

BRIEFING

The CPO as Catalyst

Turning AI into Growth Through the People Function

Greg Prickril • 2026 • The Incremental Pathway

THE EXECUTIVE LEADER SERIES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AI is commoditising the operational work that has defined the People function for decades. This creates the clearest strategic opportunity the CPO has had in a generation to become the person who determines whether AI adoption translates into organisational growth or stalls as a collection of individual productivity hacks. This perspective outlines what that shift looks like in practice and the four stages required to lead it.

Commented [VM1]: This could jar with CPOs as they don't like to be defined by operational work, even if it's true in many instances. I would propose: AI is commoditising the operational part of the People function.

Introduction

The People function covers a wide remit: workforce planning, organisational design, [talent attraction and performance management](#), leadership development, culture, compliance, employee relations. In practice, though, much of the C-suite sees it primarily through an operational lens: hiring, payroll, policy, risk. The strategic work happens, but it rarely gets the visibility [or the seat at the table](#) it warrants. That operational work is now being commoditised by AI.

The change AI is bringing to the People function is not a threat; It is the clearest opportunity the CPO has had in a generation.

Every organisation is trying to figure out how to turn AI into growth, not just efficiency. The CEO is accountable, the CTO owns the tooling, and the CFO owns the investment case but none of them can answer the question that actually determines whether AI delivers: **is the workforce structured, skilled, and culturally ready to adopt it?** That is the CPO's question. Not as mandate owner, but as the person without whom the mandate fails.

What the People function managed	What the People function now drives
Training and development	Capability building tied to output Design learning around the skills that move financial/business metrics, not completion rates.
Hiring and talent acquisition	Intelligence Architecture. Determine which roles need humans, which need AI, and which need both. Design the operating model for the org you are becoming.

What the People function managed	What the People function now drives
Employee engagement	Closing the whitespace. The gap between AI deployment and actual adoption is where value dies. The CPO owns whether usage compounds across teams or stays individual.
Compliance and policy	AI governance. Set the rules for how AI is used responsibly across the organisation, before someone else sets them for you.
Retention and attrition management	The Human Core. The goal is no longer keeping everyone. It is identifying, developing and retaining the people whose judgement, creativity, and leadership AI cannot replace, and redeploying capacity around them.

Moving the Bar

The CPO cannot lead this shift for the organisation without first leading it personally. The path has four stages, and the order matters.

Stage 1: Transform yourself

Develop real fluency with AI through daily use in your own work, not demos or briefings. You cannot credibly lead a transformation you haven't lived. This means building your own understanding of where AI creates leverage and where it doesn't.

Stage 2: Enable the function

Automate the People function's administrative layer and redirect that capacity toward the strategic work outlined above. This means redesigning workflows, rethinking team structure, and measuring what the function produces, not just what it processes.

Stage 3: Make HR the lighthouse

Use your transformed function as the reference case for the rest of the organisation. Other functions follow a working example faster than a mandate. This means documenting what worked, what didn't, and building a repeatable adoption model others can follow.

Stage 4: Enter the strategy dialogue from a position of strength

Arrive with evidence, not proposals. This means shaping the organisation's AI strategy from a track record of delivery, not requesting a seat at the table, but having earned it.

Skip to stage four without the first three, and you are offering opinions. Do them in sequence, and you are offering evidence.

Incremental change.
Transformational results.

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Mindset + Method = Money + Momentum

Conclusion

None of this is simple. Each stage demands real change in how you work, how your function operates, and how the organisation sees HR. The resistance will be structural, not just cultural. But the CPOs who move first will not be answering the question of what AI means for their domain. They will be setting the terms of the conversation.

The window is finite. The advantage will not go to who has the best technology. It will go to who has the workforce ready to use it. That question has always belonged to the CPO. Now is the time to own it.

TIP can help you at every stage. To explore how these stages apply to your organisation, visit <https://www.incrementalpathway.com/>.