

# Hiring for Growth While Building a High-Performance Organization



Today's very low unemployment rate, combined with an emerging need for harder-to-find "soft skills," is challenging employers in their desire to source, hire and develop the right people required to drive a company's ongoing growth objectives.

BY TOM STARNER

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Under the best of circumstances, strengthening a workforce that reflects an employer's true business values, culture and growth objectives while filling critical talent needs represents a challenge.

But with today's historically low unemployment rates and ongoing skills gap, the formidable task of recruiting and retaining talent with the required skills to drive growth is even more difficult. In fact, the widening skills gap accompanying full unemployment numbers (3.7% in the U.S.<sup>1</sup>) deliver a one-two blow to employers. Weathering the current storm requires innovative thinking and technology to fill talent needs through well-stocked pipelines, which, in turn, will lead to optimized productivity and the desired increases in business growth.

Research shows that the skills gap is not only very real, it's reaching serious proportions. The Society for Human Resource Management's survey of 1,028 HR professionals in late 2018 found that an eye-opening 83% say they had difficulty recruiting suitable candidates in the past 12 months.<sup>2</sup> And a separate study found that 70% of HR professionals are experiencing a skills shortage among applicants—with even the minority who reported an abundance of applicants stating that those who apply do not have the requisite skills.<sup>3</sup>

Today, that widening skills gap—which, in most cases, involves the emotional intelligence and soft skills required to build a workforce that can drive productivity, deliver financial success and boost employer brand—is creating perhaps the most hard-to-solve talent-acquisition and retention landscape ever across the globe.

Pamela Stroko, Vice president of HCM Transformation at Oracle, says the ongoing skills gap is challenging HR professionals at every turn, especially when they are tasked with providing the necessary talent to spur growth under today's trying conditions.

"There are two questions that everybody in HR is asking," Stroko says. "First, people want to know if the skills gap is a real thing. Then, if it is real—and the data says it is—the second question is, how do you hire to support growth with a widening skills gap? These conversations are happening every day within HR."

Today's job candidates can ask for things in this economy they couldn't ask for just 10 years ago, Stroko adds.

"People are also much more willing to take a risk and 'try something on' or go to a company maybe they always thought about working for because there's so much opportunity," she says. "There is a mindset out there—be it right or wrong—that, if I try it and I don't like it, I can just go get something else."

"It's shopping; but, in this case, they're job shopping," she says.

## Hiring for Emotional Intelligence: Finding Soft Skills

Keeping talent pipelines filled with the right candidates to meet emerging business challenges has prompted employers to shift needs and requirements from technical skill sets being the number one priority to candidates with so-called "soft skills," including characteristics like emotional intelligence, clear communications, critical thinking, problem solving, innovation, desire/willingness to learn, teamwork and creativity.

Stroko confirms that the notion of soft skills not being on equal footing with technical skills no longer holds true.

<sup>1</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, June 2019

<sup>2</sup> SHRM, *Skills Shortage Tightens Job Market; 83% of HR Professionals Report Difficulty Recruiting*: SHRM Research, February 2019

<sup>3</sup> Challenger, Gray and Christmas Inc., *Challenger Hiring Survey: Employers Report Skills Shortages; HR in Demand*, June 2019

"Soft skills are now the hard skills," Stroko notes. "They're actually some of the hardest factors to hire for because those skills are not in great supply in the marketplace. Things like emotional intelligence, and how it aligns with an organization's culture, values and growth plans, are very important."

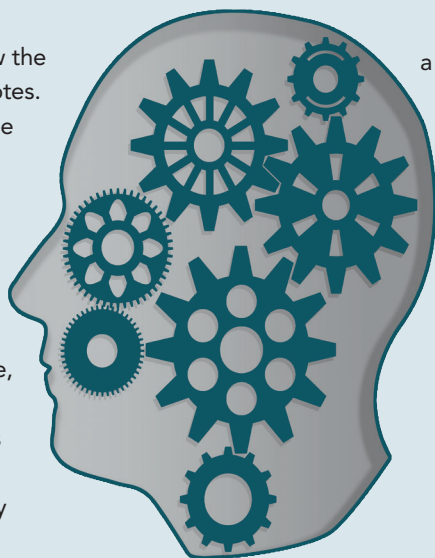
According to Wendy Lynch, founder of Lynch Consulting Ltd. and co-author of *Get to What Matters: Tools to Transform Conversations at Work* and co-founder of *The Heart of Human Capital* blog, employers have made the mistake of discounting very important foundational attributes by even calling them soft skills in the first place.

