Human Resources Marketing and Recruiting: Search for International Executive Talent

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Abstract

Keys to finding and integrating top leadership talent in an international setting cover areas that fall into the responsibility of both HR and the business leadership. In order to understand what is required to set up a functional structure as well as a progressive culture for hiring in international settings, this chapter focuses on potential success factors. It is equally important to understand what mind-set can be found in the candidate marketplace when it comes to leadership talent and how to best locate and engage the top players that could be suitable for the respective open positions. Once located and engaged in initial discussions, every part of the organization involved is tasked to fulfill their part to attract talent and then to ultimately make the right people decision. Process and structure are one aspect to secure talent, but so is defining the right set of criteria that can predict the highest chances of guaranteeing success. Once onboard, integration of new talent is vital in order to help the individual and the organization to gain immediate traction.

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Finding, hiring, and integrating talent is a tedious and costly process that is worth its investment many times over. A successful global leadership network has a multiplier effect and is essential for leveraging true global synergies. However, when things go wrong it will cost not only countless hours, fees, expenses, and lost revenue, but it will also negatively impact an organization in various ways.

Keywords

Executive search • International recruitment • Recruiting across cultures • International talent acquisition • Leadership talent placement • International headhunting

Introduction

As large and middle market companies increasingly become global enterprises in order to grow and to survive, their structures and organizations have to adapt and grow in the home region as well as in their subsidiaries. One of the challenges for leadership and human resources is finding and integrating the right kind of talent in key positions abroad. The language, culture, management style, and the way of doing business are unique in every country and region across the globe. Successful corporations have learned, many times through trial and error, to adapt to the "local way" in order to gain respect with customers and employees in the respective countries. However, the first obstacle to overcome is to gain awareness of this fact, to accept it at all levels, and then to execute this strategy successfully. The cooperation of all departments and levels is required to strategize, plan, and implement a global workforce strategy with a global perspective and local insight. "Think globally, act locally" is an often used phrase that also to some extent applies to global talent acquisition efforts. Is this a task for HR? Yes, but not on their own. Business leaders drive strategy and guide the team to achieve the vision. Business leaders know what is required locally and on global scale to win and sustain successful business relationships. Business practices span across international borders since multinational customers now have global operations that expect a uniform standard and often demand a key account approach, as well as a local contact and fulfillment entity. Therefore, companies doing business with multinational customers are forced to drive a dualistic approach and be global but with local offerings and delivery. Broken down from that, a clear profile of talent can be defined that will be best suited to execute on that strategy. But aside from education, skills, and experience of candidates that fit that bill, a deciding factor will be cultural fit cultural fit in terms of company culture as well as country culture. Culture is a soft factor and especially on the company/corporate level not always defined or written down. Many things have to come together to find the right people to fit in that environment and are equipped to achieve sustained success. Finding, selecting, and then hiring should be a joint effort between HR and the business leadership. Done right in a collaborative fashion, finding and integrating the best players will have a multiplier effect on an organization and can catapult an organization to new levels. There are several aspects that decide how successful recruiting and hiring will play out.

Search for International Executive Talent

A Changing International Leadership Challenge

What is leadership? For the purpose of this article, it represents a leadership-driven culture that cascades down from the very top to the second and third levels below depending on the size of the organization.

Filling leadership roles always has been and seems to be an even more important issue now facing organizations around the globe. Most multinational organizations are aware of the importance and sometimes urgency to recruit and attract the very best to lead their global or regional organizations. The question is, are companies equipped with the right mind-set, knowledge, and tools to take on the global leadership acquisition challenge?

Every century since the industrial revolution has brought change, new ideas, and new constraints to businesses, but now organizations face the new landscape of a now global economy operating at a rapid pace across borders. A paradigm change has started, stemming from new demands and immense technological advancements that will possibly also widen the gap between generations and their management/ leadership styles. A mainstream leadership style has and is undergoing change as a result of large corporate ethics scandals in previous decades and partially perceived management failures before and during the last major recession in the year 2008 and following years. Job security and lifelong careers seem to be a concept of the past. A sense of caution or distrust has spread through the workforce toward past, dominant, egocentric management practices especially by a now somewhat disillusioned younger generation. The command and control approach is often being replaced by a more inclusive leadership style of facilitation and empowerment to better respond to increasingly complex business issues and intertwined technologies. Technical innovation has enabled companies large or small to innovate, expand, and compete globally; the small and nimble can now overtake the large and traditional industry leaders of the past. Complex supply chains span the globe and require a multinational cooperation inter- and intracompany wide. A global, adaptive, and flexible mind-set is required to lead and steer corporations and teams toward growth and success when it has become increasingly difficult to see into the future. Being innovative and creative is a key factor for future successful leaders apart from being business savvy, technologically versed, and having multiple language and cultural fluency. Requirements change; a technology-driven society requires more leaders to be creative, innovative, inspiring, and ever more flexible to differentiate companies and their offerings from global competitors.



