

You Can't
Hire Talent
You Don't
ATTRACT



TRANSEARCH
EXECUTIVE SEARCH & LEADERSHIP CONSULTING

John O. Burdett



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You Can't Hire Talent You Don't Attract

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What keeps the best attracts the rest!

The seasonal smell of soggy socks permeates the subway. It's a bleak and blustery Monday. It's trying to snow – again. The temperature has plummeted. Arriving at work is a blessing.

After casting off several layers of winter clothing and grabbing a coffee, Sally is ready. She heads the internal talent acquisition function within ABC Co. Her team supports a range of business partners. The executive echelon included.

For her team, talent acquisition gets ever more challenging. This is especially the case when it comes to recruiting top¹ executive talent. At this level it's all about managing risk. The more senior the level ... the greater the risk factor. Risk, in turn, is about "fit." If you don't know what you are looking for, only a delusional optimist on roller skates would imagine that they might find it.

There are six foundational criteria that determine fit: (1) attraction; (2) measuring culture – today and in the future;² (3) a performance scorecard; (4) role-specific leadership competencies; (5) the way of working and the needs of the team; and (6) integration into the role. In that you can't hire talent you don't attract, it can be argued that attraction is the most important of the six criteria. That said, short-change any one of the fundamentals of fit and Edward R. Murrow's famous WWII radio

1 Top = **T**ested by adversity, **O**utstanding **P**erformers

2 "Needs, not wants!" A focus on the "aspirational culture" is to construct a fragile and abstract future agenda that will almost certainly lead to frustration and disappointment. "Need" builds commitment. "Aspiration" leads to more conversation. Similarly, the assumption that culture can be unbundled initiatively (through feel) or as part of an informed conversation is both naive and dangerous. If you can measure it, it is far more likely that you are going to be able to manage it. One should add here that not everything that can be measured should be measured ... and not everything that should be measured can be measured, Note: The major reason an executive fails when they move into a new organization is lack of culture fit.



sign-off from London to the U.S. during “the blitz” sounds about right, “Good night, and good luck.”

Today, talent acquisition is “supported” by a plethora of AI tools. Some invaluable. Other applications – although those marketing their products make sweeping assertions – appear to have invested little in developing essential relevance and validity criteria. For example, although the claim is commonplace, very few assessments are a valid predictor of behaviour. At best, they highlight leading behavioural indicators: suggested ways the candidate will act that, to have meaning, must be flexed against both the culture the hiring organization has today and the culture it needs to create in the future. In the overhyped world of artificial intelligence, it is truly a case of caveat emptor – let the buyer beware. And remember, a critical C-suite hire may amount to “betting the company.”

Meanwhile, focus is everything. Cast too broad a sourcing net and valuable time is wasted. And if the role remains unfilled for any length of time, the opportunity cost can be many times the annual salary for the position. Identifying and building a bridge to suitable candidates is the engine room of recruitment. Lack horsepower here and traction in the marketplace quickly becomes an issue. And the steeper the climb, the more horsepower you need.





Inspire the Candidate

No matter what AI sourcing tools are involved, personal interaction (e.g., telephonic, Microsoft Teams, FaceTime, WhatsApp) with an executive is essential. Few senior executives want to be subject to benediction by bot. Even fewer want to entrust the security of their personal information to a faceless machine controlled by a manipulative algorithm. Top talent need to be put on a pedestal. They want to be befriended, not befuddled; assessed, not examined; engaged, not enraged; wowed, not cowed; stroked, not poked.

Approaching high-profile candidates for an executive position is where Sally takes the lead. And here the recruiter faces a moment of truth. Top candidates are “top candidates” exactly because they are high performers with their current employer. The moment of truth arises when the individual contacted responds along the following lines, “ABC Co. sounds like an excellent business but I have a great job here.” Factor in a clear career path, loyalty to the immediate manager and a successful track record and Sally’s response is either an example of how to win in a tight labour market or it highlights a crippling Achilles heel in ABC’s recruitment process.

We should add here that the growing phenomena of “job hugging” – in a world of uncertainty avoiding “danger” is a basic survival instinct – makes this initial conversation truly the difference that makes a difference.

