A White Paper by It's Just a Fish & The HR Guys

Aspirational Hiring:

Why Your Future-Perfect Hire is Failing Right Now

GUIDEBOOK



written by

Kenneth Pennington & Paul Withers

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Why This White Paper Exists

By Paul Withers | The HR Guys

I've spent twenty years placing HR professionals into organisations. Thousands of conversations. Hundreds of placements. And I've watched the same mistake happen over and over.

Organisations hire the person they wish they needed, not the person they actually need.

It looks like this: a business is mid-transformation. Maybe post-merger, maybe scaling fast, maybe fixing what's broken. They need someone to handle the chaos of today, policies that don't exist, systems that don't work, firefighting that won't stop. But they don't write a job spec for that person. They write it for the person they'll need once the chaos is over.

Strategic. Visionary. Transformational.

They attract brilliant candidates. They make an offer. Everyone's excited.

Then the new hire shows up and discovers the reality: spreadsheets that don't talk to each other, processes held together with email chains, and a team drowning in tactical work.

The strategic role they were sold? It doesn't exist yet. Maybe it will in 18 months.

Maybe never.

Six months later, they resign. The organisation is back to square one, except now they've burned time, money, and probably their employer brand in the process.

This isn't a hiring skills problem. It's a clarity problem. And it's expensive.

Kenneth Pennington | It's Just a Fish

The legal side of this is where it gets messy. When you hire someone for Strategy Role A and give them Tactical Role B, you're not just disappointing them, you're creating risk.

Constructive dismissal claims. Wrongful dismissal. Discrimination. All hinge on one question: was the role as described?

If you hired for transformation and delivered firefighting, your documentation better show you were honest from the start. Because "we always planned for them to do tactical work first" only works as a defence if you actually said that. In writing. Before they accepted the offer.

Most organisations don't.

Paul Withers

Here's what makes this white paper different: it's not theory. It's built from real placements, real mistakes, and real frameworks that work. Kenneth brings the diagnostic tools to assess where you actually are.

I bring the strategic resourcing model, Build, Buy, Borrow—that helps you bridge the gap without setting people up to fail.

We're not telling you to lower your standards. We're telling you to hire for the organisation you have, so you can build the organisation you want.

What You'll Learn

This white paper gives you a complete framework for hiring through transformation:

The Diagnostic (Kenneth's Framework)

- How to assess your current state honestly, not aspirationally
- Five questions that expose the gap between what you say you need and what you actually need
- UK employment law considerations that protect you when roles evolve

The Strategic Options (Paul's Framework)

- Build, Buy, Borrow: when to develop internal talent, hire permanent, or bring in interim support
- Cost/value analysis of each approach
- Real examples from placements across sectors

The Implementation (Both)

- How to write honest job specs that attract the right people
- Interview techniques that test for reality, not aspiration
- Managing the transition from chaos to strategy without breaking people
- Working effectively with recruitment partners during change

Who This Is For

Primary audience:

- HR Directors, Chief People Officers, Heads of HR navigating transformation
- Business owners and MDs hiring senior HR roles during growth or change
- Hiring managers bringing in strategic talent while managing operational reality

You'll benefit from this if:

- You're mid-transformation and need to hire but aren't sure for what
- You've had senior hires leave within the first year
- You know the role you're advertising isn't quite the role that exists
- You're wondering whether to hire permanent or bring in interim support
- You want to avoid expensive mis-hires and tribunal risk

Who We Are

Paul Withers | The HR Guys

I run The HR Guys, a specialist HR Recruitment business, which helps businesses connect with HR people on a permanent, interim or fractional basis.

Over twenty years, I've placed HR professionals: CPOs, HRDs, HR BPs and HR Assistants, into organisations across the UK and EU.

I've lived through every version of the "should we hire permanent or go interim?" conversation. I've seen aspirational hiring destroy good relationships and waste serious money.

More importantly, I've developed the frameworks that prevent it.

The Build, Buy, Borrow model in this white paper isn't academic theory. It's how I advise clients every day on whether to develop internal talent, recruit permanently, or bring in interim support. It's saved organisations millions in mis-hire costs while building sustainable capability.

When you're stuck between today's reality and tomorrow's vision, I'm the person who's already helped dozens of organisations navigate that gap successfully.

Kenneth Pennington | It's Just a Fish

I run It's Just a Fish, an HR consultancy that makes HR less corporate and more human. With a background in visual communications and a master's in employment law, I help organisations think differently about people challenges, especially during transformation.

I bring the diagnostic lens that exposes aspirational hiring before it happens. And I bring the legal grounding that keeps you out of tribunal when roles don't go as planned. Because hiring through change isn't just about finding great people. It's about being honest with them, documenting properly, and managing expectations when reality doesn't match the dream.

Together, we're giving you:

- The diagnostic tools to see where you actually are (Kenneth)
- The strategic resourcing framework to bridge the gap (Paul)
- The implementation guidance to hire successfully through transformation (Both)

Let's get into it.

Executive Summary: Why You Should Read This

By Paul Withers

If you're hiring during transformation, you're probably making one of three mistakes:

1. **Hiring aspirationally:** You hire for the role you'll need in 18 months, not the role you need today. Result: They leave within six months because the job you sold them doesn't exist yet.
2. **Hiring defensively:** You're so worried about aspirational hiring that you under-hire. You bring in someone junior who can handle today but will never grow into tomorrow. Result: You're hiring again in 12 months anyway.
3. **Not hiring at all:** You're paralysed by uncertainty. You know you need capability but can't figure out what kind. Result: Your existing team burns out while you deliberate.

This white paper solves all three.

The core framework: Build, Buy, Borrow

- **Build** when you have internal talent and time to develop them
- **Buy** when the role is stable and clearly defined
- **Borrow** when you need impact now or the future role isn't clear yet

What makes this different:

This isn't academic research. It's built from real placements and real mistakes. Kenneth brings the diagnostic tools to assess where you actually are. I bring twenty years of resourcing decisions, what works, what fails, and why.

Together, we're giving you a framework that prevents expensive mis-hires while building real capability.

The ROI of reading this:

A bad senior hire costs £50-75k in turnover costs. Add tribunal risk, employer brand damage, and lost productivity, and you're easily into six figures. This white paper takes 30 minutes to read and could save you a year of pain and serious money.

What you'll walk away with:

- A clear diagnostic to assess where your organisation actually is (not where you wish it was)
- Decision criteria for when to hire permanent, develop internal talent, or bring in interim support
- Job spec templates that attract the right people by being honest about reality
- Interview techniques that test for today's needs, not tomorrow's dreams
- UK employment law considerations that protect you when roles evolve
- Real examples from placements across sectors

Who shouldn't read this:

If your organisation is stable, your roles are clearly defined, and you've got time to run a traditional recruitment process, you don't need this. Go hire permanent. It'll work fine.

But if you're mid-transformation, if you're not sure what the role will look like in 12 months, if you've had senior hires leave quickly, or if you're wondering whether to go permanent or interim, read on.

