

RACHEL KAY

Attracting Top Talent

*How Jewish organizations can compete
with America's leading employers*



VER the course of my long career in human resources, I have seen organizations amplify their impact by nurturing and investing in top-tier talent. Jewish communal organizations are already fueled by mission-driven professionals whose commitment strengthens our communities every day. The current environment—with rising unemployment among college graduates, extensive reductions in the public-sector workforce, and a growing interest in supporting Jewish institutions—offers a rare recruiting opportunity to expand that talent pool further.

What does the untapped reservoir of talent want? While the picture has been evolving in recent years, the factors are remarkably consistent throughout the labor force. It is perhaps a given that employ-

ees (and, in particular, early-career employees) value competitive base salary and benefits. This factor has been increasing in importance in the past five years as greater economic uncertainty in the United States and highly visible layoffs have underlined the need for a personal safety net. The desire for flexible work and autonomy in working conditions has also been rising, as the pandemic reset expectations on what work looks like and technology shifts made distributed working models more feasible. Meaning and purpose continue to be an important driver for many employees.



But what truly exceptional early-career talent wants most of all is *option value*. What I mean is the sense that an individual, in choosing a role or organization, is *opening* doors rather than closing them. An organization can create option value in a number of ways, and the most attractive organizations do all of these things.

Every year, the employer branding firm Universum conducts a comprehensive study of college and graduate students to identify the top employers for current students. Most of the organizations that top Universum's list pay competitively. But pay is not how they differentiate themselves, and some of the most prestigious organizations and firms pride themselves on paying less than competitors while offering a stronger total value proposition. JPMorgan Chase's employer brand tagline focuses on career growth. Consulting firm McKinsey promises: "Whether you're with us for two years or 20, the skills you build will make you a leader ahead of your peers and change the trajectory of your career." These companies are banking on what Gallup has found resonates with Gen Z: "Gen Z employees, who are launching their careers, rate 'accelerates my professional development or career development' as particularly important."

In addition to a focus on building skills, companies create option value for employees by allowing opportunities for internal mobility and role change. “Career fluidity is a defining feature of the modern workforce,” according to the Deloitte Global Gen Z and Millennial Survey. “Their job hopping isn’t driven by a lack of loyalty. Many Gen Zs and millennials see it as a strategy to...learn and acquire new skills.” By providing opportunities for internal mobility—and providing more of a career lattice than a career ladder—companies can more easily attract and retain high-performing talent.

Finally, and perhaps counterintuitively, some of the most prestigious organizations attract talent by talking about what happens after people *leave* their organization. More and more organizations are starting alumni networks and prominently featuring them in their employment communications. When I led undergraduate recruiting for an international consulting firm, one of the marketing investments I made was to film a video of alumni speaking about their time at the firm and how that experience positioned them for further success. The message that this was a place to *start* a career landed well with the campus audience. Speaking about alumni opportunities has two unexpected effects: It raises the caliber of the incoming team by widening the aperture of who might be interested, and many people who expect to leave after a couple of years find themselves drawn to the work and end up staying far longer than intended.



Some of our Jewish communal organizations may be well suited to serve as launchpads in the way that consulting, financial, or law firms are—identifying, recruiting, and developing early-career colleagues with the explicit understanding, or even aspiration, that many will depart and build careers at other organizations. So the question

becomes: How can small Jewish nonprofits make option value a substantial part of their recruitment strategy to the point that they can compete with major corporate employers?

I believe that this is possible if Jewish communal organizations adopt an approach of radical collaboration. Rather than jockeying for talent and resources, purposefully aligning in regional or national talent consortia will enable our communities to act like larger, better-funded organizations.

How? A group of organizations with overlapping talent needs would align on a set of guiding principles, practices, and investments. They would begin to act as a single large organization in terms of talent recruitment, talent planning, and career mobility (meaning the formal ability to move between organizations after an agreed-upon period of time in a given role). For entry-level roles, this could even be formalized as a rotational structure, perhaps with employees devoting one day per week to work for a different member organization of the consortium, allowing them to broaden their network, develop their skills, and pursue their additional passions. Naturally, a sense of competition would exist among the organizations regarding where a given employee ultimately chooses to pursue a career. But if executed thoughtfully, what would emerge from this competition would be an effective ecosystem where the talented individual and the organizations could find the most appropriate fit. The overall philosophy would have to view a top-talent win for one organization as a win for the consortium, with organizations subordinating their specific interest in favor of the communal one.

