A Seat at the Table:

Guide to Leading a Strategic Talent Acquisition Function



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Table of Contents

Introduction: Acquiring Talent in a Changed World 3

What is a Seat at the Table? Strategic Talent Acquisition Defined 5

Strategic Talent Acquisition Maturity Model 6

Know Your Why: Reasons to Build a Strategic TA Function 7

Know What You're Signing Up For: Barriers to Becoming More Strategic 8

The Path to Getting a Seat at the Table 9

The Building Blocks of a Strategic Talent Acquisition Function 10

How to Change the Narrative to Become More Strategic 11

People Support for Your Seat at the Table 12

- Support Team for a Strategic Talent Acquisition Function 12

Technology Support for Your Seat at the Table 13

- Technology Checklist for Building a Strategic Talent Acquisition Function 13

Conclusion: Building the Organization of the Future 14

About this Ebook 15

Introduction:
Acquiring Talent in a Changed World

The fundamental challenges of employment during the COVID-19 pandemic left a lasting impression on talent acquisition (TA). After mass layoffs and furloughs in early 2020, recruitment teams struggled to meet hiring goals when businesses reopened and regained capacity.

The pressures of working during a pandemic led to a candidate-driven market and Great Resignation, which peaked in late 2021. At many companies, the scramble to hire in a more competitive market than ever gave talent acquisition its seat at the table as a mission-critical business function.



When inflation and recession fears took hold in 2022, companies conducted layoffs and hiring freezes, and the balance of power shifted again. At some companies, talent acquisition's seat at the table was moved to the back row as recruiting teams shrank.

The world of recruitment is constantly changing – and it's hard to keep up with change from the back row. Turnover is still high. Talent has new expectations: they want flexibility, a focus on well-being, and to be driven by a sense of organizational purpose. At the same time, the amount of technology available to manage hiring processes has exploded. The complexity of hiring in this evolving landscape makes it mission-critical for TA to claim and maintain its seat at the table as a strategic partner to the business.

Moving from Cost Center to Strategic Business Partner

Talent acquisition has always been a mission-critical business function, but in many organizations, it hasn't always been positioned as one. Historically, Human Resources and talent acquisition have been viewed as cost centers. A cost center receives direction from the business; it does not inform the business. Yet the market has shown time and time again that companies' ability to drive profits is directly tied to their ability to hire the people who will create those profits.



Getting business leaders to view talent acquisition as a strategic partner means that the way talent acquisition leaders navigate relationships, inform business stakeholders, and drive accountability must change. It takes time, courage, and new tools to develop a data-driven, strategic talent acquisition function that brings proactive insights that impact business KPIs.

In conjunction with SmartRecruiters Hiring Success Services, we developed this ebook to guide talent acquisition leaders into getting the seat they deserve. First, we'll look at what a seat at the table for talent acquisition entails, why it's important for your business, and identify barriers to getting there. Then we'll offer a guide to the journey, outline essential building blocks, and give insight into how to change the narrative. Finally, we'll conclude with a checklist for enlisting technology support and a list of needed team members. Becoming a strategic talent partner is possible – and your business requires it to maintain growth and profitability. Let's get started.

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What is a Seat at the Table?

Strategic Talent Acquisition Defined

"A seat at the table" is not a metaphor; it describes the experience of being involved in exclusive meetings where business decisions get made. A historical focus on transactional metrics may have prevented talent acquisition leaders from being invited to those meetings; business leaders are looking for data and insights that can truly impact people and business decisions.



"A strategic TA leader is a **trusted partner** who can come to the table with information that tells business leaders what's happening in the market, what's realistic to assume, and how their how their decisions will **impact** the company's ability to capture and keep talent."

- Allyn Bailey, Executive Director, Hiring Success Services at SmartRecruiters

A strategic talent acquisition leader gets their seat at the table by coming to meetings with meaningful insights about

- hiring trends in the market
- hiring trends at their own company
- their team's ability to deliver upon talent-related goals
- data-driven scenarios regarding future business plans that relate to talent.

Combined with other insights about the business, TA-related data and context informs new business ventures, adjustments to business strategy, training and development strategy, and location decisions. The role that talent acquisition can play will vary at every company, so it's crucial for TA leaders to have a deep understanding of their business and the relevant talent marketplace.

