The Flex Executive Economy

Study Report 2026

How organizations and senior leaders are navigating the rise of flexible executive leadership.

A Collaborative Research Initiative by
SHRM and Board Match-Up

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October 2026

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Achal Khanna
CEO -SHRM India,
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For decades, the default response to a need for senior capability was straightforward: hire a senior leader. That default is beginning to change.

Organizations are dealing with transformation, technology shifts, growth, and capability gaps at the same time. But not every challenge needs a permanent executive. Sometimes the need is for the right expertise, against a clear mandate, at the right time.

The Flex Executive Economy Study 2026, developed by SHRM and Board Match-Up, examines how this shift is taking shape. Executive interest is already strong, while organizational readiness, access, and commercial models remain less developed.

This raises an important question for CEOs, CHROs, and Boards: Are our talent models evolving as quickly as the business challenges we need to solve?

Flex leadership is not a substitute for permanent executive roles. It gives organizations another way to bring in experienced leadership for defined needs such as transformation, turnaround, growth or governance.

Organizations will need clearer mandates, trusted ways to find talent, sound governance and greater clarity on commercials. Executives, in turn, will need to show not only what they have done, but the business problems they can solve and the outcomes they can deliver.

The next phase of leadership may be as much about accessing capability as filling roles.

This study provides an important starting point for that conversation.



Karunesh Prasad
Founder & CEO
Board Match-Up

For decades, senior leadership has largely been built around permanent roles and traditional career paths. But organizations today are navigating transformation, growth, technological shifts, and capability gaps at an ever-increasing pace. Not every challenge requires another permanent executive role. Sometimes, what is needed is the right experience, for a defined mandate, at the right moment.

At the same time, experienced leaders are rethinking how they want to contribute. Longer careers and changing expectations of work are creating new pathways across advisory, fractional, interim, board, and portfolio roles.

This is the context in which the Flex Executive Economy is emerging.

The findings show that executive interest is already ahead of market infrastructure. Experienced capability exists, but organizations still need clearer systems, trusted access mechanisms, governance, and commercial models to engage it effectively.

The research also reinforces the importance of trust. Opportunities continue to flow largely through personal and professional networks, even as executives seek better visibility, access and more structured platforms.

For Board Match-Up, this points to an important shift: the future of executive talent will not be defined only by jobs, but increasingly by business problems, capability, outcomes and access.

The opportunity is not to replace traditional executive leadership, but to strengthen the leadership ecosystem with more flexible ways to access and deploy experience.
I hope this report helps advance that conversation and contributes to a more trusted, structured and accessible Flex Executive Economy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Executives are ready. They do not believe the market is.

Senior leadership is no longer confined to full-time roles. A board may need specialist advice for a defined period; a business in transformation may need an experienced finance or people leader only a few days each month. At the same time, some senior executives are choosing to work across several assignments rather than one permanent role.

The Flex Executive Economy Study 2026, a joint initiative by **SHRM** and **Board Match-Up**, explores responses from Senior Leaders across **Asia Pacific** on how far this shift has progressed and what is preventing its wider adoption.

Whilst **68%** of the respondents have more than **25 years of experience**, just over half are already working in a flexible or portfolio-based model, either exclusively or alongside a full-time role.

The clearest gap in the findings is readiness: **49%** of executives feel very or extremely prepared for flex or portfolio work, but only **2%** believe organizations are equally ready to offer it.

Gap 1:

Preparedness of Executives Vs Organizations



49%
feel prepared for flex opportunities

2%
see organizations as ready to offer flex roles

The supply of experienced leaders who feel ready to work flexibly appears to be ahead of the systems, access mechanisms and commercial norms used to engage them.



Gap 2:

Expected Growth Vs Likely Scale of Adoption

Most respondents believe this market will grow, but few expect it to replace the traditional leadership model.

65%
expect significant growth in fractional/interim leadership

23%
expect more than a quarter of senior roles to flex

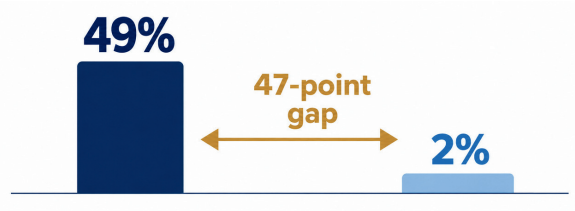
59%
say trusted platforms would accelerate adoption

- Lack of suitable opportunities **(70%)**, lack of trusted platforms **(48%)**, and financial uncertainty **(42%)** emerge as the largest barriers to the flex economy.
- For organizations, experienced independent talent is available, but the mechanisms for finding and engaging it are lagging.
- For executives, feeling ready is not enough; visibility and a clear articulation of the value they offer matter just as much.

KEY INSIGHTS

Four findings that defined the market.

01 The 47-point readiness gap between executives and market.



Nearly half of the respondents (49%) consider themselves very or extremely prepared to move into flexible or portfolio leadership. However, only 2% believe organizations are very / extremely ready to engage senior leaders through these models.

That is a 47-point gap between executives who feel ready and the organizational readiness they see in the market.

