



# Plan Your Workforce Without the Limitations of Roles

by Russ McCall

Workforce planning is rarely realized because the business does not prioritize it, HR does not have the expertise to run it and change thwarts all plans. To address this, HR leaders should decouple tasks from roles to make planning decisions that drive impact and organizational responsiveness.

True strategic workforce planning continues to be a dream that few HR leaders successfully realize. While more than half of CHROs want to advance beyond headcount planning as their workforces shift, less than 28% are confident in their approach to workforce planning.<sup>1,2</sup> There are many reasons why the ambition of workforce planning falls prey to the practical execution of workforce planning, including HR acumen and business buy-in challenges, but the most prevalent reason is change.

The increasing amount of change organizations face reduces the output quality of less-mature workforce planning (headcount forecasting), while the unpredictable nature of change makes more mature approaches (strategic workforce planning) a futile exercise:

- **Near-Term Headcount Forecasting** — Generating annual headcount projections does not take into consideration change within roles, leaving critical workflows rife with risk. There is an opportunity to adjust forecasting to align with near-term shifts in business strategy while decreasing costs by depending less on the go-to strategy of recruiting to replace and grow.
- **Long-Term Strategic Workforce Planning** — As external threats like pandemics, inflation and geopolitical tensions continue to upset our business models and talent supply, HR and business leaders have an understandable skepticism to planning for an uncertain future. Simply put, long-term strategic workforce plans become shelfware when an external shock hits.

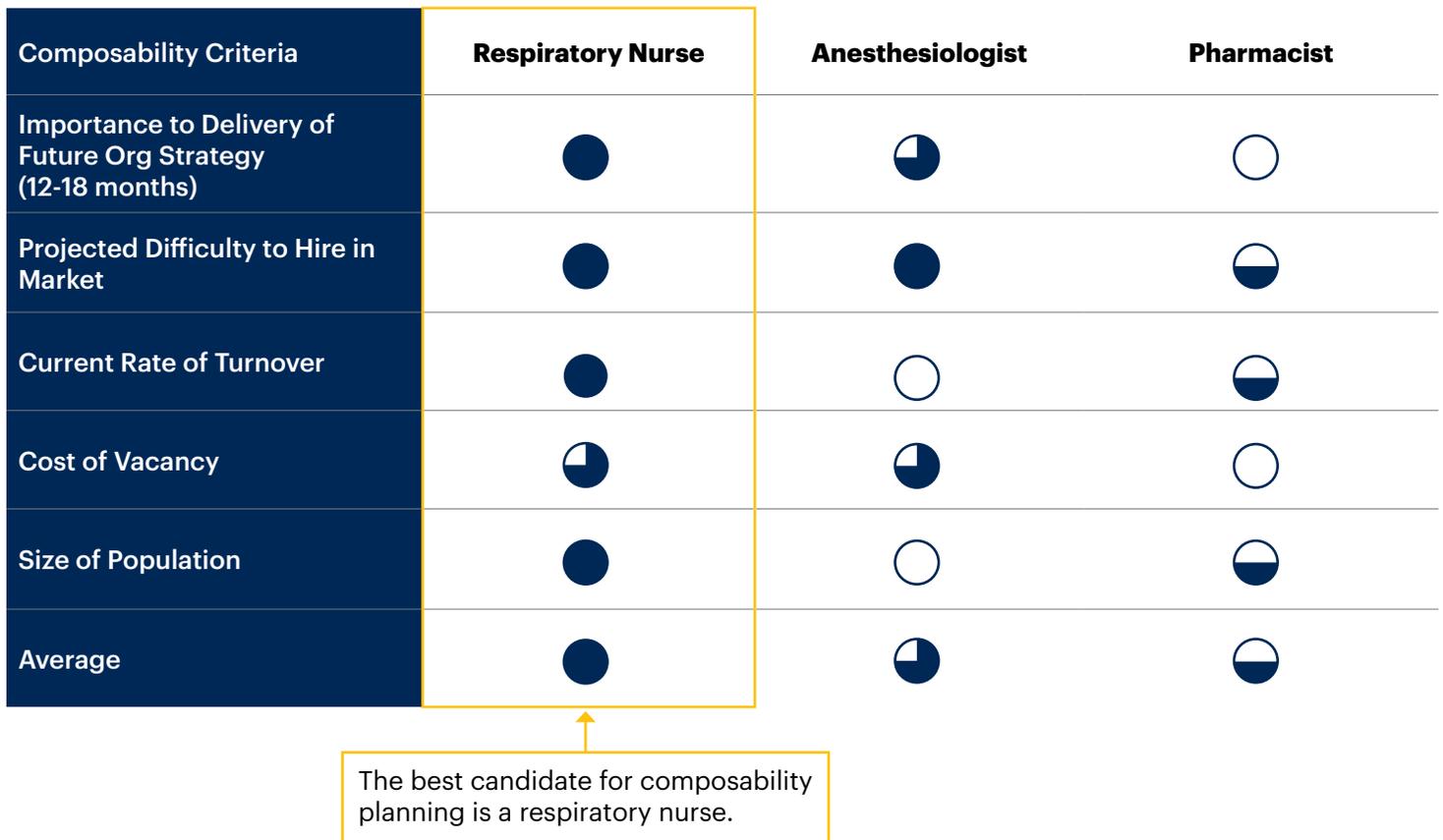
What's more, flexible work has made the process of workforce planning more difficult. Hybrid work has caused sustained, elevated turnover, which makes it harder to source essential capabilities by using building and buying solutions. Additionally, flexible work arrangements have also shifted how employees view work itself. With less time spent in office settings, employees have less of an opportunity to develop work friendships or engage in rituals like coffee chats and happy hours. As a result, they will value the

