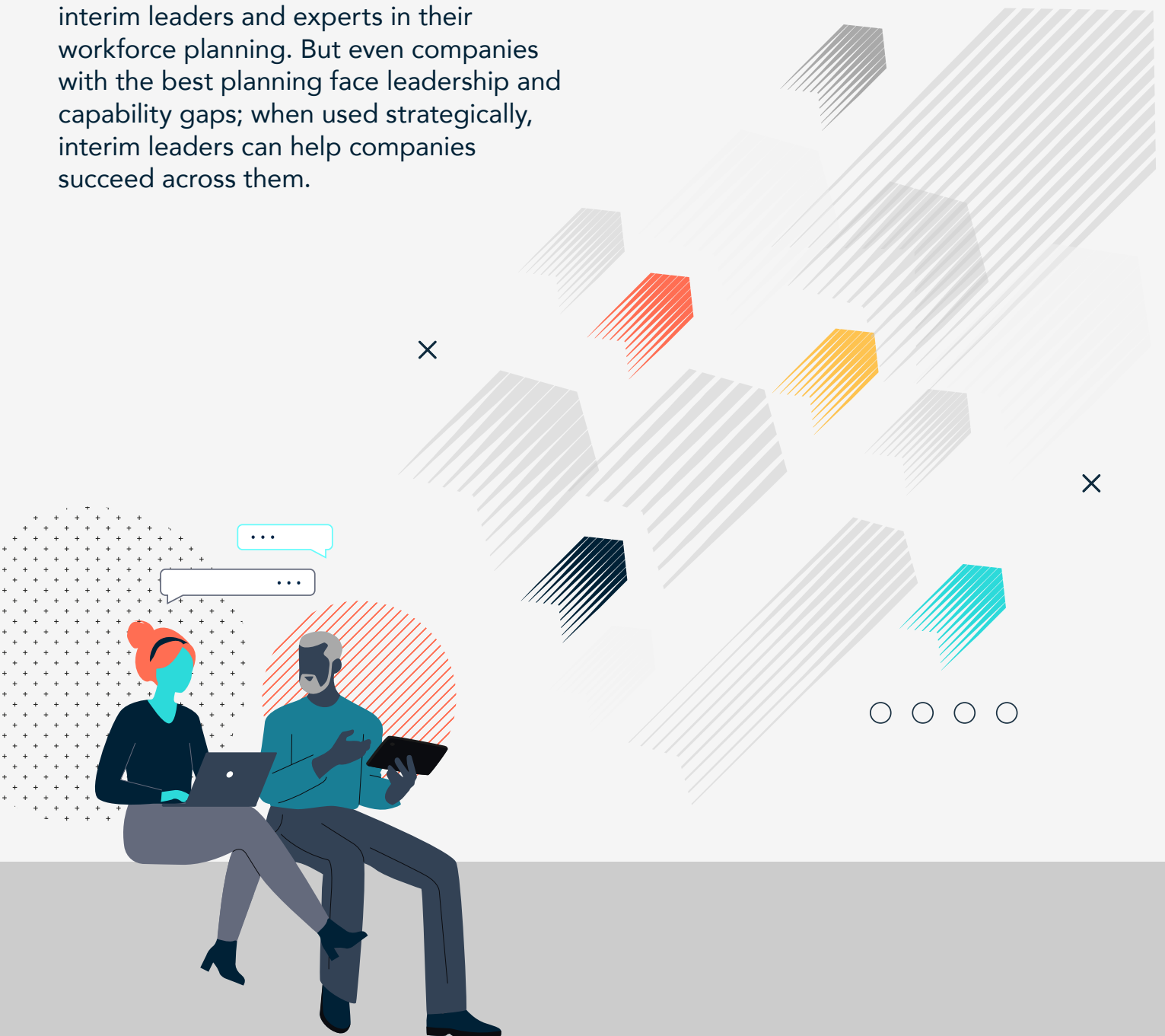


## ARTICLE

# Leadership assurance: Using flexible workforce strategies to fill leadership and capability gaps

Only 15% of HR leaders say they include interim leaders and experts in their workforce planning. But even companies with the best planning face leadership and capability gaps; when used strategically, interim leaders can help companies succeed across them.



Leadership quality is increasingly material to organizations' financial performance. Yet, given constant volatility, it's harder than ever for most leaders to determine which skills they and their teams will need to succeed, even in the short term. CEOs and chief people officers invest time in understanding skills and capability needs across the organization, with varying degrees of success.<sup>1</sup> Individual leaders may also have additional or different needs, depending on factors including the speed of AI adoption in their function or business unit, whether they are launching a new product or service, or a need to respond to unexpected customer or supply-chain shifts.

