Cultivating Leadership in a Post-Pandemic World

HOW HR PRACTITIONERS CAN APPROACH LEADERSHIP AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN THE NEW EMPLOYMENT ENVIRONMENT

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Executive Summary

Before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, HR leaders were already facing numerous challenges in guiding their organizations, including increasing market consolidation, changes in public policies, and a wave of new technologies. All these factors presented great opportunities to the organization, but also significant disruptions.

According to Fast Company, "The accelerated changes that upended organizations at the start of the pandemic will remain in 2021. But now that workers have adapted to these shifts, HR teams must rethink their talent approaches." Today, we are living in a world where the pressures of post-pandemic life and the continuous development of technology are calling upon HR professionals to take the lead.

This report explores how HR practitioners are approaching leadership and skill development in this unprecedented, high-pressure environment, as well as which tools they are using to help educate their staff, what challenges they are solving with new technologies, and which leadership trends are becoming standard.

Key insights

→ The respondents' **top-three HR leadership trends over the next 12 months include bolstering DE&I (44%), adopting a clear and definitive stance on social issues (44%), and incorporating a skills-based approach into the hiring process (41%)**.

→ **76% of respondents acknowledge that talent shortages are a growing problem**; 25% of respondents also believe they need a better workforce planning solution to manage it.

→ **93% of respondents are strategically reevaluating or transforming their company's approach to skills**; 40% also need or are already introducing a new skills-based strategy.

→ Although **59% of the respondents were highly confident in their talent acquisition strategy** before the COVID-19 pandemic, only **17% are highly confident in its aftermath**.

→ Although **61% were highly confident in their talent management strategy** before the COVID-19 pandemic, only **19% are highly confident in its aftermath**.

→ **55% of the companies surveyed are strategically reevaluating or transforming their company's approach to talent acquisition** today; among this group, nearly half **(49%) are focusing more on skills-based hiring** and less on candidates' educational backgrounds.

→ **59% of the companies surveyed are strategically reevaluating or transforming their company's** approach to talent management today.

→ Nearly **half of respondents claim changes in public policies and regulations (44%)** are challenges they faced before the COVID-19 pandemic that continue to be challenges for their HR leadership today.

→ Although **68% of the respondents claim they do not have a strong culture of learning and development** (L&D), **53% are developing a stronger culture of L&D now.**

→ Most respondents **rate their organizations' leadership development practices as good (40%)**—they are improving—**or exceptional (31%)**—they are mature.

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7 of the **Top 10 Forbes Major Banks**

Delta Air Lines: Pivoting in the Face of a Pandemic

Before Covid struck, Delta Air Lines used Avature to deliver an exceptional candidate experience in line with their brand, as well as to recruit for around 7,000 jobs.

When Covid hit, Delta switched from using Avature for hiring to leveraging the platform to activate an innovative internal mobility program in record time. They successfully redeployed their workforce, avoiding involuntary furloughs of U.S.-based employees while allowing them to nurture new skills.

"One of the huge benefits of Avature is that **it's so configurable** - not only to a company's processes, but what the company is going through at a certain time."

**— Jeri Lynn Wilson**
TA Operations Leader

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About the respondents

The WBR Insights research team surveyed 100 HR and talent leaders from across the U.S. and Canada to generate the results featured in this report.
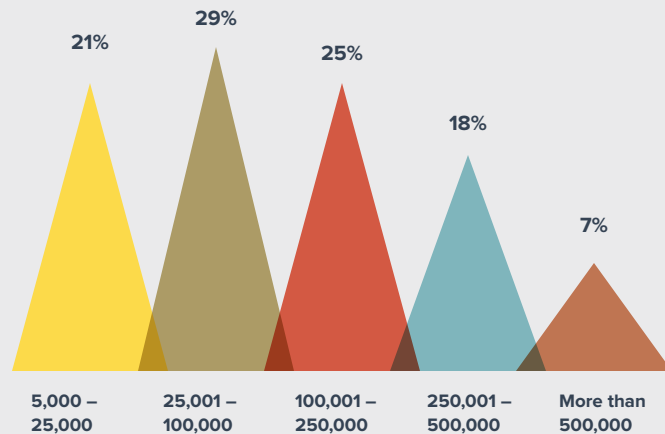
What is your industry?

- ■ Business & Professional Services
- ■ Healthcare
- ■ Life Sciences
- ■ Technology/Hi-Tech
- ■ Manufacturing
- ■ Finance/Insurance/Real Estate
- ■ Wholesale & Retail
- ■ Travel & Hospitality
- ■ Energy/Utilities

11% 11% 11% 11% 11% 11% 11% 10% 11% 13%
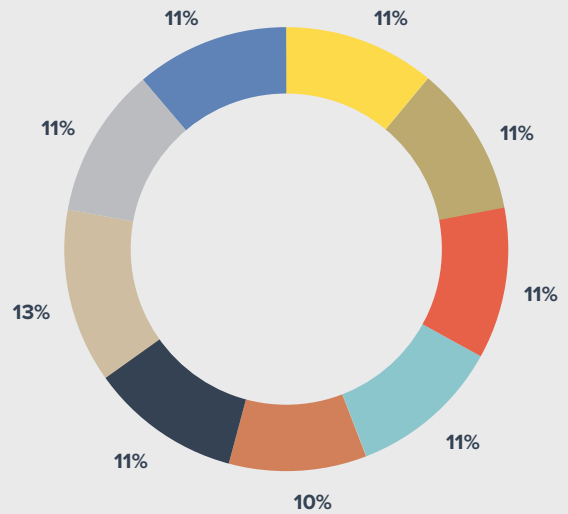
The respondents represent organizations from a variety of industries ranging from professional services and healthcare to travel and energy.

