



2026

Build, Borrow or Hire?

**What's the Right Answer
When Your Team Has a Gap?**

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A message from our founder

When there's a gap in a team, the reaction is often to think about recruitment.

Someone has left, workloads are increasing or a new skill is needed, so the next step seems obvious, write the job advert and start looking.

But it isn't always that simple.

Before deciding to hire, there are other questions worth asking.

- Could someone already in the business develop into the role?
- Is the problem actually one of capacity rather than capability?
- Would temporary support give you what you need without creating a permanent position?

That's what prompted this report.

The build, borrow or hire decision is not quite as straightforward as it sounds, and there is no single answer that works for every business.

My hope is that this guide gives you a useful way to look at the choices, work out what problem you are actually trying to solve, and decide what makes most sense for your business.



A gap appears in the team and the instinct is to recruit.

But before writing the job advert, it's worth stepping back and asking what the business actually needs.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sarah Bishop". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Sarah" and "Bishop" being capitalized and prominent.

SARAH BISHOP
FOUNDER & CEO

What's the Right Answer When Your Team Has a Gap?



There comes a point in most businesses when something simply isn't working quite as it should. Perhaps there is more work than the existing team can comfortably handle, someone has moved on and left a hole behind them, or you have realised that an important skill is missing from the business.

That is usually when the same three options appear.

- Build - developing somebody you already employ.
- Borrow - bringing in contract or interim support for a set period.
- Hire - recruiting permanently.

It sounds straightforward, but the answer is not always as obvious as it first appears.

The trouble is that businesses can become creatures of habit. If you have always promoted from within, you naturally look for someone internally. If you have always recruited when a gap appears, you start writing a job advert before you have properly worked out what the problem actually is.

Neither approach is necessarily wrong. The problem comes when the solution is chosen before the question has really been considered.

There is some useful UK research behind this, although the figures only tell part of the story. The British Chambers of Commerce found in 2026 that 73 per cent of businesses trying to recruit were having difficulty finding the people they needed. At the same time, fewer businesses were expecting their workforce to grow.

That combination creates an interesting situation. Fewer organisations may be looking to add people, but those that do need them can still find it surprisingly difficult.

So, before automatically deciding that the answer is another hire, it is worth taking a step back and asking what sort of gap you actually have.

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Is it a skills gap or a capacity gap?

This is probably the most useful distinction you can make.

A skills gap means you already have someone who could potentially do the job, but they do not yet have everything they need to do it confidently or independently. They might be new to a particular responsibility, still learning a system, or developing the experience needed to take the next step.

That does not necessarily mean you have the wrong person.

Sometimes people simply need time, guidance and the opportunity to develop. If someone has the right attitude, understands the business and is capable of learning, bringing in somebody else from outside could mean replacing a problem that might have solved itself with a little investment.

The more useful question is whether that person could reasonably get there with the right support.

A capacity gap is different. The knowledge and ability already exist within the business, but there simply are not enough hours in the day.

You see this when everyone is busy, deadlines are becoming harder to meet, people are constantly covering for one another and the phrase "we'll get to it when things calm down" has become part of the furniture.

If the extra pressure is caused by a project, a temporary increase in workload or something with a definite end date, bringing in additional help for a period could make far more sense than creating a permanent position.

On the other hand, if you have been dealing with the same level of pressure for the last twelve months and there is no sign of it disappearing, you probably need to stop treating it as temporary.

Sometimes the answer really is another person.

The cost of doing nothing is easy to miss

One of the awkward things about an open gap is that it does not always look like a problem.

The work still gets done. People stay late, priorities get shuffled around, somebody picks up the extra responsibility, and everyone manages to keep things moving. Until they don't.

The cost of an unfilled role or missing skill rarely appears neatly on a spreadsheet. It is more likely to show up as overtime, delayed work, frustrated employees, missed opportunities or your most capable people spending their time doing work that somebody else should have been handling.

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UK research has found that employers experiencing skills gaps commonly report heavier workloads for existing employees as one of the consequences. That makes perfect sense when you think about it. Work does not disappear because there is nobody available to do it. It simply moves somewhere else.

This is also why "doing nothing for now" is not necessarily the cheapest option.

It can feel cheaper to leave things as they are while you work out what to do next, but if the same people are carrying the extra workload every week, there is a cost attached to that decision as well.

It is worth asking what the gap is costing you while you are deciding how to close it.

When developing someone internally makes sense

Developing someone already in the business can be an excellent answer, particularly when you have someone who understands the organisation and has the potential to take on more.

There is an obvious advantage here. You are not starting from scratch.

They already know the people, the customers, the systems and, probably, quite a lot about how things work. What they may not have is the experience or knowledge needed to take on a particular responsibility.

