MIND THE GAP:

TOP STRATEGIC TALENT CHALLENGES FOR CIOS

By **Michael Couch** and **Richard Citrin**

It will be no surprise to the Pittsburgh Technology Council's Top CIO finalists that two of the top three key strategic priorities facing CIOs deal with talent, as reported in the recent Gartner Leadership Vision for 2022. The two key challenges? Scarcity of talent and redesigning work for a hybrid model.

There's a good deal of press covering recommendations on how organizations can effectively address these talent issues. We would like to focus on the role that CIOs and other executive leaders must play in addressing these talent gaps. These are not tasks that can be relegated solely to HR.

Closing the Talent Gap

Research examining the drivers behind the Great Resignation uncovered a profound disconnect between what executive leadership perceived as the causes for people quitting and what resigning employees indicated.

In a study conducted at the end of 2021 by McKinsey, surveyed employees specified that they left their jobs because they felt that they were not valued by their company or by their leaders and lacked a sense of belonging. They also cited a lack of opportunity for advancement. On the other hand, executives saw the resignations as being driven by employees looking for better jobs that paid more.

Talk about a gap! The employees described being driven away from their current jobs by factors related to organizational culture while execs saw talent being drawn away by easy-to-blame factors like pay.

The insight for CIOs? Organizational culture matters even more when trying to attract and retain talent in a tight labor market. Employees must understand the vision of the organization and see their role in achieving that vision. They must feel informed, feel like they are part of a valued team and must see the company focused on investing in their growth and development. These are all cultural factors related to driving employee attraction and retention. And none of them have to do with pay. CIOs should make work on leveraging these factors a priority and build habits, skills and tools to support them.

As the old aphorism goes, "You can't manage it if you don't measure it." If you haven't formally assessed your organization's culture, you will have trouble fully understanding and addressing the culture factors that will help fill the talent gaps.

The goal of culture assessment should not be to determine whether you have a good or bad culture or what type of culture you have, but to understand how clearly the key factors of culture are perceived by your employees and how aligned the different culture components are to each other. The clearer and more aligned, the higher the impact of culture on employee retention . . . as well as on other key results such as revenue growth, profitability, innovation and customer service.

The perception of an organization's culture is highly influenced by the behavior of its leaders. Do you have any leaders that are "culture poison pills" who do not behave in a way that reinforces an engaging culture? Or worse yet, who behave in ways that are counter to the company's expressed core values; not "walking the talk?" If so, eliminating these poison pills should be the very first step to take to help close the talent gap.

Redesigning for a Hybrid Work Model

Some IT workers had been operating in a hybrid work mode before the pandemic, but in roles that typically may not have required a lot of collaboration within a team or that involved implementing large scale change across teams. Some inter- and intra-team technology work is tough to do virtually.

In the 2021 Tech 50 edition of TEQ, we emphasized the need for CIOs and other leaders to be very intentional about designing hybrid work. We cited research from Amazon Web Services that showed the initial increase in productivity from newly virtual teams was not sustainable. It's just difficult to maintain critical social bonds within and across teams in a virtual environment. Hybrid work designs must incorporate intentional opportunities for work teams to be face-to-face, particularly when new members are being onboarded, when new projects are started or at key junctures in a project where the team needs to learn something new or to solve a problem.

Culture research conducted through the pandemic by our colleagues at Denison Consulting showed that the clarity and alignment of organizational culture is negatively impacted over time by virtual work. Culture suffers when associates are not exposed to leaders that are "culture carriers" or to events, activities and projects that build and reinforce culture.

When workers are in the office one, two or three days a week, the time would be best spent interacting with their teams, collaborating with other teams and being exposed to key leaders. The office becomes a place to do specific kinds of team and culture-building work . . . and not to sit alone in your office working asynchronously.

Michael Couch and Richard Citrin are the co-authors of *Strategy-Driven Leadership: The Playbook for Developing Your Next Generation of Leaders*. Available now on Amazon.com