

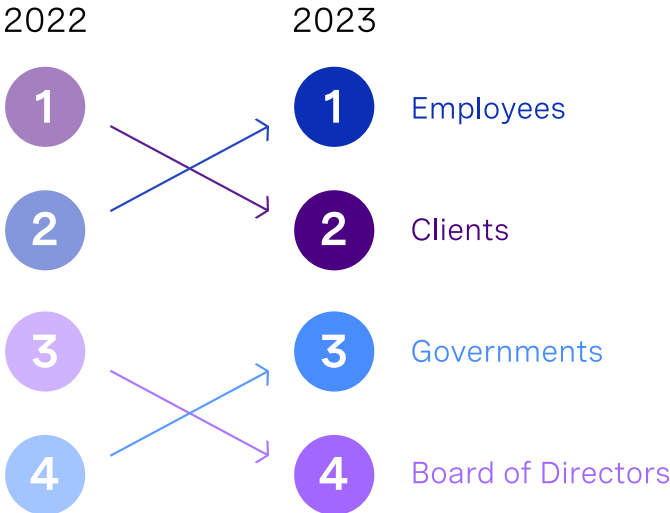
A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of several modern skyscrapers with glass and metal facades. The buildings are illuminated from within, and the sky is a mix of blue and pinkish-purple, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The perspective creates a sense of height and architectural grandeur.

Activating Change: A Strategic Guide for Today's Law Firm Chief People Officer

In law firms, talent is the quintessential intellectual capital.

Today’s professional services leaders deem talent to be the most influential stakeholder group when shaping business strategy. We have observed a trend in professional services where employees’ and partners’ influence has gained notable momentum over just the past year, according to our annual [Global Leadership Monitor](#) (Figure 1). As this trends into law firms, it’s essential to have the right chief people officer in place. Here’s what leaders at law firms need to know about what this means for the evolving Chief People Officer role.

Figure 1: Rank of stakeholder influence on business strategy in professional services firms, 2022 VS. 2023



In today’s law firm landscape, **every matter is a people matter**. As such, the role and typical profile of chief people officers in law firms has undergone a significant shift. Law firm CPOs (chief people officers¹) hold pivotal roles as strategic advisors, offering critical insights on a diverse array of issues that invariably impact the firm’s most valuable asset - its people.

To help law firm people leaders understand how the environment has changed, we conducted survey research, a market analysis, and in-depth discussions with 15 top law firm CPOs, finding two significant ways this paradigm shift has impacted their role and remit in law firms.

- **Profile Transformation:** The law firm CPO profile has experienced a dynamic reshaping, centering the role’s expanded strategic importance.

- **Activating Change:** CPOs are setting new standards for law firm leadership, evolving their cultures, and amplifying commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

To successfully activate steps towards transformation, the CPO’s agenda in law firms should include the following three focus areas, informed by the real-life successes of our interviewees.

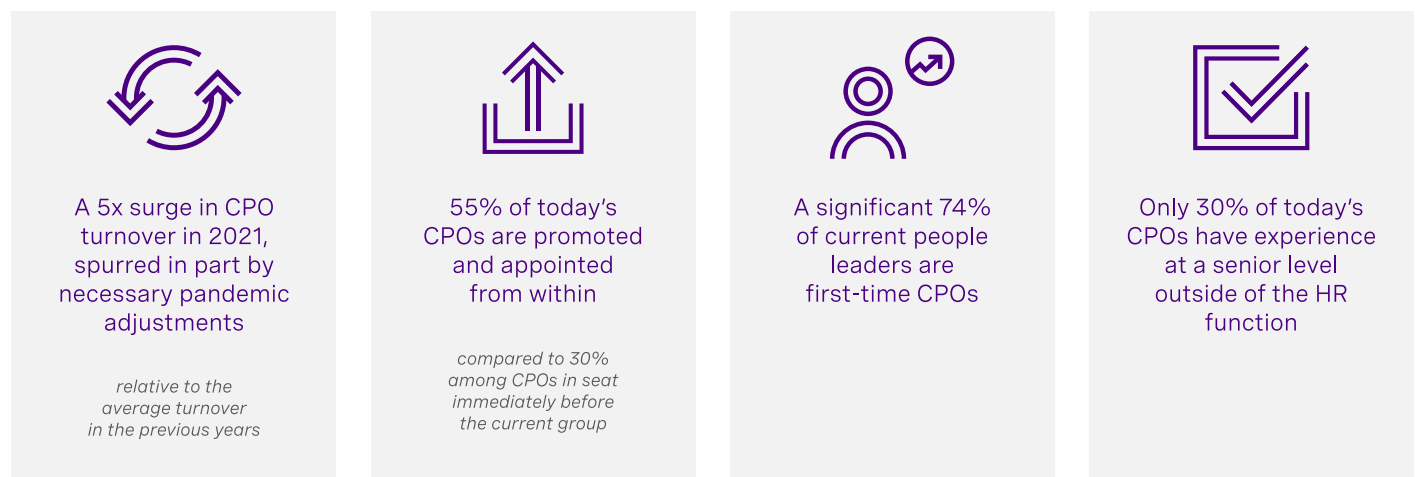
- Setting a new standard for people leadership and talent management
- Evolving the culture with a new approach to engagement and well-being
- Amplifying the commitment to increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion

Profile Transformation: The law firm CPO profile has experienced a dynamic reshaping, centering the role's expanded strategic importance

The contemporary landscape calls for CPOs who possess a strong grasp of the law firm ethos, capable of developing and driving strategic frameworks while leveraging culture to attract and retain top talent, fostering symbiotic relationships among partners and firm leaders, peers across business functions, and firm citizens as a whole.

