

Role Profiles and Strategy

Aligning Employees to Dramatic Changes in the Business and Their Professions

by John Hendrickson

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New Business Strategies Prompt Need for Redefined Roles

Leaders may develop and evangelize a new company strategy, but success depends largely on employees *whose roles have transformed* as a result of the change in direction.

A shift in strategy requires significant investment of both time and money. Unfortunately, the effort to develop strategy often trumps the time spent determining how to carry it out. Employees are challenged with execution, but success is left largely to chance if their roles are outdated, unclear, or ridden with business clichés (e.g., trusted advisor).

Organizations fail to provide the necessary guidance on roles critical to the execution of strategy for three reasons.

- The people skilled at inventing strategy tend to be big picture thinkers with little patience for the specifics of a role.
- Updating job descriptions is an exhaustive process often delegated and rarely done with a strategic lens.
- Companies lack a widely accepted format or vehicle for role redefinition.

Role Profiles Address the Challenge of Strategy Execution

Role profiles provide a solution to the execution challenge. Company leaders and business planners may discuss the implications of strategy for key roles, but they need a practical methodology to articulate the changes in role and then convey that information to the people whose jobs are critical to its success. Role profiles answers this need.

Role profiles are *concise, powerful, one-page documents* that contain:

- **Responsibilities and tasks** that are most important to company strategy
- **Performance outcomes** that provide a blueprint for success given the strategy shift
- **Technical competencies** that are emerging in importance given changes in customer, market, or technology requirements
- **Behavioral competencies** that are not just “soft skills” but definitional of high performers in the new or redefined role

In “Moneyball,” (2003) Michael Lewis tells the story of how Billy Beane and the Oakland Athletics used new talent strategies to remain competitive despite being a small market team with a limited payroll. Building on the insight of Bill James and other “sabermetric” disciples, Beane adjusted the scouting profile to reflect the type of players that best fit their resources and strategy. The new approach focused on how these athletes played, what they were measured on, and what skills they brought to the team. Inexpensive, team oriented players who had high on base percentages (OBP) and a passion for defense were in. Megastars with mega salaries and low OBP were out.

The A’s taught the players to think about the responsibilities of their roles differently. Their “job” was to get on base, advance the runner, and score runs — what the old timers called “small ball.” Their success metrics included things like OBP and Wins Above Replacement (WAR). And, their skills needed to include defense and speed, not just a big bat.

By aligning player roles with desired performance outcomes, the A’s turned decades of personnel development strategy on its ear. Results included a record breaking winning streak for the A’s, league-wide acknowledgement of the Moneyball strategy, and a World Series win in 2004 by a Boston team that implemented their own version of the system.

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Role profiles influence strategists and organizational leaders to consider how their key talent support execution success at a more granular level. They align individual performance with strategic goals, creating a distinct competitive advantage for the organization and a career road map for key talent.

Why Competency Models Are Insufficient

Competency models tell only half the story. Competencies are the skills, knowledge, and abilities that individuals bring to a role. They are *how* the job gets performed in an outstanding manner. On the other hand, responsibilities and performance outcomes describe *what* the job is and *who* is responsible for results. When strategy is introduced or changed, the activities and metrics of the job typically change as much as the skills or competencies.

A simple example may help. Imagine a waiter whose responsibilities include taking orders, serving food, clearing tables, and handling requests. His or her skill set probably includes things like efficiency, customer focus, and professionalism. Tips and table turns are the obvious performance outcomes. Now, let's reexamine this waiter as the restaurant

CASE STUDY

Role Profiles Supporting IT Transformation

A client of ours recently changed their IT business model to improve their cost structure and add new technical capabilities. As a result, many of the transactional and lower-value activities were outsourced and a redefinition of existing roles was necessary to not only explain what role incumbents should be doing but what they should stop doing.

