

ROUNDTABLE



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UNLOCKING THE POWER OF YOUR B-SUITE

At a time when recruitment is only expected to become more challenging, HR professionals are looking at creative and innovative ways to stem attrition.

In a lively roundtable discussion, Maxxia's Group Executive, Client Strategy and Engagement, Venus Sopikiotis led a panel of HR leaders in a discussion about why empowering the B-suite should be a focus for forward thinking organisations in Australia.

With transformation now a priority for many organisations, B-suite managers are the face and the front line of the 'new normal'. It falls on their shoulders to ask the tough questions, offer the care, and deliver the new ways of working.

The phrase 'B-suite leaders with C-suite impact' was coined by Rebecca Houghton at BoldHR to describe the cohort of 'middle managers' that we know are critical to a thriving organisation. Research shows 37% of people leave their jobs due to poor manager quality.¹

Clearly, managers hold the key in the retention dynamic – and that's where empowering the B-suite comes in. They are being recognised as the critical cohort in organisations and their role in supporting talent retention is becoming better understood and appreciated.

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We're experiencing a material shift in what workers think about work. I've never seen it in my 30 years in talent. People are saying I'm not going to live like that anymore. This is revolutionary.

Rebecca Houghton, Founder and CEO, BoldHR

The rise of the B-suite in a transforming workplace

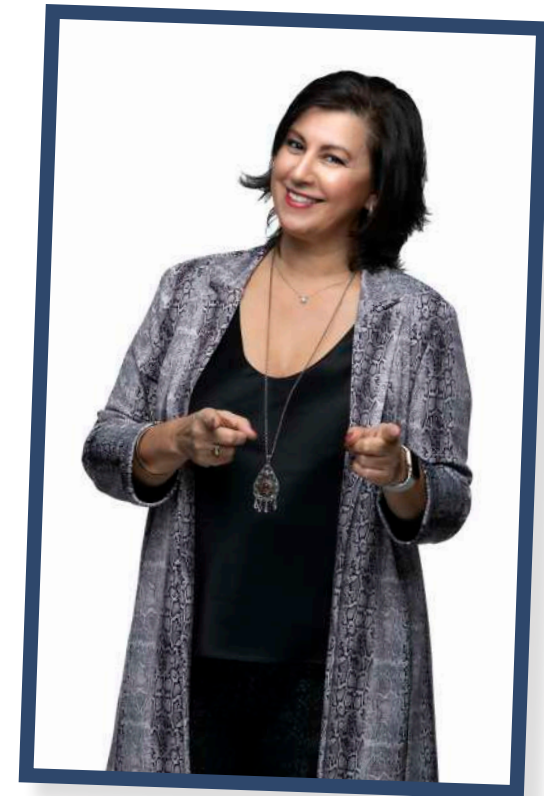
Research tells us one quarter of HR leaders report the rising costs of talent acquisition are having a negative impact on their company's bottom line due to talent scarcity.² Staff are reassessing their relationship with work after the difficult years of the pandemic and there is a critical talent shortage that even the reopening of borders is unlikely to fix.

RH: The B-suite are those experienced middle managers who hold business critical roles and usually sit three to five layers below the CEO (depending on organisational size). Generally they are too senior for training but too junior for executive coaching. They tend to have large teams and are critical to growth, performance or transformation.

JP: The B-suite holds critical roles bridging strategy with organisational capacity. They are the 'meat in the sandwich' between the two. They often pick up on potential problems before anyone else and have the real time insights needed to meet challenges head on.

RH: The C-suite can be insulated from front-line issues and too distant to appreciate what they mean in a practical sense. The B-suite are the eyes and ears of an organisation.

RH: Historically organisations have neglected and underinvested in the B-suite. But over the last 12 months there has been an uptick in organisations recognising that if they don't get middle management right, they will struggle to transform and achieve their objectives.



¹ HRM Online, Four Trends to Inform 2022 Workforce Planning, 2022

² Randstad Sourceright, Talent Trends Report, 2022

Supporting the B-suite to excel in a changed workplace

Research by Gartner³ looked at what has changed for employees as a result of the pandemic. Nearly two thirds of respondents agreed the pandemic “has made me rethink the place that work should have in my life”. Half said the pandemic has “changed my expectations towards my employer”.

RH: Employees across the public, private and not for profit sectors are rethinking what work means to them and are drawing a line in the sand. Employees are seeking purpose in their work. They are questioning the way things are done. There’s also tension over salary stagnation and flexible working. There’s a lot of questioning going on at a workforce level. Employees aren’t content with out-of-date answers to their questions. They’re looking for contemporary responses that address their concerns and demonstrate that management understands them.

JP: Working remotely has also fundamentally changed the dynamic between employees and the B-suite manager. The pandemic resulted in a physical distance yet at the same time a digital closeness. We were literally in each other’s living rooms; pets and children often appearing in or joining online meetings. While dealing with their own challenges responding to the pandemic, managers had to make a deliberate effort to check in on their remote workforce. As a result, employees saw a more authentic and vulnerable side of their managers. That has reset the relationship between employees and the employer – expectations have changed. Care and connection are now front and centre in this post-pandemic workplace.