-Organizational readiness here reflects executives' perceptions.

02 The #1 barrier is access.

70% cite limited awareness of, or access to, suitable opportunities as the biggest barrier. Lack of trusted platforms or intermediaries (48%) as well as financial uncertainty (42%) emerged as other major barriers.

This is consistent with another finding: 72% say greater awareness and acceptance among organizations and executives would do most to accelerate adoption.

70% Limited awareness of, or access to, suitable opportunities

48% Lack of trusted platforms or intermediaries

42% Financial uncertainty

72% Say greater awareness and acceptance among organizations and executives would do most to accelerate adoption

03 People want platforms, but networks still carry the market.

59%
say trusted platforms would accelerate adoption

73%
rely on personal and professional networks to find opportunities

54%
say those networks produce the highest-value work

The market is looking out for more channels to access flex opportunities, however, it still works largely through relationships. 59% say trusted platforms would accelerate adoption, yet 73% rely on personal and professional networks to find opportunities, out of which over half say such networks produce the highest value work. The opportunity is to add structure without losing the trust that makes networks effective.

04 Uncertainty and not low pay is what limits scale.

The concern is less about low pay than uncertainty around pay. 27% expect compensation to be highly variable and 31% worry about undervaluing their expertise.

Greater transparency around how flex expertise is priced could give professionals more confidence to participate and grow their independent work.

27%
expect compensation to be highly variable

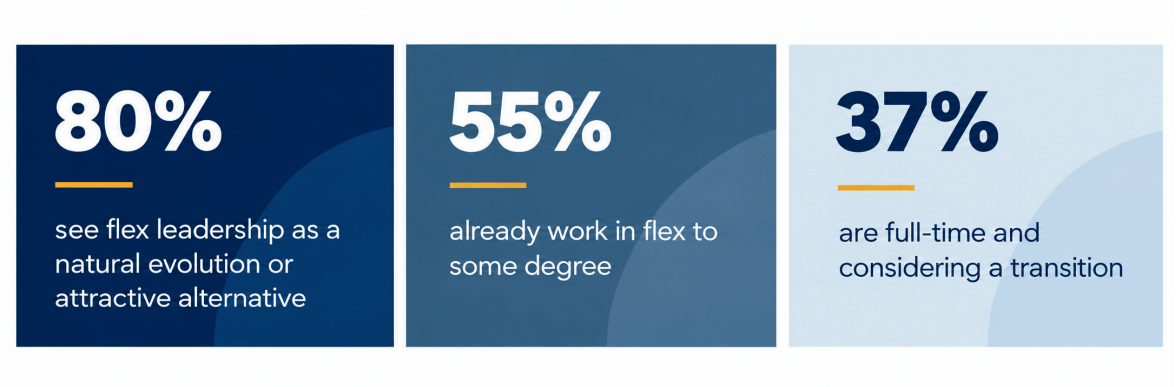
31%
worry about undervaluing their expertise.

WHERE THE FLEX EXECUTIVE ECONOMY STANDS TODAY

The idea has landed. The infrastructure is still catching up.

Flex leadership is moving beyond the margins.

- **80%** see it as either a natural evolution of an executive career or an attractive alternative to traditional employment, and many are already acting on that interest.



- More than half of respondents are already participating in the flex executive economy:
  - **31%** work fully in a flex or portfolio model, and
  - another **24%** combine flex assignments with full-time work.

- A further **37%** are in full-time senior roles and considering a transition. Only 9% are in full-time roles and not considering a move.



Current position	Share of respondents
Currently full time and considering a transition	**37%**
Already working in a flex or portfolio model	**31%**
Working across a mix of full time and flex roles	**24%**
Currently full time and not considering a move	**9%**

Fig 1: Current flex position

- Only **9%** remain in **traditional full-time roles** without considering an alternative.

THIS IS NOT A RETIREMENT PLAN.

Executives are not turning to flex leadership as a bridge to retirement.

Exploring the top reasons in Fig 2, it can be inferred that they are looking for new ways to deploy their experience and greater choice in how they build their careers.



Fig 2: Top reasons to explore flex leadership

Organizations to benefit from Flex Leadership

Respondents do not see flex executives primarily as temporary cover for vacant positions.
They see this model creating value around high-stakes business priorities:

