



Aligning people and operations.

The role of the CHRO in
operations transformation.



Protect. Transform. Sustain.

Executive summary

The role of the Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO) has expanded materially as organisations confront operational disruption, workforce shifts, and rapid digital change. HR leaders are increasingly expected to shape how operational transformation is designed and delivered, influencing safety performance, workforce productivity, and the organisation's ability to sustain change over time.

In high-performing companies, CHROs are co-leading change with CEOs, COOs, and CFOs. Their impact lies in connecting strategy to people: transformation succeeds not through systems alone, but when leaders embed the conditions for employees to adapt, perform, and thrive.

Based on interviews with senior HR and transformation leaders across industries, this paper explores how CHROs are:

- **Co-owning transformation priorities and KPIs** alongside other executives
- **Translating operational goals into people strategies** that sustain performance
- **Driving behavioural change** through competency, capability, and culture building
- **Building readiness and trust for digital and safety transformation**
- **Sustaining engagement and energy** through periods of prolonged change

The message is simple:

Operations transformation is human-powered, and the CHRO is essential to making it work.

Introduction

Operations transformation has become a defining challenge for today's organisations. Pressures to improve efficiency, manage risk, and respond to constant disruption are forcing leaders to rethink how their businesses operate. Yet transformation only endures when behaviours, mindsets, and leadership align across the organisation.



For too long, the human dimension of change has been treated as secondary – managed through programmes that rarely reach the frontline. What makes transformation last is not process design or technology, but the ability to mobilise people around new ways of working and to embed cultural norms that sustain performance.

This is where the CHRO plays a decisive role. As organisations adapt to new technologies, regulatory demands, demographic shifts, and rising expectations around safety and sustainability, CHROs are increasingly the architects of change. They connect people strategy with operational goals such as safety performance, productivity, and risk management, ensuring transformation takes root in the daily routines and decision-making of leaders and teams.

At dss⁺, we see this every day.

Working at the intersection of people, operations, and risk, we know that culture cannot shift without leadership, and operations transformation cannot be sustained without culture. The CHRO is uniquely placed to bridge these elements and turn transformation from an aspiration into a lived reality.

Strategic collaboration with the C-suite

Operations transformation only takes hold when it is owned collectively at the top. The CHRO's role in this alignment has expanded – from functional adviser to strategic architect alongside the CEO, COO, and CFO. In high-performing organisations, HR leaders are part of transformation from the start, shaping its direction rather than responding to it. Early involvement enables HR to shape transformation around operational realities, including workforce capability, safety-critical behaviours, and leadership accountability for performance.

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The CHRO must be embedded at the strategy table, co-owning transformation KPIs. Credibility grows when HR leaders understand the operational context and actively influence business planning.”

Senior HSE Transformation Leader, Energy and Logistics, South Africa

According to Gartner research (2023), organisations that integrate HR into transformation planning from the outset are significantly more likely to achieve their objectives.¹ Yet few take advantage of this lever. When CHROs connect talent, risk, and culture directly to enterprise priorities, they strengthen their influence and the coherence of transformation.

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CHROs must form a strong triad with the CEO and CFO, not just follow directives. The best CHROs help shape the transformation agenda and personally embody the change.”

Alex Kuilman, dss* IAB Member



Strategic CHROs demonstrate their value through business fluency: understanding how the organisation creates value, manages risk, and translates leadership decisions into frontline behaviour. They influence capital allocation, workforce investments, and leadership accountability. In doing so, they move from participants in transformation to co-authors of it, ensuring that culture, capability, and performance reinforce one another.

Integrating HR with operations

Transformation succeeds only when it is embedded in the daily routines and disciplines of the business. The partnership between HR and Operations is therefore decisive. When HR works alongside line leaders, people strategies and cultural expectations are reinforced with the same rigour as technical standards.

“

You cannot create transformation from the corporate tower – you need to understand what teams are really experiencing, especially in manufacturing and commercial.”

Christelle Beneteau, CHRO, Ferring Pharmaceuticals



“

People & Culture has a high impact: we set the leadership standard, design the roles and capabilities, and call out poor behaviours early—so the frontline can own the change and deliver results.”