This is how you stop hiring for tomorrow when you need someone for today.

Section 1: The Aspirational Hiring Trap

By Kenneth Pennington | It's Just a Fish

What Is Aspirational Hiring?

Aspirational hiring happens when you write a job description for the organisation you want to become, not the one you actually are right now.

You're mid-transformation. Your processes are chaotic. You need someone to roll up their sleeves and fix the broken systems. But that's not the story you tell.

Instead, you write:

- "Lead strategic initiatives"
- "Drive organisational transformation"
- "Influence senior stakeholders”
- "Shape the future of the department”

It sounds impressive. It attracts impressive people.

Then they show up and discover the reality: spreadsheets that don't talk to each other, processes held together with email chains, and a team that's drowning in tactical work.

The job you hired them for doesn't exist yet. And the job that does exist, the one they're actually doing, isn’t the one they signed up for.

That's aspirational hiring.

Why It Happens

Aspirational hiring isn't malicious. It happens because:

You genuinely believe transformation is closer than it is. You've been talking about it for months. You've hired consultants. You've got a roadmap. In your head, you're already there. On the ground, you're still in the chaos.

You want to attract top talent. Nobody gets excited about "fix our broken processes for six months." You know that. So you lead with the vision, the transformation, the future state. You're not lying, you just skip over the messy middle.

You're exhausted and understaffed. You need someone senior who can hit the ground running. You don't have time to train someone up. You don't have capacity to manage someone junior. So you hire aspirationally and hope they'll figure it out.

You confuse hiring for potential with hiring for reality. You think: "If we hire someone strategic, they'll elevate the organisation." But strategic people need a foundation to build on. If you don't have that foundation, they'll spend their time building it, and that's not strategic work.

None of this is wrong, exactly. But it sets everyone up to fail.

Why It Fails

Aspirational hiring fails because expectations don't match reality. And when that gap is big enough, good people leave.

They can't deliver on today's needs. You hired someone who's brilliant at strategy, stakeholder management, and long-term thinking. Those skills are useless when the immediate problem is "the payroll system doesn't talk to the HR system" or "we don't have a proper onboarding process."

They feel misled. They took this job because of the vision you sold. They didn't sign up to spend six months doing work they could have done five years ago in their career. They feel bait-and-switched, even if that wasn't your intent.

You get frustrated with them. You needed someone to solve today's problems while you focus on the future. Instead, they're asking questions about strategy, pushing back on tactical work, or worse, trying to transform things before the foundations are solid.

They leave. And now you're back to square one, except you've lost time, money, and possibly damaged your employer brand in the process.

The Real Cost

Let's talk numbers, because aspirational hiring isn't just frustrating—it's expensive.

Recruitment costs: Whether you used an agency (15-25% of salary) or internal resources (time, advertising, interview panels), you've spent money to attract and assess candidates.

Onboarding costs: Training, equipment, system access, manager time. For a senior hire, this can run into thousands of pounds before they've contributed anything.

Lost productivity: Both theirs (they're spinning their wheels in the wrong role) and yours (you're managing their frustration instead of focusing on your actual priorities).

Turnover costs: When they leave, you start over. Recruitment, onboarding, lost knowledge, team disruption. Research shows replacing an employee costs 6-9 months of their salary. For a £60k role, that's £30-45k. For a £100k role, that's £50-75k.

Team morale: When someone senior leaves quickly, your existing team notices. It creates uncertainty, gossip, and questions about whether the organisation actually knows what it's doing.

Employer brand damage: Every person who leaves tells a story. If that story is "they sold me transformation and gave me firefighting," that's the story other candidates will hear.

And here's the thing: this isn't happening once. For organisations stuck in aspirational hiring patterns, this is happening repeatedly. You're bleeding money and credibility.

UK Employment Law Reality

In the UK, aspirational hiring comes with legal risks.

Misrepresentation: If the job you described in the interview isn't the job they're actually doing, you've potentially misrepresented the role. That can lead to constructive dismissal claims if the employee resigns.

Probationary periods: Yes, probation gives you more flexibility to exit someone quickly (typically with one week's notice in the first month, then statutory notice after that). But if the reason they're not working out is because you hired them for the wrong role, you've wasted that probation period.

Notice periods: If you've passed probation and realised the mismatch, you're now looking at statutory minimum notice (one week per year of service, capped at 12 weeks) or contractual notice (often 1-3 months for senior roles). That's a long time to manage someone who's disengaged.

Fixed-term contracts (FTC): Some organisations think: "Let's hire someone on a fixed-term contract while we figure out what we need." Be careful. If you're using FTC to avoid committing to a permanent hire because you're not sure about your needs, you're creating risk. FTC should be used for genuinely temporary needs, not as a trial run for a permanent role. Otherwise, you may face claims that they should have been permanent from the start.

Co-employment risk with FTC: If you bring in contractors or FTC employees but treat them like permanent staff (same working conditions, integrated into the team, managed the same way, long duration), HMRC and employment tribunals may decide they should have been permanent employees. That creates tax, pension, and employment rights issues retroactively.

Settlement agreements: When aspirational hires leave, organisations often use settlement agreements to part ways cleanly. That's legal, but it costs—typically 1-3 months' salary plus legal fees. And if you're doing this repeatedly, that's a pattern that auditors and tribunals will notice.

The legal costs of getting aspirational hiring wrong aren't just the exit costs. They're the risk of tribunal claims, the cost of defending those claims, and the reputational damage if you lose.

Section 2: Understanding Your Current State

By Kenneth Pennington & Paul Withers

The Current State Assessment

By: Kenneth Pennington | It's Just a Fish

Before you write another job description, answer these questions honestly.

Not aspirationally. Not optimistically. Honestly.

Question 1: What does this person actually need to do in month one?

Not in six months. Not once you've finished the transformation project. **Month one.**

List the actual tasks. Not "drive strategic initiatives." Be specific:

- Fix the broken onboarding process
- Rebuild the performance review system
- Untangle the mess of spreadsheets
- Train managers who don't know employment law
- Implement the new HRIS that's been delayed for six months

If the list is mostly tactical, operational, firefighting work, you need someone who can and will do that work.

Don't pretend otherwise.

Question 2: How long will this tactical reality last?

Be honest. If your organisation is under pressure, under-resourced, or mid-crisis, the tactical work isn't going away in three months.

Realistic timelines:

- "We need someone to fix our foundations before we can be strategic" = 6-12 months minimum
- "We're implementing new systems and need someone to manage that" = 6-18 months depending on complexity
- "We need someone to stabilise the chaos before we can focus on transformation" = 12+ months

If you don't know how long it'll last, you're not ready to hire. You're gambling with someone's career.

Question 3: What support will this person have?

Don't just think about reporting lines. Think about practical support:

- Will they have budget to fix problems, or just authority to identify them?
- Will they have a team, or are they a team of one?
- Will they have senior leadership support when they need it, or will they be fighting for attention?
- Will they have access to the people and data they need, or will they spend half their time chasing access?