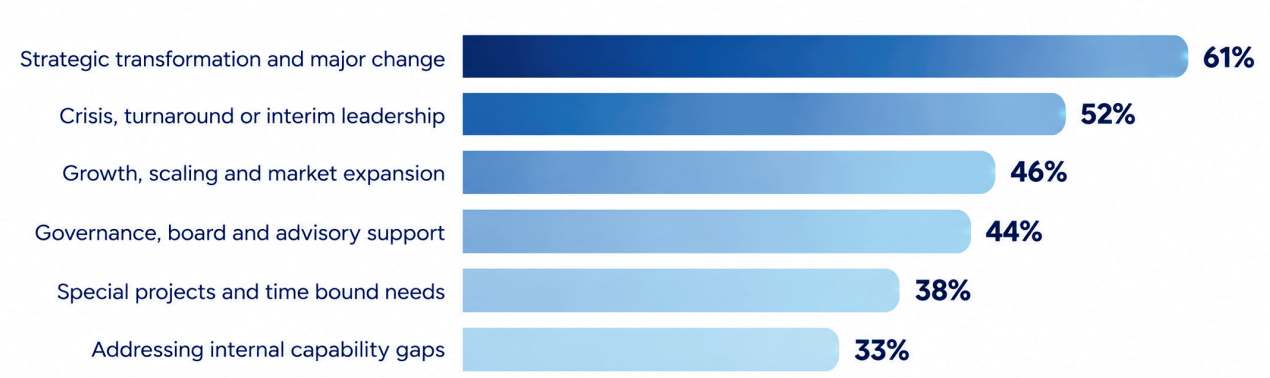
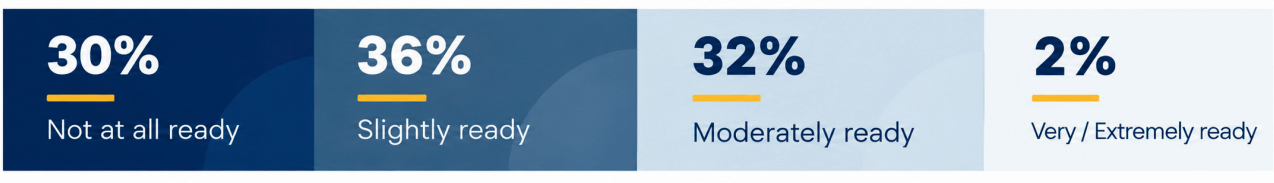


Fig 3: Where organizations benefit the most from flex leaders

But organizational readiness has not caught up.

The readiness gap is equally clear.
30% say organizations are not at all ready for flex leadership, and
36% say they are only slightly ready.
Fewer than **2%** see organizations as very or extremely ready.
In other words, executives see the demand side as lagging behind the supply of willing leaders.



SECTION 1.

THE SHIFT TOWARD FLEX LEADERSHIP

Executive careers are becoming less linear.

More than half of respondents already do some form of flex work, and many of those still in full-time roles are considering the move.

The question is shifting from whether flex leadership will grow to what place it will occupy in the wider talent market.

Growth is expected. Scale is not.

65% expect significant growth and acceptance in fractional and interim leadership models over the next five years, while **55%** expect more senior executives to pursue portfolio careers.



Share of senior roles that could realistically become flexible

But when asked what share of senior leadership roles could realistically become flexible, **60%** believe only 10-25% of senior roles could realistically become flexible while just **5%** expect more than half to do so.

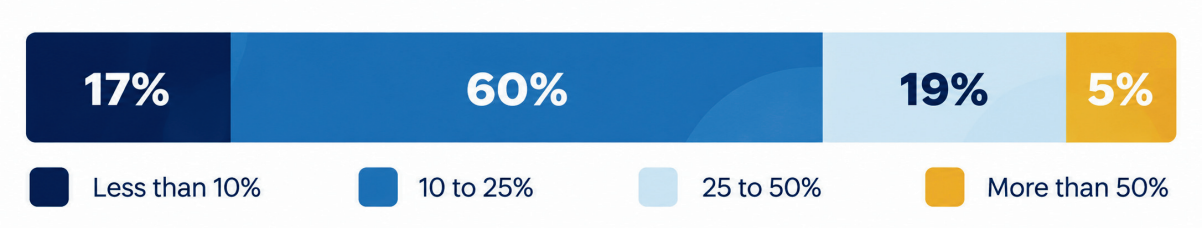


Fig 4: Share of senior roles that could realistically become flexible

- The findings suggest that **flex leadership will grow** as a distinct part of the executive talent market, without becoming the default model.
- For organizations, that means **using flex leadership** selectively when senior expertise is needed but a permanent role is not.

Executive roles are already blurring

The portfolio mindset is already visible in how respondents describe themselves. 44% chose C-suite, business unit or functional leader, 30% as senior executive, 26% as entrepreneur or founder and 23% as board member.



- **Nearly 3 in 10 (29%) identify with more than one role.**
- The traditional boundaries between executive, advisor, entrepreneur and board member are becoming less distinct.

The Signal

Build flex leadership as a targeted capability, not as an alternative organization structure.

- Identify where senior expertise is needed without a permanent role.
- Build flex talent into workforce and succession planning.
- Create pathways to test, learn, and scale the model in high-value business situations.

SECTION 2.
READINESS AND VISIBILITY

The 47-point readiness gap between executives and market.

Executives and organizations are not moving at the same pace.

49% of respondents rate themselves very or extremely prepared for flex leadership, compared with just **2%** who believe organizations are very or extremely ready to engage senior leaders this way.



This gap reflects executives' perception of organizational readiness rather than a direct assessment of organizations themselves.

