



**Gartner**<sup>®</sup>

Gartner for R&D

**Design Compelling  
Careers in R&D Around  
Purpose, Experiences  
and Omnidirectional  
Growth**

In an environment transformed by disruption, changes in the way we work and what employees want from their work are complicating today's labor market. To confront these challenges, R&D leaders must design compelling career paths to attract, engage and retain top R&D talent.

# Overview

## Key Findings

- Attracting and retaining technical talent is a critical challenge for most R&D leaders. The ways we work have changed, and what employees want from their employers is evolving.
- To address the needs and expectations of today's employees, R&D leaders must create engaging career pathways that incorporate purpose-driven career planning, a career portfolio of varied experiences and omnidirectional career growth.

## Recommendations

R&D leaders seeking to create compelling career pathways in their organization should:

- Enable staff to connect more deeply with their work by crafting career plans that blend each individual's personal objectives and interests with those of the organization's.
- Encourage staff to prepare for dynamic careers by building a diverse portfolio of experiences that expands their expertise in a variety of domains.
- Facilitate career growth that aligns to individuals' goals and equally celebrates lateral or nontraditional career progression, rather than shoehorning staff into a one-size-fits-all career structure.

# Introduction

The last several years have been marked by disruptions that have not only altered how and where work gets done but also galvanized many employees to reconsider their relationship with work and what they expect to gain through employment. In response, employers need to understand precisely how attitudes have changed and determine how their company's practices will evolve if they are to attract and retain key talent. R&D leaders feel this urgency — 96% of surveyed R&D leaders say attracting and retaining critical technical talent is a top challenge to solve for the overall performance of their department. And yet, only 53% are confident in their R&D organization's ability to solve this challenge in the next 12 to 18 months.

Fundamentally, employees want a more human-centric work experience that allows them to thrive. To help leaders make sense of employees' evolving expectations, Gartner has reinvented the traditional employee value proposition (EVP) to create our "human deal" framework. The five components of the human deal are (see Figure 1):



## Radical Flexibility

Leaders help employees feel autonomous by providing flexibility in all aspects of work, not just when and where they work.



## Personal Growth

Leaders help employees feel valued by helping them grow as people, not just as professionals.



## Holistic Well-Being

Leaders help employees feel cared for by ensuring employees use holistic well-being offerings, not just ensuring they are available.



## Shared Purpose

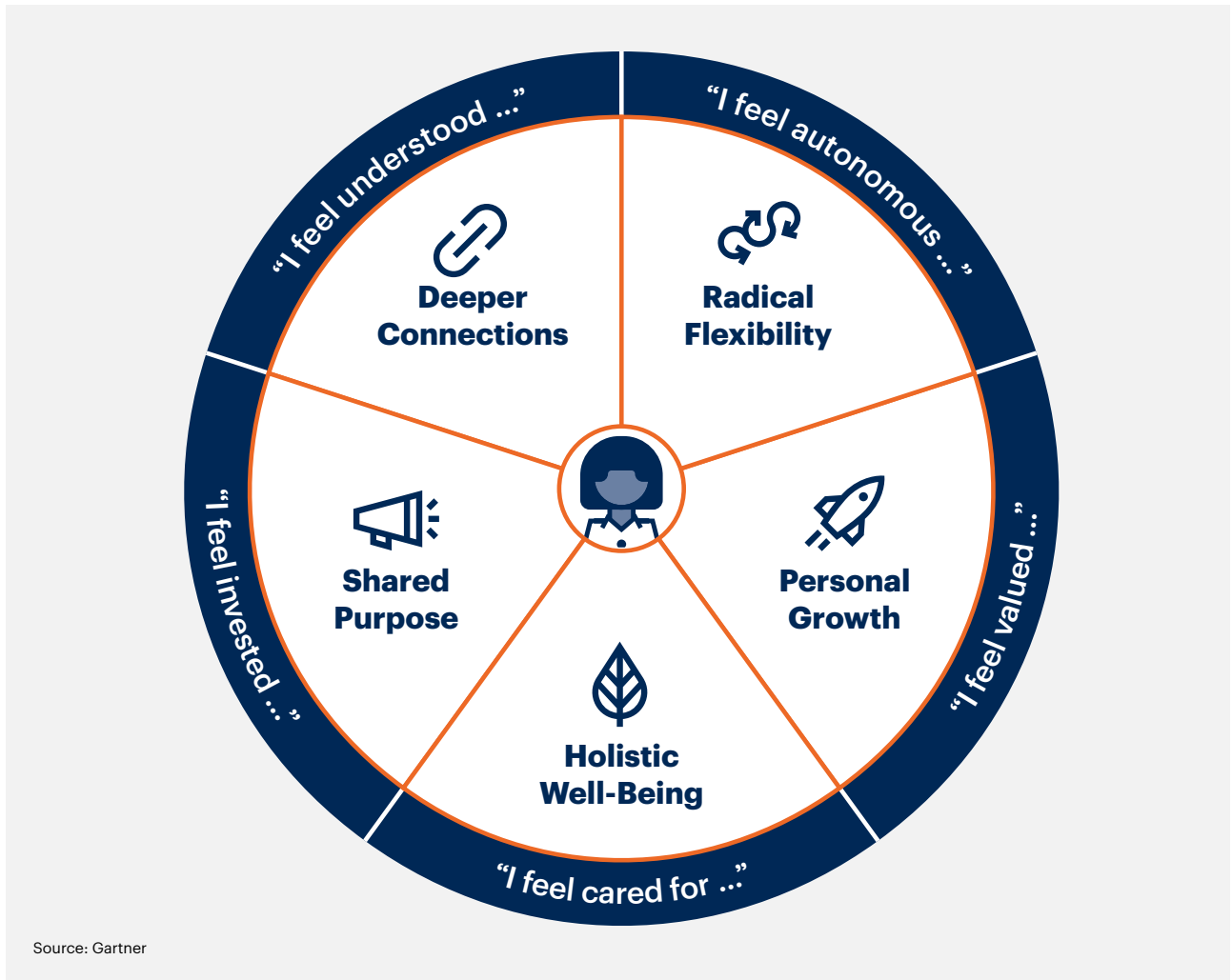
Leaders help employees feel invested in the organization by helping the organization take collective action on purpose, and not just make corporate statements.



