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The Shortlist Series:
Succeeding in Private Equity.

What makes a standout Chief Human Resources Officer?

With 28 years of experience in recruiting executive and non-executive directors for PE-backed businesses, Directorbank supplemented team knowledge with opinion from its network of PE investors and high-achieving Board directors. We then paired this with Assessio's rigorous, science-backed approach to leadership assessment - including personality and work values questionnaires - to uncover the deeper personality traits, competencies and motivations behind standout candidates.

Assessio is a pioneer in evidence-based leadership assessment, combining decades of validated psychometrics with cutting-edge technology and deep business context.
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What makes a standout PE Chief Human Resources Officer?

Ask most PE investors where value is created in a portfolio company and they will talk about revenue growth, margin improvement and business expansion. Ask them what makes those things happen and the answer is usually the same: the quality of the people, and how well they're led and aligned to the value creation plan.

And yet the CHRO (or Chief People Officer), the person most directly responsible for the people agenda, remains one of the most inconsistently appointed roles in the mid-market PE portfolio. Some investors treat it as a genuine strategic hire. Many still treat it as an administrative function. The difference in outcomes between those two approaches is significant.

So, what separates those CHROs who thrive in PE-backed environments from those who don't?

With 28 years of experience in recruiting Board level directors for PE-backed businesses across the UK and Germany, the team at Directorbank Executive Search supplemented their own knowledge with opinion from our network of PE investors and high-achieving Board directors.

Here's a summary of the top 5 findings.

1/

The role has fundamentally changed, but the brief often hasn't.
The chief HR role that a PE-backed business needs today is not the one of ten years ago. Compliance, payroll and process management still matter - but they are not the job. The job is building the organisational capability that the investment thesis requires: the right leadership team, the right culture for pace and accountability, the right talent pipeline for growth, and the right framework for retaining those people the business can't afford to lose.

2/

They must be credible in the boardroom, and on the floor.
The best CHROs operate at two levels simultaneously. At Board level, they are a genuine strategic voice contributing to decisions about organisational design, leadership capability and the people dimensions of the value creation plan. At an operational level, they are close enough to the business to know where the real capability gaps are, which managers are developing and which are plateauing, and where the cultural fault lines run. CHROs who are comfortable only in one of these areas rarely deliver what a PE-backed business needs.

3/

They understand that culture is a commercial asset.
In a PE-backed business, culture is not a soft concept. It is the operating environment that either enables pace and performance or undermines it. The best CHROs have a clear-eyed view of what kind of culture the business needs to deliver its plan, an honest assessment of where it currently sits, and a practical approach to closing the gap.

4/

They are the early warning system the Board doesn't know it needs.
Management team fragility is one of the most significant risks in a PE-backed business, and it is frequently invisible until it becomes a crisis. A strong CHRO sees it coming - they know who is at risk of leaving, which relationships in the senior team are under strain, and which leadership gaps are beginning to affect performance. This kind of intelligence, surfaced early and handled well, is worth considerably more than its cost. Surfaced late, or not at all, it becomes a Board-level problem requiring a far more challenging resolution.

5/

They have operated in a PE environment before, or something close to it.
The pace, the performance orientation, and the directness of a PE-backed business can be genuinely disorientating for CHROs who have spent their careers in large corporates where the people agenda moves more slowly, and the commercial pressure is less concentrated. The best candidates for this role have worked in

environments with real urgency, real accountability and limited patience for process for its own sake. They bring rigour without bureaucracy, and they know the difference.

Personality Traits, Competencies and Role Requirements

Part strategist, part culture-builder, very commercial - the standout PE CHRO doesn't just run the people function, they make it a genuine engine of the value creation plan. They are just as comfortable interpreting a P&L as they are reading the mood of a leadership team, and translating investor expectations into a workforce capable of delivering against objectives.

But which competencies, skills, and personality traits set apart a standout CHRO in a PE-backed environment?

