

Competition is High for Rail Execs Who Can Lead in Uncertain Times, Recruiter Says

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Merritt Canfield, chief executive officer of Meritus Executive Search Excellence

Merritt Canfield is chief executive officer of Meritus Executive Search Excellence, which provides executive search recruitment, strategy, advisory and placement services to the passenger- and freight-rail industry.

Senior Associate Editor Julie Sneider recently conducted an email interview with Canfield to gain her assessment of the current market for recruiting talent to fill top leadership positions.

RailPrime: What is the current market for filling leadership positions in the rail industry?

Canfield: The disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic will drive a continuous need for acquiring leadership in the rail industry. Naturally, we will see more retirements from leaders who have held onto their positions to help move and direct their organizations forward through the disruption. We will see leaders who leave for new opportunities, but I do not believe we will see the mass exodus other industries might experience.

In uncertain times, having leaders who can perform and deliver a competitive advantage in the market is critical. The talent war has not changed. The challenge is having leaders who can lead with facts, transparency, communication, compassion, the ability to drive and retain a talented workforce in ever-changing environments while strengthening culture, strategy, financial performance and staying nimble.

This is the most challenging time for some leaders, and if they lead successfully, the reward will be a competitive advantage in recovery and growth.

RailPrime: How competitive is it to find impact-players/performers?

Canfield: The competition for these leaders is high. When searching, it is critical to understand if they have generated results, prior measurable accomplishments, cultures and legacies, and whether they meet your organization's future expectations and culture. It is vital to understand the industry's most impressive leaders to attract and acquire impactful leaders.

Looking ahead, the ability to find extraordinary leaders will be very competitive in the market. The exemplary leadership talent will strengthen and develop people who will drive growth. When an organization conducts an executive or leadership search, it will require the search committee to be aligned with the same goal, streamline the talent acquisition process, have the knowledge, skill, and decisiveness to evaluate passive versus active leadership candidates and who will make the most significant impact on the organization.

RailPrime: How will the market evolve over the rest of this year and into next year in terms of finding and filling key positions?

Canfield: An important consideration for most organizations in the long term is to acquire the best talent who will advance their organization in the pandemic recovery and post-pandemic. Absolute attention must be placed on driving new enhancements along with more traditional talent acquisition; recruitment; diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI); development; succession planning; and retention strategies in the workplace.

All organizations in the industry should be asking how they can build strong, more diverse teams as we move into 2022 and beyond. Virtual hiring is here to stay for traditional and remote employees. The speed of making a hire will be rapid. Searching for what can now be a remote position means geographic flexibility and looking at candidates in other markets that could not have been geographically considered in the pre-pandemic period.

The strength in the market will lie in people, driving performance in a hybrid workplace, and investment in the workforce. Retention efforts will be crucial to keep employees in the rail industry, and not lose them and their transferable skills to other industries.



Also, in the past 16 months, market conditions hampered entry-level talent joining the industry, which will present a gap in talent in the coming years. Organizations will have to evaluate and bridge talent gaps that they face due to the disruption of the pandemic. Opportunities remain for organizations to prioritize efforts on succession planning and the transferring of information that comes with the individuals involved in a succession plan.

RailPrime: How challenging is it to fill positions at any level of experience in the rail industry? Will that change over the next year or two as the pandemic (hopefully) fades?

Canfield: A candidate who is a true impact player will most likely be evaluating multiple offers. The market is tight for many specialized positions in the industry and will continue as the pandemic fades.

Companies with a lengthy talent acquisition process will have less advantage over organizations with human resources, hiring authority and interview teams on the same page. Teams will have to be more focused and flexible in a market where candidates voice more requirements than ever before. It will be necessary for companies to reevaluate compensation and benefit packages to remain competitive at or above the market. The use of creative incentives, rewards and recognition to attract candidates at any level of experience will be a must to be more attractive than the competition.

One of the most significant shortcomings made in talent acquisition (long-term strategy attracting, sourcing, recruiting employees) and recruitment (short-term hiring) is not finding the best people. The cost of making a mistake and the wrong hire is rising.

RailPrime: What are the best practices in the talent acquisition process? What do employers need to keep in mind when looking for new talent?

Canfield: There is no one correct answer for any or all organizations. What is essential today is to streamline, speed up the process and allow flexibility.

Clearly communicate to the market your organization's mission, values, the difference the organization brings and the position description for any search. Your organization must be on the same page: Make sure anyone involved in the process is communicating the same message and is aware of compensation, travel, office location, expectations and onboarding processes.

Focus on how to integrate remote employees into, and making a hire feel part of, the overall organization immediately. To have an advantage in the market, understand that your organization may need to prioritize and be forward-thinking about professional development/work-life balance [benefits] now and in post-pandemic times.

RailPrime: Will remote or hybrid work remain as options in rail once the pandemic is over, or will employers end those options since not all rail jobs can be performed remotely?

Canfield: There will be remote, hybrid and traditional work environments in the rail industry. Many positions in railroading will always be on-site and require a conventional work setting.

However, what has changed for many employers is that some jobs in their organization now can be remote, which enables companies to gain talent in new geographic locations. Employees can live in areas that they could not live in before due to on-site job requirements. Most employees will want a hybrid approach to further their careers, stay in front of leaders, collaborate, and be mentored and developed throughout the organization.

Internal resources will have to be offered to meet remote and hybrid employee demands, and communication will have to be increased for employees to feel tied to the organization. The task becomes uniting the remote, hybrid and traditional scenarios into one workforce.

