenge and investment scores for each of these items are shown in Figure 8.

The top five items, which met the level of “major challenge,” were budget constraints/economic uncertainty, healthcare costs, employee well-being/morale, student enrollment, and leadership/management development. None of the items were rated as “not a challenge” in terms of their mean scores, and none of the items achieved the level of “critical challenge.”

For the most part, CHROs’ confidence that institutions would sufficiently invest in or prioritize these top five challenges lag behind the seriousness of the challenge. Within these top challenges, the exception was student enrollment. Confidence that institutions would sufficiently prioritize student enrollment exceeded the rating of the challenge itself.

Top Challenges in 2026-27 and Confidence in Institutional Investment

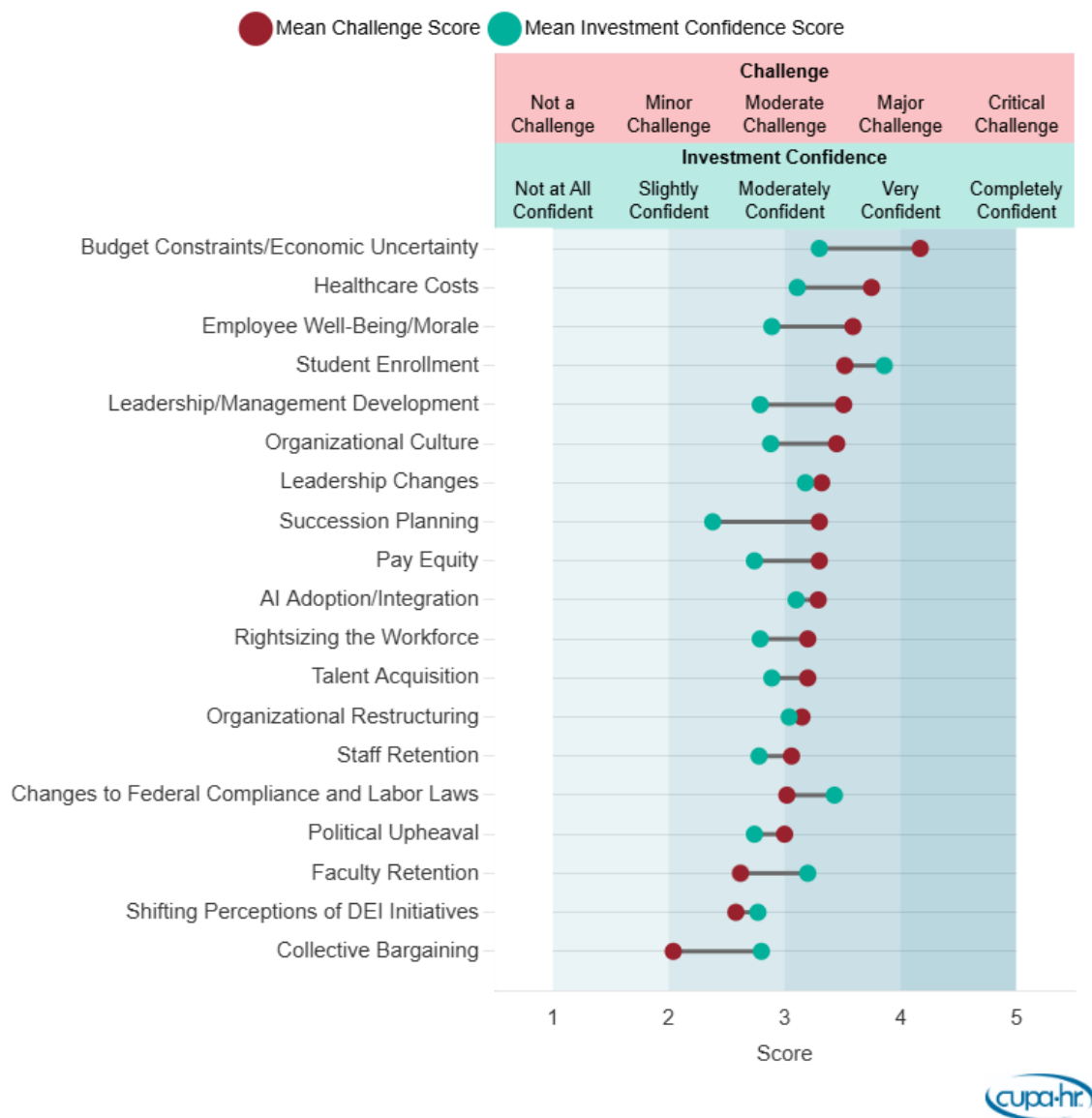


Figure 8. Top Challenges in 2026-27 and Confidence in Institutional Investment¹⁰

¹⁰ Graph is sorted in order of mean challenge scores.

HR Priorities and Predictions for Next Year: Decreased Budgets Are Top of Mind

Participants were asked to rank the top 3-5 priorities they anticipated their HR department would be managing/dealing with in the next year (Figure 9). The top three items (budget constraints/economic uncertainty, employee well-being/morale, and healthcare costs) align with the top three institutional challenges noted in Figure 8, demonstrating that HR's role next year will be strategic in meeting these challenges.

The top priorities for higher ed CHROs differ from those identified by private-sector CHROs.¹¹ First, higher ed CHROs are much more likely to have to manage tight budgets and economic uncertainty, which is not a high priority for those in the private sector. Relatedly, the management of healthcare costs is not a top priority identified in the private sector, whereas it is in the top three for higher ed. In addition, employee well-being and morale, rated second on the list of top five priorities of higher ed CHROs, does not appear on the radar of those in the private sector. And whereas AI strategy and AI future-of-work scenarios appear at the top of the list for private sector CHROs, AI adoption and integration are identified by only one-fourth (25%) of higher ed CHROs as a top-five priority (Figure 9).

¹¹ Gartner. (2026). [*2026 HR Trends: 4 Strategic Priorities for the Modern CHRO.*](#)

Top Items CHROs Expect to Be Managing in the Next Year

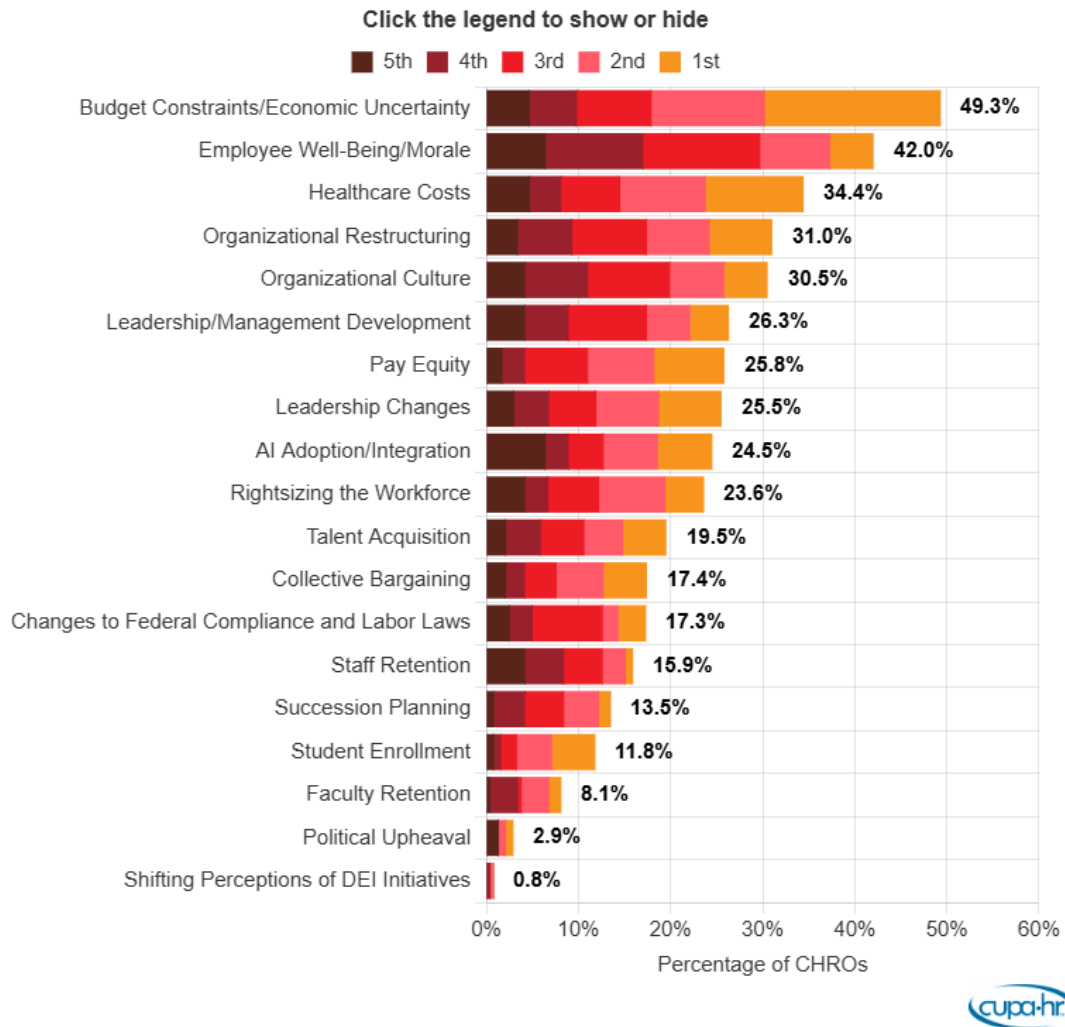


Figure 9. Top Items CHROs Expect to Be Managing in the Next Year

CHRO respondents indicated what they predict will happen in the 2026-27 academic year in relation to budgets, hiring, and turnover (Figure 10). More than half of CHROs predict that both institutional and HR budgets will decrease next year. This prediction is reflected in the fact that budget constraints/economic uncertainty ranks first in terms of items that CHROs expect to manage in the next year (Figure 9).

