



Who's Winning the Top Talent Role?



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by Marc Effron, President, The Talent Strategy Group

Through our executive search and consulting engagements we are seeing an increasingly clear profile emerge of those who win and keep the top talent role. Some factors feel familiar (see the [4+2 Model](#) by Jim Shanley and Marc Effron) while others seem to be developing as the talent management field matures.

With functional expertise being a given, the differentiating success factors include:

- 1. Clear point of view on talent:** Call it a personal talent philosophy or point of view, candidates winning the top talent job can express a cogent, fact-based, well thought-through perspective on how talent should be developed and managed. This point of view provides them with a strong foundation when creating a talent strategy and advising the business. It's more than functional knowledge – it's logic, opinion and confidence.
- 2. Top team influence:** Talent management success increasingly relies on one's ability to influence the senior team. We find that candidates are meeting with the hiring company's CEO earlier in the search process (often in the 2nd round) and that meeting quickly screens out otherwise eligible candidates. In

some cases that elimination is driven by disagreement about how talent management or HR should be managed, but it's also a proxy for the candidate's ability to influence the pivotal decision-maker on talent issues.

3. Talent management, not learning, background:

A learning background is a great asset for a learning role but we're seeing talent executives who are learning-focused falling out of top talent roles. The reasons are two-fold. Successful talent leaders are able to holistically apply the various levers of talent building – assessment, talent planning, experiences, learning, etc. They are essentially talent generalists.

Learning is a sub-function of talent management and many learning leaders have grown up in the learning specialist vertical with little if any experience with other talent management practices. Too often they lead with a learning solution when a broader approach would be more beneficial.

Second, while it doesn't describe all learning leaders, the [2013 NTMN Research Report](#) showed that those in learning roles self-identified as choosing the HR profession more to help people grow than to

help their company succeed. Whether consciously acknowledged or not, that preference likely shows in the strategic focus and resource deployments made by some learning-background talent leaders.

4. **Generalist/business partner background:** Talent specialization is certainly important but a talent specialist with a generalist rotation is far more valuable. Many companies have now lived through the COE specialist who has little understanding of, or sensitivity to, what it takes to actually make talent practices work in the field. As little as one year of business partner experience is sufficient, as long as there's some proof that the person has not lived forever in the corporate "ivory tower."
5. **Business vs. functional mindset:** A recent call with a candidate for a top talent role started with them describing the tactics they had implemented at their current organization. When asked about their overall talent strategy, they again mentioned their list of activities with no reference to the business drivers that influenced their tactical choices or the overall talent strategy within which those tactics sat. That call was not an unusual one, unfortunately, and those interactions are a constant reminder that those who succeed in this profession aren't engaged by tactics but by the opportunity to help their business win.
6. **Moderately paced movement:** Talent candidates with frequent company moves make CHRO's nervous. Those CHRO's tell us (and we agree) that few good reasons exist for moving through different companies every 2 – 3 years at the Director or VP level. While that pace of movement doesn't signal exactly what is wrong, it certainly suggests an issue with fit, performance or both. In either case, with a reasonably deep talent pool for top talent roles, the "fast mover" profile typically ends the selection discussion.

What's not proving important

Some capabilities and background profiles that may have once been considered valuable are now less so, including:

- **Classic Organization Development skills:** Classic organization development skills may be embedded

in much of the work that a talent executive does, but the specific capabilities of organization design, facilitation, team development, etc. that define pure OD aren't high on CHROs' request list.

- **Academic background beyond Masters Degree:** There are still a few companies where a Ph.D. is table stakes for securing an interview for the top talent role. We don't have any facts that suggest that talent leaders with a Ph.D. create substantially better talent solutions than those without. Given that content or technical knowledge beyond a certain point is less important than other capabilities like influencing, relationship building, knowing the talent, etc., we tell our clients that a Ph.D. is potential plus but far from a guaranteed one.

While a Masters degree is often required for the top talent role, an MBA rarely is and we see extremely few MBAs (especially from Top 20 schools) as candidates. We think this is a fundamental oversight and that those who love business, understand how business functions and know the language of business are far more likely to be successful talent leaders.

- **HR Analytics:** The ability to be analytical is certainly valued but we aren't hearing high demand yet for talent leaders with specific talent analytics experience. Given the relative youth of that function, we expect demand to increase over time and we'll let you know when it does.

Where they are going

We're seeing a clear pattern of movement from head of talent into senior business partner and CHRO roles. The most ambitious talent leaders seem to understand that it's far easier to control the talent agenda from the first chair. This movement also suggests that CEOs' reported focus on their company's talent agenda may be influencing who they select for the top job.

Overall, we find the market for talent executives is moderately active but there's strong demand for the type of strategic, influential, practical talent leader that creates a true difference in the business.