Work Deconstructed
By John Boudreau
Appeared on TalentManagement.com Thinking Ahead, June 2014

Call out:

Talent management innovators are deconstructing work into smaller pieces, with paradigm-changing implications.

Story begins:

To move a bed up a tight flight of stairs is impossible if you leave the bed intact. It just won't fit. Most have to "deconstruct" the bed by removing the headboard and legs and separating the mattress from the box spring.

Once deconstructed, you can treat the bed like a set of pieces, get them upstairs and reconstruct them. Deconstruction requires the right tools and a good understanding about how the parts fit the whole. But it has the power to reveal a solution to what at first seemed to be an intractable dilemma.

Deconstructed work is revolutionizing talent management, too, and it requires leaders to approach decisions with advanced tools and a keen sense of how pieces fit together. In the case of talent, the toolkit is the power of the Web to organize and coordinate on a scale no single employer can match. Organizations often miss the deconstruction opportunity because of long-held assumptions about jobs, employment and strategic success.

Suppose your organization has tough computer coding projects that need to be done quickly. Traditionally, you create the job of software engineer and that job combines the coding work with tasks like working with the project team, training new programmers, coordinating the different tasks, etc.

You attract and retain enough software engineers to get the work done and hope your human resource planning is accurate enough to anticipate and match talent to work demands.

Or, you can use Topcoder.com, a Web-based talent broker that allows you to post your coding tasks to coders all over the world and have them bid on the job, letting you consider their prices and proven examples of their quality to select the best fit for you. It's likely that you can find better coders at Topcoder.com than you could hire on a tight deadline. There are no employment contracts and you can expand and reduce the workforce as you need.

Perhaps the wisest "job" design is to assume Topcoder.com will do the coding and save the employment relationship for the other parts of the software engineer job.

Organizations often assume that strategically "core" tasks require employees. Deconstruction changes how talent affects your strategic value chain. Research and development, for instance, is "core" in the biotech and pharmaceutical industries, but vital elements of R&D are now deconstructed and done outside the employment relationship. Biotech firms acquire startups for their pipeline of products, often allowing the talent from the startup to move on to their next venture, rather than join the acquiring firm.

This can make sense if the early stages of biotech development are better done with risk-tolerant venture capital and with talent that prefers a steep risk-return tradeoff. Deconstruct the R&D value process, and you realize you can get the early-stage R&D through acquisition, without forcing massive performance incentives into our reward structure to induce those early-stage scientists to be your employees.

Deconstruction is useful even for jobs that will be completely done by employees. In my books "Beyond HR" and "Retooling HR," I suggested that deconstructing jobs into their pivotal and non-pivotal elements can be illuminating. Sweepers at Disneyland both sweep the park and help out guests, but sweepers often make the biggest impact through great interactions with guests, as long as sweeping is just good enough.

Boeing Co. engineers must do both technical design and collaborate with outside suppliers, but when the aerospace firm shifted to building aircraft with composite materials, supplier collaboration became much more pivotal. If you fail to deconstruct, you can get sweepers who overemphasize sweeping versus guest engagement or engineers who overemphasize technical design over collaboration — because "it's all part of my job."

Deconstructed talent management means rethinking core concepts like "jobs," "employment" and "strategic talent."

Talent leaders who deconstruct skillfully will be like the furniture mover who artfully takes apart the bed to get it upstairs, while those who cling too strongly to traditional notions of jobs and employment will be left standing at the base of the stairs, facing an "impossible" task.

John Boudreau is professor and research director at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business and Center for Effective Organizations, and author of "Retooling HR." He can be reached at editor@talentmgt.com.