Overall, CHROs predict more stable environments next year when it comes to hiring and turnover. Nearly two-thirds (64%) predict that staff hiring will stay about the same or increase, and more than three-fourths (79%) predict that faculty hiring will remain static or increase. Similarly, about two-thirds of CHROs expect turnover for both staff and faculty to remain about the same or decrease.

2026 CHRO Survey

CHRO Predictions for Next Year

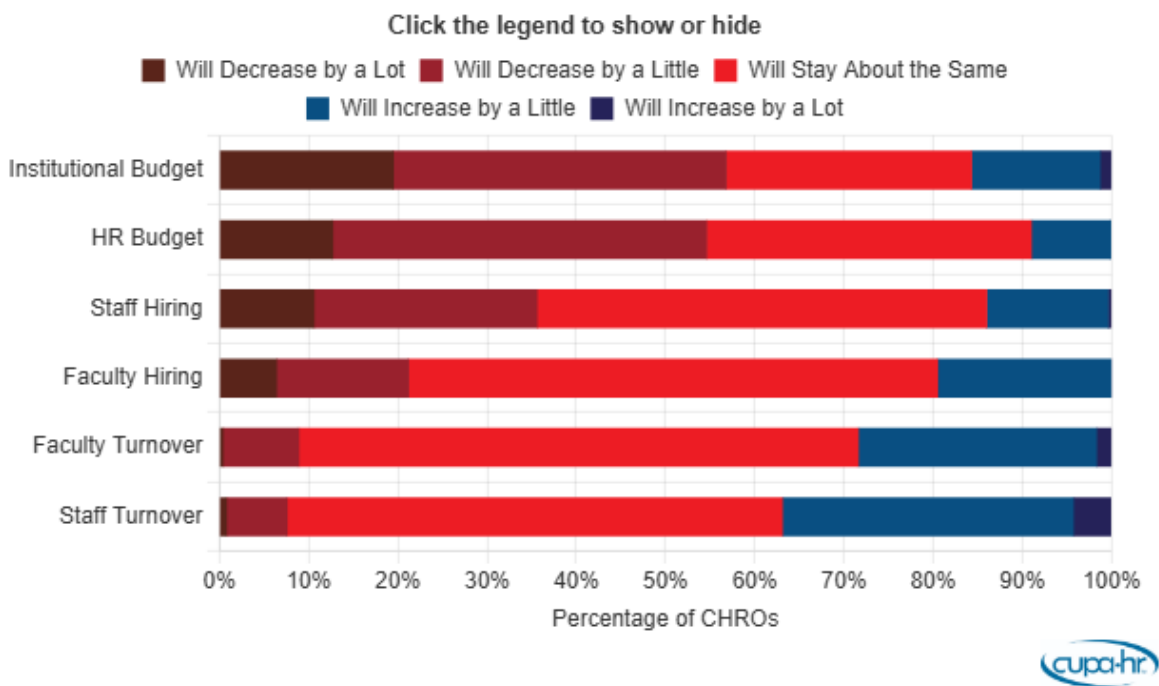


Figure 10. CHRO Predictions for Next Year

Artificial Intelligence

As colleges and universities explore the possibility and risks of artificial intelligence, CHROs sit at the intersection of the workforce, technology, and institutional policy. This section examines the extent to which CHROs are helping shape AI initiatives on campus and how they and their teams are approaching the use of AI in their own work.

One of the major concerns around AI is the potential loss of jobs. When it comes to job creation or elimination, very few CHROs noted changes. Fewer than 1% stated that AI had created any new specific *HR* roles. However, 18% stated that AI had created new roles at their institution focused on the application and administration of AI. Conversely, only 2% stated that AI had caused HR-specific roles to disappear and fewer than 5% stated that AI had caused roles on campus beyond HR to disappear.

HR Involvement in Developing Campus-Wide AI Policies

Fifteen CHROs (6%) indicated their institution has not developed any campus-wide AI policies. Figure 11 represents the 94% who have campus-wide policies in place.

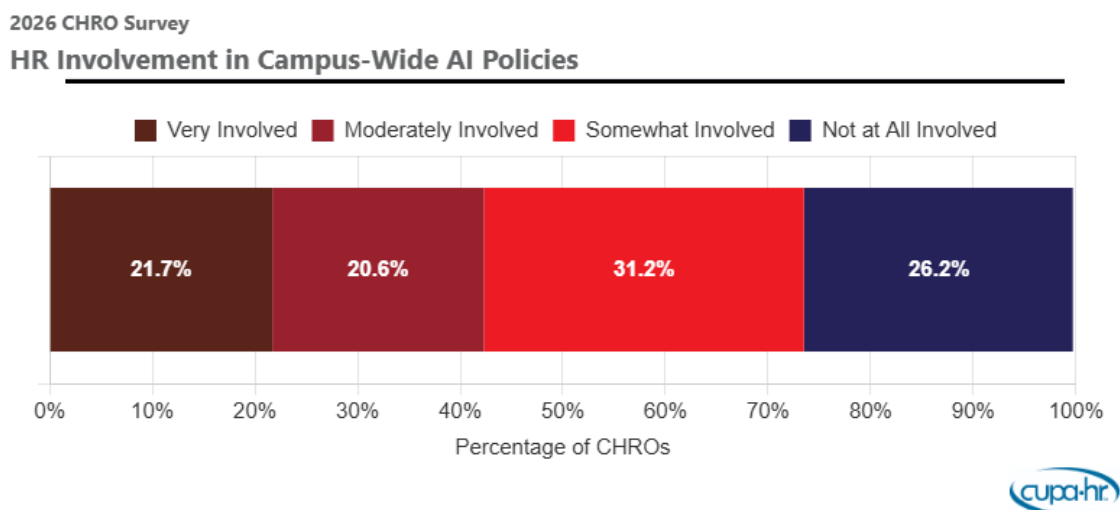


Figure 11. HR Involvement in Campus-Wide AI Policies

The adoption of AI is the largest disruption to the workforce in decades.¹² AI is not simply an IT project, but a workforce imperative that requires effective, people-centered adoption and integration. HR is central to the success of AI in the workforce. Research shows that organizations that give HR the responsibility to lead AI implementation are four times more

¹² Komm, A., et al. (2025, February). [A New Operating Model for People Management: More Personal, More Tech, More Human](#). McKinsey & Company.

likely to describe their workforce as mostly or fully AI-ready versus when a cross functional team is used or when implementation is led by IT.¹³

Nearly one-fourth (22%) of CHROs are very involved in their campus-wide AI policies, and 21% are moderately involved (Figure 11). This is great news, but unfortunately, this means that more than half of campuses are only somewhat engaging or not at all engaging their HR departments in the formation of AI policies. As AI continues to evolve, it is imperative that HR leads or co-leads institutional AI plans, as this is not simply a technical challenge but a workforce and organizational design challenge.

On a local level, more than one-fifth (21%) of CHROs state their *HR department* does not have an AI strategy. For those that do, Figure 12 depicts the elements that are part of that AI strategy.