How many employees does your company have?

21% — 5,000 – 25,000
29% — 25,001 – 100,000
25% — 100,001 – 250,000
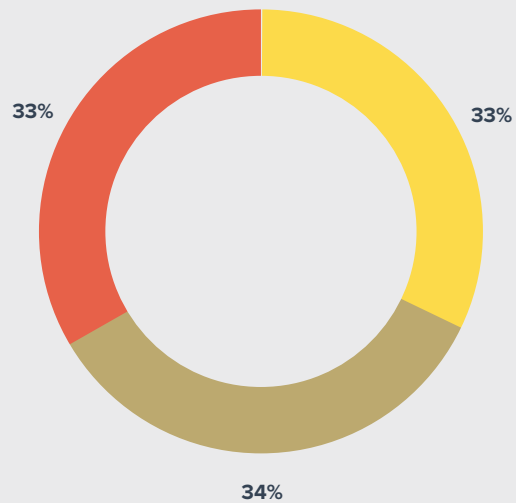18% — 250,001 – 500,000
7% — More than 500,000

The organizations represented in this study vary in size. Exactly half of the organizations have either 100,000 employees or more, including 7% which have more than 500,000 employees.

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About the respondents

What is your role?

- Talent Acquisition
- Human Resources
- People

33%

33%

34%

The respondents are almost evenly split in their roles. In each case, about one-third of the respondents have a role in talent acquisition (TA), human resources (HR), or people management.

What is your seniority?

- C-Suite
- Vice President
- Department Head
- Director

13%

20%

11%

56%
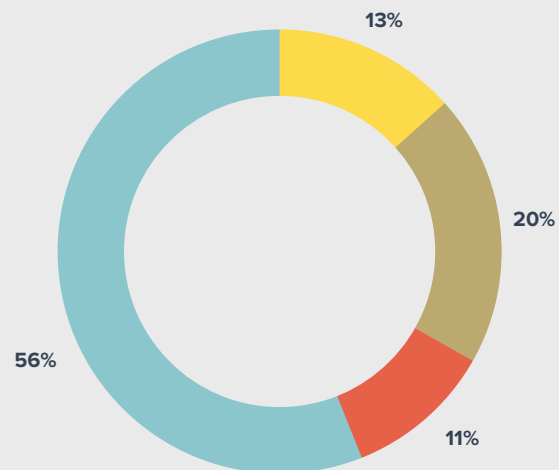
At 56%, most of the respondents are directors. Meanwhile, 20% of the respondents are vice presidents, 13% are C-suite executives, and 11% are department heads.

HR leaders set focus to skills-based hiring

The COVID-19 pandemic levied heavy challenges in almost every industry. While some sectors were more impacted than others, HR and talent management staff faced a unique set of challenges. Namely, they had to lead the organization in rapid change management to adapt the workforce to new working models, such as remote work.

But COVID-19 also had a significant impact on the labor market. While the unemployment rate increased due to business closures, other types of businesses struggled to find the talent they needed. Now, many businesses are still in the heart of that struggle, even as many sectors of the economy continue to re-open.

To what extent are talent shortages affecting your organization?

Talent shortages are a growing problem for which we need a better workforce planning solution. **25%**

Talent shortages are a growing problem, but our existing workforce planning solutions are sufficient to overcome it. **51%**

Talent shortages are not a growing problem at our organization. **24%**

At 76%, most of the respondents say that talent shortages are a growing problem for their organizations. And while 51% of the respondents say they have workforce planning solutions that are adequate for addressing the challenge, 25% say they require a better workforce planning solution.

This need for new workforce technology solutions is being driven, in part, by changing working and employment habits among workers. Many workers who switched to working from home during the pandemic would like to continue to do so. Younger, more tech-savvy employees are also entering the market. They expect to be able to engage with companies through their preferred channels and they are searching for organizations that can help them grow in their careers.

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**HR leaders set focus
to skills-based hiring**

Are you strategically reevaluating or transforming your company's approach to skills?

Yes, and we need or are introducing a
new skills-based strategy.

40%

Yes, but our existing skills-based strategy
is sufficient to accomplish this.

