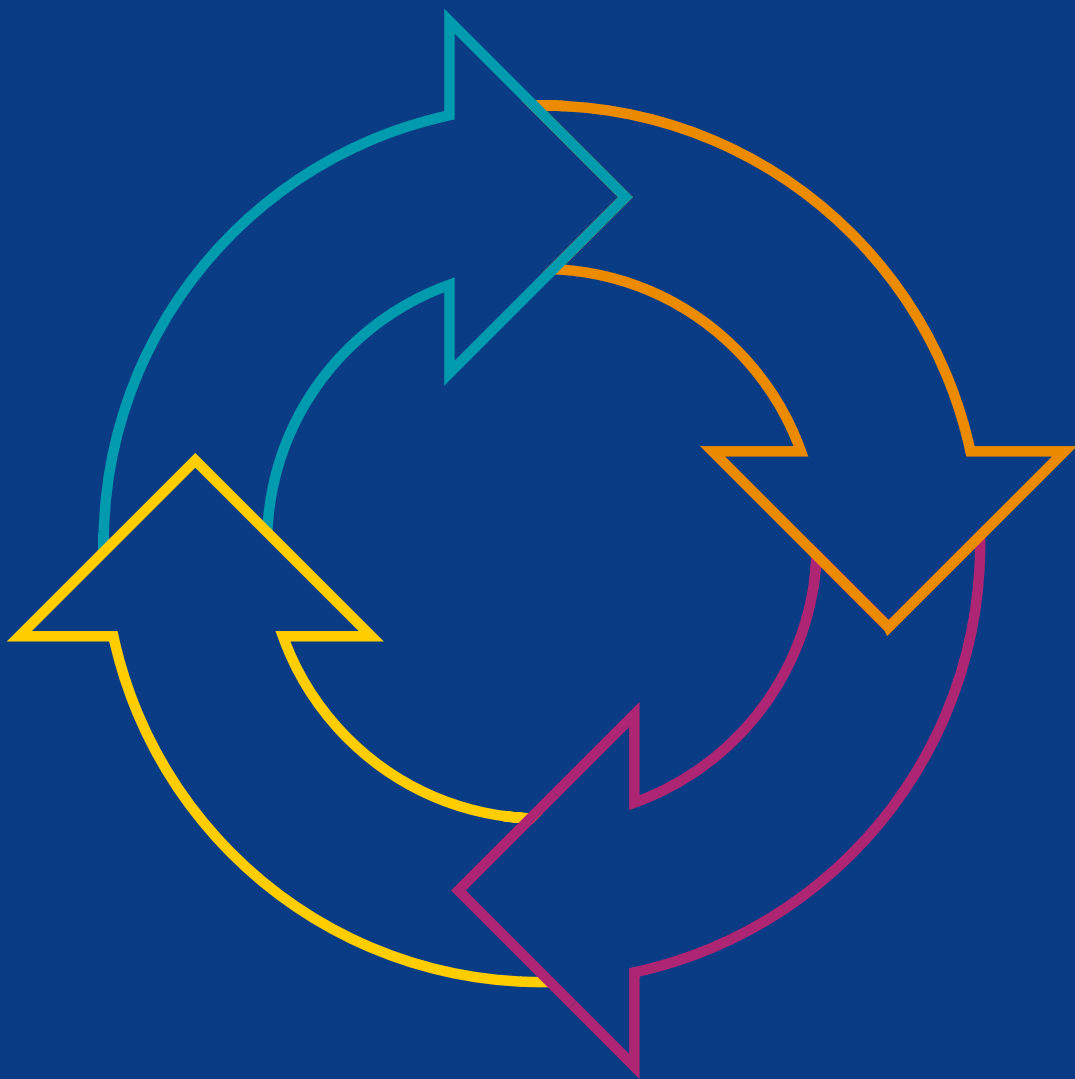


Talent Lifecycle Thinking

Why we must re-imagine our approach to talent management



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Why we must re-imagine our approach to talent management

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It's time for some big scary thinking on talent

While we've all been focused on the challenges of attracting and retaining talent through the pandemic, a stark truth has been hiding behind the headlines. That truth is that many of our approaches to talent management really haven't moved with the times. Amplified by recent events, we have allowed a significant gap to appear between how employers think about talent and how that talent thinks about employers. If we were concerned that talent management wasn't firing on all cylinders before the pandemic, applying the 'same old same old' in this new world feels even more of a worry. What's needed is, at the very least, a tune-up and, in some cases, a complete rebuild.

