vestd

The Executive Compensation Report 2026

Benchmarking UK C-Suite Remuneration



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Short on time?

Here's a quick summary.

Equity now sits alongside salary as a core part of any senior job offer. 93% of executives at businesses with 250 to 500 employees see it as an important factor when considering a role.

Vestd surveyed 400 UK-based CEOs, CFOs, COOs and CHROs at businesses with 100 to 500 employees about their pay, their equity and the benefits they value most.

The results give you a useful benchmark for how your own package compares with your peers', and they show how quickly the old salary hierarchy is changing.

Key findings:

- **Equity can outweigh salary.** More than a third of CEOs would accept a lower base salary for a stronger equity package.
- **HR chiefs now out-earn CEOs.** CHROs command higher base salaries and bigger total packages than CEOs, as businesses place more value on leaders who can hire and keep strong teams.
- **Health and flexibility are the new baseline.** Most executives now expect private health insurance and flexible working as standard, so they're worth treating as a given rather than something to negotiate for.

Introduction

If you're weighing up a new role, or wondering how your current package stacks up, you'll probably start by comparing salaries. More and more, the conversation ends with equity.

That shift comes through clearly in this report. The executives we surveyed want a real stake in the businesses they help build, and many would take less cash to get one. That makes sense to me.

A well-structured share in a growing company can be worth far more over time than a bigger pay cheque, provided you understand what you hold and when you might realise its value.

Some of the findings surprised me. I didn't expect HR leaders to out-earn CEOs, or executives at larger firms to take home less cash than those at smaller ones. Both are worth knowing if you're reviewing your package or negotiating a new one.

At Vestd, we've always believed that people work differently when they own part of what they're building. This research suggests the C-Suite agrees.

I hope it gives you a clearer picture of where you stand and what to ask for next time.



Ifty Nasir
Founder & CEO of Vestd

The current state of C-Suite cash compensation

While CEOs have historically had the reputation of being the highest C-Suite earners, our new research reveals an interesting trend: CHROs report the highest total compensation package for businesses with between 100 and 500 employees.

	Base salary	Cash bonus	Overall package
CHRO	£231,375	£74,199	£305,574
CEO	£201,749	£63,649	£265,399
CFO	£163,124	£57,124	£220,248
COO	£162,374	£56,199	£218,573

The people premium (CHROs)

Our new benchmark data highlights the rising importance and value of Chief Human Resources Officers. CHROs now command the highest average compensation packages across the C-Suite.

- **Average Base Salary:** £231,375
- **Average Cash Bonus:** £74,199
- **Total Average Compensation: £305,574**

Key insight: This new 'people premium' reflects the increasing strategic importance of talent acquisition, retention and organisational culture.

As the battle for talent intensifies and finding executives and specialist skills becomes even more difficult, the HR function has become a key driver of growth, and businesses are willing to pay to secure leaders who can build and retain high-performing teams.

The CEO benchmark

While they no longer top the average compensation table, CEOs remain highly compensated.

- **Average base salary:** £201,749
- **Average cash bonus:** £63,649
- **Total average compensation: £265,399**

Key insight: CEOs maintain strong base salaries above the £200k threshold, but a significant proportion of their total compensation is tied to the £63k cash bonus, meaning many leaders' take-home pay remains closely aligned to overarching company performance and milestones.

Finance and ops maintain parity (CFOs & COOs)

Financial and operational leadership are important pillars of businesses, and this is reflected in their almost identical remuneration structures.

CFO

- **Average base salary:** £163,124
- **Average cash bonus:** £57,124
- **Total average compensation: £220,248**

COO

- **Average base salary:** £162,374
- **Average cash bonus:** £56,199
- **Total average compensation: £218,573**

Key insight: The operational core of the C-Suite, whether that's the execution of strategy or management of capital, has a variance of just £1,700 between their total average compensation packages, sitting about £45k below the CEO benchmark.

Find out more about how COOs benchmark against their peers in the Modern COO Benchmark.

Scaling salaries: How do growth-stage businesses compare with enterprise organisations?

As businesses scale, executives might expect to see their compensation packages grow accordingly, but our new data suggests that may not be the case.

Despite more pressure from organisational complexity, increased headcounts and extra responsibility, execs at businesses with more than 250 employees actually see a drop of 2% in their total cash remuneration compared to their sub-250 peers.

	100-249 employees			250-500 employees			Difference
	Base salary	Cash bonus	Total cash	Base salary	Cash bonus	Total cash	
Executive average	£193,778	£61,006	£254,784	£184,567	£64,999	£249,566	-£5,218 (-2%)

Of all the roles measured, CEOs saw the biggest difference in their total cash remuneration by company size. Contrary to typical expectations, those at sub-250 businesses earned up to £38,227 more in cash compared their counterparts at larger organisations.

In fact, the only C-Suite roles to command higher pay at larger enterprises were COOs and CHROs, who were paid an average 4.4% and 10.7% more respectively.