"We don't have a great connotation for the word 'soft' when it comes to skill sets," Lynch says. "We imply that the real skills are the other things, like what someone has learned in school or with experience that they've had in the workplace. But that's simply untrue, especially with the changes happening in today's business landscape. Soft skills now are in demand, but are hard to find."

## Sourcing Diverse Talent Pipelines that Fit Your Culture, Business Values

How do employers today match up talent needs with their culture, values and growth objectives, while landing and keeping employees who have those much-desired soft skills?

Elissa Tucker, principal research lead of HCM at the American Productivity & Quality Center—which partners with 500 employers globally in benchmarking, best practices, process and performance improvement, and knowledge management—says that outcome will only happen for employers that take the time to pursue



a variety of options in terms of sourcing, but also develop relationships with and learn about the talent.

"If you're trying to find talent that fits with your culture and your business values and growth objectives, you need that time to engage with that candidate pool to be able to identify candidates who are going to be a good fit on all fronts," she says.

Tucker says that this includes being:

- **Proactive**—It takes planning to build a diverse slate of candidates with the potential to be high performers in a given organization, with its unique set of values and ways of working. This means starting the sourcing process well before a requisition is submitted.
- **Flexible**—To expand the candidate pool, recruiters need to think broadly and creatively regarding potential sources of candidates. Both HR and hiring managers need to be open to different types of employees, such as contract, part-time, job-share and remote workers, as well as internal talent and passive candidates.
- **Predictive**—Being open to new sources of candidates is important, but organizations should, at the same time, use the data they have on previous hires to predict which sources of talent are most likely to result in high-performing employees.

Oracle's Stroko concurs, explaining that employers need to start thinking about external pipelines well before they need to fill a job. She also suggests an effective but low-tech networking strategy as a way to get external high performers interested in a company.

"I often tell people that every single executive at your company needs to go to some conference somewhere for some reason every year," Stroko says. "While they're away, have them go out of their way to meet people, take down names of those who impress them."

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Next, those executives should build their social presence with those connections, because every person they meet can be put into an employer's recruiting system, which will likely be a key factor in keeping up with growth objectives.

"They could be a potential job candidate at some future date, or could know somebody who could be a potential candidate," she says. "You have to get much more thoughtful about this."

Stroko is convinced that hiring is no longer a cause-and-effect proposition.

"It's not, 'There is an opening, so let's fill a job,' " she says. Instead, she says, employers need to understand that they are going to have job openings over a period of time, so they must solve the issue of how to bring people into its online community, in social conversations, in wanting to learn about the company. Next, employers must nurture those relationships long term and, finally, determine how to tap that talent resource at the optimal moment.

"These questions are critical for an organization's future growth and financial success," she says.

Networking remains a potent strategy for successful talent sourcing, according to Stroko.

"If that's how people are mainly getting hired, then build a network that can yield that kind of support for your organization," Stroko says. "It's critically important."

As for potential high performers already in the fold, an internal pipeline for sourcing talent will work because, so often, the right person for an opening is already working in the company.

"Internal talent remains largely under-leveraged as a source of desirable recruits," Tucker says, adding that best-practice organizations use resources like career coaches and career maps to help employees move internally.

"They empower employees to be more engaged in the career process and streamline internal hiring," she explains. "Employers must build or fortify their organizational infrastructure to support internal

promotions and look for ways to reskill and upskill existing employees."

Technology plays an increasingly important role in employee retention and internal mobility—using career-development, learning and succession-planning tools to hire from within. By doing that, employers with rapid growth expectations—situations that create a steep learning curve for both new hires and internal talent transfers—can keep pace with the speed that can cause a whiplash effect during rapid-growth scenarios.

Tucker offers the following example of a large technology employer, which created these opportunities to foster hiring from within to keep pace with its ambitious growth projections:

- Career coaching—Employees can interact with digital assistants to design and pursue their desired career paths and get connected to appropriate training resources and opportunities immediately.
- Training and development—The organization created an interactive-training media hub that tracks users and awards them badges through the organization's gamification system.
- Internal talent acquisition—Employees can upload their resume to a digital assistant that uses an algorithm to match their capabilities to the jobs that best fit them.

"Historical workforce data like the number of years in a position and performance ratings can be used by an organization to predict which employees are ready for a new challenge," Tucker says. "It also can be used to predict which candidates are most likely to become high performers if hired."

Stroko adds that, without effective career planning, not only will employers potentially miss the chance to source talent internally, they could lose them altogether.

"In this market, keeping who you already have is so important," she says. "I've recently read that if a high potential had someone in the company who served as an advocate or mentor to them, they were 89% less likely to leave."

