Ensure Analytics Are Actionable, Credible and Accessible

by Jenna Zitomer

Even in a world where reliance on data is deepening, only 40% of senior leaders seek out HR data when making business decisions.[1] In addition, only 23% of heads of talent analytics believe leaders are even effective at using talent data to inform business decisions.[1]

In short, talent analytics is taking a backseat to other business analytics, leaving an untapped pool of valuable information leaders could leverage to improve business decisions.

Given this reality, heads of talent analytics are looking to increase the demand for talent analytics and discover new ways to embed talent data in HR and business decision making. To help, we gathered a panel of HR leaders at our October 2018 ReimagineHR conference in Orlando to speak about their experiences and share key insights on pushing talent analytics to the forefront of the business. Panelists included Steve Hall, senior director of talent management analytics and solutions for Marriott, and Jocelyn Caldwell, vice president of workforce analytics and planning within HR for TIAA.

With the goal of increasing demand for and use of talent analytics, the panelists recommended focusing on three key actions:

- Increase the **actionability** of talent analytics.
- Ensure the **credibility** of talent data.
- Make talent analytics more **accessible** to decision makers.

Actionability: Start With the End Goal in Mind

Heads of talent analytics know their data and analyses must be actionable for leaders throughout the organization to want (or be able) to use them. Our panelists shared that understanding leaders' key objectives and the problems they need data to solve is a critical factor in ensuring data is actionable. This means talent analytics leaders must take the time when starting a project to clarify the problem at hand and the end goal. As one panelist noted, it's difficult to get people to adopt something you've done when they didn't ask for it and don't see the relevance of it.

To ensure final data and analyses are actionable, the end goal of the project must also be feasible. Our panelists recommended a set of questions for talent analytics leaders to ask to clarify the goal of the project and line up the fundamental factors before obtaining and analyzing any data (see Figure 1).

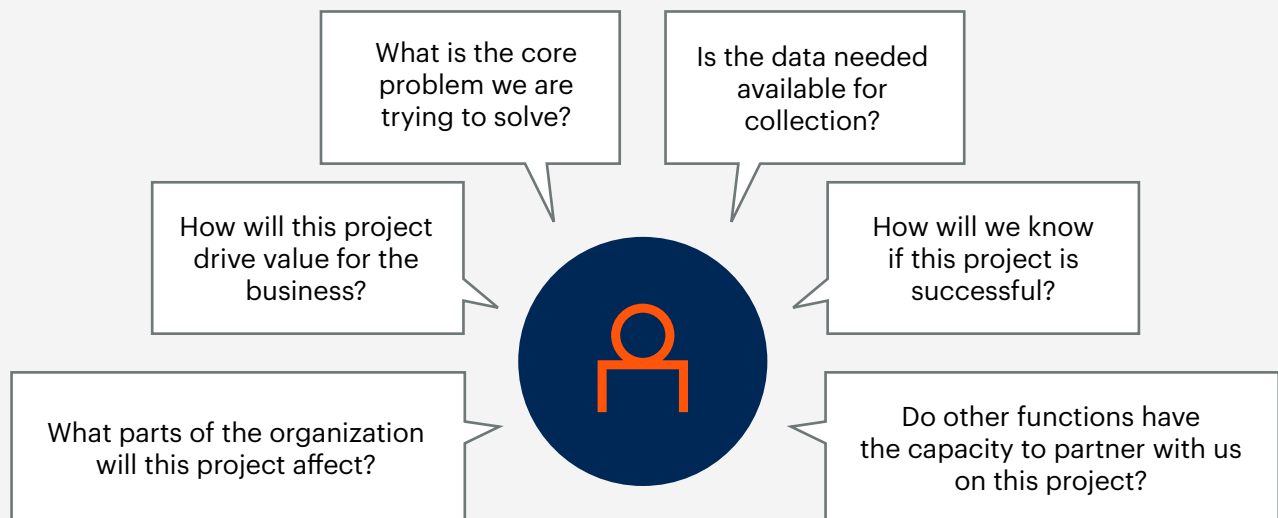### Credibility: Create Partnerships, Not Just Sponsorships

Most talent analytics leaders look to build sponsorships, hoping to gain credibility and buy-in for talent analytics through endorsements from influential senior leaders. However, our panelists realized sponsorships aren't enough. Sponsors may be beneficial for a short period of time, but their influence tends to plateau because they do not challenge and improve projects; they merely advocate for them. Instead, our panelists focus on building partnerships to help overcome the necessary gaps left by sponsorships.

To do this, one panelist suggested going beyond HR to get cross-functional partners involved in talent analytics work. When a project expands beyond the confines of HR and aims to solve a business wide problem, it transforms from an HR analytics project to a business project. Two functions the panelists recommended reaching out to are marketing and IT, which both tend to have rich client data, extensive information on employees and expertise in data and analytics.

Creating partnerships allows different functions to combine their unique skill sets, teach one another and build analytics capability throughout the organization, ultimately yielding a higher return on investment for project outcomes. Collaborating functions can also cross-check data to ensure its accuracy and suitability to the project, heightening credibility for talent analytics teams. These partnerships can be high or low investment, depending on the time and

Figure 1: Questions to Ensure Project Clarity and Feasibility

What is the core problem we are trying to solve?

