

TRANSFORMATION

# Insights

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## How bad leadership becomes toxic when it moves online

Remote teams aren't immune to toxic leadership. In fact, bad behavior can be amplified. Learn what to do about it.





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# Why the Work-from-Home Model Won't Fix a Toxic Workplace

Alex Vincent, Ph.D., SVP, Global Executive Client Partner, LHH

At the outset of the pandemic, there was a strong expectation that the whole work-from-home phenomenon would provide a respite from all of the stresses that come with working in an office environment.

The early days of remote work appeared to live up to those expectations. Freed from the stress of things like the daily commute and office politics, working from home seemed like the perfect solution. Initially, productivity surged. And for those working in a truly toxic office environment, it was a chance to avoid bosses and colleagues who create the feeling that we're constantly under attack.

## And then, reality set in.

We quickly learned that many of our assumptions about the nirvana of remote work were simply unfounded. New, pandemic-based stresses replaced some of the old ones we associated with the office environment. The tools we were employing to stay connected created as many problems as they were able to solve.

And most importantly, we learned that remote work is not an antidote for a toxic work culture.

That was certainly the realization one of my clients came to recently. In the middle of the pandemic, I got a call from a C-level leader who was concerned about the dynamics of a team of senior leaders he brought together just before workplaces were locked down. It was an impressive collection of executives, all of them boasting extensive technical knowledge and years of experience.

However, early on the leader started to realize there was a problem. Members of the team clearly did not trust each other. Open dialogue and collaboration were in short supply. Even though they were working remotely, there was an omnipresent friction that started to drain the team of its strategic and problem-solving energies. Work was simply not getting done in the manner that moved the team forward.

What started out as a promising initiative to make the company more agile and

“As our virtual work experience became more the norm and not the exception, stress fractures began to appear.”

productive quickly turned into an episode of *Survivor*, with small groups of allies breaking off into cabals that worked to undermine each other.

Listening to the leader and others, I started to realize that not only was his team not benefitting from remote work, but the whole experience of virtual collaboration may be actually amplifying the problems that existed when teams were being formed or transformed.

It all started to make sense. Many of our assumptions going into the pandemic have been largely undermined by the fact that the social and economic restrictions that prompted remote work have gone on much longer than anyone anticipated. As our virtual work experience became more the norm and not the exception, stress fractures began to appear.

As I started talking to more leaders, a few fundamental issues started to come into focus.

Toxicity had manifested in many teams in a number of ways: passive-aggressive or aggressive communication (either through emails/texts or in video meetings); frequent off-hours communication often to criticize or even undermine team members; toxic leaders who take all the credit for successes and absolve themselves of any role in a setback; cliques that seek to exclude certain members of the team from key conversations; a lack of balance from increased demands and expectations at work.

Many teams have also suffered from the fact that, despite the dramatic increase in the frequency of texts and emails between team members, there were far fewer “detoxifying moments” of interaction: casual conversations; social events; the opportunity to tell a joke or an amusing family anecdote.

Like a safety valve, these moments help to de-escalate conflicts that may be brewing. Unfortunately, even though we’ve tried to use things like Zoom happy hours to replicate these important contacts, it does not have the same beneficial effect.

I started to wonder how I was going to help the leaders that I work with.

Although there are solutions for team toxicity, they are much more difficult to deploy in a virtual environment. Ultimately, I began to modify some of the solutions I would recommend to teams who were able to meet in person. While some were easily amended, others required a significant shift in approach by the senior-most leaders who oversee team dynamics and performance.

**1/ Virtual should not mean less contact.** In a virtual world, one-on-one contact between the senior leader that oversees the team and its members is more important than ever. Leaders need to connect with key team members one-on-one to find out if there are any problems. And it

has to be done at much higher frequency; the twice-a-year performance review just isn’t going to cut it in the Zoom era. You need to reach out for quality time with key team members at least bi-weekly, and the entire team at least once a month. Make social interactions part of team meetings; make it part of the agenda every time you have a virtual gathering.

**2/ Team members still need to know who they are working with.** It is essential to set aside time for team members to share some personal details so they get to know each other. Does anyone have kids and are they home-schooling? Do team members have spouses also working from home? Are some being asked to care for elderly parents? Do they have any particular health problems to deal with? These may seem like mundane details, but they help to humanize the team members. Sharing personal information builds trust, which leads to less interpersonal conflict and better overall performance.

**3/ Preach independent problem solving.** You need to make it clear that the team must be chiefly responsible for problem solving. Senior team leaders can provide oversight and feedback, but it’s essential that your team can focus on finding its own solutions. A team that is constantly asking a senior leader to mediate disagreements or choose from a range of solutions is a dysfunctional team. Independent problem solving is the hallmark of a healthy team.

**4/ Problems need to be fully aired.** Good teams do not hide from their setbacks or flaws. But to do that, they must be in a space (even a virtual space) where people can talk openly about problems without fear of reprisal from colleagues. Some of this can be accomplished in the one-on-one sessions mentioned above. But at some point, team leadership needs to create a safe environment for team members to speak openly about problems. Set aside time in every meeting specifically to discuss setbacks or mistakes and what could have been done better. A truly safe team environment is one where everyone can discuss each other’s mistakes without fear of recrimination or embarrassment.

It is important to note that in some instances, a team can only become better by removing one or two members, or even a team leader, who are particularly toxic. Overall, however, most teams do not require invasive procedures to go from dysfunctional to functional, or even good to great.

In this topsy-turvy world of work that we all find ourselves in, all that most teams need is a focused, methodical effort to build the healthy interpersonal relationships that are the foundation of all great teams.





# Help Your Employees Shift to a Continuous Learning Mindset with Practices that Support Lifelong Employability

Michelle Anthony, Chief Revenue Officer, LHH

## How do you make sure your workforce is fit for future purpose?

Want to hear a scary fact? According to [McKinsey Global Institute](#), virtually half of the work activities currently carried out by humans could be automated by technology that already exists. Yet, as AI and algorithms advance and the world of work evolves at such speed, we face a gap in the skills businesses need and those employees have—we're not ready for the significant transition we are faced with. To get the most from our people and be ready to respond to an evolving economy at a moment's notice (see 2020), it's clear that we need to rethink learning and development and focus on lifelong employability.

In the past, recalibrating your workforce to be future-ready worked very differently. If you found it was absolutely necessary to adjust structures or downsize your business, you would call in a firm like LHH to consult on how to help transition people out of the organization with dignity and provide outplacement support so that they could find new roles outside of the company. Organizations would then set about reducing headcount where necessary before bringing in new talent.

