

Commerciality is the currency now, whatever your job title

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In recent months I have worked on a number of senior marketing appointments, a managing director search and a chief operating officer role. Completely different jobs, entirely different businesses and very different processes and hiring panels.

However, each briefing process had exactly the same theme. Whatever else the candidate specification, whatever their track record or technical depth, the client wanted to know one key thing: is this person inherently 'commercial'?

There was no space for an 'operational' managing director, no luxury of a marketer that was unable to demonstrate direct accountability for commercial growth, and the COO had to be able to link operational decision-making directly to growth and profitability.

The functional skills and experience were assumed, my job is to shortlist to brief. What the clients needed was the comfort that the person in front of them understood how the business makes money and would take decisions accordingly... and more than that, they had the ability to 'hustle'. We throw that term around all the time, it sounds very cliché. But the truth is Professional Capability is great, but if there is no capacity to 'hustle', well there's probably too much risk.

The gap is wider than most people admit.

The research suggests the clients are right to ask. In a [Gartner survey](#) of 426 senior leaders, only 32% of executives said their chief marketing officer makes compelling business strategy recommendations, and only 34% said their CMO can identify which marketing activity contributes most to growth. Gartner's prediction is blunt: by 2027, more than 40% of CMOs who push for bigger brand budgets will lose influence with the rest of the executive team because they can't show the return. So if you are a candidate looking to professionally upskill, to add value to your CV, it might not be another AI course that future-proofs your career.

Marketing is not alone. The Talent Strategy Group's [2026 Global Human Resources Report](#), drawn from more than 500 respondents, found that only 28% of chief HR officers say "knowing the business deeply" completely describes them. Across the profession it was the lowest rated capability of the seven measured, by some distance.

These are people at the top of their functions, and by their own account or their colleagues', most of them fall short on the one quality every hiring panel is looking for.

No role is purely operational any more.

For a long time, being commercial was somebody else's job. Sales brought the money in, finance counted it, and everyone else was judged on running their own area well. Operations kept things moving. HR looked after people. Marketing looked after the brand.

That division has long since gone, and the hiring market explains why. Demand for staff has fallen for thirty-four consecutive months according to the [KPMG and REC Report on Jobs](#), and the CIPD finds only [26% of employers](#) expect to add headcount this quarter. When a business makes fewer senior appointments, each one has to justify its cost. A leader who runs a tidy function and can't connect it to revenue, margin or growth suddenly looks like an overhead.

The roles once described as operational or transactional now sit closest to the numbers. An operations director controls most of the cost base. A head of customer service holds the retention figure. The expectation has caught up with the reality, and the job titles haven't.

And that's not to say that the professionals in these roles didn't already know it and deliver it! The crucial part is being able to articulate it and demonstrate ownership of the results!

How to demonstrate 'commercial nous'

Being commercial is not the same as having worked in sales. It means knowing how your organisation makes money, what your own decisions cost and return, and being willing to choose between good options on that basis. Most senior people have more of it than their CV suggests. They are just not practiced in articulating it. Sometimes, despite being inherently 'commercial', candidates simply don't have clear, official business accountabilities in their delivery.

On your CV

- **Put a number on everything you can:** the budget you held, the revenue you influenced, the cost you removed, the margin you protected.
- **Describe outcomes for the business, not activity in your function.** "Rebuilt the onboarding process" is operational. "Cut customer churn in the first ninety days" is commercial.
- **Say what you stopped.** Ending something that wasn't paying its way is stronger evidence than launching something new.

In interview

- **Know the business model** of the company in front of you before you walk in, and say where you think the pressure is.

- **Talk about trade-offs.** Panels are reassured by candidates who can explain what they chose not to do and why.
- **Use the language of the board,** not the language of your discipline. If you can't explain your work to a finance director, you haven't finished thinking about it.

In your development

- **Learn to read a profit and loss account.** It is the best investment a non-financial leader can make.
 - **Ask for ownership** of a budget or a P&L, even a small one.
 - **Spend time with customers and with the sales team.** A non-executive or trustee role will show you how a whole organisation is weighed up.
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A challenge to employers:

Employers have work to do here as well. "Commercial" is too often a comfort word, used in a debrief to describe a subjective *feeling* about a candidate. If it matters enough to decide the appointment, it deserves a definition. Say what it means in your business, put it in the brief and test it with a real problem in the interview.

For candidates, the conclusion is straightforward. Functional excellence gets you on the shortlist. Commercial credibility gets you the job, and it is the one part of your value you can raise at any stage of a career. I see it in every process, and I often know from the outset which candidate is most likely to achieve the offer, and regularly coach candidates to truly showcase capability.

Leitmotif Partners works with employers and senior candidates on precisely that question, and a conversation is the best place to begin. Email steph@leitmotifpartners.co.uk

