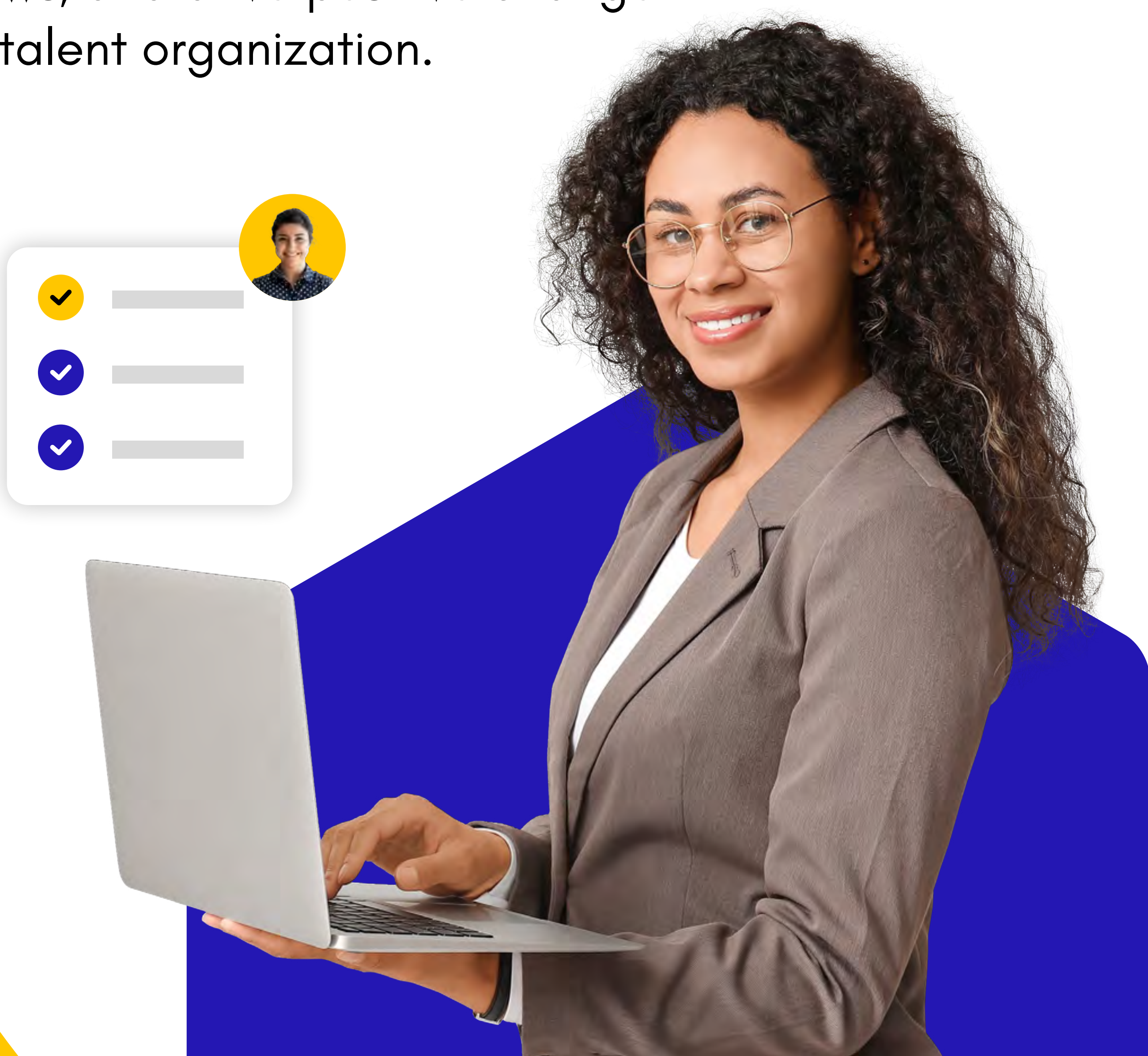
JobSync™

Implementing Kaizen in Recruiting

How small, data-driven steps for continual improvement can cut waste, streamline workflows, and drive positive change in your talent organization.



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Introduction

Visit any large company in the manufacturing, supply chain or procurement sector, and there is a good chance that you will encounter Kaizen principles. Kaizen—the Japanese philosophy of using small steps to accomplish large goals—is a familiar improvement tool in these environments. That's because it is very effective in optimizing processes, reducing waste, eliminating defects, curbing excess spending, and promoting both innovation and accountability from all workers, not just a select few.

Where Kaizen has not yet taken hold is in recruiting and talent acquisition (TA). There is no obvious reason why. When you look at the main advantage of Kaizen—that it encourages scrutiny of processes so that mistakes and waste are reduced—there is no better department to apply it than in.