As the relationship develops, Sally will work to understand what drives the candidate, what their ambitions are and the type of challenge they are best equipped to take on. But all of that is to come. Success is *in the moment*.

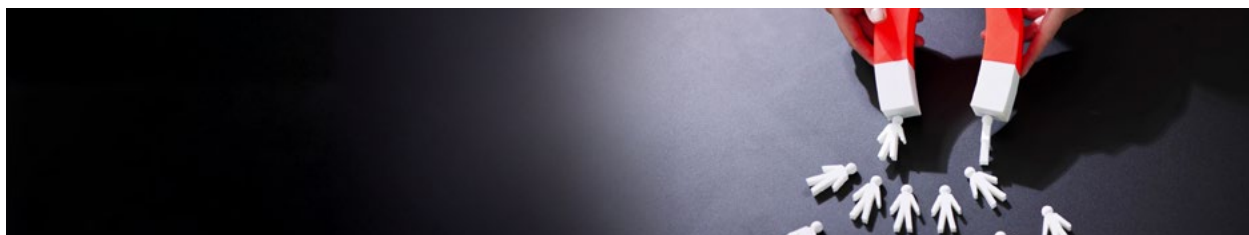
Sally is a professional – she knows exactly how to answer the “I have a great job here” response. She has done her homework. As a result, she has an attraction ace up her sleeve. Her hiring edge? Top talent want to work with other top talent. What keeps the best attracts the rest!

But Sally doesn’t play her attraction ace straightaway. Her response has three key themes – all the time, of course, giving the candidate time to ask questions:



1. **Inform.** People are programmed to look for patterns. When a career opportunity comes up, the candidate already, intuitively, knows what they want to hear. Too much information confuses. Too many contingencies and meaning is lost. Short, succinct and selective is the rule. This is who we are. This is what we do. This is where we are. In very basic terms, this is the opportunity. Where appropriate, calibration can help. “We are the fastest growing business in the sector.” The challenge? To grab the candidate’s attention. **Inform** addresses the head. It’s a bunt to first base.
2. **Involve.** This means sharing the hiring organization’s story. Again, it needs to be succinct. Where is the business heading? What makes the organization special? What are the organization’s values and beliefs? In what way does the company’s reason to be (purpose) make a difference in people’s lives? Most organizations have a great story. Few know how to present it. A compelling story starts to tap into how the candidate feels, not merely what they need to know. The intent? To turn mental awareness into an emotional connection. **Involve** employs the hand and engages the heart. It’s a hit into deep right field.





3. **Inspire.** One of the early things an interested candidate will seek to do is to find – invariably through web-based and personal research – “What is it like to actually work for ABC Co.? I’ve talked to people who really know the business. I’ve tested the product. I’ve unbundled the balance sheet. I understand the market potential for what the company does. I’ve even tried on a T-shirt but, what’s it really like to work there?”

The problem? All that’s in the future. Recognising that there is “many a slip ’twixt the cup and the lip,”³ Sally faces a challenge. She wants to win over the candidate **now!** To get the candidate’s full attention, she needs to describe *the experience NOW!* It’s an appeal to the candidate’s imagination. **Inspire** enriches the spirit and introduces a sense of belonging.⁴ Home run!

Don’t Sell The Job, Bring The Work Experience to Life.

Why do we sit down for coffee at Starbucks when it’s cheaper across the street? Why do people pay a significant premium for business class when those in the back of the plane land at exactly the same time? Why are some supermarkets that do little more than provide shelving for their suppliers struggling when others are thriving? Why do we buy VIP cinema tickets when the same movie is playing in the next theatre for half the price? Why do millions attend the FIFA World Cup knowing that their team has no chance of winning? It’s the experience, stupid!

Your teenage daughter didn’t spend more money than she could afford to simply buy a new dress – she burnt her budget because of how she wanted the dress to make her feel. A local hairdresser doesn’t advertise a better haircut – they market “the look.” And even consumers on the very bottom rung of the economic ladder want to get in on the act – they strive to spend a small amount of money on a “luxury” product they don’t really need. The “feel good” factor.