"If you want to keep people, first start building those connections so people feel like someone's



looking out for them—somebody cares about them, someone is investing in them,” she says. “Without those efforts, talented people just won’t stay.”

## Rewarding High Performers

According to Lynch, infusions of new talent certainly can help build or reinforce a high-performance culture and add momentum to corporate growth. But the success of any individual employee—new or experienced—also depends on an organization’s ability to harness and reward high performance. Thus, successful recruitment and onboarding are natural extensions of a successful approach to human capital management.

“Finding and attracting top talent is critical,” she says. “But companies cannot hire their way into high performance and profitability. Hoping that talent by itself will transform an organization is a fallacy.”

Lynch says that, after an unsuccessful hire, it’s common to blame recruitment for “selecting people who weren’t a good fit,” when it is more likely that the environment stifled performance by not nurturing their unique contribution. Simply put, she says, with aligned incentives (a win-win culture) and an aligned purpose (clear, shared values), talented, motivated employees thrive.

“To best position an organization [and new recruits] for growth and achievement, evaluate ways to improve communication, alignment and skill development,” she says. “When the pathway to mutual success is clear, it attracts and retains talent.”

## Onboarding: Fostering a Long-Term Relationship

If there is a best time to communicate to high-potential external candidates that they can trust a new employer to help them flourish, it’s during onboarding, when new hires experience a true sense of whether they made the right choice. It is also a critical early step in creating a lasting high-performance culture because, if employers want those talented newcomers to stick around, they must provide the best possible environment for career satisfaction and success. Onboarding can help drive that outcome.

“If you are onboarding a new employee and you want them to be able to feel comfortable to take risks in a team setting, it’s really important to focus on the interpersonal side and not let the tactical/ administrative side take center stage,” Tucker says. “That especially means streamlining the administrative pieces and focusing on relationship building from the get-go.”

To support a high-performing workforce, Tucker says, onboarding needs to be “paced, social and personal.” For example, onboarding should be a longer-term (up to nine months, if necessary) coordinated effort that provides new hires with information, relationships, tools and experiences at the moment of need, she says. It also should be a people-focused process, involving training, networking and performance management. Finally, a successful onboarding experience should be designed from the perspective of what new hires want, not just what the organization needs. Leveraging mobile technology as part of your HCM solution is a logical way to build this personal, intelligent onboarding experience that can connect new employees to



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the training, communications and welcome events that make their transition easier.

"Surveys of new hires show that their experience has improved," she says.

According to Stroko, research from entities such as the Aberdeen Group has shown there are two critical difference-makers in successful onboarding.

"The first thing you have to do is tell people what's expected of them at work. Tell them what the deliverables are," she says. "You need to be very specific."

Stroko says employees are more likely to stick around when they understand what's expected of them. So employers need to quickly (within 60 days) take the second critical step of clearly spelling out how performance will be evaluated.

"Unfortunately, the first time many companies talk to a new hire about what's expected is at the first performance review," Stroko says. "And with that, you've already missed the boat. That situation can stir up issues around retention because the new hires don't feel like they were honestly told what was expected of them." If employers lose those potential high performers, a negative impact on growth is sure to follow, she adds.

Lynch says employees are listening for clues when learning about a new organization during onboarding, trying to assess what's happening there and whether their new employer has its act together.

"We do not want high performers to spend their time wondering who they can trust, what they are really supposed to do, how they will be evaluated and whether or not their compensation will reflect how well they do," Lynch says. Rather, she says, those matters must be so clear and considered non-issues that the new employees can focus on performing.

"Too often, we mess up by delivering ambiguity and mixed messages when what they need to know is what they are to accomplish, how they will be evaluated and what is important to the organization," Lynch says.



## Building Productivity, Brand and Meeting Growth Demands

In the end, if employers can follow these roadmaps, the result—more often than not—will be a high-performance culture that ignites productivity, builds an attractive employer brand and boosts return on investment—a key metric that shares a hand-in-hand relationship with positive growth.

Stroko, working with Oracle's Talent Strategy Institute, found that employers that consistently make the various great places to work lists share a key attribute: Their leadership throughout the ranks clearly outlined the company values and truly lived those values.

"There was no mistaking what they valued from the top of the organization, and that translated down through the company," Stroko says. "Every company needs a what, a purpose. What do we stand for? What are our values? How do we act towards people?"

To recruit for and achieve a culture that will succeed in today's seriously competitive talent landscape, employers must imbue their values across the workforce.

"It's critical how you drive your values through any organization," Stroko concludes. "You need to create authenticity, meaning you actually do what you say you're going to do and live by the words you say you're going to live by. With that, a high-performing culture and corresponding positive growth are the likely result."

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