

When skills taxonomies go wrong and oversimplify talent

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At GCO Partners, we reimagine remote talent through trust, integration, and human nuance — because professionals aren't just skill codes on a spreadsheet, they're partners in growth. That's why ***this guest piece from Retain*** resonates so strongly with us: it highlights the danger of reducing people to rigid taxonomies, and the opportunity to combine structured frameworks with behavioural insight. This people-first approach is exactly what powers our Talent-as-a-Service model, helping clients start small, scale smart, and build teams that deliver real impact.

— *The GCO Partners Team*

Skills taxonomies are hugely important for resource planning. But sometimes, they're too rigid. Of course, standardising skills makes sense. It helps us quickly figure out who can do what. But to be honest, sometimes the whole thing can get a little... reductive.

Smart, experienced people are reduced to a handful of searchable keywords. "Excel proficiency: yes. Project



management: intermediate." And just like that, you're either in or out.

But the numbers tell us this isn't working. 87% of companies worldwide report skills gaps or expect them within a few years, yet only 10% of HR execs say they effectively classify and organise skills into a taxonomy or framework.

So what's the balance? How do we capture meaningful skills data without losing sight of the complexity, the human nuance, that makes people valuable in the first place?

When skills frameworks are too rigid

When frameworks get too rigid, people start to treat them like gospel. Someone might say, "The framework says you need exactly three years in agile methodology," even if someone with two years but amazing experience might actually be a better fit. And suddenly, we're stuck playing by arbitrary rules instead of making genuinely thoughtful decisions.

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The numbers back this up. Only 40% of organisations say they effectively balance automation with human judgement in their decision-making. Meanwhile, businesses expect 39% of workers' core skills to change by 2030.

It's almost like we've trained ourselves out of trusting our instincts. But skills frameworks are meant to help us make quicker, smarter choices, not to replace judgment entirely.

Building flexibility into taxonomies

Maybe the trick is flexibility. A taxonomy that evolves. Something adaptable enough to acknowledge the human messiness of real-world skills and experiences.

Think about it: people grow, develop new capabilities, shift interests, and gain nuanced experiences that don't always fit into neat categories. In fact, The WEF found that 50% of the



workforce has completed training as part of learning and development initiatives in 2025, up from just 41% in 2023. *This shows how quickly skills can change.*

A useful skills taxonomy would allow for these complexities. It would encourage resource and project managers to use frameworks as a starting point, rather than an endpoint, allowing for interpretation and human judgment to refine choices.

Ultimately, effective skills management leaves room for people to do what they're good at: thoughtful, informed, human decisions. Because no matter how sophisticated our tools get, resource planning always involves nuance. And nuance, last time I checked, is pretty hard to fit neatly into boxes.

How to avoid the oversimplification trap

The truth is, people don't neatly fit into predefined boxes. You've probably noticed this yourself. Someone looks perfect on paper but doesn't quite click in practice, or vice versa. That's because real-world performance isn't just about having the "right" skills—it's about context, soft behavioural skills, adaptability, and a hundred other subtle factors.

When we oversimplify skills, we risk losing sight of this complexity. Instead of genuinely useful frameworks, we

end up with checklists that don't reflect how people actually perform.

So maybe the answer is a mix of smart technology and thoughtful judgment. Tools should support human decision-making. Because, at the end of the day, skills management is about making better, more informed decisions that help people and projects thrive.

Find nuance through behavioural insights

Practically speaking, finding that nuance doesn't mean planners need to spend all day asking everyone. That's just not realistic. Instead, it's about having richer, more intuitive data at your fingertips. Insights into how people prefer to work, communicate, and collaborate.





That's where behavioural profiling can really help. Tools that leverage psychometric profiling, like *Retain*, give resource planners instant visibility into these crucial, subtle factors, like someone's preferred working style or their approach to team dynamics. And the behavioural data complements technical skills like [this blog discusses](#), creating a fuller picture of each individual.



