

## People, Leadership, and Culture

An Interview with Eileen Whelley,  
Executive Vice President-Human Resources, The Hartford Financial Services Group, Inc.

**EDITORS' NOTE** Eileen Whelley joined The Hartford Financial Services Group, Inc. in December 2006 and was named Executive Vice President for Human Resources in June 2007. Prior to joining The Hartford, Whelley spent 17 years at General Electric where she held a number of human resources leadership roles. In 2002, she was named Executive Vice President of Human Resources for NBC. When NBC merged with Universal, Whelley led the HR integration, continued to lead HR for the NBCU Television Group, and managed NBCU's diversity and employer-of-choice programs. She was named a company officer of GE, NBCU's parent company, in December 2003. Before joining NBCU, Whelley was the Vice President of Human Resources Excellence for GE Capital in Stamford, Connecticut. Before that, she served in a variety of HR leadership roles at GE's corporate headquarters in Fairfield, Connecticut and at GE Capital in both Stamford, Connecticut and in Kansas City, Kansas. Prior to GE, Whelley worked for Citicorp and Standard Oil of Ohio in a number of HR roles. She is a graduate of Potsdam College and has a master's degree from Bowling Green State University. Currently, Whelley is a member of the advisory board for Teach for America CT and a trustee of the Potsdam College Foundation Board.



Eileen Whelley

**COMPANY BRIEF** Founded in 1810, The Hartford Financial Services Group, Inc. ([www.thehartford.com](http://www.thehartford.com)) is a leading provider of insurance and wealth management services for millions of consumers and businesses worldwide. Based in the U.S., The Hartford is consistently recognized for its superior service and as one of the world's most ethical companies.

### What about the role excites you and has it evolved over the years?

I love human resources. It puts you in the center of everything a company is trying to do – it's about people, leadership, and culture. If you can help the company achieve its goals for hiring, developing, and retaining great talent, and having a culture where people can do their best work, you are going to make a meaningful contribution to a company.

These activities play to what I do well and illustrate how HR has evolved. Human resources sometimes is perceived as being a bureaucratic

and administrative function. I believe that, over the years, the focus has been increasingly on talent and the culture of an organization. A large part of a company's success can be attributed to its people and the companies that recognize that typically have a more contemporary HR organization.

**In leading the HR function, how important is it to have senior leadership involved and, at The Hartford, how critical has that engagement been?**

Our mission as a function is to support the business, so our job is to have a deep understanding of the business strategy. We do that by aligning ourselves with the business. I have found my colleagues to be incredibly receptive to that. They know people are an important part of their ability to accomplish their goals. They are collaborative but also demanding – they want our help, they see us as partners, and they expect us to contribute. That is motivating and exciting for my entire team.

**Post-recession, will leadership look at running the company differently through HR?**

Like a lot of companies, we are focused on achieving greater efficiency within our operations, and as we do that, we will automate and streamline more, so it is likely that we will need fewer people.

When there are job losses, The Hartford is committed to redeploying affected employees into the growth areas of our company. We also help employees learn new skills and try to place them in open jobs that are a good match for them and the company.

**How important is it to ascertain the engagement of employees and to have the systems in place to understand what employees are thinking?**

If you are listening to employees on a regular basis, you know what is working and what is not working, and you can understand early warning signs of discontent. If you wait until you have a problem, then you're forced into a reactive mode rather than being proactive.

We have a culture that is very committed to listening to employees on a regular basis. Our leaders embrace what they hear and take action. Even during the financial crisis, our employees were incredibly loyal because they knew we cared about them and it was clear they care about this company. Our leaders try to engage with employees at every level to understand what is going on throughout the company.

**How important is it to have a diverse workforce to mirror your client base and what is your focus on diversity and inclusion?**

The marketplace is very diverse. The data shows that women make more of the buying decisions than men; people of color are becoming a larger portion of our customers as well as our employee base; and the general public wants to deal with companies that look like them.

At The Hartford, we have a strong commitment to diversity. It starts with our CEO who is personally committed to this. We have engaged employee resource groups, a committed leadership team, and clear goals regarding diversity and inclusion.

**Are young people concerned with working for a company that is engaged in the community and how critical is it to The Hartford to bring in that next generation?**

The next generation is looking for companies that have a social agenda they can relate to, but they also want flexibility in how they get work done and they are experts in utilizing technology. We want our fair share of the Gen X talent and to do that, we provide flexible work arrangements and are committed to helping these young professionals grow their careers, even though their generation may not intend to work for the same company for 30 years. Our early career professionals get involved in a number of our community efforts. In Hartford, for example, we have a commitment to our Asylum Hill neighborhood, which provides a variety of opportunities where employees can give their time to mentor or participate in local community programs.

**Is this an industry that attracts women and are there opportunities for growth?**

Financial services in general probably does not have the most women when compared to some other industries. But in terms of The Hartford and the insurance industry, there are great women at all levels of the organization and you'll find us going out of our way to attract more women.

There is room to do better in this regard and we are committed to having more women in leadership roles.

**How do you make sure employees maintain a healthy work/life balance?**

We promote wellness through our employee benefit programs and also provide flexible work arrangements so that people can do what is right for them. We help managers understand they should manage people through expectations and goals, not face time. We also monitor how employees feel about their ability to manage work/life through our employee survey. ●