If the answer to most of these is "not really," you're hiring someone to be frustrated.

Question 4: What skills do you actually need right now?

Strip away the aspirational language and think about what will make someone successful in the role as it exists today.

Aspirational skills: Strategic thinking, influencing senior stakeholders, leading transformation, innovation

Actual skills needed: Project management, process design, getting things done with limited resources, navigating bureaucracy, firefighting, patience

Those are different skill sets. They attract different people. Hiring for the first when you need the second is the trap.

Question 5: What happens if you're honest about this in the job description?

This is the fear, right? If you're honest about the chaos, the tactical work, the reality of the role, will anyone good want it?

Maybe not. But here's the alternative: hire someone under false pretenses, watch them struggle, and lose them within six months. Then you're hiring again anyway, except now you've burned time and money.

Some people want the tactical-to-strategic journey. Some people thrive in chaos and love building foundations. But only if you're honest about what you're offering.

The Pressure Point Reality Check

By: Kenneth Pennington | It's Just a Fish

If your organisation is already under pressure to deliver, training up existing talent is tough. Nearly impossible if you want to avoid burnout.

This is the moment to be honest about your options. Can you hire someone who'll handle both today's tactical work and tomorrow's strategic work? Can you train up existing talent? Or do you need a different approach entirely?

This is where the Build, Buy, Borrow model comes in, and this is Paul's expertise. (See Sections 3 & 4 for the full strategic framework.) But here's the question you need to answer first:

What do you actually need TODAY?

Once you're clear on that, you can make a proper strategic decision about how to resource it. Don't skip the current state assessment and jump straight to "we need to hire someone strategic." That's how aspirational hiring happens.

UK Employment Consideration: Setting Expectations

By: Kenneth Pennington | It's Just a Fish

When you're hiring through transformation, be explicit in your documentation:

In the job description: Include the current state work, not just the aspirational future. "Initially, this role will focus on [tactical needs]. As the organisation matures, it will shift to [strategic work]."

In the interview: Be honest about where you are. "We're not there yet, but here's where we're going."

In the contract: If the role is genuinely likely to change significantly, consider probationary objectives that reflect current state needs. Don't promise transformation work you can't deliver in year one.

Why this matters legally: If someone claims constructive dismissal or that the role wasn't as described, your documentation is your defence. Saying "we always planned for them to do tactical work first" only works if you actually said that.

Strategic Decision-Making: Buy, Build, or Borrow?

By: Paul Withers | The HR Guys

Once you understand your current state, the next critical question is: how do you get the right capability in place?

Too often, the automatic answer is "let's hire someone permanent." But that decision can backfire if your organisation is still in transition.

There are three ways to solve a capability gap:

Buy — hire someone externally on a permanent basis

Build — develop and promote your existing people

Borrow — bring in interim, contract, or fractional support

Each route has a place. The key is knowing which one fits your reality right now.

Ask yourself five questions before deciding:

1. What do we need right now — strategy or delivery?
2. Do we have internal people ready to grow?
3. How fast do we need results?
4. Is the future role clearly defined?
5. How much risk are we willing to take?

Then follow this guide:

- Mostly tactical and urgent → Borrow
- Tactical now but time to train → Build
- Stable and long-term → Buy

This isn't just theory, it's practical decision-making that saves money, time, and frustration.

For the complete framework breakdown, decision criteria, cost analysis, and real examples, see **Section 3: The Build, Buy, Borrow Model**.

Section 3: The Build, Buy, Borrow Model

By Paul Withers | The HR Guys

Why You Need a Model

Hiring during change isn't about guessing who might fit. It's about understanding what you really need and when you need it.

The Build, Buy, Borrow model helps leaders make that call. It takes the emotion out of resourcing decisions and replaces it with structure and logic.

This is how you stop aspirational hiring from derailing your plans.

The Three Routes in Detail

1. **Build: Develop Internal Talent**

When to Choose Build

- You already have strong people with potential
- There's time and support available for them to grow
- You want to protect culture and reward loyalty.

When It Doesn't Work

- You're under delivery pressure now
- There's no time for coaching or structured development
- The skills gap is too large for a short-term fix.

What It Takes

- Real development plans, not vague promises
- Protected time for learning and mentoring
- Leaders who invest energy in coaching
- Sometimes, temporary support to reduce workload.

Cost Considerations

- Lowest direct cost, but high time investment
- Short-term productivity dip while people learn
- Best ROI when the organisation is stable enough to nurture growth.

Example

A growing organisation we supported had an HR Business Partner ready for the next step. The CPO wanted to promote but didn't want to set them up to fail.

We placed an experienced interim HR professional on a nine-month project to coach them through a major change programme.

The HRBP grew quickly, took the HR Director role at the end, and the interim left having achieved exactly what was needed, development without disruption.

2. Buy: Hire Permanent Talent

When to Choose Buy

- The organisation is stable and the role is clearly defined
- You're ready for long-term ownership and continuity
- You can offer genuine strategic work.

When It Doesn't Work

- The organisation is still changing rapidly
- You're firefighting or unclear on long-term structure
- The role is likely to evolve in 6–12 months.

What It Takes

- Clarity on what the role will actually deliver
- A stable enough environment to offer continuity
- Budget and support systems for a permanent hire.

Cost Considerations

- Higher immediate cost (salary, benefits, onboarding)
- Best value when the role is clearly defined and stable
- Highest risk if you misjudge the role's future.

Example

We recently worked with a global tech company to recruit their first Chief People Officer. The organisation was mature, the HR team was strong, and the outgoing HR Director remained available for strategic support during the transition.

The structure was clear, and the long-term vision was set. This stability meant we could run a full search and appoint a permanent CPO with confidence. A textbook example of when "buying" works perfectly.

3. Borrow: Interim, Contract, or Fractional Talent

When to Choose Borrow

- You need immediate impact or specialist help
- You're unsure how the role will evolve long-term
- You want to protect your permanent team from burnout
- You're testing what the role really needs.

When It Doesn't Work

- You treat it as a long-term patch with no plan
- You expect miracles without authority or support
- You're avoiding making a real decision.

What It Takes

- Clear scope and timeline for the interim role
- Authority for the interim to deliver
- Openness to external perspective and pace.

Cost Considerations

- Higher daily cost, but no long-term commitment
- Flexible and easy to scale up or down
- Best value when speed, clarity, or flexibility matter most.

Example

We helped a global engineering business going through a post-acquisition restructure of its UK operation. They needed senior HR leadership immediately but weren't yet clear on the long-term structure. We introduced a fractional HR Director for three days a week over six months.

This gave stability, leadership support, and time to define the permanent role. Once the structure was clear, we placed the permanent Head of HR, with the fractional HRD staying on briefly to ensure a smooth handover.

A great example of how "borrowing" bridges the gap between uncertainty and stability.