AH: We realised early on that we needed to equip our B-suite with a range of tools to connect online including things like town halls, check-ins that involved something imaginative or creative and working remotely with the camera on to capture day-to-day ‘chit chat’. We’re learning that there is no ‘one size fits all’, implementation will largely be a trial-and-error process.

JP: Now that we’re returning to the office, we’re using the agile approach we were forced to adopt during the pandemic in working through the challenges of a hybrid workplace. Again the B-suite are critical to this task. They are the ones that articulate ‘the why’ of the benefits of physically connecting in the office. They are the ones who will check in on employees whose cameras have been turned off a few days in a row. They are the ones that need to identify the signs of someone struggling.

The ability to have courageous conversations is key

Research from MetLife⁴ tells us that 77% of employees who have supportive managers say they feel mentally healthy versus only 47% of workers who don’t receive that support. Managers have learnt to be proactive checking in on staff during lockdowns and now deliberately and consciously ask difficult questions about topics such as mental health.

AH: It’s about strengthening the capabilities of our leaders to make them feel comfortable and courageous to have conversations in an area where they may not feel comfortable to ask questions about an employee’s mental health or their personal circumstances. Delivering care and connection places a significant responsibility on middle management.

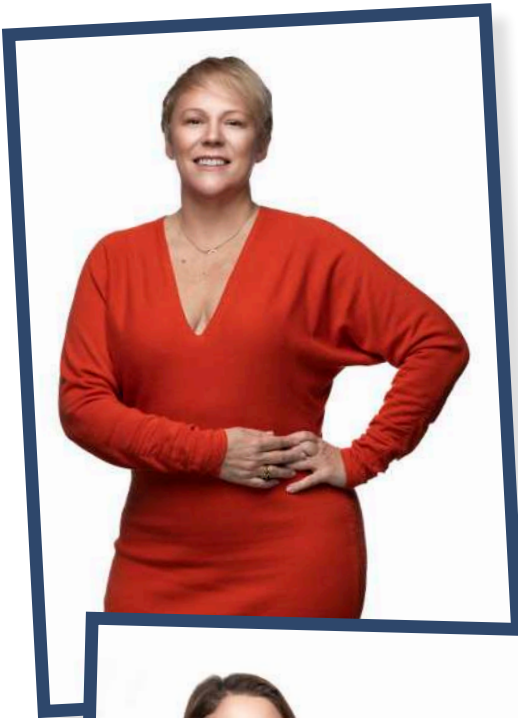
JP: We have to take care of people. We have to make sure people are alright and hopefully thriving.

RH: The relationship with your leader has proven to be one of the number one drivers of employee wellbeing and the number one driver of stress and disconnection in the workforce.



3 Gartner, Gartner HR Research Shows Organizations Must Reinvent Their Employee Value Proposition to Deliver a More Human Deal, 2021

4 Metlife, Employee Benefits Trends, 2022



What's getting in the way of unleashing the B-suite's superpowers?

RH: Burnout is a big issue. Workloads are increasing in many organisations and after the last few challenging years, the B-suite's resilience is waning. Middle managers are having to make hybrid work effective, they're negotiating increasing workloads, all the while delivering care. They are at the highest risk of burnout, and are choosing to leave their management jobs, or opting out of careers altogether. HR leaders are recognising they must equip middle managers with a new toolbox of 'tips, tricks and strategies' to deliver the care and connection staff are seeking in the current environment.

JP: This level of personalisation hasn't been something that managers have had to implement before. We are moving rapidly to a workplace where 'one size fits all' to management is no longer viable.

RH: If attrition and burnout of the B-suite continues at the current rate, HR managers will struggle to achieve transformation and corporate performance will face significant headwinds.

A radical rethink is required to ensure sustainable retention strategies

Employee value propositions (EVP) will also be more important than ever for the B-suite, offering a point of difference when more and more organisations are offering 'value adds' such as flexibility and increased pay. Organisations must clearly articulate their 'why' and offer middle management a sense of value and real-world impact.

AH: We are always seeking to preserve and extend the connection our people have to our organisation and a sense of purpose. We attract a lot of people to our organisation who want to make a difference and they want to see the real tangible impact that their work is having, and not just on our own employees and the people we support, but on the communities in which we live.

There is no off-the-shelf solution to upskilling and empowering the B-suite. Historically overlooked, this cohort is now on HR leaders' radar as the key to retention. Creating a clear value proposition is also critical in motivating this middle management cohort in the new normal and the resultant 'Great Reassessment' of work.

B-suite managers face significant challenges and are at risk of burnout. HR leaders who don't inspire and support middle management will lose in the war for talent, and that will place serious constraints of their organisation's capacity.

For more information download
Maxxia's EVP Guide