The important bit is being realistic about what development will actually involve.

Training is not a magic wand. Sending somebody on a course does not automatically mean they can do the job afterwards, particularly when the skill involved depends on judgement, experience or years of practice.

If you can explain the missing knowledge as a process that someone can learn, development may be relatively straightforward. If what you are trying to develop is judgement that normally takes years to acquire, you need to allow considerably more time.

There is also the small matter of who is going to do the teaching.

A development plan that says someone will "learn from the team" sounds perfectly reasonable until you ask who in the team has the time, experience and patience to actually teach them.

That person needs to exist.

They also need enough protected time to do it. Otherwise development becomes something everyone agrees is important, right up until something more urgent comes along. And something more urgent nearly always comes along.

When bringing in outside help makes more sense

There are times when you do not need another permanent employee at all. You just need some extra expertise or capacity for a while.

That could be because you have a particular project to complete, a temporary increase in workload, or a skill that is needed now but is unlikely to be needed at the same level indefinitely.

Bringing in contract, interim or fractional support can make sense in those circumstances because it gives you some breathing space without committing the business to a permanent appointment.

It can also be useful when you have someone internally who could eventually develop the required skill, but you do not have anybody available to teach them.

An experienced person can come in, get the work moving and, if the arrangement is planned properly, help the existing team develop at the same time.

That last part is important.

If you are bringing someone in temporarily, think about what happens when they leave. You do not want to find yourself six months later with exactly the same problem, having simply moved it down the road.

A good handover should be part of the arrangement from the beginning. Who will take over the work? What needs to be documented? Who needs to understand the process before the temporary support disappears?

There is also a tendency to look at the day rate and decide that temporary help is expensive.

That is not always a particularly useful comparison.

The better question is what the unfinished work, missed opportunity or additional pressure is costing you while the gap remains open.

And sometimes you really do need to hire

There are plenty of situations where developing someone internally or bringing in temporary help is simply delaying the inevitable.

If the need is permanent, the workload is established and nobody currently in the business can realistically grow into the role within the required timescale, then hiring may be the sensible answer.

The same applies when the problem keeps coming back.

If you are repeatedly trying to cover the same workload whenever someone is absent, takes holiday or becomes busy with something else, you may not have a development issue at all. You may simply be short of a person.

The important thing is to make sure you are hiring for the job you actually need rather than hiring because somebody currently in the business cannot do something.

Those are not necessarily the same thing.

A job description built around everything your existing team member cannot do can produce a rather odd candidate profile. You can end up looking for somebody who is almost the opposite of the person you already have, rather than defining what the business genuinely needs from the new appointment.

Start with the work instead.

What does this person actually need to deliver? What would you expect them to have achieved after six or twelve months? What experience would demonstrate that they can do it?

Those questions are generally more useful than creating an enormous list of qualifications and requirements simply because they appeared on the last job description.

Don't make the candidate pool smaller than it needs to be

This is particularly important when recruiting is already proving difficult.

The Department for Education's Employer Skills Survey found that 27 per cent of UK vacancies were considered difficult to fill because applicants lacked the necessary skills, qualifications or experience.

There is an important distinction in that finding.

It tells us about the people who applied. It does not necessarily tell us how many people in the wider working population could actually do the job.

That is a rather important difference.

Someone can be perfectly capable of doing a role and still have absolutely no intention of applying for your vacancy. They may be happily employed, not looking at job boards, or simply not have seen your advert.

So if you have a vacancy that attracts very few suitable applicants, it is worth asking whether there is genuinely a shortage of people who can do the work, or whether your current approach is only reaching the people who happen to be looking.

Those are two very different problems.

It is also worth looking carefully at your requirements.

- Does the person genuinely need a particular qualification?
- Is five years' experience essential, or would somebody with three years and the right ability be perfectly capable?
- Does that particular software package really matter if they have used something similar?

Every additional requirement reduces the number of people who can realistically apply.

That does not mean lowering your standards. It means being clear about which things genuinely matter and which have simply found their way onto the job description because they were there last time.

Four questions worth asking before you decide

When you have a gap in the team, there are four questions that can usually make the decision considerably clearer.

First, how long can the gap realistically stay open?

Not how long would you ideally like it to stay open, but how long can the business cope before something important starts to suffer?

If the answer is a few weeks, developing someone internally probably is not going to solve the immediate problem. If you have plenty of time, the calculation changes. Sometimes the answer is to split the problem. Bring in temporary help for the part that cannot wait while developing someone internally for the longer term.

Second, is there someone who could do the work and someone who could teach them?

Both matter.

Having someone enthusiastic about developing is useful. Having someone capable of teaching them is even more useful.

If nobody in the business can provide that guidance, development may not be the answer this time, however appealing it sounds.