work they do over any sense of an organizational culture that surrounds that work.

Is there a “Goldilocks” approach to managing change within workforce planning that avoids the change negligence of a headcount forecast and the change disruption of a long-term strategic workforce plan? HR leaders should consider the use of composability, which anticipates near-term change without pretending to know the future. Applied to workforce planning, composability breaks down roles into a group of



**Figure 1. Prioritizing Roles by Composability**



Source: Gartner

tasks, analyzes those tasks and determines the workforce strategies that will better align with and adapt to demand for a company’s products or services. Importantly, composability moves in lockstep with the near-term fluctuations of organizational strategy and external influences and provides a more relevant way of planning your workforce in line with today’s volatility.

Here are four steps you can take to apply a composability approach to your workforce planning.

## 1. Prioritize Roles

Start small and think ahead. Only use composability for the roles that are essential to critical workflows and that warrant the additional money, time and bandwidth that workforce planning necessitates. Roles are good candidates for composability planning if they:

- Are important to the delivery of organizational

strategy in the next 12-18 months

- Are expected to be difficult to hire in the market
- Have high turnover
- Create significant costs to the organization when they are vacant
- Represent a large segment of the workforce

For example, consider how a healthcare organization might prioritize three roles for composability: respiratory nurses, anesthesiologists and pharmacists (see Figure 1).

In this illustrative example, the best candidate for composability planning is the respiratory nurse. The role represents a sizable swath of the population, already experiences high turnover, has high tangible and intangible costs to the organization when not filled, will continue to be difficult to hire, and is critical for providing patient care.