## It's time to think renewable vs. replaceable when it comes to talent

But in today's working world, the fire-and-hire ways of the past just don't stack up. It is critical for companies to fully leverage their talent and avoid throwing

“We recognize that retraining and reskilling aren't enough—they sound episodic, like a reaction to a problem rather than the shift in mindset that is needed. We want people to stay flexible and employable for their entire working lives.”

away the knowledge, relationships and potential held by everyone. Companies often rehire people they've let go, and the reality is that, in many cases, the new talent needed just isn't out there. Recent phases of tech advancement, including digitization and advanced data analytics, have revealed a significant gap in the kind of talent companies need and the kind they have. Instead of looking outward, fighting for graduates with the right skills, only to find the skills we need have changed, we need to find a new approach to work that works for everyone. It's time to think renewable vs. replaceable when it comes to talent.

### Retraining and reskilling aren't enough

As a purpose-driven business, LHH passes on value to our clients through reskilling and upskilling, making sure hiring managers are making the most of the talent they already have. I love this, that we are there to help businesses to support their employees through key career moments. We recognize that retraining and reskilling aren't enough—they sound episodic, like a reaction to a problem rather than the shift in mindset that is needed. We want people to stay flexible and employable for their entire working lives. With life expectancy rising, it makes perfect sense that people should look to continuously adapt to a changing job market. Some of our most progressive clients have already inverted their spend from the 70% outplacement, 30% internal mobility they had in place previously. And yet, as the widespread uptake of this kind of approach is still relatively new, some managers—and often even the talent themselves—need convincing of the value of lifelong learning and employability. I'd like to share some of my top tips for getting people on board with the shift to sustainable talent.

### Convince and arm managers—they are key

In my experience, busy managers don't like to deal in hypotheticals. When having the internal mobility discussion with decision makers, it's important to demonstrate that the skills gap won't just have a negative impact on the business and its people in the future—it's having an impact right now.

### Show them how the process works

Having all the necessary information is key in making decisions. At LHH, we've

created an easy-to-understand phased approach. First, we encourage businesses to self-assess the approach they already have—and see if there is anything there that needs to change. Next, we work with them to carry out a base-level assessment and create an inventory of skills they have in their existing talent base. This gives us an idea of the people who, at least on paper, are likely to be successful in upskilling. We'll then examine the future state of their industry and begin the matchmaking process—what skills do we have, and which skills do we need? For those companies that are unsure of how factors like automation and augmentation are going to impact their workforce over the next few years, we partner with Faethm, a company that uses AI to predict the impact of forces such as automation, robotics, and the pandemic on current and future jobs.

### Explain the financial benefits

I find that people often think that reskilling or upskilling their staff will mean spending more. The reality is that it often means simply spending differently. Working with people to ensure their lifelong employability may mean investing in continuous learning but will ultimately mean spending less on bringing in talent from outside as well as less on severance costs for exiting employees.

### Frame as an opportunity for everyone

This is a focus on lifelong employability rather than fixed skills or job roles—everyone has the chance to benefit. A great example is a financial services client we recently worked with, who was automating their accountancy. We discovered that accountants had high potential to be successful as cyber security analysts—which is a job in very high demand, both in that business and in the wider market. Reskilling was a win-win approach. It's all about working to uncover those “aha!” moments.

### How do you convince your employees?

Just because the data show that someone is likely to be successful in being retrained or moving into a new role, doesn't necessarily mean they will be keen to do so. While 77% of people are receptive to going on that journey, according to [PwC's research](#), some aren't—and that's ok. Sometimes it's just about ensuring they have all the necessary information.

### Show them they can be employable for life

Managers can work with employees to create career plans that help them chart a path to more and better opportunities. Embracing lifelong learning will help them achieve their goals. It supports career advancement and personal enrichment.

### Explore more immediate benefits

People who embrace lifelong learning and bring a growth mindset to their careers are more likely to take on new challenges and are typically better able to cope with disruption and adapt to change. These attributes will serve them well, enhancing their employability both now, and throughout their journey.

### How do we keep people agile?

It won't have escaped your notice that 2020 was a tumultuous year—with people being uprooted and dramatically rethinking expectations on many issues including their relationship with work. I recently heard a futurist say that, as a result of COVID-19, we are now in 2021 where they expected us to be in 2030. The question is, with so much up in the air, how can we keep people energized when they may be experiencing change fatigue?

This isn't just a problem for the individual. We also see managers wishing to hold on to their old ways when it comes to managing their talent. The alternative just feels like playing the long game, like more work. But as part of a growth mindset, organizations must do the work to foster a culture of change and prepare their people for this change, and those of us in the talent management industry must support them by continuously affirming the importance of building a sustainable workforce. I think the answer lies in positive framing and building resilience. Hope speaks louder than fear. Rather than focusing on imagined, worst-case scenarios, let's focus on creating a culture within the organization that supports lifelong learning so that you have a workforce that's agile and ready for the demands and challenges in a fast-changing landscape.



# A Leap of Faith: How to Make a Late-Career Decision to Pursue Your Dream Job

**Rueben Cohen**, Managing Director and U.S. Head, LHH International Center for Executive Options (ICEO)

After 30 years working for the same company, Ken Daly retired from a job he loved and made a leap into the unknown.

It was early 2019 and Daly, Chief Operating Officer for the US Electric business of National Grid, one of the world's largest energy companies, felt he needed a new challenge for the next phase of his career. It was a feeling that had been building for a long time.

For almost as long as he had worked in the energy sector, Daly had demonstrated a deep passion for, and commitment to, higher education. On top of his demanding day job, he taught at the secondary and post-secondary levels for nearly 30 years, developed initiatives to promote STEM education, and sat on the boards of several colleges. In the very back of his mind, he had always viewed these activities as the “building blocks” for a future career shift.

So, at age 53 with a resumé that was heavy on technical and financial knowledge of the gas and electricity industry, Daly decided it was time to do something that few executives of his age and tenure would ever consider: he threw himself, heart and soul,

into a life-long dream to serve as a college president.

“National Grid was incredibly supportive as I transitioned my career” Daly said. “So were my wife and my kids. They had mixed emotions when I told them. For as long as my kids have been alive, they knew me as ‘Mr. National Grid.’ They were sad to see me leave something they knew I loved but they also knew about my deep interest in education.”

Although he was confident about the dream he wanted to pursue, he was less confident about what it was going to take to achieve that dream. The full magnitude of his knowledge gap began to come into focus within days of his retirement on March 31, 2019, a day that also happened to be his birthday.