This is going to mean moving our mindset from incremental improvement to thinking bigger, braver and more holistically about how we look at talent and careers. It means recognising talent as 'career consumers' and looking at the world as they do. Some of this new thinking will feel scary but, in reality, much of it is already there to see in the talent markets if we look closely enough.

Why now?

The last few decades have seen an increasing level of challenge for organisations looking to attract, retain and develop the talent they need. Then came the pandemic – suddenly we were trying to come to terms with hybrid working and an adjustment to a 'new normal'. Hybrid working has been a newsworthy topic for all kinds of reasons, but the reality behind the headlines is that it has exposed gaps in the way we think about talent and talent management – as talent en masse can now exercise new-found freedoms as consumers.

Change in talent thinking has been long-overdue. We have tweaked and re-wrapped it countless times, but the underpinning assumptions haven't really evolved much in decades. There remains, in many organisations, an underlying model of 'career' being the time you work for us – which is simply outdated. We are now in a position to challenge our assumptions, update our approaches and shift our philosophies. If we don't, this turbo-charging of consumer empowerment in the talent population will leave behind those organisations unwilling to adapt.

What are some of the things we need to think about?

A good place to start is thinking about the different career stages and embracing a lifecycle approach. Alongside this, we should reassess how we have been doing things and challenge and update our strategies. Finally, we need to make sure we have everything in place to make the best of our new strategy – aligning our people value chain for optimum execution of the strategy. So, start by looking at things in a more integrated way and focusing on these four key areas.

1. Expanding our perspective on talent to a lifecycle view

The overarching concept related to talent lifecycle thinking is one of zooming out to hold a broader and more integrated view of the talent and career system. In some cases, this means expanding our perspective across different career stages within our own organisations. In others, it is about looking beyond our organisational perspective to one which is more aligned to that of the talent we seek. A critical proportion of talent is now thinking in a different way and, therefore, we must embrace this new thinking as it cannot be ignored.

Talent may have aspirations beyond us. If so, how can we help?

We may just be a stop on the journey for talent and not the destination. Instead of looking at this as a failure of talent management, imagine having a different mindset – one of ‘an exchange of mutual value’, which deliberately looks both within and beyond the boundaries of our organisation. How can we structure career dialogue, role design, employment terms, development and employer value proposition differently if we are thinking (as talent may well be thinking) of how we can best equip them to follow their dreams – even if this takes them outside of our organisation?

Think of development across organisational boundaries and as circular

What if we thought of other companies as our development partners? Sometimes talent will move on simply because it's time to move on, not because they don't enjoy working for us. So, the time spent in other organisations could add value, not just for the individual, but for your own organisation in the future. What if career dialogue was open and honest in this respect? What if leaving was even part of the plan? What if that plan potentially involved coming back into a more senior role in the future, equipped with learning that you would find hard to deliver yourselves? Going a step further still, what if different organisations pooled their opportunities in this respect?

Join the ends to the middle as part of a more integrated talent strategy

Talent scarcity and retention issues, combined with manager preferences for ‘plug and play’ solutions, often focus organisations on shorter term recruitment activity rather than developing strategies which combine the power of different career stages within an overarching talent strategy. Developing early talent to meet a proportion of future demand for scarce and much needed mid-career skills is easy to accomplish on paper, yet ‘growing our own’ as part of a more holistic and strategic solution for scarce skills is often underleveraged. Late-career talent is often omitted from a more holistic view of talent, sometimes seen as a cost or knowledge retention risk rather than playing an integral part in reskilling or knowledge transfer.