Fig. 1 Corporate social responsibility pyramid (Carroll 2004)

An additional consideration for international leaders is a clear understanding of the social and corporate responsibility and ethics standards in various parts of the world that they are exposed to. Balancing global growth and improved business ethics/corporate governance has been added to the scope of the global leader.

The model in Fig. 1 depicts the various expectations that should be met by global entities of multinational organizations and their leadership teams. Sometimes, diverging goals between entities might have to be aligned to achieve a balanced framework that complies with corporate standards and local requirements. Standards and expectations need to be defined and communicated since what is considered ethical or legal in one region might not be considered compliant behavior in another region/country. Being profitable and economically responsible is a universal expectation and the key responsibility at the foundation. However, there are higher standards to be met in today's world for a good "corporate citizen."

The task of being an international leader is clearly not an easy one with a myriad of facets and challenges in an ever changing environment. An organization is a complex social system, an international, multinational, and intercultural organization, and an ever more complex ecosystem. Leaders need to step in and provide guidance and direction in a diffuse environment but furthermore give employees a good sense of clarity and purpose for what is expected down the road.

Key Characteristics of International Top Talent

Everyone is different; however, most high performers across the globe typically share common traits and exhibit similar characteristics that differentiate them from average performers and make them successful. Across the board, top players embrace change once seen by them as beneficial. They tend to enjoy the challenge and prosper in dynamic environments. In order to do this, they adapt and operate in a flexible mode to solve the problems at hand and prepare for those in the future.

The following are examples of traits top talent commonly shares:

- Motivation They show exceptional commitment to pursue goals. They inspire and motivate others to take (moral) action like they do.
- Curiosity They are naturally curious and have a desire to learn and explore. They enjoy new engagements and challenges on unchartered territory.
- Humility They are confident and do not need to exhibit signs of superiority to others below them. They are able to learn from failure and are open to listen to and consider other viewpoints.
- Collaboration They possess strong communication skills and get along well with others. They do not take negative feedback personally or feel attacked. They understand that together they are stronger than the sum of the individuals. They are not afraid to hire and collaborate with team members that might be even more qualified than themselves in some areas. Top talent shows genuine concern for the well-being of the team.
- Mindfulness They have the ability to put themselves in other people's shoes. They possess strong emotional intelligence skills as they are self-aware and manage their behavior as much as they are aware of their social surroundings to manage relationships successfully.
- Intercultural competency Through experience and training, they are able to understand and leverage intercultural differences. They are open to learn about and really get invested in the other culture. They are looking to take the best of all worlds instead of finding fault or giving judgment.
- Development They are willing to try and learn new ways of approaching or executing strategies. They understand that they are never done learning, and they invest time and money for personal and professional development.
- Engagement They are the driving force when it comes to engagement. They are invested into the vision and what a company stands for. They show respect and are widely respected within the company. Consequently, they can inspire others and pull along the almost 87 % of the workforce that is not actively engaged (Gallup Inc 2013).
- Determination/resilience No one can succeed without the determination to be successful. They take deliberate action after thorough analysis and then persevere.
- Creative problem solving They have an ability to think creatively and "outside the box." They can visualize solutions in unchartered territory. Their ability to see things from different points of views helps find new ways and to get on common ground.
- Adaptability They can adjust to new demands, new environments, and challenges. Their focus is on success, not on a rigid corporate structure. They are rapid learners and adjust priorities as needed. They always remain calm and show composure especially in unknown cultural and business environments. Failures

are part of business, it can happen to anyone, but top performers learn from mistakes and failures.

But does this leadership talent exist and what drives them intrinsically?

