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HR & Finance

HR Director Boardroom Summary

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Chaired by

EVERSHEDS
SUTHERLAND



Speakers:



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Discussing the topic:

'The Talent Equation - Competing for Engagement When You Can't Compete on Pay'

Retention as a Strategic Risk Profile

Retention was identified as one of the highest-impact risks facing organisations today. While the presentation highlighted the pressures businesses face when they cannot compete on pay including inflation, talent shortages, investor pressure, and pay compression the conversation in the room took this further.

Key points explored:

Go deeper than headline attrition data

Delegates agreed that raw attrition percentages offer limited insight. Instead, HR teams must investigate:

- The why behind departures not just voluntary vs. involuntary, but the underlying emotional, cultural, and structural triggers.
- How exit triggers differ by population group (generation, tenure, function, socioeconomic background).
- Whether attrition points to leadership issues, workload challenges, burnout, or a lack of purpose or progression.

Data and AI as enablers not replacements

Tools such as [Claude](#), [Copilot](#), and [ChatGPT](#) can:

- Identify sentiment shifts from surveys, listening channels, and performance data.
- Spot leading indicators of flight risk.
- Support HR teams in presenting clearer, data-driven narratives to the Board.

However, as highlighted in the discussion, listening deeply through focus groups, Gemba walks, and skip-level conversations remains essential for uncovering genuine barriers and opportunities.

Smart, Modern Objective Setting

The group discussed the need for more meaningful, strategically aligned objective-setting processes.

Where the pain points currently are:

- Goals are often vague, generic, or “cut and paste”.
- Behavioural expectations are inconsistently embedded.
- Objectives sometimes reflect historical business models, not evolving realities.

Actions and insights:

- Use AI support (Copilot/ChatGPT) to help craft SMART goals that are specific, rigorous, and aligned with organisational outcomes.
- Integrate behavioural competencies into every objective to ensure expectations are balanced between delivery and leadership behaviours.
- Incorporate more forward-looking metrics linked to capability building, continuous improvement, and collaboration.

This links directly to the discussion and emphasis on transparency, autonomy, and leadership capability as core talent levers.

Cross-Functional Partnerships and Shared Ownership of Culture

Delegates emphasised that HR alone cannot own engagement, retention, or workforce capability.

Key observations:

- High-performing organisations create shared ownership between HR and operational leaders.
- HR must enable but also challenge shifting culture from “HR problem” to “leadership responsibility.”
- Partnerships are essential to embed inclusion, recognition, mobility, and development effectively all reinforced in the presentation’s retention framework.

Understanding and Harnessing Generational Expectations

The group discussed the complexity of a multi-generational workforce, particularly around:

- Expectations of feedback frequency.
- Desire for purpose, belonging, and social connection.
- Approaches to work/life balance.
- Appetite for progression and visibility.
- Trust in leadership.

Core insight:

While each generation may express unique needs, the organisation must balance these against commercial realities. Talent strategies must be inclusive but sustainable.

This closely aligns with the emphasis on anchoring people in purpose, creating visible career pathways, and ensuring inclusion and psychological safety.



Building Strong Behavioural and Skills Frameworks

A consistent theme was the need for well-designed and well-embedded frameworks.

Why they matter:

- They set clear expectations and reduce ambiguity.
- They support capability building and leadership development.
- They enable more objective performance and succession decisions.
- They help employees understand what “good” looks like and brings about visible recognition of positive behaviours.

Current challenges:

- Many organisations have frameworks that exist on paper but are not integrated into day-to-day leadership conversations.
- Some frameworks are too complex, outdated, or detached from business strategy.

Purpose, Passion, and Value Contribution

One of the most powerful themes was the importance of ensuring employees feel the value of their work. Participants reflected that:

- Purpose is a major retention lever, especially when pay competitiveness is limited a point strongly reinforced by the room.
- People must understand the downstream impact of their role and how it contributes to the organisation’s mission, customers, or communities.
- Leaders play a pivotal role in articulating this meaning regularly and authentically.

When employees feel disconnected from the bigger picture, performance, engagement, and retention decline.

Career Pathways and Realistic Growth Opportunities

While structured career pathways remain important, the discussion emphasised the equal significance of everyday career conversations.

Key takeaways:

- Employees value clear, visible progression steps small increments, but achievable goals.
 - Development should not rely solely on formal promotions; sideways moves can build breadth and deepen capability.
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- Internal mobility should be reframed as a strength, not a fallback.
- Career progression must be personalised not “one size fits all.”

Trust in Leadership as a Non-Negotiable

Trust emerged as one of the strongest predictors of engagement and retention.

Delegates noted:

- Without trust, autonomy becomes risky, communication breaks down, and psychological safety erodes.
- Leadership capability and consistency need ongoing investment.
- Leaders must actively demonstrate fairness, transparency, and authenticity.
- Employees must believe leaders will recognise talent and reward it - this further enforces the emphasis on recognition and strong leadership.

Inclusion, Belonging, and Real-Time Feedback

Delegates noted:

- Belonging is a deeper concept than simple diversity or representation.
- A sense of belonging directly influences retention, confidence, and discretionary effort.
- Real-time feedback, not annual reviews, drives growth and connection.
- Asking meaningful questions at hiring, onboarding, and early tenure strengthens alignment and reduces early attrition.
- It is so important to recognise inclusion and EDI involvement.

Using Insight, Feedback, and Data to Drive Targeted Action

Finally, participants recognised that:

- Organisations cannot fix everything nor should they try.
- Transparency about what the business can and cannot change builds credibility.
- Continuous listening, data analytics, and visible follow-through strengthen trust.
- Effective HR teams synthesise insight into clear priorities, reducing noise and focusing on the highest-impact opportunities.

Closing Summary

The session highlighted that the talent equation is multifaceted, touching purpose, leadership, development, recognition, data, and belonging. When organisations cannot differentiate through pay, they must differentiate through people experience, leadership quality, internal mobility, and psychological safety all reinforced by the presentation's core themes.



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