

The Management Tool I Didn't Know I Was Missing

Looking back at job architecture through the eyes of a former executive

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If you had asked me twenty years ago whether we needed a job architecture, I'm not even sure I would have known what you were talking about.

Yet I was making decisions every day that job architecture could have helped me make.

Over the course of my career, I hired people, built and managed teams, promoted employees, discussed compensation, dealt with retention issues and participated in succession planning. I also mentored many people along the way. Later, when I moved into the boardroom, I looked at many of these same issues from a very different perspective.

We had organizational charts. We had job descriptions, titles and salary ranges. We certainly had performance reviews. What I don't remember having was one framework that allowed us to look across the organization and really understand how jobs related to one another, what differentiated one level from the next, and the different ways someone could progress.

At the time, I'm not sure I thought we needed one.

Looking back, I can think of many occasions when it would have helped.

When your first job follows you for years

One situation has stayed with me.

I was mentoring a woman in the same organization where I worked. She wasn't my direct report, but I had gotten to know her well enough to recognize that she was extremely capable — and significantly overqualified for the position she held.

She had immigrated to Canada and had made a decision that many newcomers make. To get her first Canadian opportunity and get her foot in the door, she accepted a position well below her previous experience and capabilities.

The strategy worked. She got into the organization.

But that initial decision ended up following her for years.

As we talked about her career and what she should do next, we kept running into the same problem. She was capable of taking on roles several levels above where she sat, but the organization was very uncomfortable with the idea of allowing someone to skip perhaps three levels at once.

I remember how frustrating that was.

Everyone could see her potential. The issue wasn't whether she could do more. The issue was how to get her from where she had entered the organization to where she probably should have been.

In some ways, she was still paying for a decision she had made years earlier simply to get her first opportunity in Canada.

That experience has always made me question the assumption that careers should progress neatly, one level at a time.

Organizations obviously need levels and structure. But people don't always arrive at the level that accurately reflects their capabilities. Careers aren't always linear either.

A good job architecture should give us the structure we need without becoming the structure that gets in the way.

Instead of asking only, *What is the next job this person can move into?*, perhaps we should also be asking, *What is this person actually capable of doing?*

What exactly does "Vice-President" mean?

I encountered a completely different version of the same issue earlier in my career in wealth management.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, titles in our industry could be quite creative.

In mutual fund sales, for example, it wasn't unusual for salespeople to have Vice-President or even Senior Vice-President titles without necessarily having significant operational or management responsibilities.

Frankly, some of it was about optics.

If you were meeting with important advisors or financial institutions, Vice-President looked better on a business card than Sales

Representative. We all understood the convention at the time.

The problem came years later.

I would find myself looking at a résumé and trying to understand what being a VP or SVP at a particular organization had actually meant.

Did this person manage people?

Were they responsible for a budget?

Did they run a business unit?

Did they have a P&L?

Or were they a very successful individual contributor with a senior title?

The title alone told me very little.

That experience taught me to look beyond titles and understand the actual scope of someone's responsibilities. And it is one of the reasons I now see the value of job architecture differently.

It provides a language underneath the title.

A lesson I learned in university — and never forgot

There is another experience that influenced the way I thought about careers long before I became an executive.

While completing my undergraduate business degree, I read *The Peter Principle*.

The basic premise — that people in organizations tend to be promoted until they reach their level of incompetence — fascinated me. It also stayed with me throughout my career.

I saw versions of it play out more than once.

Someone is excellent at what they do, so we promote them. They succeed, so we promote them again. Eventually, we put them into a job requiring completely different skills from those that made them successful in the first place.

The great salesperson becomes a sales manager.

The outstanding technical specialist suddenly has to manage people.

The exceptional operator moves into an executive position where strategic thinking and leadership matter more than operational expertise.

Sometimes they flourish.

Sometimes we have simply taken a very good employee and put them in the wrong job.

Over the years, I also learned something that may sound counterintuitive: when someone turned down a promotion, I didn't necessarily try to convince them otherwise.

Sometimes people know themselves better than we give them credit for.

They know what they're good at. They know what they enjoy. And, quite often, they know their limits.

Yet in many organizations, the only way to demonstrate ambition, earn more money or gain status has traditionally been to move upward — and eventually to manage people.

Why?

Why shouldn't an exceptional specialist be able to continue progressing, increase their compensation and broaden their influence without necessarily becoming someone's boss?

Had I understood job architecture then the way I do today, I think I would have asked that question much more often.

Then I moved to the other side of the table

My perspective changed again when I began serving on boards and committees.

The conversations were different, but the underlying issues were remarkably familiar.

We talked about executive compensation. Succession. Retention. Leadership pipelines. Key-person risk. Whether we were developing enough talent internally. Whether the organization had the capabilities required to execute its strategy.

As an executive, I had often experienced these as individual decisions.

Who should we hire?

Is this person ready for a promotion?

What should we pay them?

How do we keep them?

Who could eventually replace that executive?

From the boardroom, I began to see how interconnected those questions really were.

A board certainly shouldn't be designing an organization's job architecture. That belongs with management and the human capital team.

But I do think boards should care whether management has a credible framework underneath the people decisions they are being asked to support.

Because ultimately, these aren't simply HR decisions. They are business decisions.

What I would do differently today

I don't look back and think we were making poor people decisions because we didn't have something called job architecture.

We weren't.

We relied on experience, judgment, market information and, hopefully, a fair amount of common sense.

But experience and judgment become more powerful when there is a good framework around them.

If I were running an organization today, I would want to understand much more clearly how roles fit together, what really distinguishes one level from another, what capabilities are required at each level and — perhaps most importantly — whether talented people can see more than one path forward.

I would also want enough flexibility to recognize the exceptional cases.

The immigrant who entered the organization several levels below her capabilities.

The “Vice-President” whose title tells me almost nothing about the complexity of the job they actually performed.

The exceptional specialist who wants to grow but has absolutely no desire to manage a team.

And the employee who turns down a promotion because, perhaps, they understand something about themselves that the rest of us haven't yet recognized.

Job architecture won't make those decisions for us.

Nor should it.

There will always be a place for judgment, experience and knowing your people.

But looking back over my career, I can now see that a good job architecture would have given me something I didn't know I was missing: **a common language and a clearer framework for making some of the most important — and sometimes most difficult — people decisions an executive has to make.**

And perhaps that's the irony.

For something that sounds very much like an HR tool, I now see job architecture as something much bigger.

It is a management tool.