

# Episode 258: How To Get Executive Support As The CHRO with Jenna Saponaro



**Intro: [00:00:00.24]** Welcome to the Workology Podcast, a podcast for the disruptive workplace leader. Join host Jessica Miller-Merrell, founder of Workology.com, as she sits down and gets to the bottom of trends, tools and case studies for the business leader, H.R. and recruiting professional who was tired of the status quo. Now, here's Jessica with this episode of Workology.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:00:25.62]** Welcome to the Workology podcast sponsored by Workology. Today's podcast is part of a new series on the podcast. It is the CHRO series, and we're talking about the roles and responsibilities of the chief human resources officer. The CHRO is an executive or C level role that deals with managing human resources as well as organizational development and implementing policies of change to improve the overall efficiency of the company. This series is powered by HUB International. Today I'm joined by Jenna Saponaro. She's the Chief of Staff at Postali LLC. Jenna is responsible for H.R. functions for her company, including talent and recruitment, onboarding, performance management and training. Jenna, welcome to the Workology podcast.

**Jenna Saponaro: [00:01:12.63]** Hi, thanks so much for having me.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:01:14.79]** I'm so excited to have you here. And one of the things I want to call out is that your title is a little bit different. Your official title is Chief of Staff, but your responsibilities make it a CHRO role. Can you talk a little bit about your responsibilities and the company size?

**Jenna Saponaro: [00:01:45.15]** Sure. So we're a team of 17, so we're pretty small and our leadership team is made up of myself and the president and the CEO. And so I am responsible for all of the hiring and onboarding, performance management, organization, initiatives and improvements, team benefits and perks.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:02:04.02]** But I also a big part of my job is is company communication and documentation and making sure that we're on the same page and sort of growing together to get towards our long term goals and bring everyone along for the ride.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:02:17.78] Well, thank you for that. I just wanted to call this out because I think that a lot of people think that, oh, CHRO, their only job title is CHRO. But for smaller organizations and different company structures, you are doing a lot of different kinds of things. So let's talk a little bit about that and how your role as the CHRO works within that smaller company. You mentioned you on the executive team, but talk us through your job and maybe more about what you guys what you're working on.

Jenna Saponaro: [00:02:51.87] Yeah. So the way that our when you bring that up, I think about our org chart in a way that it works is our president oversees finance and our CEO of overseas operations. And I kind of sit between the middle of them and I support initiatives that both of them are working on in those different areas. But then I, as a Department of one, oversee the H.R. department as well as our internal marketing department. So that's related to some background that they have coming into Postali and the role I've picked up this year. But I am constantly wearing multiple hats every single day, depending on what is needed.

Jenna Saponaro: [00:03:30.50] And but my my primary role, the thing that I'm making sure that I'm taking care of every day is our team. Their needs from a benefits perspective and our talent needs. So if we're hiring and always looking for the best people to add to our team, that's my number one goal each day. And then I'm helping organize our internal marketing efforts. And then whatever Jim needs from an operations perspective, supporting him there on organizational changes and improvements. And then, John, on some of the larger initiatives and kind of acting as a liaison to between our accounts consultant that we use and our benefits administrators. So kind of jump in between a lot of a lot of different things on a daily basis.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:15.26] Never a dull moment.

Jenna Saponaro: [00:04:16.76] No.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:18.44] And you mentioned Columbus, so I'm assuming Columbus, Ohio.

Jenna Saponaro: [00:04:22.85] Yes.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:04:23.75] And then tell us about Postali. What what does Postali do? Who do you serve?

Jenna Saponaro: [00:04:28.34] Yeah, we are a digital marketing agency for attorneys. So we build websites and provide SEO services and all sorts of digital marketing services for law firms throughout the country. So we're overseeing and managing about 60 legal websites right now and we design them and develop them with SEO best practices in mind. We execute PPC campaigns and manage social and develop the content and strategy behind law for websites. And we've been in that space for 11 years.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:05:01.65] What a just an interesting niche. You don't. You don't. Everybody needs digital marketing, especially now with all of us working remotely and most business happening online. But even law firms and attorneys just like other niche industries.

Jenna Saponaro: [00:05:20.24] Yes, yeah. We definitely both Jim and John have spent near a decade or more sort of understanding this industry like no other. And I've worked at other agencies. And there's a lot to be said about being able to dive so deep into one specific industry and get to really know the ins and outs.

Jenna Saponaro: [00:05:41.75] One of the things I think makes us so unique is our ability to understand the entire business operations of a law firm and how that how we can use that knowledge to support their marketing efforts and really serve as a business partner to our clients because of the depth of knowledge that we have about the law firm industry.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:06:01.64] I love that. And a valuable tool as somebody who is in the HR space but runs a a digital training and online business, so. very cool.