Still in the midst of the transition, the organization is starting to see the benefit of a transformation of people that has accompanied the transformation of the business. For example, **business analysts** have stopped acting as mere liaisons and have begun to actually confront and counsel the business. **Architects** have transitioned from big picture thinkers whose single goal was engineering elegance to become business enablers whose eye is on the revenue as well as technology. And **project managers** have stopped chasing deadline missing developers and begun implementing processes and methodologies that make the chasing unnecessary.



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changes strategy and decides to go upmarket. The owner starts with a little job re-engineering. To build table revenue while maintaining an efficient operation, the role of server is introduced. This person does all the mechanical parts of the job, such as serving food and clearing tables. That frees our waiter up to focus more on “plus selling” and customer experience. He or she is now doing different things — building rapport, providing expertise — as well as demonstrating new competencies. Finally, simple outcomes like tips give way to total table revenue and repeat business.

If our restaurateur only focuses on building waiter skills, like deeper understanding of wines and cuisine, and does not change the job, a couple of things would likely happen. First, the waiter will not find time to sell because he or she would be constantly shuffling between the customer and kitchen. Second, the responsibility around taking orders would be seen as more transactional and less value added. That sends the wrong message. The redefined job now places a premium on taking orders because it's linked so strongly to profits and the upgraded selling skills it demands. The bottom line: all pieces of the job must work in concert with the strategy, the responsibilities, performance outcomes, and competencies.

What Does a Role Profile Look Like?

An effective role profile should be no longer than the front and back side of a legal size document. This concise, one page format captures the entire job at a glance without sacrificing critical detail on the most important responsibilities, outcomes, or competencies. The trick to brevity is forcing the tough discussion on priorities. Managers and employees can come up with infinite lists of role items, but when pressed to include the ones that most contribute to the business strategy or role effectiveness, the list gets shorter and more focused.

Typically, we include the key responsibilities and tasks, job outcomes, and competencies — both behavioral and technical — on the front side of the document (*figure 1*).

On the back page of the profile, the priority behavioral competencies are broken down more specifically with indicators and levels of proficiency required. The added detail further tailors the job profile to reflect the expectations of an employee based on experience and grade level (*figure 2*).

Figure 1: Excerpt from the Front Side of an IT Architect Role Profile

Responsibilities and Key Tasks		Performance Outcomes
<p>Architecture — General</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interpret business, security, and infrastructure requirements Identify architecture solution alternatives, given business requirements, availability of new technologies, and evolution of Bank computing/system environment Continually evaluate technology effectiveness and data interoperability <p>Enterprise Architecture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess current state of technical and business process architecture Present future state and architectural roadmaps to achieve it, given strategic direction (e.g., access management, enterprise content management, business process modeling) Ensure usefulness and applicability of architecture across multiple projects and environments Chair enterprise architecture committee <p>Application Architecture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consult on application design and implementation to ensure scalability, security and consistency Provide standards for developers to write and test use cases Assume responsibility for off script issues Provide direction and guidelines within existing enterprise frameworks for implementation teams 	<p>Governance/Policies & Procedures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create, promote and ensure compliance of architectural principles, policies and procedures Develop standards and processes for writing WSDL's, implementing schemas, defining data, etc. Drive enterprise alignment to architectural standards Maintain compliance; develop and manage exception policy <p>Best Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish and communicate best practices and relate them to architecture and implementation/policy guidelines <p>Client Relationships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage clients around their business goals and strategy and implications for architecture Provide long term strategic guidance from/to the business about goals and technology Establish trusted advisor role to balance business need with risk mitigation, quality and efficiency Educate clients; explain technical challenges, opportunities and issues <p>Risk Management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interpret impact of broad strategic risks (e.g., geopolitical, partner, mobility, terror) and operational risks on architecture Work collaboratively with Security team on 	<p>Adoption</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Breadth of adoption of new technologies and methods across multiple organizations Developers consistently use framework, architecture standards, and work products <p>Absorption</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Depth of absorption of new technologies and methods, including effectiveness <p>Business Continuity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No disruptions to operations, given implementations and risk environment <p>Learning Curve</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shortened user/developer learning curve by teaching new methods/technologies <p>Project Success</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Success of projects introducing new technologies <p>Quality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Few errors/problems coming out of architecture Improvement on existing quality <p>Longevity and Sustainability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Robustness of architecture and ability to meet needs of business over time <p>Organizational Health Profitability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Architecture contributes to bottom line value