Readiness Distribution

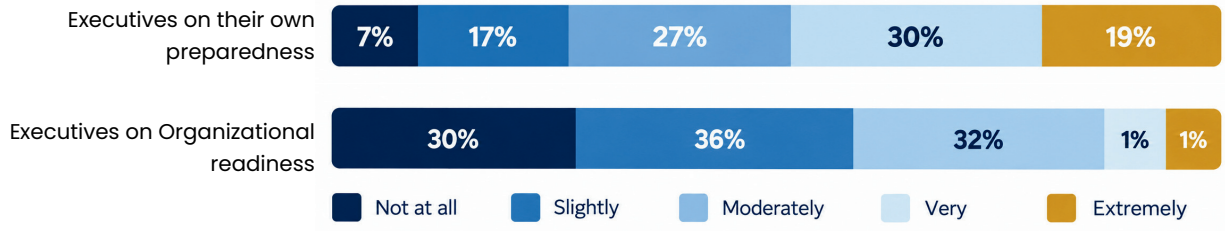


Fig 5: Executive Preparedness Vs Perceived Organizational Readiness towards Flex.

This is the largest gap in the study: executives increasingly feel ready for flex careers, but they do not see organizations as equally ready to engage them

Inside the readiness gap.

Looking at the two readiness measures together reveals four distinct groups.



Fig 6: Four distinct groups based on executive readiness and perceived organizational readiness

The **28%** who feel they are ready
but perceive low organizational readiness represent an important tension in the market.

It is observed that among this group,
63% cite limited awareness or availability of opportunities as a barrier.

Executives are visible. Opportunities are not

Senior leaders are already working to increase their visibility.

- Only **13%** say they are not actively building their professional profile.

The bigger issue may be whether that visibility leads to the right opportunities.

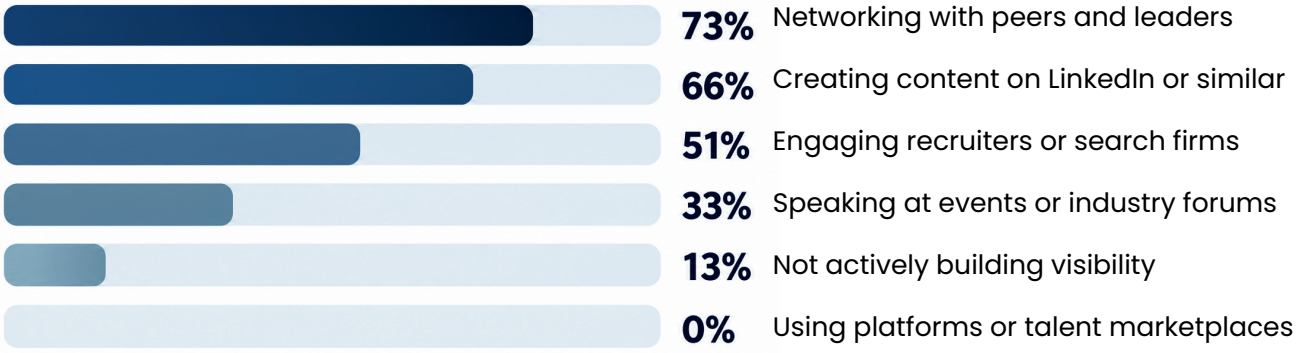


Fig 7: How senior leaders are building visibility for flex roles



- A wider workforce context appears in **Deloitte's research** on blended workforce ecosystems: **84%** of executives say managing a workforce that includes employees, partners, freelancers, and other external contributors is important to organizational success, yet only **16%** say their organization is ready to do so.

(The populations and measures differ from this survey, so the percentages should not be compared directly.)

- The common signal is the implementation gap between recognizing flexible talent as strategically important and building the systems to use it well. [1]

The Signal

Close the gap between executive readiness and perceived organizational readiness.

- Build clear pathways to identify and engage flex leaders.
- Equip managers, HR and procurement to deploy them with confidence.
- Connect executive visibility to credible, accessible opportunities.
- Establish the governance and processes that make flex leadership easier to use.

Source: [1] Deloitte Insights. Hidden Workforce Capabilities. 2025.

SECTION 3.

ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The #1 barrier is access, not money

If executives are interested in flex leadership and many feel prepared to participate, the next question is straightforward: **how do organizations** and flex **executives** find each other?

This is where a major constraint becomes visible.