Assuming availability, utility, location and, in some cases, continuity, the ultimate marketplace differentiator isn’t price – it’s the experience. Don’t sell a product – get across what it feels like to own and use it. Don’t sell the job – make tomorrow come alive today; help the candidate be there! After laying out the obvious benefits of the new role, don’t waste time trying to cajole, coax or convince – share the experience.

3 Old English proverb.

4 A sense of belonging transforms a job from a series of daily tasks into a supportive community. When employees feel connected and valued, businesses see a 50% drop in attrition.

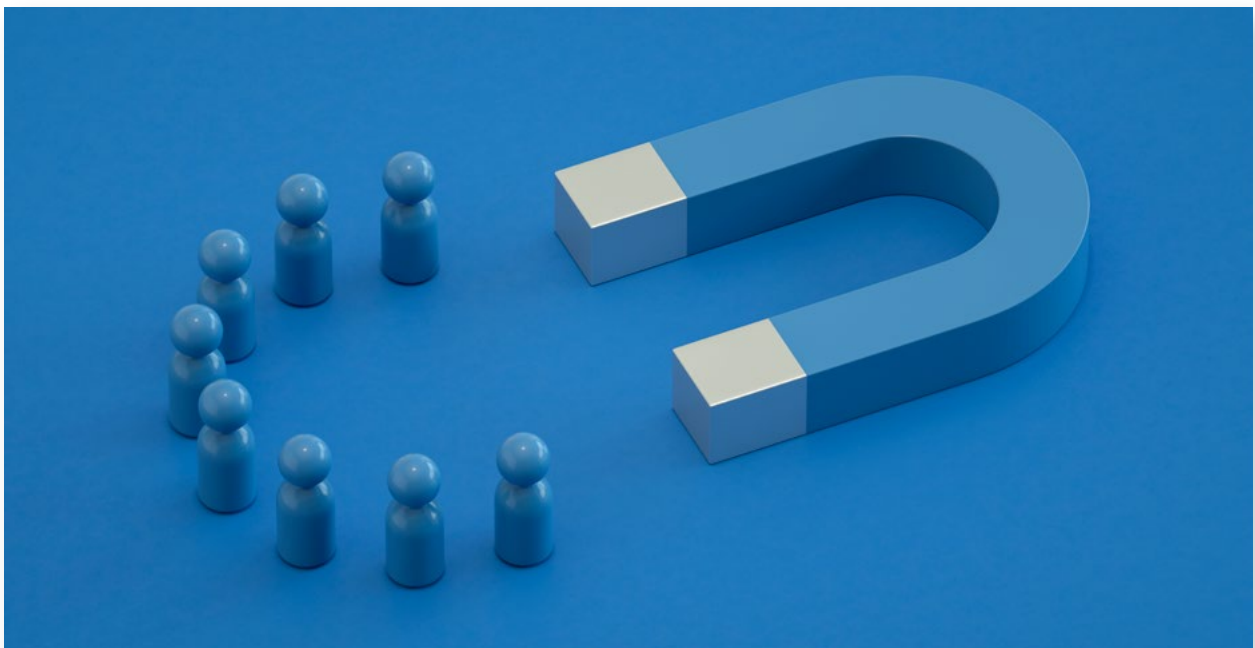


What the candidate knows sets the scene. What the candidate feels determines if they are willing to walk on the stage. When the candidate is inspired – when there is a compelling portrayal of actually working in the new business – the inescapable visualisation involved prompts their internal director to shout “Action!”

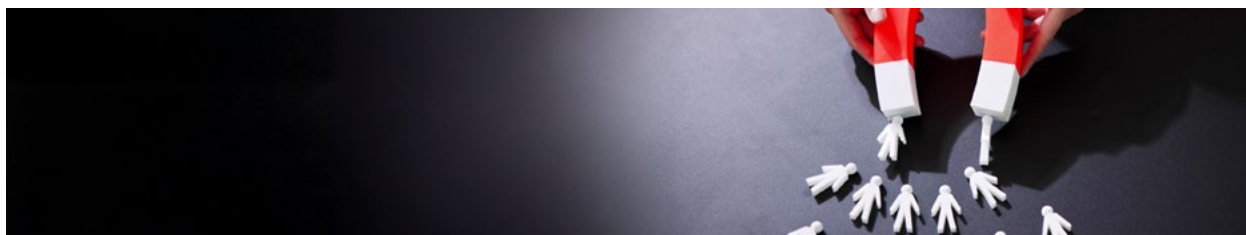
In attracting top talent, how the role is presented isn’t the recruitment brand. Slick talk isn’t the brand. Imagery isn’t the brand. The firm’s product or services aren’t the brand. The website isn’t the brand. They all contribute but the attraction differentiator is to capture and share the experience of the organization’s outstanding performers. What keeps the best attracts the rest! Successful “attraction” is enabled when Sally, with integrity and purpose, shares the following:

