

# Consider Work Redesign to Close Talent Gaps

By Dave Zielinski

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**W**hile some organizations are shedding jobs or instituting hiring freezes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, others continue to search for in-demand talent. Yet rather than trying to find or develop these scarce "purple unicorns" through traditional approaches of recruiting or internal training, some enterprising organizations are using job redesign strategies to help fill their talent gaps.

Leah Johnson, vice president of advisory services for research and consulting firm Gartner, said organizations that are continuing digital transformation efforts through the pandemic often find their biggest obstacle isn't technology but talent.

"To address that challenge, they're trying to recruit talent that's still hard to find or considering upskilling strategies," she said.

About 90 percent of the S&P 100 recruit competitively for the same 39 job roles, according to a 2019 study by Gartner, and 30 percent of critical roles remain vacant after five months. Such data suggest organizations should consider additional means of closing talent gaps beyond simply using legacy recruiting or training approaches, Johnson said.

The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the need for organizations to be able to quickly adjust to changing circumstances, and a 2020 survey of human resource leaders by Gartner found 63 percent report now using some variation of agile methods and principles—such as work or job design—with the HR function to help do so.

## How Work Redesign Can Address Talent Needs

Johnson said organizations often fall into the trap of designing work and job roles in ways that create rather than lessen talent dependencies, making it harder to find or develop talent that can fill roles. For example, some job roles are designed with such a breadth of required competencies—this "competency creep" typically includes a growing number of technical and soft skills—that it becomes a Herculean task for recruiters to source talent among limited pools that fits that broadening bill.

One example is the data scientist role. Organizations increasingly tend to look for the rare combination of technical, data visualization and high-level communication skills in one person when filling these roles, Johnson said. But by using work redesign strategies, companies can identify competencies needed for data scientists and then break the role down into bite-size tasks and skills. They might then source multiple people for parts of the same job role, such as hiring contractors or using talent temporarily loaned from other parts of a company to handle specific aspects of that role.

"We know of one company who decided it could hire for a baseline of technical and mathematical skills for data scientists, and then either outsource or upskill for the business skills and communication abilities also needed in that role," she said. "Instead of chasing rare talent, these companies often change the work and the job roles instead."

Johnson said American Express used such a "fit for purpose" process to help minimize its talent needs for data scientists. The organization initially considered recruiting eight data scientists to help leverage its existing data and systems. But by using a work design approach that first automated some repetitive tasks and streamlined other technical processes, the company discovered it could contract with two resources instead of eight to fit its needs.

Another area where work design strategies can pay dividends is in hiring for diversity in senior leadership roles, Johnson said. One challenge in that effort has long been location. For example, an organization's headquarters may be in a place where it's harder to find diverse candidates or where such candidates are unwilling to relocate. "Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the experiment with remote work, we're finding companies are redesigning more work out of necessity," Johnson said, including changing those location requirements.

Johnson said such a change could ultimately allow for a more diverse applicant pool for leadership roles because organizations may become more willing to forego a mandatory requirement about geographic location for those roles.

#### **Case Study: How Unilever Uses Work Design Strategies**

One organization that's applied such work redesign strategies is Unilever, the London-based consumer goods company. Raquel Suarez, global employer brand and talent channels director for Unilever, said the company launched an initiative to simplify roles and workflows in ways that make sourcing easier and more effective.

The process begins by "unbundling" job roles into competencies and bite-sized tasks. "Our message for line managers when it comes to finding talent is to be resourceful," she said.

For example, Unilever line managers and recruiters might analyze a job role to see which of its competencies could be addressed through loaned internal talent or external resources like freelancers or university students. Unilever used that process in examining competencies needed for some leadership roles. The analysis found that creating certain PowerPoint presentations was a task that could be outsourced to experienced contractors, freeing leaders to spend more time on strategic work.

Suarez uses the process in staffing her own department. "I could simply go out and hire a full-time brand manager with generalist skills without giving it much thought," she said. "But I use the process to think through my annual plan and my staffing needs. I might need someone with expertise in social media and LinkedIn, for example, and instead of trying to find an employer- brand generalist with those skills, I might source it separately and consider finding a specialist with social media skills."

#### **Incremental Change Over Radical Restructuring**

Johnson stressed that this work design process should be incremental and ongoing. "This isn't about blowing up an organization with radical restructuring," she said. "It's about continuously making small changes to job roles and processes that can have big impact. The idea is to use work design strategy as a supplement to recruiting or training so you can unlock more capability in your workforce."

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