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The rise of the CXO, CPO and other HR execs transforming the nursing home employee experience



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For most of her career, Ashley Romano has been tasked with building relationships and marketing senior care brands to potential residents and employees.

Nearly four years ago, she was promoted to chief experience officer, or CXO, at CareRite, which operates 33 skilled nursing centers across four states. Since

then, as she puts it, her position has been solely about making sure that “everybody is happy.”

It's an effort that is in part designed to reinforce her company's commitment to employee satisfaction. CareRite is using an approach more skilled nursing and senior living organizations appear to be embracing: elevating human resources to an executive-level position and giving them the support needed to expand beyond routine hiring, benefits and legal functions.

“Some groups are elevating their HR leaders to chief people officer or chief people and culture titles,” says Cara Silletto, president and chief retention officer at Magnet Culture, a workforce development firm. “More though are also switching to CHRO, chief HR officer, which may not seem as great or modern, but it [also] elevates the HR role to an executive position, which can be a game-changer if the senior leaders previously saw most HR functions as compliance-related instead of strategic.”

Romano's role requires her to create innovative patient and staff experiences. New Jersey-based CareRite has become known for its over-the-top [employee thank-yous](#) and Skilled Nursing Care Week celebrations, which have helped the company grow an [Instagram following](#) of more than 26,000.

In May, they raffled off prizes to employees who'd earned entry tokens throughout the year from peers who valued their work. This year CareRite doubled the entries for employees with at least two years' tenure. Each building also gave away a vacation and the companywide professional of the year — Elana Naclerio, director of recreation therapy at St. James Rehabilitation and Healthcare — landed a \$10,000 travel voucher to travel anywhere she wants.

That visibility into employee appreciation is carried out year-round, whether CareRite is celebrating an important employee milestone or fills suites at major league sports venues with employees and their families. And that, in turn, creates goodwill among current employees who help spread the word about new job opportunities.

The company averages a 3.4-hour nurse staffing rate across its portfolio and has several buildings with a five-star rating for staff, according to Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services data.

Resources for rewards

Providing powerful employee experiences is a “multi-million dollar investment” at CareRite, Romano told *McKnight's Long-Term Care News* last week. It's far from an initiative in title only.

“In regards to the chief experience officer position, I encourage a few things, first of all ensuring that ownership and all of the head leadership is in line with the same mission,” Romano said. “That really always allows all of us to know that a patient's quality of care and an incredible experience for our staff is top of mind at all times. ... Of course, wages and bonus opportunities, that all needs to be there ... because it won't work without it. But my sole position is to make sure that everybody is happy, for people to be happy, they need resources.”

Silletto reiterated that advice.

“In order to succeed, HR leaders – no matter the title – need a seat at the executive table, more capacity on their HR teams to properly address recruiting, retention, and employee relations needs, and a realistic budget to create a place where people want to work,” she said. “HR leaders must be empowered and equipped to provide effective systems, tools, and leadership development for people managers at every level.”

Silletto said she's still shocked to see SNFs with more than 100 employees without a full-time, dedicated HR team member in the building, whereas in most other industries, companies staff a full-time HR leader for just 60 workers.

“That forces all the employee issues onto 'hiring managers' whose plates are already full trying to keep their departments functioning,” she added.

“Organizational leaders wonder why staff quit, but it's clear that supervisors and managers no longer have time to be the great leaders they want to be. Bolstering HR teams can release the burden on these managers and create more support for today's new workforce, which needs more individual attention than previous generations of workers.”

In 2022, life plan community operator Lutheran Senior Services added a chief experience officer, who like Romano, planned and supported experiences across traditional company divisions. At the time, CEO [Adam Marles told](#)

McKnight's centering that much responsibility in one individual's hands was a way to ensure focus on the patient, staff and mission experiences didn't get lost for lack of coordination.

"So much is changing in our field right now and to get ahead of all these changes, we need to be thinking differently," he said.

To learn more about Romano's role at CareRite and the company's efforts to create programming that attracts and retains staff, check back for an upcoming [Newsmakers Podcast](#).

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