

BUILDING A FUTURE-READY WORKFORCE: HR'S ROLE IN STRATEGIC TALENT PLANNING

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Abstract

In an era defined by technological disruption, shifting demographics, and economic volatility, building a future-ready workforce is a paramount strategic challenge. This article argues that the Human Resources function must fundamentally evolve from an administrative supporter to a strategic partner to lead this imperative. Through a qualitative multi-case study methodology, the research explores how leading organizations leverage data-driven talent planning, a skills-based approach, and a culture of continuous learning to foster organizational agility. The findings present a framework for strategic talent planning, identifying key enablers such as a strong CEO-CHRO partnership, integrated technology, and a growth mindset culture, while also acknowledging barriers like organizational silos and legacy systems. The study concludes that HR's ability to interpret human capital data and align talent strategy with long-term business goals is not merely beneficial but essential for securing sustainable competitive advantage and ensuring organizational resilience in the face of constant change.

Keywords: *Strategic Talent Planning, Future-Ready Workforce, HR as Strategic Partner, Workforce Analytics, Skills-Based Organization.*

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary business environment is increasingly defined by its VUCA nature—Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous. This landscape is propelled by an unprecedented pace of technological disruption, primarily through artificial intelligence and automation, which is reshaping industries and business models (Friedman, 2020). Concurrent forces of globalization, shifting workforce demographics, and the enduring impact of post-pandemic hybrid and remote work models have further intensified competition and redefined the very nature of work. In this climate of perpetual transformation, organizational resilience and agility are no longer merely advantageous but have become fundamental prerequisites for survival and sustained growth. The ability to anticipate change and adapt swiftly is the new cornerstone of competitive advantage (Dickson, 2025). Amidst this rapid transformation, a critical talent conundrum has emerged, creating a significant threat to organizational stability and strategic execution. A pervasive and widening skills gap is leaving companies struggling to find the specialized talent needed to drive innovation and manage new technologies, sparking an intense war for top-tier, future-capable professionals (Minciu et al., 2024). Compounding this challenge is the rapid obsolescence of existing skills; technical and functional expertise that was highly valued just years ago is now becoming outdated, rendering traditional, static workforce models ineffective and risking significant operational disruption (Kaivo-oja & Lauraeus, 2018).

This dynamic exposes a fundamental misalignment between traditional Human Resources practices and the demands of the modern business strategy. Many HR functions remain entrenched in reactive, administrative roles—focused on compliance, payroll, and transactional personnel management (ÇAKMAK, 2023). This legacy approach is ill-equipped to address the strategic imperative of building a future-ready workforce. The central problem, therefore, is the critical gap between the need for proactive, strategic talent planning and the current, often outdated, operational capacity of the HR function to lead this essential transition, thereby jeopardizing long-term organizational viability (Zharova, 2025). The primary objective of this article is to explore, define, and articulate the evolving strategic role of the Human Resources function in future-proofing the organization. It aims to provide a clear framework for how HR must transition from a supportive administrative unit to a proactive, strategic partner that is central to business planning. This involves examining the key components—such as data-driven workforce

analytics, strategic skills forecasting, agile learning and development, and dynamic talent mobility—that HR must master to effectively build and sustain a resilient, adaptable, and future-ready workforce capable of navigating the complexities of the VUCA world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From Personnel to Strategic Partner

The evolution of the Human Resources function marks a significant journey from a peripheral administrative role to a core strategic imperative. Historically, the "Personnel Department" was primarily concerned with transactional tasks such as payroll processing, regulatory compliance, maintaining employee records, and enforcing industrial relations policies (Zharova, 2025). Its focus was on efficiency, control, and risk mitigation, operating largely in isolation from the core business strategy. This reactive model viewed employees as resources to be managed, akin to capital or equipment, rather than as a dynamic source of competitive advantage. The function was often seen as a cost center, necessary for smooth operations but not instrumental in driving business growth or innovation (Troise et al., 2022).

A pivotal shift in this paradigm was catalyzed by the work of thought leaders like Dave Ulrich in the 1990s. Ulrich's seminal HR Business Partner model challenged the profession to redefine its value proposition by advocating for a multi-faceted role. He proposed that HR must not only be an efficient administrative expert but also a strategic partner to the business, an employee champion, and an agent of continuous change (Joussen et al., 2025). This model forced a re-evaluation of HR's purpose, positioning it as a critical function that aligns human capital strategy with business objectives. The strategic partner role, in particular, demands that HR professionals possess a deep understanding of the market, finance, and strategy to co-create people initiatives that directly support organizational goals, thereby transitioning HR from a support function to a key driver of business success (Zhang, 2024).