Making the Decision: A Simple Framework

Ask yourself five questions before deciding:

1. What do we need right now: strategy or delivery?
2. Do we have internal people ready to grow?
3. How fast do we need results?
4. Is the future role clearly defined?
5. How much risk are we willing to take?

Then follow this guide:

- Mostly tactical and urgent → Borrow
- Tactical now but time to train → Build
- Stable and long-term → Buy

This isn't just theory, it's practical decision-making that saves money, time, and frustration.

Comparing the Three Approaches

Method	Best For	Timeline	Cost Profile	Risk Level
Build	Stable growth, time available	6–18 months	Low direct cost, high time	Medium
Buy	Clear roles, long-term needs	3+ months	High upfront, predictable	High if wrong
Borrow	Transformation, uncertainty	Days to weeks	Higher daily, no commitment	Low

Real Decision Criteria

Here's how to think through your decision practically:

Choose Build when:

- You have capable people who want to grow
- Timeline allows 6+ months of development
- The business can support reduced productivity short-term
- Cultural continuity matters deeply

Choose Buy when:

- The role is stable and clearly defined
- You need long-term ownership and continuity
- The organisation is mature enough to offer real strategic work
- You can wait 2-3 months for the right person

Choose Borrow when:

- You need capability immediately
- The organisation is still defining the future role

- You want to test what the role truly needs
- You're protecting permanent staff from burnout
- The timeline is uncertain

Working with Agencies to Make the Right Call

A good recruitment partner helps you decide early whether to buy, build, or borrow.

Here's how to brief them:

- Be honest about your current state
- Share the tactical reality and transformation timeline
- Explain what "success" looks like in the first six months.

Good agencies will:

- Challenge you if you're hiring aspirationally
- Suggest interim or project-based solutions where appropriate
- Protect your employer brand by setting honest expectations with candidates.

When you treat your agency as a partner, not a supplier, you get better outcomes and avoid expensive mis-hires.

The Outcome: Strategic Hiring Without Guesswork

Using the Build, Buy, Borrow model changes how organisations hire.

You stop guessing. You stop overpromising. You make informed, realistic decisions based on where you are today.

That's how you hire strategically without setting people up to fail.

Section 4: Fractional/Interim as Bridge Strategy

By Paul Withers | The HR Guys

Why Borrowing Works During Transformation

Transformation is messy. The future isn't clear yet. The work that needs doing today might not be the work you need done in a year.

This is exactly when borrowing, using interim, contract, or fractional talent, makes the most sense.

Interim professionals bring experience without commitment. They've seen similar challenges before. They can deliver impact quickly without the long-term risk of a permanent hire who might not fit the future state.

The Strategic Value of Interim Talent

Speed to Impact

Interim professionals can start immediately and deliver results within weeks. They don't need months to understand the business, they've done this work before.

Flexibility

You can scale up or down as needs change. If the project finishes early, there's no redundancy process. If it extends, you simply extend the contract.

Objective Perspective

External professionals bring fresh thinking. They're not embedded in your politics or history. They can challenge assumptions and drive change faster.

Protecting Permanent Staff

When your team is already stretched, adding transformation work on top breaks people. Interim support gives your permanent team breathing space to do their day jobs well.

Testing the Role

Not sure what the permanent role should look like? An interim placement helps you learn. You see what skills actually matter, what the workload really is, and what kind of person will thrive.

When to Use Interim/Fractional Talent

Use interim when:

- You need senior expertise immediately
- The organisation is mid-transformation and the future role isn't clear
- You're covering a gap (maternity, long-term sick, unexpected departure)
- You need a specific skill set for a defined project
- You want to test what the role really needs before hiring permanently
- Your permanent team is at breaking point

Don't use interim when:

- You're avoiding making a real decision about permanent structure
- You expect them to work miracles without authority or support
- You're using it as a long-term patch with no plan
- The role is stable and clearly defined for the long term

Cost vs. Value: The Real Calculation

Yes, interim professionals cost more per day than permanent employees. But the calculation isn't that simple.

What you're paying for:

- Immediate capability (no learning curve)
- No onboarding or training costs
- No benefits, pension, or long-term commitments
- Flexibility to end the arrangement when you're ready
- Experience from similar challenges across multiple organisations
- Speed to value

What you're avoiding:

- The cost of a bad permanent hire (£30-75k+ in turnover costs)
- Redundancy costs if the role changes
- Employment tribunal risk from role mismatch
- Lost time from a permanent hire who can't deliver what you actually need

When viewed through this lens, interim talent often represents better value, especially during uncertainty.

Interim to Permanent: The Bridge Model

One of the most effective strategies is using interim talent to bridge to a permanent hire.

How it works:

1. Bring in an interim to handle immediate needs and stabilise operations
2. Use the interim period to clarify what the permanent role should actually be
3. Define the permanent role based on what you've learned
4. Recruit the permanent hire with confidence
5. Have the interim support the handover

Why this works:

- You're not guessing what the permanent role needs
- The interim protects your employer brand (no bait-and-switch)
- Your permanent hire walks into clarity, not chaos
- The transition is smooth and supported

Example

A long-term client was going through rapid growth and acquisition. They had an exceptional HR Business Partner earmarked for a future HR Director role, but the CPO didn't want to promote too early.

We advised them to bring in an interim HR professional on a nine-month fixed-term contract to mentor the HRBP and lead key change projects. By the end of the assignment, the HRBP had grown into the new HRD position with confidence.

A smart use of interim support to "build" future leadership safely.

Managing Interim Relationships Effectively

Be clear on scope and authority

Interim professionals need clarity. What's the scope? What decisions can they make? What's off limits? Set this up front.

Give them access and authority

If you bring in a senior interim but don't give them real authority, you're wasting money. They need access to stakeholders, data, and decision-making.

Don't treat them as temps

These are experienced professionals who've been CPOs, HRDs, and senior leaders. Treat them as senior hires, not temporary staff.

Have clear exit criteria

When will the interim assignment end? What does success look like? Don't drift into an indefinite arrangement without a plan.

Use them to build permanent capacity

The best interim engagements leave the organisation stronger. Use them to mentor permanent staff, build processes, and create foundations for the future.

Fractional vs. Interim: What's the Difference?

Interim typically means full-time or near full-time for a defined period (3-12 months).

Fractional means part-time ongoing support (e.g., 2 days per week).

When to use each:

• **Interim:** Major transformation, covering a gap, project-based work
• **Fractional:** Ongoing strategic support, scaling businesses that can't justify full-time yet, senior expertise without full-time cost

Both are "borrowing" in the Build, Buy, Borrow model. The choice depends on intensity of need and duration.

Real-World Fractional Example

We helped a global engineering business going through a post-acquisition restructure of its UK operation. They needed senior HR leadership immediately but weren't yet clear on the long-term structure. We introduced a fractional HR Director for three days a week over six months.