Leaders often try to stretch their existing teams to cover new work, particularly when they are facing cost constraints. But even more often, they need help. And in these contexts, trying to find the right skill sets through traditional workforce planning efforts can be particularly unhelpful. For example, a recent survey of chief people officers found that only 56% said workforce planning was aligned with innovation or product or service development efforts.<sup>2</sup> In these and several other common circumstances—including an unexpected departure, a change management effort, or unexpected needs driven by external forces—bringing on interim leaders and experts who bolster teams for specific purposes in specific timeframes can create measurable value.<sup>3</sup>

Yet only 15% of HR leaders consider these executives a part of their workforce planning strategies, leaving a lot of opportunities unrealized. When HR leaders actively include interim leaders in their planning, executives across the organization can typically find faster solutions to talent challenges; employing interim executives can also help leaders understand where they might want to consider adding permanent expertise to the team—and where they don't need to. In addition, there are many circumstances in which leaders outside HR can leverage interim leaders on their own if needed.

## When leadership teams get stretched

There are a few common times when leadership teams often need additional help. One is events such as product launches, new market entries, or planned transformations. This is so common that Harvard Business School research has found that two of the five main reasons companies fail to execute their strategies successfully are ineffective resource allocation and lack of organizational support.<sup>4</sup>

When a senior leader departs, either permanently or temporarily, companies that don't have a clear succession plan often redistribute work among that leader's team.<sup>5</sup> This is a common problem: our research has found that 47% of executives say their organization does not have plans for at least one role it should. Redistributing work creates instability and stagnation, and stretches teams thin. For a short-term absence and for some roles, this may be okay; when an absence or a search for a full-time replacement is lengthy, it can lead to significant performance drag. In either situation, though, interim support can help stabilize the team to facilitate a smooth transition.

Our research has found that 47% of executives say their organization does not have plans for at least one role it should.

- 1 Ellen Maag, Sharon Sands, and Jane Schroeder, "[Leadership assurance: Leveraging assessment data as a key performance lever](#)," Heidrick & Struggles, November 27, 2025, [heidrick.com](#); Sarah Arnot, "[Leadership assurance: How one company achieved a meaningful return on its investment in executive coaching](#)," Heidrick & Struggles, February 23, 2026, [heidrick.com](#).
- 2 Allen Mueller and Todd Taylor, "[Leadership assurance: The role of interim leaders in supporting companies through change and disruption](#)," Heidrick & Struggles, July 16, 2025, [heidrick.com](#).
- 3 Brad Warga and Jennifer Wilson, "[Leveraging the executive leadership team to improve workforce planning](#)," Heidrick & Struggles, February 18, 2026, [heidrick.com](#).
- 3 For more on how companies can add interim leadership to their executive pipeline planning, see Todd Taylor and Allen Mueller, "[Leadership assurance: The role of interim leaders in supporting companies through change and disruption](#)," Heidrick & Struggles, July 16, 2025, [heidrick.com](#).
- 4 Kate Gibson, "[5 Reasons Strategy Execution Fails](#)," Harvard Business School, December 21, 2023, <https://online.hbs.edu/>.
- 5 For more on why executive succession planning goes wrong and how some companies are improving it, see Sarah Arnot, Sharon Sands, and Todd Taylor, "[Leadership assurance: How data can improve every aspect of executive leadership development and succession planning](#)," Heidrick & Struggles, July 31, 2024, [heidrick.com](#).

Emerging technologies, demographic shifts, or other forms of volatility can create unexpected, rapidly changing needs. Companies often hire consultants for advice, but interim leaders can be a more effective and flexible solution.

When a new leader does join, they may need short-term support for several reasons. For example, all executive teams include a mix of skills and capabilities, and the new leader's skillset may require a different set of complementary skills than the prior leader's. Or the new leader may not have experience in a relevant function or market and will need support while they get up to speed.

Finally, emerging technologies, demographic shifts, or other forms of volatility can create unexpected, rapidly changing needs. Companies often hire consultants for advice, but interim leaders can be a more effective and flexible solution. One example of an area where most companies have needed unexpected help is AI. As the World Economic Forum has noted, "Productivity gains from AI are triggering overcapacity in legacy roles, while simultaneously exposing acute shortages in AI-critical skills. This paradox is not distant; it is unfolding today."<sup>6</sup> This has several implications. One is that companies need leaders and experts right now who can manage in areas such as AI governance, prompt engineering, and knowledge architecture. In addition, existing leaders need to learn to work together in new ways, which stretches capacity and may require knowledge in new areas.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, as AI is automating many entry-level and middle-management jobs, there is a looming question about the effect on the early stages of executive leadership pipelines.<sup>8</sup>

## How flexible leadership planning can help

A workforce planning strategy that includes interim executives and experts as flexible elements around the core internal pipeline not only helps leaders alleviate all these challenges, but it also helps improve outcomes. Our survey on workforce planning found that executive teams are primarily interested in three metrics: retention of top-level talent, critical-role succession planning rates, and time-to-fill critical roles. Executives who engage interim leaders and experts strategically can ease the pain when performance on those metrics isn't where a company needs it to be by reducing the workload of internal leaders (lowering the chances of burnout) and bridging gaps while roles are being filled by offering deep, targeted expertise when and where it's needed most.

