

Solving Leadership Gaps: The Benefits of External Interim Talent



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Imagine there has been a sudden departure from one of your key teams. A senior person, a people leader, maybe even someone from the executive team.

You can't do without someone in that role. But where are you going to find a replacement quickly? An external search for a permanent replacement will take some time. And there really isn't anyone in the organization that is ready to step into this role.

In a fit of desperation, you get approval to second someone from another team and have them fill in on an interim basis. This is a 'one-for-all, all-for-one' talent strategy that assumes people are able and willing to help cover the work of a colleague who has left. And that they will do a "good enough" job to see them through to the hiring of a permanent replacement. It can often be framed as a positive step-up or lateral opportunity to build skills, which may be true but may also be artful marketing. Employees, particularly senior ones, are savvy enough to sniff out a band-aid and chicken-wire situation and only have so much tolerance for being volun-told.

In the age of the Great Resignation, this is a scenario that many organizations are employing to cover off unplanned and unwanted departures. Unfortunately, it's a strategy that has hidden pitfalls and can do more harm than good to the organization and the people involved.

In the rush to fill a pressing personnel gap with an internal candidate, many organizations find they have created a raft of other potential problems.

Absence of specific expertise.

There certainly are large organizations that have the internal talent bench strength to absorb a single departure and barely miss a beat. In this scenario, one person or a group of people doing the same job would take on additional workload to keep the company moving forward. But not all organizations have that kind of talent breadth and depth. That means an internal interim candidate is stretching their current skills and expertise to cover off a job they are not really qualified to do. Depending on the role, that can be a risky proposition.

Creating unfair expectations.

Even with all caveats and limitations explained in advance, someone filling another role internally will invariably develop expectations they are one step closer to filling the vacated role on a permanent basis. After stepping in on an emergency basis, internal interim candidates will likely feel they have "earned" a chance to make the appointment permanent. And if they find out the company is recruiting externally to fill that role, then hard feelings – both on the part of the interim candidate and their peers – may follow.

Making a bad voluntary separation problem even worse. Badly conceived and managed internal interim assignments could trigger additional vacancies. If someone is being stretched to cover two roles, or is put in a job they are not qualified to perform, there will be stress and anxiety. Suddenly, the whole idea of working for another employer in a more clearly defined role is really appealing.

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Could external interim talent be the missing ingredient?

There is another option that is often overlooked in the panic to fill a suddenly vacated role: the external interim candidate.

One of the best by-products of the trend towards talent mobility is an increasingly large pool of talent – even at the executive level – that is happy to work short term to fill a vacancy with little or no expectations that it will turn into a permanent gig.

This pool of talent has become more substantial, and accessible, thanks to a growing interest in the recruitment industry on interim placements. The potential benefits of an external interim candidate, when lined up against the obvious drawbacks of going internal, are very compelling.



An opportunity to shake things up.

External interim talent is an opportunity to introduce positive disruption to your organization. This is particularly so when an organization needs to bring in a new mindset to help energize other leaders and staff. Or the interim hire – particularly someone with executive-level experience – could be a turnaround or restructuring specialist. Some of the world's most successful companies have called upon interim “turnaround” executives to make difficult decisions in the short term, thereby readying the organization for long-term success.



An opportunity to bring specific expertise in for a time-bound specific project.

At one time or another, all organizations will face the need to acquire specific skills or expertise to deal with a specific and finite challenge. Perhaps your organization is involved in an M&A. Do you have the people in-house who know how to manage all of the legal, practical and human resource issues that will ensue? Or, perhaps you're staring down a regulatory compliance deadline – do you have the specific expertise to meet all of your legal and regulatory requirements? External interim placements can give you access to a wealth of specific skills and expertise for only as long as you need them.



An alternative to overpaying to fill a key role.

The hiring frenzy that has accompanied the Great Resignation has prompted many companies to overpay for talent. Although those hires may fill key talent and skills gaps, it can also create a compensation imbalance with existing employees. An interim talent solution can help you fill a key role right away, creating the time to do a thorough and measured recruitment that will conclude with a hire that does not upset the compensation cart.

The most any hiring manager can ask for is the opportunity to do a thorough but thoughtful search for a candidate to fill a key role, without feeling like they must break the bank to land top talent, and without leaving the organization stretched thin as employees are forced to play a stressful game of musical chairs to fill personnel gaps.

Interim talent is the solution that serves both purposes: fills a key role while also supporting hiring managers in their search for the perfect permanent candidate.



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