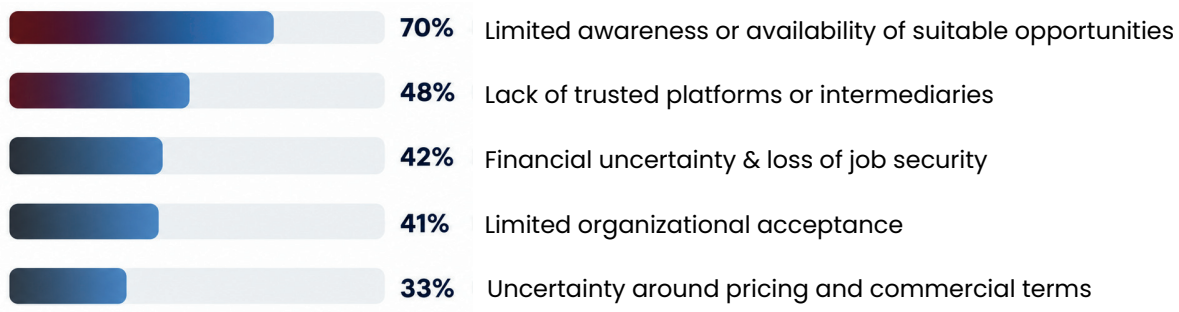


Fig 8: Biggest barriers to moving toward flex leadership

70% of respondents cite limited awareness or availability of suitable opportunities as a leading barrier. **48%** name the lack of trusted platforms, networks, or intermediaries.
41% point to limited organizational acceptance and traditional career expectations.
Financial uncertainty, at **42%**, sits in the middle of that list rather than at the top of it.

People want platforms, but networks still carry the market

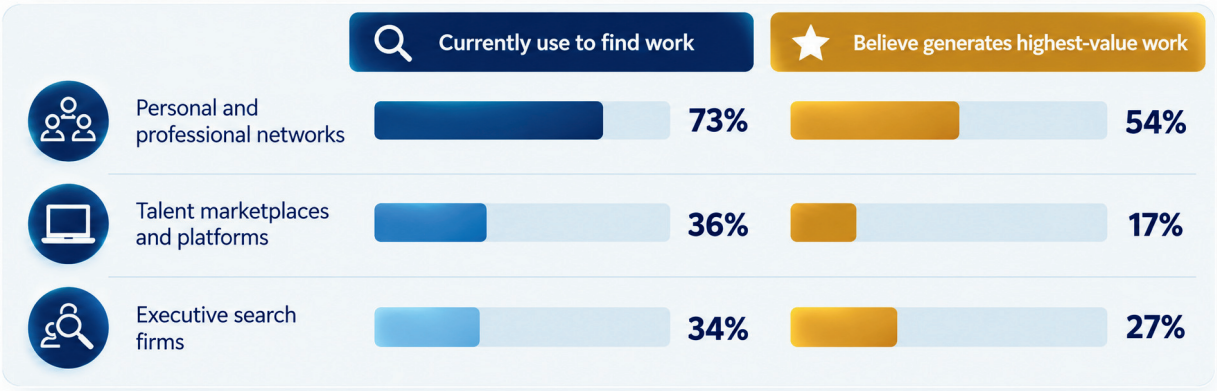


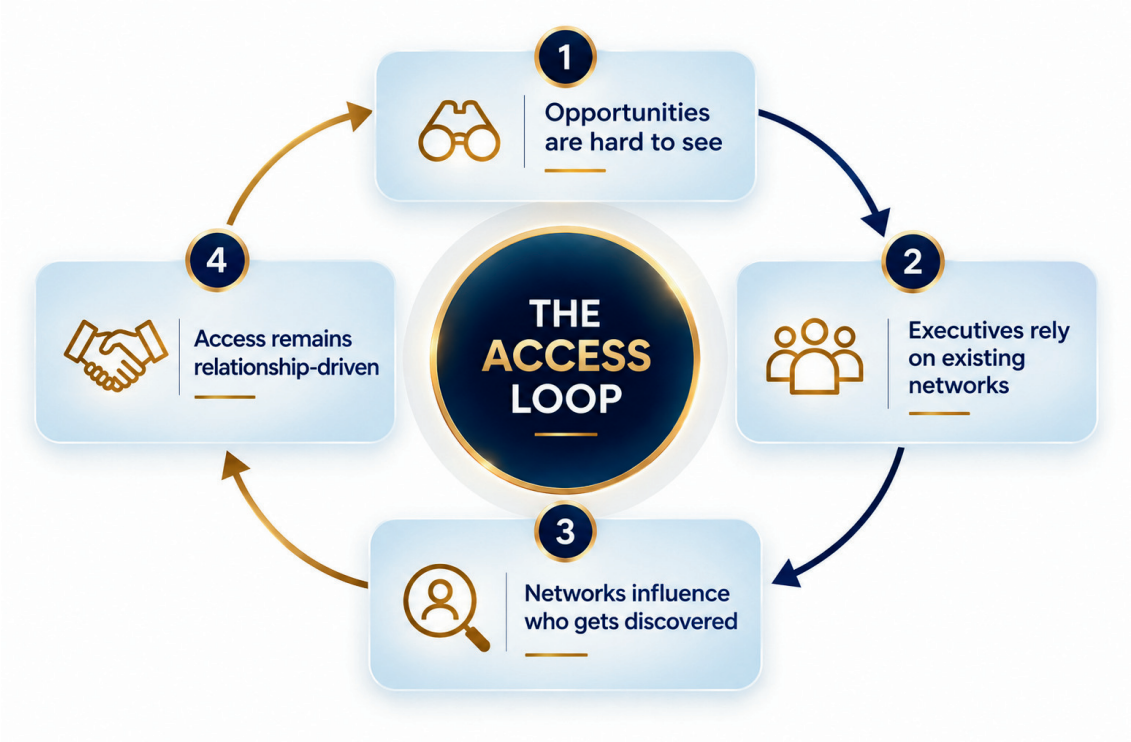
Fig 9: Where executive looks and where they think the highest value is

How executives actually search is heavily relationship-driven.
73% use personal and professional networks to find work,
36% use talent marketplaces and platforms, and **34%** use executive search firms.