To dive deeper, we paired 28 years of experience recruiting board-level directors for PE-backed businesses with Assessio's rigorous, science-backed approach to leadership assessment, including personality and work values questionnaires, to uncover the deeper traits and competencies behind high-achieving candidates.

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DEFINING PERSONALITY TRAITS

▶ Commercially fluent
Speaks the language of the P&L and the value creation plan as fluently as the language of people, and uses that fluency to earn a genuine seat at the strategy table.

▶ Grounded and visible
Spends real time on the shopfloor as well as in the Boardroom, and is trusted by managers and the wider workforce, not just the executive team.

▶ Early-warning instinct
Senses fragility in the senior team before it becomes a resignation or a Board-level problem, and raises it early, constructively and in confidence.

▶ Resilient under pressure
Stays composed and effective through redundancies, restructures and difficult conversations, without losing objectivity or empathy.

▶ Direct and trusted
Delivers hard messages plainly and fairly, earning the confidence of the CEO, the investor and the workforce alike.

▶ Builds capability in others
Develops leaders and managers at every level, treating management capability as core to the value creation plan, not a side project.

CORE COMPETENCIES

Proven HR leadership - Demonstrates experience in leading and scaling HR functions. Brings a track record of designing and implementing effective HR policies and standards and managing talent.

Business acumen - Uses internal insight and knowledge of markets and competitors to judge the commercial impact of people decisions and moves quickly to capture new opportunities.

Strategic thinking - Uses trends to anticipate future scenarios, articulates a compelling people strategy, and links it to the daily reality of the business.

Organisational awareness - Understands the power dynamics, structures and politics of a PE-backed business, and knows how to navigate them effectively.

Resilience - Keeps emotions under control, sustains performance under pressure, and recovers quickly from setbacks and difficult decisions.

Technological mindset - Understands technology trends and applies the right tools and systems to increase HR efficiency and support the business as it scales.

Influencing others - Expresses a point of view in a convincing, honest and respectful way, using sound argument to build support for the people agenda.

Developing others - Encourages the growth of leaders – and the wider workforce - and identifies the development activity that will help them meet business and career goals.

Leading teams - Builds a strong HR function with a clear identity and can resolve disputes before they escalate.

Ensuring accountability - Sets clear performance expectations and holds both self and others to the standard the value creation plan requires.

KEY ROLE REQUIREMENTS

▶ Scaling and organisational design
Experience scaling headcount and structure in a growth-stage or transitioning mid-market business, anticipating people challenges before they surface.

▶ Talent and leadership pipeline
Builds onboarding and training processes. Sets up career development and performance management systems. Manages recruitment in line with the value creation plan.

▶ Legal & regulatory compliance
Deep knowledge of UK employment law and compliance, with experience managing sensitive issues - redundancies, disputes, etc - without exposing the business to risk.

▶ Culture and performance systems
Distils what makes the business distinctive, and builds performance review, feedback and reward systems that reinforce this across the organisation.

▶ Employee engagement and manager enablement
Equips line managers to lead effectively and keeps the workforce engaged through a period of change. Makes everyone understand and feel connected to the company's vision and culture.

▶ Strategic partnership with CEO and Board
Works as a genuine thought partner to the CEO and Board on organisational design, leadership capability and the people dimensions of the value creation plan.

"The best PE CHROs don't just support the value creation plan. They make sure the business has the right people in place, with the right skills, and the right cultural fit, to deliver it."

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If you're thinking about your leadership team or your personal career ambitions, we'd welcome a confidential conversation.

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AssessioAI

AssessioAI is an innovative leadership assessment platform that equips organisations with the clarity and confidence needed to make smarter decisions in hiring, succession planning and leadership development. Combining decades of validated psychometrics with business context, the platform offers more data, sharper insight, and AI-driven guidance. Above all, it helps to decrease risk through improved hiring efficiency, reduced bias, and the greater likelihood of candidate success in a role.

AssessioAI is part of the Assessio Group.

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