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How to build a **talent strategy** that drives business results

Reejig

Setting the scene

Ask most organizations for their philosophy around talent, and they'll answer with a blank stare. First, they'll wonder what you mean. Some might parrot back a version of their Employee Value Proposition, and many will proclaim people are their most important asset.

According to a Leapgen study last year:



Record scratch. That's an organizational talent philosophy; intended or unintended, it's a reflection of practiced and historical behavior.

If you can't confidently and succinctly explain your organizational philosophy around talent, you don't have one (or worse, have an unintended one). Think of it as a belief system.

Either:

You believe people are disposable, single-use resources, like a water bottle you buy, drink and throw away.

OR

You believe talent is a sustainable resource you intend to repurpose, recycle, and keep using over a long period of time.

You fill every new or replacement position externally with a freshly acquired full-time employee.

OR

You deconstruct jobs into projects with timelines that could be completed with current employees, contract workers, or even flexible job sharing.

You hire validated skills, education, and work experience.

OR

You hire raw material and invest in skills, career development, and manager training.

So even if you don't claim to have a disposable talent system, your actions will prove otherwise. Opening a req for every backfill is a disposable talent system. Hoarding hi-po talent on your team is a disposable talent system. Allowing overwork and burnout is a disposable talent system. Neglecting to train managers is a disposable talent system. Talent is only a sustainable resource if you design for sustainability in your talent practices.

In other words, your talent philosophy is a mindset first, strategy and tactics second.



Build, buy or borrow?

Let's start with what we know.

Once you've articulated your organizational philosophy around talent, you can ask the next set of questions:



Do we build or buy talent?



Do we borrow from the fast-growing gig economy, or even create our own gig framework with an opportunity marketplace where talent is free to explore opportunities to use or acquire new skills, gain new experience, or explore fresh challenges?



Do we intend to retain all talent forever, or do we set up a system where fractional talent can contribute at times of need and ebb and flow with the organization on mutually beneficial terms?

All of these are great foundational questions to ask. There are no right or wrong answers, and the answer for your organization today might not be the answer forever. Your business strategy changes over time, and your talent strategy should follow suit.

In any case, achieving the right talent mix supported by appropriate acquisition, retention, and mobility strategies requires sound and timely workforce intelligence.

You can't fill the gaps until you understand where your gaps are.



Aligning talent strategy to business strategy



Most CEOs will tell you people are their #1 priority, but they'll tell you in the very same breath they have a hard time turning people into their #1 asset. This boils down to talent activation: **How do you activate the right people with the right skills at the right time and in the right place?**



First, know what the business needs today with an eye toward what you'll need tomorrow. This should consider how work gets done or can. It also considers how digital transformation and automation change your approach to jobs and work. This is a circular approach, not linear; a fully optimized business is one that is continually auditing, assessing, aligning, and activating talent to be best positioned to contribute necessary value.

Recommending a talent strategy starts with minding the gaps

The view of talent described above becomes even more valuable after the lens of automation is applied. How do automation, AI, machine learning, digital assistants, conversational bots, etc. change the nature of work to be done by humans?

At Mercer | Leapgen, we refer to the different types of work performed by Human Resources using the Hands, Heads, Hearts metaphor.



Hands work refers to manual work, typically transactional in nature.



Heads work refers to work that is more analytical and knowledge-focused.



Hearts work is that which deals with interpersonal, human-to-human interactions.

While we use and apply this framework to categorize and prioritize digital experience initiatives in HR, it's a useful framework for thinking about the way all work gets done.

How are your talent strategies evolving alongside the digital transformation of your business, including the necessary reskilling and upskilling that will be required?

Asking these questions will put talent leaders in a better position to make talent build, buy, or borrow recommendations to better manage the supply and demand of people in the organization. It also allows people leaders to assess the supply of necessary skills in the organization, not just talent supply. In fact, organizations should be asking whether to build, buy, or borrow skills for the organization, and that requires knowing what you have and what you need.

Once you know them, you can grow them

Skills are another topic altogether but a necessary one if we're discussing how talent strategies can help organizations achieve Zero Wasted Potential. There are three areas of focus when it comes to skills:



Capturing skills

If we are to deploy people skills for business, we need to capture them. What is the repository for accurately and consistently storing skills in a usable, centralized way? In today's heavily siloed HR and people function, some skills are captured and stored in transactional Talent Acquisition systems.

Some skills may also be captured in workforce planning systems, some in talent profiles which are filled out incredibly inconsistently, some in learning systems, and yet more within all our disparate business and functional systems. Capturing accurate skills data is one thing, but it must be stored within a single source (system) of truth before it can be understood, mapped to the business, and leveraged strategically.