## Deeper Connections

Leaders help employees feel understood by strengthening their family and community connections, not just work relationships.

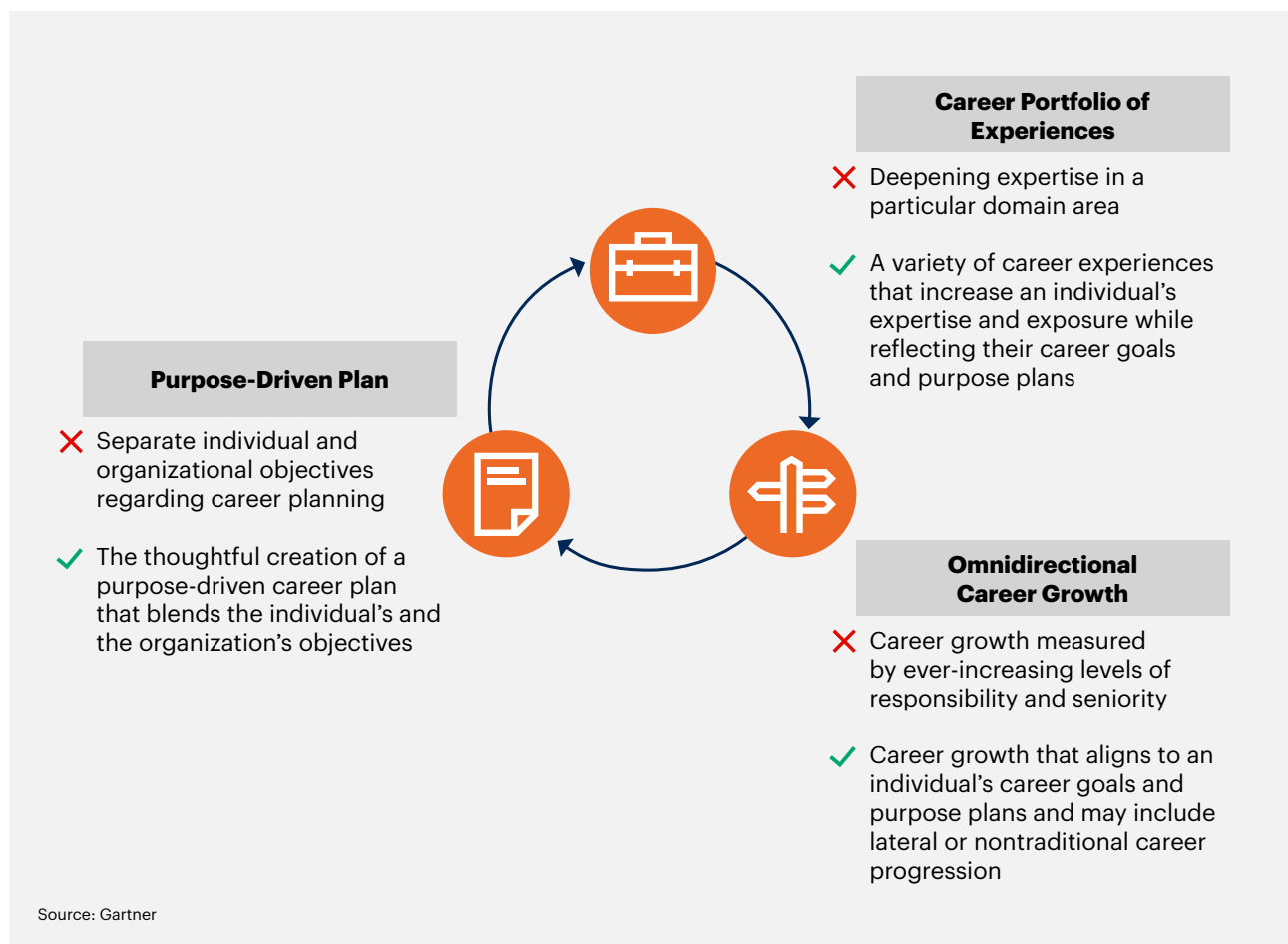
Figure 1. The Human Deal Framework



Accordingly, R&D leaders can help their reports feel autonomous, valued, cared for, invested and understood — thus driving employee engagement and better outcomes for all — by creating compelling career pathways tailored to the needs of today’s employees. To do so, R&D organizations must mature beyond both traditional, vertical career ladders (version 1.0) and dual technical and management career ladders (version 2.0) by adopting a “career pathing 3.0.” approach that incorporates:

- Purpose-driven career planning
- A career portfolio of experiences
- Omnidirectional career growth (see Figure 2)

**Figure 2. Career Pathing 3.0**



# Analysis

## Purpose-Driven Career Planning

Particularly with the rise of remote work, many employees have realized that trying to separate work from “life” is impossible; work is a part of life, alongside family, friends and hobbies. Reflecting this, the focus has shifted from work-life separation to work-life balance to work-life integration.

One powerful way organizations can design work to harmonize with the other aspects of an employee’s life experience — their communities and interests outside of the office — is through the thoughtful creation of purpose-driven career plans. Rather than outlining separate — and perhaps disconnected — sets of individual and organizational objectives when career planning, R&D leaders must help staff craft career plans that blend each individual’s personal objectives with those of the organization’s. Identifying this overlap enables employees to engage with the organization’s shared purpose and connect more deeply with the work they do.

As a starting point, managers should have development conversations with their reports on a regular (i.e., semiannual or at least annual) basis to understand each employee’s goals and aspirations, provide feedback on development progress and guide staff toward development opportunities. To encourage employees to reflect on and share their personal objectives, ask questions such as:

- How has your skill set changed from your early career?
- What has been your most rewarding role or experience? Why?
- Which part of our business, organization or industry do you find most interesting? Why?
- What task or project type would you like to do more frequently in the future?  