Key insight: The CHRO premium makes sense. As businesses scale, talent acquisition, retention and organisational culture becomes all the more vital, but company size and sprawl makes it increasingly difficult to manage. A significant proportion of the CHRO's take-home pay is tied to the cash bonus - which was higher than CEO bonuses across both company sizes - meaning that pay is closely tied to people teams hitting their objectives.

And as for the COO role, the cost of major compliance or operational failures can be catastrophic at larger enterprises, so firms are willing to pay a premium for proven, senior talent to manage that risk.

Equity:
The deciding factor

Equity has moved from a nice-to-have supplementary bonus to a foundational requirement to attract the best executive talent.

Our new data shows that executive compensation packages for growing businesses cannot rely on salary and cash bonuses alone. With evidence that cash compensation is becoming more incentivised by performance and financial results, equity can be the primary lever for talent acquisition and retention.

- 86% of executives with 100-249 employees cite equity as an important factor when joining a new company. This increases as businesses grow, **jumping to 93% for executives in businesses with 250-500 employees.**
- Almost two-thirds of people leaders consider equity a major deciding factor. 62% of CHROs cited equity as a major factor when choosing a new employer, followed by COOs (55%), CEOs (54%) and CFOs (47%).
- Firms with more than 250 employees are more likely to offer equity as part of the overall compensation package. 6% of executives at businesses with 250 employees or fewer received no equity, compared to 3% at larger firms.

Key insight: If a business is looking to hire a new C-Suite role without a defined equity component, they are effectively locking themselves out of almost 90% of the talent pool.

Another key strategic lesson for businesses is the willingness of modern executives to trade cash compensation to include or improve their equity package.

Again, CHROs lead the field. 37% of CHROs and COOs, as well as 34% of CEOs, would choose to join a business offering a lower base salary if it came with a strong equity package.

By contrast, 21% of CHROs and 25% of COOs would prefer a higher-salary role with zero equity, suggesting that pure cash compensation packages are less popular with operational and people leaders.

Under-utilised EMI

Despite being used by most of the companies listed on the FTSE100, our evidence suggests that Government-backed, tax-advantaged employee share schemes are being under-utilised by UK mid-market businesses.

Growth shares are the most prevalent vehicle for executive equity, held by 47% on average across C-Suite roles. Ordinary shares are the next most popular, with a utilisation rate of 35% across roles.

Government-backed employee share schemes had mixed uptake, with the highly tax-efficient EMI (29% average across all roles) being heavily utilised by CEOs (42%), but less frequent usage by CFOs (25%) and COOs (19%).

The comprehension gap

Even with a high demand for equity, there's a clear risk factor for businesses and their executive teams relating to how much they understand the value of what they hold.

Although 98% of executives claim to understand their equity "well", only around half (47%) of leaders in smaller companies and 59% in larger companies stated they understood the value of their equity "very well".

This suggests that some businesses are successfully offering equity to secure the best talent, but failing to provide the ongoing education and transparent valuation required to maximise the retention value of those shares once their new hires are in post.

The liquidity retention risk

Analysis of executive expectations regarding the conversion of their equity into cash reveals a clear retention risk for businesses.

While granting shares is critical for hiring executives, their ongoing retention is dependent on businesses closing the gap between typical corporate exit horizons and liquidity expectations of execs.

On average, leaders across C-Suite roles reported that they expected to realise value from their equity in three years. For financial and people leaders, this expected timeline is even shorter. More than 40% of CHROs and CFOs expect a liquidity event within one to three years of their grant.

With many scaleups operating on a typical seven- to 10-year horizon for a major liquidity event, such as an IPO or a full acquisition, this compressed expected timeline reveals a clear retention risk.

Key insight: Businesses must ensure they are proactively explaining and managing these expectations during the interview stage, as well as structuring intermediate liquidity mechanisms - such as share buybacks or secondary market sales through the PISCES framework - around the three-year mark to stay in line with executive expectations if a major liquidity event is further down the line.

Work-life balance at the top

While cash compensation and equity stakes are the most important factors for the recruitment and retention of executive talent, our data shows that the C-Suite views other non-cash benefits as fundamental components of a competitive remuneration package.

Which perks are most frequently offered to executives?

- Private health insurance - **46%**
- Flexible working - **44%**
- Company car - **44%**
- Remote working - **35%**
- Life insurance / death in service - **33%**
- Enhanced annual leave - **33%**
- Gym membership - **32%**
- Dental/optical cover - **30%**
- Enhanced pension contributions - **29%**
- Income protection - **29%**
- Wellbeing allowance - **24%**
- Enhanced maternity/paternity leave - **18%**
- Unlimited annual leave - **11%**

Our findings highlight how employers are increasingly required to offer lifestyle and wellbeing benefits as part of their job offers.