“We have interviewed the company’s top performers and this is what they love about the organization ...”

It goes without saying, everything about Sally’s initial interaction must be a positive experience for the would-be candidate. In sharing the firm’s recruitment brand she follows a well-honed script: **Be** authentic.⁵ **R**apport means “being there,” active listening and courtesy. **A**nticipate the questions likely to come up. **N**o ducking tough questions. **D**eliver quickly on any promises made or questions that couldn’t be answered.



5 Exaggeration and hype may create initial interest but will, sooner rather than later, build lasting resentment.



Misrepresent or sugarcoat the facts (inform) and you might gain the candidate's attention, but you are not going to keep it. Present the organization's story poorly (involve) and, for the talent you need most, their status quo will always win out. Strip out "the experience" component (inspire) and you are, metaphorically speaking, attempting to cut through an oak door armed only with a blunt knife.

In conducting these initial-contact conversations, Sally also has a unique opportunity to gauge how an opportunity with ABC Co. is perceived in the marketplace. It's insight that shouldn't be squandered. If you don't know how well your recruitment brand plays, you can't rework it!

The Top Performers' Shared Experience Must Be Authentic

Most organizations take a problem-solving approach to retention. "Why do our best people leave?" The exit interview! If you think exiting employees are candid when asked, "Why are you leaving the organization?" please give me a call. I have some very attractive land located on the edge of the Florida Everglades (not too swampy) to sell you.

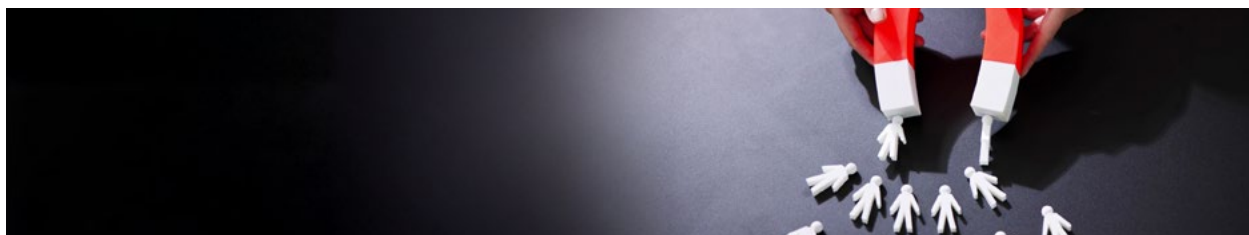
As outlined, there is an indelible link between why top performers choose to stay and attracting talent to the organization. *What keeps the best⁶ attracts the rest.* A process that helps "discover" why the organization's top people stay allows Sally to approach the moment of truth with integrity and authenticity.

Now, imagine the scene. Sally is meeting with a small group of high performers – eight or so. Her task is straightforward: Why do these leaders stay with the business? At first they are guarded. A skilled facilitator, Sally quickly overcomes this hesitancy. By looking for the positive, she quickly connects with the energy in the room. She doesn't want to curtail any concerns this group may have but there is a reason(s) that they stay ... and she needs to connect with what that is.

Few of those present will be able to draw on the rich repertoire of potential reasons needed to explain why they stay. To fully understand why the participants stay, Sally has to go deep. A meaningful process is, thus, essential.⁷ The good news? Top performers are more than ready to share what they find in the business that is special – what it is that inspires them personally.