✓ Key Highlight

From technical lists to team chemistry

Instead of focusing exclusively on what people can do, modern resourcing planning focusses on how they work together to get it done.

We've seen resource planners quickly build teams that truly complement each other by using behavioural insights. They spot potential communication issues early, pair complementary working styles, and even identify hidden strengths and leadership potential. The result? Better-matched teams, smoother projects, and fewer surprises along the way.

And that is the real goal: thoughtful, nuanced resource planning that respects the full scope of human capabilities without slowing you down.

Cross-border teams add more complexity

When you're working with teams across borders, whether that's between South Africa and Zimbabwe, or any other international setup, skills taxonomies face even greater challenges. The nuances multiply exponentially.

The numbers tell us that cross-border remote work is exploding. Global remote digital jobs are projected to grow 25% to 92 million by 2030, and 28% of employees worldwide worked



remotely in 2023. But here's what the statistics don't capture: how much harder it becomes to truly understand someone's capabilities when they're working in a different country, timezone, and cultural context.

Traditional skills frameworks struggle with this complexity. They might tell you someone has "strong project management skills," but they won't tell you how effectively they communicate across cultures, manage relationships in different business environments, or the regulatory and practical challenges of cross-border work.

Besides the obvious technical considerations, like timezone coordination and digital infrastructure,

cross-border teams face what we call "invisible complexity." Someone might excel at stakeholder management in their home market but struggle with the different communication styles and business practices across borders. Or they might have brilliant technical skills but find it challenging to build trust and rapport with colleagues they've never met face-to-face.

This is where behavioural insights become absolutely critical. When you can see not just what someone can do, but how they prefer to work, communicate, and adapt to different environments, you can make much smarter decisions about cross-border team composition. It's the difference between hoping someone will work well remotely across cultures and actually knowing they will.

Making skills taxonomies work in reality

To keep taxonomies practical and genuinely useful, consider these guidelines:

- **Keep it dynamic:** Regularly update your taxonomy based on actual usage and feedback. Platforms like Retain automate this by tracking how skills evolve through projects, helping planners always have fresh, relevant data. That way, you're not stuck with outdated definitions of capabilities, especially important when new skills and technologies seem to emerge constantly.
- **Combine insights:** Use technology to integrate technical and behavioural data seamlessly. When both types of skills are visible side-by-side, resource planners get the context they need without getting bogged down. For instance, planners using a tool like Retain can quickly see who's available and not just if they have the right skills on paper, but whether their working style fits with the existing team dynamic.



- **Automate complexity thoughtfully:** The right tools streamline complexity without oversimplifying. AI-powered matching, for example, helps planners quickly spot ideal resources based on nuanced data, making decisions easy and intuitive. Instead of manually cross-referencing skills, availability, and behavioural fit, the system instantly surfaces the top candidates, explaining exactly why they're recommended.
- **Build adaptability into decision-making:** Empower resource planners to make judgment calls even within structured frameworks. Taxonomies should support decision-making, not constrain it. Providing planners with transparent reasoning behind AI recommendations means they can confidently override suggestions when they know something the data doesn't, like upcoming leave, personal development goals, or specific client preferences.

When done right, taxonomies turn a daunting mass of information into clear, actionable insights. You end up with planners spending less time scrambling for details and more time making informed, thoughtful decisions. The end result? Faster staffing, better teams, and smoother projects—and isn't that really the whole point?

Where to go from here

If anything resonated here, maybe start by stepping back and evaluating your current taxonomy. Does it reflect the real skills and behaviours you see day-to-day? Could you add more flexibility, nuance, or behavioural context?

Taking these first few practical steps can genuinely shift your resource planning towards something more thoughtful, intuitive, and ultimately effective.

About the Author

Mike is Managing Director and Chief Operating Officer at Retain. He specialises in creating practical solutions that help organisations optimise their resource management in realistic, human-centred ways.

About Retain

Retain helps professional services firms transform resource planning through intelligent, skills-based solutions. For more, visit [Retain International](#).