

Higher Education Casts a Wider Net for Top Human Resources Executives

Chief human resources officers (CHROs) are pivotal players in driving change in higher education. Presidents, trustees, and the public in general are increasingly calling for a rethinking of how institutions operate – especially in regards to costs and educational outcomes. CHROs are the ones who must galvanize that change, and make sure that leadership, faculty, and staff are prepared for a different future.

With this imperative for change in mind, colleges and universities have become much more receptive to human resources executives from outside of education, particularly those from industries that have already undergone massive cultural change and are progressive in their HR practices. In the conversation below, Witt/Kieffer senior partner John Thornburgh explores the heightened expectations for today's higher education CHROs and discusses challenges that colleges and universities have in recruiting these leaders.

How has the CHRO role expanded or shifted in higher education? What skills or abilities are most critical today?

Thornburgh: The chief human resources officer role is being looked at as a much more strategic leadership position than it has been in the past. That's an encouraging trend. In conventional times this position was the classic personnel role focused on administration, compliance, and intent on crafting and enforcing rules and regulations. What we're seeing now is the need for an HR leader who is transformative in developing and driving a high-performing employee culture. This is not a pervasive trend but an emerging – and encouraging – one.

Presidents are now including the chief HR leader at the senior leadership table and are seeking their counsel and wisdom on all aspects of HR. Today's CHRO is still expected to be fluent in all the

functional areas of the position – whether it's payroll, benefits, labor relations, or other more traditional areas. The real value-add that these leaders now provide is in recruiting and retaining a high-performing staff and building a culture within the college or university that is much more progressive, comfortable with change, and willing to try new things. Forward-looking presidents are leaning on the CHRO to be their senior-level strategist and confidant as well as an adept administrator.

How important is the technology component of the position today, given advances in HR management software and other tools?

Thornburgh: Technology is an enormous enabler of high-performing institutions. One of the ways to attract and keep good employees is to satisfy their basic needs (whether payroll or benefits) with state-of-the-art systems. Technology can also be applied to more strategic areas of people development — such as supporting assessment and evaluation tools that provide employees with feedback and performance appraisals that are comfortable but comprehensive. The CHRO has to understand how to leverage these technologies or he or she simply won't succeed in the position.

What other skills are coming to the fore?

Thornburgh: HR leaders have really got to understand how to define an organization's existing culture and move it in new directions, to build an atmosphere that attracts the best people and incents them to apply themselves in effective fashion. Culture change – from how people view themselves to how they work with others – is both an art and science.

How do HR officers work most effectively with their presidents?

Thornburgh: Ideally they are a close confidant or counselor to the president and senior leadership team. In this role they are fully cognizant of the strategic direction that the president and the board want to take the university, and are then able to define

and implement strategies, policies, and practices that support those goals. The CHRO aligns the organization with this overall direction. In return, the president has to convey an absolute trust and confidence in the CHRO and make it clear to the university that this executive is a highly valued member of the senior cabinet. There must be a relationship of mutual respect and trust.

Given the stakes, what changes have you seen in the way HR leaders are being recruited?

Thornburgh: The challenge for higher education is that the bench strength for HR professionals who come from within the academy isn't as deep as it should be. This is especially true when compared with other mission-centered industries. Healthcare, for example, recognized this deficiency in its own HR pipeline a decade or so ago and many hospital and health systems have built a robust pool of highly qualified HR leaders at all levels of their organizations. Not a lot of people in higher education today are prepared to step into these strategic roles. In recruiting HR leaders institutions must now look as much outside for HR leaders as they do internally. Hopefully, over time that internal talent pool will become deep enough that higher education won't have to recruit its HR leadership from outside.

The CHRO is one of the few roles in a university where you don't get pushback from faculty and administrators about candidates' level of academic credentials because it is a much more creative, results-oriented role than other positions. Of course, anyone from outside academia has to have an appreciation of the culture of working in a university and the traditions of shared governance. If they view the institution as a "top down" corporate setting, they're not going to last long.

Do you see colleges and universities building a stronger pipeline of HR leaders?

Thornburgh: Higher education is just beginning to turn the corner. The stakes are so high that I hope

it happens soon, as it has in healthcare. If colleges and universities don't recognize the significant external pressures from students, parents, and state governments to deliver education in different ways and deliver proven outcomes, they will be challenged to keep their doors open. The CHRO can help drive that openness to doing things differently at all levels, whether it's a faculty member in the classroom or a staff person putting out benefit policies.

Where are top HR candidates coming from, if not from higher education?

Thornburgh: Frankly, they're coming from complicated enterprises with a lot of moving parts. Colleges and universities are equally complex organizations, with diverse academic programs, facilities, academic medical centers, and multiple customers. They need leaders in HR who are well-versed in consumer satisfaction. These individuals may be coming from nationally or internationally prominent technology firms (such as Dell, Hewlett Packard, or Microsoft), or consumer packaged goods (Kraft, Pepsi), or even consumer food services (Starbucks). Those are organizations that are very tuned in to customer and employee satisfaction.

Finally, what's happening with CHRO salaries and benefits, and how does this factor into searches today?

Thornburgh: As with any strategic position at the senior cabinet level, presidents and institutions recognize they have to be competitive to get the right person. We're seeing HR positions compensated at the same level as top-flight provosts or financial officers, with the recognition that across all of these positions higher education won't ever pay the same as private industry. The trade-off for HR leaders coming from the outside is the fulfillment of working in an intellectually rich setting serving young students, surrounded by compelling trappings of a university such as cultural events, athletic programs, and an invigorating setting. There are many HR executives who appreciate these intangible benefits and who are willing to move into higher education.

CHROs in Higher Education: A Growing List of Responsibilities

Among their myriad responsibilities, today's higher ed CHROs must:

- Steward the institution's human capital
- Exhibit fluency in all key functional HR areas
- Serve as strategic advisors and confidants to the president and senior staff
- Optimize an environment for recruiting and retaining faculty and staff
- Maintain a high profile on campus and in national academic HR communities
- Support the enabling of academic and service missions
- Embrace technology and drive employee-focused technological advances
- Monitor employee performance and drive a high-performing employee culture
- Collaborate seamlessly with administrators, faculty, staff and others
- Show vision; lead and implement change
- Adapt to shifting needs and resources of the institution
- Mentor and develop future HR leaders in higher education
- Show passion for their work



John Thornburgh is a senior partner with Witt/Kieffer based in Pittsburgh, PA. John specializes in executive search assignments for higher education, healthcare, and academic medicine clients. Prior to joining Witt/Kieffer, John gained significant executive experience in marketing, sales, and human resources roles in a Fortune 50 corporation.

For more information, contact: johnt@wittkieffer.com

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