Talent activation, as a practice, centers on an employer deliberately designing experiences throughout the employee lifecycle – from recruitment to retention – to unleash employees’ pre-existing strengths, energize performance and drive growth. An activated workforce is highly engaged, productive and loyal, qualities that can contribute to enhanced collaboration and encourage development as a competitive advantage.

Talent activation is focused on what employees are doing at each stage of the talent lifecycle, versus what they are feeling. As an example, an employee may not always be engaged (if something important is occurring in their personal life or they don’t love their job), but they can still be activated to do that job well and acquire new skills with action-oriented experiences in place.

Our Talent Activation, the Employee Experience, and Skill Development survey examined how larger company supervisors and above are currently activating their talent by designing and executing specific employee experiences at the recruitment, onboarding, learning and development, and performance evaluation stages.

Overall, our respondents were very confident in their measures to take talent management to the next level. Eighty-seven percent agreed with the statement: My organization’s approach to talent management has really evolved in the last five years. More specifically, 89 percent responded that their organizations have put at least some focused effort into the candidate experience (that is, the process recruits go through from application to interview to offer), and 91 percent said their organizations have done so for the employee experience (that is, the process employees go through from onboarding to learning and development/training to performance evaluation). However, despite this clear focus, respondents still observe significant skills gaps at all levels. In the following pages, we’ll explore how this disconnect plays out.
RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

Respondents shared a variety of techniques for activating talent during sourcing, recruiting, and hiring. Sixty-one percent use a career page or subsite on the company website, 58 percent use social media platforms, 55 percent develop an employer brand by telling a compelling story, 54 percent target employee referrals, 53 percent target job boards, and 51 percent provide insight into organizational brand and talent goals during the interview process. Eighty percent claimed they use a modern Applicant Tracking System (ATS) for talent sourcing and candidate management, and 79 percent replied that their recruitment experience prompts candidates to answer the core question: What is this organization about and why would I want to work there?

Figure 1: Techniques for Activating Talent at the Recruitment Stage [by % of respondents]
ONBOARDING STRATEGIES
The survey results were clear that onboarding has moved beyond a one-day orientation event and into a longer initiative with multiple components. Organizations are still covering the basics. For instance, 72 percent of respondents said their onboarding experience introduces new hires to people within the organization and 60 percent said it sets job scope and performance expectations. But in addition, 58 percent said the onboarding experience surveys new hires about their experiences and 57 percent said it immerses new hires in the organization’s culture. Fifty-six percent offer an onboarding portal to complete new hire paperwork, and 55 percent deliver personalized content on job location and role. Eighty-three percent of respondents agreed that their onboarding experience answers the core questions: What can I expect here, and what’s expected of me?

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES
Survey respondents are continuously activating their talent with a variety of learning approaches. Sixty-six percent actively promote development paths, mentor and skill acquisition opportunities inside and outside the organization. 57 percent provide in-person course or “lunch and learn” opportunities. Fifty-six percent have automated the learning process to monitor completion and ensure compliance, and 50 percent recommend and provide access to external vendors or learning institutions to supplement in-house offerings.

Training methods currently used include individual or department-level trainings led by internal consultants (63 percent), full or partial tuition reimbursement for university-level education (60 percent), development of internal courses (57 percent), full or partial reimbursement for online learning or massive open online courses (MOOCs, 52 percent), and individual or department-level trainings led by external consultants (51 percent).

A majority (64 percent) strongly believes company leadership supports the learning and development strategy, and 77 percent of respondents agreed that the learning and development experience provides employees with the necessary information and tools to grow their skillsets and careers.

Figure 2: Percent of respondents who strongly agreed that company leadership supports their L&D strategy.

NOTE: Other answers included: slightly agree, neutral, and disagree
PERFORMANCE EVALUATION STRATEGIES

When it comes to activating talent at the performance stage, organizations use a mix of traditional and modern techniques. For instance, 62 percent still conduct annual performance reviews, but 43 percent have moved to doing reviews a second time during the year.

In addition to, or instead of a formal review process, practice 60 percent of respondents said their organizations practice Continuous Feedback, or regular manager/employee check-ins to monitor progress, improve relationships, and recognize accomplishments. Fifty-four percent of respondents shared that their organizations also create individualized learning plans that map to clearly identified performance objectives. All in all, 76 percent agreed with the statement: My company’s performance evaluation experience prompts recruits to answer this question: How will I give and receive the feedback necessary to achieve my goals?
DESIGNING AND EXECUTING EXPERIENCES

Although human resources appears to be the driving force behind designing an effective employee experience that activates talent at the onboarding, learning and development, and performance evaluation stages (73 percent said HR leadership plays a major role, and 62 percent shared that HR team members do), in most organizations there is a healthy degree of collaboration. Fifty-three percent of respondents said individual managers are involved, 45 percent said they rely on employees themselves, and 41 percent cited c-suite leadership as a key influence.

Speaking of the c-suite, most respondents (89 percent) said that at least some consultation with c-suite executives takes place to make certain that the actions associated with the employee experience are appropriately connected to overall organizational strategy and goals.

