

How Part-Time Senior Leaders Can Help Your Business

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July 02, 2024



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Summary. Technological innovation, advances in remote work, and reshaped post-pandemic priorities have led to companies hiring fractional leaders, or part-time senior talent, to occupy key leadership roles. These leaders, who typically have 20 to 30 years of experience, blend strategic and functional leadership with a hands-on approach, and they offer their skills to multiple organizations, typically startups or small and medium-sized enterprises. The arrangement enables organizations to benefit from senior leadership without the expense and commitment of a full-time hire, and it allows senior executives both career flexibility and stability. This article looks at the pros and cons of fractional leadership and outlines three crucial conversations to have before engaging in this kind of arrangement. **close**

As organizations look to reinvent themselves to spur growth, they often seek to acquire senior talent who can infuse new ideas, skills, and leadership within the organization. However, hiring and retaining senior talent is fraught with challenges.

Furthermore, small and medium-sized organizations often struggle to access and afford the senior talent necessary for driving growth.

In response to these challenges, we're seeing a new approach in which companies are hiring fractional leaders, or part-time senior talent, who occupy key senior leadership positions. These leaders typically have 20 to 30 years of experience, and they blend strategic and functional leadership with a hands-on approach. While they possess the experience to serve as full-time C-suite executives, they choose to offer their skills to multiple organizations, dedicating only a fraction of their time to each. As Karina Mikhli, founder of the online community Fractionals United, aptly puts it: "Being fractional isn't about a specific scope or project. It's about playing a key role in the leadership team and being included in the organization chart." This arrangement enables organizations to benefit from senior leadership without the expense and commitment of a full-time hire, and it allows senior executives both career flexibility and stability.

Our search of LinkedIn found that as of early 2024, more than 110,000 individuals identified as fractional leaders, as compared to just 2,000 individuals in 2022. The interest in fractional working has been growing for some time, but the pandemic, advancements in technology, the normalization of remote work, and reshaped priorities have further accelerated this trend. As Rob Smith, a fractional chief digital officer, told us: "With all the technology available today, I don't need to be physically in the same place to be effective. It's allowed me to work for multiple companies at once."

To better understand how organizations can effectively leverage this growing pool of senior talent, we spoke with 11 pioneers in the fractional movement and four organizations that have hired fractional leaders. Here's what we learned.

Pros and Cons of Engaging Fractional Leaders

To date, startups, along with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), have been the early adopters of fractional talent. Although their needs may vary, these organizations often lack the financial resources or the volume of work to justify hiring full-time experienced senior executives. To a lesser extent, we've seen large organizations hire fractional leaders for roles in emerging areas, such as innovation, digital, and AI, where they can provide skills that may not necessarily be found in-house and are often experimental in nature.

Beyond the financial advantages of accessing a seasoned leader for a fraction of the cost, fractional leaders can offer a different dynamic to CEOs. "A power asymmetry

exists that makes it difficult for employees to tell the CEO what they need to hear,” explains Jason Voiovich, a fractional chief marketing and product officer. “As a fractional, not being dependent on a single company for my income, I have a heightened sense of responsibility and feel empowered to initiate difficult conversations.”

It’s not only CEOs that benefit. With their deep functional expertise, fractionals often serve as advisors and mentors to other C-suite leaders. Barry Hurd, a fractional chief marketing officer (CMO), describes his role as providing expert counsel to full-time CMOs: “I’ve worked with a couple of CMOs who have hired me to simply double-check their work. I act as the executive coach, bringing my 30 years of wisdom and experience.” Similarly, Katie Walter, another fractional CMO, shares an experience where she supported an executive transitioning into a marketing leadership role: “She had never led the marketing function before, so the expectation was that I would work alongside her and help her to become more effective. In this case, I was introduced to the team as her coach.”

The benefits also extend to the organization as a whole. Because fractional leaders often juggle multiple roles, they gain access to a wide professional network and are exposed to diverse working methods. This unique position allows them to introduce new ideas and practices among the organizations they serve. “My fractional colleague is out doing different things when she’s not working with us, and sometimes she brings that knowledge back too, which is very helpful,” says Priya Narula, a founder who has hired fractional talent for her startup.

At the same time, not every role is suitable for fractional coverage, and not every experienced C-suite officer is cut out to be a good fractional leader. Fractionals are not available to address all the needs of an organization. They make themselves available for key meetings and are intentional about engaging in specific activities that help the organization achieve its objectives.