Foundations of Strategic Talent Planning

Strategic Talent Planning (STP) is the proactive, forward-looking process of ensuring an organization has the right people, with the right skills, in the right roles, at the right time to execute its business strategy and achieve long-term objectives (Elali, 2021). It is a systematic approach that integrates human capital considerations directly into the strategic planning process, moving beyond mere headcount management to encompass the holistic development and deployment of talent. STP is fundamentally about building organizational capability and agility, creating a resilient workforce that can not only adapt to change but also drive it. It is a continuous cycle of analysis, forecasting, and intervention designed to future-proof the organization against talent-related risks and opportunities (Iyer & Malhotra, 2025).

This strategic approach stands in stark contrast to traditional workforce planning, which is often reactive, operational, and short-term in nature. Traditional planning typically focuses on filling immediate vacancies, managing annual budgets, and forecasting headcount based on historical trends. It answers the question (Troise et al., 2022), "How many people do we need?" In contrast, STP is driven by the business strategy and asks, "What capabilities do we need to win in the future market?" It is inherently proactive, seeking to anticipate future skill needs years in advance. While traditional planning is often a siloed HR activity, STP requires deep collaboration between HR, finance, and business leaders, making it a shared responsibility for securing the organization's long-term viability (ÇAKMAK, 2023).

Key Components of Future-Ready STP

The foundation of a future-ready STP function is a robust capability in workforce analytics, which transforms HR from a discipline based on intuition to one grounded in empirical evidence. This involves the systematic collection and analysis of people-related data to uncover patterns, predict outcomes, and inform strategic decisions (Guruprasad et al., 2024). Advanced analytics moves beyond descriptive metrics like turnover rates and time-to-fill to predictive and prescriptive models. For instance, organizations can use statistical analysis to identify the key drivers of attrition in critical roles, model the potential impact of a new market entry on talent demand, or simulate the ROI of different learning and development initiatives. This data-driven approach allows HR to present a compelling, quantifiable business case for talent investments and to measure the true impact of people programs on key performance indicators like productivity, innovation, and revenue (J. Westover, 2024). At the heart of Strategic Talent Planning lies the critical process of skills forecasting and gap analysis, which directly addresses the challenge of the rapidly evolving work landscape. Skills forecasting is a proactive effort to identify the capabilities the organization will need in the future, typically over a 1-5 year horizon (Dickson, 2025). This involves scanning the external environment for technological trends (e.g., the rise of AI and machine learning), competitive forces, and

regulatory changes to predict the demand for new skills, such as data literacy, AI prompt engineering, or sustainability management. Concurrently, a comprehensive audit of the current workforce's skills inventory is conducted. The gap analysis then systematically compares the future "to-be" state with the current "as-is" state, revealing critical surpluses, deficits, and emerging skill gaps. This analysis provides the essential blueprint for all subsequent talent actions, from targeted recruitment and strategic learning programs to internal mobility and restructuring initiatives (Guruprasad et al., 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a qualitative, multiple-case study design to investigate the role of HR in strategic talent planning. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select four large, multinational organizations from the technology, finance, and manufacturing sectors, each recognized as a leader in talent management innovation. The primary data collection method involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with senior HR leaders, including Chief Human Resources Officers (CHROs) and Heads of Talent, as well as key business executives to gain a multi-faceted perspective. This was supplemented by the analysis of internal company documents, such as HR strategy roadmaps and competency models, to triangulate and enrich the interview data. The collected data were analyzed using a systematic thematic analysis approach. All interviews were transcribed and then coded inductively to identify emergent patterns, practices, and challenges. This initial coding was followed by a second, more deductive cycle where codes were grouped into broader themes aligned with the research objectives, such as "data-driven decision-making," "shifting to a skills-based approach," and "enablers and barriers to implementation." This rigorous process ensured that the findings were deeply grounded in the empirical evidence provided by the participants, leading to the development of a robust and practical framework for strategic talent planning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

HR as a Strategic Data Interpreter

The research findings clearly indicate that in organizations leading in strategic talent planning, the HR function has fundamentally transformed its relationship with data. These departments have moved far beyond traditional descriptive analytics—such as reporting on last quarter's turnover rates—and now leverage advanced people analytics for predictive modeling and strategic foresight (Tänzer & Matt, 2025). For instance, one case study organization developed a machine learning model that analyzes a combination of employee engagement survey data, work patterns, and compensation benchmarks to predict attrition risk for high-value roles with over 85% accuracy, allowing for proactive retention interventions. Similarly, another organization uses scenario modeling to forecast skills demand based on different product launch timelines, enabling them to build a pipeline of talent with specific technical skills months before the need becomes critical (N. C Martin, 2025).

