



Senior leadership, hired with proof.

A brief on the capability–identity distinction in executive hiring.



A brief produced by the firm for senior decision-makers evaluating their next executive search.

The argument advanced here is the operational form of the firm's published research on capability and identity in executive hiring. The position papers and books grounding the argument are available at kitalent.com/research.

Senior hires fail on identity, not on capability.

Most senior-hire failures, especially in the first eighteen months, are not failures of competence. They are failures of fit between who the person is and what the role and organisation actually demand. The research literature has documented this pattern for forty years. The executive search industry has, for the most part, not built its process around it.

We have. This brief explains how.

Senior hiring assessment is organised around two questions, although the industry rarely articulates them as such.

The first question is: what can this person do? This question concerns **capability**: technical skills, soft skills, management skills. Acquired, developable, observable. Capability can be benchmarked. Capability responds to coaching, training, and practice.

The second question is: who is this person? This question concerns **identity**: personality, values, motivation. The genuine drivers of the candidate's interest in this role at this time. Identity is not malleable in the same way capability is. The behavioural genetics literature establishes 40 to 60 per cent heritability of major personality traits. The longitudinal stability literature establishes rank-order consistency of 0.74 between ages 50 and 70. Traits change, but slowly, in small magnitudes, with limits.

The two questions concern empirically distinct constructs. They require different forms of evidence.

A NOTE ON WHAT THIS IS NOT. *The position above is not a defence of cultural matching. Informal cultural matching, as critiqued in the sociology of work literature, calibrates against the recruiter's preferences and the firm's existing demographic composition. Structured identity assessment, as practised here, calibrates against the operating reality of the role and reads documented decisional patterns rather than similarity. The two are operationally distinct. For some senior roles, structured assessment correctly identifies candidates whose identity constructively differs from the existing organisation.*

	CAPABILITY	IDENTITY
CONCERNS	What this person can do	Who this person is
COMPONENTS	Technical, soft, management skills	Personality, values, motivation
NATURE	Acquired and developable	Stable, slowly evolving
EVIDENCE	Specific, scored, benchmarked	Descriptive, scenario-based, calibrated
ASSESSMENT	Single structured interview, decision scenarios	Multi-conversation, decisional pattern exploration, longitudinal
COMMON FAILURE	Mis-scoping the role	Mis-reading the candidate

Capability and identity require different process architectures, not merely different questions.

KiTalent Position Paper No. 01

When an interviewer asks a candidate “how would you describe your leadership style,” the interviewer typically believes they are surfacing identity. In practice, they are surfacing articulation skill: the candidate’s ability to describe their leadership style fluently. The candidate who answers most fluently is often the candidate who has rehearsed the answer most frequently.

This is the dominant failure mode in senior assessment. Articulation is read as identity. The fluent candidate becomes the preferred candidate. The reflective candidate becomes the second-place candidate. The hire is made. Eighteen months later the hire is gone, and the post-mortem locates the cause in factors that were observable at the time of assessment but were not surfaced by the process.

The empirical literature on impression management has documented this for decades. Candidates can and do manage impressions in interview contexts. A single conversation can be performed. A series of structured conversations, probing decisional patterns from multiple angles across diverse past situations, becomes much harder to perform.

The discipline is not theoretically complicated. It is just rarely practised.

THREE. THE RESEARCH GROUNDING.

The argument advanced in this brief is developed at academic length across the firm's published research. The capability–identity distinction is grounded in organisational psychology, behavioural genetics, and adult-development research. Its phenomenological grounding draws on Heidegger's analysis of situated intelligibility. Its analytic grounding draws on category mistake, competence without comprehension, and the limits of symbolic representation. The three traditions converge on a single operational claim: that capability and identity require different forms of evidence and cannot be assessed within the same conversational register.

Reading Between the Times. Independent monograph. The philosophical foundation of the project. Sixteen chapters.

