

— WHITEPAPER · TALENT ADVISORY

The fractional talent acquisition model.

How growing companies buy senior hiring leadership without buying a senior headcount — and how to tell a genuine fractional partner from a consultant with spare time.

For founders, CPOs & HR directors

EU & UAE

14 min read

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1–3

days per week — the typical engagement shape

1–2

weeks to start, against 4–6 months to hire

~30%

of a full-time TA leader's loaded cost

3–12

months, then handover — by design

01 • THE PROBLEM

The gap between a recruiter and a Head of Talent.

Somewhere between twenty and five hundred people, almost every company hits the same wall. Hiring stops being a series of vacancies and becomes a function — one that needs a strategy, a process, a data model and someone accountable for all three. The company is not yet large enough to justify a full-time Head of Talent Acquisition, and it is already too large to keep running hiring off the side of a founder's desk.

The usual responses to that gap are all imperfect. Hiring more recruiters adds capacity without adding direction. Hiring an agency adds candidates without building capability. Hiring a full-time TA leader adds a four-to-six month search and a six-figure commitment to solve a problem that may not need a full-time owner for another two years.

Hiring problems rarely announce themselves as hiring problems, either. They arrive disguised as something else — a delayed product launch, a founder with no calendar left, an offer declined for reasons nobody recorded. By the time the pattern is visible, the function has usually been broken for two or three quarters. These are the symptoms we see most often:

Nobody owns the outcome

Recruiters own requisitions. Hiring managers own decisions. HR owns the process document. Nobody owns whether the company hits its headcount plan.

Activity is high, results are not

Interview volume looks healthy. Roles still sit open for ninety days, and nobody can say which stage is leaking.

Agency spend has compounded

What began as cover for one hard role has become a structural cost line — and no internal capability was built along the way.

Every manager interviews differently

No shared scorecard, no calibration. Hiring quality becomes a function of which manager happened to run the loop.

The data does not exist

The board asks for time-to-fill and pipeline conversion. It takes a week to assemble, and the numbers are not trusted when they arrive.

The senior hire is stuck in a loop

You need a Head of Talent to fix hiring. Hiring one takes four to six months of the hiring capability you do not yet have.

None of these are recruiting problems. They are all the same problem: the hiring function has no owner.

Fractional talent acquisition exists to put an owner in place at a fraction of the cost and a fraction of the delay — and to make the arrangement temporary by design.

● 02 • DEFINITION

What fractional talent acquisition actually is.

A fractional talent acquisition leader is a senior TA operator who owns all or part of a company's hiring function on a recurring, part-time basis — and who is accountable for the function's outcomes, not for the delivery of a named vacancy.

Four characteristics distinguish it from everything adjacent to it.

It is recurring, not project-shaped

A fractional engagement is a standing commitment — the same days each week, the same meetings in the calendar, the same person in the leadership conversations. That rhythm is what allows a function to be built rather than merely diagnosed. A consultant visits; a fractional leader turns up on Tuesdays.

It carries accountability, not just advice

The engagement is defined by the outcomes it owns — time-to-fill, offer-accept rate, agency dependency, hiring manager satisfaction — agreed before the work starts. If those numbers do not move, the engagement has failed, regardless of how much activity took place.

It is senior by definition

Fractional works because seniority is the scarce input, not hours. A company hiring thirty people a year does not need forty hours a week of leadership judgement; it needs eight to sixteen hours a week of the *right* judgement. Fractional is the mechanism that makes buying only the scarce part possible.

It is designed to end

The measure of a successful fractional engagement is that the client needs less of it over time. Playbooks are documented, recruiters are coached, systems are instrumented, and the function keeps working when the fractional leader steps back. An engagement that creates permanent dependency has been run badly.

A consultant tells you what to fix. An agency sends you candidates. A fractional TA leader owns the function, fixes it while it is running, and leaves behind a hiring machine that works without them.

● 03 • COMPARISON

How it differs from the alternatives.

Buyers routinely mis-classify fractional TA — usually as an expensive consultant or a cheap recruiter. It is neither. The distinction that matters is what is actually being purchased.