Fractional leaders must excel at using their time effectively across multiple organizational clients. They need to adeptly switch contexts between various tasks within business operations and across clients in different industries. This ability to juggle “solopreneurship” skills often presents a steep learning curve for senior leaders transitioning from the corporate world. John Arms, a fractional CMO and co-founder of Voyageur U, a support resource for aspiring fractionals, also highlights the need for fractional leaders to engage in their roles with a giving mindset and an abundance mentality, underscoring their commitment to serve multiple clients effectively as a part-time ally.

And finally, an effective fractional leader must possess deep experience and understanding of the job they are leading that only comes from having developed in

that function. Carol Fraser, a seasoned fractional chief human resources officer (CHRO), articulates why this is so important: “Human resources encompasses 26 different specialties from payroll to leadership development. As a fractional CHRO, I’m expected to have some level of understanding and experience in all of these specialties so I can hit the ground running in organizations of any size.”

3 Conversations for Building Effective Fractional Engagements

Integrating a fractional leader into your organization requires consideration and planning. While there are similarities to full-time hiring, the unique dynamics of fractional engagements require three key conversations that are crucial for addressing specific needs and expectations, ensuring seamless integration and fostering an effective partnership.

1. Start with the work, not the role.

Fractional work starts with understanding the work to be accomplished, not by defining the role to be filled. “Adopting a needs-based approach demands additional effort, particularly for organizations accustomed to defaulting to full-time hires,” explains Taylor Crane, founder of Fractional Jobs, a job board for fractional work. “Yet this strategy unveils a spectrum of hiring opportunities beyond the full-time or no-time dichotomy.”

To adopt a work-needs approach, organizational leaders should ask:

- What is the actual need from this function?
- What kind of investment is the organization willing to make (or does it need to make)?
- Does the work need to be full-time?
- What is the budget?
- What are the key characteristics required for a leader in this role?

By considering these questions, organizations can uncover a range of hiring configurations, from fractional to full-time. Adopting a work-needs based approach not only diversifies hiring options but also aligns organizational resources more closely with actual needs.

2. Ensure a good fit.

“Fractionals appreciate the flexibility of leveraging their experience and what they like to do for organizations that need it,” explains Brett Trainor, a fractional strategic staffing specialist. Organizations most likely to benefit from fractional leaders,

particularly those experiencing rapid growth, also want flexibility to accommodate uncertain growth trajectories and the evolving needs of roles.

This means both parties should engage in conversations to set and manage expectations regarding the role, its responsibilities, and how it might evolve with the organization's growth. It's particularly helpful to discuss the endpoint of the fractional relationship before it even begins. For example, some organizations may not anticipate the need for a full-time role and may expect the fractional leader to remain indefinitely. Other organizations, especially those on a faster growth trajectory, may envision growing the function to a point where a full-time leader is necessary.

To facilitate these discussions with a potential fractional hire, consider asking the following questions:

- Can you share your experience with fractional leadership?
- What do you consider to be your expertise? Can you describe your career trajectory in the function we're hiring for?
- How do you envision executing the work? Will it be solely by you, with support from a junior team that you help hire, or through external contractors?
- What are your expectations for this role's longevity and its evolution?
- How have you managed transitions out of past fractional roles?

These questions aim to uncover the candidate's experience, approach to the role, and expectations for the future, ensuring alignment with the organization's needs and growth plans. Ultimately, the key to a successful fractional relationship lies in mutual understanding and flexibility, allowing both parties to be successful.

3. Maintain an effective relationship.

A successful fractional relationship demands active management and intentional effort from both parties. Fractional leaders must be deliberate in structuring their time and setting clear boundaries with clients to ensure a focus on essential tasks.

Rachel Taylor, fractional matchmaker and former CEO, highlights a common pitfall: Organizations with constantly shifting priorities struggle to gauge the value of their fractional engagements. Such changes can lead to misunderstandings about a fractional leader's contributions, as repeated shifts in direction can obscure their achievements.

To prevent these issues, it is crucial to establish consistent and open communication throughout the engagement. Establishing clear metrics and regular check-ins can

ensure that the organization and the fractional leader are aligned on expectations and achievements. Both sides should frequently check in to:

- (Re) confirm alignment on priorities and deliverables
- Discuss definitions of success and establish metrics for measuring the impact and value of the engagement
- Identify and agree on the expected cadence of activities as part of the leadership team (e.g., meeting participation, milestone deliverables, providing employee feedback)
- Evaluate the structure of the relationship and whether it needs to evolve

Ultimately, the foundation of a successful fractional engagement is built on transparency and trust. Adopting an approach of over-communication can help in preemptively addressing potential misunderstandings and aligning expectations.

Organizations in need of senior leaders, yet seeking flexibility and lower costs, might do well to consider fractional leaders. By reimagining the traditional approach to hiring senior talent, organizations can gain access to seasoned talent and position themselves for sustainable growth.

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