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# The COVID-19 crisis has opened opportunities for internal hiring and talent development

**VIRGINIA GALT**

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With hiring budgets constrained, many pandemic-battered organizations are, by necessity, catapulting their own employees into new roles rather than recruiting external candidates. These lateral moves and “battlefield promotions” have created unexpected opportunities throughout the ranks, according to human resources trend-spotters.

New leaders have emerged at the management level and future leaders have been identified across the board, including people in front-line positions.

“The crisis has given a number of executives the chance to shine,” says organizational psychologist Guy Beaudin, Toronto-based senior partner with management consulting firm RHR International Inc.

“Many of my clients’ succession charts have been rewritten in the last year. In some cases, the individuals who were pegged as high-potentials disappointed, and talent that had been

overlooked until now were given a platform to show what they can do,” Dr. Beaudin said in an interview.

Recruitment costs are not the only factor driving the increase in internal appointments, he added. “With so much disruption inherent in the current context, boards and management teams are looking to create stability and continuity where they can.”

Since the onset of COVID-19, internal mobility has increased by almost 20 per cent, researchers at the LinkedIn professional-networking platform said in a recent report. A blog written by two of Dr. Beaudin’s Chicago colleagues and posted on RHR’s website in January, 2021, spoke of “the business imperative for creating ‘real-time [talent] development plans’ and moving quickly to address evolving challenges and opportunities as the pandemic plays out. Some situations have required ‘battlefield promotions’ – in a crisis such as COVID-19, there is no playbook,” wrote Grant Levitan, a senior partner with RHR, and accounting manager Jeff Rahman.

But the massive shift to virtual work has also given leaders deeper insights into the depth of talent in their organizations and the opportunity to craft longer-term career plans for standout employees who have demonstrated leadership potential “by stepping up and bringing latent strengths to light” during the pandemic, they wrote.

Half of the 1,500 talent human-resources specialists LinkedIn contacted in a global survey conducted in July, 2020, expected their recruitment budgets to decrease in 2021, while two out of three expected their learning and development budgets to grow or stay the same as more organizations upskill or redeploy existing employees to meet emerging business needs.

The events of the past year have created a sense of urgency in recruitment circles. The imposition of lockdowns to curb the spread of the coronavirus has forced many organizations to reduce operations, cut staff and assign remaining employees to take on unfamiliar roles. Other organizations, particularly in the technology fields, are scrambling to keep up with growing demand, says leadership coach Corina Walsh, founder of St. John’s-based Shift People Development Inc.

Development of in-house talent was a key agenda item at the Human Resources Professionals Association’s virtual annual conference, where Ms. Walsh conducted a session on filling the leadership pipeline from within. External recruitment is time-consuming and costly, said Ms. Walsh, who spoke at the conference in late January. She showcased a Newfoundland-based

firm that specializes in ship-building design as an example of a company that expands employees' skills and knowledge throughout their careers so they can grow with the business.


Five years ago, Genoa Design International Inc., which works with shipbuilders on the design of navy supply ships, ice breakers and ferries, established an academy to keep employees up-to-date on state-of-the-art technical skills but also to provide the broader business education they'll need if they want to advance.

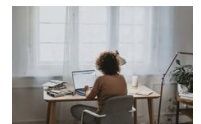
Genoa initially established the academy to develop its own pool of design engineers because it was difficult to compete with Newfoundland's well-heeled oil and gas industry, which was after the same talent base, Genoa CEO Gina Pecore said in an interview. "We quickly realized that Genoa Academy had become part of our competitive strength, not just in recruitment but also with retention and upskilling from within." The company now has 250 employees and will have to hire externally to keep up with the growth. But it will always look internally first to see if there are employees ready to take on new supervisory or leadership roles that open up, Ms. Pecore said. If internal candidates are interested but not quite ready, the company will broaden their experience and prepare them to take advantage of future opportunities.

There are situations where a company needs an outsider with a new perspective, Dr. Beaudin said. But generally, a qualified internal candidate has the advantage of understanding the culture. "If the selection process is done correctly and the right candidate is picked, they come in with a degree of credibility that is hard to replicate in external candidates, hence their ability to hit the ground running."

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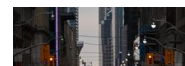
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351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

Phillip Crawley, Publisher