Model	What you are buying	Horizon	Accountable for
Recruitment agency	Candidates for one named role	Per hire	That vacancy
RPO	Outsourced delivery capacity	12–36 months	Volume against an SLA
Embedded recruiter	An extra pair of hands under your brand	3–9 months	Requisition throughput
Interim TA leader	Full-time gap cover	3–9 months, full-time	Continuity
TA consultant	A recommendation	Fixed project	The report
Fractional TA leader	Leadership, system and accountability — part-time, ongoing	3–12+ months, 1–3 days/week	The function's outcomes

The practical test is simple. Ask what happens to your company after the engagement ends. With an agency, you have the hire and nothing else. With a consultant, you have a document. With a fractional leader, you should have a working function, a trained team, and instrumentation you can read yourself.

04 · FIT

When it works — and when it doesn't.

Fractional is not universally the right answer, and any partner who tells you otherwise is selling rather than advising. The model has a clear operating range.

Strong fit

- 20–500 employees, or 15+ hires a year
- No TA leader, or a team with no leadership
- Post-funding growth with a headcount plan attached
- Agency dependency you want to reduce structurally
- New market entry, nearshore or shared-service build-out
- A TA leader has left and a permanent search is running
- Hiring quality is inconsistent and nobody can say why

Weak fit

- Fewer than about ten hires a year — you need a recruiter, not a leader
- One hard-to-fill role and nothing structural behind it — that is a search assignment
- An organisation that will not give a part-time leader real decision rights
- Hiring that is genuinely paused, where the honest advice is to wait
- A mature TA function with a capable leader already in post

There is one further condition that matters more than company size: **authority**. A fractional leader who cannot change a process, challenge a hiring manager, or decline a badly-scoped role is being paid for advice that will not be taken. The engagement should be scoped with explicit decision rights, or not scoped at all.

05 • ECONOMICS

What it costs, and what it replaces.

The right comparison is not a day rate against a salary. It is the total cost of the alternatives — including the cost of the delay.

	Agency	Full-time TA leader	Fractional
Time to start	2–4 weeks	4–6 months	1–2 weeks
Cost shape	15–25% of salary, per hire	Salary + employer costs + equity	Fixed monthly retainer
Builds internal capability	No	Yes	Yes
Owens the whole function	No	Yes	Yes
Scales down when hiring slows	Partially	No	Yes
Exposure if it is wrong	Per hire	High — a leadership mis-hire	30 days' notice

The arithmetic most buyers run

A senior hire at a €80,000 salary placed through an agency at a 20% fee costs roughly €16,000 in fees alone. Two such hires made in-house instead will typically cover several months of a fractional retainer — before counting the compounding value of the process, data and team capability that remain afterwards.

This is why agency spend is usually the most productive place to start the business case. It is already in the budget, already visible to finance, and it is the one line that a functioning in-house capability reliably reduces.

A note on how fractional should be priced

Fractional retainers are priced on scope and seniority, not on hours logged. A retainer buys availability, ownership and judgement across an agreed remit — which is why credible partners quote a monthly figure and a day commitment rather than an hourly rate. Be cautious of any fractional proposal priced as a percentage of hired salaries: that is an agency contract wearing a different name, and its incentives point away from building your capability.

06 • EVALUATION

Capacity and capability are two different questions.

This is where most fractional buying decisions go wrong. Buyers evaluate capability carefully and capacity barely at all — then discover six weeks in that the person they hired is spread across nine clients and answers email on Fridays.

Capability — "can they do this?"

Proven by **evidence**: artefacts they have built, functions they have owned, numbers that moved, and depth in the specific hiring problem you have. Not by a list of skills — every CV has those.

Capacity — "will they be there?"

Proven by **specificity**: days per week, response times, meeting cadence, how many roles they will carry, and how many other clients they run at once. Vague answers here are the strongest single predictor of a disappointing engagement.

How to test capability

Ask for artefacts, not references. A scorecard they designed. A hiring dashboard they built. A market map they produced. A ninety-day plan from a previous engagement. Anonymised is fine — the point is that someone who has genuinely run a function has a drawer full of these, and someone who has not, does not.

Then ask them to describe a function they inherited in poor condition, what they changed first, and what the numbers looked like before and after. Vagueness at that question is disqualifying.

How to test capacity

Ask for it in writing, in numbers, before contracting:

- How many days per week, and which days?
- What is your response time during business hours?
- How many live roles will you carry for us?
- What is the standing meeting cadence?
- **How many other clients do you have right now, and what is your maximum?**
- What is the notice period, in both directions?