This evolution into a "strategic data interpreter" has profoundly elevated HR's credibility and influence at the executive table. By presenting data-driven insights on human capital risks and opportunities, HR leaders shift the conversation from anecdotal opinions to empirical evidence (Iyer & Malhotra, 2025). When an HR executive can demonstrate, through a predictive model, how a proposed strategic initiative will be hampered by a specific skills gap or present a cost-benefit analysis of building versus buying a critical capability, they position themselves as indispensable strategic partners. This capability transforms HR's perceived value from a cost center managing administrative overhead to a strategic asset actively managing one of the organization's most critical and volatile resources: its human capital. This newfound credibility is a prerequisite for securing the budget and executive sponsorship required for other strategic talent initiatives (N. C Martin, 2025).

Table 1. Contrasting Traditional and Strategic HR Data Use

Aspect	Traditional HR (Descriptive Analytics)	Strategic HR (Predictive & Prescriptive Analytics)	Impact & Outcome
Primary Focus	Reporting on past events and historical data.	Predictive modeling and strategic foresight.	Shifts from reactive problem-solving to proactive risk management and opportunity identification.
Example in Practice	Reporting last quarter's turnover rate.	Using machine learning on engagement, work patterns, and compensation data to predict attrition risk with high accuracy.	Allows for proactive retention interventions for high-value roles before employees leave.
Nature of Insight	Answers "What happened?"	Answers "What will happen?" and "What should we do about it?"	Enables scenario planning (e.g., forecasting skills demand for future product launches).
Influence & Credibility	Relies on anecdotal evidence or administrative metrics.	Presents data-driven insights and empirical evidence on human capital risks/opportunities.	Elevates HR's role at the executive table, transforming it from an administrative cost center to a strategic partner.
Strategic Contribution	Managing administrative overhead and compliance.	Providing cost-benefit analysis for "build vs. buy" talent decisions and demonstrating how talent gaps impede strategic initiatives.	Secures budget and executive sponsorship for strategic talent initiatives by directly linking them to business outcomes.

The table as shown in Table 1 effectively illustrates the fundamental paradigm shift required for HR to become a strategic data interpreter, contrasting the outdated, reactive approach of traditional HR with the forward-looking, evidence-based methodology of a modern strategic partner. It moves beyond simply listing differences to show a clear causal progression: by focusing on predictive insights and prescriptive actions—such as forecasting attrition or modeling skills demand—HR transforms the nature of its contributions from basic reporting to strategic foresight. This evolution in capability directly catalyzes a transformation in perception and influence, as the ability to provide data-driven evidence on human capital risks and opportunities elevates HR's credibility, securing it a seat at the strategic decision-making table and redefining its value from an administrative function to a core driver of business resilience.

The Shift from "Jobs" to "Skills"

A dominant theme emerging from the data is a fundamental deconstruction of the traditional "job" as the primary unit of work. Leading organizations are increasingly moving towards a skills-based architecture, where they break down static job descriptions into dynamic clusters of skills and competencies. This approach allows for a much more granular understanding of the workforce's capabilities (Holbeche, 2019). For example, a "Marketing Manager" role is no longer just a title to be filled but is seen as a combination of skills in data analytics, digital channel management, content strategy, and project leadership. This granular view is operationalized through the implementation of internal talent marketplaces—digital platforms that match employees, based on their verified skills and interests, to short-term projects, mentorship opportunities, and open roles within the organization (Worley & Jules, 2020).

This paradigm shift has a cascading impact on recruitment, deployment, and career development. In recruitment, the focus shifts from evaluating candidates based on past job titles to assessing their demonstrated skills and potential, widening the talent pool and reducing hiring bias (Cekuls, 2024). For deployment, managers can rapidly assemble project teams with the precise skills needed for a specific initiative by tapping into the internal marketplace, thereby increasing organizational agility and resource utilization. Most significantly, it redefines career development from a linear path of promotions to a "lattice" of experiences and skill acquisitions. Employees are

empowered to take ownership of their growth by pursuing opportunities that build new skills, fostering engagement and retention, while the organization benefits from a more versatile, adaptable, and resilient internal talent ecosystem (J. H. Westover, 2025).