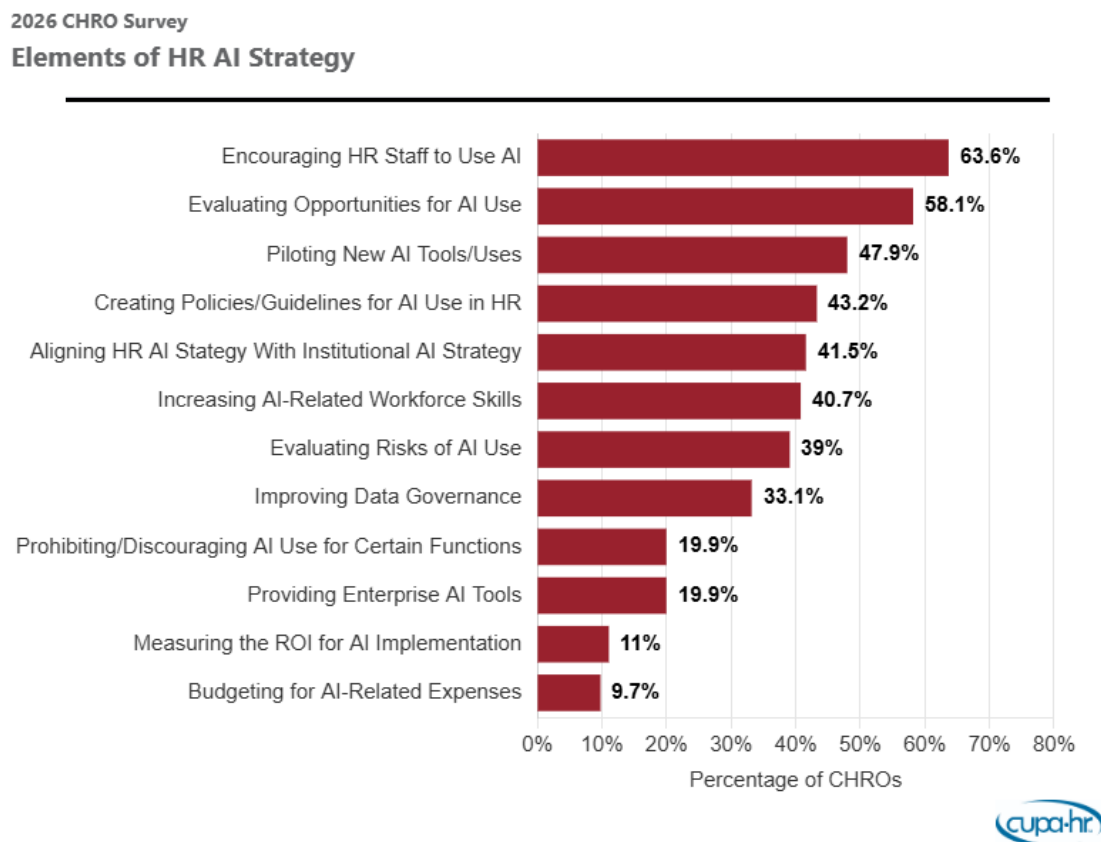


Figure 12. Elements of HR AI Strategy

¹³ Brekken, K. (2026, July 28). [AI Works Better When HR Helps Lead It, New Research Finds](#). *HR Executive*.

If HR is expected to lead when it comes to organizational change and workforce transformation due to AI, to gain credibility, it must also have its own house in order. Doing so requires encouragement and application of AI within the HR department.¹⁴

HR teams with an AI strategy in place are already well on their way, with 64% of CHROs stating that they encourage HR staff to use AI, 58% stating they evaluate opportunities for AI application, and 48% stating they are piloting new tools and uses. All of this indicates an interest and willingness to evaluate the possibilities of AI application.

Attitudes Toward AI

When CHROs were asked about their personal attitude toward AI on a scale of 0 (not enthusiastic at all) to 100 (very enthusiastic), they responded with a median of 75. This indicates that, overall, CHROs are enthusiastic regarding AI use and application (Figure 13).

¹⁴ Durth, S., et al. (2026, June 8). [HR's Dual Mandate in the AI Era](#). McKinsey & Company.

2026 CHRO Survey
CHROs' Attitude Toward AI

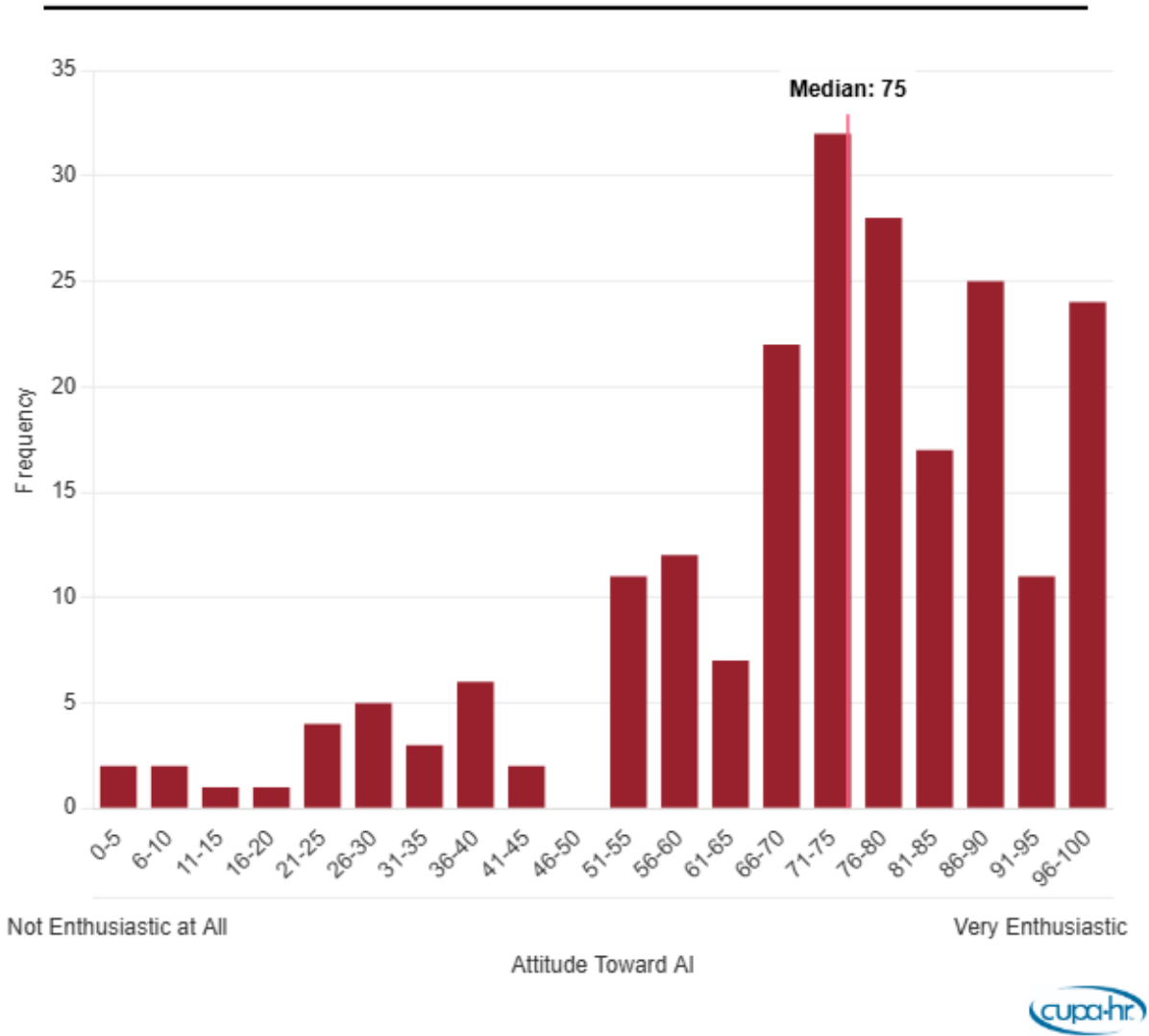


Figure 13. CHROs' Attitude Toward AI

We asked CHROs where they would place their institution's leadership in terms of their encouragement of AI use on a scale from 0 (not at all encouraging) to 100 (very encouraging). CHROs perceive this to be slightly below their own enthusiasm with a median score of 70 (Figure 14).

Leadership's enthusiasm and encouragement around the use of AI has an impact on AI usage.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, there is a significant relationship between CHROs' personal attitude toward AI and how frequently they use AI at work.¹⁶ In other words, the more enthusiastic a CHRO is about AI, the more likely they are to use AI. In addition, their enthusiasm is infectious — the more enthusiastic a CHRO is about AI, the more AI is used *across HR functions* in their department.¹⁷

This same relationship exists with other senior institutional leadership in their encouragement of AI. Greater encouragement of AI use from senior leadership is associated with more AI use among CHROs.¹⁸ Senior leadership encouragement is also associated with more AI use across HR functions.¹⁹

¹⁵ Variables for "personal AI use" and "HR AI use" were created by averaging the appropriate Likert-scale usage items displayed in Figures 15, 16, and 18.

