Crisis-Proofing Your Talent Processes

The COVID-19 pandemic is disrupting many talent processes. But it doesn’t need to stop them. In fact, now is the opportune moment to review, re-evaluate and redesign how you go about delivering the talent your organization needs.

This is about far more than converting in-person processes to virtual formats. It is about identifying the leaders who will lead our organizations and our societies through the immediate crisis and down the road to recovery. In this way, the HR function and the CHRO in particular will have a critical role to play in managing the current situation and in keeping their organizations two steps ahead.

What principles do you need to apply, and what pitfalls should you avoid, when creating virtual talent processes? How can you create experiences that not only withstand the current crisis but also enable you to build and accelerate your workforce of the future?
New epoch, new leaders

Leadership greatness is forged in the heat of adversity—and right now, the world is experiencing extreme levels of upheaval to match and potentially exceed those of other epoch-changing events such as the global financial crisis (2007-08), the September 11 attacks (2001) and the end of the Cold War (1991). Indeed, UN Secretary General António Guterres recently warned that the coronavirus outbreak is the biggest challenge the world has faced since World War Two.

At this time of unprecedented disruption, both for businesses and for humanity, we can expect to see an extremely broad spectrum of responses from our leaders. Already we are hearing from organizations at the forefront of this crisis that their leaders are vacillating between being led by fear and by purpose, with obviously very different results.

In the developmental heat of the situation, we need and are likely to see a new breed of effective leader emerge. This leader will need to:

- Step into development rather than stepping away.
- Embrace uncertainty.
- Navigate complexity.
- Lead with empathy, curiosity, passion.
- Be fast, decisive and bold.
- Run towards the fire.

“There is no better time to observe the quality of leaders than when seismic challenges are rocking their world.”
Now is the opportune moment

Businesses everywhere will face existential threats in the coming weeks and months. For many, the survival of their entire industry could be at stake. In such an environment, it may be natural for organizations to want to abandon or postpone work devoted to talent management issues.

But the truth is that there is no better time to review and shift talent management practices. Now is the opportune moment for organizations to gain complete clarity, knowledge and intimacy of their leaders so that they can answer the killer questions of talent management:

1. What do we have? Or What is our current supply and demand?
2. What do we need? Or What is our immediate and future demand?

These questions, concerning talent supply and demand, will be fundamental to the survival of many businesses in the coming weeks and months. And, just as the current situation is forcing companies to make rapid, real-time adjustments in their supply chain, so all of us need to be prepared to constantly reassess our supply and demand of talent.

That’s why we are advising our clients not to postpone their talent reviews but to conduct them more frequently than ever. This is certainly not the time to get bogged down in bureaucracy. So rather than focusing on processes and tools, it’s best to use this opportunity to reflect on the core purpose of talent management, namely establishing which leaders will lead your organization back to recovery and beyond.

The advantage you have is that the current environment is an ideal one for assessing your leadership—for there can be no better time to observe the quality of your leaders than when seismic challenges are rocking their world.

“Now is the opportune moment for organizations to gain complete clarity, knowledge and intimacy of their leaders so they can answer the killer questions of talent management.”
Virtual processes work

Virtual connectivity has been growing exponentially for many years. Now suddenly it is the new normal. It is triggering us to explore new ways of socializing, of playing sports, and even of showing love and appreciation at a higher rate than ever before. And it is triggering us to explore new ways of working too. Can your talent management function meet the challenge?

You shouldn’t have to look too far to find examples of successful adaptation. Most talent acquisition teams have spent years honing their virtual processes, using technology to deliver quality hires with greater efficiency, candidate experience and at lower cost. Many learning and development programs are now conducted remotely rather than face to face, including at one global oil and gas company, where last year they began using virtual reality to develop their new generation of leaders. And here at Korn Ferry, we have been delivering virtual assessments with clients globally every day for many years.

It is true that when many of us think about talent reviews, however, we are likely to picture an in-person meeting. But that doesn’t mean that a fully virtual version is not feasible. In some cases, it may even be preferable.

Here are some of the key principles of effective virtual delivery that we recently applied when calibrating the top 300 leaders of one of our clients in the equivalent of a day (without meeting physically):

- Make it simple.
- Keep sessions short and focused.
- Include practical and interactive components.
- Incorporate elements that create emotional connection on a human level.
New paradigm for building trust

Why have organizations been slower to move some HR processes to a virtual environment than others? In conversations we have with our clients, we see a clear bias towards face-to-face interactions for processes such as talent reviews and senior executive coaching because it is believed that physical presence is required in order to create intimacy.

Our experiences cast doubt on this belief. For example, we recently conducted fully virtual talent reviews of the top 300 leaders of one of our clients. Many of the leaders, we discovered, felt liberated by the virtual environment. It provided a safe space in which they could be curious, open to different views and willing to engage in dialog, rather than seeing the conversation as a competition, which can often happen in traditional face-to-face meetings.

Clearly, it is possible to create intimacy in a virtual environment. But to do it, we must find new ways to build credibility, reliability and trust. This requires a significant shift in mindset. Technology can also help, with many platforms including features and functionality that make it easy for participants to connect, share and reach out.
The COVID-19 crisis is a moment of truth for leadership. The unprecedented challenges and unpredictability of the current situation will enable many leaders to stand up and shine. Others will inevitably be found to lack certain capabilities that are considered mandatory for the executive committee.

In our experience, even organizations that have the right data may be using it to make wrong decisions. One common issue is when businesses dismiss information that goes against existing viewpoints, which can often be unsound. For example, many managers conflate performance with future potential. They also tend to favor people who are politically astute, highly networked, and personally congenial, even though they may lack the capabilities for a leadership role.

Now more than ever, leaders need the courage to make evidence-based decisions and the humility to challenge their own view of talent, especially when the data contradicts their beliefs.
The global pandemic will touch and change virtually every area of every business. Follow these four principles to create talent processes that can withstand the current crisis and give you the leaders who will steer your organization to future success.

1. **Seize the moment**
   
   There is no business as usual anymore. With leadership now at the front and center of everyone’s minds, you have an ideal opportunity to redefine and refine your talent processes, especially those that have been working less effectively.

2. **Measure what matters**
   
   The COVID-19 crisis has revealed clear differences between existing leaders. Some are rapidly figuring out new solutions to the unprecedented challenges their organizations face. Others are falling back on old playbooks, which may or may not work in the present environment. This highlights the need to ensure your leaders have the right capabilities—build success profiles of the leaders you need and measure against them.

3. **Update your data**
   
   As we saw above, the extreme pressures of the current situation will throw your leaders in a new light, revealing things about them you did not know before. People you thought of as high potentials may prove disappointing. Others may establish themselves as genuine successors. Using updated criteria to reassess your leaders, whether through formal assessments or informal talent discussions, will help you make the most of this new information and build a better workforce for the future.

4. **Virtual by design, not by default**
   
   Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, it is vital when moving into a virtual environment that you do not simply take the talent processes of the past and reinsert them into a different channel. To succeed, you need to recognize that this is completely new way of engaging and interacting with people—and you need to redesign your processes accordingly.