

Gartner®

Strategic Workforce Planning in an Era of Constant Disruption

by Aaron McEwan and LJ Justice

A wide range of social, political, economic, technological and other disruptions threaten today's workforce plans. CHROs can't assume their organizations' needs, priorities and challenges will be consistent from one year (or even one quarter) to the next. Plans made in January could be out of date by July. It is tempting to wait for conditions to stabilize before taking action on strategic workforce planning (SWP). But what if conditions never stabilize?

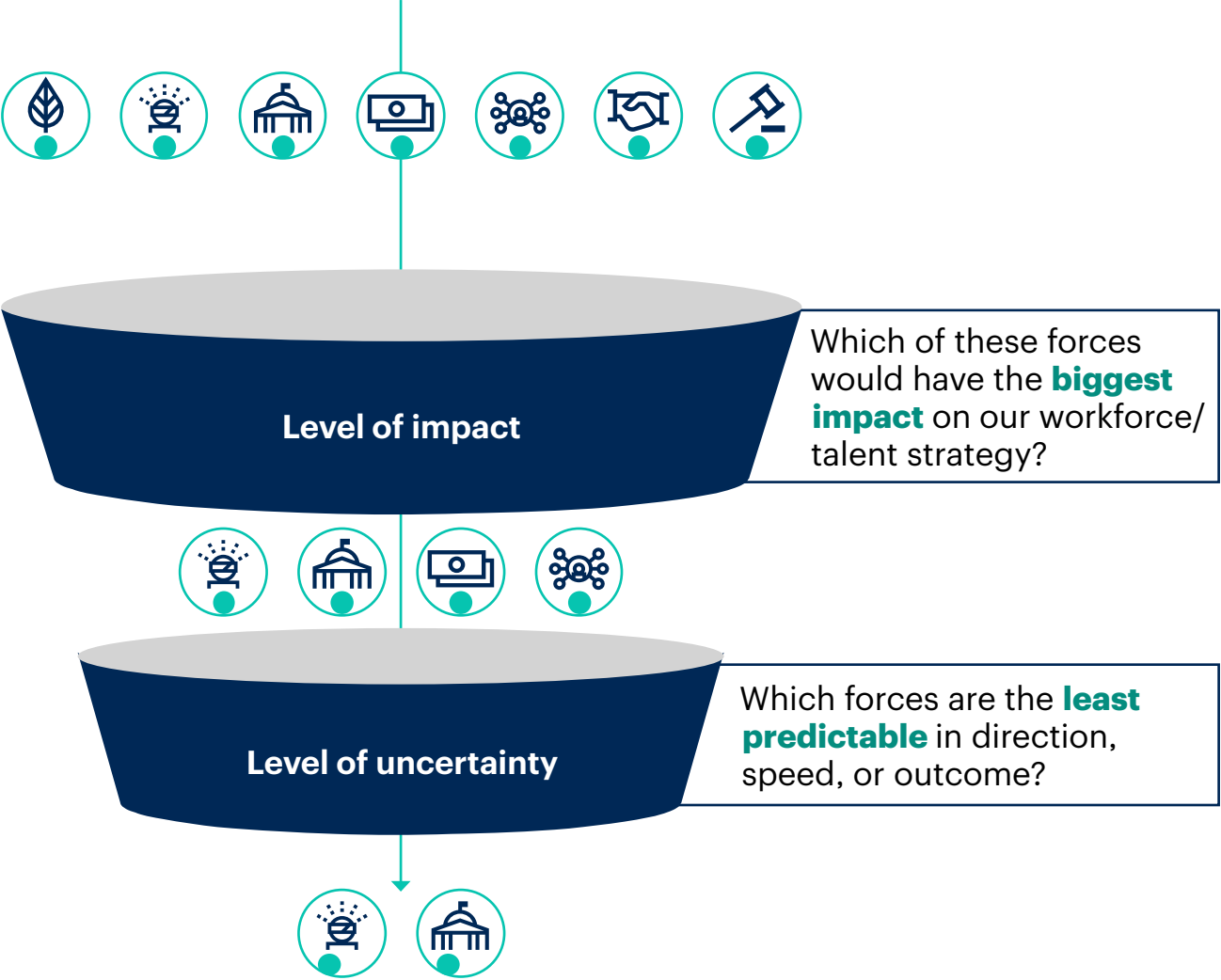


In this environment, CHROs need to create workforce plans that are not just resilient, but antifragile: that is, evolving to be even stronger in the face of shocks and risks. Antifragility is more than just resilience; surviving disruption is not enough when the disruption is constant, continuous and multidimensional. Organizations need to be able to get stronger, add more value and be more profitable in turbulent times.