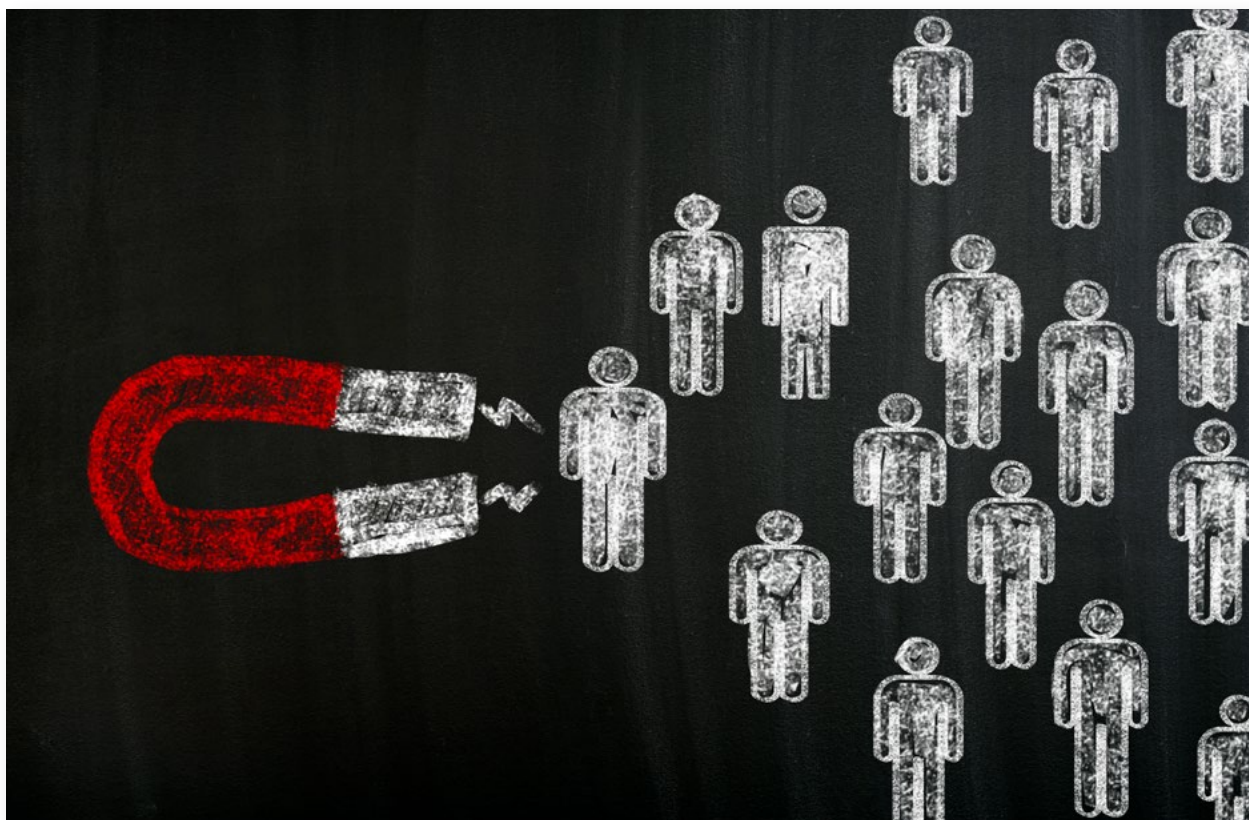
6 I have used the term "best" here because it supports a memorable phrase. It should not be assumed, however, that the recruitment challenge is to find the "best" candidate. Uncovering the best candidate is relatively easy. The more difficult and more meaningful task is to uncover the *right* candidate.

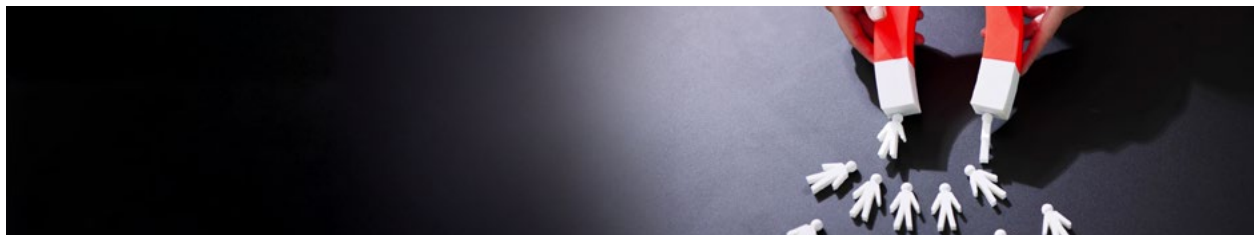
7 See a full explanation of the Orxestra process at the end of the article.