This shift is attributable to both chief people officer's instrumental role in steering firms through intricate decisions and formidable obstacles over the past three years, and to the far-reaching impact of people-related priorities that impact every facet of today's strategic management agenda.

Figure 2: Analysis of the most senior ranked people leaders at the top 100 global law firms—current CPO vs. immediate predecessor



Source: Russell Reynolds Associates Analysis, 100 Global Law Firms

The compounding pace of change of the past three years has forced nearly every organization to take stock of and begin to reshape its leadership approach. This shift necessitates chief people officers who can:

- Drive substantial workforce change
- Thoroughly grasp the unique criteria for success in their firms
- Attract and nurture exceptional talent across all levels
- Master the nuances of balancing stakeholder perspectives in this complex ecosystem
- Frame and bring cohesion to solving some of the firm's most pressing talent challenges

CPOs looking to drive sustainable change need to translate the characteristics above to meaningful action, which we outline below.



Activating Change: CPOs are setting new standards for law firm leadership, evolving their cultures, and amplifying commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Three Key Focus Areas and Actions for Forward-Thinking Law Firm CPOs

Transformation 1: Setting a new standard for people leadership and talent management

During the pandemic’s onset, the law firm chief people officers we interviewed rapidly adapted to the unexpected shift to remote work—a stark change for a sector used to in-person operations. These conversations made it evident that these CPO’s strategies were transformative, not just reactive. They redefined the future of work by integrating collaboration, flexibility and balance, setting new benchmarks in people leadership and talent management in this uncertain environment.

Action	Result
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Moved to online platforms, focusing on skills vital for remote work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Led to more resilient teams, capable of handling remote or hybrid work’s uncertainties.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Redefined leadership with training that emphasized work-life balance and mental health, fostering a psychologically safe workplace.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leadership and supporting employees became a collective responsibility, enhancing community and collaboration.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evolved talent management strategies, introducing flexible career paths to accommodate dynamic career trajectories.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Proved crucial for retaining and attracting talent in a competitive market and addressing a variety of career goals.

Transformation 2: Evolving the culture with a new approach to engagement and well-being

Nowhere is the focus on culture and engagement more prevalent than in the current reshaping of the workplace to better align to people's needs. Over the last several years, numerous dynamics have surfaced critical questions about law firm culture and employee engagement, including pandemic response, the war for top legal talent, a new generation with different work-life aspirations, and adjusting to hybrid working.

As a result, many law firms are currently focused on fostering engagement and shaping a robust culture that creates a sense of belonging and connection to the firm. At the same time, they aim to foster a workforce excelling in empathy, adaptability, and creativity by redefining the value proposition to address mental health and burnout issues.

Our interviewees shared that this required evaluating their existing cultures, clarifying distinctive elements of their culture, and resetting the value proposition to better reflect the current context and needs of the incoming generations.

Action

- "Flipped the value proposition" to offer a clear and compelling organizational vision that includes the firm's purpose values and inclusive leadership.
- Increased internal communications and creatively leveraged new communications formats, including videos and podcasts.
- Implemented mental health training, encouraged open dialogue about well-being, and upgraded benefits to cover essential mental health resources.
- Held leaders accountable for team wellness by adjusting workloads and discouraging after-hours communication.

Result

- Increased engagement and retention of talent and greater sense of belonging.
- Greater transparency about the firm, its business, and how it makes decisions—including people decisions—in addition to an increased level of communication via more open and accessible leadership.
- Set a new standard in the legal industry for prioritizing employee well-being.
- Started to prioritize a more sustainable and balanced work environment.





Transformation 3: Amplifying the commitment to increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion

In the wake of diversity, equity, and inclusion's (DEI) heightened prominence, law firms have displayed an enduring dedication to amplifying their own DEI initiatives, with CPOs playing a pivotal role in propelling these efforts. Testaments from law firm people leaders underscore a discernible shift over the past few years - a steadfast emphasis and dedication to DEI at all levels, underscored by a growing comprehension of the pertinent issues by law firm leaders and commitments to make meaningful change.

The CPOs we spoke to shared how cultivating a robust agenda centered around diversity, equity, and inclusion called for them to be adept at steering inclusive talent management practices, effectively conveying DEI commitments to external stakeholders (including clients), and adeptly adapting to evolving regulatory landscapes. Working in tandem with their firm diversity and inclusion leaders, they began to better embed inclusive practices across their firms, rather than centralize them in the DEI or HR function.

