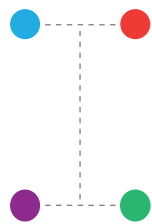# Are You Overlooking Value in Hidden Talents?

**By Chuck Sparrow**

*Having improved visibility into their employees' skill sets can help organizations adapt faster to changing conditions and provide greater career opportunities.*

I'd known and worked with Chad for several years before learning that he played the banjo. Sure, we were only business colleagues, but how had we never discussed his musical ability or that he regularly jammed with his band for local gigs? And what other hidden talents did Chad have that I didn't know about — or that didn't directly apply to his current role in our company?

As I'm writing this, we are experiencing a war for talent in the US — a record number of open jobs along with a record number of people quitting their jobs.[1,2] And millions of others are considering leaving their current employers, as NPR reports.[3] For organizations grappling with new operating models and ways of working, these are additional stresses which must be addressed. As we are architecting the future of work, are we overlooking talent that is hiding in plain sight?

All too often, the capabilities and aspirations of the individuals within our organizations are based exclusively on what we observe between 9 am and 6 pm, and only what we recall of those observations. While individuals possess a breadth of knowledge, skills, and competencies gained from formal education or experience, managers may see only a handful of those from any one person. Yet, when formal detailed skills surveys are conducted, it is common to find team members possessing dozens, if not over 100, skills and capabilities that are relevant within the organization. And for the individual team members, what is the message they are receiving when their skills are overlooked?

Having improved visibility of individuals' full complement of talents and desires can help organizations adapt faster to changing conditions, become less dependent on third parties for capabilities that are better retained and developed in-house, and provide broader career opportunities for employees. As we collectively focus on ensuring that we can live out the people-are-our-most-important-asset mantra, employing the following best practices will help us do just that.
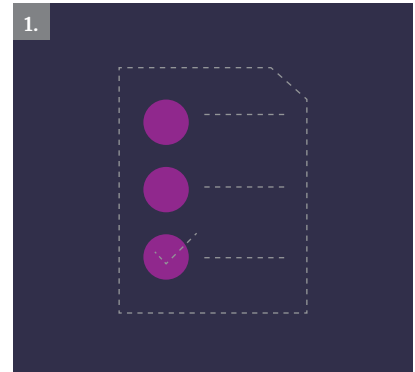
One key challenge organizations face when bringing in new people is the focus on the skills and competencies that are of immediate interest. In many cases, organizations are hiring for a specific role, with successful candidates required to meet multiple defined criteria. Thus, educated recruits tailor their experience to best match what is written in the position description, all boiled down to a professionally advised one-to-two-page resume to highlight that applicable experience. As a result, the candidate's known competencies are only a subset of what the individual likely possesses.

To provide a means of uncovering the additional skills and experience a new team member brings, one of the onboarding activities that can be executed for new team members is a skills survey or inventory, tailored for the organization. This inventory can provide a foundation for new hires that should be updated on a periodic or event-driven basis (such as completion of training or obtaining a certification).
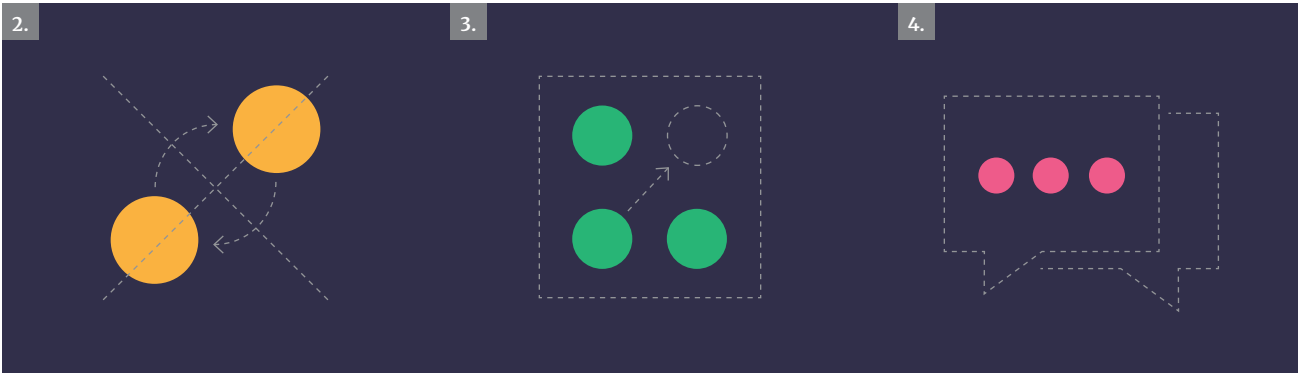
### AVOID LIKE-FOR-LIKE REPLACEMENTS WHEN FILLING OPEN POSITIONS

All too often, when a team member leaves, managers will look for a replacement — similar role, similar skills, and a similar fit within the culture of the existing team. But what if the demands of the organization have changed, or are changing? Do you need a substantially like–for–like replacement? Strategic resource management should be influenced by current and future organizational needs, not historical hierarchies. Information from internal sources such as the sales pipeline, corporate strategy, or pending acquisitions should be used in forecasting skills and capabilities required in the future. External sources providing insight into emerging trends should also be used to help identify likely changes in resource needs.

Utilizing demand data and trends, organizations can develop plans for addressing talent needs by leveraging the following options:

**Grow:** Identifying existing employees with foundational capabilities and interests which, when fostered through additional training and leadership, can successfully transition into new roles and responsibilities.
**Outsource:** Establishing partnerships with third parties to meet resource demands that may require specialized skills for specific purposes, or for work efforts that can be accomplished more efficiently outside the organization.
**Acquire:** Determining the skills and capabilities which need to be added to the organization and focusing Talent Acquisition in those areas.