53%

No, we are not strategically reevalutaing
or transforming our company's approach
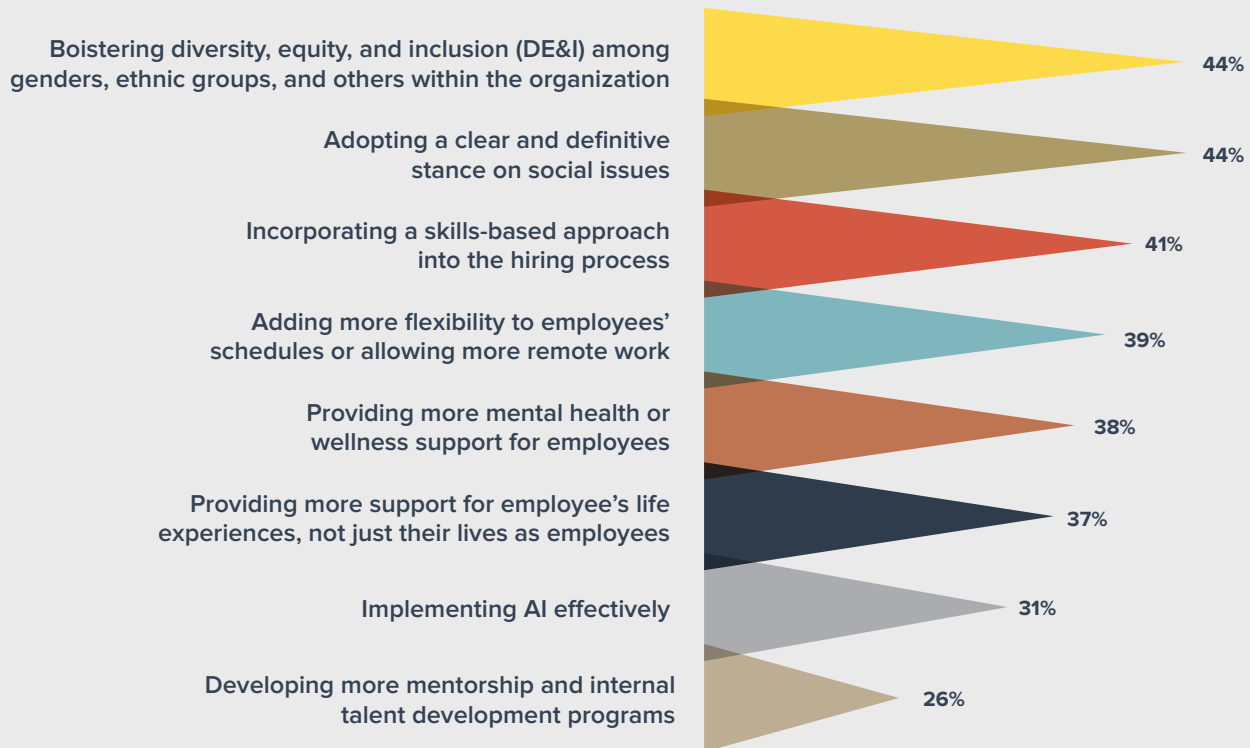to skills at this time.

7%

Thankfully, most organizations are responding to these changes. For example, 93% of the organizations surveyed say they are strategically reevaluating or transforming their company's approach to skills. Most organizations (53%) say their existing skills-based strategy is sufficient to accomplish this, but 40% say they must introduce a new skills-based strategy.

This is good news for prospective employees, especially those that may be considering careers in new sectors. Many workers don't realize that the skills they obtain in one position may be relevant to another. Companies that focus on skills-based hiring can provide more opportunities to employees who are looking for career changes, and this can substantially increase the talent pool.

HR leaders set focus to skills-based hiring

Which of the following HR leadership trends is your organization considering as part of its HR strategy over the next 12 months?

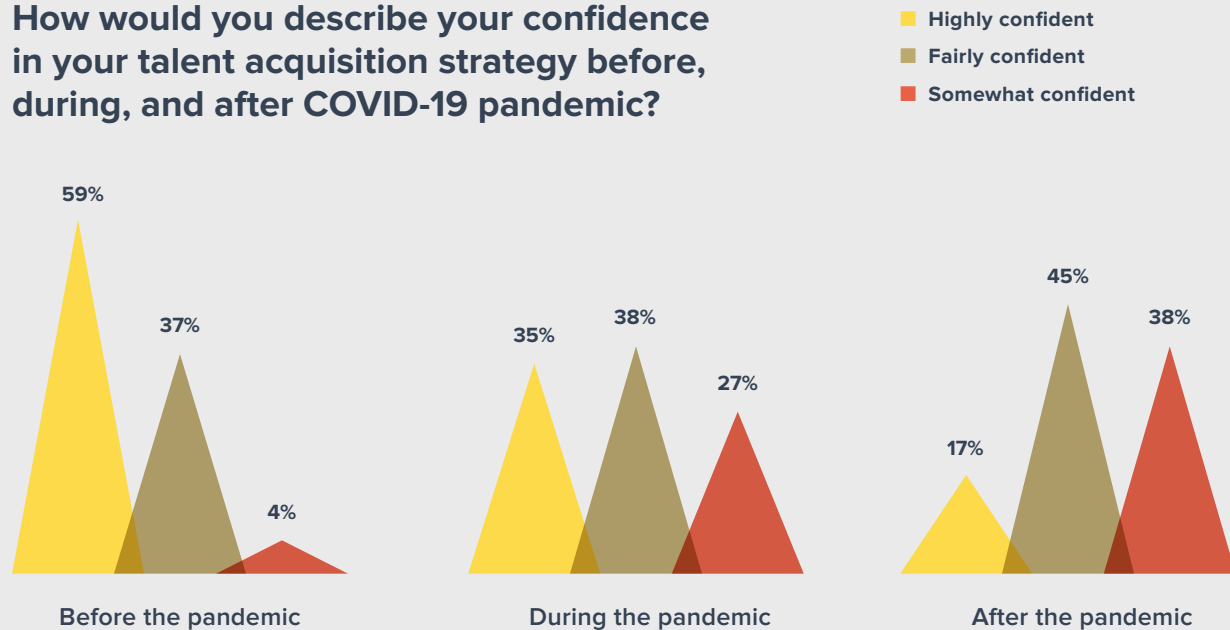| Trend	Percentage
Boistering diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) among genders, ethnic groups, and others within the organization	44%
Adopting a clear and definitive stance on social issues	44%
Incorporating a skills-based approach into the hiring process	41%
Adding more flexibility to employees' schedules or allowing more remote work	39%
Providing more mental health or wellness support for employees	38%
Providing more support for employee's life experiences, not just their lives as employees	37%
Implementing AI effectively	31%
Developing more mentorship and internal talent development programs	26%

The organizations surveyed are also considering a range of HR leadership trends as part of their HR strategies over the next 12 months. Many of these trends could significantly impact and improve the way they attract and empower their employees.