“For 30 years, the energy industry was all I knew,” Daly said. “I mean, I loved my job. I never missed a day of work over my time with National Grid. That was 7,000 consecutive days. Now, for the first time since I left school, I was going to try and start something totally new. In many ways, I’m not sure I was 100% clear on what was involved in a move like that.”

“It’s so hard for people who are heavily embedded in their careers and former roles. It’s hard for all of us to shake off who we were and move on to who we want to be. But to make the leap, you have to pick a point in time where one chapter closes, and another chapter starts.”

**Ken Daly**



Notwithstanding his long and successful career, Daly said he was patently aware he had not undertaken a job search since he was in college. Having only applied for internal promotions over his three decades at National Grid, Daly admitted he didn't really know how or where to start pursuing his second-career dream job.

Daly certainly had a lot of advantages as he entered this new and somewhat uncertain period in his professional career. He had a wealth of experience leading and transforming large organizations with equally large goals. He also clearly had a calling and deep commitment to higher education having served as an adjunct professor, school board member and advisor to many different schools at different levels of the educational system. He had shown repeatedly that he was guided by a deep set of personal values with a commitment to helping future generations.

Still, the magnitude of his challenge began to create a very stretching aspiration in Daly's mind, which was a new experience after three decades of feeling completely in control of his professional destiny. He was going to try something completely new, which meant there was a distinct possibility he would fall short of his very specific goal.

Fortunately, National Grid offered Daly the opportunity to work with LHH's International Center for Executive Options (ICEO), a boutique advisory firm specializing in senior executive leadership and career transitions. Very quickly, Daly said, he started to grasp the magnitude of his challenge.

Although he knew the exact type and level of job he wanted, Daly had not formally applied for or even talked to a college about his career aspirations. In his own research, he learned an astounding and somewhat daunting fact: the odds against him making the leap from the business world to higher learning were about 100 to 1.

### **Set a timeline to achieve your goal**

"When I started looking, I was aware that of the last 100 college presidents hired throughout the country, only one had come directly from the business world," Daly said. "They traditionally went from dean to provost and then to president. I knew I was swimming against that tide to some extent. So, to make sure I wasn't doing anything foolish, I gave myself just one year to pursue my dream."

### **Prepare your mind and body**

To ensure that he was mentally and physically prepared for the challenges to come, Daly started what could be described as a second-career bootcamp. He enrolled in a course that prepared aspiring college presidents. He also hit the gym with a vengeance and did exercises to strengthen his mental attitude. He was making himself physically and mentally stronger so that he could seize any opportunity that came along.

### **Build your personal brand**

Daly also worked with his ICEO advisor to strengthen and re-establish his identity as a candidate for college

president. He created a robust presence on social media, including LinkedIn, to emphasize his role as a leader of big organizations and to highlight his love of education. He began to relentlessly mine his network in the world of higher learning, using it to gather insights and understanding of what would be demanded of him in this new dream job.

### **Be prepared to learn and to potentially fall at the first hurdle**

Within a few months of starting his search, Daly found what appeared to be the perfect opportunity: St. Thomas Aquinas College—a small, liberal arts school north of New York City in suburban Rockland County—was searching for a new college president. However, Daly said he knew right from the start that getting this job would involve a steep learning curve.

The previous president had been in her job for a remarkable 25 years. Given the stability of leadership the school had enjoyed, it was determined to undertake a very thorough search for its next president. The school started its search with a remarkable 70 internal and external candidates.

### **Learn about the interview and screening process before embarking on it**

Daly had always assumed that a school looking for a new president would employ a thorough and rigorous hiring process. Still, nothing could quite prepare him for the comprehensive, high-pressure search process taken by St. Thomas Aquinas College.

Initial candidates were screened and then twelve were offered interviews, which were held at an airport hotel for secrecy. Then, a short list of three candidates was released publicly so students, faculty and administration could learn about who remained in the competition. Although the school's board makes the final decision, remarkably both students and faculty were given an opportunity to vote for their preferred candidate.

When it came down to a final list of three candidates, Daly said he was asked to do 10 presentations—each one 20 minutes of presenting and a full 70 minutes of Q&A—to different constituencies within the school so that everyone could be fully informed before voting. His experience leading and transforming complex organizations along with his deep insights into higher education served him well.

### **Play to your strengths**

"I hadn't been through interviews like that for 30 years," Daly recalled. "When I was meeting with people on campus, I tried to play to my strength. I had done a lot of public speaking, and I think that helped me. Even though the corporate world doesn't normally use an open forum show like this, I was very comfortable with the process and really enjoyed my time on campus."

After all the meetings, presentations and the seminal vote, on a snowy afternoon in December, Daly received the phone call he had been dreaming of for most of his adult life. He had the job. He was going to be a college president.

After taking some time to celebrate with his family, Daly settled into a six-month period as president-elect and then became president at the beginning of July 2020. During that time, he launched a 100-day plan that involved a listening tour with each employee and some quick wins around building a strong team and making strategic campus investments.

### **Prepare for the unexpected when starting a new role**

As it turned out, Daly's arrival on campus directly coincided with some of the worst days of the COVID-19 pandemic. In some ways, it was a fortuitous bit of timing; with so much uncertainty and fear, Daly's training and expertise in the energy sector—where communication skills and crisis management are core competencies—started to shine through.

“My 30 years in the energy sector gave me a pretty solid grounding in emergency planning,” he said. “I had to manage operations through all kinds of challenges, like 9/11, Hurricane Sandy and Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. Right away at the school, I launched a COVID-19 plan that would have looked and sounded exactly what you might find in a world-class energy company. I think it served us very well.”

### **No matter what experience level you are at, you always have more to learn**

Looking back now on the tumultuous year, Daly said he cannot believe how much he learned, both about himself and the complexities of starting a new career later in

life. “When you start out in your career, things are pretty straightforward. If you're looking for a job as an entry-level accountant, you have a more or less clear idea of what you need to do. When you're trying to make a late-career change, it's a lot more scattershot.”

If he were to advise other senior leaders looking to make a similar change, Daly said he would emphasize the importance of “being humble enough to admit that you don't know all the things you don't know.”

“It's so hard for people who are heavily embedded in their careers and former roles. It's hard for all of us to shake off who we were and move on to who we want to be. But to make the leap, you have to pick a point in time where one chapter closes, and another chapter starts.” For me, that point was March 31, my last day at National Grid and my first day as an aspiring College President.

Above all, Daly said, senior leaders making late-career shifts need to embrace humility so that they can absorb and embrace new approaches to finding that right next role. And to commit yourself to making a break so you can undertake the journey to the next great stop on your career path.

