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# Hiring managers look for candidates' potential to problem-solve, rather than hard skills

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With today's ever-changing job market, the key for HR professionals is to find staff with the ability to be flexible and learn, versus hiring for hard skills alone.

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Building Toronto's new 15.5-kilometre Ontario Line subway is a daunting enough task as is, but Natali Falero's job is perhaps even more daunting – she needs to find workers with the right skills to get it done.

“We come across candidates with skills from past construction experiences who could help and contribute to the team. But it's more important to focus on peoples' potential and attitude when hiring,” says Ms. Falero, Human Resources Manager of Trillium Guideway Partners, a construction consortium designing and building the new subway line.

“We are always looking for individuals with strong problem-solving abilities, a growth mindset and excellent communication skills,” she says.

It makes sense for the subway consortium to put a premium on those qualities even if they are hard to pinpoint, says Mary Elms, director of career education and coaching at Queen's University's Smith School of Business in Kingston, Ont.

“It's a matter of looking to the future, and you should be strategic and intentional about what kinds of qualities you want in your workers. You have to look not only at what kinds of skills you need today for the work, but also at what kind of skills you might need tomorrow,” Ms. Elms says.

The market for skilled technology workers is particularly tight, according to a recent survey by recruitment firm Robert Half. Its research revealed that 94 per cent of Canadian technology leaders are struggling to find qualified candidates to fill open positions, while 39 per cent are seeking to fill vacated positions.

“As organizations navigate this talent-driven market, their focus is primarily on building teams with expertise in critical areas,” the research said.

Finding knowledge workers with the right skills can be especially challenging for a project as complex and costly as the Ontario Line. The line will have 15

new stations that run from the Exhibition through downtown, across the Don River and then run North up to the current location of the Science Centre. It will cost at least \$19-billion and is not scheduled to be completed until 2031 at earliest.

“It really comes down to finding people who understand adaptability. You’re looking for people who can be flexible, manage change,” Ms. Elms says.

“There are other cornerstones for success in this kind of work, where the job descriptions are wide-ranging or keep changing. You need someone who is good at critical thinking – you have to deal with the unexpected. You need people who can work well as a team and you need people who can communicate well,” she says.

“We look for people who are good at time management, who have strong emotional intelligence and are comfortable with technology. These are competencies that tend to help employees prepare for unforeseen changes,” Ms. Falero says.

Recruiters need to be open-minded because skills required for certain jobs are changing constantly and quickly with the relentless advent of new technology and artificial intelligence, says Jodi Kovitz, chief executive officer of the Human Resources Professionals Association, which regulates HR practitioners in Ontario.

“We’re in the age of upskilling. People come into the work force in Canada with highly diverse backgrounds and skills, so you’re really looking for those who have the ability to develop and learn new skills, even if we don’t always know what those skills are yet,” she says.

“Some people struggle with jobs where there’s ambiguity or uncertainty, but others are comfortable with situations where it may not be clear right away exactly what to do,” says Winny Shen, an associate professor of organization studies at York University’s Schulich School of Business in Toronto.

“The key is to look for people who will likely be comfortable in these evolving environments, and also to train managers to frame these unknown situations

as opportunities rather than barriers,” she says.

The other major challenge for recruiters and HR leaders is to retain the flexible, adaptable people that they hire, Ms. Falero says. She refers to billionaire Sir Richard Branson’s advice: “Train people well enough so they can leave, treat them well enough so they don’t want to.”

Ms. Falero says she looks carefully at the “great resignation” phenomenon of skilled people leaving jobs for better offers or for a more comfortable work-life balance.

“To meet these challenges, companies should adapt, giving employees the opportunity to raise their concerns, to have their voices heard,” she says.

“People do not change jobs just for better opportunities but also for a greater sense of respect and acknowledgement. Offering opportunities for professional development, providing clear progression paths and maintaining open lines of communications are effective,” she says.

“Another aspect that employers disregard is the opportunity to ‘keep in touch’ when a company has done everything in their power to retain an employee but still they decide to make a change,” Ms. Falero adds.

“Unless there is a major reason not to have someone back, it’s important to maintain an open door and welcome the employee to return.”

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