Less frequently?
- What is the definition of a successful career for you?

As a manager, ask yourself questions such as:

- How can I best help my report in their current role?
- What can I do to help my report achieve their career goals?
- What short-term and long-term development opportunities could I suggest?
- What can my report do now to best position themselves for their next role?
- Who in my network would be helpful for my report to contact?

## **A Career Portfolio of Experiences**

Gone are the days when a typical R&D employee would work at the same company — or even within the same career path or industry — for decades, if not their entire career. Employees today want more flexibility, and companies no longer offer the same job security they once did. Even within more stable careers, skills evolve and expire faster than ever before. Greater agility is necessary as business needs change within the span of months instead of years, presenting challenges for talent mobility and development.

In response, expanding beyond career experiences aimed at establishing deep expertise in one area, or even “T-shaped” skills combining depth and breadth, R&D leaders must enable employees to build a diverse portfolio of experiences that grows their expertise in a variety of domains. A varied career portfolio not only provides employees options as their career goals, interests or needs change but also prepares staff for successful careers amid a dynamic labor market and organizations’ rapidly evolving skill requirements.

## **Omnidirectional Career Growth**

Lastly, employees recognize that traditional career ladders do not allow for career preferences to change and make for a one-size-fits-all career structure. Even career lattices, designed to offer greater flexibility of movement, struggle to accommodate evolving organizational structures and new skills-based roles for employees to grow into.

In reality, growth is omnidirectional, not just upward. Instead of career growth measured by increasing levels of responsibility and seniority, R&D leaders must facilitate career growth that aligns to individuals’ goals and purpose and offers lateral or nontraditional — even downward — career progression. If an employee wants or needs to take a step back, a step sideways or skip a step from one role to the next for personal or professional reasons, that should be equally embraced as career growth.

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