Kate Daly – Chief People Officer, Fonterra

Gallup reports that engaged teams deliver 63% fewer safety incidents, 32% fewer quality defects, and up to 78% less absenteeism.

When HR is embedded directly in operations, organisations see measurable improvements in safety performance, quality, and the speed at which new ways of working are adopted. At MedcoEnergi, HR partnered with Operations and HSE to align technical competency, training, and mindset development. At Mercado Libre, HR strengthened leadership visibility through walkabouts and real-time feedback, turning safety from a compliance issue into a shared cultural anchor.

This proximity builds operational fluency for HR leaders – the ability to translate strategy into behaviours that teams can live every day. By co-designing rituals, embedding feedback loops, and aligning learning with frontline realities, HR enables change to land faster and endure under pressure.

Organisations that embed HR into operations see higher engagement, stronger safety performance, and faster adoption of new ways of working. Gallup reports that engaged teams deliver 63% fewer safety incidents, 32% fewer quality defects, and up to 78% less absenteeism.² Integration transforms HR from a back-office function into a frontline enabler of performance and resilience.

² Source: Gallup (2023). State of the Global Workplace; Gallup (2023). Gallup Q12® Employee Engagement Performance Research. Performance outcome figures are drawn from Gallup's Q12 meta-analysis of employee engagement and organisational outcomes.

HR's Role in digital transformation

Digital transformation is rarely held back by technology – it is held back by people. Culture, not platforms or budgets, remains the single biggest barrier to digital adoption. For CHROs, this is an opportunity to ensure investment translates into value by preparing the workforce to embrace new tools and ways of working.

The CHRO's role is not to choose systems but to create the conditions for adoption: building digital fluency, rewarding experimentation, and ensuring leaders model digital-first behaviours. As one HR leader in the energy sector noted, *"Digital safety transformation only works when HR is involved. Leadership, engagement, and behavioural readiness are all HR domains."*

Leading organisations are reframing digital not as a rollout, but as a culture shift. One company redesigned learning on digital-first platforms to engage younger employees while supporting mindset shifts in senior leaders. At Mercado Libre, HR uses AI to support learning, automate HR processes, and track adoption – but its greater contribution lies in building comfort with experimentation and change.

When HR leads on the human side of digital, adoption accelerates and performance follows. The opportunity for CHROs is clear: by shaping culture, building capability, and tracking behavioural adoption, they can turn digital ambition into operational reality.

How HR can help overcome challenges in operations transformations

Even the best transformation programmes encounter human complexity. Change creates pressure, competing priorities, and uncertainty. For CHROs, these are not obstacles to manage after the fact—they are design challenges to anticipate and shape.

Three dynamics stand out:

1.

Change intensity

Multiple initiatives often stretch workforce energy. CHROs bring focus by sequencing priorities and ensuring each transformation has a sustainment phase.

2.

Confidence and clarity

Employees hesitate when the “why, what, and how” are unclear. CHROs build psychological safety and inclusion so people stay engaged.

3.

Early positioning of HR

Involvement from the start enables HR to design transformation around people rather than adapt it later.

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Transformation often fails to transition to a sustainment phase, leaving employees in ‘perpetual project mode’ and risking burnout.”

Senior Operations Leader, Oil and Gas, Global

Roughly 70% of change initiatives miss their goals, often due to employee resistance or lack of leadership alignment.



Research suggests that roughly 70% of change initiatives miss their goals, often due to employee resistance or lack of leadership alignment. Yet these same dynamics can become levers for resilience when HR shapes transformation early and deliberately.

Figure 1 summarises insights from interviews with senior HR leaders. The size of each bar reflects how frequently and strongly interviewees identified each barrier to operational transformation.

By viewing resistance as feedback, fatigue as a signal for focus, and misalignment as a design flaw to correct, CHROs turn obstacles into opportunities for sustained performance.

