

CREATING PEOPLE ADVANTAGE 2023

# Set the Right People Priorities for Challenging Times

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**BCG**



**WFPMA**  
World Federation of People  
Management Associations



# Executive Summary

The past few years have been uniquely challenging in the business environment, owing to lingering economic uncertainty, supply-chain shifts, geopolitical tension, and the aftermath of the pandemic.

But going forward, disruptions are likely to increase in frequency and severity. That creates stiff challenges for people management functions, who will need to respond to external factors along with their organization's evolving internal needs. The latest Creating People Advantage survey—an ongoing joint study conducted by BCG and the World Federation of People Management Associations—reveals areas where companies responded well and areas where they must redouble their efforts.

This year's survey included responses from 6,893 participants in 102 markets, across all industries. Respondents considered 32 people management topics, ranking them by future importance to their organization and by current capabilities of their organization.

## Analytical Highlights

This year's analysis includes the following key highlights:

- **Talent Gaps.** Many companies do not have all the talent they need. Talent gaps and shortages represent the top business challenge that companies face, cited by 72% of respondents.
- **Divided Attention.** Companies are better at responding to pressing external factors (such as shifts in supply necessitated by the war in Ukraine) but less able to look ahead and focus on the people management priorities critical for success in the future. Respondents are stronger in topics that were critical during the pandemic—such as employee health and safety, more flexible work models, and policy management—although these are no longer their biggest priorities.
- **Lagging Digitization.** Digitization remains a crucial area for people managers, but digital capabilities (including HR IT architecture, operation, and cloud software) continue to lag in many organizations, making this topic an increasingly urgent priority.
- **Core Priorities.** Although each company must build the capabilities most relevant to its unique context, virtually all companies need to emphasize strategic workforce planning, talent acquisition, upskilling and reskilling, digitization, and accompanying change management and leadership behaviors.

- **AI on the Rise.** AI is gaining traction among people managers, but the vast majority of organizations are still at the earliest stages of adoption. First movers that have started to implement AI-based solutions are seeing tremendous benefits across a range of use cases in people management.

## Recommendations for People Management Leaders

Our findings point to five recommendations for people management leaders to adopt in dealing with challenging times in 2023 and beyond.

**Leverage data to accurately plan for talent supply and demand.** Strategic workforce planning is a perennial challenge for most organizations. Although the core principles are not new, the urgency to act has increased, and the availability of data-driven insights has changed the competitive landscape.

**Get better at talent acquisition.** In a market where specialized talent is in short supply, digital technology can help companies differentiate themselves on the basis of the experience they offer applicants, leading to better success rates in recruiting and hiring new employees.

**Invest in upskilling and reskilling the current workforce.** Developing new skills in your existing workforce is far more cost-effective than hiring new people. Moreover, ever-changing technology confront companies with the need to continually refresh their workforce's skills and capabilities.

**Unlock value through AI.** Generative AI has the potential to revolutionize self-service processes, boost productivity, personalize customer experiences, and build data-driven talent ecosystems. First movers are already capturing value with use cases along the entire HR value chain.

**Focus on change management and organizational development.** In the realm of leadership behaviors, change management, and organizational development, it is imperative not to underestimate the transformative potential—and pitfalls—of change. With this in mind, organizations are focusing more on the behaviors of entire leadership teams than of individuals.

## Introduction

Since 2008, BCG and the World Federation of People Management Associations (WFPMA) have partnered on a series of comprehensive global surveys of people leaders. Over the years, our objective has been consistent: to provide a data-based view on where people management leaders should focus their efforts to create the most value for the people management function and the entire enterprise. The results of these surveys offer critical insights not only for people leaders, but for all leaders seeking to prioritize most important levers of the people management portfolio and build a future-proof workforce.

Events during the past few years have underscored the critical importance of people management—and in particular of knowing where companies should set their priorities. The pandemic and its aftermath forced companies to quickly build up specific capabilities—for example, in employee health and safety, and in more flexible work models. But the current environment may be even more challenging, due to increasing talent gaps, less fluid talent markets, the growing need for digital transformation and innovation—especially in the area of AI—and the impact of economic downturns on the workforce. In navigating this challenging environment, people leaders benefit from a quantitative approach to determining where they should focus.

The 2023 edition drew responses from 6,893 participants in 102 markets, including people management professionals and those in other functions. (See [Exhibit 1.](#)) We asked participants to rank 32 people topics, grouped into nine main clusters, in terms of future importance to their organization and current capabilities of their organization. We also asked participants to reflect on the significance of traditional topics such as talent management, emerging trends such as environmental sustainability, and organizational processes such as digitization. (For more details on the methodology underpinning the survey, see [Appendix I.](#))

In analyzing the survey results, we identified the biggest people management priorities for the current environment, including (among others) strategic workforce planning, talent acquisition, upskilling and reskilling, and digitization. We also identified key differences across geographic markets and between small and large companies, as well as the key role of people management in addressing business challenges. Finally, we devised recommendations for people management leaders, including case studies of these ideas in action.

## Identifying the Top HR Priorities

Our survey has used a consistent methodology, enabling us to compare results and identify trends over time. We are aware that many HR topics may be influenced by national labor laws or the general economic state in the market where an organization operates. However, this has been a factor since the beginning of the series.

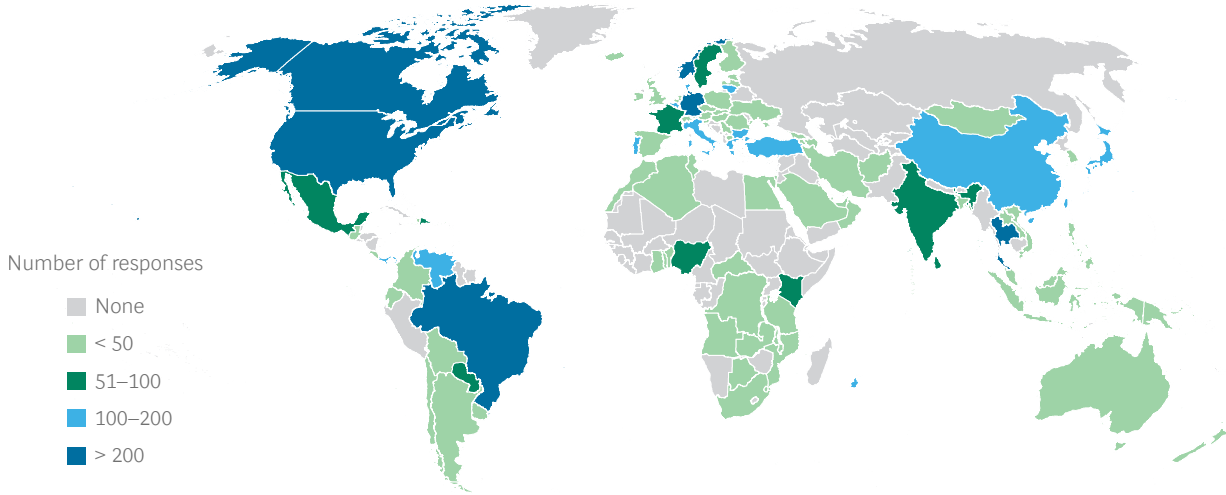
As in past years, we started by identifying a pool of 32 people management topics, grouped into nine clusters. (See [Exhibit 2](#) and [Appendix II.](#)) We then asked respondents to rank all 32 topics in terms of the future importance of each one and their company’s current capabilities with respect to it. We then sorted the topics by those same two dimensions—future importance and current capabilities—to identify the most pressing people management priorities. (See [Exhibits 3, 4, and 5.](#)) For this year’s analysis, we added sustainability and ESG standards to our topic list. Initially, we also included AI as a topic, but because AI has been advancing so rapidly—and because our survey was in the field for eight months—we found that early respondents assigned a lower priority to the topic than later respondents did. That “noise” in the data convinced us to remove it from the quantitative results.

Following is a synthesis of key findings from the 2023 analysis.

