

Perspectives



The Apprenticeship Conundrum

Professional services firms rely heavily on an “apprenticeship” model for career development. But that may be hindering diversity and inclusion goals.



KORN FERRY





The problem:

The way professional services firms assign workers to projects, known as experience management, creates unintended obstacles to diversity and inclusion.

Why it matters:

Professional services firms are among the most active recruiters of underrepresented talent, but they have had trouble retaining and advancing that talent.

The solution:

Reframe experience management around a deployment model that rewards leaders for developing talent across functions, industries, and practices.

It was as if the firm was running to stand still. Every year it hired a greater number of underrepresented talent than the year before. But every year, the firm also lost more underrepresented talent than the year before. The result was a stubborn inability to significantly increase the overall representation of such talent in the firm.

The challenge isn't unique to any industry, but it is more pronounced among professional services firms, in part because they are among the most active recruiters of underrepresented talent, hiring tens of thousands of these employees annually. Michele Parmelee, the deputy CEO and global chief people and purpose officer at Deloitte, says the industry stands out to this worker population in particular because of its entrepreneurial nature and the ability it affords them to shape their own careers. "It's the best avenue for talent to learn as much as possible as fast as possible," she says.

Yet, despite regularly ranking among the best workplaces for underrepresented talent, professional services firms have had trouble advancing people to senior and executive leadership ranks. While many factors contribute to that dynamic, a growing body of evidence suggests one of the main reasons is how these firms manage the talent experience.

Because professional services firms rely heavily on an “apprenticeship model,” where career advancement is often a function of the projects to which talent is assigned, the onus is on the individual to create their own personal networks and find internal mentors and sponsors, says Juan Pablo Gonzalez, a Korn Ferry senior client partner and sector leader for the firm’s Professional Services practice. As a result, he says, teams tend to form organically, with the same people continuing to do the same type of work together. Put another way, managers want to keep reliable performers on the same projects, and employees want to build their reputations by working in areas and with people they know well.

But that makes it hard for people to move around and get the experience and recognition they need to advance in their careers, says Gonzalez. “This type of model inadvertently creates barriers to the development, advancement, and engagement of underrepresented groups,” he says.

Those barriers have suddenly become larger in light of the pandemic and the shift to remote work. Underrepresented talent was

“The apprenticeship model inadvertently creates barriers to the advancement and engagement of underrepresented groups.”

already disadvantaged when it comes to access to critical experiences, such as profit and loss responsibility, and mentors who can show them the hidden rules to success in an organization—and they are even more so now. “Ask any managing partner in a professional services firm how they achieved success, and they will tell you stories about the mentors and teams that shaped their careers,” says Gonzalez.

When viewed through that prism, and against the backdrop of the pandemic and the purpose movement, Gonzalez says there is an immense opportunity for professional services firms to leverage their talent experience capabilities to advance diversity and inclusion efforts.



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Not long after the pandemic hit, Booz Allen Hamilton launched a new internal career hub along with a requirement for all employees to update their digital profiles, including experience, skills, and certifications. Recognizing that building natural networks and getting staffed in a remote environment was going to be more challenging for employees, the firm doubled down on digital profiles as a way to quickly and easily match talent to projects, says Aimee George Leary, senior vice president of talent strategy at Booz Allen.

Data supplied by the firm shows that from July to December, employees conducted more than 25,000 internal job searches per month. The software's matching algorithm winnowed that figure down by recommending roughly 1,350 employees per month to open positions, resulting in an average of 230 applications. "The goal is to get more deliberate about engaging the active population applying for new opportunities," says George Leary.

She readily admits, however, part of the challenge is that a lot of project staffing needs take place in a gray area. People are pulled into projects based on demand and availability and time constraints that preclude the possibility of a formal search. Put another way, the official channels for advancement—human resources counselors, employee resource groups, learning and development programs, talent accelerators, and the like—will only go so far. By extension, that means for professional services firms to really build a pipeline of qualified but underrepresented talent capable of ascending into the upper ranks, "there has to be a clear intentionality on the part of leaders to make it happen," says George Leary.