¹⁶ $r(234) = .489, p \text{ (one-tailed)} < .001$

¹⁷ $r(233) = .412, p \text{ (one-tailed)} < .001$

¹⁸ $r(234) = .319, p \text{ (one-tailed)} < .001$

¹⁹ $r(233) = .276, p \text{ (one-tailed)} < .001$

Campus Leadership's Attitude Toward AI

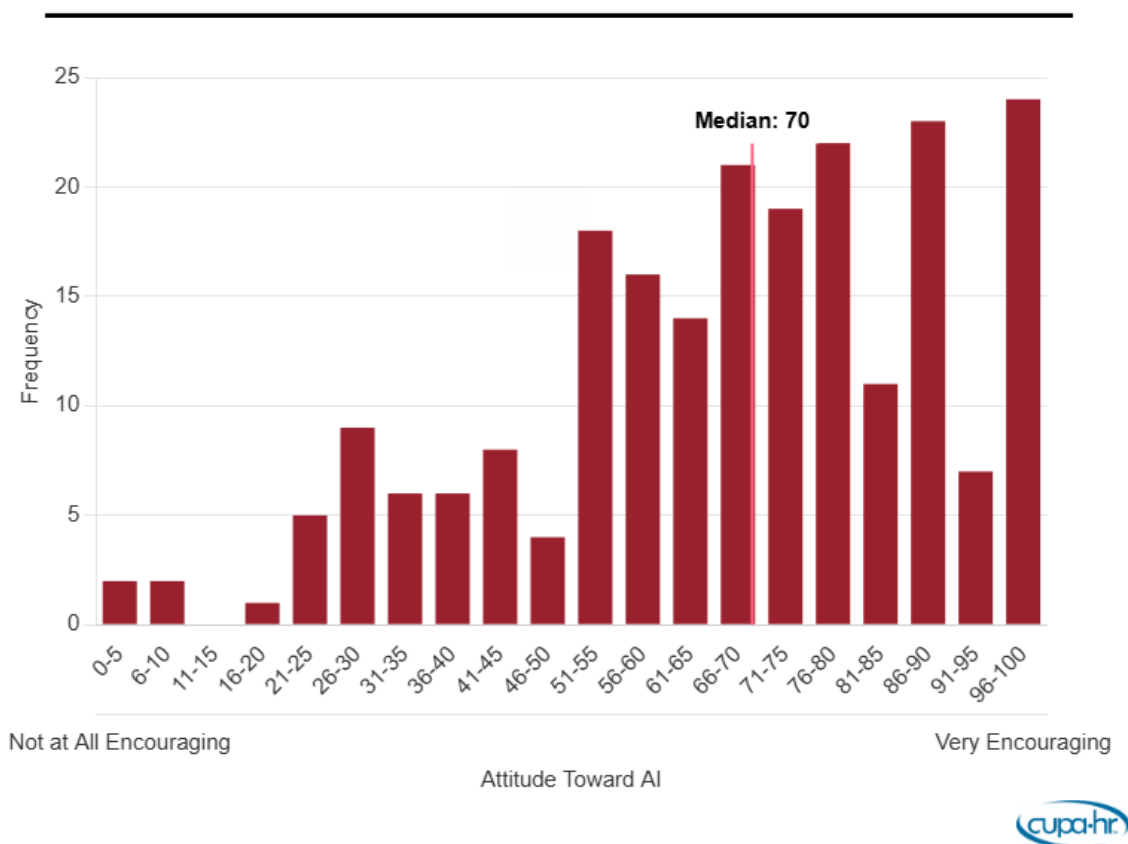


Figure 14. Campus Leadership's Attitude Toward AI

AI Adoption by HR

When it comes to AI adoption among higher education human resources departments, one of the primary uses is in the recruitment and hiring function. This tracks with similar data from the private sector.²⁰ For employers, AI can serve as a useful tool to identify talent, but it can also come with risks including discrimination and bias if not properly managed.²¹

CHROs note that when it comes to recruitment and hiring, the most prevalent uses of AI come in some of the least risky but often most time-consuming tasks. Topping the list is drafting standard emails, with 82% using AI at least somewhat (Figure 15). Creating job descriptions and creating interview questions follow with just over three quarters (77%) of CHROs indicating that their teams are using AI at least somewhat for creating job

²⁰ House, E. (2026, April). [The State of AI in HR in 2026: 5 Critical Insights for CHROs](#). SHRM.

²¹ Bommasani, R., et al. (2026, May). [AI Hiring Tools Can Yield Racial Bias and Systemic Rejection](#). Stanford University HAI.

descriptions and three quarters (75%) are using AI at least somewhat for creating interview questions. These tasks are lower risk activities in the hiring process, as half or more indicate they do not use AI at all for standardizing criteria for equitable hiring, candidate prescreening, and resume screening.

Scheduling interviews stands out as one of the least used applications for AI with 70% indicating they do not use AI at all for this task. This could indicate either that the tools have not been made available for this task or that staff are not comfortable using these tools just yet.

2026 CHRO Survey

Extent of AI Use in HR Departments for Recruitment and Hiring

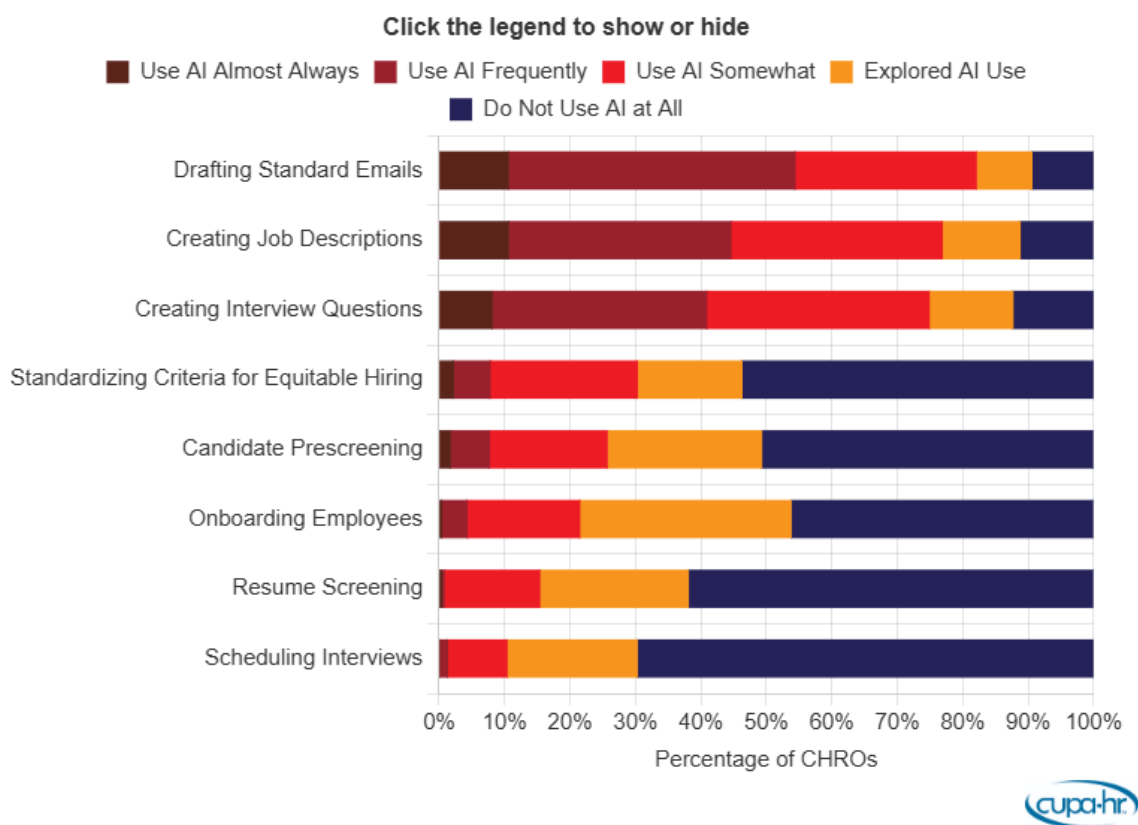


Figure 15. Extent of AI Use in HR Departments for Recruitment and Hiring²²

When it comes to the broad functions of HR departments, text-based tasks top the list (Figure 16). Writing policies/procedures is the most frequent use, with almost 79% stating that they use AI at least somewhat. Creating training materials comes next, with 68.5%

²² Graph is sorted in order of mean scores on each item.

stating they use AI at least somewhat. CHROs also indicate that HR teams are seeking to automate repetitive administrative tasks/workflows, with 35.6% stating they have explored these options and almost 32% sharing that they use AI at least somewhat for these tasks.