This gave stability, leadership support, and time to define the permanent role. Once the structure was clear, we placed the permanent Head of HR, with the fractional HRD staying on briefly to ensure a smooth handover.A great example of how "borrowing" bridges the gap between uncertainty and stability.

When to Transition from Interim to Permanent

Signs you're ready for permanent:

- The organisation is stable enough to define the long-term role clearly
- You know what skills and experience the permanent hire actually needs
- The transformation work is done or has a clear roadmap
- You can offer meaningful strategic work, not just firefighting
- Leadership is aligned on the role, scope, and expectations

Signs you're not ready yet:

- The organisation is still in flux
- You're not sure what the permanent role should be
- Leadership isn't aligned on what this person should do
- You're still firefighting and building foundations
- The interim is still delivering critical transformation work

Don't rush to permanent just because "interim is expensive."

Rushing to a permanent mis-hire costs more.

The Long-Term Value

When used strategically, interim and fractional talent doesn't just fill gaps, it builds organisational capability.

They:

- Stabilise operations during chaos
- Build processes and systems that outlast them
- Mentor permanent staff to grow into bigger roles
- Give you time to make smart permanent hiring decisions
- Protect your employer brand by avoiding aspirational hiring
- Deliver results without long-term risk

That's the real power of borrowing strategically.

Section 5: Talent Management During Transformation

By Kenneth Pennington | It's Just a Fish

Managing the Mismatch

So you've hired someone. Maybe you were aspirational (and now you've read Section 1 and feel seen).

Maybe you were honest but the organisation shifted. Either way, you've got a mismatch between what the person was hired for and what they're actually doing.

What now?

Option 1: Get Honest Fast

Have the conversation. Not in six months. Now.

"We hired you for X. The reality right now is Y. Here's why. Here's how long Y is likely to last. Here's what we're doing to move toward X."

Most people can handle honesty. What they can't handle is being sold one thing and given another with no explanation.

In the conversation:

- Acknowledge the gap. Don't pretend it's not there.
- Explain why (org reality, market shift, timeline changed, etc.)
- Give a realistic timeline for when the role might shift closer to what they expected
- Ask what support they need to handle the current reality
- Check in regularly. Don't have this conversation once and assume it's fine

UK legal note: Document this conversation. If they later claim constructive dismissal, your evidence that you were transparent and supportive matters.

Option 2: Adjust the Role

Can you shift responsibilities so the role is closer to what they actually signed up for?

Maybe that means:

- Bringing in temporary support to handle the tactical work while they focus on strategy
- Redistributing tactical tasks to other team members
- Bringing in a contractor to cover the firefighting so they can lead transformation

This only works if you actually have budget and capacity to make these changes. Don't promise adjustments you can't deliver.

Option 3: Support the Exit

Sometimes the best outcome is acknowledging the mismatch and parting ways respectfully.

This is not failure. This is recognizing that you hired for a role that doesn't exist yet and the person isn't willing or able to wait for it to materialize.

How to do this well:

Have the conversation: "It's clear this role isn't what either of us expected. Let's talk about what's best for you."

Offer support: Extended notice period, flexibility to interview, reference, outplacement support if budget allows.

Settlement agreement: If you're past probation and want a clean exit, a settlement agreement protects both parties. Typically costs 1-3 months' salary plus legal fees. Worth it to avoid tribunal risk.

Protect your employer brand: How you handle exits matters. A well-managed exit creates goodwill. A messy exit creates Glassdoor reviews and damaged reputation.

UK legal note: If you're exiting someone during probation, you have more flexibility, but document the reasons clearly. If you're exiting post-probation, take legal advice. Constructive dismissal claims are expensive.

What Doesn't Work

Hoping it'll get better: It won't. If the mismatch is fundamental, time won't fix it.

Blaming the person: "They're just not strategic enough." Maybe. Or maybe you hired someone strategic and gave them tactical work.

Ignoring the problem: Disengaged employees don't quietly disappear. They underperform, spread negativity, and eventually leave on their terms (or yours, expensively).

Training and Development: The Build Option

If you're thinking "Can we train our existing people up?" here's the reality check.

(This is just one part of Paul's Build, Buy, Borrow model—see Sections 3-4 for the full strategic framework. Here we're focusing on practical implementation.)

Building capacity works if:

- You have time. Training someone to move from tactical to strategic roles doesn't happen in a few weeks. You're looking at 6-12 months minimum, often longer.
- You have budget. Training, coaching, mentoring, and external development programs cost money.
- You have their capacity. If they're already drowning in tactical work, adding "development" just creates burnout.
- They actually want it. Not everyone wants to move into strategic roles. Some people love operational work. Don't force career paths people don't want.

Building capacity doesn't work if:

- Your organisation is already on fire. If you're under-resourced and over-pressured, you don't have the space to train people up.
- You need strategic thinking now. Building someone's strategic skills while the business is waiting for strategic decisions is a recipe for frustration.
- You're hoping training will fix a hiring mistake. If you hired the wrong person for the role, training won't make them the right person.

If you're building, be explicit:

"We're investing in you to develop [skills]. Here's the timeline. Here's the support you'll get. Here's what success looks like."

And then actually provide that support. Don't say "we'll invest in your development" and then never give them time or budget to develop.

Managing Talent Through Organisational Transformation

When your organisation is transforming, your people are managing two jobs: their actual role and the emotional labor of navigating change.

That's exhausting. If you don't acknowledge it and support them through it, they'll leave.

What talent needs during transformation:

Clarity: Even if you can't give them certainty about the future, give them clarity about what you know today. "We don't know exactly what the structure will look like in six months, but here's what we know right now."

Communication: Frequent, honest updates. Even if the update is "we still don't know." Silence creates anxiety.

Support: Extra check-ins, coaching, space to vent frustration without judgment. Transformation is hard. Pretending it's not makes it harder.

Flexibility: Some people will thrive in the chaos. Others will struggle. Flex your expectations and management style accordingly.

Recognition: Acknowledge what they're managing. "I know this is tough. I see you handling [challenge], and I appreciate it."

What doesn't help:

- Pretending everything's fine
- Expecting people to just "adapt"
- Punishing people for struggling with change
- Ignoring the emotional toll of transformation

Transformation breaks people if you don't support them through it. And then you lose your best people at the exact moment you need them most.

Section 6: Making It Work

By Kenneth Pennington & Paul Withers

Implementation Framework

By: Kenneth Pennington | It's Just a Fish

You've read the white paper. You see where you've been going wrong. Now what?

Here's the step-by-step framework for hiring through transformation without setting everyone up to fail.

Step 1: Assess Your Current State (Do This First)

Before you write a job description, before you brief a recruiter, before you do anything, complete the assessment from Section 2.

Answer these questions in writing:

1. What does this person need to do in month one? (Specific tasks, not aspirational goals)
2. How long will that tactical reality last? (Be honest, add buffer)
3. What support will they have? (Budget, team, leadership attention, access)
4. What skills do we actually need right now? (Not aspirational, actual)
5. What happens if we're honest about this? (The fear and the reality)

If you can't answer these honestly, you're not ready to hire. Pause and figure out the answers first.

