

When Experience Is No Longer the Best Proxy for Readiness



One of the more exigent and consequential questions CEOs face is whether they have the executive talent to deliver on their strategy.

In my work across succession planning and executive search, I often see clients approach this question in a very concrete way. They begin with the strategy, translate that strategy into the goals or KPIs the executive will need to deliver and then work backward to the capabilities required to drive those results.

That thinking often makes its way into a job description, which is usually organized around the actions, responsibilities and outcomes for which the leader will be accountable. The role needs to scale this part of the business, transform that function, improve performance, build a stronger team or deliver against a specific set of operating priorities.

From there, the conversation naturally turns to experience. Who has done something similar before? Who has operated in a comparable context? Who has the functional depth or capability set to execute against the role as currently defined?

For a long time, that was a sensible way to evaluate executive talent. If the strategy was clear and the role likely to remain consistent over the next several years, relevant experience was a logical starting point. The past provided useful evidence for the future.

But the limitation of this approach is becoming more evident. Clients may begin with a job description that emphasizes past experience or functional capability only to find that those criteria aren't enough to predict who'll remain effective as the strategy, the role and the operating environment inevitably continue to change.

The question is no longer only whether a candidate has the right experiences or functional capabilities.

Those still matter, but they're increasingly treated as necessary inputs rather than the full answer. More often, clients are asking us to look more deeply at leadership capabilities: how a leader makes sense of ambiguity, how quickly he or she learns, how effectively the leader adapts when the context changes, and whether that person can bring others along as the strategy evolves.

In many ways, this is a more demanding question. Experience can be seen on a résumé. Functional capability can often be inferred from the roles someone has held and the results they've delivered.

Leadership agility is harder to observe from the outside. It requires a deeper understanding of how an executive thinks, what he or she pays attention to, how decisions are made under pressure and how willing the leader is to adjust when the old playbook no longer fits.

This matters because strategy is becoming less static. The external environment is changing quickly, and businesses are adjusting to new technologies, shifting customer expectations, changing cost structures, evolving competitive dynamics and greater uncertainty around where growth will come from. AI is part of this shift, but it's not the only factor.

As strategy evolves, the leadership requirements attached to that strategy evolve with it.

The executive well-suited to deliver today's priorities might need to operate differently 12 to 24 months from now. A growth agenda might become an efficiency agenda. A functional transformation might become an enterprise-wide operating model shift. A role that once required depth in a specific area might begin to require broader influence across the organization.

This requires a different kind of leadership. The modern executive isn't simply executing the strategy as written. He or she is helping interpret the external environment, translate that interpretation into strategic choices, coordinate across the enterprise, align others around those choices and then pivot when the business requires a different path.

Research on the future of work reinforces this shift. [The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025](#) found that employers expect 39% of workers' core skills to change by 2030. Deloitte's insights on the boundaryless organization points to a similar pattern: work is becoming less defined by static jobs, and skills are increasingly being deployed more flexibly against changing business needs.

While much of this research focuses on the broader workforce, the implications for executive leadership are significant. If work is becoming more fluid across the organization, executive roles also are becoming more fluid. The way organizations evaluate executive talent therefore has to place greater emphasis on the capabilities that allow a leader to succeed not only in the role as it exists today, but as it's likely to become.

This is where executive assessment becomes a more critical part of the executive search process.

At its best, it helps reveal how a leader is likely to operate when the job changes, when familiar playbooks no longer apply and when the path forward is unclear. It helps surface how an executive thinks amid uncertainty, how they learn, how they respond to pressure, how they take in feedback and how they adapt their leadership approach to the needs of the organization.

Assessing differences between candidates regarding these attributes isn't always obvious from a résumé or a track record alone. Two executives may have similar experiences. Both may have led large teams, managed transformation or operated in complex environments. But they may differ meaningfully in how they interpret ambiguity, challenge assumptions, build followership or evolve when conditions change. Over time, those differences often determine whether an executive is able to adapt and evolve with the business and the external environment.

This is why more clients are asking to go beyond the experience profile. They still want to understand a candidate's traditional role-readiness. But they're also asking a more forward-looking question: Does this leader have the agility to grow with the strategy, adapt as conditions change and remain effective as the role evolves?

My recommendation: make that question central to the talent evaluation process, not secondary to it.

Past experience and functional capability will always matter, but they're increasingly becoming gating criteria rather than the center of the decision. In a more fluid environment, readiness has to include a deeper view of how a leader thinks, learns, adapts, influences and evolves. That's what gives CEOs greater confidence not only that an executive can step into the role today, but that he or she can continue to be effective as the strategy and the role change tomorrow.





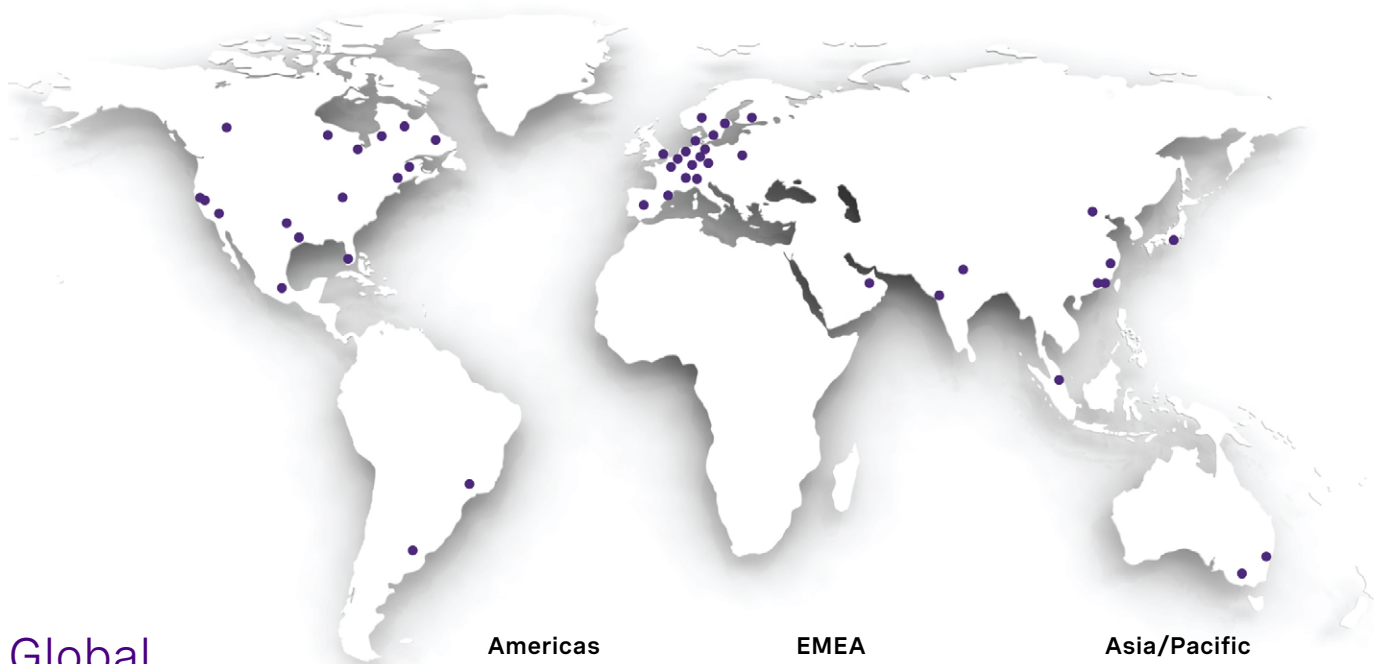
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