



**Strategic CHRO**

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

# "Our Best Leaders Have An Understanding Of How People Work"

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Gavin Rennick



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***Gavin Rennick, CHRO at Schlumberger, shared his key leadership lessons with me and my colleague, David Reimer, CEO of The ExCo Group, in our latest Strategic CHRO interview. Subscribe [here](#) for future interviews.***

**Reimer: How did you get into HR in the first place?**

Rennick: I'm an engineer by background — electronics engineering with a specialization in AI, and a degree in business. After spending time in operational and engineering roles for a number of years, I got a phone call from the president of our division asking me to be his head of HR. After that, I returned to business-facing roles before eventually coming back into the HR Function as the CHRO.

The model at our company is that we try to develop talent broadly, and HR is one of those areas we prioritize. We believe that our best leaders have an understanding of how people work. About two-thirds of our executive leadership team have had a HR position at some point in their career.

That means I have lots of people on the team who do know what I do, which is great and makes my job interesting. It also means that there's a genuine appreciation and understanding across the company about why some of these things are important.

And for me personally, I'm really fascinated in the intersection of technology and people. What does this mean for people development? What does it mean for processes? How do you develop talent to be

successful in the future? How does this impact your corporate culture?

**Bryant: What are some other core aspects of your culture?**

Rennick: A fundamental aspect in our culture is that we recruit where we work, and we offer our talented employees global opportunities from very early on in their careers. And so our leadership team is very international – there are nine different nationalities represented on our leadership team of ten people. And if you add the level below that, there are 23 nationalities represented among our top 30 leaders.

We are constantly evaluating teams for their diversity. If you have an over representation of people from the same country on a team, someone will ask you why that's the case.

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We also have this strong culture of promoting from within. We just hired the first person from outside the company into our C-suite in our entire history, which dates back to the 1920s. And that was because we needed a particular skill set that we did not have internally.

Because our senior leaders have been with the company for so long, that helps reinforce our culture and creates a consistent approach around the world, particularly as we move people around so much. I've worked in about 14 different countries in 18 cities.

**Reimer: What is your company's framework for handling the growing demands from stakeholders, including employees, who think that companies get more involved in broader societal issues?**

Rennick: You have to have very clear principles for how your organization exists in the world and how it operates. One of the most important points is that we believe we are an international organization through and through. We don't believe we're a French organization, even though that's where the company was founded. We don't believe we're an American organization, even though that's where we're listed.

We believe that we're an international organization. The views of our employees in the United States are not the same necessarily as the views of our employees in the Middle East on certain topics, or the views of our employees in Europe on other topics. So there is a certain apolitical approach to the way we operate the company that is very much part of our culture.

We do it because we think it's a good business principle, but we also do it because we recognize that we value all of our employees, and they may have strongly opposing views on certain topics. The issues that some CHROs are facing in the United States may have absolutely nothing to do with the huge population of our employees in Africa or Latin America or anywhere else in the world.

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I am often struck by the ridiculous ways we were asked to report information on diversity in some countries. The US Census categorizes me as Asian, apparently, because I happen to come from Australia. We have a large African population, and a large percentage of them happen to be white, and they're all considered Black, according to some definitions. It's really quite farcical.

So the way we approach this is to say that there are certain things that we manage as a global company, like climate change. Our ambition is to have a 50% reduction in our Scope 1, 2 emissions and 30% in scope 3 emissions by 2030 and to be true net-zero by 2050.

In the last few years, there is much more pressure on companies to be clear about their positions on different issues in each country, but we do that through our local leaders, who are much more attuned to the nuances of what's going on in those countries.

**Bryant: It's an interesting approach in your culture to make clear that people are going to move around. That probably makes them better able to deal with all the disruption in the world.**

Rennick: I don't want to oversell it, though. There are large populations within the company that don't want to move. When I signed on, you made a choice early on about whether you want to go international. And if you do, your manager tells you up front that when you sign up for this, you're accepting the fact that you could be asked to move

anywhere, anytime, no questions. We are a little more refined these days, but some of that spirit still applies.

And frankly early in your career, when you're learning and developing quickly, it's addictive. My wife is from Alaska. It hard for me to have imagined as a boy growing up in western Australia that I was going to marry a girl from Alaska who had not travelled much outside of the United States when we met, and then the next assignments for us were France, Louisiana, and Norway. After that, she was the one saying to me, when's our next move?

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It's quite interesting because you actually change the characteristics of a human being and their families through that developmental experience. People get comfortable with the fact that they are going to be uncomfortable and that grows them in ways they did not ever imagine.

By the way, we do lose employees along the way because they decide they want to stay put. So even though we do stretch people as part of our development model, it doesn't always work. But that exposure of putting someone into a high-pressure environment where they have to learn really extracts the most intense development of an individual.

I remember on my first assignment being in an operational location in Saudi Arabia in the middle of Ramadan where most of the crew around me only spoke Arabic. Having to achieve results in that environment brings something out of you as an individual.

**Reimer: What are the X-factors you're looking for in your future leaders?**

Rennick: We like people who can learn and who are multidimensional in their management capabilities. They have the ability to go deep on a product, to go deep on business models, and to go deep on being able to extract value from their talent, as well as understand the big picture.

We also look carefully at the person's reputation. We look very carefully at the dynamics of a team around a manager. If a person's team loves working for them, that's a great starting point. Then they need to have the technical capability, and that includes not just strong business acumen, and technical or operational depth but also the ability to think creatively on the strategic side of the business.

Relationships in business are far more complex now. There are many more times when someone who was your customer is now your partner or your supplier. That's particularly true in tech, but it's broadly happening everywhere else, as well.

And so to be able to lead in a highly complex business environment requires a development path to building talent who can succeed in these situations. You have to be very purposeful about the experiences you give people to get them to that point.