The Vectorized Afterlife of the They. Book, Volume 1, KiTalent Annuals in Research on Executive Search. The thesis: AI is the vectorized afterlife of the language of the They.

Executive Search as Erfahrung. Book, Volume I bis, KiTalent Annuals in Research on Executive Search. Senior executive search reframed as Erfahrung: the formative undergoing through which a subject is changed by what resists first understanding.

Artificial Intelligence Doesn't Exist. Book. The argument for "artificial fluency" as the accurate operating term for what we call AI.

The Capability-Identity Distinction in Executive Hiring. Position Paper No. 01. Grounded in I-O psychology, behavioural genetics, and adult development.

The Ontological Boundary of Algorithmic Assessment. Position Paper No. 02. Phenomenological grounding for the consultant-led portion of senior search.

The Candidate Is Not the Profile. Position Paper No. 03. Analytic-philosophical grounding for the limits of representation in hiring.

All titles available at kitalent.com/research. Each is final, peer-citable, and authored by Alessio Montaruli.

FOUR. AN ADVISORY NOTE FROM THE FOUNDER.

Thirteen years in executive search have taught me that most senior hires fail not from lack of effort, but from one confusion: capability and identity are not the same thing. Skills can be taught. The way someone reads a room cannot.

KiTalent exists to find the rare combinations of technical depth and cultural fit that produce senior tenures lasting eight or ten years. We assess slowly, on both capability (soft, hard, and management skills) and identity, which is values, motivation, character. But we scout fast, because the right candidates do not stay reachable for long.

The position papers and books referenced on the preceding page are the intellectual ground for this firm's discipline. They are not marketing. They are the published record of how I think about senior assessment, and they are the standard the firm holds itself to on every mandate.

Alessio Montaruli

FOUNDER & GROUP CEO



Identity assessment requires multi-conversation engagement, structured exploration of decisional patterns, and time to read what a single interview cannot surface. Most search firms cannot deliver this within the timelines clients expect. We can, because the firm operates two disciplines that create the operational basis for it.

Parallel market mapping. The firm continuously maps senior talent across its sector and geographic priorities, year-round, independently of any active mandate. By the time a client brief arrives, the relevant candidate universe is already known. The work that other firms begin at week one of the search has already been done. The time recovered is the time available for identity work.

Direct approach. The firm engages passive candidates directly, never through database matching, mass outreach, or response to public postings. Passive candidates surface decisional patterns that active candidates have rehearsed. Direct approach is the operational requirement for identity assessment because identity-relevant evidence is most readable from candidates who are not auditioning for the role.

Speed is not a marketing claim. It is the operational consequence of having done the mapping before the brief.

Every shortlist we produce arrives in two distinct evidence layers, deliberately separated.

The **capability layer** is specific, scored, and benchmarked. For each candidate it contains: domain expertise relevant to the role; documented decisions in scope; observable results; specific scenarios from the candidate's career that show competence under the conditions of the new role.

The **identity layer** is descriptive, scenario-based, and calibrated against the company's operating reality. For each candidate it contains: decisional patterns across diverse past situations; what the candidate consistently protects and what they consistently sacrifice; the genuine drivers of interest in this specific role at this specific time, distinguishable from rehearsed answers; how the candidate's identity fits, or constructively differs from, the operational identity of the hiring organisation.

The two layers are presented separately in the shortlist document. The client weighs them independently. The shortlist is not a fit score; it is two columns of evidence.

CAPABILITY EVIDENCE

Domain expertise relevant to the role

Documented decisions in scope

Observable results

Specific scenarios under the role's conditions

IDENTITY EVIDENCE

Decisional patterns across diverse past situations

What the candidate consistently protects

What the candidate consistently sacrifices

Genuine drivers of interest in this role at this time

Identity fit with, or constructive difference from, the hiring organisation

THE TWO LAYERS ARE PRESENTED SEPARATELY. THE CLIENT WEIGHS THEM INDEPENDENTLY.