Is the data needed available for collection?

How will this project drive value for the business?

How will we know if this project is successful?

What parts of the organization will this project affect?

Do other functions have the capacity to partner with us on this project?

Source: Gartner (February 2019)

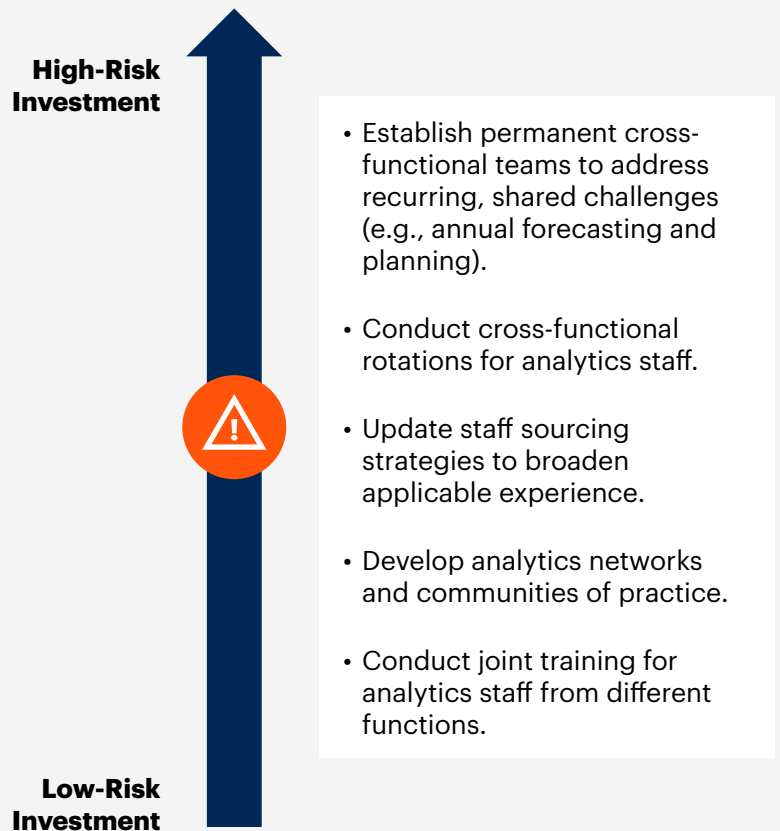effort a talent analytics team is willing to expend (see Figure 2).

Accessibility: Combine Technology and Training to Increase Data Usage

Leaders are more likely to use data if the process of finding and analyzing it is as streamlined as possible. Both panelists highlighted the role self-service tools can play in ensuring HRBPs, managers and senior leaders have easy, consistent access to talent analytics information.

One panelist noted, however, that the technology itself will not make talent analytics accessible; it must be combined with training. For instance, the panelists suggested putting significant effort into training HRBPs to know, use and become comfortable with the talent analytics data from self-service tools. The panelists agreed that HRBPs are often an overlooked potential partner for talent analytics teams. When trained effectively and with access to the right technology, they can act as a one-stop shop for business leaders in gathering data and information about talent — a sort of intermediary between the data scientist and the business.

Our previous research has found that analytics training in the HR community should be tailored to professionals' skill levels and tenure, especially given that data judgment and communication skills have not always been common in HR.

Figure 2: Options for Building Cross-Functional Analytics Partnerships

High-Risk Investment

• Establish permanent cross-functional teams to address recurring, shared challenges (e.g., annual forecasting and planning).

• Conduct cross-functional rotations for analytics staff.

• Update staff sourcing strategies to broaden applicable experience.

• Develop analytics networks and communities of practice.

• Conduct joint training for analytics staff from different functions.

Low-Risk Investment

Source: Gartner (February 2019)

For instance, one best-practice organization employed a two-pronged approach:

- For recent-graduate hires and others with some experience in analytics, development focuses on completing a formal analytics project to help them apply their analytics capabilities within the organization and grow their organizational acumen.

- For more experienced HR professionals with little analytics background, a reverse-mentoring opportunity provides an informal method of partnering senior HRBPs with new hires who have completed their analytics projects.

One of the key benefits of this kind of training is that it ensures HRBPs (and other users) are confident enough to face pushback from senior leaders and stakeholders on recommendations made using data and analytics.

While technologies such as self-service tools are certainly helpful for placing available data in leaders' hands, heads of talent analytics must also be skeptical of any technology that makes advanced analytics too accessible (or easy). "Be wary of anybody with a shiny toy that says they're going to use machine learning to figure out everything," one panelist noted. "You'll end up with wonky things." Before relying exclusively on AI, heads of talent analytics should develop better-researched hypotheses that can be complemented by, rather than substituted with, data analysis from AI.

Conclusion

Talent analytics teams that ensure their data and analyses are actionable, credible and accessible can move into 2019 knowing their efforts have a higher likelihood of making an impact. Taking extra time before a new initiative to dissect the project, form partnerships and streamline processes where possible will help the talent analytics team develop more clout. In this case, going slow to go fast is key.

1 Gartner 2019 Future of Talent Analytics Survey