Action

- Led concrete discussions at all levels of the firm about integrating DEI practices across a range of firm operations, beyond just hiring and promotion.
- Leveraged technology to better track and manage workflow to ensure equitable distribution of opportunities, particularly in a hybrid/remote environment.
- Leveraged technology to take a more data driven approach to understanding and reporting diversity stats, including to clients who increasingly request that information.

Result

- Advanced the idea that a diverse and inclusive culture is everyone's responsibility. Leaders are better at addressing and calling out bias when they see it.
- Helped to mitigate the challenges hybrid working presents for building diverse teams and talent pipelines.
- Entrenched a greater focus on ensuring diversity amongst leaders and legal teams.

Many CPOs noted the importance of keeping DEI at the forefront and as a critical component of the broader culture and engagement strategy. While there is still much work to do, many noted encouragingly that DEI is firmly on the leadership agenda and regularly discussed in management and in partner meetings, in ways it has never been before.

What's next for people leaders in law firms?

By setting new standards for people leadership and talent management, evolving cultures around employee wellbeing, and amplifying DEI commitments, people leaders' impacts on the workplace transformations have proven to last beyond the pandemic, and will undeniably benefit their firms and the industry for years to come.



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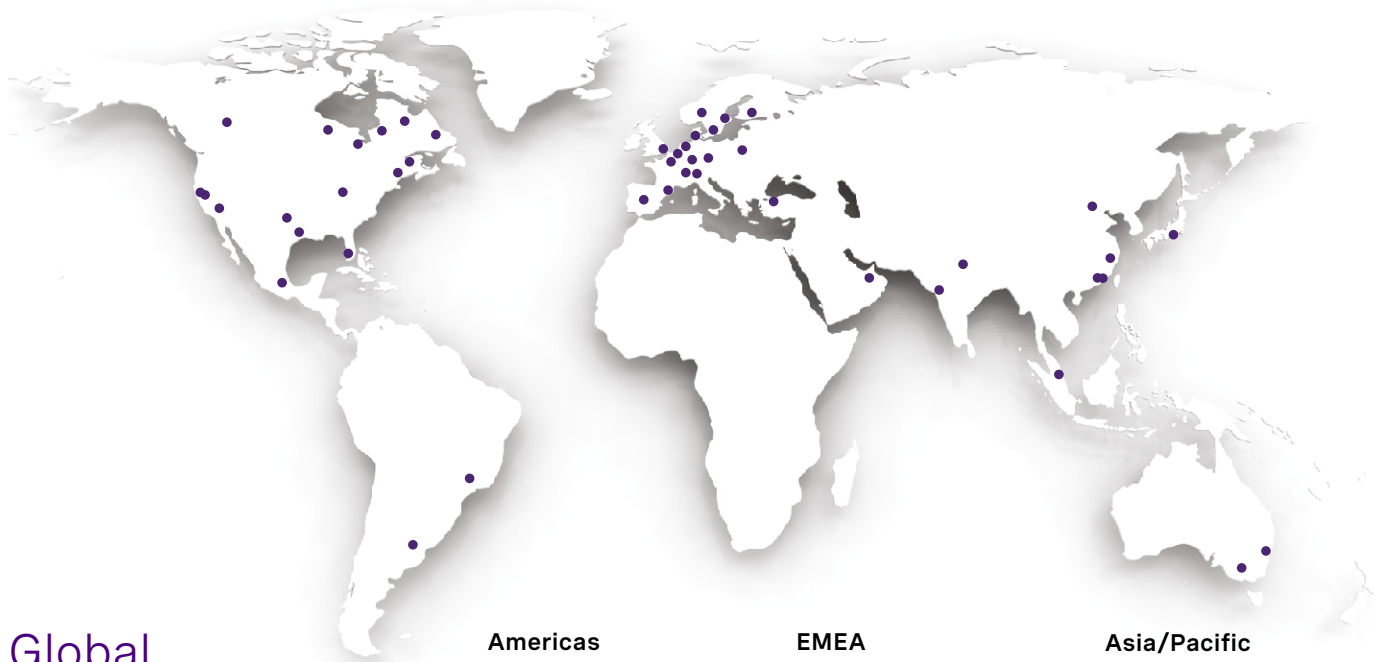
Footnotes

¹ Chief People Officers (CPOs) may also be referred to by various alternative titles, including Chief Human Resources Officers (CHROs), Chief Talent Officer, or Executive Directors of Talent Management, depending on the organization's preference and structure. These titles all denote leadership roles focused on managing the human capital and organizational culture within a company or law firm.

About Russell Reynolds Associates

Russell Reynolds Associates is a global leadership advisory firm. Our 600+ consultants in 47 offices work with public, private, and nonprofit organizations across all industries and regions. We help our clients build teams of transformational leaders who can meet today's challenges and anticipate the digital, economic, sustainability, and political trends that are reshaping the global business environment. From helping boards with their structure, culture, and effectiveness to identifying, assessing and defining the best leadership for organizations, our teams bring their decades of expertise to help clients address their most complex leadership issues. We exist to improve the way the world is led

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