Figure 2: Excerpt from the Back Side of an IT Architect Role Profile

IT Behavioral Competencies	Proficiency Level Required		
	Minimum	Advanced	Exper
<p>Business Acumen...demonstrates understanding of the industry and the role IT plays in driving financial success</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anticipates future business trends and technical environments and mobilizes resources and technical decision making to ensure the Bank is ahead of the curve on opportunities and threats Creates well developed business cases for technology recommendations, including financial rationale, cost-benefit analysis, etc. Prioritizes investments in technology to reflect business conditions and needed impact (i.e., most done with least resources) 	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Change Management...responds positively and creatively to changes in business, technical or organizational requirements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acts flexibly to changes in client needs and requirements without sacrificing integrity of products, plans or processes Communicates changes broadly to teams and stakeholders to ensure awareness and agreement Provides a clear and detailed picture of future scenarios brought on by changes in projects, design/architectures, or systems 	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Communication & Demonstration Skills...makes complex IT/technical issues accessible to business audience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops metaphors, analogies, and graphical illustrations to communicate complex topics and information Adjusts presentation or demonstration approach to best fit audience need and level of technical understanding Demonstrates composure and a thoughtful/articulate response when challenged by audience 	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Conceptual Thinking...demonstrates understanding of patterns and connections among different sets of data, business requirements and user tools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creates advanced models and frameworks to explain complex technical phenomenon and inform decision making Flexes from macro to micro and back again when working on technical issues with multiple layers (i.e., data center to users) Sees the big picture clearly and can manipulate key elements or components without sacrificing the larger view 	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Enterprise Perspective...takes a broad view of the organization beyond own function or role to the benefit of the whole</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Takes full scope of company needs and technology direction when making decisions Delivers technical solutions that are well integrated, scalable and consistent with enterprise architecture and business goals Strives for simplicity and elegance in design to create momentum for widespread adoption and reuse — and can be easily explained to business community or users 	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Innovation...identifies opportunities for taking current design and IT practices further ahead for the benefit of users and business</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invents new approaches, practices and applications and brings them to the attention of the business/industry Incorporates new technologies, methodologies, and frameworks quickly (i.e., early adopter) Fundamentally changes how people see the business and the relationship to technology to encourage "break set" thinking and 	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Role Profiles Improve Development Planning

Too frequently, we hear employees complain that they are unclear about expectations. They describe mixed messages about what is important and little transparency around how their role contributes to the business. Similarly, we listen to managers grumble about not knowing where to start with employee development. They express concern about not being able to promise promotions and are in the dark about how employee jobs relate to other roles in the company.



As a result, professional development discussions can quickly deteriorate into rambling monologues because the manager feels obligated to explain the job rather than focus on the employee's career or skill needs. Because role profiles are easily digested and provide a clear line of sight to strategy, the development meeting can truly become a conversation where manager and employee equally contribute to ideas about assignments, experiences, and education that can close skill gaps. And, when profiles are created for entire job families, employees and managers can see the relationship between their current sets of responsibilities, outcomes, and competencies and what is needed for lateral moves and promotions.

In the current organizational climate, where promotions are rare and career growth is more about versatility than upward movement, role profiles are especially useful. Employees and managers can have more informed discussions about the choice of assignments, rotations, and training that can build skills and experience without ever leaving the department.

Using Role Profiles for Talent Management

With McKinsey's "War on Talent" essay (1997) and the seismic demographic and technology shift of the last decade, talent management has gone from back burner issue to the subject of intense Board conversations. We now realize that the growth, and in some cases, survival of organizations, is dependent on how well they hire and cultivate their people resources.