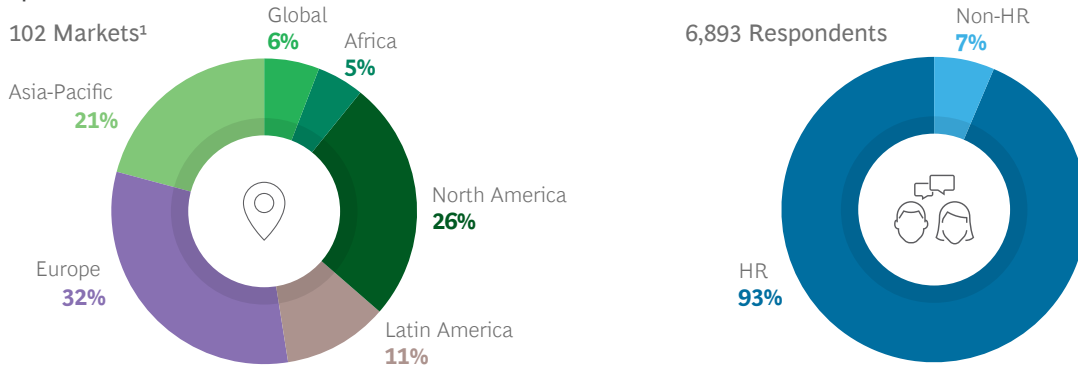
**People management functions are typically good at responding to short- to medium-term stimuli.** When companies have clear people management priorities, they can quickly build up the requisite capabilities to succeed. For example, health and safety is the number one topic in terms of current capabilities, and flexible work schemes ranks in the top ten. These results signify the lasting impact of the pandemic and the advances achieved during it, proving that people management functions can significantly boost their capabilities when they focus on a narrow list of priorities.

**The bigger challenge today involves looking ahead and planning for the long-term future.** In a fast-moving business environment, with disruptions ranging from AI to climate change and sustainability, and geopolitical issues, it is not enough to be good at reacting to external, short-term challenges. Instead, companies must look ahead and proactively reallocate resources to topics that will be more important to future performance over the next three-plus years. In that realm, the results show that companies have considerable work to do.

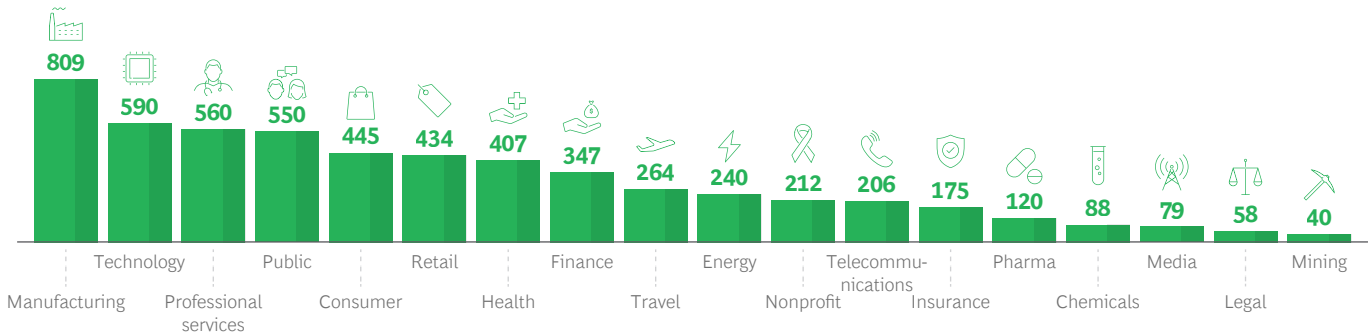
# Exhibit 1 - Our Survey Drew Responses from Almost 6,900 Participants in 102 Markets Across Various Industries and Seniority Levels



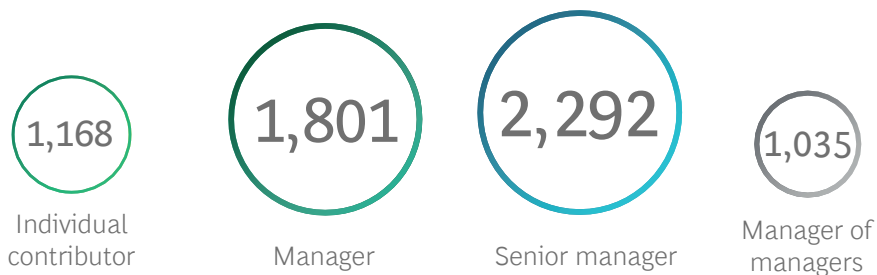
## Regional split



## Industry split



## Level of seniority



Source: 2023 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis.

Note: "Other" and "Not applicable" responses are not included. Because of rounding, not all sector percentages add up to 100%.

<sup>1</sup>Responses are from 102 markets; Taiwan (5 respondents), Hong Kong (502 respondents), and Mainland China (180 respondents) are grouped as China.

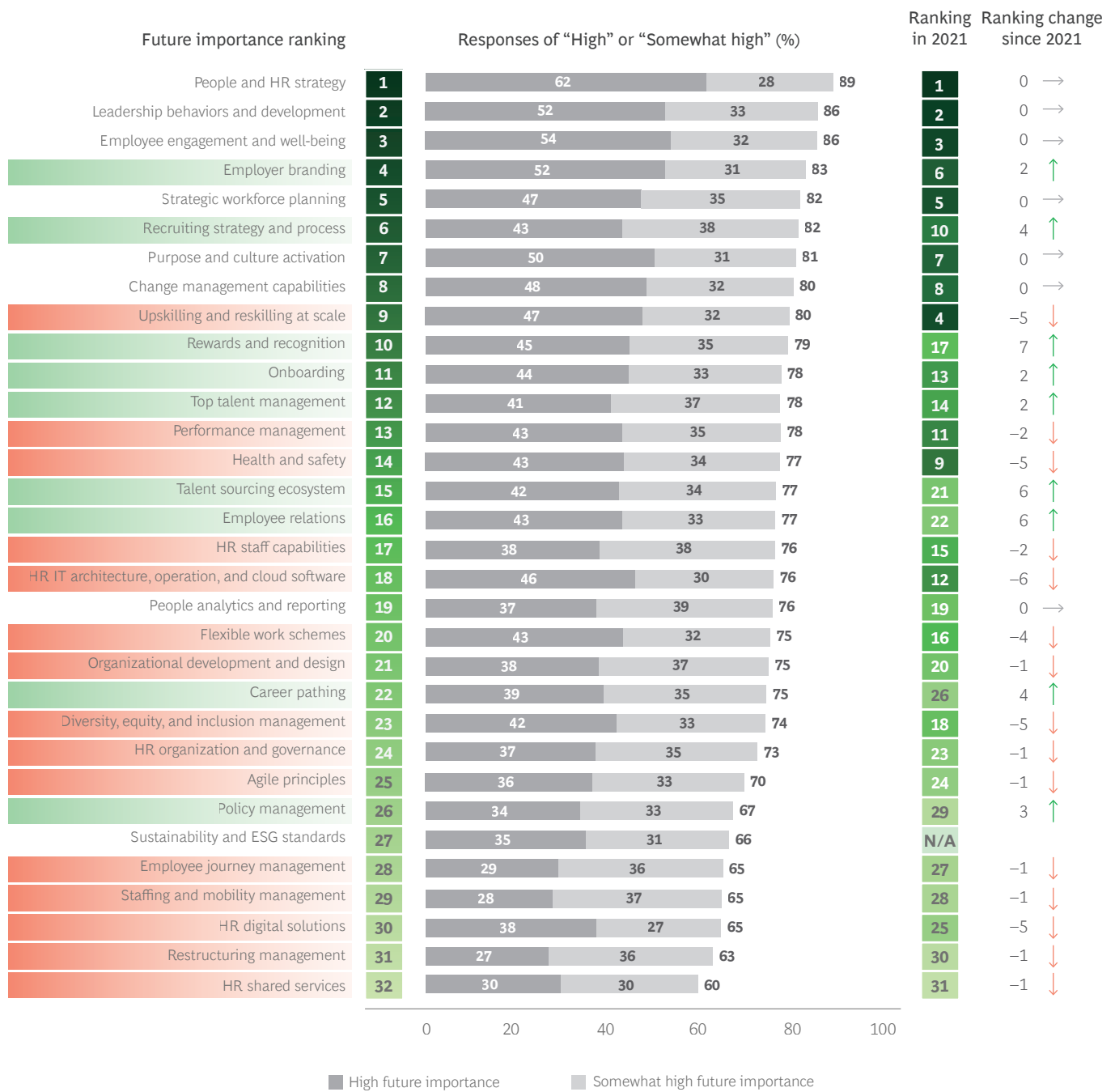


## Exhibit 2 - The Analysis Considered 32 People Management Topics in Nine Clusters

Clusters	HR and people management topics				
People and HR strategy, planning, and analytics	People and HR strategy	Strategic workforce planning		People analytics and reporting	
Talent acquisition	Employer branding	Talent sourcing ecosystem	Recruiting strategy and process	Onboarding	
People development	Upskilling and reskilling at scale	Career pathing	Top talent management	Staffing and placement management	
Performance, rewards, and engagement	Performance management	Rewards and recognition		Employee engagement and well-being	
Purpose, behavior, leadership, and culture change	Purpose and culture activation	Change management capabilities	Leadership behaviors and development	Diversity, equity, and inclusion management	Sustainability and ESG standards
Labor and employee relations	Policy management	Employee relations		Health and safety	
Organizational transformation	Agile principles	Organizational development and design	Flexible work schemes	Restructuring management	Employee journey management
HR tech stack	HR IT architecture, operation, and cloud software			HR digital solutions	
HR operating model	HR organization and governance	HR shared services		HR staff capabilities	

Source: 2023 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis.

