

# Congratulations! You're the New Chief Talent Officer

Catherine S. Farley

An organization's senior talent leader can have many titles, but the responsibilities remain constant: Strategically prepare the workforce and the organization for current and future business challenges.

The job title on the business card may be “chief talent officer” or a combination of related words in any number of variations, but the charge for senior-level talent executives today is far broader and more challenging than the job description of a traditional head of HR. Their mission is to develop and direct companies' talent and capabilities toward measurable impact on overall business performance.

This more strategic function is rising at a time when the business environment is more challenging than it has been in decades. In many organizations, job certainty is low and stress is high. Morale and engagement are falling as employees find themselves doing more work with fewer co-workers. Almost overnight, executives in charge of workforce planning, sourcing and development went from worrying how to find qualified people for open positions to worrying about retaining the critical talent they have and what to do with all the qualified people showing up at their doorsteps.

However, an economic downturn also presents a tremendous opportunity to enhance the strategic value of the workforce. This is a time of nearly unprecedented change. Some jobs may never come back even when the economy recovers. Reskilling in mass numbers will be required. Entire industries and business functions are being reinvented.

Think more boldly about talent. What kind of talent is needed to drive an organization forward? How should critical skills and capabilities be sourced? How do we identify, develop and retain top performers? How do we stay flexible in the face of rapid change? What is the optimal culture for the kind of business we want to

be? These questions drive the mission for talent executives, framing their job descriptions and affecting how they are evaluated and rewarded.

## The First 100 Days

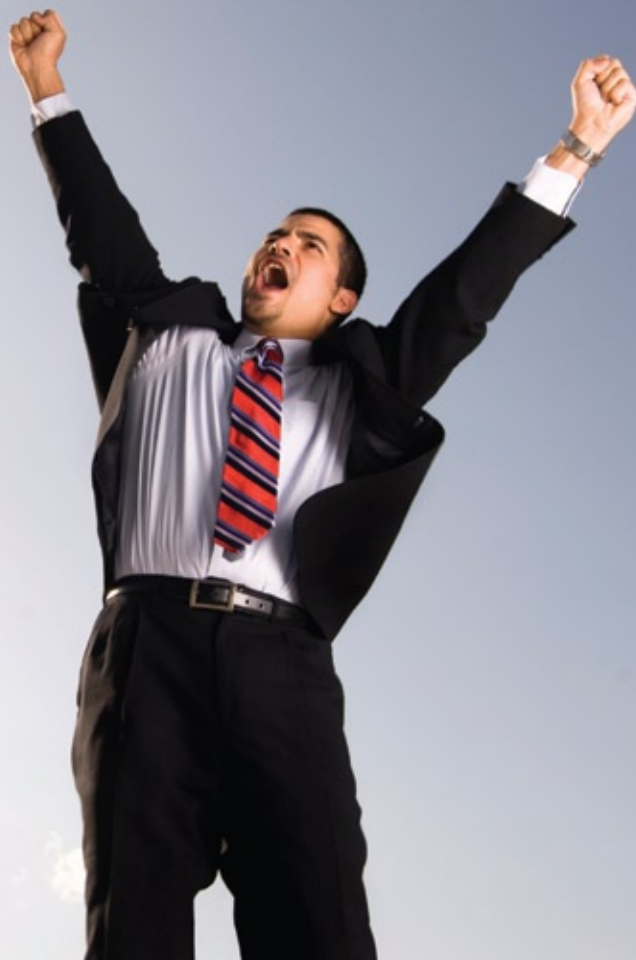
If you're a new chief talent officer or someone with an equivalent set of responsibilities, several focus areas should be of primary importance in the first 100 days.

Focus on executive buy-in. To succeed, have a direct reporting and working relationship with the CEO. In some cases, the talent executive role is created with the CEO's direct involvement. For example, Phila Broich, chief talent officer for Corbett Accel Healthcare Group, joined the company after meeting CEO Scott Cotherman, who had a strong professional background in organizational development.

“Scott very clearly understood the potential of new workforce and organization practices and had a strongly held belief in a broader vision of talent management, one that is a blend of workforce, organization and corporate strategy,” Broich said. “The position began as a meeting of the minds. We knew we had the potential to do something really new: build a differentiated culture in this industry focused on talent development.”

Sydney Johnson-Gorrell, who recently became chief talent officer for Oriental Trading Co. — a direct marketer of novelties, party supplies and home decor products — also speaks of the passion for talent development she shared with the company's CEO Sam Taylor.

“When we first sat and talked about the possibilities for this position, we knew we wanted something beyond the basics of whether we had the right benefits, com-



pensation and training programs in place. We wanted this position to be a change agent, a new way to engage and bring out the best in our talent and to focus them on making our company even better.”