The HR department is also the primary overseer of actions associated with the employee experience at the onboarding, learning and development, and performance evaluation stages to ensure tasks are completed as necessary. Seventy percent of respondents said this is HR leadership’s responsibility, and 54 percent said it falls to HR team members. Fifty-three percent of respondents said individual managers are involved, followed by employees themselves (35 percent) and c-suite leadership (34 percent).

Our respondents are using technology to facilitate talent activation in significant numbers. Two-thirds of participants shared that they are using newer, cloud-based human resources management systems or portals. Forty-three percent build and maintain proprietary websites, 39 percent employ real-time communication software like Yammer and Slack, 36 percent use mobile apps, and 30 percent use social media. These technologies make it easier to deploy a customized experience not just for full-timers, but, in many respondents’ cases, for part-time employees (42 percent) and seasonal employees (17 percent) as well.

Even more promising is that most participants are measuring the effectiveness of their employee experience. Two-thirds are conducting employee sentiment surveys, 53 percent examine performance ratings, and 49 percent take the temperature of employee sentiment via interviews. Forty-seven percent leverage time to productivity as a key metric, while 44 percent look to retention duration. Eighty-four percent of participants said that they have personally observed a retention increase since their organizations began focusing on activating talent through the employee experience.
RECOGNIZING SKILLS GAPS

Despite the vast amount of information and training that many respondents have told us their organizations are providing to employees, workforce skills gaps persist and are worrisome. Seventy-seven percent of respondents agreed with the statement: In my organization as a whole, I am concerned about employee skills gaps.

Not surprisingly given prior Career Advisory Board research on technology and “soft” skills, the greatest skills gaps are observed in the areas of technology/digital fluency (cited by 62 percent of respondents), communication (56 percent), business acumen (48 percent), diversity and cultural awareness (46 percent), and customer service (42 percent).

Skills gaps affect employees at all levels, but according to our respondents, lower level employees are more vulnerable. Seventy-one percent of participants said their individual contributors or frontline employees don’t have the necessary skills, while 63 percent shared that they see skills gaps in their supervisor population, and 45 percent are concerned about skills gaps at the executive level.

If talent activation and an effective employee experience are as high a priority as these results suggest, why aren’t skills gaps being closed more quickly? More than half of respondents cited time and budget as barriers, followed by an insufficient talent pipeline (45 percent) and lack of executive sponsorship (41 percent).

Figure 3: Percentage of respondents who are observing skills gaps by level
KEY ACTIONS FOR EMPLOYERS

These results illustrate that many organizations are activating talent more effectively than they did even a few years ago. And yet, despite a great deal of purposeful activity during the recruitment, onboarding, learning and development, and performance evaluation stages, some companies continue to experience problematic skills gaps and poor retention. The Career Advisory Board recommends the following strategies to take further advantage of maturing talent activation strategies.

• **Identify the gaps in your current candidate and employee experience:** Many organizations design experiences little by little, and therefore, some of your talent activation strategies may be ahead of others. If you have, for instance, a sophisticated candidate experience that earns stellar marks from candidates, but your performance experience hasn’t changed since 2000, the latter is an area that deserves new consideration.

• **Encourage a variety of learning strategies:** Develop and retain top talent by employing corporate training initiatives involving everything from in-person courses taught by internal staff to the collation and promotion of relevant massive, open, online courses (MOOCs). Shorter, stackable content pieces that zero in on your most significant gaps may be more likely to hold attention and activate talent.

• **Create and execute mentorship programs:** Senior-level mentors, or employees who are skilled in a specific area (such as digital fluency), can be powerful additions to your arsenal in addressing skills gaps. Make sure that your program is easy to understand and take on by mentors and mentees alike, and that it has a clear beginning, middle, and end.
Leverage technology to continuously re-evaluate your experiences: Experiences are only as good as the degree to which they reflect changing market, organizational, and employee requirements. Use survey software frequently to assess the effectiveness of your experience at different phases, and keep your eyes on feedback coming in through your portal or other sources.

Measure your level of talent activation: Before engaging in a new talent activation strategy, assign a metric that will track its success. For example, if you intend to roll out customized onboarding content, can you measure time to productivity for those hires who will experience it compared to those who did not?

Sell the benefits of talent activation to leaders: Fully activated talent naturally leads to improved business outcomes. Crunch your data to illustrate why your organization is better off today than it was before employee experience was a priority, and take advantage of internal forums to demonstrate what’s working and what you have in mind next.

ABOUT THE TALENT ACTIVATION SURVEY
The Talent Activation research was conducted online within the United States by DeVry University on behalf of the Career Advisory Board in August 2018. Survey respondents included 505 US-based individuals [53 percent male, 47 percent female] with full-time positions at the supervisor level or above, in companies with more than 500 employees [mean company size was large at 15,000]. Our respondents’ primary job responsibilities include the hiring, development, and management of employees.

ABOUT THE CAREER ADVISORY BOARD
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