# Exhibit 3 - Several Topics Related to Talent Acquisition Have Risen in Respondents' Rankings of Future Importance

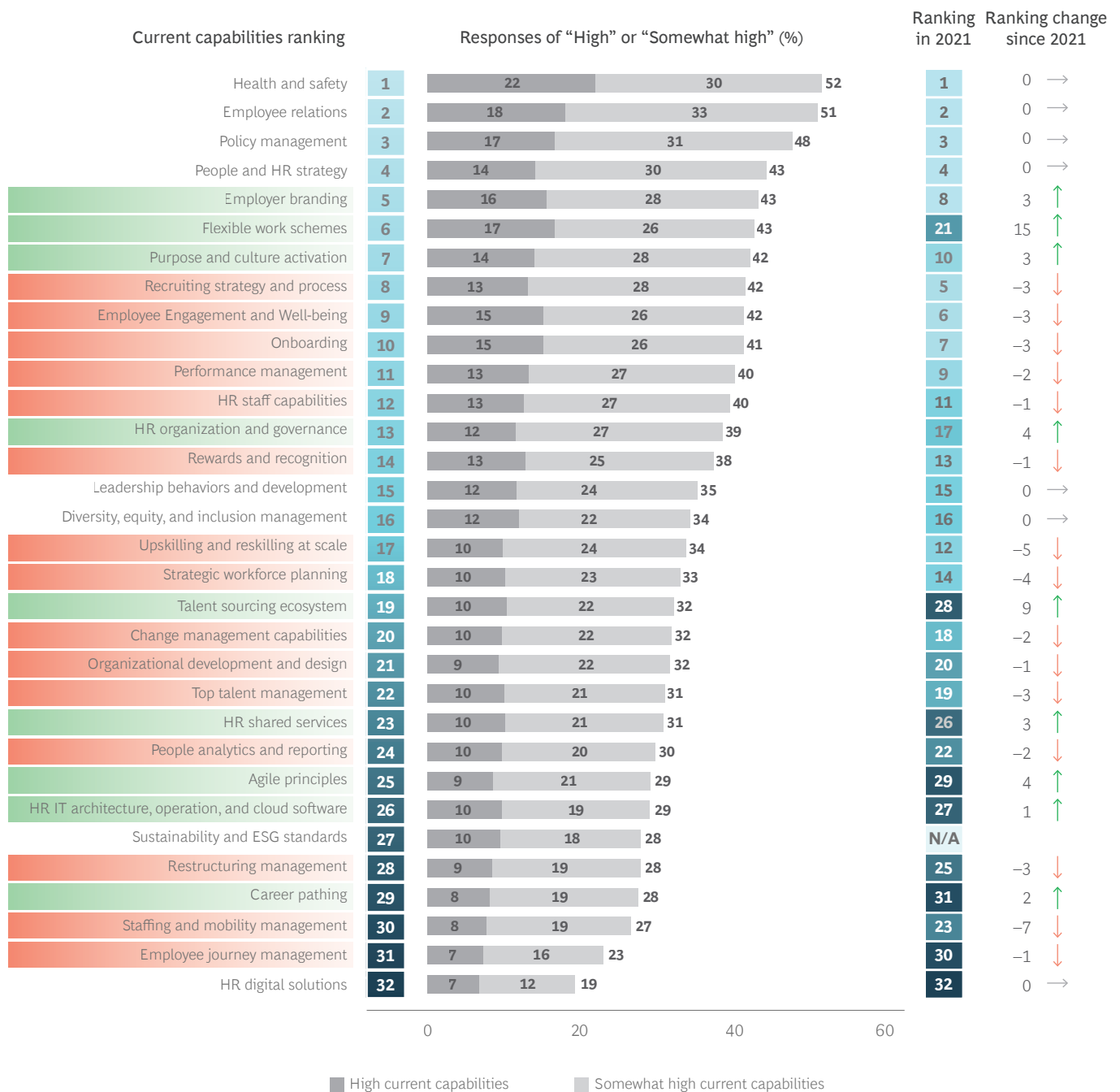


Source: 2023 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis (n = 6,842).

Note: Topics are ranked by percentage of "High" and "Somewhat high" responses. Because of rounding, not all bar chart totals equal the sum of the individual segments. N/A = not applicable.



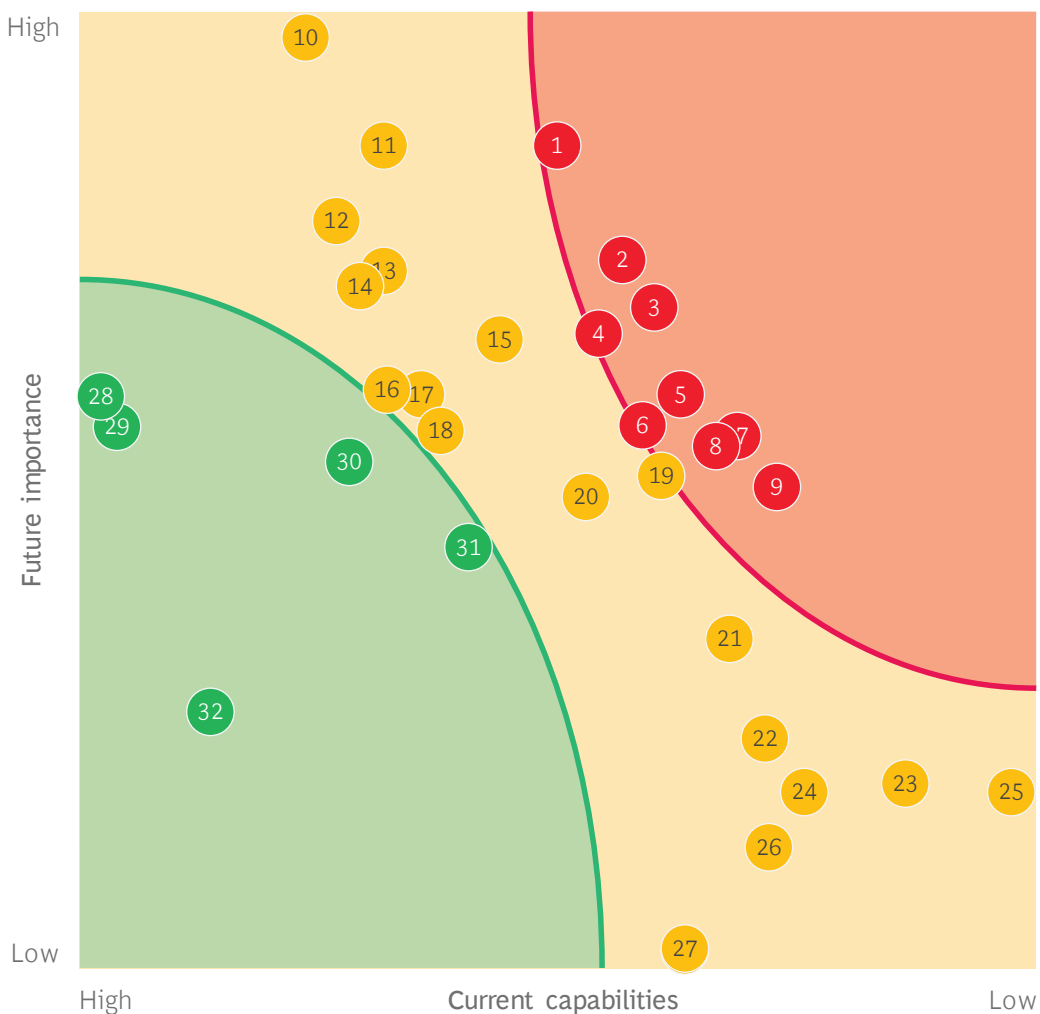
# Exhibit 4 - Companies Report Strong Capabilities in Several Areas That Are Less Important for Future Performance



Source: 2023 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis (n = 6,842).