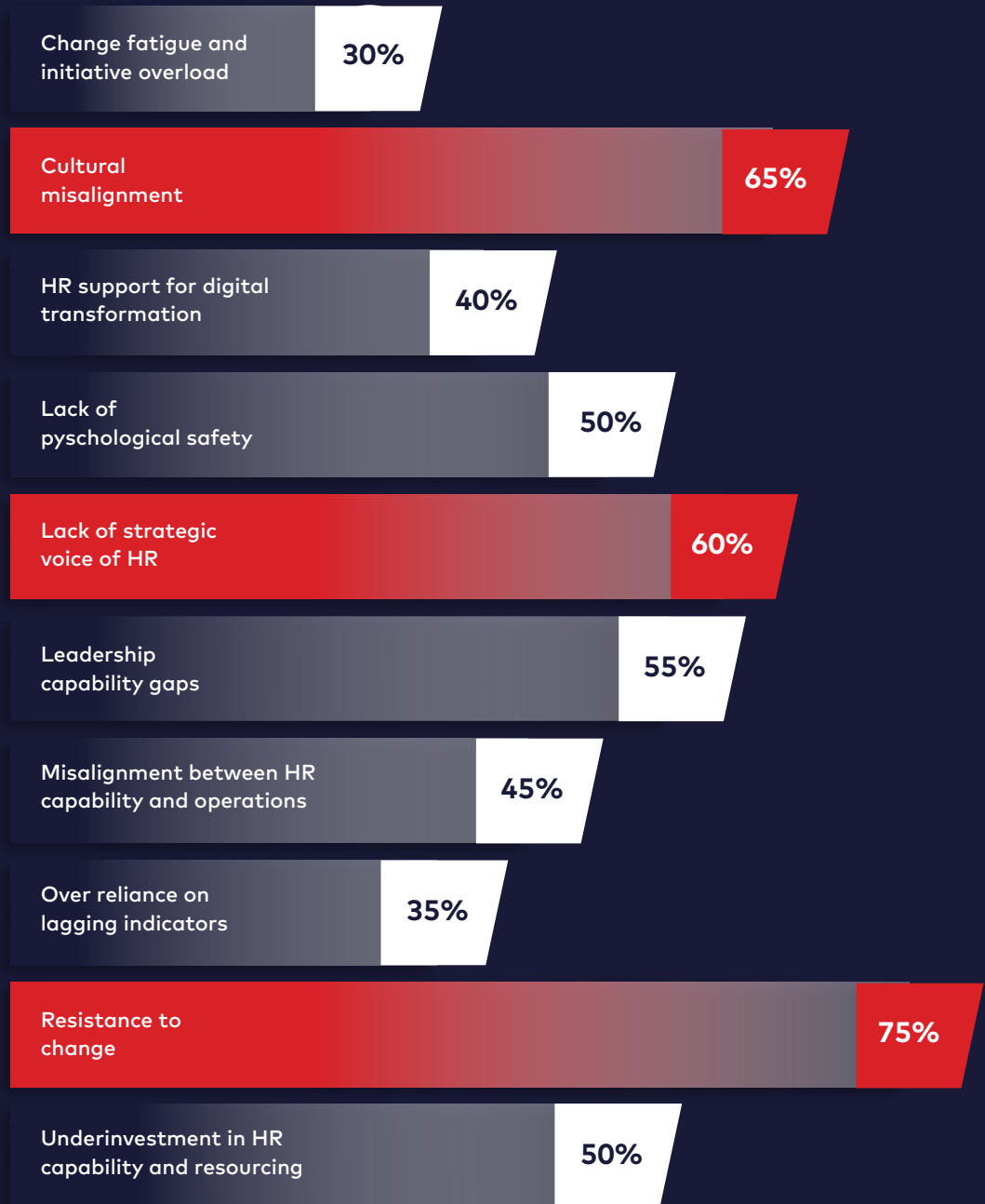


Figure 1: Critical challenges, obstacles or resistance points encountered for HR initiatives during operations transformation



HR-led initiatives driving transformation

When HR leads operations transformation, it shifts from a supporting role to an architect of change. The most effective initiatives share three traits: they are co-created with the business, embedded in operations, and measured by outcomes that matter.

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We created a new performance management system grounded in behavioural change and collaboration, not bureaucracy.”

HR Leader, Pharmaceutical Industry

Recognition-rich cultures experience 31% lower voluntary turnover, underlining how HR-led initiatives strengthen retention and resilience.