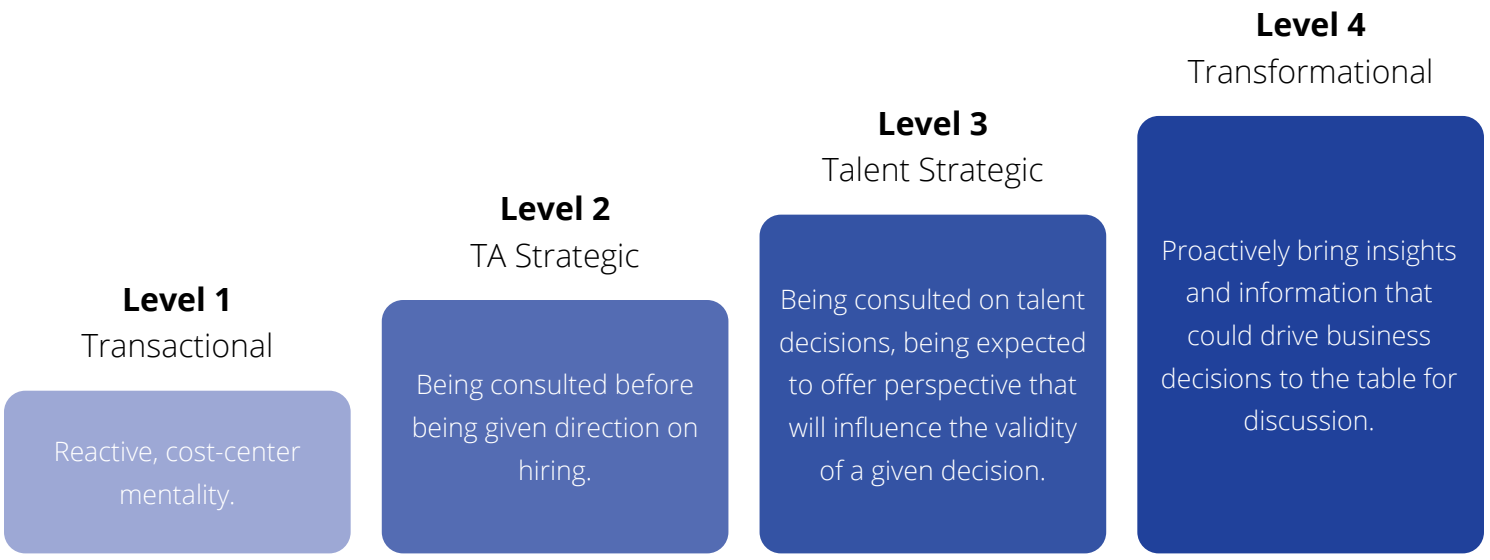


"Having a seat at the table means not just being involved in decisions directly related to talent acquisition, it means providing input into **all decisions that have a talent lens to them**."

- Allyn Bailey, Executive Director, Hiring Success Services at SmartRecruiters

Like any organizational shift, growing a strategic talent acquisition function takes time. The iterative process is based on strong relationships, actionable data, and the willingness of those sitting at the table to cooperate. We've identified four levels of talent acquisition maturity, shown in the image on the next page.

Strategic Talent Acquisition Maturity Model



Example Scenarios By Maturity Level

Level 1: Transactional

A TA leader is told to hire 100 engineers in the next calendar year so that the company can build a new product. TA leader hires a bunch of contract recruiters and struggles to meet the goal. Attrition on the new team turns out to be high because recruiters oversold the mission and culture to get people in the door.

Level 2: TA Strategic

The business team asks if it's reasonable to hire 100 engineers in the next year. The TA leader comes back with an estimate of how long it would take and how much it would cost to achieve the goal in the current location and suggests developing a remote engineering team if they want to do it faster.

Level 3: Talent Strategic

The business team wants to develop a new product. The TA leader looks at functions in the organization that are in decline and suggests developing a program to reskill those employees to work in the new division. Or, they explore whether it would make sense to open an office in another location to meet the demand. They also discuss partnering with a local university to offer a certification program in a function directly related to the business.

Level 4: Transformational

A TA leader notices consistently high turnover at a warehouse facility despite the high wages. Data reveals that there may not be enough available talent to keep meeting the demand. Given the high recruitment costs, the business decides to improve working conditions by setting more achievable employee goals, offering longer breaks, and improving the culture. The warehouse becomes a more attractive place to work, and retention increases.

Know Your Why:
Reasons to Build a Strategic TA Function

Whatever your level of maturity on the strategic talent acquisition continuum, the path to becoming a transformational strategic partner is long and varied. Before you embark on any journey, it's important to know why you're doing it.