“I learned pretty quickly that while you are making a break from the past, emotionally you have to allow yourself to look forward,” Daly said. “Other than the occasional dream at night, I never look back. That's what people do to follow their passions. To find something that you really want to do, rather than something you feel you have to do.”





# How Alaska Airlines Delivers Consistently Great Customer Service

Paula DeYoung, VP, Business Development

While most of the world's airlines have generally been forced to keep a low profile during the pandemic, Alaska Airlines decided to lean into its reputation for world-famous customer service and dance.

In December, the fifth largest airline in the United States released [a television commercial](#) that riffed off the popular 1980s pop song *Safety Dance*. The one-minute spot features actual customer-facing front-line Alaska Airlines employees – pilots, flight attendants and ground crew – dancing and lip-synching to the song, which was given new lyrics that stressed the airline's rigorous health and safety protocols.

The ad is frank and fearless in delivering a message that could be difficult for some travelers to accept. But its playful and humorous approach makes the new health and safety demands seem much less threatening.

"If your friends don't mask, why don't they mask, well they won't fly this airline!" the song proudly trumpets.

The commercial – which was also broadcast during the Superbowl in early January – has since gone viral. And in so doing, drawn well-deserved attention to both the unique culture of customer service at Alaska Airlines, and its stoic attempts to improve and expand on that culture even while navigating the uncertainty of the pandemic.

Charu Jain, SVP, Merchandising and Innovation, said that while price point has always been the major driving force behind customer purchase decisions, the focus has clearly shifted during the pandemic to health, hygiene and overall safety.

Jain said a shift in focus of that magnitude might have presented an insurmountable challenge to many other airlines. However, the keen focus that Alaska Airlines has had on customer service and employee engagement proved to be difference makers.

"Right now, our customers are concerned about safety and hygiene," Jain said during a recent [LHH Conversation Series](#) live stream event on how to build a culture of customer service. "So, our Next-Level Care has focused on making our experiences safe and almost entirely touch-free. In doing that, we didn't just look at our guests, but also our employees."

Jain said Alaska Airline's deep commitment to customer service has helped everyone navigate the new pandemic-era reality of air travel.

The entire flying experience – from kiosk check-in to boarding and deplaning – has been made completely touch free. That, Jain noted, is a tribute to the commitment Alaska employees have to customer service and to the airline's commitment to involving both customers and employees at all stages of designing and implementing those safety protocols.

Vikram Baskaran, VP of Information Technology, said Alaska Airlines has created what it calls the "Feedback Loop" for its customers and employees. Employees are provided with a "toolkit" that helps them make real-time decisions to address customer issues. Customers are then asked to provide feedback on their experiences, both positive and negative, which is then looped back to the employees.

Particularly when it comes to pandemic health and safety protocols, the airline felt

"Our Next-Level Care has focused on making our experiences safe and almost entirely touch-free. In doing that, we didn't just look at our guests, but also our employees."

Charu Jain, SVP, Merchandising and Innovation, Alaska Airlines

it was essential to get employee buy-in on the front end and then carefully gauge customer feedback. “We involved our people in all the innovations,” Baskaran said. “We tried them out on certain flights and then gave the employees a chance to offer their feedback before rolling it out to the entire airline. This helped employees really embrace the solutions because they’ve been part of the development.”

And what of the customer experience? “Over the past 11 months, our (customer service) scores have actually gone up about 11 points,” Baskaran said. “Honestly, it was a little bit of a surprise. In the time of COVID, when there are less people flying and we have doubled down on safety, it directly translated into some fantastic scores that our frontline is very proud of.”

Jain said being able to offer enhanced customer service at a time when the whole notion of customer service has been completely disrupted by the pandemic is a testament to the strong cultural foundation that existed before COVID-19 arrived.

For example, Jain noted that Alaska Airlines was able to minimize layoffs and furloughs – it is by far and away one of the least-affected airlines in terms of separations – largely because so many employees agreed to take leaves and retirement. “Thousands of our employees have taken leaves and retirements so that their co-workers can keep their jobs. That selflessness, how everyone is pulling together, is pretty amazing.”

Although the future is uncertain for air carriers, Jain said that she believes Alaska Airlines will come out of the pandemic stronger than it was going in. “It all goes back to our culture where we take care of people,” she said. “We take care of our guests and we take care of our employees.”









# Why We Need to Talk About Well-being in the Workplace

**Alex Vincent**, Ph.D., SVP, Global Executive Client Partner, LHH

After five years as President and CEO of Sleep Number—a smart bed company with a mission to improve lives by individualizing sleep experiences—Shelly Ibach thought she knew quite a bit about mental and physical health and well-being. After all, the company’s culture is built around the idea that a good night’s sleep can literally change the world.

But in November 2017, Ibach learned a new and difficult lesson about well-being when she lost her husband George to leukemia. After 34 years of marriage, she found the grief and sense of loss almost unbearable.

This level of devastation was unfamiliar to Ibach and she was not sure how to move forward. She knew she needed to heal to function and planned to take a few weeks

physically away from work. Sleep Number has a “work for your day” culture, which means team members can work from any location to simultaneously support their personal and business needs. She began working from home and anticipated going to the office at the end of a five-week mourning period.

And then, just before her return date, she went to a family fundraiser event. It was her first opportunity following George’s death to be around a crowd of people. The experience gave her a great deal of insight and she realized her feelings were still too raw to function effectively in the office.

“At this event, I remember so many people came up to me and said all these unbelievable things,” Ibach recalled. “While

“Grieving is about moving forward and finding graces. I find sharing these graces is both healing and giving.”

**Shelly Ibach,**  
President & CEO, Sleep Number

I am sure their intentions were good, their sentiments carried a lack of understanding and in many cases made me feel worse. Death and grieving are difficult topics, and most people are unsure of what to say.” On the drive home, it became clear to her that she needed to figure out how to handle uncomfortable and potentially upsetting sentiments with grace before physically returning to the office and interacting with thousands of team members. She continued to work from home and focus on healing.

As it turned out, the extra week was time well spent. Ibach said she knew how important it was to put her team members at ease; many of them were likely to feel awkward and unsure about what to say. She felt she had to be fully and completely open about discussing her loss, and not necessarily wait for people to approach her.

Additionally, throughout the 18-month battle with leukemia, she and George stayed close to her leadership team. Ibach was inspired by their courageous honesty; their candid questions and dialogue resulted in her team understanding and supporting her and George in a manner that was the most helpful to them.