At Ferring Pharmaceuticals, HR introduced behavioural nudges that encouraged innovation and accountability, helping shift leadership mindsets and embed expectations into daily routines. Similar approaches at other organisations – linking leadership visibility, safety walkabouts, and feedback loops – show how subtle interventions can reinforce transformation at scale.

The common design principle is clear: HR works alongside Operations and HSE from the outset, delivers initiatives where work actually happens, and measures success through engagement, safety, and performance outcomes. Recognition-rich cultures experience 31% lower voluntary turnover³, underlining how HR-led initiatives reduce attrition, preserve critical capability, and limit operational disruption during periods of transformation.

For CHROs, the lesson is direct: by leading initiatives that are operationally grounded and measurable, HR can embed culture, safety, and performance together—turning transformation into a lived capability rather than a one-off programme.

³ Source: Bersin, J. (2012). New Research Unlocks the Secret of Employee Recognition. Forbes.”

Employee engagement and retention during transformation

Employee engagement is one of the strongest predictors of whether operations transformations will endure. When people feel trusted, included, and supported, they bring energy and resilience to change. Engagement is not a “soft” issue – it is a performance lever.

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Task forces include internal leaders—not just consultants—creating ownership and capability for sustained change.”

Iwan Prajogi, Senior HR Leader, MedcoEnergi



Employees commit more deeply when they help shape transformation rather than simply receive it. Gallup research shows that employees who feel heard are 4.6 times more likely to feel empowered and committed during change.⁴ Organisations with psychologically safe cultures are significantly more likely to retain top talent through transformation.

Leading companies embed these practices systematically. *“We build culture from day one through structured onboarding, leadership alignment, and real-time feedback,”* notes Andres Jose Cortina of Mercado Libre. Such approaches make culture visible in daily routines rather than abstract in values statements.

For CHROs, the opportunity is to connect engagement directly to operational outcomes – linking trust and inclusion to safety, productivity, and retention. By humanising the change journey and creating visible feedback loops, HR leaders ensure transformation is not only delivered but embraced.

Employees who feel heard are 4.6 times more likely to feel empowered and committed during change.

⁴ Source: Gallup. (2023). State of the Global Workplace: 2023 Report.

Metrics and indicators to evaluate HR's impact

Transformation today is measured in real time. Just as operations track safety performance or production uptime, HR has the opportunity to demonstrate its impact with equal rigour – linking cultural and behavioural outcomes directly to business performance.

Joint accountability is key. "Joint KPIs between HR and Operations, like training effectiveness and cultural integration, create shared accountability," noted a senior HSE transformation leader in the energy sector. Shared measures signal that culture and performance are inseparable.

Leading organisations are moving beyond lagging HR metrics such as attrition or training hours. They use leading indicators – psychological safety scores, behavioural adoption, leadership readiness, and engagement data—to show whether change is taking root and to adjust in real time.

At Mercado Libre, *"Engagement, mobility, and succession readiness are tracked rigorously and tied to operational outcomes,"* explained Andres Jose Cortina. This approach connects employee experience directly to resilience and performance.

Figure 2 illustrates the indicators most frequently cited by CHROs we interviewed. The size of each circle reflects how strongly interviewees rated each measure in capturing HR's contribution to operational transformation.

Figure 3 highlights how accountability for transformation is distributed across HR, Operations, and shared partnership areas. It shows where close collaboration – particularly around safety, culture, and digital enablement – is most critical to success.

For CHROs, the opportunity is to make culture visible and measurable: to track not only what employees deliver, but how they adapt, learn, and lead through change.