When asked which channel is most likely to generate the highest-value work,
54% chose personal networks,
27% chose executive search firms, and **17%** chose talent marketplaces.
Networks appear to be both the main and the most trusted channel.

The market has an access loop

The result is a self-reinforcing access problem: opportunities are hard to see, networks remain the main route to work, and those same networks influence who gets seen.



At the same time, **59%** say trusted platforms and marketplaces would accelerate adoption.

Platforms are unlikely to replace relationships.
Their value may be in making a relationship-driven market easier to navigate, more visible and more trusted.

The Signal

Turn a network-driven market into a more accessible talent ecosystem.

- Broaden discovery beyond existing leadership networks.
- Build trusted, curated channels connecting demand and capability.
- Define opportunities as clear business mandates, not vague roles.
- Put the governance and ownership around flex engagements in place.

SECTION 4.

COMPENSATION AND COMMERCIAL MODELS

The problem isn't pay. It's predictability.

Compensation is not the main reason respondents hesitate. The bigger concern is that the commercial model still feels unsettled.

Respondents do not necessarily expect flex leadership to pay less than traditional employment.
49% expect compensation to be slightly or significantly higher,
16% expect it to be about the same, and
only **8%** expect it to be lower.
Further, a considerable 27% expect flex leadership compensation to be highly variable or inconsistent.



Fig 10: Expected flex pay compared to full- time role

The compensation issue is not that executives think flex work pays badly.
The leading concern is the risk of undervaluing expertise or services **(31%)**, followed by income unpredictability **(22%)** and a lack of established market benchmarks **(17%)**.

Biggest compensation concern	% of respondents
1. Risk of undervaluing expertise or services	31%
2. Unpredictability of income	22%
3. Lack of established market benchmarks	17%
4. Complexity of negotiating commercial terms	15%
5. Timeliness and reliability of payment	13%

Fig 11: What worries executives the most about flex compensation

Taken together, the **findings show a commercial clarity gap**: executives see earning potential in flex leadership, yet many are concerned about undervaluing their expertise.

The preferred commercial model is a blend

The findings do not point to one standard pricing model. Commercial terms are likely to vary with the duration, scope, risk and outcomes of the assignment.

74% say a combination of models is appropriate, and **66%** select monthly retainers. Project and assignment fees follow at **46%**, equity or success-based arrangements at **38%** and daily or hourly rates at **29%**. *The lowest score for the daily rate is notable, because it is the unit in which most interim work is still sold.*

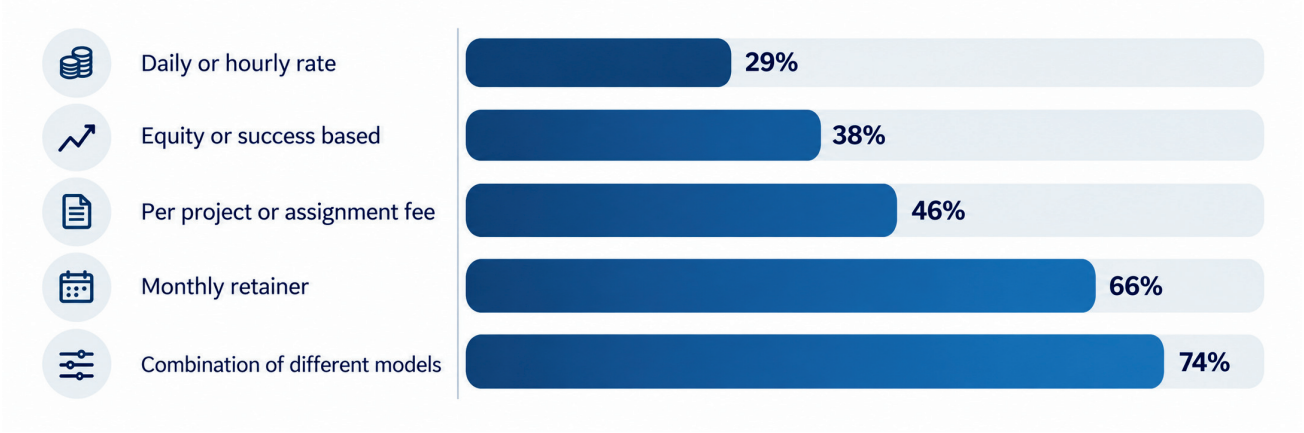


Fig 12: Compensation models seen as appropriate for flex executives

Examples from outside this study show how **flexibility** and **predictability** can coexist.

- **Deloitte** cites Unilever's U-Worker model, where external workers receive a minimum retainer and core benefits across short-term projects.
- **Harvard Business Review** similarly notes that portfolio careers require practical planning around the mix, timing and economics of assignments.