A close relationship between the chief talent officer and the senior executive team does several things. One, it announces to the entire organization that development and focus on workforce talent related to the company’s business goals is being taken seriously at the highest levels. The talent executive should be evaluated and rewarded exactly as other leaders are: by how the business performs. Second, a direct reporting relationship to the senior officer ensures organizational capabilities are continuously in place to execute business strategy.

Consider Sony DADC, a leading producer of optical disc media, where Gabriel Du Toit serves as senior vice president of organization performance and development. He reports directly to Sony DADC’s president and was recruited by the president for this new role after the head of HR left the organization.

The president saw the ensuing transitional period as an opportunity to do something different. He asked Du Toit, then vice president of operations, to “get this organization to a different place.”

Du Toit is not only a part of the Sony DADC senior executive team, he has helped shape the group’s makeup. Each week, the team has a one-hour conference call to calibrate.

“During that call, everyone reports on their key initiatives, and I make the executive team aware of important organizational programs,” Du Toit said. “We also discuss the organization and talent implications of various initiatives. Together, we coordinate our efforts so that every part of our business is synchronized.”

The result of talent officers’ direct involvement in corporate strategy is that the development of new organizational structures — and sourcing of necessary talent — occurs in parallel with business or product development.

This paid off when Sony DADC significantly expanded production of Blu-ray discs last year. “We listened to customers’ feedback from the previous year,” Du Toit said.

“They felt we needed to add more experienced personnel to support our market needs. So one of my goals was to improve our recruiting and development capabilities to prepare for the next phase of our Blu-ray strategy. We were able to get the right people in place ahead of schedule, and the success we realized added tremendous value to the company’s Blu-ray disc rollout.”

### Focus on Relationships With the Business

A second key to success flows naturally from the previous need for talent officers to work more closely with the business — define business goals and partner with business colleagues to deliver results. In many cases, the company’s mission statement reflects this close relationship between corporate and talent strategy.

At Sony DADC, for example, its mission refers explicitly to “delivering excellence to our customers through our people.” Du Toit said that means, “Every day I know exactly what our goals are, and I am able to clearly measure whether I am helping the company achieve them.”

Further, the close relationship between lines of business and the talent organization means everyone shares responsibility for talent development, everyone is aware of the importance of the talent dimension, and strong senior sponsorship for difficult change initiatives is easier to find.

James Bland, a managing director in JPMorgan’s Investment Bank, said a close relationship with the business is critical for talent executives. “The charge for all of us today is to be much more focused on business impact. For some time, we’ve spoken of the need to work on a kind of trusted adviser model to the business. But you can only really achieve that if you’re giving your colleagues a business rationale for what you’re trying to do.

“Whether it’s a development or mobility initiative, or any sort of talent management program, you need the sponsorship of key people. If the rest of the organization thinks the CEO doesn’t buy into it, it’s very difficult to drive strong business results.”

Engaging with and listening to appropriate stakeholders is another key to success, especially if a talent officer is new to the company. Bland, who joined JPMorgan in 2007 after years working with another financial institution, said, “If you come from outside, getting a feel for the talent and the culture is critical.

“You get that by talking to people at different levels. Don’t just talk with senior management. Do focus groups with relatively new recruits, managers and other key stakeholders. The success of talent management is not measured on one or two programs. Success is about identifying and retaining your top people and making them excellent at their current jobs and their next jobs. It’s absolutely vital to get a sense very quickly of what your priorities need to be.”

## Focus on Top Talent

Development and retention of top talent is another important key to achieve and sustain high performance. Bland said his priorities for the coming year are threefold. First, there are the core development programs — leadership, relationship management, personal skills and so on — needed by most employees on a daily basis.

“Then, there is another set of initiatives focused on identifying, developing and retaining our high-potential performers. The third priority is to work with the business to ensure these all take place in an environment that is fully inclusive.”

This focus on top talent can be a way to make better talent investment decisions — something critically important during a recession. By performing a strategic role assessment executives can redistribute salaries and rewards according to performance levels and the business value delivered by different individuals. The result can be lower overall workforce costs in the short term while creating a fitter organization in the longer term.

Social, economic, political and industry changes are only going to accelerate. It is more important than ever to have an executive oversee the continuous creation of an agile organization. Such a company can change on a dime and reskill and develop a new generation of leaders capable of meeting the challenges that lie ahead.

The ability to manage change effectively is essential to maintaining high performance and emerging from the recession in a stronger position than competitors. A chief talent officer can help a company reprioritize its mission around talent, organization and business strategy. The executive in charge, whatever the job title, has a vital role to play in shaping an organization with the flexibility and resiliency to survive and thrive during these times. **TM**

---

Catherine S. Farley is a managing director with the Accenture Talent & Organization Performance group and leads the talent management practice. She can be reached at [editor@talentmgt.com](mailto:editor@talentmgt.com).