

These are the competencies for geostrategic advantage. Does your team have what it takes?

Geopolitical rivalry has reached the labor market. With the talent war on, here's how your business can build the workforce you need.



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In today's [Polarized, Liquid, Unilateral, Tense and Omnirelational \(PLUTO\)](#) world, the word on everyone's lips is resilience. And yet resilience, despite being one of the professional qualities most in demand, is also the quality hardest to find, according to HR, Talent and People executives surveyed by IESE in its latest report on [The Future of Work](#).

Amid all the wars being waged around the world, there is another kind of war being fought — for talent, capable of navigating conflict and not just surviving but thriving in this PLUTO world.

This fight for talent is both “exhausting and fierce,” admitted Eva Labarta, head of Axon South Europe, speaking on an executive panel at IESE's [Geopolitics Summit](#) in Madrid. Yet it's a necessary fight, as talent has become a fundamental pillar of competitive advantage.

And don't think this is a battle you can avoid. As the [political adviser Michèle Flournoy has warned CEOs before](#): “You may try to avoid geopolitics, but geopolitics is going to come find you.”

So what kind of talent is needed today? And do you have it?

Success depends on talent

Besides resilience — the ability to navigate changing environments and manage adversity, with endurance and emotional intelligence — [The Future of Work](#) report cited several other competencies in greater demand today.

Talent essentials

Curiosity & creativity

A desire for continuous learning, and an ability to access knowledge wherever you find it, in order to innovate.

Passion & courage

Boldness channeled through a realistic understanding of how companies operate.

Teamwork & collaboration

A cross-functional mindset and an ability to bring others on board.

Leadership

The ability to cast a global vision and drive change.

Critical thinking

The ability to analyze, evaluate and question things.

Ethical values

Acting with utmost respect for others and working with humility.

Common good

Building for the long term rather than short-term gratification.

Although these competencies were highlighted by executives of firms operating in Spain, they are certainly not unique to Spain. The World Economic Forum's [Future of Jobs Report 2025](#) similarly highlighted resilience, flexibility, agility, leadership and social influence, among others, as increasingly in demand owing to geoeconomic fragmentation and geopolitical tensions.

Megatrends like digital transformation and artificial intelligence (AI) are also putting a premium on specific technical skills. With [the race for AI supremacy](#) akin to the Cold War era space race or nuclear arms race, many companies are currently vying for software engineers, data scientists and developers who can create and use new AI models and tools. In the Spanish survey, 86% of respondents said they expected AI to transform their businesses within the next five years — yet they also [reported significant difficulties in finding adequate profiles](#) up to the task.

This was echoed in another report by [Joan Jané](#) on [the U.S. drive to reshore manufacturing](#). As with AI, the current U.S. attempt to rebuild its manufacturing base faces the same basic hurdle: a shortage of skilled labor.

Whether racing ahead with AI or reshoring manufacturing, “success depends on talent,” says Jané, “a workforce that spans roles from machinists and technicians to engineers, coders and data specialists.”

But he adds: “Equally important — and often overlooked — is the need for executives and general managers who understand how to leverage these roles as sources of competitive advantage.”

For technical workforce development, [education is key](#): integration of STEM subjects in primary and secondary education; more apprenticeships and vocational training programs; and university degrees tailored to future market needs, with MBA programs incorporating manufacturing strategy, digital supply chains and Industry 4.0 into their core curricula.

The latter relates to a point Jané makes in his report: “Over the past two decades, U.S.

business schools have deprioritized manufacturing-related education, placing greater emphasis on finance, marketing and corporate strategy. As a result, many leaders have lost operational fluency, weakening their ability to drive informed decisions about sourcing, automation and global production strategy.”

Spotting the opportunities for value creation and innovation inherent in the new geopolitical realm requires renewed “strategic fluency at the C-suite level,” says Jané. “Without upskilling at the leadership layer, you can have the most advanced AI systems in the world, but they will be of no use if you don’t also have executives who understand how to align them with global trade dynamics and harness them as sources of long-term advantage.”

Despite speculation that AI may replace talent, IESE research finds that [AI is increasing the demand for AI-savvy managers](#) with problem-solving skills and ethical judgment to interpret and implement data insights effectively.

Executive dream team

To navigate a more conflict-prone environment, make sure your C-suite epitomizes these qualities, according to [Jordi Canals’ report on strategy in times of geopolitical disruption](#).

Authenticity & consistency

The senior management team sets the tone, so act authentically and in alignment with the company’s purpose and values.

Purposeful vision

A clearly defined vision of the kind of company you aspire to build will serve as a powerful beacon when the path ahead is dark.

Learning

The ability to learn quickly, assimilate conflicting views and make timely course corrections when decisions don’t go as planned.

Reinvention

Rapid and continuous development of new capabilities to adapt organizational competencies to new realities.

Simplicity

Breaking problems down to their essential parts, and focusing on actionable, achievable goals and solutions.

Enriching relationships

Professional, intellectual, emotional, familial and relational self-care is essential in times of

turbulent change.

Integrated approach

Understanding the multidimensional nature of problems and formulating holistic solutions that address interlinked challenges.

Expanding the managerial mindset

The concern that the current generation of talent may be ill-prepared for geopolitics was raised by [Mike Rosenberg](#) in his book [Strategy and Geopolitics](#). It's worth revisiting his advice for managers, which is even more relevant in 2025 than when he tried to disabuse managers of their perception in 2017 that nuclear attack, Middle East conflict and deteriorating U.S.-China relations were remote, low-probability events.