2026 CHRO Survey

Extent of AI Use in HR Departments for Broad Functions

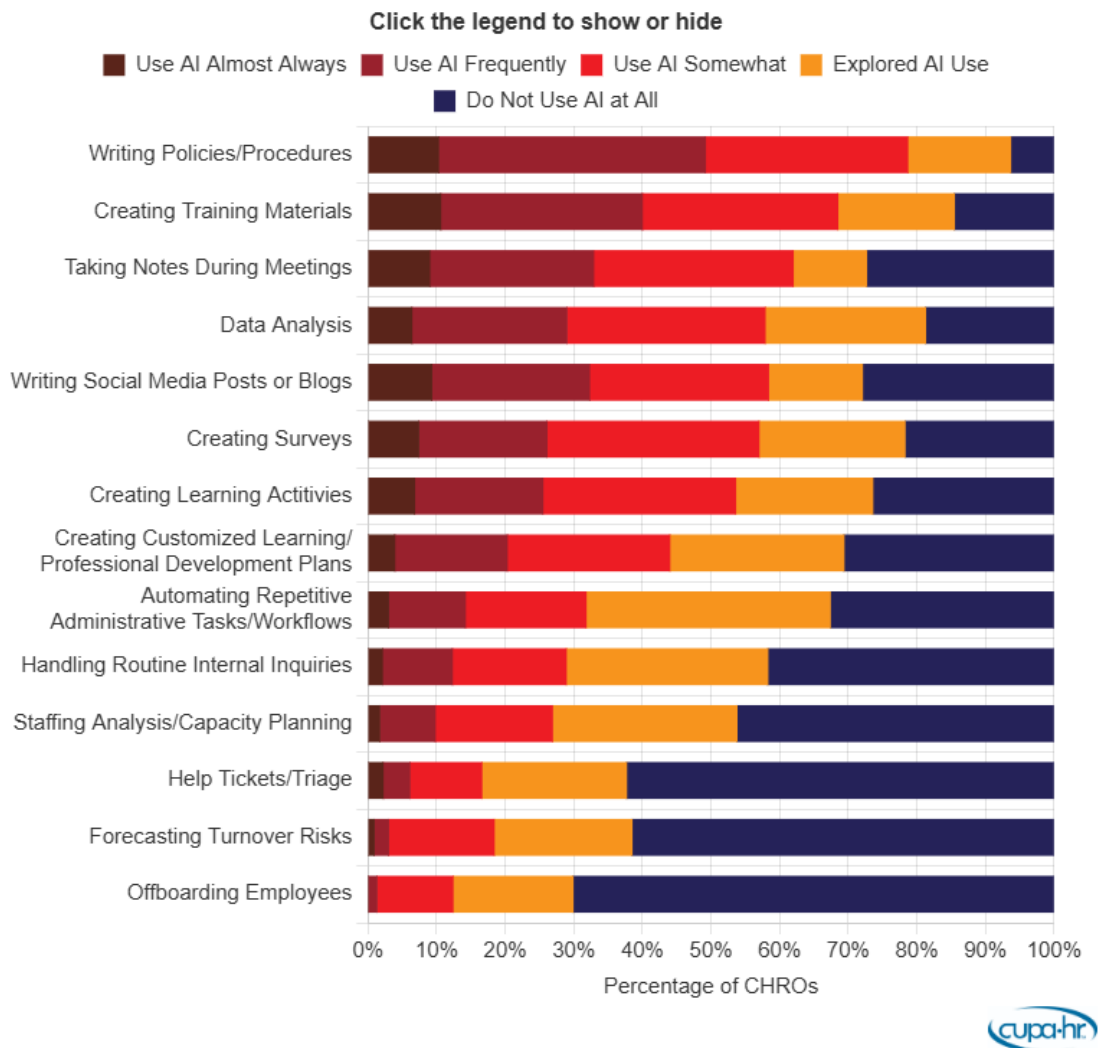


Figure 16. Extent of AI Use in HR Departments for Broad Functions²³

²³ Graph is sorted in order of mean scores on each item.

HR Use of Chatbots

Chatbots that leverage large language models are becoming more prevalent across websites as an alternative source for seeking information or assistance.²⁴ For HR teams, chatbots can quickly provide responses to routine questions without involving an HR team member. Only 14% of CHROs state that a chatbot is already implemented within their department (Figure 17). However, 42% are planning to implement one. Of note is that 44% report they are not planning to implement a chatbot. It will be interesting to see how these numbers change during the next few years.

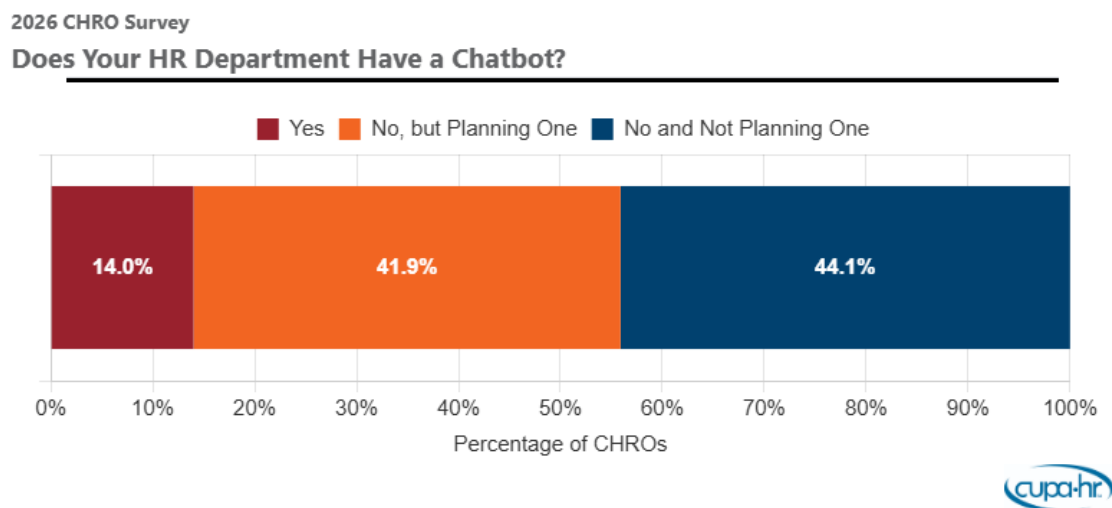


Figure 17. Does Your HR Department Have a Chatbot?

AI Adoption by CHROs

Very few CHROs stated that they don't use AI at all for any tasks (Figure 18). Much like scheduling interviews in recruitment and hiring functions (Figure 15), scheduling meetings is the task least used or explored by CHROs personally. Like their HR departments, text-heavy tasks top the list for CHRO use, suggesting either the availability of tools or comfort with the current AI offerings for these tasks. More than half of CHROs use AI frequently or almost always to draft emails, to proofread or copyedit, and to summarize long documents.

²⁴ Aldhafeeri, L., et al. (2025, October). [Generative AI Chatbots Across Domains: A Systematic Review](#). *MDPI Applied Sciences*, 15(20).

These findings mirror research indicating that nearly two-thirds of those using AI are doing so to generate text.²⁵

2026 CHRO Survey

Extent of AI Use Among CHROs

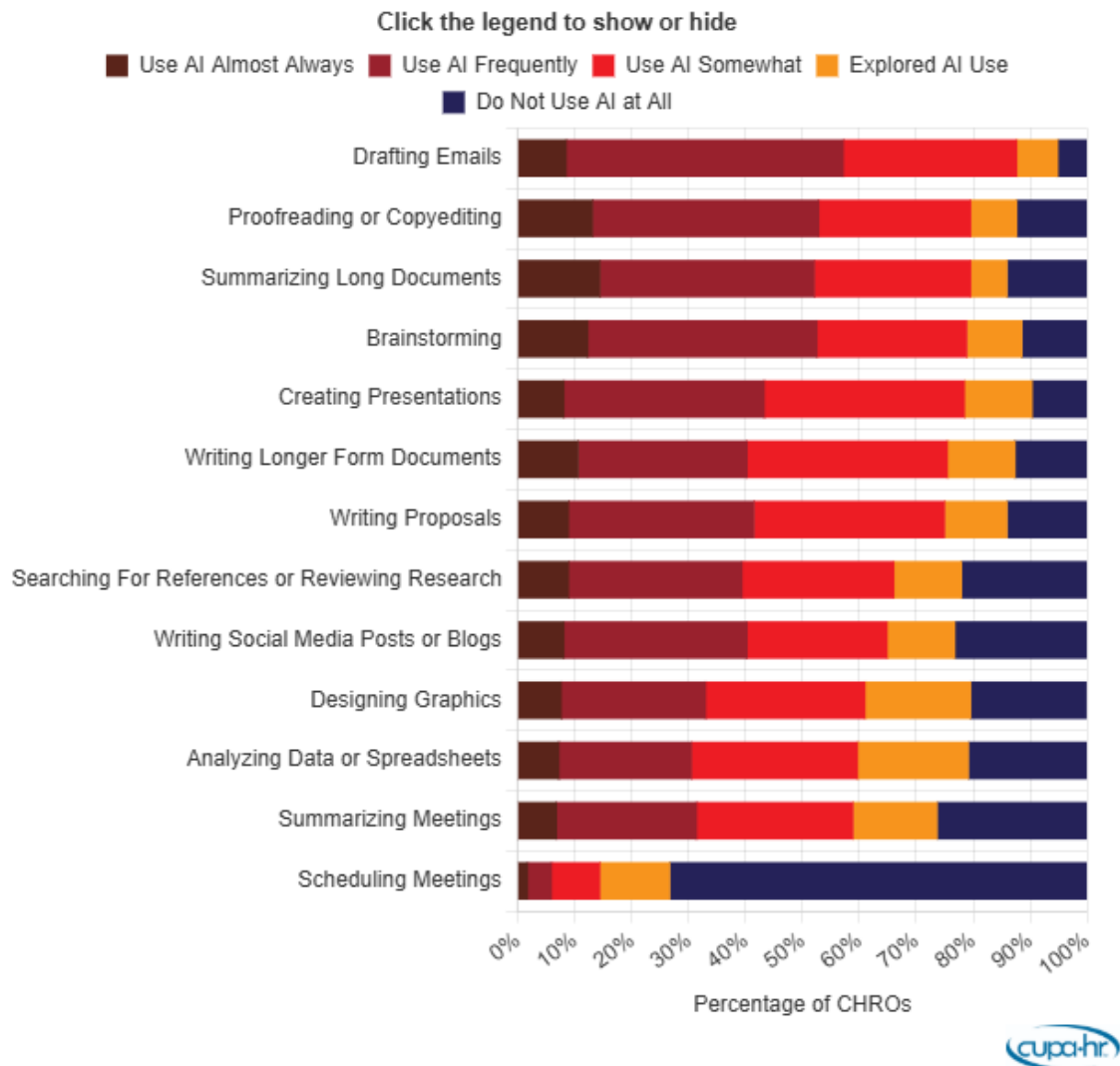


Figure 18. Extent of AI Use Among CHROs²⁶

²⁵ Singla, A., et al. (2025, March). [The State of AI: How Organizations Are Rewiring to Capture Value](#). McKinsey & Company.