Note: Topics are ranked by percentage of "High" and "Somewhat high" responses. Because of rounding, not all bar chart totals equal the sum of the individual segments. N/A = not applicable.

# Exhibit 5 - Sorting the 32 Topics by Future Importance and Current Capabilities Identifies the Most Pressing Priorities for People Leaders



## ● High need to act

- 1 Leadership behaviors and development
- 2 Strategic workforce planning
- 3 Change management capabilities
- 4 Upskilling and reskilling at scale
- 5 Top talent management
- 6 Talent sourcing ecosystem
- 7 HR IT architecture, operation, and cloud software
- 8 People analytics and reporting
- 9 Career pathing

## ● Medium need to act

- 10 People and HR strategy
- 11 Employee engagement and well-being
- 12 Employer branding
- 13 Recruiting strategy and process
- 14 Purpose and culture activation
- 15 Rewards and recognition
- 16 Onboarding
- 17 Performance management
- 18 HR staff capabilities
- 19 Organizational development and design
- 20 Diversity, equity, and inclusion management
- 21 Agile principles
- 22 Sustainability and ESG standards
- 23 Employee journey management
- 24 Staffing and mobility management
- 25 HR digital solutions
- 26 Restructuring management
- 27 HR shared services

## ● Low need to act

- 28 Health and safety
- 29 Employee relations
- 30 Flexible work schemes
- 31 HR organization and governance
- 32 Policy management

Source: 2023 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis (6,842).

Note: Underlying topic rankings include responses of “High” and “Somewhat high” for future importance and current capabilities.



Many of the topics on which companies are currently strongest rank only in the middle of the pack with regard to future importance. These are now table-stakes measures. People managers need to execute them well, but they are not differentiating factors for overall company performance or for the performance of the people function. By shifting their focus to topics that yield results in the medium to long term—such as mobility, staffing, upskilling and reskilling, and the efficiency of the people management function itself—people management functions can build up the right capabilities and shape their company’s overall people agenda in a truly differentiating way. This is especially beneficial given that many organizations now find themselves voluntarily or involuntarily in a state of always-on transformations: Being holistically people-centric is crucial not just to looking ahead but also to adapting to this new reality of constant change.

**This leads to a differentiated overall picture when it comes to the portfolio of core activities.** The most critical people management priorities in the results—topics that ranked as important for the future but for which current capabilities are low—include the following:

- **Strategic Workforce Planning.** Such planning is on the agenda of people leaders and is increasingly being implemented. Given talent scarcities and more dynamic business priorities, people management functions must look ahead and anticipate the organization’s future talent needs. Respondents ranked strategic workforce planning 5th in terms of future importance, but only 18th in terms of their current capabilities.
- **Talent Acquisition.** In our most recent survey, topics related to talent acquisition and retention rose in future importance. Specifically, rewards and recognition, talent sourcing ecosystem, and employee relations showed steep increases. Top talent management, employer branding, and recruiting strategy and process rose, too, but with more moderate increases. These results show that people managers understand the value of identifying, recruiting, and retaining key talent in an increasingly competitive market. Yet current capabilities in this field lag—a surprising aspect of the data set, given its attributed importance. Overall, topics such as recruiting strategy and process, onboarding, and top talent management finished near the middle of the pack; indeed, each of these three topics showed a decrease of three places compared with the 2021 results. One exception is employer branding, which ranked fifth overall in terms of capabilities, up three places from the 2021 survey. This probably reflects an increasingly tough recruiting environment in which employer branding is an important aspect of getting applicants even to look at a job posting.

- **Upskilling and Reskilling.** The topic of upskilling and reskilling does not rank especially high on most respondents’ agendas. In our survey results, the topic ranked 9th in future importance, five places lower than in the 2021 results, and its ranking in current capabilities is even lower (17th overall, five places lower than in the 2021 survey). Survey results notwithstanding, companies need to constantly update their profile of skills and capabilities, and upskilling and reskilling (along with talent acquisition) are critical to making this happen. The results, however, show that companies are focusing too little on this topic. People management leaders are understandably concerned about their ability to bring in external talent—an ongoing challenge, as our data suggests—but they can and should prioritize developing the talent they already have.
- **Leadership Behaviors and Development, and Change Management.** Two other priorities that stand out in the data are leadership behaviors and development (ranked 2nd in terms of future importance but 15th in capabilities) and change management capabilities (8th in importance but 20th in capabilities). These results indicate companies’ need to continuously respond to a very dynamic business environment with leaders who are comfortable spearheading change and overseeing ongoing change initiatives. In other research, we demonstrated how critical it is for leaders to use their head, heart, and hands to have a lasting impact as **generative leaders**. Many organizations continue to overlook these priorities, although companies see their value in a dynamic business environment. Change management is like a muscle that can be built, but it needs to be trained consistently if the organization is to benefit from its strength.
- **Digital Capabilities.** Many organizations need to reinforce their digital capabilities, which underpin multiple people management topics in our analysis. For example, HR IT architecture, operations, and cloud software is among the topics where the need to act is strongest, but agile principles and HR digital solutions also require significant action. Digital is a broad area in which virtually all organizations should continue investing and building capabilities. Other topics may rise and fall in importance, but digital technology is not going away—and smart, proactive investments in this area will yield rewards and unlock a multitude of other topics for which it is a foundational capability.

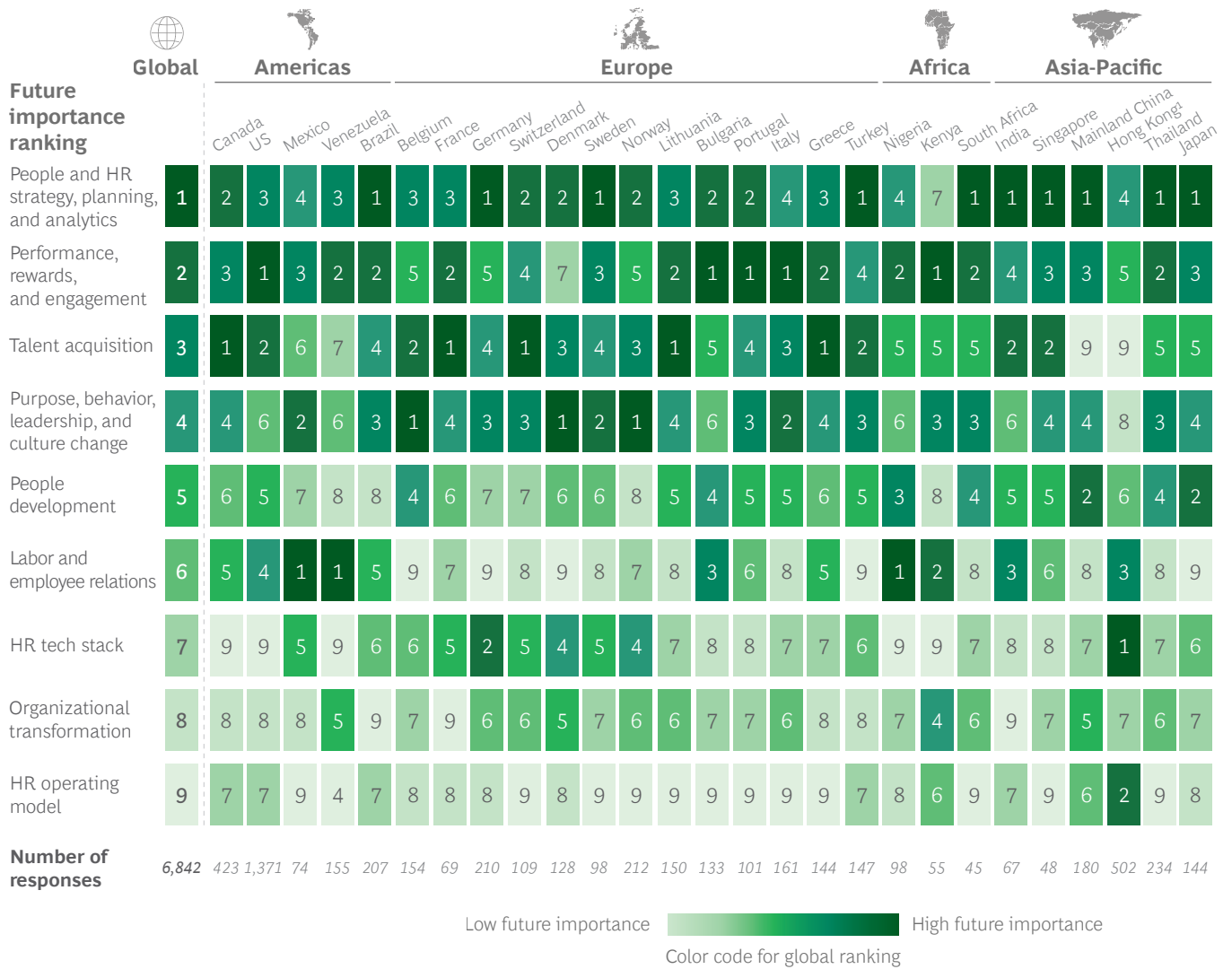
**Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Management.**

The results regarding DEI management surprised us. The topic was ranked 16th in current capabilities (no change from the 2021 results), but it fell five places in future importance, to 23rd. One possible explanation is that many people management functions have combined tasks related to DEI with ESG (a topic that our study combines with sustainability). This suggests that DEI has not lost its importance going forward, but that ESG will provide strong support for the topic to give it the priority it continues to need.

