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# PEOPLE AT THE CENTRE MYTH OR REALITY?

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**The present context is marked by profound change, highlighted by concepts such as technology, Artificial Intelligence, uncertainty, and sustainability. People are now at the forefront, being regarded as key stakeholders for corporate sustainability. Chief People Officers focus on knowledge, listening, and participation as fundamental pillars of human resource management. They tackle complex challenges such as Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, organisational fluidity, and the evolution of leadership models. Technology and sustainability deeply influence people management. The ability to manage change requires strategic vision, implementation skills, and inclusivity.**

**D**escribing the current context might seem like an almost futile exercise. We are so immersed in change that it becomes challenging to pinpoint the distinctive aspects of the period, yet paradoxically, it also feels repetitive because we keep hearing and sharing the same words: technology, Artificial Intelligence (AI), uncertainty, sustainability...

It is interesting that some recent research attempts to interpret this moment with the concept of transformative change, as a phase for companies on radical transformation in strategy, culture, systems, processes, and people.

What does it mean today to 'put people at the centre'? This well-known principle has gained traction since the pandemic, driven by the increasing recognition that people are genuine stakeholders, essential for ensuring an organization's long-term sustainability.

## OUR PERSPECTIVE

We addressed this topic with some Chief People Officers, engaging through both a structured survey and ongoing dialogue with them. The following is a summary of their insights (the figures on the next page and available via the QR Code represent some survey results).

First, their reflections revolve around three concepts – knowledge, listening, and participation – which are enabling factors for the real and concrete management of this stakeholder. The questions they ask themselves when reflecting on these aspects are almost more significant than the answers:

- Knowledge: How well do we know the people within our organization? What does it mean to know them, and what are the boundaries to avoid infringing on privacy? What management models and systems can we implement to facilitate these processes?