²⁶ Graph is sorted in order of mean scores on each item.

CHRO Concerns About AI

When asked about concerns regarding adopting or scaling AI at their institutions, more than two-thirds (68%) of CHROs report that they are not concerned or are only slightly concerned about leadership resistance and lack of support (Figure 19). Of greatest concern are the risks associated with AI use (security/legal/compliance issues, insufficient data protection, and increased misinformation). Only 2% of CHROs state that they have no concerns regarding security/legal/compliance issues, and just under 4% say they have no concerns when it comes to both insufficient data protections and increased misinformation. Managing risk is a critical piece of how AI is implemented across campus, pointing to the need for policies to ensure sufficient data governance, proper use of AI tools, and the protection of information.²⁷

²⁷ National Institute of Standards and Technology. [*Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework*](#) (AI RMF 1.0).

2026 CHRO Survey
Concerns About AI

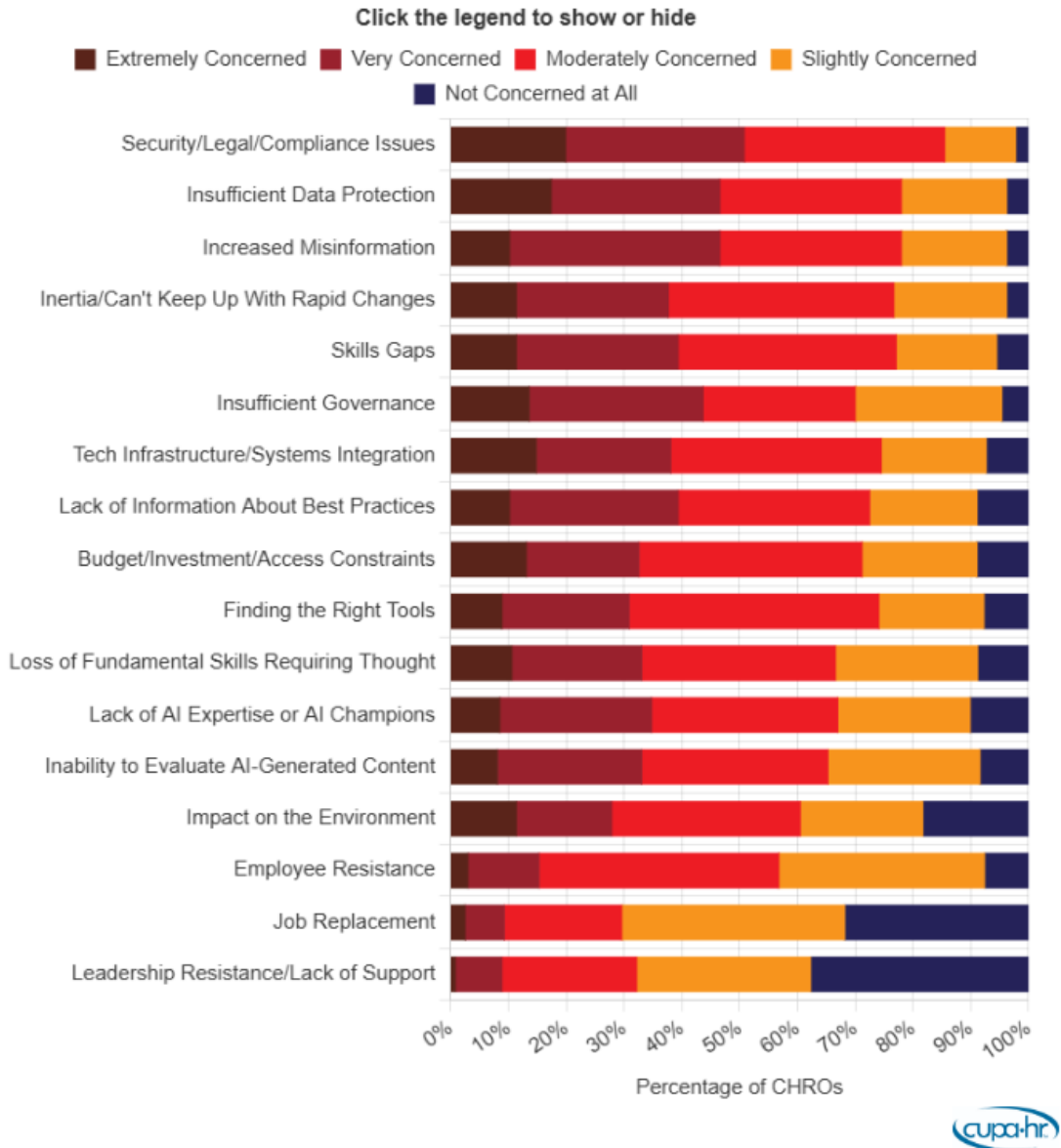


Figure 19. Concerns About AI²⁸

The Landscape of Remote/Hybrid Work

Nearly half (42%) of CHROs rank employee well-being and morale as one of their top five priorities heading into the 2026-27 academic year (Figure 9). This mirrors findings among

²⁸ Graph is sorted in order of mean scores on each item.

CHROs in industry.²⁹ However, it is not always clear which actions or changes are most effective in boosting well-being and morale. Investments in well-being programs that focus on the individual employee (e.g., stress management training, well-being apps) rather than systemic factors (e.g., overwork, leadership development) are, at best, ineffective and can backfire when employees perceive that they — rather than the structural systems of their jobs or work environment — are being held responsible for their declining mental health.³⁰

One overlooked systemic factor impacting employee well-being and morale is the availability of remote or hybrid work.³¹ One of the assumptions underlying return-to-office mandates is that remote work discourages connection and collaboration.³² However, recent evidence shows that remote work does not undermine employee connection.³³ What's more, remote workers report the highest levels of well-being.³⁴

The ability to work on a remote or hybrid basis also remains a significant factor underlying retention, both in higher education³⁵ and in the private sector.³⁶ One reason for the relationship between remote/hybrid work and retention is the increased autonomy and flexibility that remote or hybrid work provides.³⁷ Increases in retention can be seen even with small changes in flexibility, such as the ability to work one day per week remotely.³⁸

Percentages of Employees Who Have Fully Remote or Hybrid Work Schedules

We asked CHROs what percentage of their institution's employees are fully remote (i.e., required to come to campus *at most* once per month). More than half (53.4%) state that their fully remote workforce is 5% or less of their total workforce (Figure 20).

²⁹ Hedrick, K., Wigert, B., & Pendell, R. (2024). [Despite Employer Prioritization, Employee Wellbeing Falters](#). Gallup Workplace.

³⁰ Croft, J., Parks, A., & Whillans, A. (2024, October). [Why Workplace Well-Being Programs Don't Achieve Better Outcomes](#). *Harvard Business Review*.

³¹ Lezcano, A. M., et al. (2026, July). [Rethinking Return-to-Office: The Positive Impact of Remote Work on Well-Being, Connection, and Employee Retention](#). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 17.

³² Gibson, et al. (2023). Should Employees Be Required to Return to the Office? *Organizational Dynamics*, 52(2). doi: 10.1016/j.orgdyn.2023.100981

³³ Lezcano et al., 2026.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Schneider, J., & Bichsel, J. (2025, September). [The CUPA-HR 2025 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey](#). CUPA-HR.

³⁶ Choudhury, P. (2025). *The World Is Your Office: How Work From Anywhere Boosts Talent, Productivity, and Innovation*. London: Harvard Business Review Press.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Schneider & Bichsel, 2025.