Both examples are consistent with respondents' preference for blended commercial models rather than reliance on a single daily rate.[2][3]

The Signal

Build commercial clarity around the value of flex leadership.

- Establish market relevant benchmarks by mandate and expertise.
- Match the commercial model to the business outcome.
- Define scope, deliverables and value upfront.
- Create greater consistency and transparency in contracting.

Source: 2. Deloitte Insights. Hidden Workforce Capabilities. 2025.
3. Harvard Business Review. How to Launch a Successful Portfolio Career. 2017.

- Respondents point to 3 priorities for wider adoption:
  - greater awareness and acceptance (**72%**),
  - better access to relevant opportunities (**60%**) and
  - trusted platforms (**59%**).

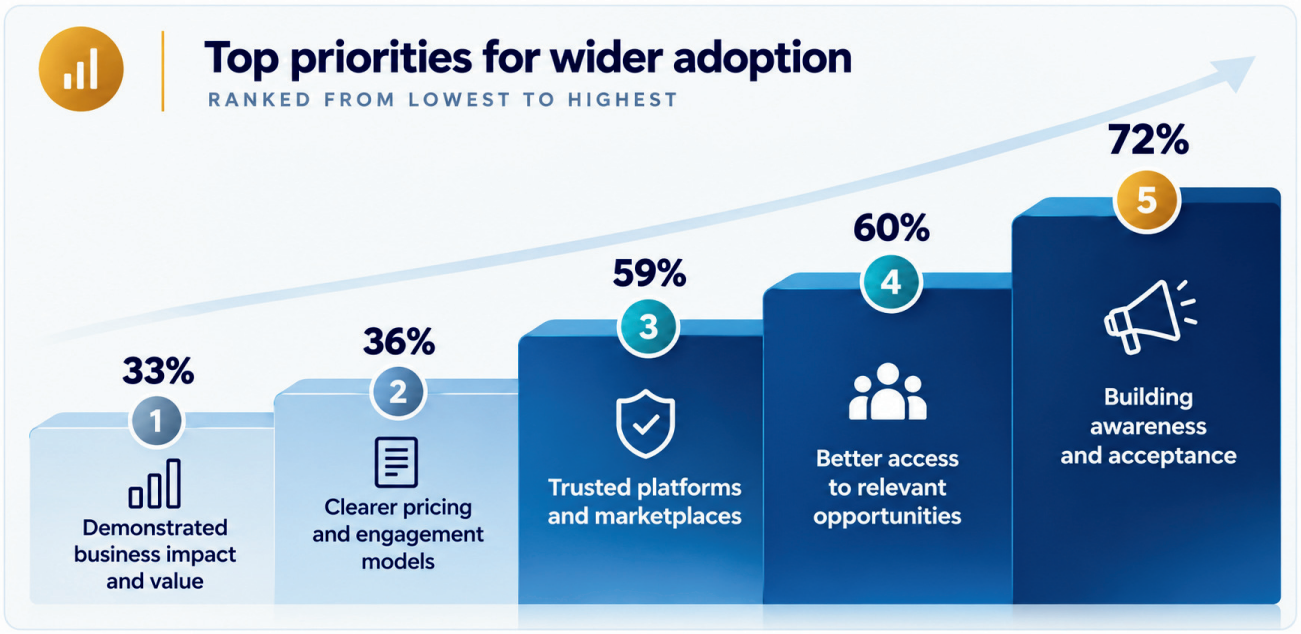


Fig 13: What would most accelerate adoption

What does it mean for organizations: Build flex into the talent strategy

Organizations can start with situations where the mandate and outcomes are easiest to define: transformation, turnaround, growth and governance.

The opportunity is to build the infrastructure that enables:

- Define business mandates and outcomes, not simply job descriptions.
- Expand sourcing beyond existing leadership networks.
- Establish clear decision rights, governance and accountability.
- Give every flex engagement a named internal sponsor.
- Measure business outcomes rather than presence.

What does it mean for executives: Move from readiness to relevance

Executives looking to participate in this market should:

1. Be clear about the business problems they solve.
2. Build visibility around expertise and outcomes, not simply experience.
3. Develop relationships across multiple routes to opportunity.
4. Establish a clear commercial proposition and pricing logic.
5. Build a pipeline and financial runway for a market that may take time to mature.

For executives, the shift is from saying

"I am an experienced leader looking for flex work" to being

clear about the specific business problem they can solve.

For the ecosystem: Build the missing market infrastructure

The findings show demand for better intermediation:

59% want trusted platforms,

48% cite their absence as a barrier, and

no respondent currently uses one to build visibility.