The key to building an antifragile workforce plan is scenario planning, which allows organizations to prepare to withstand disruption and to capitalize on the opportunities it presents. Rather than try to plan for every conceivable scenario, CHROs should narrow their focus onto the issues of greatest strategic importance to the organization that are the most unpredictable and most vulnerable to disruption. They can then plan around these scenarios in six steps:

- 1 Define the focal talent issue.** Ask targeted questions, such as: Is the issue tied to enterprise priorities? Does it materially affect critical roles, skills or talent pipelines? Is the future of the issue highly unpredictable? Would stress-testing the priority give you options for planning?
- 2 Identify the most disruptive forces** that shape the issue and **filter down to two critical uncertainties** (see Figure 1). Start with a manageable list of potential threats, such as Gartner’s TPESTRE framework (technological, political, economic, social/cultural, trust/ethics, regulatory/legal and environmental). Ask: Which of these forces would have the biggest effect on your workforce? Which forces are the most unpredictable, and what are you least prepared for?
- 3 Craft scenarios around the focal issue.** Use the top two most relevant driving forces to define the scenario planning exercise for the focal talent issue.
- 4 Explore the workforce implications of each scenario** and identify signals that indicate a scenario is becoming real.

» Figure 1: Questions to Narrow Forces for Scenario Planning



Source: Gartner

- 5 Assess scenarios to action workforce plans.** Map anchors — actions that would help in every scenario — and options to take in response to each scenario. Use these options to adapt your plans to any scenario that may arise.
- 6 Hold your plans lightly.** Increase the frequency of workforce plan review based on emerging signals and stakeholder feedback. More frequent reviews ensure plans remain aligned to business needs as they evolve throughout the year.