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To do talent management effectively, leaders must be as unambiguous about roles as they are about strategy. It is a mistake to discuss a new customer segment or channel strategy without assessing whether the sales and marketing organization is equipped to execute it. It is also a mistake to proceed with an acquisition without considering how the roles of employees will need to change to accommodate the incoming organization or achieve the economies of scale that were promised to shareholders. And yet those mistakes happen because leaders expect their vision for roles will be communicated to employees via the management chain. The failure lies in assuming that managers will be instantly ready to articulate the changes in the role. Role profiles force this issue into the open and provide a timely solution.

It is not possible or even advisable to build role profiles for every employee and department. But it is important to build them for the pivotal positions and job families that are impacted by strategy shifts or are tied to the core competencies of the organization. Understanding the whole job and how it relates to the business, strategy, and related jobs will empower employees in their roles and direct attention to the activities or skills that contribute to business success and advance their career prospects.

Building and Validating Role Profiles

Role profiles are not difficult to build but require strong collaboration between the internal/external consultant, the management team, and the incumbent population. The first step involves conversations with senior leaders about the direction of the business and its implication for the role. In these meetings, the consultant is mostly listening and asking questions. In particular, he or she is challenging leaders to articulate differences in the responsibilities and outcomes of roles under changing conditions, not just the need for increased aptitude or competencies of role incumbents.

The second step involves interviews with a sample of high-performing role incumbents to understand the “as is” condition of the role. These interviews lead to a version 1 of the profile by focusing on the four major components of the profile: responsibilities (with illustrative tasks), performance outcomes, and behavioral and technical competencies. We balance direct questioning about the content with additional time spent on critical incidents that provide tangible stories and illustrations of the content.

The consultant creates the version 1 profile based on what he or she has interpreted from the interviews and initial strategy meetings. Then a

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focus group is set up to validate the profiles and more directly tie them to the “to be” state of the role, in alignment with organizational or strategy changes. These meetings tend to be very engaging — and very revealing of the distinctions between what the role is and what the role should be to optimize performance. Finally, the role profiles are validated with the executive team to ensure their words and strategy are fully embodied in the language of the profile.

The Ultimate Value of Role Profiles

Once the profiles are developed and validated, the real fun begins! Role profiles that are nicely printed and widely distributed rarely make a strong impact, if that is all that is done with them. The real benefit comes from changing the hiring and succession profile, challenging incumbents to raise their game to meet the new demands of the position, and directing training and resources to development issues that are prompted by the strategy shift. This aggressive approach to talent management ultimately pays dividends to the employee, as well as the organization, because they begin to be more proactive in their professional and career development, leading to greater engagement and job satisfaction

Role profiles are like a chip inside a computer, tablet, or phone. They provide the engine for the application but ultimately it is the application that matters. In this case, the application is a well-executed strategy, a more focused development plan, and a better set of criteria for staffing and succession planning.



About the Author

John Hendrickson is a partner at Cambria Consulting, Inc. He is a consultant and executive coach with significant experience designing and implementing leadership and talent management programs inside Fortune 500 companies. He has worked with Cisco, Microsoft, JP Morgan Chase, Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi UFJ, and other prominent companies to develop role profiles in a variety of functions to better align employees with their organization's strategies.

John is known for delivering results for the business and measurable professional development for employees. He is a quick study of the uniqueness of a given industry or culture and adapts best talent management practices to fit the situation and business challenge. He has executive coaching experience at the CEO, C-suite, and senior leadership levels and is a passionate believer in the potential of business professionals to accelerate their careers with practical yet inventive developmental plans.

About Cambria Consulting, Inc.

Cambria Consulting has been a pioneer in the field of talent management. Founded in 1985, Cambria has helped organizations match the requirements of a role and strategy with individual and organizational competencies. This has made their approach to HR systems like recruiting, succession, and development more strategic and contextualized to the client business environment.