In recruitment, there is much to be gained by sharing time and resources. Recruitment processes follow a typical marketing funnel. Organizations have to build candidate awareness, consideration, application, and offer acceptance. Going to “market” as a consortium—representing a broad array of organizations and opportunities—would allow split responsibility for career fairs, campus

Hillel visits, and outreach; with organizations agreeing to represent the entire consortium rather than just their niche. This may be most effective along functional lines (e.g., marketing, programming, finance). Bringing a list of open roles from across the consortium and talking about a wide set of opportunities increase the chance that a prospective candidate would find something attractive. Once applicants are being considered by organizations, runners-up for roles who are well qualified but perhaps not the perfect fit could be shared among the partner organizations, even for roles that the applicant had been unaware of.

The higher education community has already been harnessing the power of collective recruitment for some time. The Higher Education Recruitment Consortium (HERC), founded in 2000 to improve recruitment practices and workplace culture, has expanded from a regional consortium in the Bay Area to having multiple consortia across the country. HERC facilitates a recruitment marketplace and talent platform for a wide range of independent colleges and universities, offering a shared job board, webinars for job seekers, virtual career fairs, and research reports. Regional HERC directors help job seekers and member institutions maximize the association by fostering collaboration in accordance with its collective mission.

Applying this to the Jewish communal marketplace, a Jewish talent consortium could hold joint talent reviews where they discuss their high-potential talent and the types of challenges those individuals seek. Leaders from each organization could contribute ideas for the next roles for those individuals, side projects that could be interesting (a version of Google's "20% time" approach, by which Larry Page and Sergey Brin encouraged employees to spend a fifth of their time on creative but risky projects), or development programs that could build their skills. By treating high-potential talent as a shared resource rather than a proprietary one, the consor-

tium would increase the chance that the talent would stay within the community.

The next question for a Jewish talent consortium would be this: After attracting the right talent to Jewish communal work and mapping out enticing career paths, what additional benefits could we deploy to encourage them to stay?

There are various retention tools in the HR toolbox. Like other tools, they often work better when they are used collectively. If an employee at a member organization is looking to make a career move, bonuses and guaranteed pay raises could be standardized for those who stay within the consortium. Such benefits could encourage top talent to stay within the Jewish communal workforce rather than leave for the corporate or public sector.

In order to be even more attractive, a consortium could consider adding some of the tangible benefits of tenure in corporate and government work. For instance, with tenure comes increased retirement-fund contributions or no-interest home loans, among other features. Consortium organizations could also allow paid-time-off balances to transfer, align benefits packages, and add retention bonuses for years of service to the consortium. A very aggressive consortium could consider offering support for student-loan repayment or introducing pension plans where they do not already exist — something that has fallen out of favor in corporate America but still draws workers from Jewish nonprofits to the public sector every year.



Over the past decade, the Jewish community has seen notable innovations in collaboration and career development. The creation of Leading Edge in 2016, along with its recent merger with JPro, catalyzed a field-wide investment in leadership development and pro-

fessional excellence. In the 2010s, Hillel, BBYO, and Moishe House formed the Talent Alliance to promote internal mobility across organizations. While the initiative ultimately disbanded because of execution challenges, its successes demonstrated meaningful potential and helped establish foundational models for deeper collaboration.

At the same time, organizations have strengthened early-career talent pipelines, including through Hillel's Springboard Fellowship, which—with support from leading foundations—places recent college graduates into first professional roles across the Hillel network, and the Orthodox Union's Emerging Leaders Fellowship, which supports high-potential college-age volunteers through internships and leadership development. More recently, the launch of a Jewish Talent Platform initiative involving major foundations and national organizations such as BBYO, Hillel, the Foundation for Jewish Camp, JFNA, and Leading Edge signals a next phase of cooperation, as these partners plan to share insights and data to map pipelines of high-potential early-career leaders and recruit them into compelling entry-level roles. Efforts to improve retention have also emerged, including the Jewish Community Professional Tuition Grant program supported by the Atlanta Federation and the Zalik Foundation, which provides substantial tuition reimbursements to Jewish professionals seeking to send their children to Jewish day schools.

These initiatives are important and inspiring. Yet we can be even more ambitious in our collaboration in order to compete with the most attractive employers. Employees who are passionate about the Jewish communal mission are already drawn to Jewish organizations. But if the Jewish community wants to attract the best of the talent still out there, it needs to start thinking like America's top employers do and offer the same kind of value. In the Jewish community, one way to do that is to deliver together the option value and opportunity that Jewish organizations struggle to deliver individually.

This work is not easy even in the private sector, as I know all too well. The best talent is eager, anxious, and driven, requiring constant challenge and growth. But I've seen that the results are worth the investment; the power of a strong team cannot be underestimated. If the Jewish community cooperates to mirror the advantages offered by the most prestigious employers in the world, then we will create not just workplaces but launching pads for the next generation of leaders devoted to strengthening Jewish life. *

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