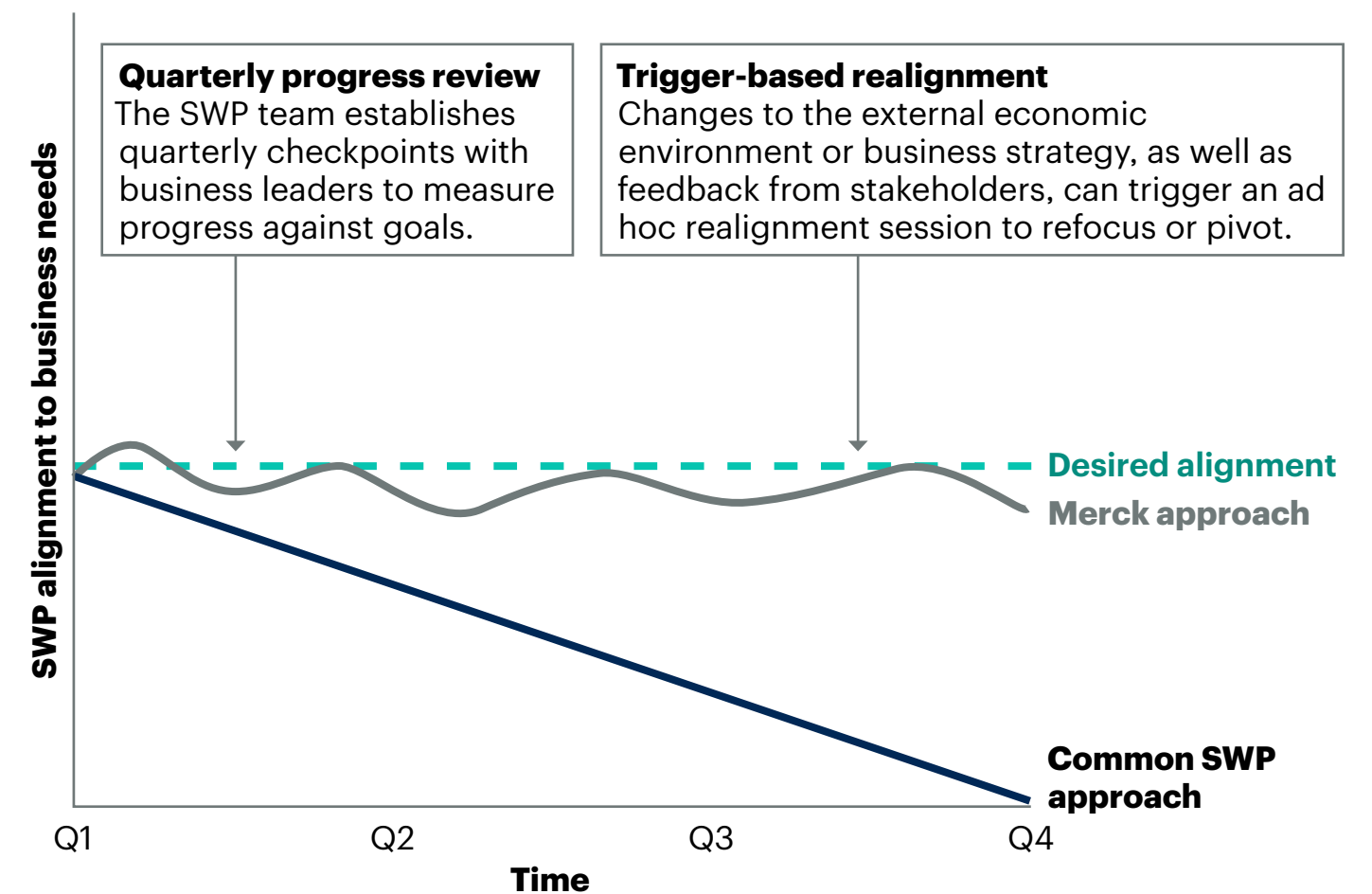
Rather than engaging in scenario planning as a one-and-done process, CHROs should think of these steps as a cycle that can be completed rapidly and regularly. Frequent, quick scenario planning exercises provide a level of flexibility that traditional, annual SWP processes typically lack.

At Merck, for example, the SWP team reviews the strategic workforce plan on a quarterly basis to adhere to agreed objectives and measure progress against goals. Merck also has frequent audits at shorter intervals, allowing for better adjustments to changes and stronger alignment with the business context (see Figure 2).

(To learn more about Merck’s approach to SWP, see [Case Study: Drive Strategic Workforce Planning Through Business Engagement \(Merck\)](#).)

This process enables CHROs to generate a flexible set of options to address the most disruptive scenarios the organization is most likely to face, while also providing clarity on their anchors: the strategic investments they should make no matter what. Proactively developing strategic options means the organization is ready to respond to scenarios as they arise, or even before. This approach can also help strengthen the business case for strategic HR investments and increase the perception of HR as a key strategic partner in the organization.

» **Figure 2: Regular Strategic Workforce Planning Reviews**
Illustrative



Source: Adapted from Merck



Trusted insights, tailored guidance and execution tools backed by 25,000+ annual CHRO conversations, 200+ HR experts and dozens of quantitative studies

Gartner for CHROs

Achieve your mission-critical priorities with personalized guidance from an experienced Executive Partner.



Provides a **safe sounding board** for you to discuss ideas and challenges



Contextualizes Gartner insights, interactions and tools to advance your objectives



Shares **implications of hot topics and emerging trends** for you and your organization



Supports you in **communicating the progress and business value-add** of your priorities and plans



Helps **pressure-test your priorities** and plans based on real-world experience



Ensures you **make the most of the Gartner platform**, including tools, peer insights and connections, and more



Learn more about becoming a Gartner client today.

Connect with us

Get actionable, objective business and technology insights that drive smarter decisions and stronger performance on your mission-critical priorities.

U.S.: 1 855 322 5484

International: +44 (0) 3300 296 946

[Become a Client](#)

Learn more about Gartner for CHROs

gartner.com/en/human-resources

Stay connected to the latest insights



Attend a Gartner conference

[View Conference](#)