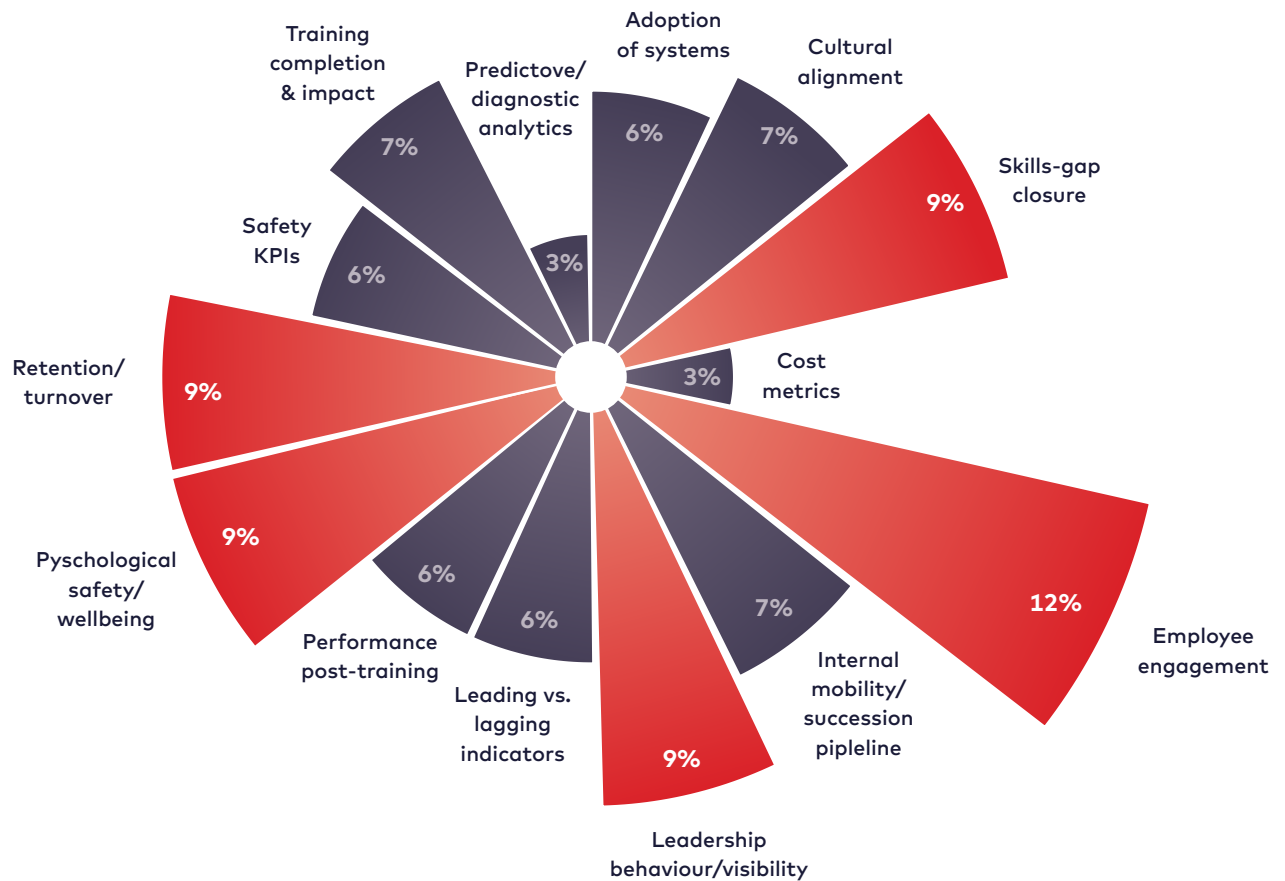


Figure 2: What metrics or indicators should be used to evaluate HR's contribution to operations transformation?