Step 2: Decide Your Approach

Based on your current state assessment, you need to decide how to resource this role. This is where Paul's Build, Buy, Borrow model comes in (detailed in Sections 3-4).

The short version:

Buy (permanent hire): Hire for today's needs or find someone who genuinely wants the tactical-to-strategic journey.

Build (internal development): Train existing talent if you have time, capacity, and budget.

Borrow (interim/fractional): Use contract talent to bridge today while you prepare for tomorrow.

Paul's sections will walk you through the decision framework, when each approach makes sense, and how to work with agencies effectively. Don't skip that—it's the strategic core of avoiding aspirational hiring.

Step 3: Write an Honest Job Description

If you're hiring (buying), your job description needs to reflect reality, not aspiration.

Include:

Current state work: "Initially, this role will focus on [list actual tactical needs]. This includes [specific examples]."

Timeline for transition: "As the organisation matures over the next [realistic timeframe], the role will shift toward [strategic work]."

What's hard about this role: "This role requires someone comfortable with [chaos/ambiguity/firefighting/building from scratch]. If you need clear processes and stable systems, this isn't the right role yet."

What kind of person thrives here: "This role suits someone who [loves building foundations/thrives in chaos/wants the tactical-to-strategic journey/prefers operational work]."

What you're not yet: "We're not yet [where you want to be]. We're working toward it. Here's what we're doing to get there."

This will scare some people off. That's the point. You want to scare off people who want the aspirational version and attract people who want the actual role.

Step 4: Honest Interviews

Your interview process should test for the actual role, not the aspirational one.

Ask:

- "Talk me through a time you built something from chaos." (Tactical reality check)
- "How do you feel about spending 6-12 months on operational work before shifting to strategy?" (Expectation setting)
- "What frustrates you most in a role?" (Check if current reality will frustrate them)
- "What do you need from a role to feel successful?" (Check if you can provide it)

Be explicit about the reality:

"Here's what the first six months will actually look like: [describe tactical work]. After that, it'll shift to [strategic work]. How does that sound to you?"

Watch their reaction. If they look disappointed or try to negotiate their way out of the tactical work, they're not the right person for the reality of the role.

Step 5: Onboarding with Reality

When someone starts, don't suddenly pretend the aspirational version is real.

In the first week:

- Revisit the reality of the role: "Remember we talked about the tactical work? Here's what that actually looks like."
- Set expectations: "In your first 30/60/90 days, here's what success looks like." (Be specific, be realistic)
- Check in frequently: "How are you finding the reality vs. what we discussed?”

In the first 90 days:

- Formal check-ins at 30, 60, and 90 days
- Address gaps immediately if reality doesn't match what you said

- Adjust probationary objectives if the role has shifted

Use probation properly: Probation is your safety net. Set clear, current-state objectives. Review regularly. Document everything.

Step 6: Manage Actively

Once someone's in the role, don't assume they're fine. Manage actively, especially during transformation.

Weekly check-ins: "How's the role matching your expectations? What's feeling harder than expected? What support do you need?"

Be honest about changes: If the organisation shifts and the role changes, tell them immediately. Don't wait for them to figure it out.

Address mismatches fast: If you see signs they're struggling with the reality, have the conversation. Don't hope it'll get better.

Document everything: Conversations, expectations, adjustments, concerns. If you end up in tribunal, your documentation matters.

Red Flags You're Falling Into Aspirational Hiring Again

By: Kenneth Pennington | It's Just a Fish

Watch for these warning signs that you're slipping back into old patterns:

In the job description:

- Lots of "strategic," "transformation," "innovation" language with no mention of current tactical needs
- No mention of what's actually hard about the role right now
- Reading it makes you think "this sounds like a role we don't have yet”

In the interview:

- You find yourself selling the vision more than explaining the current reality
- Candidates ask about the current state and you deflect to the future state
- You're attracted to someone because of their strategic experience but haven't tested their tactical skills

In the hire:

- You're thinking "they'll elevate us" rather than "they'll handle what we need today"
- You hired them for their last role's seniority rather than this role's requirements
- You're already planning how they'll "grow into" the strategic work without confirming they'll do the tactical work

After they start:

- They keep asking about the strategic projects you mentioned in interview
- They're pushing back on tactical work
- They're trying to transform things before the foundations are solid
- You're frustrated they're not "getting it”

If you spot these, pause. Reassess. Have honest conversations. Don't wait for the resignation.

Success Metrics: What Good Looks Like

By: Kenneth Pennington | It's Just a Fish

How do you know you've avoided aspirational hiring and hired well?

Month 1:

- New hire understands the current reality and isn't surprised by it
- They're tackling the actual work that needs doing, not trying to skip to strategy
- They're not expressing frustration about the gap between interview promises and reality

Month 3:

- They're delivering on the tactical needs you hired them for
- They're building foundations rather than trying to build strategy on chaos
- They're not job hunting (you can usually tell)

Month 6:

- They're still engaged and productive
- If the role is shifting toward more strategic work, they're ready for it
- If the role is still tactical, they're okay with that because you were honest

Month 12:

- They're still with you
- They're delivering value aligned with what you actually needed
- They'd recommend your organisation to others

Long-term:

- Reduced turnover in transformation roles
- Improved employer brand (candidates say "they were really honest about what the role involved")
- Less money wasted on mis-hires and settlement agreements
- Better organisational outcomes because you've got the right people doing the right work

Working with Agency Partners

By: Paul Withers | The HR Guys

Do You Need to Use a Recruitment Agency?

Well, clearly I'm a bit biased on this one, but I'll try to be objective. The reality is that it depends, it depends on whether you have both the time and capability to secure the results you need. If using someone like me was free, I don't think many people would turn down the support.

After twenty years recruiting HR professionals across the UK and EU, my network is strong. That means I can often reach candidates you simply won't find yourself.

So with that in mind, why wouldn't you use someone like me? The obvious answer is cost. If you don't want to pay a fee, there's no deal to be had. Or perhaps you already have capable in-house resource: someone with the experience, time, and network to run a full search properly. If that's the case, brilliant.

But too often, internal hiring means posting a job ad and hoping for the best. You can always find someone for a role, but if your business is serious about finding the right person, then recruitment has to be taken seriously too.

For interim and fractional hires, most clients tell me they need three things:

(1) Someone good,
(2) A fair, transparent cost, and
(3) Speed.

That's exactly what a partner like The HR Guys helps you achieve.

Recruitment fees, like anything, come down to perspective.

Do you see them as a cost, or as an investment in your business?

If achieving what we've discussed in the earlier sections matters, clarity, capability, continuity, then the right recruitment partner is very much an investment.

Why Agencies Still Matter

Hiring is one of the most important decisions any organisation makes.

Done well, it sets you up for success.

Done badly, it drains time, money, and morale.