The Mind-Set of Sought-After International Talent

Top performers vary in style and approach especially across age groups, but there are significant similarities that can be observed even across generations like Baby Boomers, Generation X, or Millennials. When recruiting leadership talent for international roles, it is helpful to focus on the similarities first. What motivates them generally? Looking at the potential pool of talent motivation varies depending on how active or passive they are in considering new opportunities. Contrary to many active candidates in any market, top passive talent is not primarily driven by financial reward. They can wait for the right opportunity and carefully evaluate it to see if they would be able to work with high-caliber people who have comparable values, and if they can work on a product, service, or for a purpose, they can really identify with and get excited about.

Once those requirements and the opportunity at hand seem to be a match, talented managers and executives will likely weigh these general considerations as important for an optimal opportunity:

- What impact can they have? How will the network of power and influence between headquarter and foreign entity determine possible local impact? Will this setup allow them to make a difference?
- Is there a possibility for personal and professional growth and development? In the remote unit, at headquarters, or globally?
- What is and will be the work-life balance including global travel requirements?
- How does the financial reward fare against the above requirements?

Eventually when they start considering a new opportunity, top talent carefully evaluates up- and downside potential, risks, and rewards. The following aspects will also influence career decisions.

What will the new environment be like on a daily basis? What will it be like to work for the given leadership group and with the new team at hand? This is one of the practical questions mostly pondered by the talent after being engaged in conversations. What resources are available to them, what authorities will they have, and what is expected of them in the short term and midterm? Coming into a multinational and intercultural setting adds complexity in accumulating all the facts to draw oneself a realistic picture. Not only will a potential candidate work and deal with the local organization and customers, in a global corporation, oftentimes dotted reporting lines are added and global account structures require international customer interaction. Working in the confines of the local structure and standards is compounded with global standards and priorities that can overrule or contradict local powers of authority. Will they really have freedom, support, and resources and do the values align in the corporate context as well as the local entity setup?

Good candidates evaluate risks of a possible career change early on. Most successful top performers look back at a continuous career development. Going from the known to the unknown can be an unsettling proposition. It should be the responsibility of the hiring authority to provide transparency of the future career and company development, opportunities, and risks to grow individually and as an entity. Top candidates with time and choices at hand do not need to make a move that will increase downside risks without a clear overwhelming upside potential and clarity.

Lifetime learning and career development: Top talent understands they are never done learning; they are looking for continuous improvement and advancement in themselves, others, and their organizations. Can professional development and training be provided on the same or higher level as with the current/previous employer? This among many other things will shape their decision-making process.

The Human Aspects: Corporate Culture Within the Confines of the Country Culture

Business results have a direct correlation to an ability of any organization and its members to think, act, and feel as humans. Financial outcome can be seen as an effect not the cause, human engagement, and drive impact success. One should address the human side when trying to attract and engage talent. Ideally one should convey the vision, the company strategy, and how they would fit into this vision as an integral part of the team. What is the fabric of the organization, what does it feel like to work in the international organization, and what is the common global goal?

A company's culture is an intangible concept to many. Generally company culture could be defined through these main components: shared language, shared space, and shared tools.

What are indicators you are on the right track and what are signs of a healthy cultural environment? The following sample indicators can help assess cultural goal alignment (Walton 1991):

- 1. There is a general sense of transparency.
- 2. Trust is built through information sharing.
- 3. Mutual respect is the norm not the exception.
- 4. People do not have reason to feel fear.
- 5. People experience employment and overall security.
- 6. There is a low level of status differences.
- 7. Employees feel well compensated for performance.
- 8. Training and professional development opportunities are available.
- 9. A careful hiring process that emphasizes culture fit is in place.
- 10. There is a sense of empowerment within the teams.
- 11. Work is team driven.
- 12. Continuous improvement is encouraged.

Managing and living a positive corporate culture can yield direct rewards. Studies have shown that a managed company culture can have a direct impact on productivity and bottom-line success.