Third, is the need permanent?

This sounds obvious, but it is surprisingly easy to overlook when everyone is busy. If the additional work is linked to a project, a temporary contract or a particular period of growth, it may not justify a permanent appointment.

If the same workload has been there for a year and is likely to remain, continually using temporary solutions can become an expensive way of avoiding the decision.

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Finally, what is the gap costing you while it remains open?

Look beyond the obvious salary comparison.

Consider lost work, delayed deadlines, overtime and the amount of time your strongest people are spending covering something that is not really their job.

That last one is particularly easy to overlook because it does not arrive as a separate invoice.

Apprenticeships and placements have a place too

There is another option that is sometimes overlooked because it does not provide an immediate answer.

Apprenticeships and work placements can be a good way of developing capability for the future, particularly where you know that the same skills will be needed repeatedly.

They are not, however, a quick solution to a vacancy that needs filling next month. That is not a criticism. It is simply a question of timescale.

If you have a recurring problem and can see that the business will continue to need those skills, it makes sense to think further ahead and consider how you could develop people rather than repeatedly trying to find finished articles elsewhere.

The best time to build a longer-term development route is usually when everything is reasonably calm, rather than when everyone is already running around trying to solve an immediate problem.

Think about what is coming next

There is also a useful argument for developing people before a new requirement lands on your doorstep.

UK employers surveyed by the Department for Education expected to need to upskill their workforce over the following year, with changes in technology and regulation among the reasons given.

That makes sense.

If someone already understands your business, your customers and the way your organisation operates, they have a considerable head start when they need to learn something new.

You do not necessarily need to wait until a new system arrives or a new requirement becomes urgent before thinking about who might be able to take it on.

Sometimes the best development plan is simply looking a little further ahead.

So, which one is right?

There is no universal answer, which is probably why the build, borrow or hire question keeps coming back.

If the right person is already in the business but needs time, support and experience, developing them could be the best route.

If the need is temporary, urgent or requires expertise you do not currently have, bringing someone in for a period could give you the breathing space you need.

If the need is permanent and there is nobody internally who can realistically grow into it within the required timeframe, hiring is probably the sensible option.

And sometimes the answer is a combination.

- You might bring in outside help now while developing someone internally for the future.
- You might recruit permanently while using temporary support to keep things moving.
- Or you might realise that the role you were about to advertise does not actually need to exist in the form you first imagined.

That is why it is worth defining the problem before deciding on the solution.

The biggest mistake is assuming that a difficult hiring market automatically means you need to hire more creatively, advertise in more places or offer more money. Sometimes you do.

Sometimes you simply have the wrong problem in front of you.

Take the gap you are dealing with now and ask yourself how long it can remain open, whether someone inside could realistically take it on, whether the need is permanent and what the business is actually losing while you wait.

Once you have answered those questions honestly, the right route is usually much easier to see.

And if you still cannot decide, that may be the point at which a conversation with someone who knows the market is useful. Not necessarily because they have a magic answer, but because sometimes it helps to have somebody outside the business look at the problem without all the assumptions that have built up around it.

After all, the aim is not simply to fill a gap.

It is to solve the right problem.

A little about Sarah Bishop and Recruit Recruit Ltd



Whether you're a sole trader hiring your first team member, a VC-backed startup needing to scale fast, or a corporate looking for top-tier C-suite talent, one thing stays true:

Your business grows when your people grow.

I help founders, CEOs and business leaders build brilliant teams through:

- Recruitment: finding and placing the right people for the right roles or embedding a talent team into growing businesses
- Sales & Leadership Training: developing high-performing teams that sell, lead and deliver
- Speaking & EmCeeing: energising events and conferences with insight, humour and practical takeaways
- Coaching: supporting leaders to grow confidently, communicate better, and build culture that sticks

Over the years, I've supported businesses at every stage, from bedroom startups to scale-ups and established firms navigating change. What they all have in common? A vision to grow and the ambition to get the right people on board to make it happen.

I bring no-nonsense advice, energy, empathy and results, whether I'm:

- Hiring a game-changing leadership role
- Training a founder-led team to sell with confidence
- Speaking on stage about team-building, fearless follow-up, or people strategy
- Coaching a business owner through their first ever hire

So, let's talk if:

- You're ready to grow and want to hire with confidence
- You need training or coaching to get more from your team (or yourself!)
- You're planning an event and want a speaker or EmCee who brings both energy and value

Drop me a message or connect – let's build something brilliant together.

Email: sarah@recruitrecruit.co.uk or call 01902 763066



Now – #1 Bestseller on Amazon – “Scale Up!: The Founders’ Guide to Accelerating Growth by Building Dream Teams” by Sarah Bishop