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How to Fill the Talent Gap

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Despite high unemployment, employers worldwide report difficulties in filling key positions.

So the immediate problem is not the number of potential candidates. Rather, it is a talent mismatch: There are not enough sufficiently skilled people in the right places at the right times. Simultaneously, employers are seeking ever more specific skill sets and combinations of skills — not just technical capabilities alone but perhaps in combination with critical thinking skills or other qualities that will help drive the organization forward. As a result, the "right" person for a particular job is becoming much harder to find.

Furthermore, employers facing ongoing, systemic talent shortages — such as those in the health care and energy industries — are not going to find the perfect candidate every time. Instead, they must recalibrate their mind-sets to consider candidates who may not meet all the job specifications, but whose capability gaps can be filled in a timely and cost-effective way. Training is vital. A commitment to reskilling and upskilling current and potential employees will enable organizations to expand the available talent pool, ensure that their work force continues to be appropriately skilled, and keep employees engaged in their work.

The key to success with this new mind-set is the ability to identify a "teachable fit." Teachable fit is a concept that focuses on four questions:

- What capabilities are essential to perform the job?
- Which of these are teachable in an efficient way?
- Is there adequate time and money to develop these capabilities in the candidate?
- Do candidates have the capacity (both motivation and capability) to develop them?

Smart organizations are already adopting this approach, but typically in a limited and non-systematic way.

Find the teachable fit

In any problem of supply-demand imbalances, there are two basic responses: reduce demand or increase supply. The focus here is on increasing the supply by changing the employer's mind-set regarding sources of available talent. To fill large and systemic talent gaps, four potential labor pools are promising: location migrants (who are willing to relocate for work), industry migrants (who are able to transfer their skills to new industries), internal role changers (who already work for your organization) and work force entrants.

Training and development are the keys to successfully tapping into these talent pools listed, especially the last three groups. At the same time, a commitment to training and development is central to building a sustainable talent strategy. But individuals respond differently to training, depending not only on their existing skills but also on their ability and desire to learn. How can employers efficiently and effectively close the gap between their needs and the abilities of candidates and employees?

Start by understanding how fillable those gaps are — both in terms of technical skills and candidate mind-sets — and at what cost. Teachable fit is a practical framework that can predict how successfully a candidate's skill gaps can be filled. It can help employers understand their talent needs better and make training and development investments that are more likely to pay off.

The framework is an analytical tool that maps the capabilities needed for a given role against an individual's likelihood of meeting those needs. The capabilities are divided into four standard groups:

Knowledge of business or academic disciplines or industries

Formal or explicit knowledge comes through study and is confirmed by academic degrees and business certifications. Informal or tacit knowledge comes through experience and association with knowledgeable colleagues. The key here is to recognize the importance of tacit knowledge and the means of attaining it.

Skills including both "hard" skills (e.g., technical or administrative skills) and "soft" skills (e.g., conflict resolution or strategic thinking)

Skills tend to be applied pragmatically. They are acquired through practice and grow with experience. Hard skills can be confirmed by certification or apprenticeship. It is also vital to recognize the importance of soft skills, rather than focusing only on candidate assessments on the easier-to-measure hard skills.

Values and mind-set represent what an individual seeks in life and on the job — one's attitude toward work. These are revealed through both conversation and behavior and are relatively difficult to shape. They are also capabilities associated with jobs. Some jobs — sales, for example — require more initiative and self-management than others. Some jobs depend on more continuous learning and adaptation than others. The key here is to recognize these

important traits when defining the job requirements.

Personality and intelligence are basic characteristics. Some people are naturally outgoing and empathetic and thus natural fits for customer service roles; others are the opposite. Some roles rely heavily on analytical intelligence, others on synthesis or creativity, others on emotional intelligence and many on combinations of the above. Again, the idea is to be as precise as possible about what a job or role calls for in terms of these traits.

After examining those four areas of capability, the employer then weighs each on two scales: Is it important? And, is it teachable?

This approach can help determine what capabilities really matter for success. By dissecting job roles, employers can identify the skills that can migrate across industries or be developed with relative ease. At one end of the spectrum, capabilities that are highly important and not easily teachable are the show-stoppers, the genuine must-haves. Initial screening of candidates can start with these. At the other end, capabilities of low importance may be dropped from the evaluation checklists used with candidates to save effort and avoid distraction.

In developing each job taxonomy for teachable fit, the idea is not to generalize capabilities or lower standards. Rather, it is to be more detailed and specific about the pragmatic requirements of the job, and more focused on the gaps that can be filled. Since the goal is to determine a teachable fit, the capacity and☒motivation to learn are vitally important.

Teachable fit taxonomies like these can also guide talent management more generally. As patterns in the important and teachable capabilities emerge, employers can direct curriculum investment. Equally valuable is the information employers can gather on the less-obvious types of capabilities that can be found in particular industry sectors or among particular groups of underemployed workers. This data can help employers refine their focus on particular industry migrants. And as employers recognize where teachable fit still leaves them shorthanded, they can be clear about where to supplement their☒work forces with contingent employees.

As the skills mismatch grows more severe, the teachable fit framework becomes foundational to talent strategy. It is a key step in an approach that is more expansive, systematic and sustainable — a talent strategy that not only keeps up with business strategy but accelerates it.

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