



# *Senior leadership, hired with proof.*

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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](http://kitalent.com/research). The measurement method behind every number in this brief is published at [kitalent.com/methodology](http://kitalent.com/methodology).

# *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 evidence is not anecdotal. In the largest study of its kind, tracking more than 20,000 hires, 46 per cent failed within eighteen months, and 89 per cent of those failures were attitudinal rather than technical.<sup>1</sup> The derailment literature has documented the same pattern since the Center for Creative Leadership's first studies in 1983.<sup>2</sup> The executive search industry has, for the most part, not built its process around it.

We have. This brief explains how.

One consequence is worth stating on page one: because the process is built to produce proof, the commercial model can afford to charge for it only after you have seen it. No upfront retainer. The interview fee is invoiced only after you validate the shortlist, and is absorbed into the placement fee on hire.

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<sup>1</sup> Leadership IQ, *Why New Hires Fail*, longitudinal study of 20,000+ hires and 5,247 hiring managers.

<sup>2</sup> McCall & Lombardo, *Off the Track: Why and How Successful Executives Get Derailed*, Center for Creative Leadership, 1983, and the derailment literature since.

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, as the term is used throughout this brief and in the firm's research, means character. It does not mean demographics. 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.<sup>3</sup> The longitudinal stability literature establishes rank-order consistency of 0.74 between ages 50 and 70.<sup>4</sup> Traits change, but slowly, in small magnitudes, with limits.

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

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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.*

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<sup>3</sup> Bouchard & Loehlin, *Genes, Evolution, and Personality*, Behavior Genetics, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Roberts & DelVecchio, *The Rank-Order Consistency of Personality Traits from Childhood to Old Age*, Psychological Bulletin, 2000.

	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. This is not speculation: in the study cited on page three, 82 per cent of hiring managers reported that warning signs had been visible during the interview process. Visible, and not surfaced.

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. AN ADVISORY NOTE FROM THE FOUNDER.

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Thirteen years in executive search, ten of them building this firm, 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 argument in this brief is developed at academic length across the firm's published research, listed near the end of this document and available in full at [kitalent.com/research](http://kitalent.com/research). Those books and position papers 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.

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**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.

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## CAPABILITY EVIDENCE

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Domain expertise relevant to the role

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Documented decisions in scope

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Observable results

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Specific scenarios under the role's conditions

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## IDENTITY EVIDENCE

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Decisional patterns across diverse past situations

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What the candidate consistently protects

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What the candidate consistently sacrifices

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Genuine drivers of interest in this role at this time

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

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

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- 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.
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- 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.
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- 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.
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- 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. No upfront retainer. The interview fee is invoiced only after you validate the shortlist, and is absorbed into the placement fee on hire.*
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- 05 Ongoing · Progress Management**  
Weekly written reports on pipeline development, new candidates surfaced, and market feedback. Search direction adjusts as information accumulates.
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- 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.

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**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. Then the fee.*

Mandate calibrated and market mapped before outreach. Two-register screening, two-layer shortlist. Sector-native consultants, weekly pipeline visibility. No upfront retainer. The interview fee is invoiced only after you validate the shortlist, and is absorbed into the placement fee on hire.

*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.*

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. Validated shortlist in seven to ten working days. No upfront retainer. The interview fee is invoiced only after you validate the shortlist, and is absorbed into the placement fee on hire.

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#### **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.

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#### **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.

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*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.

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*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.

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*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.

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. Relocation appetite is identity evidence, not capability evidence: it was the layer the stalled process had never assessed.

*Ten hires. 100 per cent completion. Cross-border relocation.*

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CASE N° 02

## Recovery from a failed prior process

Two Financial Controllers placed in six weeks in a major European capital, 15 per cent under budget, after two prior agencies had been unable to close. Brief recalibration plus sector-native direct search.

*Two hires. Six weeks. 15 per cent under budget.*

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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. A profitable division.*

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Placements from these and other engagements feed the same retention measure reported on the following pages: 96 per cent of placed candidates still in role at the twelve-month mark.

*Full case studies, with method, metrics, and what we got wrong on the first pass, available at [kitalent.com/case-studies](http://kitalent.com/case-studies).*

*Saying so within the first call saves everyone time.*

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

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Technical or specialist mandates.

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Culture-critical leadership hires.

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Cross-border and multilingual roles.

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Searches stalled through standard channels.

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Confidential or off-limits assignments.

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**Pass on us when a different route will solve it.**

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Volume or junior hiring.

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Administrative roles.

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Briefs well-served by in-house TA.

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Job-board friendly searches.

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TWELVE. EVERY CLAIM LINKS TO HOW IT IS MEASURED.

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**7–10 days**

To a validated shortlist on mapped senior-management mandates. Measured in working days from brief alignment to shortlist delivery, twelve-month rolling window.

**96%**

One-year retention: placed candidates still in role twelve months after start date. Measured across placements on a trailing twelve-month basis.

**NPS 72**

Client satisfaction. Twelve-month rolling survey across active client relationships.

**8+ years**

Average length of an active client relationship, measured across the current client base.

*All figures verified on a twelve-month rolling basis. The full measurement method, including what each figure does and does not include, is published at [kitalent.com/methodology](https://kitalent.com/methodology).*

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*“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

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*“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)

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*“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

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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.

For a buyer, each title below answers one practical question.

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**Reading Between the Times.** Independent monograph, sixteen chapters. The philosophical foundation of the project.

*In practice: why fluent machine output is not understanding, and what that means for delegating judgement.*

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**The Vectorized Afterlife of the They.** Book, Volume 1, KiTalent Annuals in Research on Executive Search.

*In practice: why AI systems reproduce the average of what has already been said, and why senior assessment cannot be delegated to them.*

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**Executive Search as Erfahrung.** Book, Volume I bis, KiTalent Annuals in Research on Executive Search.

*In practice: why the best briefs change during the search, and why a process that cannot revise its own brief is a weaker process.*

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**Artificial Intelligence Doesn't Exist.** Book.

*In practice: the case for "artificial fluency" as the accurate operating term for what we call AI, and where the boundary of algorithmic assessment sits.*

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**The Capability–Identity Distinction in Executive Hiring.** Position Paper No. 01.

*In practice: the evidence base, from I-O psychology, behavioural genetics, and adult development, for assessing the two constructs separately.*

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**The Ontological Boundary of Algorithmic Assessment.** Position Paper No. 02.

*In practice: which parts of a senior search can be systematised, and which parts must remain consultant-led, and why.*

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**The Candidate Is Not the Profile.** Position Paper No. 03.

*In practice: why no document, database entry, or profile can substitute for reading the person, and what that implies for shortlist quality.*

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*All titles available at [kitalent.com/research](http://kitalent.com/research). Each is final, peer-citable, and authored by Alessio Montaruli.*

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.

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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.

SPEAK WITH US

Schedule a conversation  
[tidycal.com/team/meeting-with-kitalent](https://tidycal.com/team/meeting-with-kitalent)  
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