A decade-long study including several hundred companies in over 20 diverse industries showed that companies that managed their corporate culture outperformed similar companies that did not. Between managed and unmanaged corporate cultures, the research indicates the following differences:

- 1. Growth in revenue of 682 % (managed) compared to 166 % (unmanaged)
- 2. Value growth, stock price increase of 901 % compared to 74 %
- 3. An income growth of 756 % compared to just 1 % (Kotter and Heskett 1992)

The challenge for multinational companies is an alignment and coexistence of a corporate culture within the respective country culture. For talent acquisition purposes, it is a prerequisite to first define their corporate culture at large and then manage company culture in the confines of the respective country. One should question how it can positively attract the right talent in the particular marketplace. Does it speak to the target talent audience and if not, what can be done to convey it to the ideal talent group? A new leadership hire in the local country/market will also somehow be tasked with being a culture-carrier, a person that can convey and live part of the uniqueness and identity of the overall company culture. By the same token, successful new leaders are expected to be flexible and tolerant to the home country organization and its culture as well as to the regional one. This can be particularly challenging for international talent that is from neither the corporate home country nor the subsidiary and possibly create a multitude of issues. A proactive recruiting process and integration process can mitigate risk and develop capabilities (e.g., direct search, culture fit assessment, training, coaching, mentoring, etc.).

Rotating talent around the globe as well as regular global leadership meetings/ events can support such integration efforts early on and on an ongoing basis. A big step is taken by creating awareness and by proactively building intercultural cohesion that feeds into a successful international talent acquisition process.

Locating and Engaging Globally Minded Talent

Due to the before-mentioned current talent market trends and conditions, an overarching theme should be that of caution but openness when looking for new leadership talent. Approaching talent acquisition efforts with an understanding of talent scarcity versus a talent surplus typically yields a more resourceful and thoughtout master plan. In an international setting, the approach should be open-minded with an understanding that practices and cultural aspects are neither good or bad, but simply different.

Having a detailed talent acquisition and later development plan is key. What is the current and future hiring plan? Does your organization have a clear strategy which

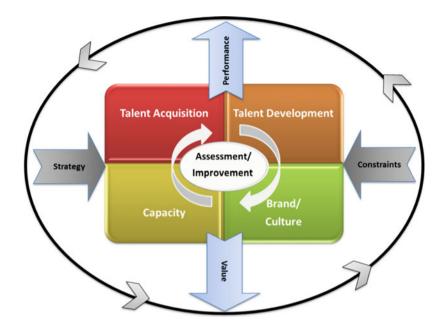


Fig. 2 Talent Optimization Matrix[®], InterKon Associates LLC

serves as a foundation for a talent acquisition plan? Thinking strategically as well as tactically is both beneficial for HR and the business side. When looking for international hires in a multinational environment, specifically one should project what the role of leaders will be years down the road. Planning hiring needs 8-12 months out increases the chances of locating and hiring the best. Reacting to changing needs on short notice can create a scenario where one has to settle on hiring any person that has just applied, not necessarily the best talent available in the market. It takes time to locate, engage, and eventually convince a high potential that the given position is a real career opportunity. New subsidiaries and transplants typically have a steeper growth curve than the parent company which has been established for many years. Hiring needs differ from those in the home country for that reason, apart from the country-specific requirements. One tool for a structured approach is the development of a global competency matrix to align talent strategy with business objectives. What are the key aspects for success in the local market as well as in interaction and context with the parent business? Overlaying this with the strategic SWOT analysis can highlight the critical factors for success. The cycle of talent acquisition, transition, and development is closely connected to capacity and culture. Through constant improvement and adjustment driven by outside factors and relevant strategy adjustment, it can be considered a work in progress (see Fig. 2).

Part of a leadership talent acquisition plan in a foreign country is to familiarize oneself with the current local talent marketplace, local customs, and legal employment framework. The marketplace is different and influenced by different factors in Europe than in Asia or in North America compared to South America. Even within those regions one can find vast differences (e.g., Canada vs. Mexico, China vs. Japan, etc.). Sometimes, hiring authorities in the home region or abroad have their own existing networks and connections where people get hired or advance on the basis of who they know or what is most convenient. This can yield poor hiring decisions since an entire pool of possible alternative candidates was never considered or evaluated. Having an open mind and being willing to invest time and money to get presented with and grasp the whole picture will most likely pay off in the long run.

Every great organization thrives to recruit and hire star performers. Most are looking for high performers that can take their organization and teams to the next level. But it is not an easy task to get noticed by A-players in the respective market. This is especially true for new market entry situations where the company name and brand carry no meaning or are not recognized as in the home country. Most high potentials are not actively pursuing a career change but are rather considered passive candidates that need to be approached directly or through referrals. They are busy and engaged with their current career. It is estimated that one in five is not even registered on popular online networks like LinkedIn and certainly not on online job portals. Their time is valuable and in an effort to preserve it, they limit distracting interactions. Confidentiality is also paramount for them to uphold their reputation and avoid rumors.