Jenna Saponaro: [00:06:09.26] Yeah.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:06:10.04] Talk to us about the skills and experience that you feel like are absolute requirements for the CHRO role.

Jenna Saponaro: [00:06:16.91] There are so much so many things that I could list here. And I think the first thing that comes to mind is emotional intelligence. My background in the public sector, I worked for the state legislature here in Ohio, in Columbus, and I have a humanities based major Women's Studies and comparative religion major. And I think to be successful in this role, you need to be really astute in observing others and how they're doing, how they're feeling, how they're responding to things, especially to change and being able to respond accordingly and tailor your and my communication style to different individuals, as well as to different groups to be able to get make sure you're getting your message across properly and thinking through what will matter to that person about what you are sharing and being being able to show some empathy with that. I mean, I'm a very I'm a classic H.R. person is I'm a people person. And I strongly believe that if you can reach people on a personal level and some in some way, then you're going to have a

much easier time delivering them tough feedback if you need to, getting them to come along, if a change is being made.

Jenna Saponaro: [00:07:33.96] So that's that's probably one of the the greatest skills, I think. And then I think you do need a proven ability to lead people, not just projects. I think that there's a big difference between being able to organize work really well and get you can get all of those the different components and timelines and things into place and truly lead people and be able to show others that you are interested in their development and kind of bring them along for the ride with you.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:08:03.90] Do you feel like this pandemic with everybody now working from home has has changed your style and how you're approaching and and communicating with people?

Jenna Saponaro: [00:08:15.21] Yeah, for sure, I think I'd like to think and I feel that at Postali, we've always done a good job of really considering every member of our team as as people, not just employees. At Postali, we we care about what else is going on in their lives. We consider that and we show that and a lot of ways interpersonally and through our benefits.

Jenna Saponaro: [00:08:36.09] But I think that we've all had to, you know, especially as anyone who's a manager on our team and just the team in general, consider where someone might be with their mental health or someone someone what someone might be going through, given the circumstances, given maybe either the lack of access to their loved ones or family members and the toll that that is taking on them. And it's been kind of a taking it a day, week, month at a time, because there's been like different phases of this. We're in November of 2020. So, you know, I think the kind of uncertainty of March was really stressful in April and now the kind of the wear of how many months we've our everyone's lives have been changed and sort of not ever imagining that it would go on this long.

Jenna Saponaro: [00:09:25.15] That's I can I can tell that starting to wear on people. So I think really keeping that in mind and and checking up on people more, I think I've definitely been trying to personally check up on our team members more. Luckily, we have a lot of great communication tools in place, so I can kind of tailor that to people's style. So for some I might send a quick slack and say what's up? And just kind of see how they're doing. Others, we might schedule a virtual coffee, hang out and just kind of chat for half an hour about whatever and talk about what we've been cooking and our dogs and things. But I've definitely been making more of an effort on that front.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:10:02.28] I love that. And in this interview series that we've been doing with the CHROs, you're the first officially and I'm doing air quotes while I say this Department of one. Can you can you talk to us about how that is different maybe than than other CHRO roles?

**Jenna Saponaro: [00:10:19.48]** Sure. Yeah. And I think it's important that while I am technically a department of one, I certainly have support. And I think probably the biggest distinction to make is we have an accounting team and a benefits team that are outside of our organization.

**Jenna Saponaro: [00:10:35.13]** So while I serve as a liaison to them and I'm involved in rolling out our new health plans to the team, and making sure everyone understands what they need to sign up for and all that stuff, I'm not bogged down with the administrative paperwork, so I'm not processing payroll. I'm not processing a lot of the paperwork. And that was a it's a conscious choice by us as a leadership team to realize that in order for me to be able to focus on bigger picture items that we needed someone else to do that works. So I think that's important there. And then both Jim and John are very hands on with with all the work that I do. So while I'm usually the main one sort of executing the decision, I definitely have them to think through everything and to plan and kind of vision out what we want.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:11:22.38]** Like all department of ones that are are having to process payroll right now are super jealous of the fact that you have an outsource team to help you with that. I have a friend of mine who was and has been in manufacturing and she changed her wedding date thinking about payroll processing day like she need to be there for that and.

**Jenna Saponaro: [00:11:44.73]** Oh no.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:11:45.42]** I know. But that's I I'm telling you, everyone there are people listening on here that are saying, yep, that's how my life is. So I love that your organization values your role as an executive partner in this and is willing to invest in those other services or other people so that you can really focus on the strategy and the execution.

**Jenna Saponaro: [00:12:11.25]** Yeah, yeah. We're a big believer in getting creative with resourcing when we need it. We're not going to if they're if we don't have the right person to do something in the time frame that we want, we we try to get really creative with the solutions to try to try to get it done.