The fifth question matters most and gets asked least. A fractional partner with an honest, published limit on concurrent engagements is telling you that their availability is a real commitment rather than an aspiration. One with no limit is telling you something too.

Capability is what a partner can do. Capacity is how much of it you actually get.

Insist on both in writing. A partner who will not put capacity in numbers is not offering you leadership — they are offering you their spare time.

How an engagement is structured.

A well-built fractional engagement escalates commitment in steps, so that neither side is asked to make a large decision on small information.

Stage	Shape	What it produces
Hiring teardown	Free, 45 minutes	An outside read on where the function is losing time and money. Useful whether or not anything follows.
TA diagnostic	Fixed fee, 2–4 weeks	A full review of process, data, tooling, team, pipeline and market position — with a prioritised roadmap and a 90-day plan.
Fractional lead	Retainer, 1–2 days/week, 3-month minimum	Ownership of the function: strategy, process, systems, reporting, hiring manager enablement, recruiter coaching.
Embedded delivery	Retainer, 2–3 days/week	All of the above, plus hands-on sourcing, screening and closing — for periods of genuine hiring intensity.
Fixed-scope project	Defined deliverable	ATS implementation, interview architecture, market entry, executive search, AI workflow build.

Two structural details are worth insisting on regardless of who you work with. First, **the diagnostic fee should be credited against the first month of any retainer that follows** — it removes the incentive to sell you a diagnosis you do not need. Second, **the KPIs the engagement is accountable for should be agreed before it starts**, not reported at the end. Both are simple tests of whether a partner is confident in the work.

08 • EXECUTION

What good looks like: the first 90 days.

A fractional engagement should produce visible change inside a quarter. If it has not by day ninety, something is wrong with the scope, the access, or the partner.

DAYS 1–30

Diagnose and stabilise

Audit the pipeline, process, ATS data and team. Sit in on live interviews. Meet every hiring manager. Identify the two or three roles that are genuinely stuck and unstick them personally — credibility is earned by fixing something visible early. Establish baseline metrics; you cannot claim improvement you did not measure.

DAYS 31–60

Install the system

Rebuild the hiring process end to end and document it. Introduce structured interviews and scorecards, and train the managers who will run them. Clean and instrument the ATS so reporting is a query rather than a project. Bring sourcing in-house where it is viable. Set the weekly hiring review that will outlive the engagement.

DAYS 61–90

Transfer and prove

Coach the recruiters against the new process rather than doing the work for them. Hand the weekly review to an internal owner. Publish the first full month of clean metrics against the baseline. Agree what the next quarter needs — which is often *less* of the fractional leader, not more.

Notice the direction of travel. By day ninety, a good engagement is already reducing its own necessity. That is not a commercial weakness; it is the product.

09 • MEASUREMENT

The numbers that should be on the table.

Agree these before the engagement begins, review them monthly, and hold the partner to them. A fractional leader uncomfortable being measured on this set is the wrong fractional leader.

Metric	What it tells you
Time-to-fill	Whether the process works. Segment by role family — a blended average hides everything that matters.
Offer-accept rate	Whether your proposition, process and closing are competitive. Below 80% is a signal, not a statistic.
Agency share of hires	Whether internal capability is genuinely being built, or merely described.
Sourced vs. inbound	Whether you can reach passive talent, or depend on who happens to apply.
Stage conversion	Where the pipeline leaks. The single most actionable number in recruiting.
Hiring manager satisfaction	Whether the function is trusted internally. Quarterly, five questions, no more.
Quality of hire at 6 months	The metric that matters most and is measured least. Manager rating plus retention is enough to start.
Cost per hire, loaded	The number finance will ask for. Include agency fees, tooling, advertising and internal time.

A practical note: measure fewer things properly rather than many things approximately. Four metrics with trustworthy data will change more decisions than twelve with caveats attached.

AI, compliance and human judgement.

Modern talent acquisition is being reshaped by automation faster than most in-house functions can absorb it. A fractional leader is well placed to bring that capability in, because they see across many hiring environments rather than one. But the line between useful and reckless matters, particularly in Europe.