Update your perceptions on the power of apprenticeships

Recent research by Henley into apprenticeships shows that, far from being a vehicle aimed mainly at early talent, apprenticeships are being used across the different career stages to provide structured career progression and reskilling, becoming a great partner to talent lifecycle thinking and helping to bridge different career stages. Equally, an encouraging trend is the use of apprenticeships to grow greater self-sufficiency in hard to source skillsets (such as data analysis). So, in the case of apprenticeships, we do see elements of a more strategic approach to talent but this is not being universally leveraged.

2. Take the opportunity to challenge and update our talent norms

Invert the leadership development model

Leadership development has grown to become a huge industry, but most of our approaches have conformed to a central philosophy in which we take individuals with different thoughts, strengths and weaknesses, hold them up against some consistent

view of what good looks like, and set about the task of sculpting the peg to fit the hole. We talk a good game in terms of the importance of diversity yet, our fundamental model is one of 'sameness' and 'fit'. As a result, current leadership development practice might be stifling the benefits of diversity in organisations and costing us more than focusing leadership development on two or three differentiators and 'harnessed difference'.

Update capabilities to current and future context

Have 'desired' leadership capabilities really evolved since the 1970s? Complexity has overtaken capacity in many areas and we cannot apply the same processes and formulas to leadership as we used to. Increasing VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity), globality, digitisation, climate and natural resource issues are just some of the context-defining factors for leadership in the modern era. Yet, these are not sufficiently prominent in leadership development thinking.

Another example is in the area of data analytics. This is not a new thing, yet we have arrived at a situation where almost all organisations are experiencing big gaps between demand and supply – data analysis and data science have become some of the most sought-after skillsets in the market. This has happened because of a lack of forward talent planning and an inability to develop multidimensional and joined-up talent strategies which think more broadly across the talent lifecycle.

Greater focus on how we learn and career pathing

As more research has been conducted on learning effectiveness and neurology, we have seen the emergence of key philosophies. It has become apparent that blended learning, alongside clear data to help align learning content, timing and access to how the adult brain works, are crucial elements of development. Approaches to learning within organisations have taken some of this on board but there is more opportunity to translate this to longer-term career pathing, especially for leader development. We know from other research that a key factor in VUCA skills is the acquisition of breadth

and perspectives, developed over time, through exposure to diverse situations and experiences in different parts of a business. As such, this ups the ante on the careful planning needed around the types of career paths which are best able to provide the right experiences.

3. Re-invent SWP and develop focused end-to-end sourcing strategies hard-wired to the business need

Change the conversation around strategic workforce planning

Sadly, most organisations have had a bad experience with strategic workforce planning (SWP) at some point, often through over-industrialised or over-granular approaches. The real value of SWP lies in intercepting the 'big ticket' risks early in the process by being able to engage with macro level data, scenario planning and more consultative approaches. Most often, success with SWP happens when positioned as a critical dimension of wider business planning; not when developed as a standalone HR process further down the line. As such, we need not even call it SWP, therefore avoiding any issues of credibility. If we don't make a good start with SWP, then we lack the key ingredients to create a bigger picture overview of our talent strategy.

Pick the right talent strategy but think holistically

Once we understand the talent we need most, we can start to think about the best routes to sustainably source it. The best solution might be to buy it in, permanently or for a period. Or it might be to develop it internally, to move it from one place to another or even to outsource or partner around the skills needed; or any combination of these. SWP approaches also allow us to understand which skills might be losing currency and, therefore, to think about reskilling as a means of sourcing the talent

we need. We can only really consider reskilling, or a migration from external to internal supply of talent, if we are thinking longer term. So, if we are not applying SWP principles then we are much more likely to get stuck recruiting our way out of trouble.

Use talent data and insights to support strategy choice

Data is a key factor in choosing the most appropriate strategy to deal with a particular talent need. We need to have a view on quality, supply and location of talent, who the competition is, what talent is looking for and its perception of us; these are essential consumer data basics in any organisation. We need to recognise that talent are consumers too and should be treated no differently to any other consumers – often we develop decent insights only in relation to our internal talent.