The fact that something is simple doesn't always make it easy. Facilitation is often viewed as a lower-order management skill. It isn't. It involves superior knowledge of the topic, empathy, asking the right question at the right time, aligning the approach with the context, knowledge and temperament of the audience and recognising that people open up when the five **Rs** of facilitation are present:

1. **Resonance:** the facilitator comes across as being both trustworthy and fully qualified to manage the activity (who).
2. **Realistic:** selecting the group, setting the time and determining the location are congruent with the desired outcome. Recognising that participants may be in different countries, the session can be conducted online. Where participants are in the same location, the session should be face-to-face (where).
3. **Relevance:** participants have to understand how the activity has real meaning for the business (why).
4. **Reliability:** the content of the session and the questions posed are consistent with the participants' perception of the topic being reviewed. This has a good





deal to do with the credibility of the facilitator but if, for example, participants disagree or challenge an underlying concept, that contradiction has to be surfaced and explained (how).

5. **Results:** how and when the outcome will be presented, to whom and the level of confidentiality accompanying the group's contribution must be transparent (when).

Conclusion

In conclusion, let's revisit how Sally deals with the moment of truth described earlier.

Applicant: "Thank you for your interest and I really appreciate the information you have just shared, but I have a great job here."

Sally: "I can understand that but let me share with you what makes this opportunity special. I recently asked a group of our top performers why they stay. Here is what they love about the organization ..."

By sharing why top performers stay, Sally moves beyond informing and even beyond the value of involving the candidate in the hiring organization's story. Inspiration comes from the Latin noun *spiritus*. It means "to breathe life into." By sharing the attraction narrative drawn out of the conversation with top performers, Sally is breathing life into the likelihood that the candidate she is speaking to will find "the experience" compelling. The key is authenticity. Sally can't get by on purely thinking that she knows why the organization's top performers stay. Top performers (candidates) are, invariably, top performers because they have a highly developed sense of what's true and what's speculation.

Without facilitating the session as outlined above, what the candidate will hear is Sally's opinion. By presenting the organization's hiring value proposition (inform, involve, inspire) with authenticity and genuine transparency, she is taking the first step in building that intangible – but oh so important quality – trust.

It's five times easier to keep an established customer than to win a new one. And it's easier – and a lot less expensive – to keep top talent than it is to uncover the right external candidate in a tough employment market.

But why do your top performers stay? If you know the answer you have a piece of the recruitment puzzle (attraction) that is invaluable. If you don't attract top talent, you can't hire top talent!



If you are a line manager and assume this conversation is what Human Resources gets paid for, think again! This from the website of a major packaged goods firm: “Our leaders are accountable for attracting and recruiting talent.” To that end, if you are in Human Resources, lead a function or are a line manager, consider the following:

1. Assuming your organization has a great story, how is it presented? Do all of those who talk to or meet the candidates, including external resources, share that story in the same way? What would it take to ensure that “your story” gives you a competitive edge with top talent?
2. What do you need to do to ensure that you (and/or those representing you in the market for talent, e.g., executive search) answer the “moment of truth” response with clarity and authenticity?
3. Do you know why your top talent stays? Not merely think you know. Really know! “Knowing” based on a robust, research-based approach. A process where the collective “scores” of a cross section of those asked why they stay provides valid data as to the overall retention health of the organization.