Successful TA leaders set out a vision, a Northstar that addresses why they're embarking on the initiative. Before developing a Northstar vision, it's helpful to clarify the reasons for becoming more strategic for the business, your TA team, and yourself.

Benefits for the Business

Every new hire contributes to the success of the organization. By delivering a stellar candidate experience and establishing processes that improve the quality of hire, talent acquisition helps the company deliver business results. Operational excellence is simply not possible without the right people in place. A strategic TA function decreases risk by ensuring that business initiatives are aligned with talent availability.

According to the Josh Bersin Company[1], companies that leverage the right recruiting strategies are

- 5X more likely to delight customers
- 30X more likely to engage and retain employees
- 35X more likely to innovate effectively.

Reflection Activity

List three possible business outcomes that might occur if your company's TA function becomes more strategic.

Benefits for the Talent Acquisition Team

A strategic talent acquisition function requires resources. Since the TA team is the frontline to employment at your company, engaging and retaining these team members is just as important as hiring employees in other areas of the organization. A seat at the table gives TA leaders greater ability to

- Meet TA team staffing needs
- Get more budget for necessary technology tools
- Elevate knowledge of TA staff, potentially increasing team satisfaction and retention
- Connect TA processes to business outcomes.

Reflection Activity

List three benefits that might be possible for your team if your TA function becomes more strategic.

Personal Benefits

It must be acknowledged facilitating an organizational shift has a growth edge. The tasks of gathering data, refining processes, building relationships, getting buy-in, implementing new technology, and so forth will challenge each individual leader in unique ways.

The personal benefits might include stronger skills in relationship building, data analysis, boundary setting, and team collaboration. Getting your seat at the table and effectively using it is an opportunity for a career win, an achievement to post on your resume that prepares you for the next challenge.

Reflection Activity

List three personal growth opportunities that might occur if you successfully built a more strategic TA function.

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1. Josh Bersin Company, The Definitive Guide to Recruiting, 2022

Know What You're Signing Up For:
Barriers to Becoming More Strategic

There could be many reasons talent acquisition doesn't have a seat at the table at your organization. Understanding the company's history of TA and acknowledging the possible barriers will help you gather the inner and outer resources you need to move forward. Background and context will help you navigate relationships and create a realistic action plan. Following is a list of common barriers to building a strategic TA function and possible solutions.

Barrier	Potential Solution
Little historical investment in the candidate experience	Rebuild the candidate experience with the proper tools
Lack of stakeholder TA data literacy	Add an educational component to TA business reviews
Siloed business functions	Schedule deliberate cross-functional meetings
Stakeholders unwilling to change	Educate stakeholders with data on TA impacts to the business
Dismissal of the work that goes into hiring by key stakeholders	Educate stakeholders with a detailed view of the hiring funnel activities
Lack of personal authority or strong relationships	Seek out mentorship and/or training
Lack of accurate, detailed reporting on hiring activities	Develop a reporting strategy, enlist new technology
Limited understanding of business needs and talent marketplace dynamics	Get educated on the business, subscribe to information resources, seek data analysis help

Reflection Activity

List the three biggest barriers to building a more strategic TA function at your company.
Then list possible solutions for each one.

The Path to Getting a Seat at the Table

The shift to becoming a strategic leader is not just a personal mindset shift; it's a shift for the entire organization. The process of developing a new vision for talent acquisition and then carrying it out could take 6-18 months or even longer. The following chart lists common stages. Planning and socialization are best when intertwined; information-gathering and alliance-building across the organization will help develop a more effective plan.

Path to Getting a Seat at the Table

Stage	Activities
Awareness	Identify that change is necessary for the business to succeed in the current environment and that an adaptive recruitment strategy will need greater organizational support.
Evaluation	Assess current processes, systems, and relationships. Identify knowledge gaps and process bottlenecks. Evaluate TA's strengths and weaknesses.
Planning	Create a tiered plan for improving processes and systems over time. May require education, information gathering, relationship-building, consultation.
Socialization	Form alliances, plan strategies for building deeper alliances, get buy-in for plan.
Implementation	Lead change management for new processes and technology that includes a reporting strategy.
Optimization	Regular review of reporting to view wins and make adjustments.



"You kind of have to spearhead your way into conversations in a grassroots way and **bring a compelling story**. It starts with awareness of where you are and then identifying the small wins that you can build along the way to **get to the bigger seat**."

- Jared Best, Regional Practice Leader, Hiring Success

Reflection Questions

What conversations are you already having?
What successes can you draw upon as you begin to have new conversations?