**Differences Across Geographic Markets and Company Sizes**

In different geographic markets, the overall results with regard to future importance have continued to evolve and now show a somewhat more heterogeneous picture across countries than the 2021 results did. Occupying the top spot once again is the people and HR strategy, planning, and analytics topic cluster—now followed by performance, rewards, and engagement in second place, and talent acquisition in third. In 2021, the purpose, behavior, leadership, and culture change topic cluster finished second, followed by performance, rewards, and engagement. When we view results at the country level, some disparities in specific markets become prominent. (See Exhibit 6.)

**Exhibit 6 - A Regional Breakdown of the Nine People Management Topics Reveals Disparities in Future Importance**



Source: 2023 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis (n = 6,842).

Note: This chart depicts a selected sample of the 102 markets. "Other" and "Not applicable" responses are not included.

<sup>1</sup>Hong Kong is a special administrative region of the People's Republic of China.



**With regard to future importance, the overall survey results for 2023 are more heterogeneous across countries than those for 2021.**



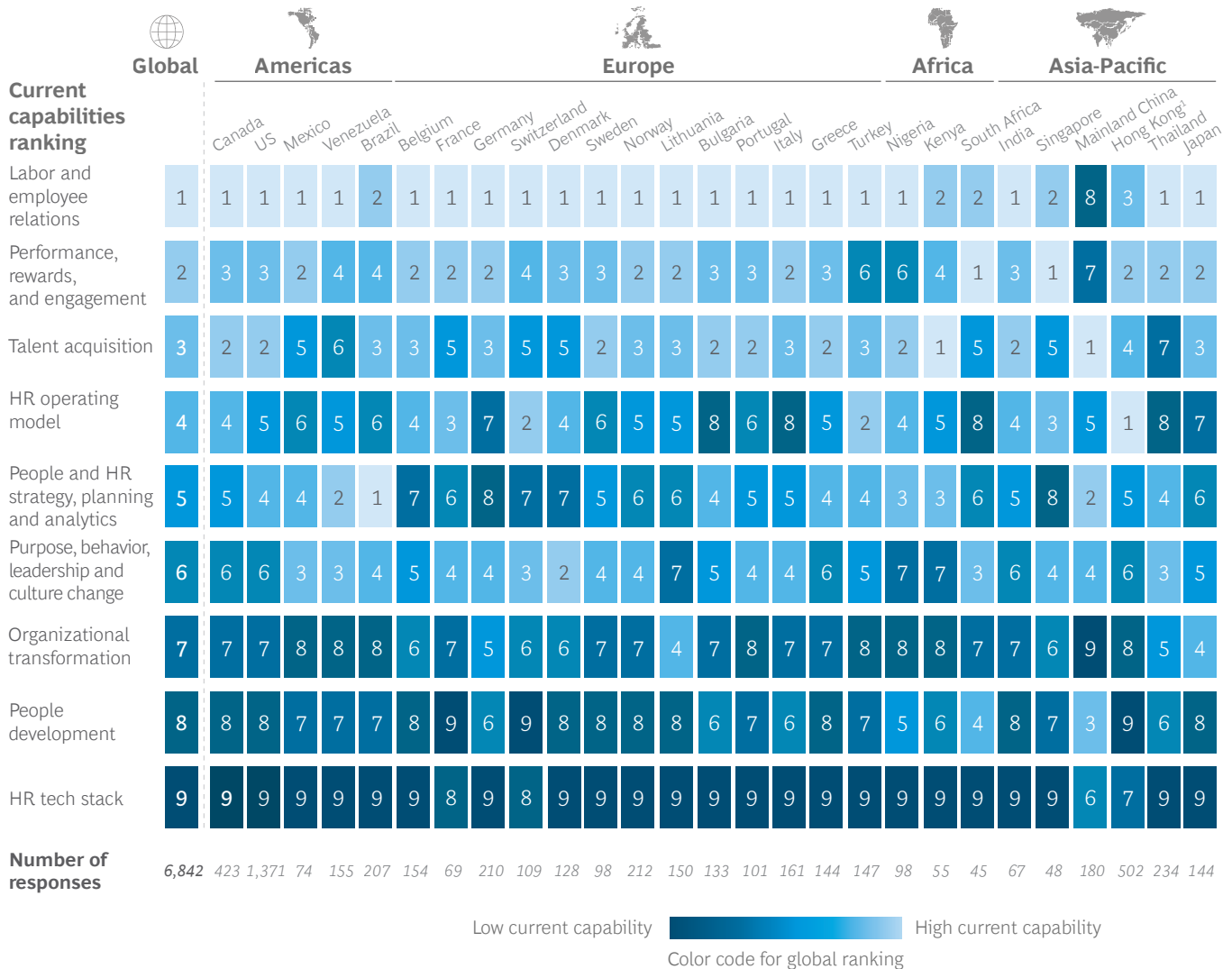
Here is a selection:

- In Mainland China and Hong Kong, talent acquisition was the lowest-priority topic cluster (out of nine choices), whereas globally it finished third.
- The purpose, behavior, leadership, and culture topic cluster is seen as significantly more important in certain Western and Northern European countries than elsewhere. Respondents in Belgium, Denmark, and Norway ranked it first, and respondents in Mexico, Sweden, and Italy ranked it second.
- Respondents in most of Europe (except Bulgaria and Greece) and Asia (except India and Hong Kong) ranked the labor and employee relations topic cluster as less important than global average of markets did.

- Hong Kong ranked the HR tech stack topic cluster first overall, and Germany ranked it second, but in the overall data set it finished seventh overall).

The geographic breakdown of current capabilities offers a more consistent and homogeneous ranking worldwide. (See Exhibit 7.) As in 2021, the labor and employee relations topic cluster came in first, followed by performance, rewards and engagement and talent acquisition (all of which are typical “bread and butter” tasks for a people management function). The following topic clusters, however, showed varied levels of prominence in different countries:

## Exhibit 7 - Across Most Geographic Markets, Companies Ranked Their Current Capabilities Highest in Labor and Employee Relations



Source: 2023 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis (n = 6,842).

Note: This chart depicts a selected sample of the 102 markets. “Other” and “Not applicable” responses are not included.

<sup>1</sup>Hong Kong is a special administrative region of the People’s Republic of China.



- In China, Turkey, and Nigeria, current capabilities on the performance, rewards, and engagements topic cluster are significantly below the global average (where it is ranked second overall).
- In some Western European countries (including Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, and Denmark), as well as in Singapore, current capabilities on people and HR strategy, planning, and analytics lag noticeably behind the global average (ranked fifth overall).
- Overall, capabilities in the talent acquisition topic cluster rank third worldwide, but several geographies and markets—most notably Thailand, Venezuela, Mexico, France, Switzerland, Denmark, South Africa, and Singapore—reported significantly weaker capabilities on this cluster.
- Some Asian and European geographies—especially Hong Kong, Switzerland, Turkey, France, and Singapore—prioritize the HR operating model topic cluster significantly above the global average (ranking fourth overall).

Aside from geographic differences, some interesting results emerged when we divided the overall survey results into large companies versus small and medium-size companies. (See Exhibit 8.) The people analytics and reporting topic and the sustainability and ESG standards topic, for example, ranked significantly higher in future importance at large companies. This may be because larger companies are subject to stricter laws, policies, and reporting requirements than smaller companies typically are.