So, upon returning, she committed to a series of in-person townhalls to ensure everyone could hear from her directly about the loss of George and how she was doing. “In general, I tend to be a very private person, but this was a time when I knew I needed to push through that introvert side of me and share how I felt. It was real and relatable.”

Those townhalls taught Ibach a lot about herself, her company and the importance of well-being at work. Well-being had always been at the core of Sleep Number’s culture, which is deeply committed to the idea that the world can be a better and healthier place through higher quality sleep. But after she lost her husband, Ibach said she better understood the healing power of sleep at yet another level.

“As the CEO, building an inclusive culture with shared values of passion, integrity, innovation, courage and teamwork has always been paramount. After George’s death, I realized the importance of sharing how I lead through adversity. While I have always understood the value of knowing team members personally, it was clear the entire company would benefit from

modeling this behavior. Meeting with the broader team and sharing experiences brought us all closer together. It helped us deepen our commitment to total leadership; caring for all aspects of our lives.”

Those realizations would become critically important when the pandemic struck in early 2020. Like many retailers, Sleep Number—a publicly traded company that prides itself on controlling all aspects of its business from research and development to sales through its own branded chain of 600 stores—was facing great uncertainty.

“Prior to the pandemic, we were growing at double digits,” Ibach said. “Then, suddenly, we were temporarily closing 80% of our stores. Thankfully, we had our ‘work-for-your-day culture,’ which meant our technology supported most of our headquarters team members to work from home and we knew how to lead through adversity, accept circumstances and find the path forward. For me, these were well-honed learnings from when George battled leukemia and then died. It was important to ensure everyone had the tools they needed to handle the changing circumstances and emotions.”

Through the early months of the pandemic and following the intense civil unrest that started in Sleep Number’s hometown of Minneapolis, Ibach communicated weekly to all company team members with a weekly email and an invitation for any team member to respond directly, to ask questions or make comments. Ibach and her team also convened “listening” events, open forums where team members could safely ask questions and talk about any subject.

“I found the level of intimate conversation around individuality helped people embrace their unique attributes with greater appreciation and inclusion. We stayed close to one another and supported each other’s life challenges in and outside of work. It was really helpful for our teams to talk about how they were handling everything—from distance education to diversity, equity and inclusion.”

Throughout 2020, Ibach and her team conducted “pulse surveys” to inform management’s understanding of how team members were coping with stress. The company welcomed feedback and worked to support team members’ needs, bolstering its technology and well-being

tools—providing access to a mental health hotline, for example—to keep people connected to one another in real time and provide them with tools to deal with stress and uncertainty.

On the third anniversary of George’s death, Ibach wrote a deeply personal note to all team members. “It was a continuation of my grief journey. Grieving is about moving forward and finding graces. I find sharing these graces is both healing and giving.” In that note, Ibach openly shared how deeply she cares about her teams’ well-being and welcomed them to share their personal lives at work as part of Sleep Number’s culture of authenticity.

In July, Ibach held an all-day strategic session with her senior leadership team. “We had a great discussion on how to advance our culture in the areas of DE&I and well-being.” Listening to her team’s passion about building on the company’s foundation of individuality gave Ibach even greater clarity and belief in their purpose of creating a healthier and happier society through higher quality sleep.

As a result, in October she announced a self-described career highlight when she gave all 4,500 team members their very own Sleep Number 360® smart bed. Said Ibach, “This investment in their individual well-being is the ultimate indicator of our commitment to ensure they are their best self.”

Going forward, Sleep Number’s prospects have only improved, even with the continued economic uncertainty of the pandemic. It has introduced new products, with new technology features, and has advanced its sales and digital strategy to “sell and service from anywhere.” The team’s ingenuity, resilience, agility and perseverance all complement their deep shared values around individuality.

“All of this—from George’s death to the pandemic—has taught me the value of being present, being kind and leading with empathy and compassion. As a leader, I need to demonstrate these behaviors every day, while continuing to make courageous decisions which advance our purpose.” This consistency supports Sleep Number’s culture, which celebrates individuality and values well-being. Ibach’s team is dedicated to their mission of improving lives by individualizing sleep experiences and it gives them the confidence to fearlessly forge ahead.

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# Preventive vs. Corrective Career Management: Tactics to Improve Organizational Performance

Caroline Pfeiffer Marinho, Head Strategic Solutions & Innovations - Talent Solutions at The Adecco Group

It was a stark reminder of the importance of preventative measures.

In September 2020, the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board, a group created by the World Bank and the World Health Organization, released a [study](#) that argued an investment of just \$5 per person in global health infrastructure could largely prevent the next pandemic from bringing the world to its collective knees.

These people know what they are talking about. This is the same organization that in September 2019 – just 90 days before China formally identified a new pneumonia-like virus – [warned](#) the world that we had failed to prepare for a global pandemic that would lead to “widespread havoc, instability and insecurity. The world is not prepared.”

After more than a year suffering under the suffocating presence of COVID-19, we can certainly see the wisdom in the GPMB’s admonitions. The world did not have the strategies, supply chains or medical equipment and supplies to weather the pandemic storm.

The very same scenario we have faced in the pandemic is bearing down upon us when it comes to the future of work.

For many years now, the best and brightest thinkers in economics and human resources have been warning us that we need massive investments in transformational business strategies, including re/upskilling of millions of workers who are about to see their jobs disappear as AI-powered machines assume

a bigger role in the business world.

There are a few countries and organizations that have adopted a preventative approach. They are adopting new technologies to replace low-skill tasks and then reskilling their people to perform new, higher skill roles.

But clearly, far too many of us are ignoring an impending crisis, ready to apply corrective measures to problems that could have been prevented with a little advanced planning.

## The future of work preparedness gap

How big is the gap between current skills and future skills needed to build more productive, more sustainable careers? Two different sets of numbers from the World Economic Forum describe in graphic detail what current pressures are being applied and the rewards we may accrue if we start acting now.

The first number is alarming and, for many of us, rather depressing: by 2025, the [WEF estimates](#) that half of all work currently performed in the world will be done by machines, and that more than four in 10 companies it surveyed plan to reduce their human workforces as they adopt technology to automate manual tasks.

Then, we have the second and perhaps more encouraging number from the WEF: widescale investment in re/upskilling has the potential to [boost global GDP](#) by three percent or \$6.5 trillion by 2030. The growth in economic activity will come from transitioning people out of jobs

“Unless we ... find ways of transitioning workers from outmoded jobs into the jobs of the future – millions of the world’s working people, and their employers, will get steamrolled by technology.”



being assumed by machines and training them for a new generation of jobs, many of which that will involve creating, supporting and managing all that new technology.