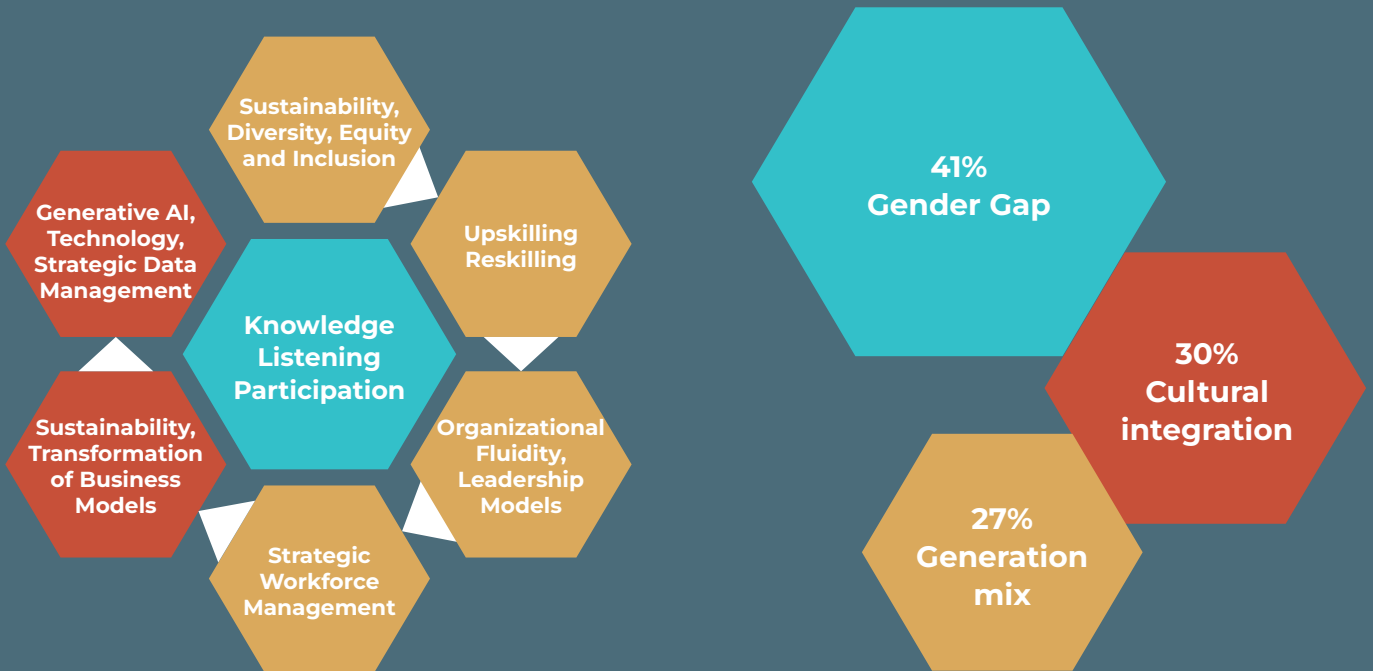
# The priority HR themes for companies

Figure 1

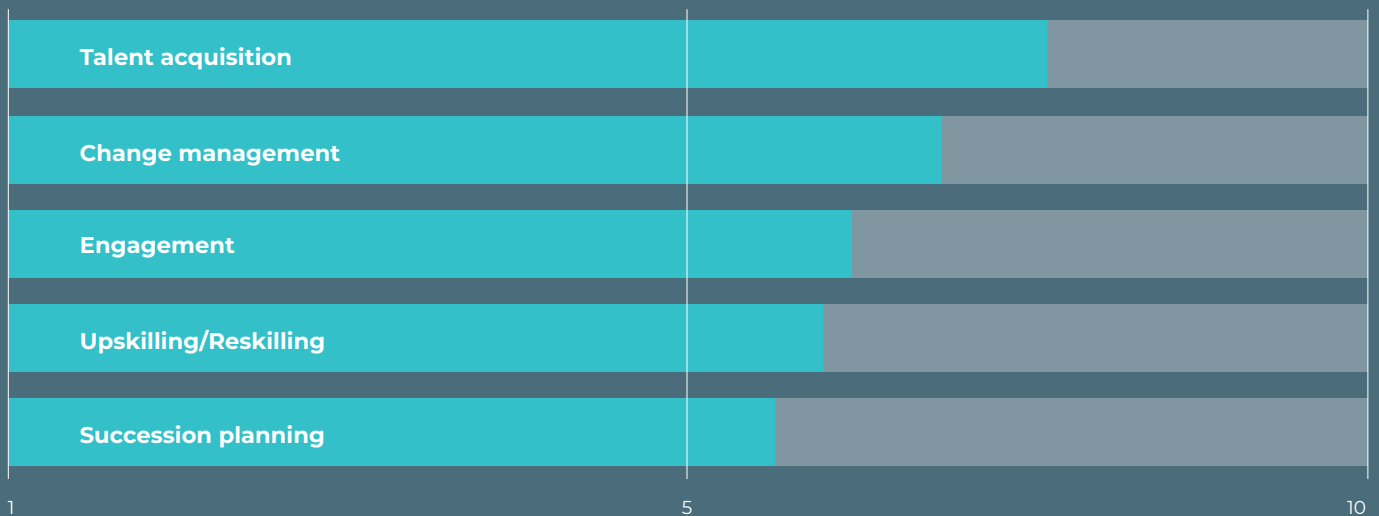
**1** Themes impacting knowledge, listening, and participation

**2** Concerning Diversity, Equity, Inclusion what is your priority? (Please select 1 option)

■ Enabling Factors   ■ Cross-Cutting Themes   ■ Challenges



**3** Using your company and the two-year period 2023-2024 as a reference, rank by importance (where 1 is the most important and 10 the least)



Source: The responses are the result of a questionnaire conducted by Eric Salmon & Partners in 2023 to explore the distinctive aspects of HR strategy, with input from a hundred HR Directors.





- **Listening:** What are the opportunities for dialogue to share and understand needs, expectations, fears, and dreams? How can these moments be set up, structured, and implemented? How can listening be transformed into action?
- **Participation:** To what extent do individuals at all levels of the company contribute to the development of projects and initiatives for the growth of the organization and themselves? How widespread is the culture of process-oriented work, project-based work, and/or work methods inspired by innovative and flexible methodologies?

In a context where there are virtuous mechanisms of knowledge, where listening to people is considered a strategic management lever, and where participation is a structured way to value everyone's contribution, complex challenges can be managed. For example, using Diversity, Equity & Inclusion as a strategic design point for professional models (such as development, career, and succession plans), Total Reward policies (addressing the gender gap, wellbeing systems, and Smart working), and overall management (cultural integration and generational mix).

Additionally, organizational fluidity becomes the ability to provide organizational insights to interpret market challenges with flexible, rapidly adaptable logic: organizational design will increasingly result from collective

thinking and the synthesis of work methods and process management that continuously evolve (such as the agile approach). This ties into the evolution of leadership models as an attempt to establish both operational and strategic capabilities to support change.

Strategic workforce planning should then be used as a comprehensive and medium-term vision of dynamics at all levels of the organization, balancing the internal and external market. This is an area where the evolution of Talent acquisition, retention, and engagement practices and processes can be found. Finally, upskilling and reskilling, both in terms of creating virtuous processes of continuous updating and contributing to the development of self-awareness as a capability of self-knowledge and self-assessment to create widespread conditions of employability.

Additionally, some themes (Figure 1.1) emerge that impact the points highlighted above, including strategic data management; technology, particularly generative AI, as a truly divergent transformative lever with unimaginable impact, especially in terms of the 'strategic workforce'; and sustainability as a push for the strategic and radical revision of both established business models and approaches and people management systems.

## FUTURE-PROOF LEADERSHIP

The challenges emerged from this dialogue with Chief People Officers are complex and multifaceted, requiring those responsible for guiding and facilitating transformation to have strategic vision, implementation capabilities, and the ability to create an inclusive context where people are real agents of change. These are skills that define a manager profile capable of balancing short-term needs with medium-term perspectives, adept at managing constant uncertainty, and increasingly sophisticated in outlining future scenarios. These characteristics, for those of us engaged in the study and development of leadership models, represent key aspects for defining 'future-proof leadership' and identifying people who can be virtuous interpreters of this time.

## ONLINE CONTENT

Due to space constraints, some content is available online. It can be accessed via the QR code.





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