## Exhibit 8 - Larger Companies Show Different Priorities Compared with Smaller Companies

### Future importance

Topic	Overall rank	Rank among large companies	Rank among small and medium-size companies	Difference
People analytics and reporting	19	6	22	-16 ↓
Employee relations	16	28	13	15 ↑
Performance management	13	25	11	14 ↑
Sustainability and ESG standards	27	17	29	-12 ↓
Diversity, equity, and inclusion management	23	12	23	-11 ↓

### Current capabilities

Topic	Overall rank	Rank among large companies	Rank among small and medium-size companies	Difference
Sustainability and ESG standards	27	11	30	-19 ↓
Diversity, equity, and inclusion management	16	9	18	-9 ↓
Top talent management	22	16	24	-8 ↓
Strategic workforce planning	18	25	17	8 ↑
Onboarding	10	15	7	8 ↑
Change management capabilities	20	28	20	8 ↑

Source: 2023 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis (n = 5,517).

Note: “No” and “Other” answers are not included. Large companies have at least 5,000 employees (n = 668); small and medium-size companies have fewer than 5,000 employees (n = 4,849).

In contrast, small and medium-size companies tend to have more collegial working relationships but also higher internal transparency, owing to the smaller workforce size. Consequently, the employee relations and performance management topics scored much higher in future importance at smaller companies.

### The Role of People Management In Addressing Business Challenges

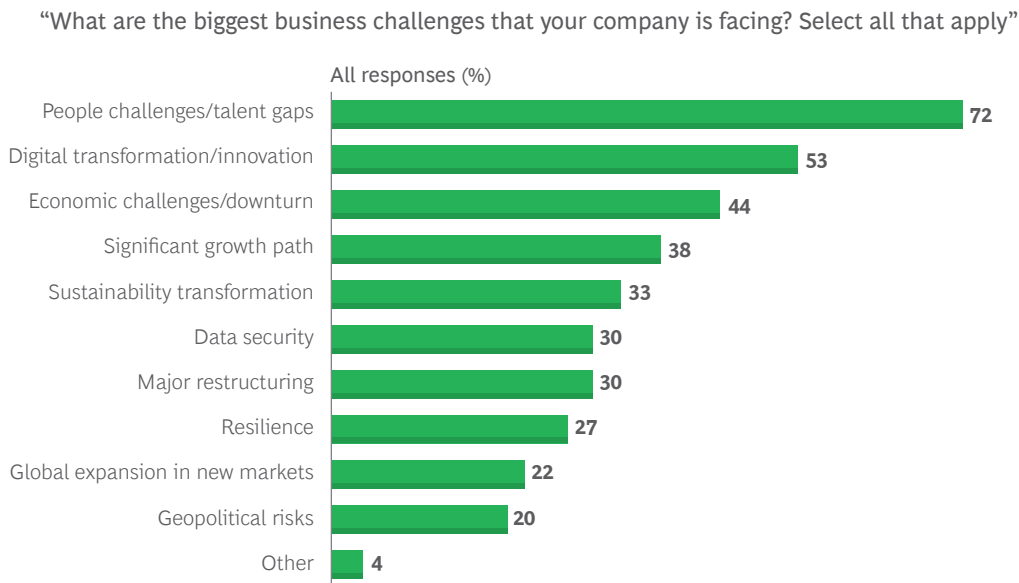
As part of this year’s survey, we asked respondents to identify current business challenges. The results underscore that people management functions are a core element in solving many such challenges. (See Exhibit 9.) Nearly three-fourths of respondents highlighted people challenges and talent gaps as the biggest business challenge they currently face, significantly more than for any other issue. That result is notable because the respondent base includes not only people management professionals (who may understandably focus on talent-related challenges), but also other business leaders. The consensus underscores the severity of the talent gap challenge.

Digital transformation and innovation ranked second, cited by slightly more than half of all respondents. Several others challenges—including sustainability transformation, major restructuring, and global expansion in new markets—have a clear people component as well and cannot be properly addressed unless the right talent is in place.

The survey results show that respondents recognize the importance of digital transformation and innovation to the continued success of their companies—and also their awareness of the weakness of their organization’s current capabilities in those areas. Specifically, topics in the HR tech stack cluster rank in the bottom third of the 32 topics covered in the survey—with HR digital solutions as the weakest current capability overall. These findings resonate with our discussion above, in that companies are often better at recognizing the importance of specific capabilities than at building those capabilities.

When asked whether their people management function uses relevant digital technologies, only 35% of respondents agreed. The results regarding the use of HR data and analytics to anticipate people challenges are even worse—just 30% agreed. (See Exhibit 10.) There is clearly room for improvement in harnessing the power of digital technologies, especially in light of the increasing adoption of AI-enabled tools.

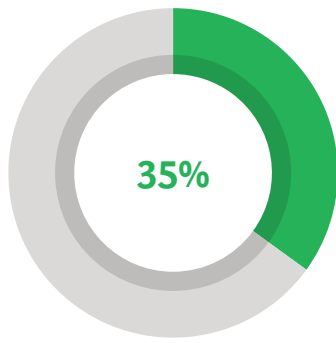
## Exhibit 9 - Most of the Business Challenges Identified by Respondents Have a Clear People Component



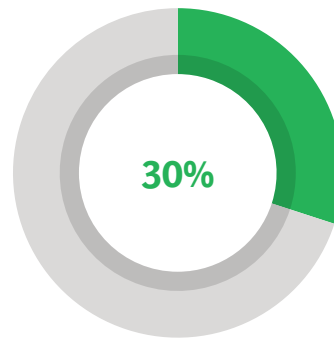
Source: 2023 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis (n = 6,158).

Note: “Other” and “Not applicable” responses are not included. On average, respondents selected four responses for their company.

# Exhibit 10 - Digital Technology and Data Analytics Have Clear Room for Improvement



Just 35% of survey respondents say that people management is **using relevant digital technologies**



Just 30% of survey respondents say that people management is **using data and analytics** to anticipate people challenges

■ Overall agreement

**Source:** 2023 BCG/WFPMA proprietary web survey and analysis (n = 5,892).

**Note:** “Other” and “Not applicable” responses are not included.

In our experience, it is important for companies to see digital not as a goal per se but rather as an enabler for other goals, such as greater efficiency, improved service levels, or a better employee experience. It is thus a foundational element of multiple people management topics. And as digital technology becomes more pervasive and the speed of adoption becomes a bigger driver of company performance, people management functions will need to catch up in their digital capabilities. Those that do will improve their performance and also help solve broader business challenges.

## Recommendations for People Management Leaders

On the basis of the survey data and our work with clients, we identified five recommendations to help people management leaders set the right priorities for challenging times in 2023 and beyond.

**Leverage data to anticipate talent supply and demand.** Strategic workforce planning is a perennial challenge for most organizations. Although the core principles are not new, the urgency to act has increased. One consumer goods company recently underwent a strategic workforce planning process to shift out of reaction mode and instead look ahead to anticipate its future people needs, offering a model for other organizations to follow.

The company saw that digitization, generative AI (GenAI), climate and sustainability, evolving preferences among talent, and industry-specific shifts were all fundamentally changing its workforce requirements. Simply recruiting and managing talent as it had in the past would not be enough. Instead, it needed to plan for the workforce that it would require three to five years later.

The company started by mapping the job architecture and skills of its current workforce, to create a baseline. It also took into account its overall business strategy in order to identify the specific skills and capabilities it would need to execute that strategy. It then modeled the future supply and demand of talent in key areas to quantify critical talent gaps that it would need to address. Finally, the company created a plan to close those gaps, considering a range of measures such as acquiring new talent in specific fields, developing current employees through upskilling and reskilling measures (that is, by establishing a link to the company’s learning and development), using contingent labor such as contractors, deploying technology to automate certain processes, and making individual career paths part of performance development conversations. By creating transparency with regard to long-term talent requirements, the company no longer needs to instantly react to short-term disruptions. The new, proactive approach is far more cost-effective in building a future-ready workforce.

Throughout the process, several factors helped the company succeed:

- The company closely linked the project to its overall strategic planning process, with people management leaders working hand-in-hand with the business to understand the company's future strategy. This kind of partnership is critical if people management is to have a seat at the table with C-suite officers and optimally support the overall strategy.
- Rather than using manual processes and spreadsheets (approaches that other organizations typically remain stuck with), the company relied on new AI-powered tools and solutions that can accurately forecast and model various scenarios for talent supply and demand. Those solutions move beyond the rough estimates of the past to provide more robust, quantifiable, data-driven scenario insights that support more transparent and accurate planning.
- The company built flexibility into its workforce plan, with key milestones and gates that enable the people management function to assess progress, identify emerging issues on the basis of changing circumstances, and make rapid adjustments over time.