In order to locate top talent in the local market, therefore, building relationships is key. One can start with local business networking groups, build an in-house recruiting initiative, or reach out to global consulting firms that provide recruiting/ search solutions on a global scale or through partnerships in the relevant region.

Working with third party recruiting/search consulting entities has potential benefits that go beyond convenience and efficiency. They have an opportunity to connect and foster relationships in the markets and relevant niche that will go further than what an internal recruiting team can accomplish. Top talent is more likely to network with an independent advisor that can be there for multiple opportunities now and down the road. Always driven to utilize time efficiently, top performers tend to dedicate time for meaningful relationship building with a trusted advisor. Furthermore, third party search consultants work on different schedules and can make themselves available off hours and weekends to build and deepen relationship. First-class recruitment consultants succeed by maintaining close, mutually rewarding connections and a trusted network. For those reasons, third party talent acquisition providers can have an ability to cast a wider net and introduce a much wider variety of potential candidates to choose from.

When working with an international executive search/recruiting firm, it is important to understand and manage expectations right out the gate. If a new business relationship is built, a recruitment plan should be developed together with clear goals and responsibilities. In order to equip the consulting firm with all the necessary "ammunition" to sell an opportunity, the employer should work closely with the consultant to explain and convey the company culture, inner workings, goals, and vision apart from all the standard company information and position requirements. The employer can support the service provider in promoting a position by sharing the passion of the opportunity and by describing all the aspects as detailed as possible. It is a task for both hiring authorities from the business side and HR to transfer knowledge to a service provider to the fullest extent.

Finding and engaging talented people in a scarce environment requires acquisition specialists who can recruit, hiring managers who can attract, and last but not least a company that offers good career opportunities with upward mobility, not just lateral moves.

Finally, all parties involved should keep reassessing the talent acquisition situation and adjust plans and expectations if required. Some common reasons for a failure to hire talent are the following:

- There is just not enough talent in the particular niche/market.
- The talent acquisition strategy and execution plan are not effective.
- Expectations are unrealistic.

Selecting Future Global Leaders

Candidate experience is one of the buzzwords in talent acquisition that has become more prevalent as good talent becomes more scarce. Walking in the shoes of an applicant/candidate opens one's eyes as to how they might see and experience an organization and the process. This is even more complex in an international setting since what one would experience when walking in a candidate's shoes in the home country might differ vastly from what a local candidate in the remote market might experience. Attempting to see the process from another person's point of view not only helps understand how a company's recruiting experience might feel like but also what would drive decision-making from the point of view of a candidate.

Communication is always a two-way process. One person might not necessarily hear what the other person meant to say. Every company has a unique recruiting/ hiring process and style. Communication with service providers and candidates is essential to keep candidates engaged. Having a transparent and honest communication strategy supports rapport building and prevents offsets in perception. Intercultural and international standards of communication should be taken in consideration when planning a communication strategy.

Interviewing candidates and communication with candidates is a key component to a successful hiring strategy. Utilizing multiple team members for the interviewing process can have its benefits but can potentially also be the downfall of a successful recruiting process. Introducing candidates to multiple team members on a peer and superior level is useful for a candidate in order to get a feel for the social environment of a future workplace, and it adds an extra set of eyes on the employer side. However, of particular importance is the selection and the amount of team members a candidate will meet. Too many people with too many opinions can distort the picture of the candidate and lead to the fact that a candidate is not hired even though he/she could have been a good fit (politics, personal agendas, lack of interview experience, etc.). In an international setting, a misstep that corporations take unknowingly at times is who they select to be the interviewer and also the decision-maker. In an ideal scenario, it is a small, select group of a handful of people that are tasked with the process and decision-making. The individuals need to be intimately aware with the host country business and social environment, so they do not disrupt the process or negatively impact the recruiting and later decision-making process of a potentially very qualified candidate. In order to avoid confusion and to expedite the entire process, responsibilities within the hiring team need to be set and communicated early on.