We have a challenge, but we also have an opportunity. Unfortunately, not enough companies are rising to that challenge and offering the reskilling or upskilling opportunities that their workers demand.

Survey data shows that notwithstanding the enhanced focus on reskilling and upskilling, companies are failing to make the proper investments. A [2018 global study](#) by Gartner revealed that only 20 percent of employees have the necessary skills for both their current role and a future job that is more sustainable in the age of AI.

In the past, employers have responded to this kind of gap by firing employees with outdated skills and going out onto the open market to hire new people with a new array of skills. Unfortunately, the global skills shortage that existed prior to the pandemic is still a major obstacle to the fire-and-hire strategy. Increasingly, the most successful organizations are looking for strategies to reskill and redeploy.

Unless we change this equation – and find ways of transitioning workers from outmoded jobs into the jobs of the future – millions of the world’s working people, and their employers, will get steamrolled by technology.

### **A preventative – rather than corrective – approach to workforce management**

The biggest challenge for companies facing the future work preparedness gap is figuring out where to start. Between the challenge of adopting new technologies and finding the people with the right skills to work in that new environment, it can be difficult to plot a preventative course. In many instances, we don’t know what the solutions are because we’re not quite sure what kind of problems we’re facing.

There are three questions organizations should ask themselves to determine the size and scope of the future skills gap, and whether there is still time to apply preventative measures.

#### **1. Have you identified the jobs of the future and the skills needed to fill them?**

Many companies are focused intently on the adoption of new technologies, but spend little time identifying the people they will need in these roles. For example, Faethm, a global leader in workforce analytics, has [identified](#) 32 skills and capabilities needed to fill the most common future jobs. If you haven’t taken the time to identify future roles and the skills needed to fill them, then you’re going to be one step behind in your talent management strategy.

#### **2. How well do you know your workers?**

Far too many organizations overlook redeployment opportunities because they suffer from a profound knowledge deficit when it comes to the skill profile of their current employees. As difficult as it is to believe, these organizations don’t have a clear picture of the existing skills of their employees or their preferred career aspirations and thus, have no idea which ones have transitional or transferable skills that would allow them, with some focused learning opportunities, to transition into different roles within the company. Performing a detailed skills assessment that includes an opportunity for employees to identify future career paths is essential to closing the preparedness gap.

#### **3. Do you have a learning strategy to fill the jobs of the future?**

To get as much value out of existing employees, organizations need an effective learning strategy that combines career-focused reskilling opportunities that are connected directly with future employment opportunities. In other words, organizations need to open the door to learning with the understanding that on the other side, there is a rewarding and sustainable job that will be future proofed going forward.

These strategies are very broad and can contain within them many sub-strategies and tasks that should not be overlooked. However, if these proactive, preventative strategies are embraced now, rather than waiting to implement reactive corrective measures later, the future skills crunch won’t overtake your workforce strategy, and can effectively prepare an organization for the future of work.





# Breakthroughs in Building Business Relationships in a Virtual World

**Frank Congiu**, SVP, Key Global Accounts

In the virtual business world that has been forced on all of us because of the pandemic, how do we re-create those “high-touch” moments?

I work in a “high-touch” business where face-to-face meetings often mean the difference between bringing on a new client or losing out on a prime opportunity. In the business world, the ability to interact directly with people builds trust and confidence. I knew I had to find ways to replicate those high-touch moments in a socially distanced context. I’m not saying it’s been easy, but there have been breakthroughs.

## **Like our CHRO dinners.**

Prior to the pandemic, I organized a series of extremely successful dinners where

senior HR leaders gathered with notable thought leaders to discuss the pressing human capital issues of the day. This was not a transactional event; everyone involved was “off the clock” and what was said was off the record. It was my way of giving something back to these important business contacts, an opportunity to enjoy a glass of wine, a great meal and some candid talk.

These dinners were not just great networking events, although there was a lot of that going on. I think that everyone who attended felt energized and even reassured by the fact that they were not alone in facing certain challenges.

Prior to the pandemic, I hosted 18 dinners in New York and another five across the United States and United Kingdom. In

“To keep everyone moving forward in this challenging environment, we must focus on the so-called soft skills of leadership: compassion, empathy, and self-awareness.”

all, we had 200 unique attendees from more than 140 companies. The dinners featured keynote addresses by notable thought leaders such as executive coaching guru Marshall Goldsmith, global thought leader Keith Ferrazzi, and Sally Helgesen, a renowned author and women's leadership coach.

And then came COVID-19, and the opportunities to gather over great food, wine and conversation evaporated. Even though we couldn't bring people together in a physical sense, I wanted to continue building on the momentum we'd created in a virtual setting.

The first step was getting my long-time friend Keith Ferrazzi, who has always been a great draw, to headline a virtual dinner to talk about his new project, [Go Forward to Work](#). We also offered attendees some "high-touch" fringe benefits: all registrants would get to pick from one of six elegant wines. I then sat back to wait for a reaction.

The response was off the charts. All available spots for the virtual CHRO dinner were snapped up in short order. Even more gratifying, we had a nearly 100% show rate for the event.

I needed to make sure that the Ferrazzi dinner wasn't a lightning strike. So, I got Marshall Goldsmith for a return engagement. In addition to a wonderful bottle of wine, we also sent every registrant a copy of one of his latest books. Again, the response was overwhelming.

Since that first event, I've hosted six more virtual CHRO sessions with the same approach: virtual meeting, high-touch benefits. The reaction has taught me that no matter how challenging the world has become, we need to focus less on all the things that we've lost and start looking for ways to adapt and thrive in the new normal.

The need to create high-touch strategies is not just important for our relationships with customers. Within an organization, leaders need to find ways of creating high-touch moments with the people they lead who may still be working away from the head office.

Now, not all leaders are going to be comfortable sending free wine and books to their teams, just to create a high-touch moment. Although some might appreciate a gesture like that, the people you're leading want some very basic things: clarity in communication and genuine empathy.

Good leaders need to be able to communicate clearly and effectively with the people they lead, but it's hard when you cannot look directly into people's eyes and see how they are responding to your message. In a virtual world, we need to be more explicit and thoughtful about our messages.

And you must be able to show that you really understand what your people are going through and are sensitive to their emotional state.

Recently, I was promoted and, in the announcement, my immediate superior Kristen Leverone went above and beyond to let people know what she thought I had contributed to the company. She told other people in my part of the company how she met me, how we got to know each other, and the various successes we had enjoyed working in concert with each other.