For example, 41% of the organizations surveyed say incorporating a skills-based approach to the hiring process is one of the top three HR trends they considering. And in each case, 44% of respondents consider bolstering DE&I within the organization and adopting a clear and more definitive stance on social issues are top-three trends. Over one-third of the respondents also consider flexible scheduling, mental health and wellness support, and providing more support for employees' life experiences to be significant trends.

Companies will rethink talent acquisition and management

Due to the significant changes within the employment landscape, the talent acquisition approaches that worked just two years ago are far less effective today. Skilled workers are more empowered than ever to find careers that suit both their professional growth needs as well as their lifestyle needs. Several studies have also revealed that many workers are willing to turn down positions if they don't meet certain requirements, such as the ability to work from home at least part of the time.

How would you describe your confidence in your talent acquisition strategy before, during, and after COVID-19 pandemic?

- Highly confident
- Fairly confident
- Somewhat confident

Before the pandemic: 59%, 37%, 4%

During the pandemic: 35%, 38%, 27%

After the pandemic: 17%, 45%, 38%

Considering these changes, organizations have been forced to rethink their talent acquisition strategies. The results of this survey reveal a clear decline in organizations' confidence as it pertains to their TA programs.

For example, 59% of the respondents say they were highly confident in their organization's talent acquisition strategy before the pandemic, while another 37% say they were fairly confident. Since the pandemic has begun to subside, the respondents' confidence in their talent acquisition strategies has also declined. Now, only 17% of the respondents say they are highly confident in their organization's talent acquisition strategy and 45% say they are fairly confident. More than one-third of the respondents (38%) say they are only somewhat confident in their strategies.

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Companies will rethink talent acquisition and management

What the 17% of respondents who are "highly confident" in their post-pandemic TA strategies have to say about HR leadership trends in the next 12 months.

"HR needs to focus on analytics. A great deal of development can be achieved with the help of smart analytics in the HR department." - **Vice president, wholesale & retail company**

"Discovering how much digitization is necessary to maintain a healthy workforce and balance within the organization will be imperative. – **Director, life sciences company**

"The use of data in talent and skill identification will be the most significant shift."- **C-suite executive, technology company**

"Re-designing the workforce is an important trend that every HR department will ponder over and find solutions for." – **Director, technology company**

"Effectively incorporating technology into HR will be a big part of the agenda, and it will continue to be in the next 12 months."– **C-suite executive, manufacturing company**

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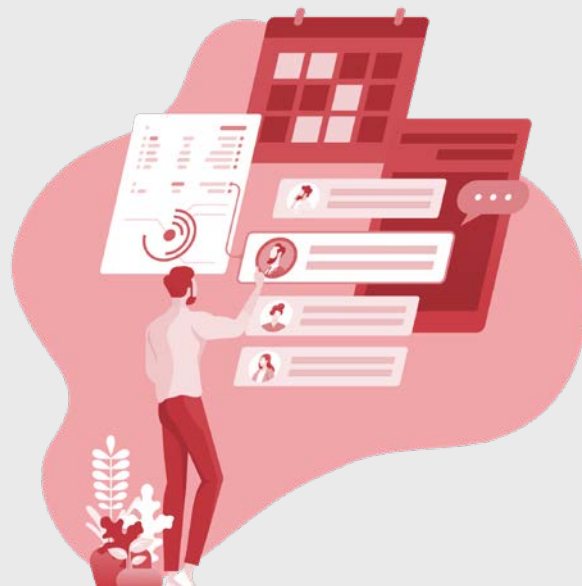
Companies will rethink talent acquisition and management

For some organizations, regaining confidence in their TA efforts will simply be a matter of incorporating the right technology or shifting workflows to meet new hiring objectives. Others may need to conduct a strategic overhaul, adjusting how they search for, acquire, and nurture talent.