**Break: [00:12:27.54]** Let's take a reset. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell and you were listening to the Workology podcast sponsored by Workology. This interview and this podcast episode is part of our CHRO series, which is powered by HUB International. And today I'm talking with Jenna Saponaro of Postali LLC.

**Break: [00:12:47.45]** This episode is sponsored by HUB International, your full service employee benefits broker. Explore HUB's 2021 Employee Benefits Outlook at [www.HUBInternational.com](http://www.HUBInternational.com) for emerging trends, challenges and opportunities ahead in 2021.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:13:07.03]** Now, when we had our prep call, one of the things I really loved that you shared as you talked about technology adoption and you talked about Lattice in terms of how you're you're using that and it's been critical to to your success in your role. Can you walk us through how you're using Lattice and then kind of the how it's changed or helped you support the organization?

**Jenna Saponaro: [00:13:35.32]** Sure, yeah. So I think before I go to Lattice, I want to go to Radical Candor by Kim Scott. So I don't know if you've read that book before, but it is all about caring personally while challenging directly. And it's really a book about communication. And we read this book as an organization and we talked about it. And it was kind of the first time that this type of thing had been done at Postali. And we just really stressed the importance of consistent, direct and kind communication and kind of like wanted to put it out there for the team. Like, this is what we want. We want you to be honest. We want you to be highly communicative. That's that's going to be the the way things are moving forward here. And, you know, after sort of like laying the groundwork through that book, Lattice came into play a few months later as really the platform to allow that to happen and to make sure that it was happening. So it wasn't just a suggestion, but really something that was ingrained into our work and how we communicate with each other about things besides the literal tasks at hand each day. We have a great project management tool that we use that and to great project managers that handle the day to day work.

**Jenna Saponaro: [00:14:47.83]** But Lattice is is really for how we are supporting our teams and their professional development within the company, within their own career goals. It's how we are keeping track of company wide goals and initiatives and making sure each individual is supporting those. And it's how we are giving consistent feedback, both public praise and private criticism room for improvement. So the rollout of that, I think probably everyone in H.R. talks about the importance of communication. And we, of course, started with why. And I think obviously doing the sort of team book reading as a as a group and discussion really helps everyone understand why it was so important for us to invest in this type of platform and asked that everyone participate in it. And then we we customize Lattice for our purposes. We are a small team and not every feature made sense for us. And I think that's a big thing that I've learned in general is a lot of large, sophisticated software tools are meant for larger teams. So we do, I think, a good job of adapting them to make sense for us and what our day to day looks like. And so each time we rolled out a new feature within Lattice, we sit down with the managers first and we get there by in and we answer their questions and concerns before we rolled out to the rest of the team so that we can ensure that when the as we know, conversations always happen outside of those meetings and the side conversations.

**Jenna Saponaro: [00:16:16.65]** And that's OK. But we want to make sure that we're really being clear about why we're doing things and getting our manager set up to support their direct reports through Lattice and through some of those requirements that we have.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:16:31.00]** First off, I love Radical Candor. It's one of my my favorite books. And as my team has grown, that is one of the books that I pulled off the shelf and said, I need this for myself as as a leader that's going to support my team members. So I love that that you guys have have added that and it's helped shape these different initiatives and programs that you guys have rolled out since.

**Jenna Saponaro: [00:16:55.60]** Yeah, yeah. We're we're big fans. I've actually I got to see, Kim Scott speak at a conference, which is really cool, but it's just it's timeless advice. We always we keep going back to even did when we first read the book, we kind of did the plot point. We had everyone sort of anonymously place where they thought they fell on the chart, which was which was good to kind of have sort of a transparent moment of like, OK, here's where we're at as a team and where do we want to be.

**[00:17:27.10]** I love that. I the last time I listened. Well, I read the book was audio book. And so it kind of it's her reading it. So I feel like she is my best friend now.

**Jenna Saponaro: [00:17:37.87]** Yeah.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:17:39.05]** Get get all the insights directly from her voice, so that's fantastic.

**Jenna Saponaro: [00:17:43.24]** Yeah.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:17:43.90]** I want to ask a little bit more just about technology in general. So you mentioned Lattice, but obviously you use other HR technologies, you mentioned Slack earlier to. How does technology support and help you focus on company goals and ensuring that all employees are engaged and in alignment? What does that look like?

**Jenna Saponaro: [00:18:02.29]** It's so important to when we have we have sort of like a symphony of systems working together to make sure that the team knows where to find the right information and that we're keeping track of things in the right way, and it's a lot of stuff we have Slack as our chat tool. We have Wrike as our project management tool. And then we have a tool called Notion, which is a shared workspace and notetaking app that you can really highly customize and create your very unique custom workspace for your team, which we've been using now for two years. And it's a great, great place for us to hold company information. It's a great place to house our values and our vision for the company and information about our team members. And it's visually really appealing. You can you can really customize and add photos and emojis and all sorts of cool stuff.