That's where a good recruitment partner earns their value, not by sending CVs, but by helping you make the right hire, at the right time, for the right reasons.

Too often, organisations treat agencies as a last resort or a cost to control. In reality, the right partnership can save thousands and prevent months of disruption.

When to Engage an Agency

You don't always need an agency. But there are clear moments when you should use one.

Use an agency when:

- You're hiring for a critical or senior role where getting it wrong would be costly
- You need to move quickly but can't compromise on quality
- You want access to a broader or more passive candidate network
- You're working through change and need external perspective
- You don't have in-house expertise or capacity for the search.

Go direct when:

- The role is well defined, volume-based, or part of a regular hiring cycle
- You already have strong internal sourcing capability.

The Agency as a Strategic Partner

A good agency should act as an extension of your team, not a middleman. They bring market intelligence, honest feedback, and help you avoid the mistakes that lead to failed hires.

The best partnerships work when there's transparency about current challenges (not just future goals), when the agency understands both the reality of your business and your vision, and when both sides treat the relationship as ongoing, not transactional.

When agencies are involved early, they can test whether the role brief matches the market, advise on salary benchmarks and job scope, identify risks before you go to market, and challenge unrealistic expectations.

That's how you prevent aspirational hiring before it starts.

How to Brief an Agency Properly

Most hiring problems start with poor briefing.

If your recruiter doesn't have the full picture, you can't expect the right outcome. A strong brief should cover the current state (what's really happening now, workload, culture, challenges), the future vision (what success looks like 6–12 months from now), the timeline (when the role needs to deliver results), the support structure (who's in the team, what help they'll have), and the non negotiable (what skills or experience are truly essential).

It's tempting to only sell the "future," but honesty about "today" is what ensures your new hire stays.

What Good Agencies Bring Beyond Recruitment

A strong partner agency should offer market insight (what candidates really want and what competitors are offering), advisory input (when to go interim, when to hold off, when to promote internally), risk management (helping you avoid legal, reputational, or retention issues), and candidate experience (ensuring your process builds, not damages, your employer brand).

They're not just filling a vacancy, they're protecting your reputation and future talent pipeline.

Cost and Value: Seeing the Bigger Picture

It's easy to see agency fees as an extra cost. But if you view them through the lens of risk, speed, and accuracy, the value becomes clear.

A good agency saves you the cost of a bad hire, weeks or months of lost productivity, internal time spent screening and interviewing the wrong people, and the brand damage from a poor candidate experience.

Red Flags to Watch For

Not all agencies are equal. Here's what to avoid: they oversell candidates without understanding your current state, they avoid challenging unrealistic expectations, they push for speed over fit, they don't meet candidates before presenting them, or they see their role as ending once a CV is sent.

If that's what you're getting, you don't have a partner, you have a supplier.

What Makes a Great Agency Relationship

When it works, the partnership feels easy. You get insight, not pressure. Honesty, not hype. Look for a recruiter who asks tough questions about your reality and your readiness, gives you clear feedback even when it's uncomfortable, has a track record in your field, and is more interested in understanding your needs than closing a deal. The best agencies care about relationships and outcomes, not transactions.

The Agency Partnership Model

The most effective way to work with an agency is through a partnership model rather than a one-off engagement. That might mean retained search for senior or confidential roles (focused, structured, and fully accountable), exclusive agreements for key hires (giving you priority and better terms), or ongoing advisory support (keeping you connected to market changes and available talent).

When agencies know your business well, they can act fast when you need them. They already understand your culture, standards, and pace, no need to start from scratch. That's when the relationship starts to pay dividends.

Agencies and Transformation: Getting the Timing Right

During periods of transformation, timing is everything. Hiring too early creates mismatch. Hiring too late creates pressure. A good agency helps you balance both by advising when to bring in interim or fractional talent, knowing when the market is ready for your permanent role, and helping you shape the brief as the business evolves. They're not just matching CVs, they’re managing change.

A Partnership Built on Honesty

The best relationships between clients and agencies are built on honesty, not spin. If you tell your agency the truth about where you are, they can help you find someone who fits, and stays.

That's how you move from aspirational hiring to successful hiring. When you work with an agency that truly understands your business, you're not just filling a vacancy, you’re building capability, protecting your brand, and hiring with purpose.

That's the real value of a strong agency partnership.

Conclusion: From Aspirational to Actual

By Paul Withers

Here's what twenty years of placing HR professionals has taught me: most hiring failures aren't about finding the wrong person. They're about asking the wrong question.

The wrong question is: "Who do we need to become the organisation we want to be?"

The right question is: "Who do we need to handle where we actually are right now?"

Answer the second question honestly, and the first question takes care of itself. Because once you've got someone handling today's reality effectively, you can build toward tomorrow's vision.

But if you hire for tomorrow's vision and ignore today's reality, you get neither.

Aspirational hiring sounds strategic. It feels ambitious. But it's actually the opposite.

It's avoidance.

You're avoiding the hard truth about where your organisation actually is by hiring for where you wish it was.

The organisations that hire successfully through transformation do three things differently:

1. **They assess their current state brutally honestly** — No spin, no optimism, no "we'll get through this phase quickly." Just: this is where we are, this is what needs doing, this is how long it'll realistically take.
2. **They choose the right resourcing approach** — Build, Buy, or Borrow. Not automatically permanent. Not automatically interim. The right approach for their actual situation.
3. **They're honest with candidates** — The job spec includes today's tactical reality, not just tomorrow's strategic vision. The interview explains the chaos, not just the transformation. The offer sets expectations for what the first year will actually involve.

It's not complicated. But it requires discipline.

Kenneth Pennington

The legal piece matters more than most organisations realize. When you hire aspirationally and it goes wrong, you're not just losing a good person. You're creating risk.

Constructive dismissal claims succeed when someone can show the role wasn't as described. Wrongful dismissal claims succeed when you end a relationship that was built on misrepresentation. Discrimination claims get harder to defend when the story you told at interview doesn't match the reality someone experienced.

Your defence in all of these? Documentation showing you were honest from the start.

Job description that includes current state work? Interview notes showing you explained the reality? Contract that reflects the actual role, not the aspirational one? That's your protection.

The irony is this: the honesty that protects you legally is the same honesty that prevents the problem in the first place. When you're upfront about where you are and what the role will actually involve, you attract people who want that journey. And they stay.

Paul Withers

If there's one thing I want you to take from this white paper, it's this: hiring through transformation doesn't have to be a disaster. It just requires you to stop pretending you're somewhere you're not.

Use the frameworks. Do the diagnostic. Be honest in your job specs. Choose Build, Buy, or Borrow based on your actual situation.

Work with partners who challenge your thinking instead of just sending you CVs.

That's how you go from aspirational hiring to successful hiring.

That's how you build the organisation you want without breaking the people who work there.

And that's how you avoid wasting time, money, and credibility on mis-hires that never should have happened in the first place.