Are you strategically reevaluating or transforming your company's approach to talent acquisition today?
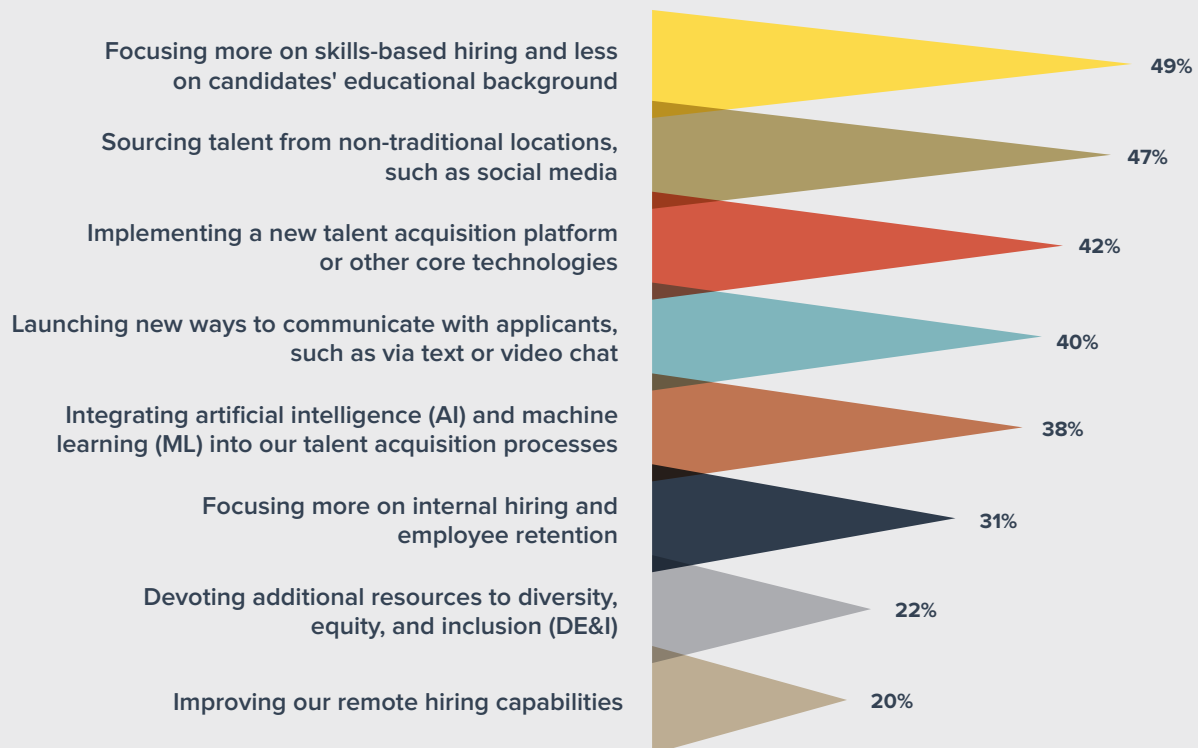
■ Yes
■ No

45%

55%
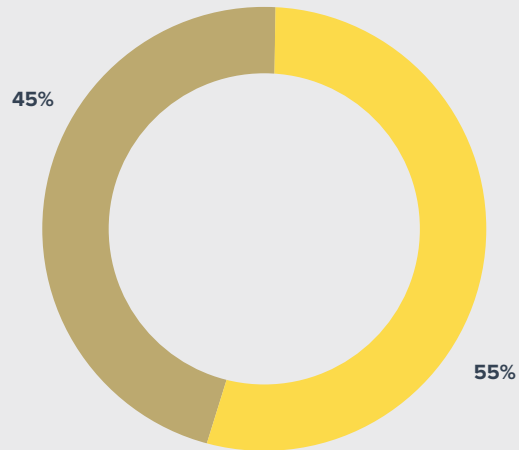
Indeed, 55% of the respondents say they are strategically reevaluating or transforming their company's approach to talent acquisition. These organizations will likely be reviewing reports over the previous year, changing their focus, and auditing their talent acquisition technologies to meet the demands of tomorrow's workforce.

Companies will rethink talent acquisition and management

Since you said "Yes" what ideas are you considering for improving your company's approch to talent acquisition?

Idea	Percentage
Focusing more on skills-based hiring and less on candidates' educational background	49%
Sourcing talent from non-traditional locations, such as social media	47%
Implementing a new talent acquisition platform or other core technologies	42%
Launching new ways to communicate with applicants, such as via text or video chat	40%
Integrating artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) into our talent acquisition processes	38%
Focusing more on internal hiring and employee retention	31%
Devoting additional resources to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I)	22%
Improving our remote hiring capabilities	20%

Almost half of these respondents (49%) say they are focusing on more skills-based hiring and less on candidates' educational backgrounds.

As we've noted, this represents a growing trend among TA and HR professionals as a way to create wider talent pools and focus on hires that fill mission-critical needs. For decades, educational credentials have been the driving factor in employment decisions. And although a college degree is still a requirement for many positions, organizations are realizing that hiring candidates from other sectors can better serve their own by infusing it with new perspectives and innovative ideas.

