

The one big thing: Rethinking the CEO search

By Martha Josephson



Digital content enterprises are all about giving the market what it wants before the market knows it wants it. Quite simply, it's a hits-driven business. Running such an enterprise demands a certain type of CEO—more an impresario than a traditional corporate executive. My colleagues and I have led several of these searches, and the strategy for finding such a leader sheds some useful light on how the CEO search and succession processes are likely to evolve—not just in this particular digital segment but across other industries as well.

As organizations across sectors continue to evolve in these customer-centric, disruptive times, the omnipotent CEO becomes less and less of a desirable—or even viable—template.

Traditionally, making a CEO selection involves choosing among candidates who are likely to be fairly comparable in terms of track record and competencies. Their professional development would have exposed them to most of the major aspects of the business. The final choice often comes down to two things: cultural fit and a comparison of the differences between the candidates—which candidate's marginal strengths and weaknesses make him or her most compelling for the role when compared with the other choices.

When searching for a digital content CEO, however, such a strategy is unlikely to work. For that leader, it isn't about checking all the boxes—it's about having one critical thing in great abundance: the ability to drive innovation. And as Harvard Business School professor Linda A. Hill has shown, driving innovation means shaping an environment in which ideas are combined, tested and refined in an iterative loop of creative abrasion, agility and collaboration. It is an inherently messy, unpredictable process, requiring a leader who can unleash the energy of his or her organization while harnessing that power to meet concrete milestones and deliverable deadlines. Candidates who can achieve results amid those paradoxes are rare, and when you find one, it doesn't really matter if he or she lacks experience in dealing with investors or in crafting far-reaching strategic partnerships. Those shortcomings can be countered by a top-flight CFO or executive vice president for business development. But there's nothing that can make up for a creative enterprise whose innovation isn't led from the top.

Instead, particular leadership traits rooted in adaptability and curiosity take on an outsized importance. It might be the ability to spur innovation, lead transformation or create a culture of community and purpose. A CEO search—or formulating a professional development plan for internal candidates—begins with identifying those critical spikes that the organization demands now and going forward. Those become the non-negotiables that drive the process; other factors become secondary.

the leadership blog | ceo insights

We shouldn't be surprised that today's business models call for a different way of defining what is needed from a chief executive. It's no longer enough to examine traditional factors like company strategy. Instead, looking for a CEO requires boards to really understand the DNA of the organization and then find a leader who can leverage that essence like no one else can.

For more information contact:

Martha Josephson

martha.josephson@egonzehnder.com

+1 650 847 3055