While private healthcare, flexible working and a company car are the benefits most frequently received by executives, enhanced annual leave (33%), gym memberships (32%), and dental/optical cover (30%) also feature prominently.

Healthcare and flexible working: The core perks

There are two benefits which have separated themselves as the core necessities in a modern executive compensation package.

- **Private healthcare:** 36% of executives value private healthcare most highly among their non-cash benefits. This jumps to 45% of executives in businesses with 250-500 employees.
- **Flexible working:** An increasingly important offer. 35% of those surveyed ranked flexible working among their most highly valued non-cash benefits.

Key insight: Non-cash perks are now seen as a base-level offer for top executives. Private health insurance and flexible working are no longer valuable USPs which will set your business apart from the competition. Failing to meet baseline expectations will simply disqualify a business from securing top-tier talent.

Strategic recommendations

01 In a battle for talent, HR holds strategic value

Our report has highlighted how difficult it is for businesses to find and recruit the best people that will power the next phase of their growth with compensation alone.

With workplace culture, productivity and employee retention high on the boardroom agenda, CHROs are leveraging their power and now sit atop the executive compensation table.

Securing an elite-level CHRO as your business scales can be a gamechanger for reducing staff churn and improving organisational efficiency.

02 Equity is the new differential

Equity is an important consideration for nine out of ten executives when they decide whether to accept a role, and one in three operational and talent leaders would accept a lower salary to secure equity as part of their overall compensation package.

Far from a nice-to-have, equity is now an essential part of executive retention, as well as offering businesses an opportunity to avoid inflating salaries while tying compensation to performance.

03 Beware the exit gap

While executives now expect equity as part of their compensation package, the potential gap between exit horizons and C-Suite expectations could lead to a retention risk.

Liquidity is key in these situations and intermediate liquidity options such as secondary sales and share buybacks can help to alleviate itchy feet beyond the three-year mark.

04 Standardise your baseline benefits

Quality-of-life benefits are now basic expectations for leading executives and a failure to offer core perks like private healthcare and flexible working will rule out a huge proportion of the talent pool.

Focus negotiation efforts on performance bonuses and effective equity vesting schedules, rather than haggling over lifestyle benefits now seen as the default.

05 Education is key

Almost all executives claim to understand their equity, but only around half have a strong understanding.

Equity education should go far beyond a one-time onboarding discussion. Ongoing support to help your teams understand the real-world value of their shares is vital.

When teams see the true value of their shares, they are far less likely to jump ship for a nominal bump in base salary.

Summary

Pay at the top of growing UK businesses no longer follows the old hierarchy. CHROs now earn more than CEOs on average, and executives at companies with 250 to 500 employees take home slightly less cash than their peers at smaller firms.

Equity is what has grown in importance. Nine in ten executives weigh it up before accepting a role, and around a third would take a lower salary for a stronger stake. Yet only about half say they understand its value very well. On average they expect to see a return within three years, long before most scaleups reach an exit.

For founders and boards, that means planning equity with the same care as salary. Being open about what shares could be worth, and offering earlier routes to liquidity such as share buybacks or PISCES, can help equity do its real job of keeping good people.

Vestd helps growing businesses set up and manage share schemes like EMI, EMI2 and growth shares. Leaders can see exactly what they own and what it could be worth, so equity becomes something they can plan around rather than a promise on paper.

If your next role comes with equity, it's worth asking whether it's managed on Vestd.

Methodology

Vestd commissioned Censuswide to conduct a survey of 400 executives working as a CEO, Chief HR Officer, Chief Financial Officer, or Chief Operating Officer at businesses with between 100 and 500 employees, exploring their base cash compensation, as well as equity and wider benefits. The survey was conducted in November 2026.

Vestd, the sharetech platform

Since 2014, we've helped growing businesses and the leaders who run them share ownership the smart way - so everyone grows together, one slice at a time.

Share schemes

Attract and keep the people you can't afford to lose with a tax-efficient share scheme designed to fit your business like a glove.

Equity management

Take equity admin off your team's plate. Automations and notifications keep ownership up to date without the spreadsheets.

Company secretarial

Say goodbye to manual filing and time-consuming paperwork. The platform makes it simple to stay on top of your statutory obligations.

Fundraising

Get investment-ready and run funding rounds for a fixed fee, with no percentage taken from the round.

Stakeholder comms

Keep investors, the board, employees and other shareholders informed with regular, consistent updates.

Company valuations

HMRC share scheme valuations from our in-house team, ready for your finance function. 409A too.

S/EIS Advance Assurance

The simplest route to Advance Assurance and Compliance Statements, with less back-and-forth for your finance team.

Cap table

A digital cap table that gives the board an accurate view of ownership, with scenario modelling to plan the next round, hire or exit.

Shareholder dashboards

Dashboards let shareholders and option holders, from new joiners to the C-suite, track the value of their stakes.

Book a free, no-obligation consultation today to see how easy it could be to reward your team. Talk to us!



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