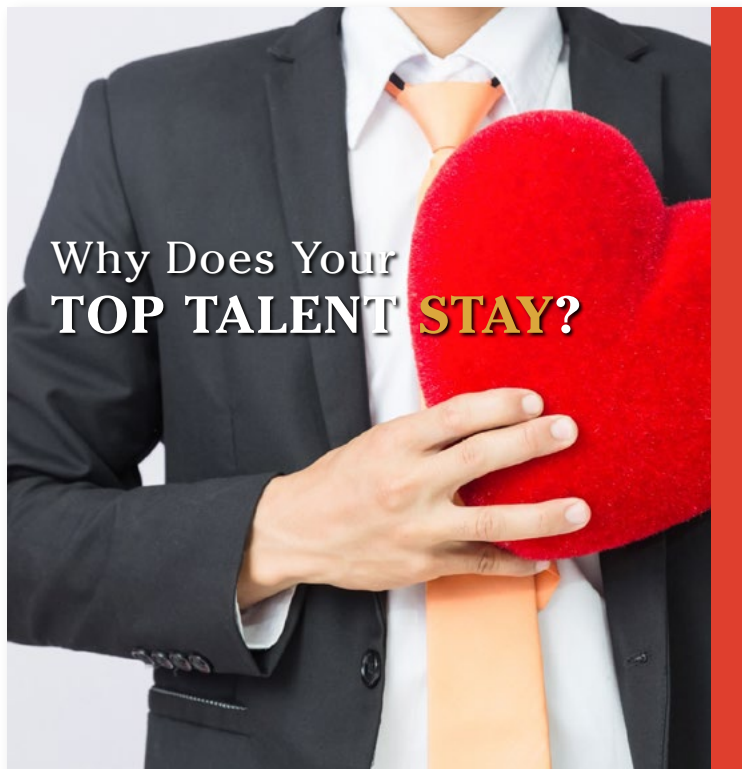
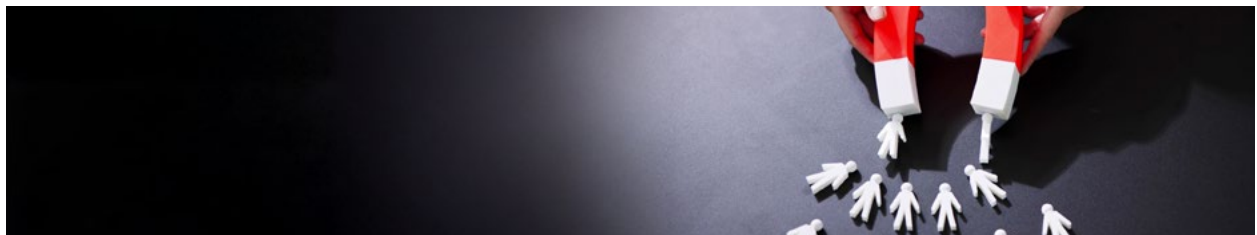
Why Do You Stay?



- Attraction
- Retention health
- Board work



The Orxestra *Why Do You Stay?* process builds on a series of 50 research-based statements – each representing a key dimension of retention. The process is structured such that it enables participants, working as a group, to agree on several statements that determine, with clarity, why they stay. Moving beyond that, utilising the unique TRANSEARCH algorithm, the participants’ chosen retention statements provide an invaluable score of the organization’s retention health. This score is an early warning of retention problems that need to be addressed and/or areas where the organization would do well to reinforce success. *Why Do You Stay?* is also an invaluable complement to strategic succession planning. Used one-on-one with mission-critical executives who are essential to the viability of the succession process, *Why Do You Stay?* can do much to derisk succession. Think of *Why Do You Stay?* as a way to provide reassurance to the Board on a critical leadership issue.



Why Does Your
TOP TALENT STAY?

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Why Does Your TOP TALENT STAY?

The final offering in John's highly lauded leadership triad, book three explores the challenge of retention ... outlining, amid unprecedented societal and workplace disruption, 21 proven strategies to retain Top Talent.

Click the button below to read *Why Does Your TOP TALENT STAY?* by the author, featured on the TRANSEARCH website.

[Read the article >](#)



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*“What keeps
the best attracts
the rest!”*

- John O. Burdett

JOHN O. BURDETT has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world's largest corporations.

In 2019, his work with ABB's top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year. His ongoing partnership with TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached numerous executive teams

around the world in how to coach. He currently coaches a select group of CEOs.

Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award. John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, John has published 16 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. A number of them bestsellers. His most recent book is a fully revised version of his international bestselling book on executive integration: *Without Breaking Stride*. To download his current business articles go to www.transearch.com/orxestra/downloads