01

Day 0–1 · Brief Alignment

Collaborative briefing with the client team. Profile, cultural and operational fit, communication style, decision timing all defined and documented in a written brief.

02

Day 1–5 · Market Mapping

Parallel-mapping data activated. Specific search plan, network referrals, all relevant candidates identified. The candidate universe is largely known on day one because the mapping has been continuous.

03

Day 5–8 · Multi-Level Screening

Two-register screening, deliberately separated. A capability conversation testing competence against the brief. An identity conversation surfacing decisional patterns across diverse past situations. Psychometric assessment is available on request where the brief warrants it.

04

Day 7–10 · Validated Shortlist Delivered

A shortlist pack containing two-layer evidence on each candidate, a market mapping report, and our written recommendation.

Validation point. The major commercial commitment begins here.

05

Ongoing · Progress Management

Weekly written reports on pipeline development, new candidates surfaced, and market feedback. Search direction adjusts as information accumulates.

06

Hire + 90 days · Closure and Onboarding Governance

Final interviews, offer negotiation, contract signing, and structured ninety-day onboarding governance to support integration.

Traditional retainer. *Pay upfront. Hope it works.*

Large retainer billed before any candidate is presented. Blind CVs sent before the mandate is calibrated. Generalist researchers, opaque pipeline. Risk sits entirely with the client.

Contingency. *Pay nothing. Get nothing scarce.*

No upfront cost, but the same mandate runs at multiple firms in parallel. Quantity rewarded over fit. Candidate pool thins. Candidate experience deteriorates. Methodology is shallow by design.

Proof-First™ Search. *Validated shortlist first. Pay per interview.*

No upfront retainer. Mandate calibrated and market mapped before outreach. Two-register screening, two-layer shortlist. Sector-native consultants, weekly pipeline visibility. The major fee triggers on shortlist validation.

The commercial structure of Proof-First Search exists to align the firm's incentives with the discipline. The firm is paid for delivering proof, then for delivering the hire.

NINE. THREE BUYING ROUTES. ONE SEARCH STANDARD.

Every mandate follows the same operating discipline: role calibration, market mapping, direct headhunting, structured assessment, evidence-based shortlist delivery, and post-placement follow-up. The commercial model changes according to the risk profile of the role and how your organisation buys search.

PROOF-FIRST™ SEARCH

Best for new partnerships, time-sensitive senior mandates, and risk-sensitive roles. No upfront retainer. Validated shortlist in seven to ten working days. Interview fee, then a placement fee on hire. The major fee triggers only after the client has validated the shortlist.

RETAINED SEARCH

Best for confidential, mission-critical, C-suite, board, and succession mandates. Standard retained structure with milestone fees. Off-limits protection and exclusivity. Deeper stakeholder calibration and assessment sequence. The same six-stage process, the same weekly visibility.

TALENT MAPPING FIRST

Best before a role opens, for market-entry decisions, compensation questions, and succession planning. Target-company and candidate universe map. Compensation, mobility, and availability signals. Feasibility recommendations before the brief is final. Converts naturally into search when the mandate is approved.

Across the searches we publish and the hundreds we do not, four families of mandate recur. They are the work we are built around: not always board-level, but the kind where the wrong hire slows a market launch, weakens a technical function, breaks a team, or leaves a strategic country uncovered.

I. **Technical and specialist leadership**

When the recruiter has to read the role, not just the title. Senior technical leads, software architects, actuarial and risk leaders, investment and portfolio managers, regulatory specialists, industrial automation directors, data infrastructure leaders. The brief is wrong, and the shortlist is wrong, when the consultant cannot read the role.

II. **Culture-critical leadership hires**

“Right on paper, wrong in the company” is the failure we work to prevent. We calibrate leadership style, decision rights, stakeholder context, team maturity, and operating environment before outreach begins. The shortlist is built to introduce candidates who can succeed inside the organisation, not only ones who match the job description.