Jenna Saponaro: [00:19:00.21] So it's been a great place, not just for our existing team members, but new team members when we bring them on, for them to be able to browse through and read about the company and where we're at and where we're looking to go. And that's a great a very foundational, I'd say, H.R. tool for us, too, because people know when we roll out initiatives or we have a new process or a new process in place, that Notion is the place to go for that.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:19:29.10] One of the other things I wanted to make sure that we touched on is your guys' benefits package, because it is frickin amazing.

Jenna Saponaro: [00:19:35.45] Yes, it is.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:19:36.39] Especially considering the size of your organization. Can you talk us through some of the highlights and how they're impacting your employee engagement and retention and so on?

Jenna Saponaro: [00:19:46.59] Yeah, yeah. So we are a values based organization and one of our values is people are the reason and we really do care about having genuine connections amongst our team members. And like I said earlier, we really do want to support each team member outside of work. We don't really believe in, like the you come to work as one person, then you leave and go home to your home life or your personal life. I mean, we want people to feel like they can bring their whole selves to work every day and having really fantastic supportive benefit programs from a full medical, dental and vision plan, a profit sharing for our plan from a really fantastic paid family leave program for new moms and dads at one hundred percent pay for ten weeks.

Jenna Saponaro: [00:20:37.35] Whether you give birth or adopt to our flexible time off, we don't have a cap on on vacation time and taking time off. These are all things that have been since I started with the company two and a half years ago, very, very clear from John, the founder and president and the CEO, that we care deeply about these things.

Jenna Saponaro: [00:20:56.91] And it's I've heard from current team members and as I'm talking with candidates when I'm hiring, it's a huge draw to them. I think more than ever, when companies recognize that these all of these things, in addition to your salary, of course, impact your life greatly. And they range from the very serious. It's very important to have medical insurance, of course, but we also have a Starbucks perk when we're when we're in the office and we get a Starbucks across the street, we want people to be encouraged to walk across and get a coffee with their coworker. And so we give a gift card to Starbucks each month. So and we're always I didn't even name them all on our website, but we're always dreaming up new things to and surveying the team. What what would impact you? What would mean a lot to you if we were able to offer this and that? It's just it's just very important to us.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:21:54.12] I'm just really incredibly impressed with Postali, the leadership team's focus on the people and investment in your role. And that's coming through in the performance and the growth in the organization.

Jenna Saponaro: [00:22:10.61] It is, it is, and we we talked to our team members all the time, and we for a small agency, we have people who have been here for three, four, five years beyond and our benefits and support and our flexibility, especially with their schedules and into their needs to support their family and adjust their schedules that they need is definitely something that we hear time and time again that people really love about working here.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:22:39.82] Jenna, thank you so much for for sharing with us today a lot of really great nuggets here about roles and responsibilities and and how H.R. can make an impact in an organization of any size. I wanted to ask you where people can go to connect with you and learn more about you and the work that you're doing at Postali.

Jenna Saponaro: [00:23:00.72] Sure. Thanks so much for having me. I really appreciate you sort of including me in this group. I love talking about what I do and our team, and I love that we do have prioritized this role for a company our size. And I think it's really important. So you can go to Postali.com, you can reach me at JSaponaro@postali.com as well as on LinkedIn.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:23:26.56] Awesome. And we'll include your LinkedIn profile URL in the show notes as well. So and Postali's information too so you can check out all the amazing benefits, job opportunities that they have available and then also connect with Jenna to. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us, Jenna. Really appreciate it.

Jenna Saponaro: [00:23:46.20] Yeah. Thanks so much.

Closing: [00:23:47.91] There have been so many changes in H.R. in the past decade, but we've never lost our focus on the people. HR teams are now being formed around an executive level role like the CHRO or Chief People Officer or in Jenna's case, the Chief of Staff who are more connected to the strategy and operations of the overall business. This means that this leadership position has a large role in technology selection, adoption, training and so on. I appreciate Jenna for taking the time to share her experience with us today. Thank you for joining the Workology podcast sponsored by Workology. This podcast is part of our CHRO series and it's powered by our friends at HUB International. This podcast, the Workology podcast is for the disruptive workplace leader who's tired of the status quo. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell and until next time, visit Workology.com to listen to all our podcast episodes.

**Closing: [00:24:42.78] Are you studying for your HRCI or SHRM exams? Join our free H.R. Certification Study Group on Facebook, search for HR Certification Study Group, or go to [HRCertificationStudyGroup.com](http://HRCertificationStudyGroup.com). ACE your exams with the H.R. Certification Study Group.**