### RESOLVING DEMAND MANAGEMENT GAPS — LOOK INTERNALLY FIRST

Ah, yes — there's the math we need. The purpose of demand management is to capture the total demand for a group, compare that to the available capacity of that group, and prioritize efforts. In many cases, the narrative ends up being "based on current and forecasted demand, my group will need X more people to deliver on those objectives." That is relatively sound logic that can be used to justify new hires or add contract resources for a period. However, demand management is often performed within the context of individual teams vs. having an enterprisewide approach to identifying resources who have relevant skills and potential available capacity to meet those demands.

To help address the constraints and challenges in balancing the demand vs. supply calculations, consider posting opportunities internally first, encouraging existing employees to pursue opportunities that may be of interest and are a match for their skills profile. In addition, for organizations that capture and maintain data at the individual level for skills, competencies, certifications, and preferences, it can be a relatively straightforward task to use keyword searches to proactively identify employees across the enterprise who would be likely candidates for "that cool new initiative."

### USE COMMON LANGUAGE

To be effective in demand management, we need to ensure that we are speaking a common language and are consistent in the attributes which are used to describe demand (work to be performed) and supply (resources). Common descriptors are roles, capabilities, skills, preferences, and allocation over time. Let's take the scenario of an initiative for corporate development. Due to a pending acquisition, the team needs to add an accountant to the team for two months. The details of the opportunity and responsibilities may be described in the following manner:

**Role:** Senior Accountant
**Capabilities Needed:** Mergers and Acquisitions
**Skills:** Financial Due Diligence; IFRS
**Preferences:** Travel Willingness — up to 80 percent, international (Canada)
**Allocation:** 100 percent allocation weeks 1–3; 40 percent allocation weeks 4–8

Having this same data structure for the resource pool(s), the corporate development team should be able to quickly identify potential candidates for this opportunity. This assessment should not preclude the process of posting the position internally and having team members express an interest in filling this role. Having quality data can help expedite decision-making by providing an initial list of likely candidates.

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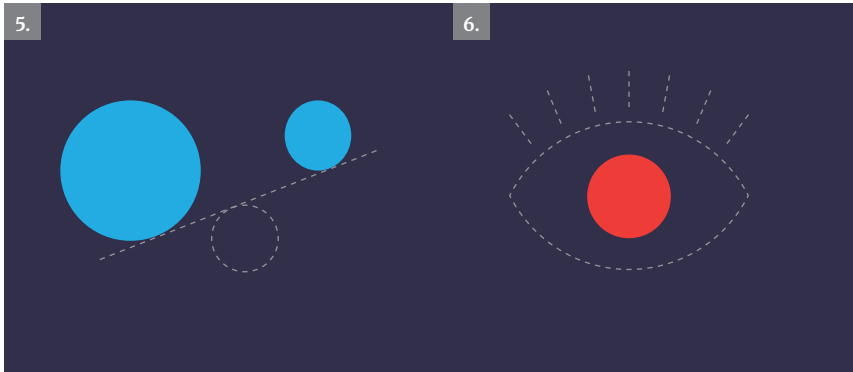
## UNDERSTAND THE BALANCE OF SKILLS REQUIRED AS RELATED TO EACH OTHER

Even as organizations invest in the right skills and capabilities, you may encounter the risks of having a skills imbalance. Being able to assess the number of roles, relative to each other, is critical for efficient operations across teams. As an all-too-real example of how this can play out, Company A had decided to leverage offshore development teams. In fact, after some negotiations, the company had contracted for 50 developers at an attractive hourly rate. The questions were then posed: *"What does the rest of our organization need to look like? How many business analysts and business SMEs are needed to elicit and develop requirements for new functionality? How many FTEs will be needed for testing? For deployment? For support?"* As a result, the entire system was operating at less-than-optimal efficiency.

Qualitatively, the imbalance often results in some groups working extra hours to keep up, while other groups end up with more idle time — neither of which promotes a healthy culture of teamwork.

## ENSURE VISIBILITY OF ALL DEMAND "AND OTHER DUTIES AS ASSIGNED."

In calculating the capacity of a team or organization, it is common to estimate some team members who have less than 100 percent available capacity. Perhaps the rationale is that certain team members get pulled into other efforts, such as support, sales calls, or management functions. The impact of this approach is that we lack a total picture of demand. With additional visibility, we are better able to assess the prioritization of all activities, considering total capacity. We are in a better position to see the demands and evaluate whether certain tasks and activities are best met by that group, or if it should be the responsibility of another part of the organization. We can still reserve time and budget for activities such as support — evaluating process performance metrics in addition to project-based actuals vs. budget.

While these practices take discipline, they are beneficial in helping increase the efficacy of human capital within an organization, while enabling team members to find opportunities that would benefit from their skills and interests. And as talent strategies and operating models continue to evolve, it is critical to have visibility of the knowledge, skills, and competencies which currently exist. Do you have that visibility — or are you overlooking real value?

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Sources:

1   *Quit levels and rates by industry and region, seasonally adjusted (bls.gov). https://www.bls. gov/news.release/jolts.t04.htm*

2   *Job Openings and Labor Turnover Summary (bls.gov). https://www.bls.gov/news.release/ jolts.nr0.htm*

3   *The Great Resignation: Why Millions of Workers Are Quitting Their Jobs : NPR. https://www.npr. org/2021/06/24/1007914455/as-the-pandemic-recedes-millions-of-workers-are-saying-i-quit*