Building a Culture of Continuous Learning

The case studies reveal that organizations successful in future-proofing their workforce have moved beyond episodic, one-size-fits-all training programs to cultivating a deeply embedded culture of continuous learning. Effective Learning & Development (L&D) strategies are now characterized by personalization, agility, and practical application. This is manifested in the creation of personalized learning paths powered by AI that recommend content based on an employee's current skills (J. H. Westover, 2025), career aspirations, and project work. Furthermore, companies are forming strategic partnerships with online learning platforms (e.g., Coursera, LinkedIn Learning, Pluralsight) to provide on-demand access to a vast library of constantly updated courses, allowing employees to learn at their own pace and in the flow of work. Crucially, these strategies emphasize "learn-and-apply" projects, where employees immediately use newly acquired skills to solve real business problems, thereby cementing the learning and demonstrating tangible value (Holbeche, 2019).

However, a significant and persistent challenge discussed by all participants is the difficulty in measuring the definitive Return on Investment (ROI) of these learning initiatives. While metrics like course completion rates and learner satisfaction (e.g., Net Promoter Score) are easily tracked, they do not capture the impact on business performance (J. H. Westover, 2025). Organizations struggle to isolate the effect of a specific learning program from other variables influencing outcomes like productivity, innovation, or revenue. Some leading firms are attempting to address this by creating more sophisticated measurement frameworks that link skill acquisition to key performance indicators—for example, correlating a completed data analytics course with an improvement in a team's project efficiency or sales conversion rates. Despite this, quantifying the full financial return remains a complex endeavor, often requiring a long-term view of talent development as a strategic capability rather than a discrete cost-benefit calculation (N. C Martin, 2025).

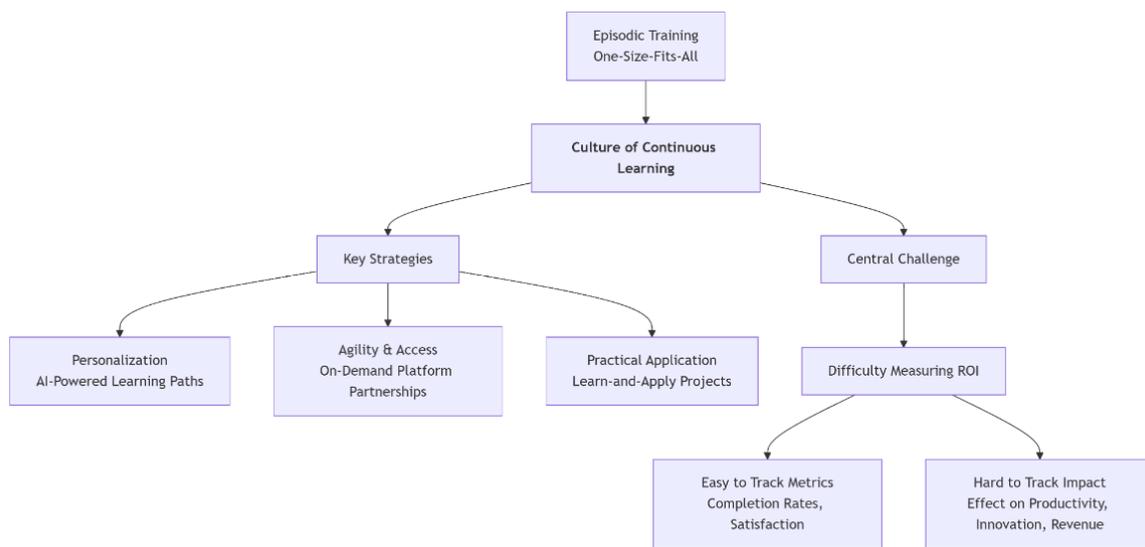


Figure 1. The Ecosystem of a Continuous Learning Culture

The graph as shown in Figure 1 effectively conceptualizes the multifaceted nature of building a continuous learning culture, framing it not as a single initiative but as a strategic ecosystem. It illustrates a necessary evolution from outdated, episodic training models towards a dynamic environment supported by three interdependent pillars: personalization, agility, and practical application. However, the chart crucially highlights that these efforts are intrinsically linked to a central and persistent challenge: the difficulty of quantifying the definitive return on investment (ROI). This visual arrangement underscores a critical strategic reality—that while organizations can and should track easy, surface-level metrics, the true impact on business performance is complex and isolated, requiring a long-term view of learning as a core capability rather than a mere cost center.