4. Align the people value chain to support integrated talent strategy execution

Translate, test and tune – align the process value chain to the talent strategy

Ultimately, we need to be able to execute on talent strategies. This means being able to translate the strategies emerging from our thinking around SWP and resulting talent strategies to the operational people processes (such as recruitment, reward, learning and development, assessment, employer brand) which will deliver it. We need to understand what the talent strategy will mean for them and also need from them.

- **Employer value proposition (EVP)** – What does the data tell us we need to talk about (or turn the volume up or down on) in terms of our employer value proposition? The aim is to develop more 'targeted value propositions' (TVPs), which are fine-tuned to appeal to a particular talent audience rather than a generic one.
- **Compensation and benefits** – We have an understandable desire to maintain checks and

balance around reward, but there is also an equally strong case for tailoring to specific situations when needed. If there are real risks associated with affordability, then strategy must reflect this, not carry on regardless.

- **Suppliers** – Are our current partners in recruitment or development still the best options for this talent? New skillsets may fall outside of the core expertise of partners with whom we have enjoyed long and productive relationships, so we should be open to reviewing our preferred supplier lists.
- **Learning and development** – Where internal development is the chosen strategy, or a part of it, we need to ensure that our L&D function can deliver what we need. If reskilling is a big part of the strategy, then this may have significant cost and resource implications. If we are bringing in new kinds of talent (e.g., niche IT skills), then we need to think about the adequacy of our professional development solutions.
- **Policy** – This is very topical in respect of working arrangements. If your organisational stance is not aligned with this market driver, then there will be consequences and this too will inform your ultimate strategy choice.

Validate the HR function's capability to support the talent strategy

We need to check there is alignment between our talent strategy and the capability of the HR function. How is it organised, what are its priorities, resources and capability of its individuals? Henley's considerable experience in supporting success in SWP shows that, after incorrect positioning of SWP, the next biggest factor in failures to generate value from strategic talent planning is the individual capabilities of those tasked with supporting it.

Ensure that central and local working practices are supportive

Powerful talent strategies recognise the appropriate balance between wider enterprise needs and more local needs and give us the ideal platform to explore mutual benefit and the balance between different parts of the operating model. There should be considerable focus placed on this dimension and its impact on enabling or disabling talent strategies.

To sum up

Hopefully, these ideas have achieved one thing, and that is to reinforce the size of the opportunity that we have around a new operating model for talent. The pandemic, and the resulting turbulence within talent markets, has created an opportunity to re-examine many elements that we take for granted. It is also a reminder that we can be caught out in our talent thinking.

The window for systemic change may not be open for long. If we let things re-form around our existing frameworks, we will be further behind the talent curve than before. We need to significantly enhance our talent planning and SWP and start applying consumer thinking to talent. Most importantly of all, we need to think bigger and wider about the talent lifecycle and how we join together and align different elements of it into more effective and holistic talent strategies.

Henley and talent management

Henley Business School has been at the forefront of developing talent since 1945, whether enhancing the capability of leaders and other professionals or helping the wider organisation to build its own capability to develop and execute strategy.

In the world of talent management excellence and wider HR effectiveness, Henley has been a key partner for organisations for nearly two decades through its blend of research, networking, open enrolment and custom development programmes, coaching expertise and consulting capability. We have the ability and expertise to look right across the talent lifecycle in a holistic and joined up way.

We passionately believe that talent management needs a fresh perspective to bring it into better alignment with modern talent trends and we want to play a lead role in changing the conversation around talent to drive better outcomes for both organisations and individuals. We can help organisations from any sector to check if their assumptions and approaches to talent are fit for the future, and we can partner them in taking practical steps to change, where needed.

If you would like to talk about any of the points raised in this article, or simply connect to share your own experiences, we would love to hear from you:

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Nick is an experienced HR practitioner and recognised thought leader in organisational capability, talent and HR effectiveness. He offers considerable expertise and insight on a wide variety of HR-related topics, particularly strategic workforce planning, where he is considered a global thought leader in the field.

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