It was a really touching, truly inspirational message to hear from my boss. She had taken the time to get to know me and wasn't afraid to share that with other people. It's an excellent example of how leaders need to reach a little deeper and put some emotion and vulnerability into their communication.

To keep everyone moving forward in this challenging environment, we must focus on the so-called soft skills of leadership: compassion, empathy, self-awareness. And because you won't be able to show off these skills in person, you have to be better at written communication and management of live online interactions.

As we continue to work in a mostly virtual business world, high-touch opportunities will be very few and far between. Leaders must be creative in finding ways to connect. And once we've connected, we need to be willing to demonstrate how much we care.





# Five Steps to Maximize Networking Connections and Move Your Career Forward

Lee Hecht Harrison

There's an old expression around careers and hiring that says, "It's not what you know but who you know." The advent of social media has changed the game of building a professional network. Our networks now span farther and more extensively than ever before, allowing us to virtually connect with people we may not yet have met in person, but with whom we potentially have an opportunity to exchange professional value.

This shift has proven to be highly beneficial for job seekers. As any hiring manager or job seeker will tell you, making connections and gaining insights from the people who know or may be connected to a prospective employer will allow you to gain deeper insights into a prospective employer. Learning about the employer

prior to making direct contact gives you tremendous advantageous over the sea of other job applicants.

It is commonly understood that referrals and word of mouth are key factors in landing a new role, but it's not enough to simply exchange business cards or connect on LinkedIn. In order to maximize the value of your connections it is essential that you proactively build, nurture and maintain strong relationships with people in your industry and function.

Up until early 2020, the best way to start building connections was through regular attendance at networking events. While COVID-19 has a hold on the world, none

*"Learning about the employer prior to making direct contact gives you tremendous advantageous over the sea of other job applicants."*



of us are likely to attend any breakfast networking sessions any time soon. However, there are plenty of techniques and methods we can use to find and nurture connections virtually.

Here are five steps you can take to boost your profile and build your professional network.

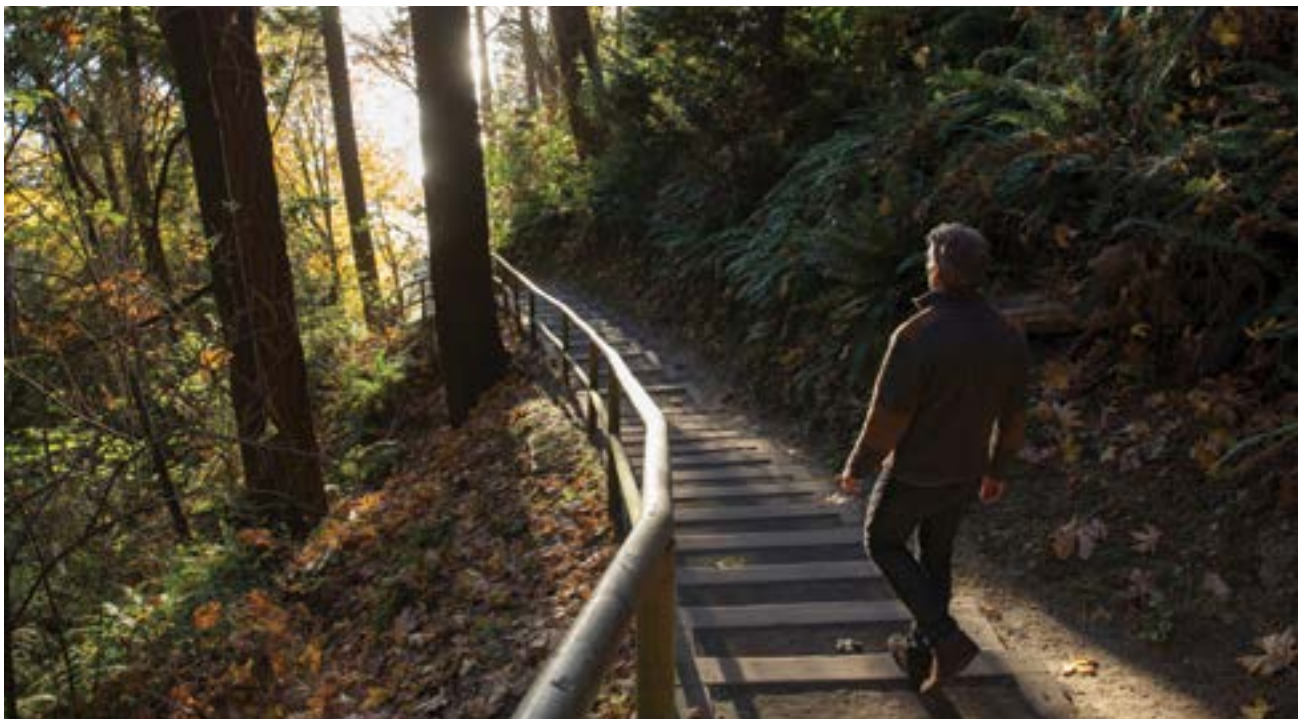
- 1. Listen to what your network is saying.** The newsfeeds of your chosen social platforms are rich with information from your network. This is where you learn about hot topics your network is discussing and stay up to date with any key trends you should be aware of as you navigate the job market. Build trust and foster collaboration by commenting on OP, reacting, sharing and replying to commenters.
- 2. Share knowledge and offer value.** Once you've started making yourself known it's important that you keep your connections engaged. One of the best ways to do this is to share relevant content of your own. Share insights about how you work, your thoughts on the industry or the value of your skill set. This is a sure-fire way to impress and engage the right people. Great examples of

shareable content include industry reports, research you have found that your network will value, and articles you have read from specialist publications.

- 3. Be a hub for other connections.** If you can facilitate introductions between mutual connections, then you immediately place yourself in a strong position as a connector and someone who provides value to others. You may be connected to people who could prove valuable to others. And, providing a great introduction will motivate the recipient to adopt a similar mindset and make it a habit to do the same.
- 4. Remember your manners.** Acknowledge helpful actions of others when they offer you useful information or advice. Remember to thank anyone who endorses you on LinkedIn or other platforms. If someone has offered some advice or introduced you to a great contact that led to a helpful conversation, an interview or career opportunity, continue to build and strengthen your relationship and let them know how things have progressed and show your gratitude.