## 2. Decouple Tasks

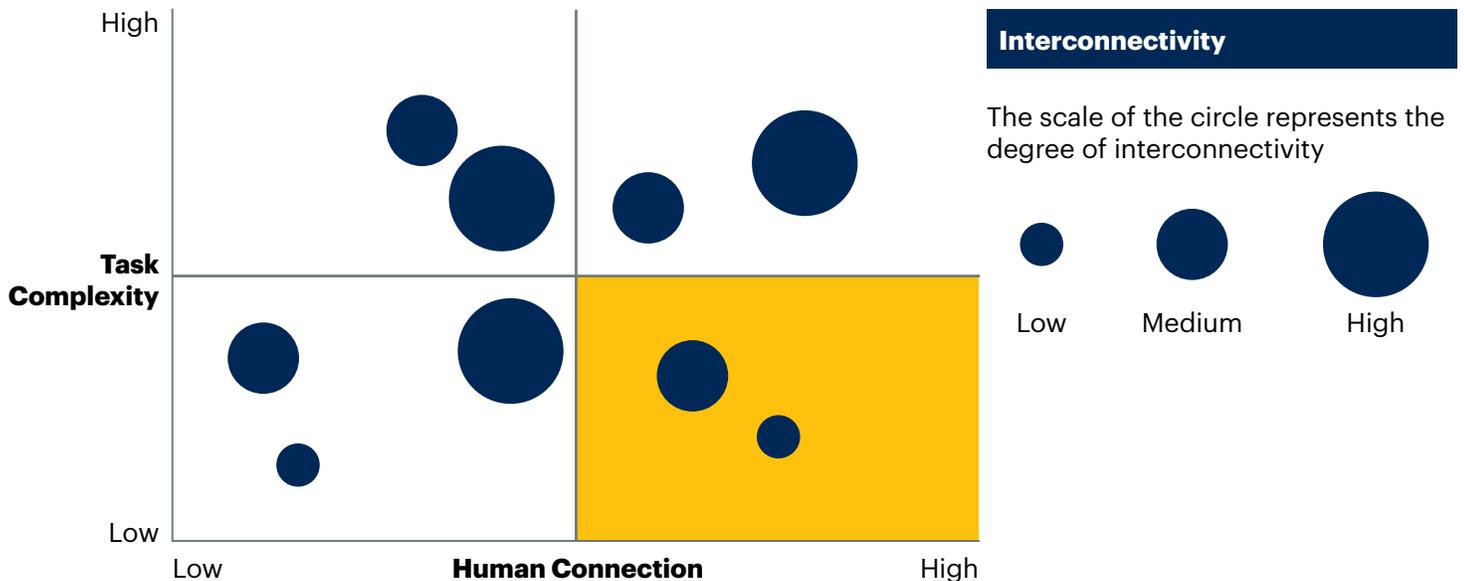
Having identified roles suitable for composability planning, HR leaders must deconstruct the selected roles into a composite list of tasks and then make sense of those tasks. The task analysis must be conducted according to criteria relevant to the role, to the industry, and to the organization's strategy. Continuing with our example, a healthcare company might evaluate a nurse's tasks according to their complexity, interdependence with other tasks and degree of human connection (see Figure 2). This would be quite different from a manufacturing or retail sales role, where the more appropriate refinement criteria could be time spent on the task, ease of learning or even the ability to complete the work remotely.

## 3. Strategize Solutions

Once HR leaders have prioritized the roles, translated them into tasks and analyzed those tasks, they should begin evaluating ways to optimize the delivery of tasks that were once confined to a role. In this exercise, HR leaders may find many tasks can remain within their original role, while others might be ripe for innovative sourcing models.

For example, tasks that might be low on human connection, complexity and interconnectivity could be good candidates for automation. Providence Health used AI to transcribe nursing notes and send them directly to doctors, freeing up time to focus on patient care.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, White Castle uses robots to flip burgers, allowing employees to prioritize tasks related to the customer experience.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 2. Task Deployment Framework: Nursing**



For more complex, recurring tasks, HR directors may simply decide to build slack into the system with more diverse resourcing options. For example, Unilever has a program called “U-Work,” where employees select the assignments of most interest to them, rather than having a fixed role.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, employees at Aldi perform multiple tasks that go beyond the boundaries of a role, from stocking to taking inventory and receiving shipments.<sup>6</sup>

## 4. Monitor and Course-Correct

HR leaders should be ready to course-correct with the interventions they choose. Two considerations are clarity of impact and speed of signal: In other words, which of these strategies will successfully deploy the tasks of resource-constrained roles? And how quickly can we access data that will provide a clear signal of success? HR leaders must also evaluate how recomposing tasks among different stakeholders or technologies adds work friction. For example, does the added interplay of automated note-taking in nursing cause unnecessary complexity or detract from patient outcomes?

## Conclusion

The use of composability aligns workforce planning with today’s environment of constant change. Its near-term nature reduces the impact of future disruptions, and some of the steps, namely the data, task and intervention analyses, offer the strategic insights that a talent forecast lacks. As more organizations recognize the importance of protecting critical workflows, composability offers a practical lens on how to take action today.

<sup>1</sup> Gartner’s 2022 HR Priorities Survey was conducted from 7 July 2021 through 28 July 2021 and includes responses from 572 HR leaders globally and across all major industries.

<sup>2</sup> 2021 Gartner CHRO Survey; n = 44 HR leaders.

<sup>3</sup> [Providence Taps Nuance to Develop AI-Powered Integrated Clinical Intelligence](#), HIT Consultant.

<sup>4</sup> [White Castle to Hire 100 Robots to Flip Burgers](#), Today.

<sup>5</sup> [Future Workplace](#), Unilever.

<sup>6</sup> [How a Cheap, Brutally Efficient Grocery Chain Is Upending America’s Supermarkets](#), CNN Business.