The Building Blocks of a Strategic Talent Acquisition Function

To become a strategic partner to the business, the evaluation stage of your journey should include an assessment of critical talent acquisition functions. The table below covers the core areas of a strategic talent acquisition function and lists signals about the level of your company's investment.

Essential Components of a Strategic Talent Acquisition Function

	Signs of Underinvestment	Signs of High Investment
Candidate Experience	High candidate drop-off rate, high ad spend to fill pipeline or over-reliance on agencies. Limited or inaccurate employer branding.	High offer acceptance rate, low application drop-off rate, healthy proportion of organic applications and referrals.
Recruiter Experience	Too much time on admin and repeated tasks, high team turnover, vague recruiting career path.	Recruiters empowered with technology that streamlines processes. They receive training and promotion opportunities. High team retention.
Hiring Manager Engagement	Hiring managers uncooperative, slow to review candidates, have unrealistic job requirements or timeframes.	Good collaboration between recruiters and hiring teams, equitable hiring decisions.
Assessment Process	High turnover rate, long time-to-fill, little consistency in evaluation process, not leveraging AI or assessment tools.	High retention rate, good job-candidate fit, clear hiring criteria that leverages assessment tools at appropriate stages.
Technology	Poor recruiter and candidate experience, limited reporting ability, little collaboration among hiring teams. Patchwork of disparate systems.	High system adoption, predictable time to hire, good quality of hire due to scalable, transparent, structured process. Central system that integrates point solutions.
Reporting	Incomplete data due to poor adoption of systems. Disparate systems that make end-to-end talent pipeline reporting difficult or impossible.	Access to actionable daily, weekly, and monthly reporting from multiple systems that uncovers process roadblocks. Predictive capabilities based on past results.
Analytics	Not achieving hiring targets. Reliance on anecdotal marketplace information or limited data from free or low-cost tools.	Realistic hiring targets, analytics-based scenarios brought to talent planning meetings. Integration of TA data with people analytics.

Reflection Questions

In which area is your company most invested? Underinvested? Which area would be easiest to invest more in? Brainstorm how you could generate a small win. Then start strategizing on how to achieve a big win.

How to Change the Narrative to Become More Strategic

Becoming the kind of leader who is invited to meetings again and again because you bring valuable information and insights requires a deep understanding of your company's business, your leadership colleagues' concerns, and the marketplace. "The biggest thing a leader can do is change the narrative," said Jared Best, Regional Practice Manager, Hiring Success. "Move away from talking about transactional data and focus on data that ties back to organizational objectives." The three strategies below will facilitate conversations and change the perception that talent acquisition can move the needle on business objectives at your company.

Learn About the Business

If your business is undergoing cost pressures, you will need to have accurate data on cost and efficiency metrics on TA as well as data on how hiring the right people brings value to business functions. Jared Best recommends learning about other business leaders' KPI's. "When you understand how other leaders across the business are measured for success, you can start to change the narrative on things they care about," Jared said. Just as recruiters learn about candidates to understand their motivations, strategic TA leaders learn about their business colleagues.

Expose Your Work

Many people may think they know what goes into hiring, but few have full visibility into all the intricacies of talent acquisition. "We don't typically go into business meetings and talk about some of the complex parts of our work," said Allyn Bailey. "We need to talk about our value in terms of how we impact business results," Allyn recommends bringing your work out of hiding. For example, a TA leader could outline how they found out that a specific market was a good place to look for talent. Or they could explain why they leveraged a specific assessment strategy to find talent that would not only be a good fit for today but also for skills that may be needed in the future.

Learn About the Market

The candidate landscape is always changing. Societal concerns, business pressures, educational trends – all these factors and more can influence your company's ability to find the right talent and keep them engaged. A strategic leader pays attention to business news, follows competitive activity, and analyzes data from proprietary sources.



"If you want to be involved in the company's overall strategy, you need to understand what talent is needed to make a business impact, the externalities of the talent market, and the competition. This knowledge gives you the **credibility to advise senior leadership** on an optimal hiring strategy."

-Dave Novak, Engagement Manager, Hiring Success

Reflection Activity

Identify one action step for each area listed above.
Consider how it will help you change the narrative toward becoming a strategic business partner.

People Support for Your Seat at the Table

The symbiotic relationship of people and technology supports a strategic talent acquisition function. As you begin to gather support, it's useful to identify your support team and where you might need to build alliances. Then, look at your recruiting tech stack and determine if adjustments will be necessary.

No journey to transformation happens alone. This chart summarizes the key players in supporting a strategic function.