- 5. Be part of a community.** Understand that people in your industry/job role/area of expertise who you may view as a competitor for a job are often in the exact same position as you are—they are overcoming the same obstacles and learning valuable lessons. Connecting and forming a community with these people (either loosely or through private groups on platforms like WhatsApp, Slack, Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook) will be nothing but beneficial for several reasons. Firstly, they're a source of advice and a community in which to share your experiences. Secondly, each member of the community will have their own connections. These can open doors to reach many more people and job opportunities than you would be able to on your own.

Keep these steps in mind and you'll find yourself better connected than ever before. Nurturing these connections and staying involved in the scene requires constant effort. However, when it comes to making your next career move, do it right and the return on investment will be huge.









# Fresh Start, Fresh Tactics: How a New Approach to Upskilling & Reskilling Is Redefining the Workplace

Ranjit de Sousa, President, LHH

As a leader of a fast-growing global company in the HR space, I am passionate about helping companies realize the full potential of their people, no matter where they are in their career journey or which industry they operate within. The events of 2020 have caused us to adapt personally and professionally in ways none of us could have predicted, and have proven why upskilling and reskilling are so important; we need to evolve at lightning speed to survive, as discussed in [our recent article](#). Businesses are having to rethink how they approach and invest in talent management, with the focus shifting from replacement to redeployment of people.

Investing in career development has become increasingly important as companies seek, retain and develop talent.

The way we choose to nurture new and existing skills within the workforce can also help build human-first, future-proof businesses. At LHH, we understand that how we invest in and develop people will result in whether a company thrives or not. We follow the philosophy of the “Return on the Individual”—investing in the development of people at key moments in a person’s career. From when they first join to when they have opportunities to move into new roles or senior leadership positions (or even when seeking roles outside of the organization), this approach has revealed itself to be of prime importance this year.

Reskilling was at the center of the talent conversation in 2020, with [several companies](#), including JPMorgan, Accenture and Verizon, having evolved their approach

“With technology like AI and machine learning automating jobs in many sectors – and the new roles emerging as a result—it’s important that employees stay agile in their skills and engage in continuous learning.”

to reskilling, launching million and even billion-dollar programs to help Americans improve their knowledge and skills during the pandemic. Indeed, the current health crisis has prompted a surge in interest in reskilling among both employers and employees looking to contribute to an adaptable and future-ready workforce. With technology like AI and machine learning automating jobs in many sectors—and the new roles emerging as a result—it's important that employees stay agile in their skills and engage in continuous learning.

After [speaking](#) with Deanna Mulligan, CEO of Guardian Life Insurance Company of America, it soon became clear that fostering a culture of learning within the workforce was already a priority for some businesses pre-pandemic; so much so, that Mulligan wrote an entire book on the subject: [Hire Purpose: How Smart Companies Can Close the Skills Gap](#). Exploring what defines a “learning and growth mindset,” Mulligan discussed the organization's work with General Assembly—a global leader in upskilling and reskilling—and how this investment has already paid off. From the creation of more sustainable roles for graduates to reskilling call center workers to be coders—and even dedicating a day to micro-learning for employees across the business—Mulligan's advice was to “start small and keep moving forward.”

Organizations are waking up to the fact that investing in reskilling and upskilling to prepare employees for the future is ultimately good for their people and their business.

### Why make upskilling a priority?

To put it in terms we can all understand, many leaders see little value in investing time and money in staff members when they have no guarantees that they are even going to stay. To them, upskilling is not an investment—it's a cost, and one that will always be pushed to the bottom of priorities when push comes to shove.

But according to [Gartner](#), managers who are good at developing their direct reports' skills are known to boost their employees' performance by as much as 26 percent—yet almost half (45%) of managers say they don't feel confident doing so.

So, while upskilling might be a trending topic, adaptability must be the primary focus. The old hire-and-fire model for evolving companies is no longer the socially-responsible approach—and even if it was, the volume of expertise needed simply isn't out there anymore.

### Ensure upskilling doesn't slip through the net

Ambitious people are motivated by personal goals; they are on a journey towards their ideal working life, with all the different stops planned out before them. As a leader, it's almost impossible to know what that journey might look like. If your team member feels like their journey is being set off course by a lack of communication, personal development opportunities being pushed back, or conspicuously absent

pay raises and promotions, they might start to feel lost—and begin looking for another way to get where they need to go.

Of course, while it's one thing to develop a reskilling plan for your employees—it's quite another to prioritize (and stick to) amidst trying times. With the usual barriers of being too busy or with attentions diverted elsewhere, the added challenge of effective communication from behind a screen—and knowing when a team member might be ready to engage in that conversation—is one of the reasons why upskilling might fall by the wayside. Ultimately however, this won't make a difference to your employees. If they feel they aren't being supported, they will start to feel disengaged; bad news for them, their work, and the business at large.

The bottom line? Upskilling and reskilling can save a company more money than the initial investment involved in delivering it. It sounds like a big undertaking, but not if we view it as a continuous investment. To simplify things and work towards a new vision, I would suggest approaching the challenge in the following three ways:

**1/ Invest in analytics and assessment.** While many are spurred on by their own ambitions—are they bringing that drive to work with them? As a business, having robust skills mapping and an individual assessment process in place allows you to set priorities and keep everything objective, ensuring that everyone in your organization feels seen and heard. It also shows you who is most adaptable—and therefore who is worth investing in. While the metrics by which people are assessed are likely to vary according to their role, it is essential that steps to progression are clearly signposted, and that everyone is held to the same standards—wherever their personal strengths may lie.

**2/ Implement new approaches to learning.** Whether you're teaching your team new skills or empowering them to enhance the skills they already have, it's worth breaking the steps down into bite-size chunks on demand, ensuring employees don't get too overwhelmed. You could enlist the support of external coaches when onboarding new hires, develop training in-house, and leverage mobile and remote learning platforms.

**3/ Make feedback transparent.** This is something that managers should always be working on, endeavoring to offer constructive feedback in the moment and making the route to success crystal clear. When taking a new employee into the organization, giving them a coach as an incentive is a great way of showing them that the company is invested in their career.

While it's crucial that things are kept equitable, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to the upskilling and feedback process. Best practice for career development varies from sector to sector, role to role—and of course from person to person. It all depends what stage an employee is at in their career journey—and what their destination might look like. As one of the best ways you could invest in your workforce, both from a personal development and productivity point of view, I anticipate a bright future for those businesses willing to embrace this positive change in 2021.



# TRANSFORMATION Insights

In today's marketplace, organizations are discovering the need to turn their attention inward to find their future talent. At LHH, we help companies see the possibilities in their people. Through assessments, coaching, upskilling and transitioning, companies can realize the untapped potential within their own workforce, resulting in increased productivity, morale, and brand affinity.

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