The clearest example of the skills-based hiring phenomenon is the massive demand for technology skills encompassing almost every industry.
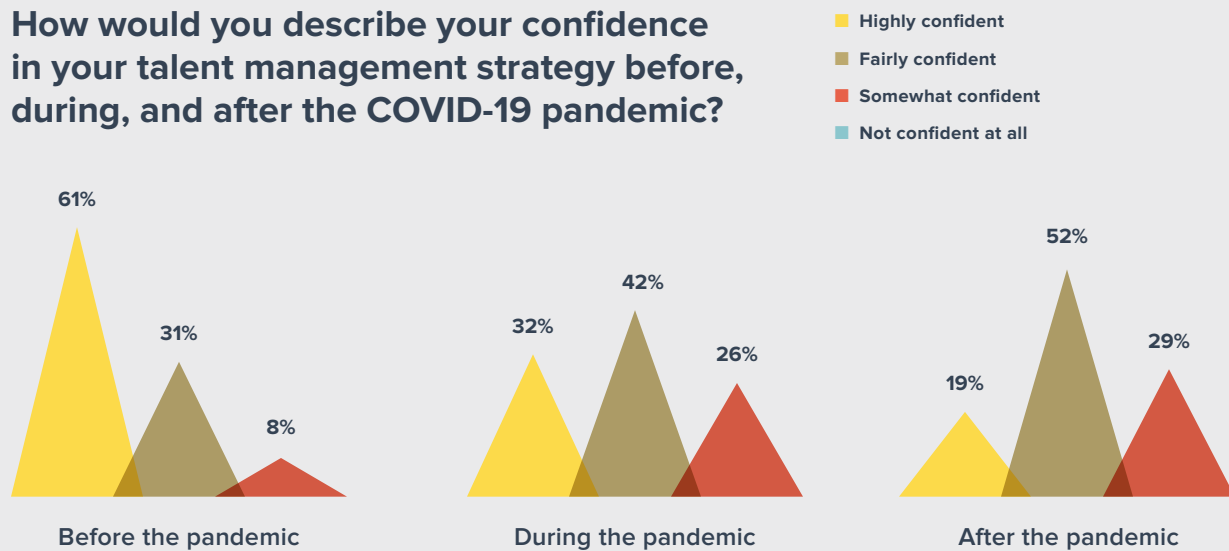
Companies will rethink talent acquisition and management

Organizations are also turning to non-traditional channels to find candidates for positions. According to this study, 47% of these respondents are turning to channels like social media to find candidates. It's also worth noting that 40% of these respondents are adopting new ways to communicate with candidates, such as through text and video chat.

These changes are representative of a shift within some organizations to make applying for a job more accessible and streamlined for candidates. Communicating with candidates via SMS, and even on social media messaging apps, can also make the job application process less cumbersome and create opportunities to reach more candidates.

Finally, 42% of respondents who are strategically reevaluating or transforming their company's approach to TA today are implementing new core technologies, such as talent acquisition platforms, as part of their new TA strategy. Companies that are still dependent upon legacy systems, standard application forms, and email-based hiring may still acquire candidates, but managing the candidate experience is becoming more challenging than ever. A robust talent acquisition platform can introduce automation into the talent management process, help HR staff keep all their candidate communications organized, and more.

How would you describe your confidence in your talent management strategy before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic?

- 🟨 Highly confident
- 🟫 Fairly confident
- 🟥 Somewhat confident
- 🟦 Not confident at all

Before the pandemic
61% 31% 8%

During the pandemic
32% 42% 26%

After the pandemic
19% 52% 29%

The results of the next question reaffirm many of the respondents' needs for a new talent management program. Although 61% of the respondents say they were highly confident in their talent management strategy before the pandemic, only 19% can say the same about their talent management strategy after the pandemic.

Companies will rethink talent acquisition and management

Are you strategically reevaluating or transforming your company's approach to talent management today?

■ Yes
■ No

41%

59%
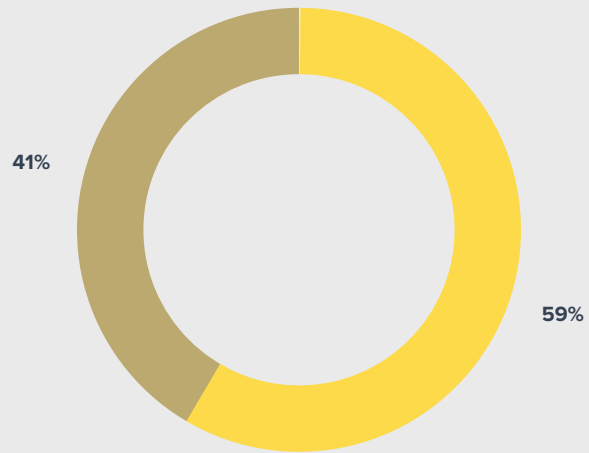
As such, 59% of the respondents are strategically reevaluating or transforming their company's approach to talent management. Although most respondents (52%) are still fairly confident in their strategies, the loss of confidence warrants a reassessment of the organization's goals, processes, and technologies.

Today, most companies need an end-to-end talent management strategy that is empowered with technology. To cultivate leadership within the organization, HR professionals must be able to track and monitor employees as they progress in their careers and acquire new skills. With a robust talent management platform in place, organizations will have more opportunities to identify employees who would thrive in leadership positions. They'll also be able to reduce employee churn by providing team members with more opportunities to grow within the company.

