



**Adam**  
we are adam.com

# AGENCY TALENT ATTRACTION in 2023

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**OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES AND PITFALLS**

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In 2021 we saw two years of growth crammed into a single 12 month period as the world rushed to recover from the chaos of 2020.  
But what did that mean for talent?

Demand for the best people went through the roof. We saw businesses competing to be the best place to work, but there was a massive void of talent.  
With every organisation upping their game, there was a reduction in the numbers of people looking to move. And why would they?

Suddenly they're being paid better, have access to an array of new benefits and are working with great clients who they love and are passionate about.  
Better the devil you know than risk uncertainty by jumping ship.

First, let's take a look at what agencies are doing to retain their current staff.





# What does great retention look like?

For starters, it's not table tennis, bean bags or 5 types of organic porridge in the cupboard. It's a question we get asked a lot at We Are Adam, and the answer is usually a) unexpected and b) a pleasant surprise.

## 01 Strong, authentic leadership.

Your agency should have a clear direction of travel that is well communicated by your senior team. Each person in your business has a role to play in achieving your goals, and they need to know exactly what that looks like. How does their day to day contribute to companywide achievements?

The role that I then play is to craft this compelling narrative of vision and direction and present it to passive talent; giving you access to those who aren't currently looking for a new role.

## 02 An evolved, modern culture.

In 2022, one of the first questions we are asked by any potential candidate is "What's the remote working policy?". 95% of people will walk away from a role that is 5 days in the office. Of course, there are exceptions, but the vast majority will not continue a conversation if the business doesn't offer some kind of flexibility. Thanks to 2020, the toothpaste is out of the tube on this. We've all had a taste of remote work, and we're not prepared to go back to how things used to be.

It comes down to trust. If we're not granted the flexibility to work from home, we don't feel trusted. A lack of trust corrodes any feelings of autonomy and respect and so we start to lose valuable employees for reasons which are actually quite simple to fix. I personally struggled with remote working to begin



with. I was so used to having oversight over everyone's activity that it was hard to loosen the reins a little. Once I realised that I was the problem, things started to click, and before I knew it we were having our best ever quarter.

That doesn't mean you simply leave your employees to it though. You will need to be there to support and coach them, but on terms that benefit both employee and employer, not whenever you dictate. Which leads me nicely to ...

## 03 Offer empowered progression.

A clear pathway for development is absolutely fundamental to retaining your top talent. It begins from the moment they step through the door, figuratively speaking of course. Day One they should be able to see exactly what their career journey could look like. Learning and Development is an essential part of both talent attraction and retention. I strongly recommend investing well here.

## 04 And finally, the fundamentals.

Pay well. Provide great benefits. Make sure people actually use them. Provide opportunity for regular socials and internal events. This stuff is all par for the course these days, and are a minimum requirement, not a nice to have.



# What challenges are agencies currently facing?



Many of the big names, particularly in London, have gone fully remote to allow access to a global talent pool.

UK-based candidates now have access to opportunities which offer a better work life balance, combined with London salaries no matter their geographical location and exciting work with global clients – all things that smaller businesses are struggling to compete with.

With in-house roles seeing sharp spikes in salaries, many agency folk are being tempted into working for a single brand. More money with less stress?

Who can blame them, I suppose...

What's interesting is that one agency owner mentioned how he'd had people leave when they returned to 3 days based at HQ. However, many of them have since got back in touch, wondering if their role is still available.

Typically, they report feeling isolated being a fully remote and want to regain connection with the business and their employees.

There's been a huge focus in my network on culture over the last 5 or so years. Agency owners have worked

hard to foster an inclusive, vibrant environment, but are really struggling to make that translate remotely. They're feeling the loss of office banter, and getting to know new people is proving a substantial barrier to successful growth.

With a lack of emotional connection, some agencies are finding that new starters are less committed. The role is being treated as transactional. They log on, do their job and log off.

For some, this is leading to faster turnover as new starters quickly jump ship for a promotion and more money in a candidate short market.

The antidote, of course, lies in your onboarding. If you nail their induction, remote employees can be fully engaged and entrenched in your culture, making retention a breeze.

If you're experiencing the same challenges, why not consider a Face to Face policy? It doesn't matter when or where, as long as you see someone

I recently spoke to an agency owner with a business based outside of London. He had interviewed a candidate who, despite living 10 minute drive from the office, wanted to be fully remote or they weren't interested. Many agency owners feel as though they are being held over a barrel by candidates, who know they are in a position of power in the current market. This is leading to rushed recruitment processes. One leader shared that they had to go through their entire process in a single day!

I would strongly advise against this by the way.

in your team in person at least once a month.

A few agency leaders I know have implemented this type of policy with great success. Most employees are meeting for lunch or a beer after work, creating those stronger connections and improving retention.

References, a standard part of everyone's recruitment process, often come back confirming dates only. They feel fractured and ultimately tell you nothing about the employees performance. The common fear with agency owners at the moment is that those who are actively looking to move haven't worked out in their previous role.

It's a risk most are having to take, but if you don't recruit, you're probably moving backwards.

One thing is for sure; the struggle to onboard remotely is a universal one, and no one has got it right yet.

# How can you tackle these challenges?

You'll be glad to hear I've got some quick fixes, but you might not like the investment that comes along with them. If you haven't already, you'll need to look at adding some or all of the following:



Pay rises. Our 2022 salary survey found that 59% of respondents were not happy with their current salary & package. With the cost of living crisis looming large, we expect to find the same in our Jan 2023 report.



Training budgets. Autonomy over their own development is key. This should be in addition to any mandatory training, especially companywide sessions.