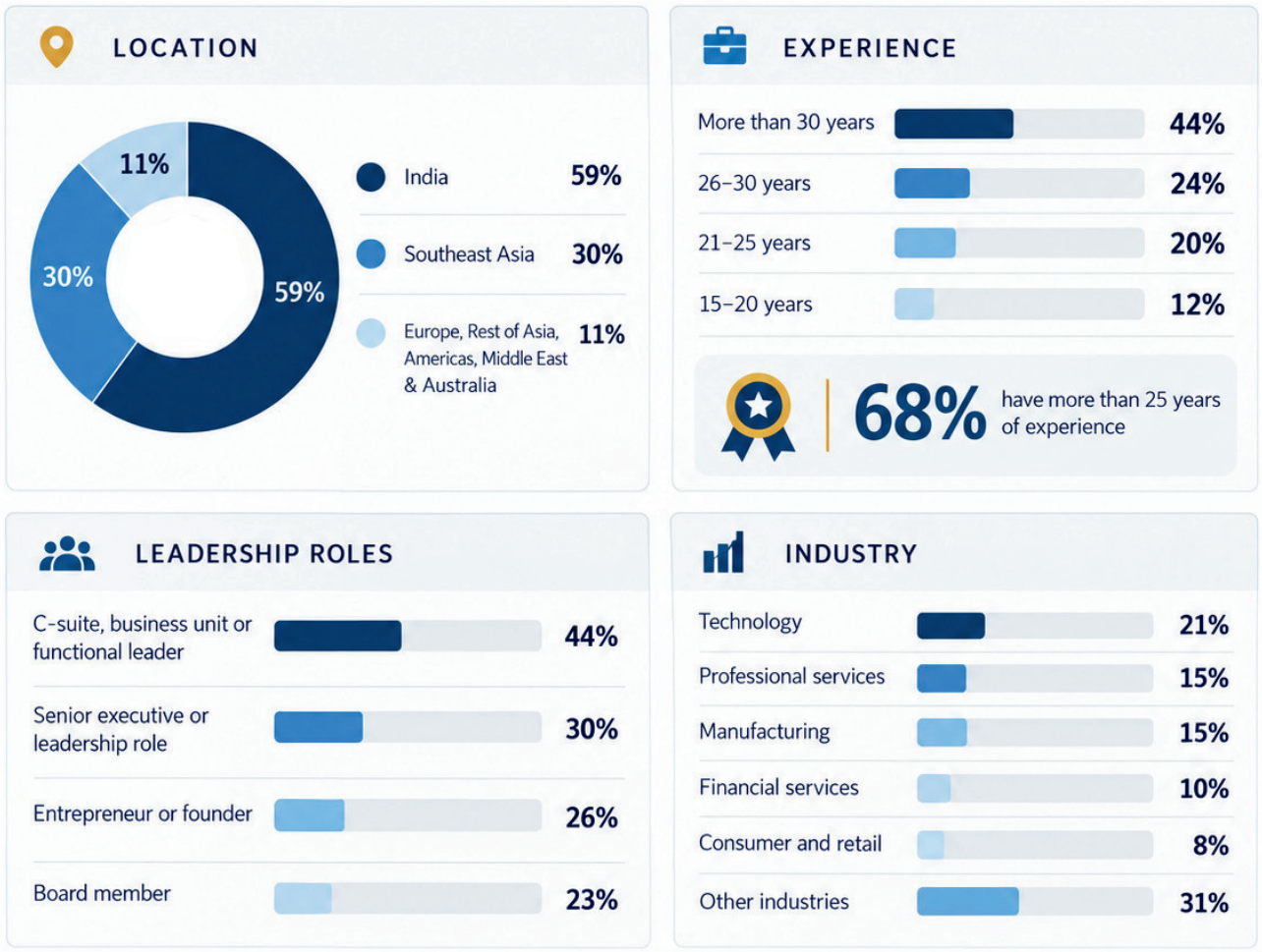
But a platform alone will not create the market; adoption will also require changes in how organizations and executives find, assess, and engage one another.

The opportunity is to build the infrastructure around them:

- Trusted discovery of credible executive capability.
- Curated matching around business mandates.
- Market benchmarks for pricing and engagement models.
- Clear contracting and governance standards.
- Visible proof of outcomes from successful flex engagements.

Research Methodology

The Flex Executive Economy Survey 2026 is primary research conducted jointly by SHRM and Board Match-Up.



Research Team

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About SHRM

shrm.org

SHRM is a global authority on work, workers and the workplace.

Through research, professional development, thought leadership, standards and advocacy, SHRM supports HR professionals, business leaders and organizations in navigating the changing world of work.

Its work spans critical areas including workforce strategy, leadership, organizational culture, talent, technology and workplace transformation—helping organizations create better workplaces while strengthening the role of people and HR leadership in business performance.

Within the context of the Flex Executive Economy, SHRM brings an important organizational and workforce perspective to the conversation on how leadership models, careers and talent strategies are evolving.

About Board Match-UP

boardmatch-up.com

Board Match-Up is a platform connecting experienced leaders with organizations seeking executive capability through newer leadership models.

It is built around a simple premise: organizations do not always need leadership capability in the form of another permanent role, and experienced executives increasingly want more diverse ways to apply their knowledge, networks, and experience.

Board Match-Up helps bridge these two sides of the market, and its focus extends beyond matching individuals to roles.

It seeks to strengthen the broader ecosystem required for flexible executive leadership to succeed, including executive readiness, organizational adoption, trusted access, commercial models and governance.



The Flex Executive Economy

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