#### **Get better—much better—at talent acquisition.**

Talent acquisition is another priority for virtually all organizations—and one that companies can increasingly address through digital technology. For example, a services company realized that it was no longer bringing in top-tier talent as cost effectively as it had in the past. Applicant expectations and recruiting processes had evolved thanks to new technology, but the company's recruiting and hiring processes remained largely analog and manual. In response, it launched a transformation program to digitize its talent acquisition function.

First, the company set a vision for success and developed a business case to clarify the investment required and to establish targets for improved performance. The goals were to use digital technology to harmonize talent acquisition processes across business units and worldwide, to dramatically improve the experience for job candidates, to make recruiters more efficient, and ultimately to hire more qualified candidates.

The company mapped processes for identifying key candidate capabilities in the talent acquisition process, in order to identify pain points and areas where it could harmonize and digitize processes. The company then spoke with several technology providers to find a partner that could both meet basic functional requirements and build a future-state technology stack capable of evolving over time.

The project is still underway, but early feedback from stakeholders has shown a significant increase in recruiter satisfaction and productivity (based on metrics such as cost per new hire), along with an increase in the number of high-quality applicants and the number of accepted job offers. At the same time, the company has decreased its reliance on headhunters, thereby decreasing costs at that end as well.

Several factors have been critical in helping the transformation succeed:

- The company started with a clear business case, including goals that aligned with business objectives and specific KPIs that quantified progress along the way.
- Key users and stakeholders now provide input at critical junctures during the process, particularly in connection with redesigning processes and workflows. Understanding the end-to-end user experience and the factors that users considered most important significantly increased buy-in for the project. Further, pilot testing with real users uncovers bugs before new processes and technology go live.
- Agile, iterative ways of working help the team manage interdependencies and tradeoffs during the design and implementation process. A cross-functional group of stakeholders—including talent acquisition experts, technology teams, and vendors—sorts through these issues while remaining focused on the overall vision of the target state. It also creates governance processes to give employees the right levels of data access and user rights within the overall HR operating model.
- An activist project management office uses appropriate change management principles to boost engagement, ensure that the project stays on schedule, resolve tradeoffs, and manage risk.
- Critically, the team took a long-term view of technology. For example, it resisted the urge to overly customize the technology, which would lock in changes and prevent the company from adapting the system in the future. Instead, it focused on process changes, designed to enable the company to upgrade and advance from vendors in the future.

**Invest in upskilling and reskilling for your current workforce.** Upskilling and reskilling is a core topic for organizations. Developing new skills in your existing workforce is often far more cost-effective than recruiting and hiring new people externally. Moreover, rapid changes in the business landscape—particularly in areas of technology—mean that companies must continually refresh the skills and capabilities of their workforce.



For example, a beauty company faced a massive challenge in its business model, due to a greater emphasis on sustainability and green products. In particular, the R&D function needed to shift all of its products and processes to natural ingredients within ten years. Achieving that objective entailed reinforcing some core skills that the R&D department already possessed—notably product development skills such as coloring and fragrance-building—but also relying heavily on digital and AI to better understand and respond to changing consumer needs.

To meet these challenges, the company launched a comprehensive upskilling and reskilling program. First, it identified the skills it would need in the future, along with individual and departmental gaps to prioritize filling. It also built differentiated programs for people in different roles. Leaders and transformation managers received training in driving the overall transformation and supporting staff. Product and data teams trained in technical areas such as data analytics and AI, and all R&D employees became more adept at managing data and working with new tools and solutions.

The program emphasized the 10/20/70 approach, according to which 10% of upskilling consists of formal training, 20% involves exposure to new practices, and the remaining 70% is on-the-job instruction, to embed new ways of working. Transformation leaders used early adopters within the organization to train others, along with tools such as gamification to spur adoption.

Although the program is not yet fully implemented, the company is already seeing a dramatic increase in digital and sustainability skills in R&D, positioning the unit to become faster and more effective at innovating, understanding customer preferences, and developing greener products. More broadly, the investment in upskilling and reskilling has increased retention in the workforce, as employees learn important new skills and grow into roles with more responsibility.

**Unlock value through AI.** Even though we did not include our quantitative survey findings regarding AI, it—particularly GenAI—is a **crucial topic for people managers**, and it is here to stay. Early use cases demonstrate the tremendous value that this technology offers to those who master it. For example, GenAI has the potential in HR to revolutionize self-services, boost productivity, personalize customer experiences, and build data-driven talent ecosystems, among other benefits. (See Exhibit 11.)

Nevertheless, the past few months have also shown that most companies are only at the beginning of the process of mastering the interplay between human and tech intelligence. Typically, in companies that are further down the road with regard to their people management functions, people management leaders play a dual role.

First, at the enterprise level, people management leaders should be involved in preparing for the broader AI transformation. They should help define the skill set that cross-functional AI teams need to oversee efforts across the company, including identifying responsible AI contacts and setting up policies and rights for using AI-enabled technologies. Broad upskilling programs, typically starting with the 100 most senior executives, are essential to gain buy-in and prepare for wider adoption. Aligning workforce transformation with the enterprise strategy ensures that AI supports the bigger vision of the company.

Second, people management leaders benefit from implementing AI within their own function. Successful leaders set an overall vision that aligns with company goals, establish an AI team for their own function, and designate a dedicated point person on the topic. As a practical matter, successful people management functions start by organizing their foundational data and prioritizing high-impact use cases. As skill demands become clearer, **prioritizing digital and data skills** through upskilling, reskilling, and talent recruitment becomes crucial.

The coming months will provide evidence of the massive competitive advantage that companies equipped to harness AI gain over those that stand still. Results from the first large-scale studies in organizations suggest that productivity improvements of 20% to 30% are possible, depending on the task and starting position. It will be exciting to see how people management functions seize this opportunity, for themselves and for the benefit of their organizations.

**Focus on change management and organizational development.** In the realm of leadership behaviors, change management, and organizational development, it is imperative not to underestimate the transformative potential—and pitfalls—of change, especially in light of the significantly increased speed of decision making that AI and other forms of digital technology permit. People management functions should position themselves as leaders in this endeavor to actively shape the people agenda of their organization and to execute change programs. In doing so, they should adopt a holistic perspective that focuses both on recruiting external talent and on nurturing and upskilling the existing workforce, as this is paramount to making individuals an integral part of the change journey.

# Exhibit 11 - Generative AI Offers Use Cases Throughout the People Management Value Chain

Value chain	Current use cases		Near-term future use cases		Long-term future use cases	
Anticipate	Forecast turnover from pattern recognition and sentiment analysis	Predict and model the impact of workforce demand projections	Optimize ROI and success KPIs and other key metrics	Create proactive sourcing capabilities, and establish a pipeline of prospects and sources	Predict future required employee skills on the basis of corporate strategy	Forecast and identify talent gaps in organizations
Attract	Auto-generate dynamic job postings with targeted skills, based on company needs	Write personalized recruitment messaging to target candidates	Screen and match applicable resumes	Conduct AI-enabled video- and text-based interviews of candidates	Designate critically required skills	Generate personalized compensation packages
Develop	Identify organizational skill gaps and reskilling programs	Optimize and create new training and development content	Create new real-time personalized employee learning and development programs	Create on-demand targeted support and training/mentor or coach matching	Build interactive virtual training/mentoring	
Engage	Enable self-service for employee queries	Provide a smart assistant/chatbot for repetitive tasks	Conduct employee sentiment analyses to anticipate needs	Optimize budgeting and activities to maximize ROI on the basis of given KPIs	Facilitate targeted wellness and stress management	Redesign personal benefits packages and recognition programs

Source: BCG analysis.

At the same time, people leaders need to embody the changes they seek, appealing to the heart of the organization, in line with the principles of **generative leadership**. Increasingly, companies are focusing on leadership behaviors of entire leadership teams—including the C-suite and other leadership teams at any level of the organization—rather than on individuals. Change is seldom limited to a clearly defined area, so companies need to take a broad perspective on change that encompasses all stakeholders involved. The people management function plays a pivotal role in this, not only in caring for its own function, but also in championing the well-being and growth of the entire workforce and, ultimately, driving successful organizational transformations for the entire company.

