

What Makes a High Potential Employee?



Most companies are concerned with identifying and developing high potential employees. These employees may represent an organization's future leadership and competitive advantage. High potential employees may be the most difficult to retain, however, because they may be the most marketable employees due to the demand for their skills and talents. It is critical for employers to take appropriate steps to ensure that their high potential employees are properly attended to and engaged.

Identifying high potential employees

Typically, high potential employees are identified on the basis of their work performance, competencies they demonstrate in their day-to-day performance, and career aspirations. Job performance alone is not enough. An employee can be an excellent performer but may not be promotable to a higher-level position.

Alternatively, an employee may demonstrate excellent performance as well as outstanding competencies, but may have no interest in moving, for example, out of an individual contributor's role to that of a department/division manager. The organization must be sensitive to all three factors.

The following competencies are typically used to identify high potential employees:

- Is a quick study/motivated to learn
- Is assertive
- Manages change effectively
- Is capable of dealing with uncertainty
- Exhibits excellent decision-making skills
- Is innovative
- Possesses leadership presence
Demonstrates flexibility
- Knows the organization
Demonstrates persistence
- Demonstrates personal responsibility
- Is results-oriented
- Takes calculated risks
Develops self
- Demonstrates self-knowledge
Thinks strategically
- Establishes a vision



Defining "high potential"

"High potential" can be defined in many ways. Some organizations define high potential in terms of the additional responsibilities an individual is able to assume. In large, multi-level organizations, high potential may be defined by the number of salary grades or organizational levels an individual might move within a given time period. In smaller, less hierarchical organizations, the term may be used to describe people who could move into jobs at the vice president level or above. To a certain extent, each organization must adopt a definition that its managers can agree on and that makes internal sense.

Consider these vital factors:

- **High potentials are agile learners.** They have the ability and the willingness to experiment, learn from experience, and apply that learning to perform successfully in new situations. They are comfortable with change in a real and meaningful way—words and actions match. They are linked into proving that they can grow or change with the organization. They are eager to step forward and take responsibility, and most importantly, they are ready and willing to act.
- **High potentials are quietly confident.** They are not boastful, and the energy they convey is often very calming. They are flexible, go with the flow, yet are not afraid to make a decision and take a risk to better themselves, their team, and their company.
- **High potentials have a clear leadership style that promotes collaboration and stewardship.** They have a genuine desire to bring out the best in others by focusing on strengths. In other words, how can we best complement one another? They focus on working in partnership with others and in providing them with opportunities to grow, advance, and do the best they can with their strengths.
- **High potentials have a broad knowledge base.** They are comfortable with complexity and intellectually challenged by new experiences that require them to apply knowledge and experience gained.
- **High potentials are people-focused.** They are skilled communicators in a variety of communication methods and situations. They can work with a diversity of people and can adjust their style and learn from others to enrich the focus on connecting people. They are globally savvy. Acceptance, not just tolerance of others, is an important quality in their interactions.
- **High potentials are results-driven and they are equipped to deliver results even in first-time situations.** They are comfortable extending participation to others, giving credit where credit is due, and instilling and engendering the cooperation and teamwork of others.
- **High potentials are self-aware.** They know themselves, their values, beliefs, and expectations. Not only can they articulate these, but they can also take action that is a reflection of exactly what they value, believe, and expect. High potentials recognize skills, weaknesses, blind spots, and hidden or inexperienced strengths.


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Developing high potential employees

The key to retaining high potential employees lies in actively working with them to develop the knowledge and skill they will need for career advancement. If you do not take an interest in their development, they will seek an employer who will. While you may invest in their development only to have them leave anyway, it is a business risk that must be taken.

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