Percentage of Employees Who Are Fully Remote

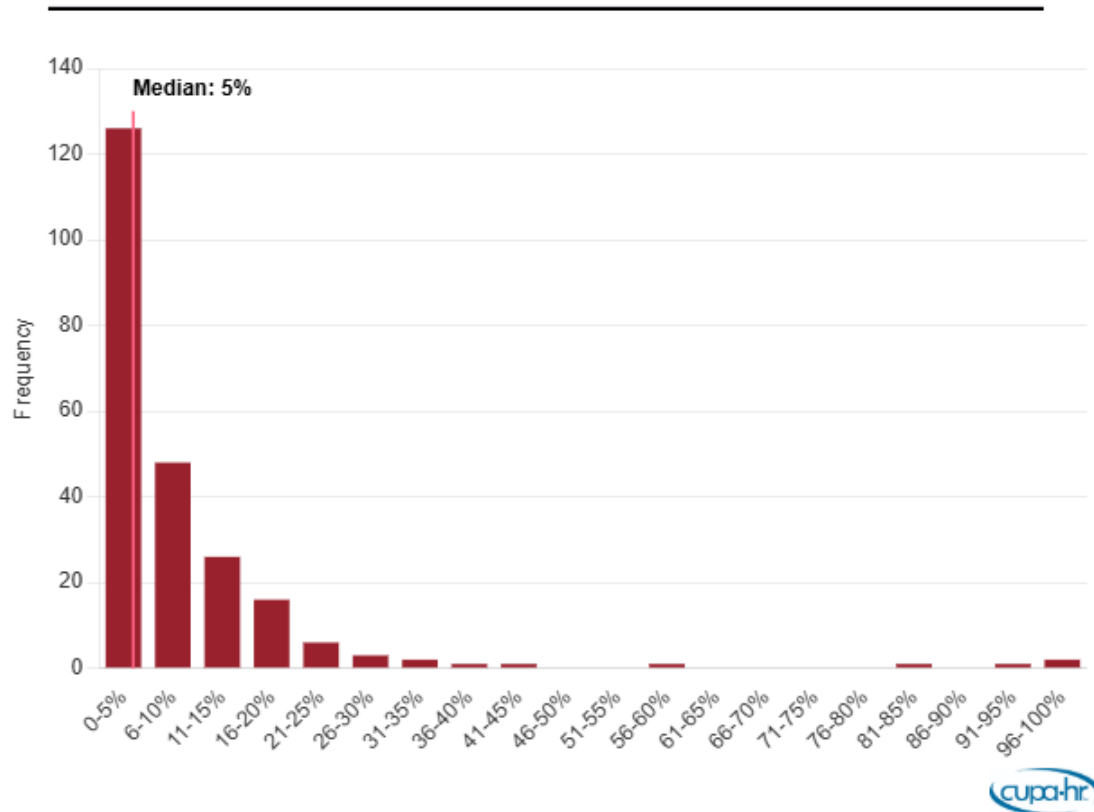


Figure 20. Percentage of Employees Who Are Fully Remote

We also asked what percentage of their institution's employees work on a hybrid basis (i.e., able to work at least one day per week remotely for the most part). Responses here were more varied. Half (50%) of CHROs state that at least 35% of their workforce has a hybrid schedule (Figure 21). However, the most common response is that very few employees (fewer than 5%) work on a hybrid basis, meaning that the majority of higher ed employees do not have the flexibility of working even one day per week remotely.

Percentage of Employees Who Are Hybrid

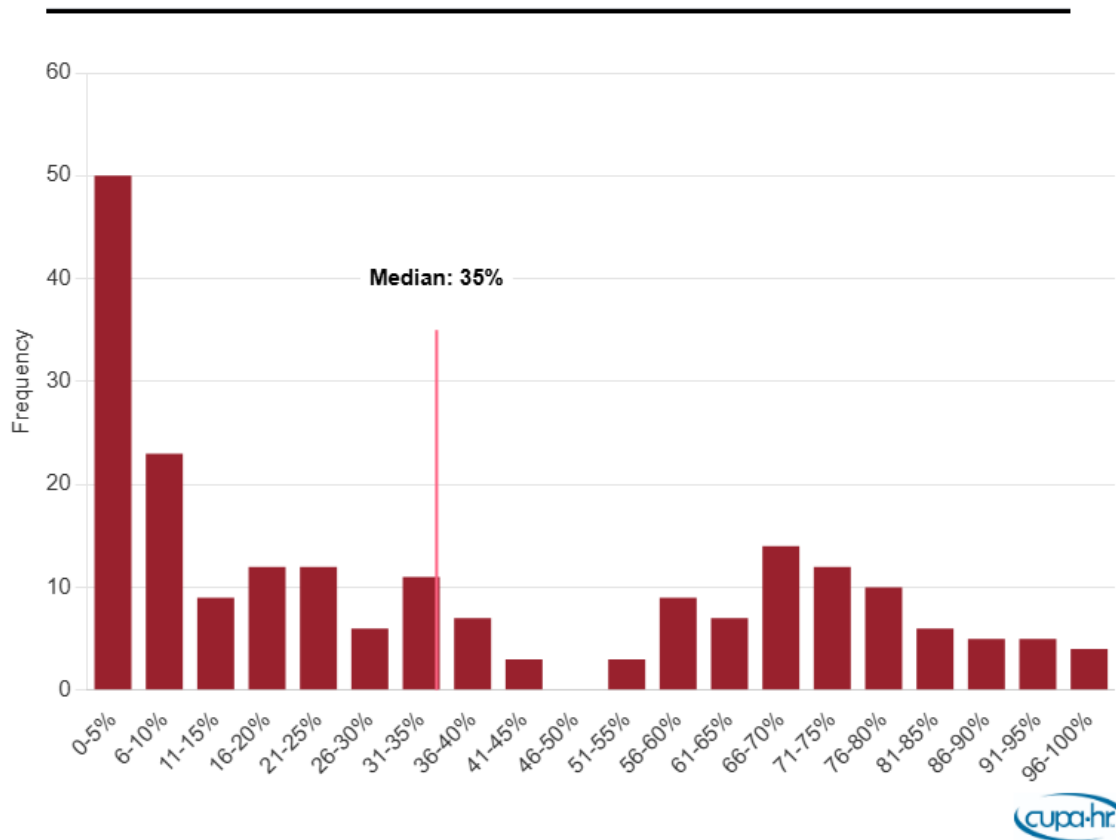


Figure 21. Percentage of Employees Who Are Hybrid

Policies on Remote and Hybrid Work

Most CHROs (86%) state there are institution-wide policies governing remote/hybrid work. The flexibility of those policies, though, varies widely from 0 (inflexible/not accommodating) to 100 (very flexible/accommodating) (Figure 22). The flexibility of institutional policies on remote/hybrid work has a significant relationship with the percentage of employees who work on either a remote³⁹ or hybrid⁴⁰ basis. When CHROs were asked how they would characterize their institution's policies on remote/hybrid work, the median response was 60, indicating that most CHROs believe their institution-wide remote/hybrid policies are on the flexible or accommodating side (Figure 22). However, many higher education employees continue to experience a mismatch between their desired and actual work

³⁹ $r(198) = .283, p \text{ (one-tailed)} < .001$

⁴⁰ $r(198) = .470, p \text{ (one-tailed)} < .001$

arrangements.⁴¹ Fewer than one-third of higher ed employees currently work in a hybrid or remote work environment, yet nearly two-thirds have a desire to do so.⁴²

2026 CHRO Survey

Institutional Policies on Remote/Hybrid Work

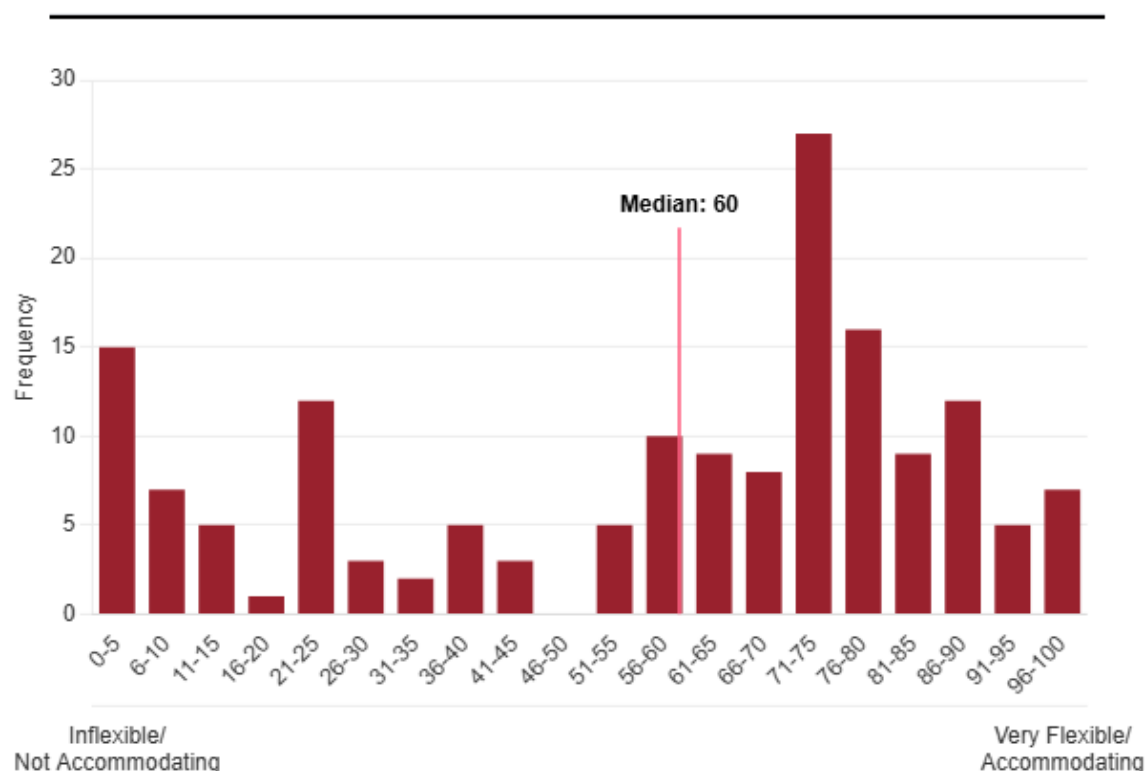


Figure 22. Institutional Policies on Remote/Hybrid Work

Of the CHROs with institution-wide remote/hybrid work policies, most (83%) say that HR has at least moderate influence or input into those policies (Figure 23). Very few (6%) say that HR has no influence or input. This influence matters. There is a significant relationship between the amount of input or influence HR has and the flexibility of an institution's policies on remote/hybrid work.⁴³ There is also a significant relationship between HR influence/input and the percentage of their employees that work on either a remote⁴⁴ or hybrid⁴⁵ basis. In other words, the more influence and input that HR has on institution-wide