People management functions play a pivotal role within organizations, as do their leaders, who need to set people management priorities for the short, medium, and long terms. In the short term, people management leaders must remain sufficiently nimble to offer prompt solutions in an increasingly volatile, multifaceted business environment that is marked by continual crises and diverse challenges. Though this capacity for adaptability has always been important, in the current poly-crisis environment, it has become an imperative.

Yet organizations cannot limit themselves to short-term thinking. They also need to strategically prepare for the medium to long term by looking ahead and prioritizing critical workforce topics that can ultimately make or break an organization. In parallel, people management functions must establish efficient operational processes that facilitate the execution of its priorities.

While many HR departments shine in one or the other of these areas, the most successful companies distinguish themselves by excelling in all of them, effectively providing comprehensive solutions to the complex and evolving demands of modern businesses.

# Appendix I

## Methodology

The first Creating People Advantage report was published in 2007. Since then, we have selectively removed or added topics and subtopics for analysis to reflect trends and shifting priorities in HR and people management. In this year's report, we looked at nine broad topic clusters, broken out into 32 topics.

The online survey was conducted from March through October 2023. Using a five-point scale, respondents rated each topic on future importance and assessed their organizations' current capabilities with regard to each topic.

A total of 6,893 respondents from 102 markets replied to the survey. The bulk of the respondents (94%) were from HR functions, including HR generalists/business partners, HR specialists/members of a center of excellence (such as for recruiting, talent, diversity, learning and development, or a shared-services center). The remaining respondents were from non-HR functions and external consultancies.

Respondents came from all organizational hierarchy levels: 17% individual contributors, 26% managers, 33% senior managers, and 15% managers of managers. All remaining respondents came from other levels of hierarchy or did not reveal their level.

The industries most heavily represented in the survey were manufacturing (12% of respondents), technology (9%), professional services (8%), public sector (8%), and consumer (6%). The remainder of respondents came from various other industries.

# Appendix II

## Definitions of the 32 HR and People Management Topics

### People and HR Strategy, Planning, and Analytics

**People analytics and reporting.** Analysis of HR data to improve transparency, decision making, efficiency of HR processes, HR outcomes, and the impact and value of people management, as well as to facilitate reporting.

**People and HR strategy.** A strategy ensuring that the organization's people priorities and HR operations are aligned with its organization's goals and focus on the most impactful levers.

**Strategic workforce planning.** Systematic forecast of workforce supply and demand scenarios, including job architecture and skills taxonomy based on the organization's goals, external trends, and competency requirements from a strategic, long-term perspective.

### Talent Acquisition

**Employer branding.** Proactive development and marketing of the organization's value proposition to increase employer attractiveness to key employee target segments through offline and online channels and platforms.

**Onboarding.** Active integration of new hires into the organization culturally, professionally, and administratively.

**Recruiting strategy and process.** A strategy to determine required hiring levels and hiring approaches to successfully attract the best candidates for open roles, as well as to identify, attract, screen, interview, select, and hire the right employees for specific positions with optimal effort through specifically designed processes and systems.

**Talent sourcing ecosystem.** A comprehensive talent sourcing system that permits access to and leveraging of a wide variety of talent pools that meet the organization's needs.

### People Development

**Career pathing.** Defining internal talent marketplaces and specific career paths for different employee groups, and creating models to enhance their career and performance.

**Staffing and mobility management.** Coordination and encouragement of short- and long-term project assignments (such as international transfers, assignments to squads, or special projects) for employees, and support for their realization.

**Top talent management.** Assessment and segmentation of top employees based on their performance and capabilities, and provision of the right opportunities for them to perform, develop, and advance in their careers, thereby ensuring the right pipeline for key positions.

**Upskilling and reskilling at scale.** A strategy to identify competencies and upskilling and reskilling needs, to offer training programs that help employees gain new skills for their current position or a different one, and to establish a range of digital applications and services (for example, organizational learning academies).

### Performance, Rewards, and Engagement

**Employee engagement and well-being.** Delivery of tools, systems, and processes to engage and retain employees and to ensure and enhance their well-being.

**Performance management.** Regular and transparent performance management processes based on agreed-upon and known performance and behavior criteria for each job category and level.

**Rewards and recognition.** Connection of individual performance to reward schemes, remuneration, incentives, and career development options designed to drive the organization's success.

### Purpose, Behavior, Leadership, and Culture Change

**Change management capabilities.** Supporting holistic organizational changes and major transformations by ensuring employee buy-in, readiness, and engagement, and by enabling leaders to navigate challenging situations.

**Diversity, equity, and inclusion management.** Actively encouraging and managing gender, cultural, religious, educational, social, national, ethnic, and other diversity to the mutual benefit of employees and the organization.



**Leadership behaviors and development.** Developing individuals into leaders who can influence, motivate, and enable their staff to reach organizational, team, and individual goals.

**Purpose and culture activation.** Articulating and embedding a powerful organizational purpose to create a sense of meaning, inspire employees, and unlock efforts to grow sustainably, fulfilling the organization's role in society and implementing and maintaining a strong organizational culture that supports attitudes and behaviors vital to achieving the organization's goals.

**Sustainability and ESG standards.** Advancing the organization's integrated sustainability initiatives and goals by, for example, implementing performance outcomes based on ESG standards.

## Labor and Employee Relations

**Employee relations.** Ensuring harmonious relations between the organization and individual employees through direct communication and interaction with employee representatives (such as unions and social bodies) to address staff demands and to facilitate understanding and acceptance by staff of change processes.

**Health and safety.** Designing and building a psychologically safe and healthful workplace that cultivates physical health, promotes mindfulness and resilience, and ensures compliance with safety regulations and reporting standards.

**Policy management.** Managing HR policies and standards to achieve organizational goals in line with changing legal requirements (such as labor law, co-determination, data protection, and other regulations).

## Organizational Transformation

**Agile principles.** A set of principles supporting quick adaptations to a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) world, higher-speed project completion (for example, through sprints), and enhancement of product development.

**Employee journey management.** Mapping the employee's journey from the moment of hiring until exit to create a holistic understanding of each employee's questions and needs and thus improve satisfaction and experience.

**Flexible work schemes.** Models of work that use technologies to improve performance, expand flexibility (for example, through virtual or hybrid work models), and increase independence and employees' satisfaction.

**Organizational development and design.** Supporting transformation of the organization into one that blends human capabilities and technology, focuses on the customer, and adapts quickly to changes (for example, by having HR personnel act as agile coaches, organizational design advisors, or trainers for man-machine collaboration).

**Restructuring management.** Establishing an infrastructure that facilitates modifying financial and operational aspects of the organization to guarantee crisis resilience and the like.

## HR Tech Stack

**HR digital solutions.** Using digital solutions—such as robotics process automation or generative AI—to accelerate HR processes and services.

**HR IT architecture, operation, and cloud software.** Using suitable HR IT architecture—specifically, human capital management cloud solutions—to facilitate collaboration and to improve the efficiency of HR processes and services.

## HR Operating Model

**HR organization and governance.** Designing an effective and efficient HR organization (including the right roles, organizational units, agile practices, and collaboration methods) and creating strong governance structures to enable fast, responsible, evidence-based decisions.

**HR shared services.** Building a strong HR shared services center structure by, for example, bundling HR operations in hubs and consolidating the regional footprint.

**HR staff capabilities.** Forecasting and developing the right mix of skills, individuals, and roles in HR to further improve the quality and impact of HR work and future-proof the HR function.

# For Further Reading

Boston Consulting Group has published other reports and articles that may be of interest to the reader. Recent examples include those listed here.

[How Generative AI Will Transform HR](#)  
August 2023

[How to Attract, Develop, and Retain AI Talent](#)  
May 2023

[What Job Seekers Wish Employers Knew](#)  
January 2023

[Shifting Skills, Moving Targets, and Remaking the Workforce](#)  
May 2022

[What the Industrial Goods Workforce Wants](#)  
April 2022

[Creating People Advantage 2021: The Future of People Management Priorities](#)  
June 2021

[Decoding the Digital Talent Challenge](#)  
November 2021

[The Future of Jobs in the Era of AI](#)  
March 2021

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Association Nationale des Directeurs des Ressources Humaines (ANDRH), France

National Association for Human Resources (NAHR), Georgia

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Chinese Taipei - Chinese Human Resource Management Association (CHRMA), Taiwan

Human Resource Association of Tanzania (HRA), Tanzania

Personnel Management Association of Thailand (PMAT), Thailand

Association des Responsables de Formation et de Gestion Humaine dans les Entreprises (ARFORGHE), Tunisia

People Management Association of Turkey (Peryön), Turkey

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), United Kingdom

Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), United States

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