Section 7: What's Next for You

By Paul Withers & Kenneth Pennington

If You're Reading This, You're Probably in One of Three Situations

Situation 1: You're about to hire and you're not sure what to do

You know you need capability. You're not sure whether to hire permanent, develop internal talent, or bring in interim support. You're worried about getting it wrong.

What to do next:

1. **Complete the current state assessment** (Section 2). Be brutally honest. Where are you actually, not where you wish you were?
2. **Use the Build, Buy, Borrow framework** (Section 3). Based on your actual situation, which approach makes sense? If you're not sure, that's a signal you might need external perspective.
3. **If you're leaning toward "Borrow,"** read Section 4 again. Interim and fractional talent is often the smartest move during uncertainty, it gives you capability now while you figure out the permanent solution.
4. **Write an honest job spec** (Section 6). Include the tactical reality, not just the strategic vision. Test it: if you were a candidate, would you feel misled six months in?
5. **Consider talking to a recruitment partner early.** Not to start hiring, but to pressure-test your thinking. A good partner will tell you if you're being aspirational, if your brief matches the market, and whether your timeline is realistic. (Section 6 covers how to work with agencies effectively.)

Situation 2: You've already hired and it's not working

Someone's in role. It's not going well. There's a gap between what you hired them for and what they're actually doing.

You're not sure whether to fix it or move on.

What to do next:

1. **Have the honest conversation now** (Section 5). Don't wait. Acknowledge the gap between expectation and reality. Explain why. Discuss options.

2. **Assess whether it's fixable.** Is this a role mismatch (the role isn't what they signed up for) or a performance issue (they can't do the work that needs doing)? You can manage performance. Role mismatch is harder.
3. **If it's a mismatch, consider bringing in interim support.** This protects the permanent hire from burnout and gives you breathing space to either adjust the role or help them transition out gracefully.
4. **Document everything.** If you end up parting ways, your documentation showing you were honest about the role's evolution is your legal protection.

Situation 3: You keep making the same mistake

You've had multiple senior hires leave within the first year. You know something's wrong but you're not sure what.

What to do next:

1. **Audit your last three senior hires.** What did the job spec promise? What was the actual work? Where was the gap? Be forensic. The pattern will show you where you're being aspirational.
2. **Stop hiring until you fix the pattern.** Seriously. If you keep hiring aspirationally, you'll keep getting the same result. Bring in interim support to handle the immediate need while you figure out the permanent solution properly.
3. **Get external perspective.** You're too close to this. Whether it's a recruitment partner, an HR consultant, or a peer who's been through transformation, talk to someone who can see what you can’t.

The Build, Buy, Borrow Decision Tree

If you're still unsure which approach to take, use this:

Start here: Is the organisation stable and the role clearly defined for the next 12+ months?

→ **YES** → Buy (hire permanent)

→ **NO** → Go to next question

Next: Do you have internal talent who could grow into the role with support?

→ **YES** → Can you give them 6-12 months of protected development time?

→ → **YES** → Build (develop internal talent, potentially with interim support to reduce their workload)

→ → **NO** → Borrow (bring in interim while you build internal capability)

→ **NO** → Go to next question

Next: Do you need results in the next 3-6 months?

→ **YES** → Borrow (bring in interim/fractional)

→ **NO** → Is the future role likely to be significantly different from today's role?

→ → **YES** → Borrow now, Buy later (use interim to stabilize, then hire permanent once you know what you actually need)

→ → **NO** → Buy, but be honest (hire permanent, but make sure the job spec reflects reality)

Working with a Recruitment Partner

Kenneth Pennington

If you decide you need external support, whether to pressure-test your thinking or to actually hire, here’s how to set yourself up for success:

Before you engage:

- Complete the current state assessment (Section 2)
- Be clear on whether you're looking for Build, Buy, or Borrow
- Identify your non-negotiables vs. nice-to-haves
- Be prepared to be challenged on your brief

When you engage:

- Share the reality, not just the vision
- Explain the timeline honestly
- Be clear about what success looks like in the first six months
- Ask them to challenge your thinking

Red flags to watch for:

- They don't ask tough questions about your current state
- They accept your brief without pushback
- They push for permanent when you might need interim
- They oversell candidates without understanding fit

What good looks like:

- They pressure-test whether you're ready to hire
- They suggest the right approach (Build, Buy, Borrow) for your situation
- They're honest about market reality and timelines
- They protect your employer brand by setting honest expectations with candidates

Paul Withers

If you're working with The HR Guys specifically, here's what to expect:

1. **Discovery conversation** — We'll walk through your current state, your vision, and where the gaps are. We'll challenge whether you're ready to hire and what approach makes sense.
2. **Strategic recommendation** — We'll advise whether you should Build, Buy, or Borrow. Sometimes the answer is "don't hire yet, bring in interim support while you figure it out." We'll tell you that.
3. **If we move forward** — We'll work with you to write an honest brief, source the right candidates (permanent or interim), and manage the process from first conversation to successful placement.
4. **Post-placement support** — Whether you've hired permanent or brought in interim, we stay involved to ensure the transition works. If it's interim-to-permanent, we manage that transition smoothly.

The goal isn't just to fill a role. It's to help you build sustainable capability without the disaster of aspirational hiring.

Final Thought

Paul Withers

Most organisations wait until they've made the mistake before they seek help. They hire aspirationally, watch it fail, and then call someone like me to clean it up.

Don't wait.

If you're about to hire during transformation, talk to someone who's seen it before. Pressure-test your thinking. Make sure you're not hiring for tomorrow when you need someone for today.

Because the cost of getting this wrong isn't just money. It's time you'll never get back, credibility you'll struggle to rebuild, and people who deserved better.

Get it right the first time.

How to Reach Us

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Whether you're ready to hire, considering your options, or just want to pressure-test your thinking, get in touch. The conversation costs nothing. The insights might save you everything.

About the Authors

Paul Withers | The HR Guys

Paul has spent twenty years building one of the UK's most trusted networks in interim and fractional HR talent. He's placed senior HR professionals across hundreds of organisations, from scale-ups navigating hypergrowth to FTSE companies managing complex transformation.

Paul developed the Build, Buy, Borrow framework from real-world experience: watching organisations make expensive hiring mistakes, then developing the strategic approach that prevents them. He works with CEOs, CFOs, and HR leaders who are trying to build capability during periods of change without the disaster of aspirational hiring.

When he's not placing talent, he's advising clients on when NOT to hire, often the most valuable conversation he has. Paul's philosophy is simple: strategic resourcing isn't about filling vacancies, it's about building organisations that work.

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Kenneth Pennington | It's Just a Fish

Kenneth runs It's Just a Fish, an HR consultancy focused on finding a different way to look at change and HR. With a background in visual communications and a master's in employment law, he helps organisations think differently about HR challenges, especially when companies are trying to build their future while managing their present.

Kenneth brings the diagnostic lens and legal grounding that keeps organisations honest about where they actually are and protected when making difficult people decisions during transformation.

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