When it comes to interviewing, many approaches have been evaluated in recent years for their effectiveness. Behavioral interviewing is a standard practice that has shown its merits but might not provide one with the full picture and projection of possible future success. The environment an employee is in can determine and shape behavior. Therefore, past success or failure in a previous role and organization does not necessarily mean the same in the new organization and environment. Increasingly, research supports the notion that how people are managed has an effect on productivity, quality, and profitability and therefore ultimately business value (Pfeffer 2007). For this and other reasons, careful consideration and structured evaluation are essential for making the right people decisions in an international setting. The stakes are high and it pays to evaluate carefully which candidate best fits into this multifaceted environment. A blended approach of behavioral and performance-based interviewing can be an effective way to understand a candidate's real personality, motives, professional strengths, and shortcomings as well as dreams and ambitions. Pinpointing on previous international/ intercultural experience and developed skills will help project possible future success in a global setting. While experience and skills are important possible predictors, having the talent to develop and adapt to the new environment and setting is even a higher priority. There are many pieces to the puzzle and only a comprehensive picture will allow decision-makers to select the best international leader/manager.

"When in Rome. . ., do as the Romans do." Personalizing and adapting the talent acquisition process will generally yield better results. Corporate directives and bureaucracies can sometimes bog down or restrict recruiting activities in the regional markets. While corporate standards are important to maintain a common understanding and reduce variance, it might be hindering for a market-specific talent acquisition activity. What is the norm, legal, and ethical in one country might be different from the other country. Cultures and standards differ as well. This also applies to the perception of time available/needed for a recruiting project. Different countries may have different cultural concepts of time (e.g., monochronic vs. polychronic), but also candidates and employers might have a different understanding regarding the "usual" timeline of a recruiting processe. Some regions have customarily long notice periods and longer decision-making processes, while in other regions it could be more time compressed. Creating a plan, adjusting to the local customs, and clear communication support a more cohesive process and can lead to an enhanced candidate experience compared to an unstructured process.

Integrating New Talent in a Multinational, Multicultural Setting

Once a decision is made to hire and the offer has been accepted by the preferred candidate, companies start the onboarding process. Most corporations have a structured approach in place to handle all necessary administrative steps. This might include local or international relocation. Relocation can be an added stressor for candidates and especially their spouses and families which should not be underestimated. Their world will be turned "upside down" for a period of time, and supporting the new employee and families is something that ultimately accelerates the integration process. Offering spousal support and cultural training before and after an international relocation is one component to achieve a holistic integration. This in turn improves the new employees' moral and effectiveness, thus delivering value sooner rather than later. A dedicated onboarding plan can be useful to start the relationship building and to make the new employee most efficient early on. Onboarding is part of the candidate experience that will shape the starting phase of employment. It sets the tone for the beginning work relationship.

In an international environment, a new employee not only has to figure out the culture and processes of the new entity but also deal with the added complexity of a global structure and its inner workings. New relationships have to be developed internally as well as externally. Establishing and fostering personal connections between key leadership staff and the new employee can help make the transition smoother and to make a new hire more comfortable to integrate as a human being, not just an executive branch. It is again the human interaction that can impact the outcome. The more and the earlier meaningful interaction takes place and bonds begin to grow, the higher the success rate. When connected on an emotional level, everyone feels more invested. These efforts will also reduce the chances of a candidate entertaining or accepting a dreaded counteroffer from the current (and now disappointed) employer. Efforts put into onboarding and transitioning should not be underestimated, since naturally everyone assumes everything is a done deal when a candidate signs on. Challenges, opportunities, and day-to-day problems will always be there, but with the right team and the right attitude, they can almost always be solved and new paths can be chartered.

Conclusion

As the world globalizes so should every corporation's talent pool. Finding, attracting, and integrating good leadership talent is challenging enough in one country/region, but it is multiplied in complexity when one is tasked with developing a global leadership network that can function well in a local region and interacts successfully globally. As much as one can prepare for such a task and as much leadership talent gets trained and educated, there is still a sizable portion of "trial and error" and "learning by doing" that takes place. Making mistakes is part of the human learning and improvement process. As long as everything is seen as an opportunity to improve and one can learn from their own mistakes, the global

leadership talent conundrum can be solved. As for leadership candidates the same applies but with a lower tolerance level for mistakes as organization looks at the local top 2 leadership levels and holds them accountable for success or failure. However, having had the opportunity of holding one or several international management and then leadership roles can be an extremely beneficial experience and competitive advantage compared to other potential candidates since they have been shaped through this journey before.

Together great things can happen. When people with the same mind-set, experience level, attitude, and level of motivation come together, their impact surpasses the sum of all individuals. Leveraging global synergies through an efficient and diverse international leadership structure can be an untapped source for sustainable success and corporate value enhancement.

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