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Ways to Drive Diversity Through Experience

The “apprenticeship” model employed by professional services firms can inadvertently create barriers to advancing underrepresented talent. Here are five ways to overcome those obstacles.

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Deploy rather than utilize.

Incentivize leaders to move and absorb talent from different teams instead of keeping talent in the same positions.

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Create a badging system.

Recognize skills-based training through a badge or other certification to encourage managers to become aware of and staff unknown or new talent.

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Reward an “our talent” mindset.

Encourage leaders to prioritize firm goals and strategic business objectives in developing talent.

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Model inclusive leadership.

Elevate leaders who foster collaboration, teamwork, and diversity of thought and representation.

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Engage the ambitious.

Leverage digital tools to zero in on the talent that is actively looking to expand their networks and opportunities.



“Developing inclusive leaders creates more cultural agility.”



Instead of relying on behavioral inclusion, professional services firms can leverage their experience management functions to drive structural inclusion, says Alina Polonskaia, Korn Ferry’s global leader for diversity and inclusion solutions. Under the former, individuals take on the work of mitigating unconscious bias through their actions, while the latter is about putting equitable systems in place that prevent those biases from occurring in the first place.

Traditionally, firms think about inclusion from a cultural perspective, but Polonskaia says that’s limiting. Rather, she says, firms should also look at inclusion from a structural perspective, incorporating clear and transparent processes around how performance management and talent experience decisions are made, and elevating leaders who foster collaboration and teamwork.

“Often firms have no idea of the breadth of skills they have in-house, because they fail to develop inclusive leaders,” says Polonskaia. She says inclusive leaders prioritize teamwork over individual performance and value differences among employees, which leads to more visibility into talent

capabilities and a better ability to match skills with needs. “Developing inclusive leaders creates more cultural agility,” she says. “It’s a chain reaction.”



Tension exists on any team in any organization as it relates to talent, however. Leaders are naturally proprietary when it comes to team members, in essence viewing them as their talent. Developing inclusive leaders and building structural inclusion requires a mindset shift that puts the organization first—in other words, adopting an “our talent” perspective.

One way to encourage that behavior, says George Leary, is to change the way leaders are recognized and rewarded for developing talent. She says while leaders certainly get evaluated and credited in performance reviews for building high-performing first and second teams, “it’s not what propels someone through an organization.”

Part of the reason for that is because the main aim of experience management is to maximize utilization, meaning getting people off the bench and onto teams. And the most efficient way to do that is to keep people on the same kinds of projects. Gonzalez says that reframing how experience management is measured, and in turn how leaders are held accountable, could provide a path for professional services firms to advance their diversity objectives.

“Changing the focus from utilization to development and deployment can create a greater good by helping underrepresented talent build bigger networks and the organization build more capabilities,” says Gonzalez.

For instance, Gonzalez suggests firms could carve out a portion of a leader’s financial incentives for project mobility. “You can create thresholds that reward leaders for moving people to new teams and absorbing people from other teams,” he says. Similarly, firms could employ a skills-based badging system for talent, the idea being that managers would be more open to accepting unknown or new talent because they would have certified training. That kind of system could be particularly useful to professional services leaders working in the defense and government space, where there is a dearth of workers cleared for confidential and classified assignments.

Gonzalez believes measures like these will ultimately help professional services firms improve the rate of retention and advancement for underrepresented talent over time. He says turnover among these populations is so significant—and the goals for increasing their representation so great—that incremental improvements can result in huge wins.

In fact, firms are already starting to see some of the diversity pay off from experience management. One byproduct of the pandemic and shift to remote work is that the geographical dispersion of talent is leading to more diversity, says Deloitte’s Parmelee. She says in some cases, talent has relocated to areas where the firm doesn’t have a physical presence, which has opened up opportunities to reach new clients or be staffed onto teams they wouldn’t have otherwise. “We now have the ability to more broadly staff teams within practice areas,” she says.



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