For example, a global fintech and payments company recently brought in an intelligent automation and IT systems expert with extensive experience at top strategy consulting firms and Fortune 500 companies to evaluate its process maps and make recommendations to streamline the business. This leader's depth of expertise and lack of internal bias were crucial to reducing the role of internal politics and increasing speed in prioritizing opportunities based on relevance and technology maturity, developing business cases and implementation plans, and securing buy-in from all relevant stakeholders.<sup>9</sup>

Unexpected departures are another situation in which interim leaders can make a huge contribution.

As we've noted, unexpected departures are another situation in which interim leaders can make a huge contribution. The Canadian arm of a major US financial services company, for example, needed to fill a gap suddenly when an HR executive went on medical leave. Rather than redistributing their responsibilities, the company engaged an experienced HR leader with extensive experience in both the US and Canada across all levels of the HR function, particularly in strategic HR planning and organizational development. The interim leader took on the day-to-day responsibilities of the role while consulting on onboarding and L&D

6 Frédéric Gigant and Rémy Sergent, "AI's new dual workforce challenge: Balancing overcapacity and talent shortages," World Economic Forum, October 3, 2025, [weforum.org](https://www.weforum.org).

7 Ryan Bulkoski, Jaimee Eddington, Katherine Graham Shannon, and Brad Warga. "AI and leadership: How finance, HR, and technology leaders are collaborating to make the most of AI across the enterprise," Heidrick & Struggles, September 3, 2025, [heidrick.com](https://heidrick.com).

8 For more on how companies are addressing the middle-management gap in particular, see Brian Kropp, Brad Warga, and Jennifer Wilson, "Chief people officer focus: 2026 agenda—becoming an enterprise CPO," Heidrick & Struggles, February 3, 2026, [heidrick.com](https://heidrick.com).

9 "Intelligent Automation Expert to Identify Opportunities for AI Application," Business Talent Group, a Heidrick & Struggles Company, [resources.businesstalentgroup.com](https://resources.businesstalentgroup.com).

processes and serving as a strategic advisor for the broader leadership team. This enabled the company to advance key priorities and support ongoing HR operations, both areas that could have faltered without specific leadership.<sup>10</sup>

Sometimes what's most helpful isn't one specific interim leader, but access to a bench of experts who can be brought in as needed to complete critical workstreams. This was the case when the clinical development group of a global pharmaceutical company began a transformation to improve clinical processes, deliver cost savings, and increase speed to market and patient access. With a flexible project management office resourcing model, the company was able to deploy a rotating team of project managers across workstreams—such as process and governance, communications, and change management—all overseen by someone with extensive experience at a top consulting firm. Over the course of the two-year initiative, 5 to 10 different interim experts were engaged across the company at any given time.<sup>11</sup>

---

Leadership quality matters more than ever, and it's crucial that every organization has a robust leadership pipeline. But even the best pipeline springs a leak from time to time, and pipelines aren't necessarily flexible. So, companies that strategically leverage interim leaders and experts as part of their overall leadership workforce planning can be better prepared for every eventuality.

---

<sup>10</sup> "Interim HR Leader for an Unexpected Leadership Gap in Insurance," Business Talent Group, a Heidrick & Struggles Company, [resources.businesstalentgroup.com](https://resources.businesstalentgroup.com).

<sup>11</sup> "Dynamic and Scalable Project Management Resourcing for a Clinical Transformation," Business Talent Group, a Heidrick & Struggles Company, [resources.businesstalentgroup.com](https://resources.businesstalentgroup.com).

---

## About the author

### Sunny Ackerman

is the global managing partner of the On-Demand Talent Practice and the partner-in-charge of Heidrick & Struggles' Los Angeles office.

[sackerman@heidrick.com](mailto:sackerman@heidrick.com)

# On-Demand Talent

Tap experienced interim leaders and experts on a flexible, as-needed basis. Heidrick & Struggles delivers on-demand access to top independent talent to solve significant business problems, drive major transformations, and fill urgent leadership and capability gaps.

Whether you're facing market volatility, fending off competition, or leveling up your technology and operational capabilities, strong leadership and in-demand skills are essential. Gaps at any level can sap momentum, throw organizations into disarray, and stall progress on important initiatives. When you're short a key player, undergoing an extended search, or building out new capabilities, even temporary solutions can be transformative.

We offer critical talent for critical moments, including:

- Interim executives spanning C-suite to director
- Management consultants and subject matter experts and advisors
- Special project leaders for moments of innovation, transformation, and change

## Leaders of Heidrick & Struggles' On-Demand Talent Offering

Global

Sunny Ackerman  
Dallas  
[sackerman@heidrick.com](mailto:sackerman@heidrick.com)

Americas

Allen Mueller  
Washington, DC  
[amueller@heidrick.com](mailto:amueller@heidrick.com)

Europe & Africa

Mike Schwanke  
Munich  
[mschwanke@heidrick.com](mailto:mschwanke@heidrick.com)

Dr. Christian Frank  
Munich  
[cfrank@heidrick.com](mailto:cfrank@heidrick.com)

M.E. Reidy  
London  
[mreidy@heidrick.com](mailto:mreidy@heidrick.com)