Where automation genuinely pays

- **Sourcing at scale** — persistent, criteria-based searches that surface new matches continuously instead of in bursts
- **Market intelligence** — competitor org mapping, talent availability and compensation benchmarking assembled from public data in hours rather than weeks
- **Administrative load** — interview notes structured into scorecards, scheduling, candidate status updates, pipeline hygiene
- **Reporting** — dashboards that assemble themselves, so the monthly hiring review is a discussion rather than a data-gathering exercise
- **Institutional memory** — a searchable base of playbooks, personas, benchmarks and hiring manager preferences that survives any individual's departure

Where it does not belong

Automated rejection, opaque ranking and inferred candidate attributes carry legal exposure and reputational risk in roughly equal measure. Under the EU AI Act, systems used to filter applications or evaluate candidates fall into the high-risk category, with obligations around human oversight, transparency and record-keeping; GDPR obligations on automated decision-making apply independently of it.

Automation removes administration. It does not make hiring decisions. Every screening outcome that affects a candidate should be reviewable by a named human, every tool in the stack should be documented, and no candidate should ever be rejected by a system nobody can explain.

Any partner proposing AI in your hiring process should be able to describe, without hesitation, exactly which decisions remain human and how that is enforced. Vagueness here is a compliance risk you will inherit, not one they will carry.

Ten questions to ask any fractional TA partner.

Use these in a first conversation. The answers separate operators from consultants quickly.

01

How many concurrent clients do you have, and what is your maximum?

The capacity question. An honest published cap is the strongest available signal.

02

Which days will you be with us, and what is your response time?

If this cannot be answered in numbers, it is not a commitment.

03

Show me an artefact you built — a scorecard, a dashboard, a market map.

Operators have a drawer full. Advisors have slides.

04

Describe a function you inherited broken. What did you change first, and why?

Sequencing reveals judgement more reliably than any credential.

05

What KPIs will you accept accountability for, and from what baseline?

Willingness to be measured is the cheapest competence test there is.

06

What does handover look like, and what do we own at the end?

If the answer is not documented and contractual, dependency is the business model.

07

Will you recruit yourself, or only advise?

Both are legitimate. Discovering the answer after signing is not.

08

How do you charge, and does any part depend on hired salaries?

Percentage-based pricing reintroduces agency incentives regardless of the job title.

09

Where exactly does AI sit, and which decisions stay human?

You will inherit the compliance exposure of whatever they deploy.

10

Under what circumstances would you tell us not to hire you?

A partner who cannot describe their own poor-fit case has not thought about fit at all.

12 · HOW WE WORK

Fractional talent acquisition at Dreamwork.

Dreamwork is a founder-led executive search and talent acquisition practice across the EU and UAE. Our fractional practice exists for one reason: a meaningful share of the companies who approach us for hiring support do not primarily need candidates. They need someone to own the function that produces them.

The background behind the engagement is operational rather than agency-only — talent acquisition led for a 10,000-employee multinational, a €30M staffing P&L, a 1,400-person build completed inside twelve months,

and a sustained 38-day time-to-hire at multi-country scale. That is the difference between advising on a hiring function and having run one.

We hold ourselves to the standard set out in this paper, which means our capacity is published rather than implied.

	Advisory	Fractional lead	Embedded
Days per week	0.5	1–2	2–3
Live roles supported	up to 5	up to 15	up to 25
Response time	24 hours	8 business hours	4 business hours
Contact cadence	Weekly, 60 min	2× weekly + async	Daily stand-up + async
Hands-on delivery	—	Optional	Included
Recruiters managed	—	up to 4	up to 8
Reporting	Monthly	Bi-weekly dashboard	Weekly dashboard
Minimum term	3 months	3 months	3 months

We run a maximum of four concurrent fractional retainers. When those are full, we say so and give you a date. You will never be someone's twelfth client — which is the only thing that makes the response times above mean anything.

Our diagnostic fee is credited in full against the first month of any retainer that follows. Our KPIs are agreed before the engagement starts. Our handover — playbooks, process documentation, dashboards, trained people — is a contractual deliverable, not a courtesy. And if fractional is the wrong answer for you, we will say so on the first call; the section on poor fit in this paper is not decoration.

● BEGIN THE ASCENT

Find out where your hiring function actually stands.

Forty-five confidential minutes on your open roles, your bottlenecks and the two or three things worth fixing first. You leave with a plan whether or not you engage us.

✓Confidential by default

✓No obligation

✓Response within one business day

✓Maximum four concurrent retainers

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General guidance on talent acquisition operating models — not legal advice.