Creating movement with skills

When skills data is consistently captured and accurately stored, it can be used to support career movement, talent mobility, and essentially create an intelligent internal talent marketplace. This gives employees and managers visibility and transparency into what their people can do, want to do, and could develop to drive additional business value. People generally don't want to leave; they leave because they feel they must leave based on value they're either enabled to or prevented from delivering to the business.



Planning with skills

Planning what organizations will need in the future requires a fundamental understanding of what skills translate to business capabilities the organization can then align to projects and programs and demand. Workforce planning based on skills demand is much more agile than basing it on job profiles, which are generally conflated, outdated, and duplicitous. Planning with skills requires adoption of skills, a culture of skills, and a flexible approach to how fractional parts of people resources might be mapped to programs and projects, not singular jobs. This might be the workforce of the future: fluid, nimble, democratized, and deconstructed.

This is where the rubber meets the road: once your workforce is fully understood (including acquired and desired skills) and you shift the way work gets done in your organization (think Hands, Heads, Hearts as well as projects and teams over jobs and reqs), a talent strategy can be devised and achieved through acquisition, retention, contract and gig support.



The million-dollar question: how do you get there?

1

Ask the right questions

Start at the beginning – what is the short-term and long-term business strategy, and what is the clearly articulated talent strategy that supports it?

2

Take inventory

how well do you know your people, their skills, and their career development interests?

3

Shift the cultural mindset

Don't forget: Talent strategies are often a cultural mindset shift before they are a skills, mobility & retention strategy. Make sure you have a well-aligned organizational mindset about how you view talent, how talent views opportunity, and how the organization intends to support.

4

Execute

When mindset is aligned and strategy is formed, you can execute the tactics that can support both. Don't forget, your organizational talent philosophy is what you practice, not just what you preach. But you must do both.

Summary

The Impact: what does this reap?

Working with a clear vision and organizational philosophy around your talent strategy will put HR and people leaders in the driver's seat to make sustainable, strategic recommendations to the business about its buy, build, or borrow options when it comes to aligning talent to the business. This serves to activate, optimize, and maximize an organization's most powerful investment, its people. It also creates a sustainable foundation upon which to apply a skills strategy to even further future-proof the workforce.

Today's HR leader owns any organization's most competitive differentiator: its own workforce intelligence. Figuring out how to turn into an actual business advantage is the highest calling of HR in the Now of Work.

An organizing talent philosophy can help today's business & HR leaders make strategy buy, build, and borrow recommendations to future fit its workforce for optimal performance. This is accomplished by:

- Accessing timely and relevant workforce intelligence
- Aligning talent strategy to business strategy
- Minding the skills gaps
- Underpinning your skills, mobility, and retention strategies with the necessary cultural mindset shift

About the authors



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Siobhan is an award-winning workforce futurist and one of the top global experts in the intersection of workforce strategy and artificial intelligence. She led the efforts behind the world's first independently audited Ethical Talent AI™, has earned the status of World Economic Forum Technology Pioneer, Forbes Cloud 100 Rising Star, and LinkedIn's Top Start Up in 2022. Her work has been featured in notable publications such as Forbes, Fortune, and The Wall Street Journal. Prior to founding Reejig, Siobhan has led the workforce strategies behind some of the most successful multi-billion dollar mega-projects in the world.



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Jason is a leading analyst, thought leader, and consultant in the area of human resources, the future of work and the impact technology have on that future. He is the Co-founder and CEO of Leapgen, a digital transformation company helping organizations shape their future workplace by broadening executive mindsets to rethink how to better design and deliver employee services that meet the expectations of the workforce and the needs of the business.



About Reejig

Reejig is a leading workforce intelligence platform that enables large-scale organizations to find, retain, and upskill talent at scale. Powered by the world's first independently audited Ethical Talent AI, Reejig acts as your central nervous system for all talent decisions, helping you create a world with Zero Wasted Potential.

Find out what your organization can achieve with **workforce intelligence**.

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Mercer | Leapgen designs and executes innovative digital strategies to transform how HR delivers value to an organization and how people experience work. We fuel the success of digital transformation programs by delivering market-leading and unbiased advice, human-centered consulting, knowledge, research & tools to enterprises and solution providers. Our core belief is that workforce technology should make work smarter, not get in the way. We know employees expect the same frictionless, personalized experiences inside of work as they have outside of work. We help organizations move beyond simple technology implementation to true deployment of all digital capabilities.

This is how we change the way the world works. With the most experienced, passionate bench of HR thought leaders, and a proven track record of success, we deliver the vision, strategy, and design needed to turn your challenges into successful solutions.