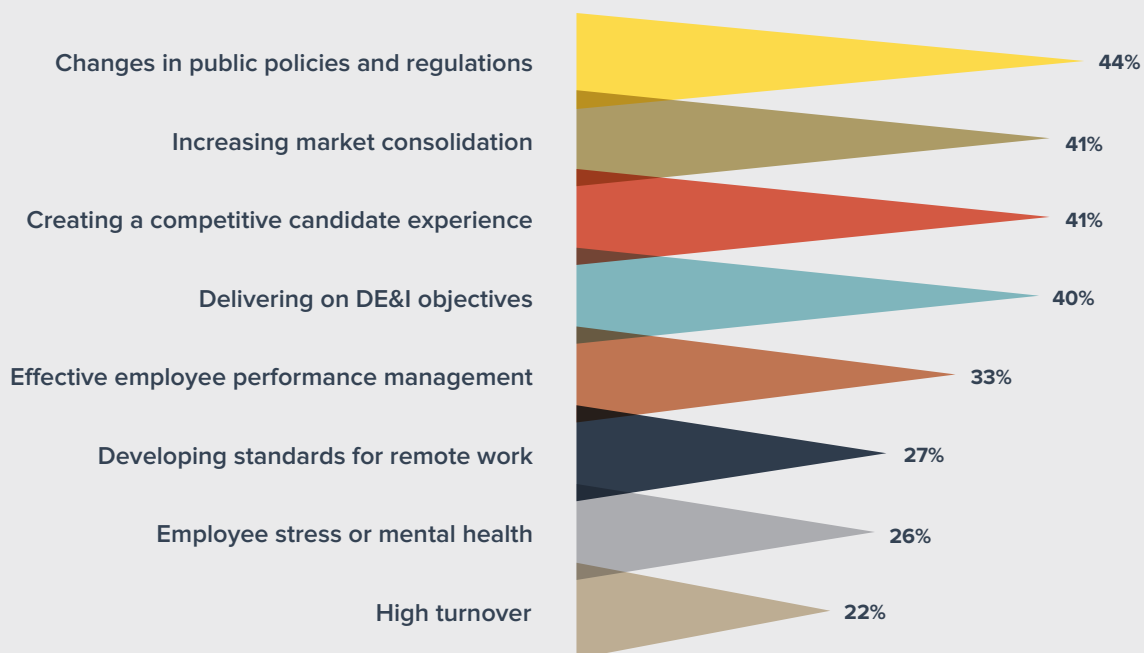**INSIGHTS**
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Most organizations are strengthening their L&D strategies

Despite the significant and unprecedented disruptions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, some trends within HR and TA departments have been ongoing. Many millennial employees are now approaching their peak earning years and are entering leadership positions, and the technology-native generation Z is already beginning to enter the workforce. These new demographics will forever change what is expected of the candidate experience.

Marketing consolidations, changes in regulations, and an increase in awareness for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) are also creating both challenges and opportunities.

What challenges were you facing before the Covid-19 pandemic that continue to be challenges for your HR leadership today?

Challenge	Percentage
Changes in public policies and regulations	44%
Increasing market consolidation	41%
Creating a competitive candidate experience	41%
Delivering on DE&I objectives	40%
Effective employee performance management	33%
Developing standards for remote work	27%
Employee stress or mental health	26%
High turnover	22%

A significant number of the respondents say they were already challenged by changes in public policies and regulations (44%), increasing market consolidation (41%), creating a competitive candidate experience (41%), and delivering on DE&I objectives before the pandemic struck. They also say they are still challenged by these initiatives today.

Most organizations are strengthening their L&D strategies

Which HR challenges have you successfully solved, or do you expect to solve, with the help of new technology?

| Challenge	Percentage
Increasing market consolidation	40%
High turnover	38%
Effective employee performance management	38%
Employee stress or mental health	37%
Changes in public policies and regulations	35%
Delivering on DE&I objectives	32%
Developing standards for remote work	28%
Creating a competitive candidate experience	26%

Many of the respondents expect to resolve these challenges soon if they haven't already. For example, 40% of the respondents say they have either solved or will solve their challenges related to increasing market consolidation. Over one-third of the respondents are confident in their ability to solve other challenges, such as high turnover (38%), effective employee performance management (38%), and employee stress and mental health (37%).

Still, most respondents say they haven't solved or don't expect to solve any of the challenges presented to them in the survey. Several of the challenges the respondents identified as existing before the pandemic are also challenges that they are struggling to solve today. For example, only 26% of the respondents are confident that they have created or will create a competitive candidate experience, and only 32% of the respondents are confident about delivering on their DE&I objectives.

**Most organizations
are strengthening their
L&D strategies**

Does your organization have a strong culture of learning and development (L&D)?

■ **Yes, we have a strong culture of L&D.**

■ **No, but we are developing a stronger culture of L&D**.

■ **No, and we are not developing a stronger culture of L&D.**

53%

32%

15%
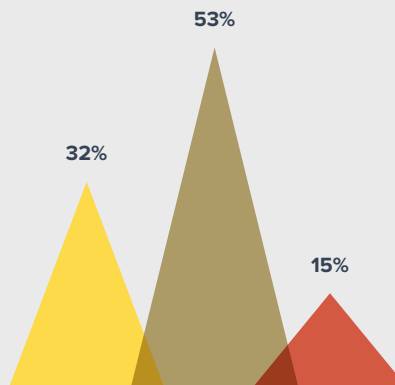
Similarly, most respondents (68%) say they don't currently have a strong culture of learning and development, although 53% of the respondents say they are working on developing a stronger one. Only 15% of the respondents are not developing a stronger culture of L&D.

This suggests that most organizations recognize the importance of L&D for cultivating leadership within the organization and for providing the organization with numerous other benefits.

**Most organizations
are strengthening their
L&D strategies**

Since you have a strong culture of L&D, does your company leadership actively champion L&D?