First, he concurs with Jané on the need for more expansive executive education. Many leaders have backgrounds in engineering, accounting and business administration, which breeds a certain kind of thinking. "Engineers and finance people are taught that problems can be solved, and if you just do the math right, you will get the correct result. People with this type of mindset tend to insist on clarity when there may not be any," says Rosenberg.

To improve geopolitical awareness, recruiting talent with backgrounds in history, political science and liberal arts could help to enrich the mix. This was mentioned during the [Strategy Science Conference](#) hosted by IESE in June 2025. In a panel discussing the ways that strategy scientists could factor geopolitics into their thinking, it was felt that more cross-disciplinary collaboration would be helpful — seeking insights from political science, law and international relations to gain a broader understanding of the geopolitical context and its implications for business strategy, away from traditional knowledge silos.

So, how would established executives do this in practice? Rosenberg suggests the following:

- **Do a postgraduate program.** The U.S. military, for example, sends officers back to school to receive advanced degrees in political science, history or other disciplines.
- **Invite experts to run crash courses on geopolitics** for managers in your company, offering in-depth knowledge of strategic regions affecting your business.
- **Attend colloquiums and conferences** on geopolitical subjects by experts in their fields.

- **Reassess your performance metrics.** Would learning an additional language or doing one of the previously mentioned activities be as valid a performance target as hitting the bottom line?
- **Rotate.** Rotating managers through job assignments in different countries, functions and business units is an indispensable means of acquiring firsthand knowledge of the potential impact of geopolitical developments on company operations and supply chains. Yet such assignments must be factored into performance metrics, so that executives are recognized, and their career progression not penalized, for deviating from the usual path.

For every barrier, an opportunity in the war for talent

Thankfully, some features of today's labor battleground provide opportunities to leverage: namely, remote work. "Remote work has many advantages," said Axon's Labarta. Citing data on Europe having a significant talent shortage in areas like data science, cybersecurity and AI, she said that, thanks to ICT, companies like hers were able to recruit from anywhere. "I don't care where they are: Swedish, Romanian, Irish or Nigerian. With remote work, we can manage it all."

Another opportunity stems from the tighter restrictions on immigration, particularly in the United States. [Boston Consulting Group cited a program](#) to lure 10,000 highly skilled IT workers from the U.S. to Canada, which was oversubscribed within days — and that was before Trump was in power. Since then, his administration's targeting of academics and scientists has seen record numbers of Americans applying to work in the U.K. or in France, which launched a [Safe Place for Science Program](#). The upside of a brain drain is that one country's loss is another's gain. Global companies should be making the most of this trend, using tactics such as: offering funds to lure diaspora talent back home, as China is doing; targeting highly skilled talent from an ally, as in the Canadian example; and easing visa processes so that foreign graduates with desired skills can stay in or move to your country, with legal pathways for easier labor mobility.

Speaking on the same panel as Labarta at IESE's [Geopolitics Summit](#), Christoph Steck, director of public policy at Amazon Spain & Portugal, identified untapped opportunities in Europe. Although Europe gets a lot of flak for overregulation — especially in key areas like AI,

putting the EU at a competitive disadvantage for talent attraction, recruitment and retention — Steck thought Europe needed to play to its strengths: its talent, its people and especially its single market. Having a single market the size of the EU's is an incredible advantage, though Steck lamented it was [not as integrated as it could be](#). By removing internal barriers to talent — from using AI to overcome language-related frictions and leveraging Europe's multilingualism, to automatically recognizing and co-validating qualifications and credentials — Steck saw plenty of scope to unleash the competitive potential of the world's largest trading bloc.

This is your moment to act. Find the opportunities and invest in people — strategically and across multiple disciplines. Build the workforce you need, not only to weather the current storms, but to emerge stronger and smarter in the era ahead.

Sustaining competitiveness in the geopolitical talent war

Treat talent as a strategic asset

Talent is a pillar of economic sovereignty.

Invest in core tech skills

AI, cybersecurity and data analysis should be central to your upskilling/reskilling efforts.

Share intergenerational knowledge

Encourage mixed teams, mentoring and succession plans to ensure vital knowledge doesn't get lost.

Rethink education

Vocational training may align better with business needs, and reduce overqualification.

Reconsider your Employee Value Proposition (EVP)

Salary is only one aspect. Today's workers also value flexibility, growth and development, meaningful work and wellbeing.

Foster ties

Closer ties between industry and academia, and between the public and private sectors, can help to build the workforce of tomorrow.

Promote ethical, human-centered leadership

In an age of algorithms, human judgment, empathy and values-driven leadership make the difference. Ethics isn't a restriction — it's a competitive edge.

MORE INFO:

“[3 keys to shockproof your global supply chain](#),” based on the book [Strategy and Geopolitics](#) by Mike Rosenberg.

“[Estrategia de la empresa ante cambios geopolíticos disruptivos](#)” by Jordi Canals.

“[The manufacturing renaissance: reshoring, innovation and industrial strategy for U.S. competitiveness](#)” by Joan Jané and Holly Anne Hill.

[The Future of Work](#), a report by IESE’s Maria Luisa Blazquez, Mireia Las Heras and Jordi Canals, with contributions from Francesc Arribas and Jose Perez del Valle. It is published as part of IESE’s [Education for Jobs Initiative](#).

“The geopolitics of AI” with Sampsa Samila is available for Members of the IESE Alumni Association to [watch on demand here](#).

This article is included in [IESE Business School Insight online magazine No. 170](#) (Sept.-Dec. 2025).

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