III. **Cross-border and multi-market searches**

Most mandates involve language, relocation, or regulatory complexity across borders. Our four hubs in Turin, Nicosia, Almaty, and New York are designed so each search runs in-market with sector-native consultants, rather than out of a single head office. Compensation, mobility, and employer-brand reality are tested early.

IV. **Senior management as the core, with selected executive search where it fits**

Country managers, heads of function, department directors, senior technical leads, and specialist leaders are the centre of our practice. We also run selected C-suite, board, succession, and confidential mandates, especially for clients where we already understand the sector, culture, and leadership context.

ELEVEN. THREE DOCUMENTED ENGAGEMENTS.

CASE N° 01

Cross-border specialist placement

Ten Polish-speaking insurance specialists sourced for relocation to Italy after an internal process had stalled. Brief recalibrated, candidates calibrated for relocation appetite, shortlist landed inside three weeks.

Ten hires. Cross-border relocation.

CASE N° 02

Recovery from a failed prior process

Two Financial Controllers placed in six weeks and below budget in a major European capital, after two prior agencies had been unable to close. Brief recalibration plus sector-native direct search.

Two hires. Six weeks. Under budget.

CASE N° 03

Building a function from concept

A new operating division built across eight adjacent sectors through targeted leadership search and structured candidate calibration. More than one hundred interviews.

Eight sectors. One hundred and more interviews.

Full case studies, with method, metrics, and what we got wrong on the first pass, available at kitalent.com/case-studies.

Saying so within the first call saves everyone time.

Talk to us when the search needs executive-search discipline.

Technical or specialist mandates.

Culture-critical leadership hires.

Cross-border and multilingual roles.

Searches stalled through standard channels.

Confidential or off-limits assignments.

Pass on us when a different route will solve it.

Volume or junior hiring.

Administrative roles.

Briefs well-served by in-house TA.

Job-board friendly searches.

THIRTEEN. EVERY CLAIM LINKS TO HOW IT IS MEASURED.

7–10 days

To a validated shortlist on mapped senior-management mandates.

96%

One-year retention: hires still in role after twelve months.

NPS 72

Twelve-month rolling client satisfaction survey.

8+ years

Average length of an active client relationship.

“KiTalent’s team stand out for their enthusiasm, competence, effectiveness and professionalism. They’ve demonstrated great ability in understanding our specific needs and proposing the best candidates.”

TALENT ACQUISITION DIRECTOR, GENERALI GROUP

“We’ve created a real partnership, based on cooperation and mutual trust, clear and effective communication. They provide attentive high-quality service.”

TALENT ATTRACTION DIRECTOR, BULGARI (LVMH)

“Reliable and dynamic professionals with a strong background and a very active network, which allows them to move quickly and stay current with market trends.”

TALENT ACQUISITION PARTNER, ZURICH INSURANCE GROUP

KiTalent is an international management and executive search firm. Founded in London and Turin in 2016. Two hundred and more organisations served. Eight-plus years average partnership.

The firm operates from four hubs:

Turin: European HQ and origin of the firm.

Nicosia: Mediterranean and Middle East.

Almaty: Central Asia and CIS.

New York: Americas.

The arguments in this brief are the operational distillation of a body of published research that the firm maintains in public. We publish at five registers: founder editorials, books and position papers, applied research, documented case studies, and buyer-facing guides. We publish because we think the discipline is worth committing to in writing. Clients who work with the firm find that the arguments stated here are not marketing positions. They are how the firm actually conducts a senior search.

FIFTEEN. SPEAK WITH US.



A thirty-minute conversation is enough to know whether the brief in your mind matches the discipline this firm offers. No NDA required to talk. No commitment.

Alessio Montaruli

FOUNDER AND GROUP CEO

SPEAK WITH US

Schedule a conversation
tidycal.com/team/meeting-with-kitalent
[\[email protected\]](#)
kitalent.com

BY REGION

EMEA and Asia +39 388 385
0000
Americas +1 (934) 200-4949

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