■ Yes
■ No

25%

75%
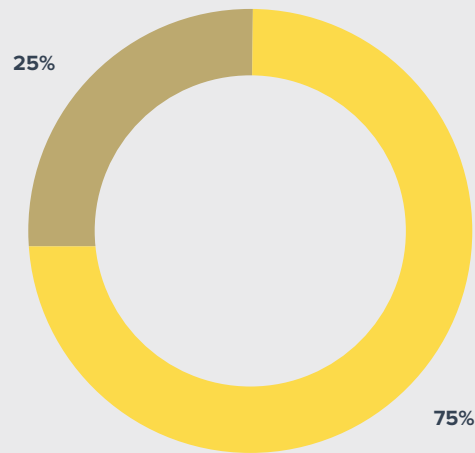
Creating a strong foundation for L&D can start at the grassroots level, but it requires buy-in from leadership to be truly effective. Not surprisingly, 75% of the respondents who rate their L&D cultures as "strong" say their organizations' leadership actively champions L&D.

Workplace L&D often requires organizations to allocate time and resources to educate employees, but evidence suggests that those investments pay dividends. L&D can make employees more effective in the workplace, but it can also help employees discover new talents and improve points of weakness, so they are more confident in their jobs. L&D can also provide employees with more opportunities to grow and expand their careers.

L&D is essential for organizations that intend to promote leaders internally rather than hire them externally. Promoting internally can help the organization save on costs, but it can also motivate employees to stay at their jobs and seek advancement. Companies that have robust internal hiring practices, mentorship programs, on-the-job learning opportunities, and other incentives typically have much stronger employee retention than companies that don't.

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**Most organizations
are strengthening their
L&D strategies**

How would you rate your organizations'
leadership development practices?

- ■ Exceptional—our leadership
  development practices are mature.

- ■ Good—our leadership development
  practices are improving.

- ■ Needs Improvement—our leadership
  development practices are lacking.

- ■ Poor—our leadership development
  practices are minimal or non-existent.

40%

31%

28%

1%
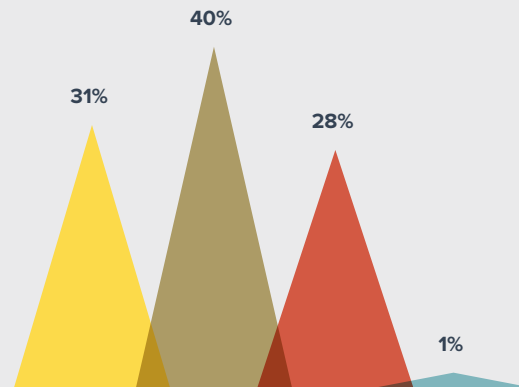
Researchers asked the respondents to rate their organizations' leadership development practices, and the results mirror the responses on L&D. At 31%, less than one-third of the respondents believe their leadership and development practices are "exceptional," and therefore mature. Most of the other respondents say their leadership development practices are improving, but they have not reached a level they are confident in yet.

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Conclusion: Inclusivity, technology, and employee growth will drive talent strategies

Leadership development, on-the-job learning, and talent acquisition are interlinked, so designing an organizational strategy that encompasses all three is imperative for organizations that wish to hire the best talent and keep essential skills within the company. Skilled and educated workers have more opportunities than ever to switch jobs, and the hiring market is still so tight that employees are being offered monetary incentives to leave their current positions and move to a new company.

In written responses, the respondents believe that HR and TA departments should onboard new technologies to facilitate new hiring and working models. Multiple respondents say that "digitization" and "automation" will be essential to build new talent acquisition and management practices, and it could help HR teams streamline their operations.

But the respondents also agree that HR departments need to take care of their employees, provide them with ample opportunities to grow, and create opportunities for employee feedback. "Our industry has been severely pressurized in the past one year and could be in the future," says an HR director at a healthcare organization. "Listening to your employees and taking all their needs into consideration is essential."

Other respondents are focusing heavily on diversity and inclusiveness, as they believe it will be key to finding the innovative talent they need to stand out in the marketplace.

"Diversifying leadership talent and building a stronger future will play a part here," says a manufacturing VP. Similarly, a TA director at a technology company says it is important for HR teams to focus on "creating programs that will ensure people from diverse walks of life can have access to opportunities as equally as others."

Other respondents also believe that employee development will be key in today's competitive hiring environment, so organizations that are lacking in their learning and development strategies should focus on solutions. Judging by these responses, it's clear that HR teams face several challenges in changing their strategies to meet the organization's post-pandemic needs. Only those organizations that can build an inclusive culture and foster employee growth will be well-positioned to take on future challenges.

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Key
Suggestions

→ **Consider adopting a skills-based hiring strategy** if you haven't already. This could help you significantly expand your talent pools, and it could improve the rate at which you acquire candidates with much-needed skills.

→ **Incorporate analytics, artificial intelligence, automation, and other technologies into your HR processes.** New solutions may be required to help you identify candidates with the right skills, and they will be necessary for you to compete with other organizations for top-tier talent.

→ **Conduct an audit of your current workforce planning solutions** to determine if they will help you achieve your hiring and talent development goals. Most respondents say talent shortages will continue to affect their organizations.

→ **Search for talent from non-traditional locations and implement ways to communicate** with candidates over non-traditional channels **like SMS and social media.**

→ **Evaluate your learning and development strategy** to determine if it is effective in promoting employee retention. Today's employees want to be able to grow in the workplace, and they're more likely to stay within the company if they can find opportunities for advancement.

→ When managing change to talent acquisition, talent management, and L&D, **find individuals within your company leadership to champion new strategies.**.

→ **Review your strategies regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion.** Companies that hire diverse leaders and candidates have better outcomes and are more innovative.

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