Wellbeing gifts. Start rewarding employees with nice-to-haves that they aren't going to spend their own money on. Unless you know your people REALLY well, I'd suggest asking what they want. It's pointless spending thousands on a spa retreat when they'd rather do extreme sports.



Benefits budget. The best solution I've seen is a fully flexible benefits budget, where people can spend it on whatever they want that fits the category of wellbeing.



Produce an annual reward statement. Detail everything beyond their base salary; their benefits, bonuses, holidays etc. It's a great reminder that you offer so much more than just their basic earnings.

Most of the common issues can be faced head on by addressing your company culture. I bleat on about culture relentlessly, but it truly is the key to getting hiring and retention right. Have you asked your team what they want the culture to look like? Culture, like brand, is what your employees say when you're not in the room. As a business owner, if you are dictating culture, you'll never get their buy in. The key is in listening and acting on employees' needs.

You need to start interviewing against culture. Whilst almost every hiring manager I know is looking for either a culture fit or a culture add, very few have actually structured their interview around it. My interview advice is this; keep the first 50% of the conversation about presenting your opportunity to get them bought in and excited. Buy in is still essential – on average, you'll be competing against 4 other agencies.

But the second half MUST be about them; their skills, their behaviours, their competency and how they see their development panning out. You have to dig deeper in order to mitigate the risks that come with hiring in the current market.

Just because you need to move quickly to hire right now, doesn't mean it needs to be rushed. Get the whole team involved. Give everyone the right to veto a potential new hire, no matter their seniority. How someone speaks to a junior member of staff is often very telling of their character. By getting others involved, you can run multiple interview stages in a shorter space of time, rather than trying to cram every meeting into your own busy calendar.

For our internal hiring at We Are Adam we start with a quick phone interview to help us screen CVs. Those who do well there are invited to a Teams interview with 2 people – typically 1 manager and 1 junior employee. They're largely looking for behavioural queues.

Will this person work well with our existing team?

Next, we invite them to another Teams interview with 2 people who would be their peers. How are their technical skills? Do they understand the environment in our business? By meeting with their potential future teammates, the candidates get to ask more about the way We Are Adam operates than they would if only senior management have been involved.

The final stage is always face to face. Normally with a couple of the senior team, where we get in to the nitty gritty of the role requirements, and follow it up with a Meet The Team session. By then we've had 3 opportunities to sell our role and what is unique about our business, as well as get under the skin of the candidate and assess their capability and attitude.

If possible, the Meet The Team should be in a neutral venue, such as going to the pub for a few drinks. In a larger group, people tend to relax and a neutral environment allows them to let their guard down. We've had consultants say no to making an offer in the past based on conversations that happened outside of the interview room. This whole process can be done in less than a week.

Finally, don't be scared of getting it wrong. Everyone does sometimes. The mantra "Hire Slowly. Fire Fast" still applies in some cases, despite the pressures of the current market. Some agency owners worry that the "fire fast" mentality poses a massive threat to culture. If they see people offboarded within 3 months, does it raise question marks around a supportive culture? Not if managed correctly. If you can see someone isn't working out, chances are their teammates can see it too. You'll be surprised how often people are relieved to see you take action.



# Who is doing remote culture well?



Whilst we can all do a quick google search and find the same big names with a fully distributed workforce, I thought it would be useful to share how one business in my network has handled going fully remote. This business is 40+ heads, though you would think they were several hundred from the outside.

They decided to get rid of their office and start recruiting overseas. Stripping back their 'monolithic' structure, they removed the need for any trickle-down culture and instead created multi-discipline pods.

Naming them chapters – Design Chapter, Client Services Chapter etc. – each pod runs self-sufficiently, building its own unique culture, managing its' own budget and implementing systems and processes specific to the functions needs.

This business focuses on creating wider connections through shared interests and goals. Project teams are created when the business is going through improvements,

which further brings likeminded people together, along with fresh ideas and creativity.

This has proven to be a great way to get buy in on wider business projects where they had previously struggled.

Water cooler moments are gone. They can't be forced.

Instead, serendipitous moments occur in natural groupings. This business owners' advice is to simply take it where you can find it. Big advocates of Slack for async comms, they've created hobbyist channels for those who wish to participate, with topics such as pets, plants and being parents among many others.

## The golden question; will it get easier?

I wish I could say yes. The honest answer is that I can't say for sure. In 2022 we saw a record high of 1.3 million vacancies combined with a record low of 3.5% unemployment. That's not going to correct itself overnight.

All I know is it is going to be harder in the short term. I'm going to leave you with a question I ask every agency owner – what is your talent attraction strategy?

Almost everyone in my network either says they don't have one, or it's scribbled on a napkin at best. The fact is, your TA strategy should be as structured as your business development strategy.

Ultimately, one can't function without the other. If you focus solely on BD, how are you going to fulfil those new client wins? If you turn the tap off on TA just because you need to tighten up cost base, you're effectively crippling business growth.

So, how are you building your EVP? You are experts in branding and marketing, so turn

some of that knowledge inwards and dress up your own shop window. Chucking a job advert out and hoping for the best will not work.

You need to be meeting people, even if you aren't actively hiring. Just like BD, you should be building relationships with the people you'd like to target. By building up a network of passive talent, you'll have a whole pool to tap straight into when the time is right.

Like any other business strategy, think medium to long term. Give ownership to someone to keep them accountable. Note, that doesn't have to be you just because it's your business. Give them some measurables to track so you know those relationships are being maintained.

And most importantly, keep yourself visible and front of mind.



**If you're struggling to get your head around  
talent challenges, drop me a line  
on [leon@weareadam.com](mailto:leon@weareadam.com).**

**I'd love to get heads together over a coffee to  
see what solutions we can come up with.**