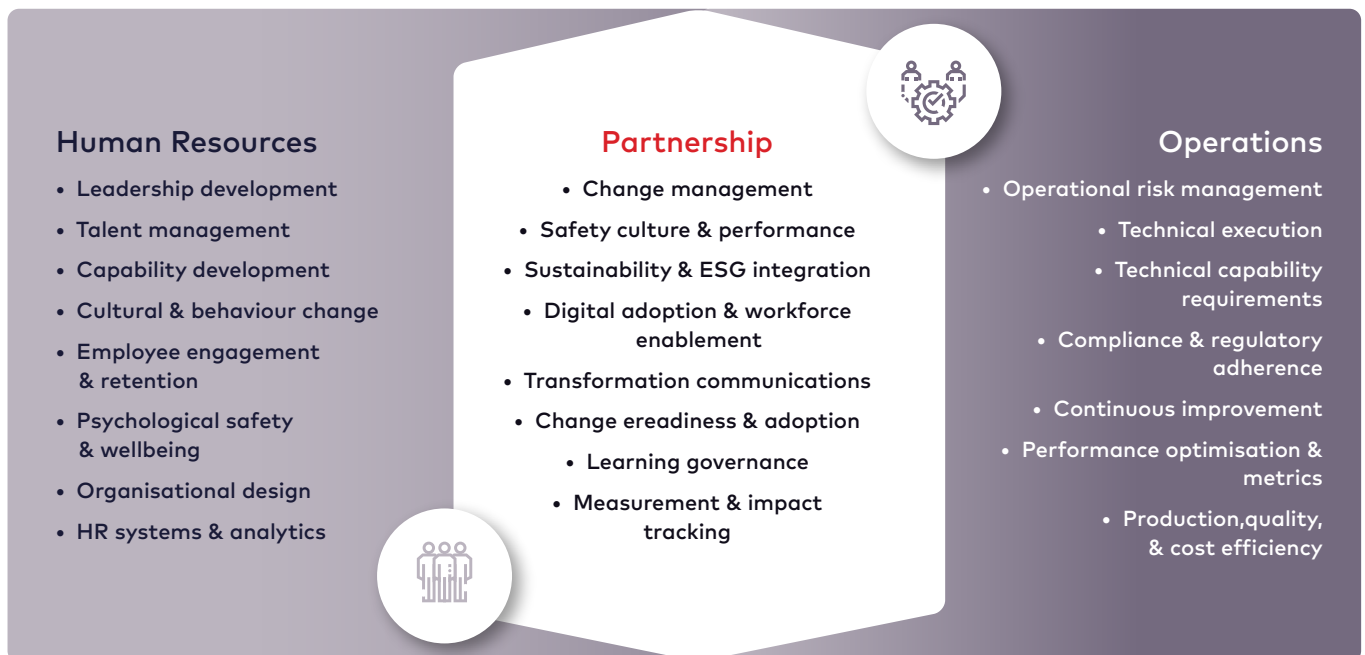


Figure 3: Indicative accountabilities during operations transformation

Recommendations for CHROs leading operations transformation

Taken together, these insights point to a clear agenda for CHROs. The role is no longer about supporting transformation from the sidelines but about shaping the conditions that make it succeed.

The following five actions reflect practices observed in organisations where HR is a true transformation partner:

1. Claim a strategic seat

Join business planning early, co-own transformation KPIs, and align people strategy with enterprise risk and performance goals.

2. Embed in operations

Partner with Operations and HSE to align culture, safety, and performance where work happens.

3. Build digital and analytical fluency

Develop workforce confidence, leadership capability, and HR's own data literacy to accelerate adoption.

4. Design transformation for people

Translate change into routines, rituals, and leadership behaviours that teams can live every day.

5. Measure what matters:

Track leading indicators such as engagement, psychological safety, and behavioural adoption to sustain transformation in real time.

These priorities reflect a shift in identity: from HR as a support function to HR as a transformation engine – co-owning outcomes, not just enabling them.

Conclusion

HR as an operations transformation engine

Transformation only endures when culture, capability, and leadership align with operational goals. That alignment does not happen by chance: it is built through shared ownership between the CHRO, CEO, COO, and CFO. By embedding HR in operations, championing digital readiness, and making culture measurable, organisations create the conditions for resilience and performance.

At dss+, we see this every day. In high-risk, high-reliability environments, transformation succeeds only when people and operations advance together. Our experience shows that when CHROs help leaders embed culture into daily routines, strengthen capability, and build trust under pressure, transformation becomes sustainable.

The CHRO's role is now inseparable from the success of transformation itself. By stepping fully into this position, CHROs can demonstrate what forward-looking organisations already know: **the future of operational transformation is human-powered – and HR is its engine.**



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About dss⁺

dss⁺ is the operational transformation partner for complex and high-hazard industries. Driven by our purpose, we help organisations achieve breakthroughs in safety, performance and sustainability that build business endurance and ensure long-term success.

We engage deeply within organisations to empower teams to shift mindsets, shape cultures, and establish the capabilities required at every level. We combine technical expertise and operational experience with a people-centred approach and data-driven insight.

Find out more at www.consultdss.com



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