⁴¹ Schneider & Bichsel, 2025.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ $r(198) = .460, p \text{ (one-tailed)} < .001$

⁴⁴ $r(236) = .159, p \text{ (one-tailed)} = .007$

⁴⁵ $r(236) = .352, p \text{ (one-tailed)} < .001$

remote/hybrid work policies, the more flexible and accommodating those policies are, which leads to greater numbers of employees who have access to the benefits of these flexible working arrangements. This, in turn, results in greater retention of these employees.⁴⁶

2026 CHRO Survey

Influence and Input in Determining Remote/Hybrid Work Policies

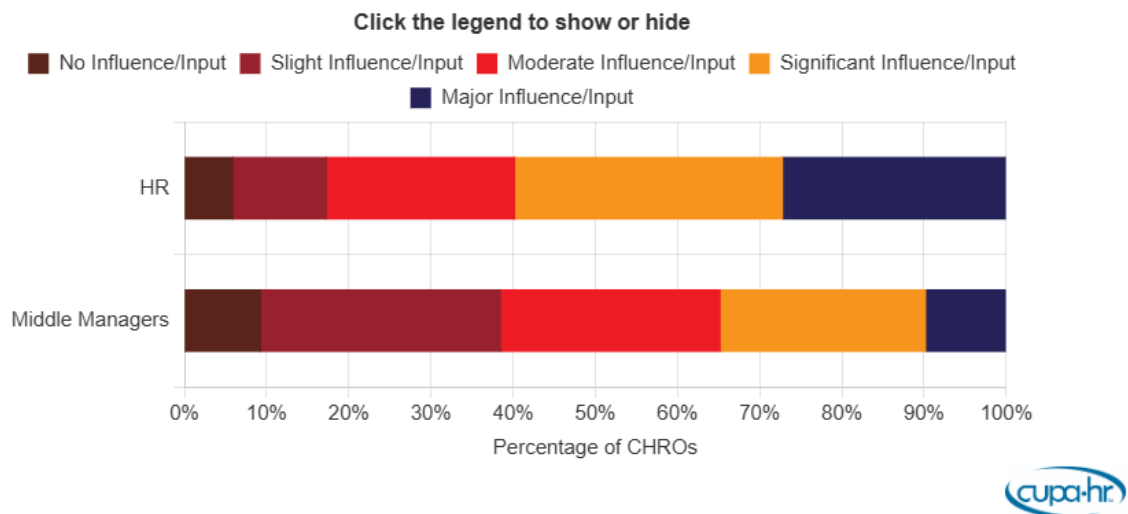


Figure 23. Influence and Input in Determining Remote/Hybrid Work Policies

We also asked CHROs how much influence and input middle managers at their institution have in determining remote/hybrid work policies for the employees in their area. According to the CHROs surveyed, only 61% of institutions empower their middle managers with at least moderate influence or input into remote/hybrid work policies for employees who report to them. Again, though, this influence matters. The more influence and input that middle managers have in determining these policies for their area, the more flexible and accommodating the institution-wide policies on remote/hybrid work are.⁴⁷ And although the amount of middle manager influence does not have a significant relationship with remote work, there is a strong relationship between their influence and the number of employees who enjoy the ability to work on a hybrid basis.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Schneider & Bichsel, 2025.

⁴⁷ $r(198) = .423, p \text{ (one-tailed)} < .001$

⁴⁸ $r(236) = .336, p \text{ (one-tailed)} < .001$

Conclusions

Higher education CHROs predict the top challenges institutions will face in 2026-27 are budget constraints/economic uncertainty, healthcare costs, and employee well-being/morale. Confidence that institutional leaders will sufficiently invest in or prioritize these challenges lags behind the seriousness with which they are rated. Given that CHROs also rank these same challenges as the top items *they* expect to be managing in the next year, they may expect to face hurdles in terms of buy-in from senior leadership as they tackle these challenges.

Decreased budgets are top of mind for higher ed CHROs as they consider their priorities and predictions for next year. This differs substantially from CHROs in the private sector, who have AI strategy and future-of-work scenarios as their top priorities. More than half of higher ed CHROs predict that both their institutional and HR budgets will decrease next year.

More than half of CHROs have little to no involvement in their institution's AI policies. This aligns with the fact that CHROs place AI adoption and integration in the middle of their challenges and items they expect to manage. Given that AI strategy and AI workforce development are top of mind for private-sector CHROs, it may be the case that higher ed CHROs are ceding the responsibility of AI strategy to IT to focus on the budget and cost-related challenges they rank near the top of their priority list.

CHROs rate their own enthusiasm of AI on the enthusiastic side, and they rate their institution's senior leadership's encouragement of AI on the high side. These ratings of AI enthusiasm and encouragement are significantly related to AI use, both personally and within the HR department.

Most CHROs consider their institution's policies on remote/hybrid work to be on the flexible side, and most CHROs have at least a moderate influence on those policies. The amount of CHRO influence on these policies matters — more influence means more flexibility and more employees who have access to remote or hybrid work. And although the influence of middle managers also matters in terms of the availability of flexible work, fewer middle managers appear to have this influence or input.

Recommendations

Provide bold and clear leadership from HR regarding budget constraints and the impact on the workforce and the mission of the institution. HR leaders frequently share concerns that they are not included in decision making regarding budget cuts. Sometimes this challenge is created by presidents and other campus leaders who do not

value the input of the CHRO. Sometimes this challenge is created because the CHRO is not bold enough to provide input or suggest a course of action. As CUPA-HR's President and CEO Dr. Andy Brantley stated in a recent presentation, "Don't wait to be anointed or appointed." CHROs should develop the confidence and competence to provide meaningful, informative input to help with decision making.

Proactively alert presidents and other campus leaders regarding the reality of increased healthcare costs. According to a recent survey, healthcare costs are increasing at rates not seen in two decades.⁴⁹ The same report notes that health insurance is the largest expense other than salaries for most organizations. The reality is that these annual increases are typically driven by external factors and not plan design. CHROs should frequently update presidents, other campus leaders, and boards of trustees regarding healthcare cost trends long before the annual renewal so that increases are not viewed as a surprise. It's also important to periodically engage external expertise to help review plan design. For those CHROs who depend on benefits brokers, it's important to remember that brokers can be strong partners but might also be motivated by revenue they generate from your business.

Strongly advocate regarding the importance of employee well-being and morale, and ensure this is an institutional priority. As noted in this report, CHROs rank employee well-being and morale as one of the biggest challenges and most important priorities heading into the 2026-27 academic year. Improving employee well-being boosts employee performance and organization outcomes and also leads to higher rates of retention and greater success in recruiting high-performing applicants.⁵⁰ Presidents and other campus leaders are understandably inundated with multiple challenges and priorities. CHROs should advocate to ensure that employee well-being programs and practices are incorporated and utilized throughout campus.

Get involved with strategic AI decisions. Although HR didn't list AI as a top challenge, it will have a significant impact on the workforce, and we can expect it to become more of a challenge in the future. If HR is not already actively leading or co-leading initiatives to increase AI use and adoption within the workforce, find or begin those initiatives and share this report.

Model AI use within HR. To lead or co-lead AI initiatives, HR needs to demonstrate its adoption and use of AI within its own department. Create safe spaces for staff members to use AI and share their successes and challenges. Advocate for appropriate AI access/tools

⁴⁹ Levin-Scherz, J., Bremen, J. M., & Delves, D. (2026, April). [Healthcare Oversight Belongs in the Boardroom](#). WTW.

⁵⁰ De Neve, J. E., & Ward, G. (2025). *Why Workplace Wellbeing Matters: The Science Behind Employee Happiness and Organizational Performance*. Harvard Business Publishing.

within the applications you already have, and ensure that policies and parameters are put in place that safeguard important information. Ensure that training is available and that there are clear channels for team members to ask questions.

Address AI risk head on. CHROs state that their top AI concerns are around security/legal/compliance issues, insufficient data protection, and increased misinformation. CHROs and their HR teams should work with other campus leaders to identify what these risks are to their institution and put policies and procedures in place to address these concerns. AI is constantly changing, and HR teams should revisit and test these policies and procedures at a pre-defined frequency knowing that adjustments will need to be made.

Engage your peers in AI discussions. Some of the best resources around AI use and adoption are your peers at other institutions. Find out how other institutions are adopting AI tools, policies, and procedures by engaging in the “AI in the Workplace” community in [CUPA-HR Connect](#).

Use your influence to create more opportunities for remote or hybrid work throughout your workforce. Access to these opportunities increases retention and employee well-being. Develop policies and procedures that empower managers to make decisions about remote/hybrid work where possible. Understanding that some CHROs are not given the opportunity to implement remote or hybrid work policies and that some positions (for example, housekeeping and grounds maintenance employees) must perform their work on campus, it is also important that CHROs advocate for schedule flexibility.

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