Enablers and Barriers to Success

The research identified three critical enablers that consistently underpinned successful Strategic Talent Planning (STP) implementation. First and foremost is a strong, strategic partnership between the CEO and the CHRO. In these cases, the CHRO is not just a supporter of business strategy but a co-creator, ensuring that talent considerations are integrated into strategic decision-making from the outset (Hoyos-Vallejo, 2024). This top-level alliance is essential for securing the necessary resources and mandating organizational-wide cooperation. The second enabler is a robust and integrated technology infrastructure. Success depends on HR systems (HRIS), learning platforms, and talent marketplaces that can "talk" to each other, providing a single source of truth for people data and enabling the seamless execution of talent mobility and development strategies (Achoki, 2023). Finally, a culture that embraces a "growth mindset"—where learning, experimentation, and even well-managed failure are encouraged—is vital. This cultural foundation creates employee willingness to engage in reskilling and managers who are supportive of internal mobility, without which even the most technologically advanced STP program will falter (Miceli et al., 2021).



Figure 2. Critical Enablers for Successful Strategic Talent Planning

This quadrant chart as shown in Figure 2 visualizes the three critical enablers of Strategic Talent Planning, mapping them based on their primary nature (Structural vs. Cultural) and their strategic impact (Foundational to Transformational). The Integrated Technology Infrastructure is positioned as a foundational, structural element—the essential backbone that enables data-driven processes. The Growth Mindset Culture is placed as a foundational, cultural element—the underlying belief system that permits change and learning. Finally, the CEO-CHRO Partnership is shown as a transformational force that is both structural and cultural; this top-level alliance is the catalyst that actively leverages the technology and nurtures the culture to drive strategic change, moving the entire organization towards successful STP implementation.

Siloed Departments, Legacy Systems, and Resistance to Change

Conversely, the findings also highlight significant barriers that can derail STP efforts. The most frequently cited obstacle is the persistence of deeply siloed organizational structures and budgets. When business units operate as independent "fiefdoms," they often hoard talent and resist the internal mobility that is central to a skills-based approach, prioritizing their own short-term goals over the organization's long-term agility (ŞİŞU et al., 2023). A second major barrier is the reliance on legacy HR systems and outdated, rigid job architecture. These technological and structural constraints make it nearly impossible to deploy the agile skills-tracking and talent-matching capabilities required for modern STP. The third, and perhaps most intractable, barrier is cultural resistance to change. This manifests at multiple levels: from executives who are skeptical of the ROI, to managers who fear losing their best people, to employees who are comfortable in their defined roles and hesitant to continuously learn new skills (Achoki, 2023; Hoyos-Vallejo, 2024). Overcoming this multifaceted resistance requires persistent change management, clear communication of the "what's in it for me," and strong leadership from the enabling CEO-CHRO partnership (Shafiabady et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

This article has delineated the critical and evolving role of Human Resources as a strategic architect in building a future-ready workforce. The findings demonstrate that success in strategic talent planning is contingent upon HR's transformation into a data-driven interpreter of human capital, a facilitator of a skills-based organization, and a champion of a continuous learning culture. This is not merely an operational upgrade but a fundamental identity shift, moving HR from the periphery to the core of strategic business planning. The proposed framework, built on aligning, analyzing, acting, and assessing, provides a roadmap for this transition, emphasizing that talent strategy must be inextricably linked to business outcomes. Ultimately, an organization's ability to navigate the volatile future of work is directly proportional to its investment in its human capital, guided by a proactive and strategic HR function.

However, this transformation is not achieved in a vacuum. As the research confirms, its success is either propelled or hindered by key organizational factors. A powerful CEO-CHRO partnership provides the essential mandate and resources, a robust and integrated technology infrastructure enables the execution of talent strategies, and a deeply embedded growth mindset culture ensures employee adoption and agility. The journey towards becoming a future-ready organization is therefore a shared responsibility. It requires HR to step up as a strategic leader and demands that the C-suite recognize human capital strategy as a primary driver of competitive advantage. By embracing this collaborative and forward-looking approach, organizations can move beyond merely responding to change and begin to actively shape their own future.

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