Support Team for a Strategic Talent Acquisition Function

Role	Responsibility
Recruiting Managers	Advocate for recruiters' day-to-day experience, contextualize data, ensure systems are used properly and processes are followed. Manage hiring logistics.
Data Analysts	Query data to gather actionable insights that tell a story, assist with stakeholder education.
Business Leaders	Communicate business goals and market concerns, support change initiatives.
HR Business Partners	Connect TA data with internal talent data and use it to inform succession planning and retention strategies.
Hiring Managers	Change behaviors and expectations based on data and system requirements.
IT Managers	Provide implementation and integration support, ensure compliance and data integrity.
Technology Vendors	Offer implementation support, training, and consultation.
Mentors	Provide coaching and advice to leaders.
Consultants (optional)	Assist with implementations and change management.
Recruitment Process Outsourcing (optional)	End-to-end support by experts for companies with adequate budget that do not want to build internal resources.

Reflection Questions

What are your strongest relationships?

Which relationships will you need to develop or strengthen?

Technology Support for Your Seat at the Table

As you review solutions for improving your recruitment tech stack, keep these high-level questions in mind. For a more detailed list of questions, view the SmartRecruiters RFP Template.

Technology Checklist for Building a Strategic Talent Acquisition Function

	Function	Question to Ask
☐	**Candidate Experience**	Can candidates apply and self-schedule interviews with minimal clicks and data entry from their preferred device? Does the system facilitate communication throughout the hiring process? Does it support digital offer delivery and background screening (through integrations if required)?
☐	**Recruiter Experience**	Are bulk processes automated and templated? Do systems help recruiters manage their workload by offering an end-to end-view of their pipeline and status for any given role? Are point solutions integrated in a way that minimizes the need for recruiters to log in to separate systems?
☐	**Hiring Manager Experience**	Is the ATS easy for hiring managers to use? Does it encourage collaboration and offer transparency where needed?
☐	**Assessment Process**	Does it help create a structured hiring process? Does it integrate with external assessment providers?
☐	**Spend Optimization**	Does it help optimize recruitment marketing spending? Does it offer programmatic support for job advertising?
☐	**Reporting Capability**	Can it be our single source of truth for all recruiting activities across systems by measuring the talent pipeline end-to-end? Does it present data in an actionable way? Is it customizable? Can the data be easily integrated with our existing business intelligence tools?
☐	**Integrations**	Can our point solutions easily integrate with a central TA system of record (e.g., via APIs)? Can our TA system of record help us see centralized analytics across our ecosystem of integrations? Does the central system connect with our HCM/HRIS?
☐	**IT Requirements**	Is the system easy to configure and maintain without extensive IT development? Does it meet compliance requirements in all the countries in which we operate?

Conclusion:
Building the Organization of the Future

Most talent acquisition leaders started out in the business because they are passionate about people.



For many, it's gratifying to know that they're giving people jobs – jobs that can help employees grow and evolve as human beings. So too, business is evolving to be more inclusive, innovative, and sustainable. A strategic TA function is at the forefront of societal and workplace change. By bringing together people, data, and technology, your seat at the table will enable your business to grow in a way that's people-centered, dynamic, and aligned with the market. With the right support, it's probably easier – and more fun – than you think. After being on this journey for decades, we can confidently say it's worth it. We'd love to help you get started.

About this Ebook

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Additional Resources

Guide to Evaluating the Business Value of a Talent Acquisition Platform

To help you build the business case for your technology investments, this 23-page guide offers a high-level overview of business drivers for talent acquisition and offers 11 ways to save money and build efficiency.

The Definitive Guide to Hiring Success

This in-depth guide is the playbook for modern TA leaders to future-proof their organizations. It guides readers through each step of the Hiring Success methodology and provides real examples of organizations that transformed their talent function to create lasting impact.

Hiring Success: How Visionary CEOs Compete for the Best Talent

In this easy-to-read book, SmartRecruiters founder Jerome Ternynck offers 30 years of learnings and differentiated recruiting strategies that have transformed the way companies hire. Senior leaders will walk away with strategies to attract, select, and hire the best talent on demand and within budget.

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See SmartRecruiters in Action

As a global leader in enterprise recruitment software, SmartRecruiters offers a cloud-based Talent Acquisition Suite that allows teams to attract, select, and hire the best talent. 4,000 companies worldwide rely on SmartRecruiters to achieve Hiring Success—including brands like Bosch, LinkedIn, Skechers, and Visa—using recruitment marketing, CRM, AI, ATS, and a marketplace of 600+ connected vendors all within one scalable platform.

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