It's no secret that TA has a lot of waste built into its processes, and hiring mistakes can be very expensive. If Kaizen can pinpoint expenditures on initiatives that don't build a pipeline of quality candidates, don't lead to good candidates getting hired, or don't help TA teams do their jobs more effectively, that's savings for the company. And if it can help TA teams identify processes that do work, even better.

Since Kaizen was introduced in the 1940s, two companies have become synonymous with its use: Toyota and Ford Motor Company—Ford famously used Kaizen to execute one of the most successful corporate turnarounds in history. In writing this guide, we were lucky to have the expertise of Melissa Thompson, Ford's Global Head of Talent Acquisition. With her insights from the trenches, we will show you how to apply Kaizen principles in your talent organization to create better processes than ever before.

The Kaizen Philosophy:

Continuous Improvement Without Excuses

Kaizen translates to "change for the better" or "continuous improvement." It is both a philosophy and a method.

As a philosophy, it encourages all employees to constantly look for possible improvements and then to initiate positive change in an organization.

As a method, Kaizen breaks down problems and processes into small, incremental changes that can be easily implemented on an ongoing basis, instead of making drastic changes all at once. The idea is that these small steps lead to gradual but significant improvements over time.

The principles of Kaizen can be summed up as follows:

1. **Get rid of fixed ideas.** Just because you've always done it this way, doesn't mean it's the best way or that the process cannot be improved.

2. **Seek solutions, not problems.** Think about "how" to do it, not "why" it cannot be done. How can you do this task 3 minutes faster? How can you make the process 5% more enjoyable? Make things happen.

3. **No excuses.** Do not make excuses or try to justify the past, start by questioning current and best practices. Create a bias for action.

4. **Choose a simple solution, not the perfect one.** Do it right away even if it's only half of the target.

5. **Use creativity before money.** Don't spend money on the problems you are attacking with Kaizen, at least not initially. Use your wisdom.

6 **Empower everyone to be a part of the problem-solving process.** All employees play a part in spotting issues and suggesting improvements; this helps stop weak processes becoming a huge burden for everyone.

7 **Eliminate waste.** View waste as a problem to solve. There’s less need for oversight when errors are caught early.

8 **Make decisions based on data.** Collect and analyze data as another way to reduce waste and inefficiencies. Use data to measure the effectiveness of changes and make adjustments.

9 **Learn through action. Do it, don’t just talk about doing it.** Take fast action and learn from real situations.

10 **Find balance:** Minimize overburden and burnout by making sure the allocation of work is balanced and everyone contributes to the end result.

11 **Technology serves people and processes:** If technology doesn’t add direct value, or if a process has to be adjusted to accommodate that technology, then it is creating waste.

12 **Never stop improving.** Kaizen is continuous. In a Kaizen workplace, new improvements are put forward every day.

“Kaizen is really about thinking, ‘where am I trying to get to in the next 3 to 5 years, and what am I doing today that’s driving me, in incremental steps, towards that objective?’“

Melissa Thompson

Global Head of Talent Acquisition
for Ford Motor Company

The Kaizen Method:

Tools and Techniques to Support Improvement

Supporting the Kaizen philosophy is a whole collection of methodologies, techniques, and frameworks that talent functions can adopt to identify issues, create solutions, and roll them out. You get the most out of Kaizen when everything is standardized, so it's worth exploring some of the more common tools and techniques that businesses use to do this.

Kaizen Events. A Kaizen event or "blitz" is a four-hour to multiple-day session in which everyone comes together to identify process wastes and solutions to those issues. To have a credible impact, events must have clear objectives and dedicated people.

PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) Cycle. This is a four-step, never-ending process for continuous improvement:

- Plan is about finding problems and preparing a plan, including time for each step.
- Do is about implementing and testing different solutions. It might involve pilot programs, test runs, and other types of experiments run in a controlled environment so the impact can be measured.
- Check is about studying the results and measuring the success of the solution based on an agreed set of metrics. What went right and wrong?
- Act is about standardizing and embedding the solution into the fabric of your operations before cycling back to the "P" phase and finding new problems and further improvements.

The 5 Whys Technique. This simple but effective technique involves asking "why?" five times to get to the root cause of an issue or problem.

Gemba Walks. Gemba means "the actual place" in Japanese. It refers to going to the real source, where the work is done, and observing processes firsthand instead of trying to solve problems behind a desk.

Value Stream Mapping is a visual tool for identifying waste and inefficiencies in a process. It helps teams see the entire process from start to finish and pinpoint areas for improvement.

"In a three-day Kaizen event, the first day is dedicated to the current state and getting clarity on the problem statement. The second day is for ideation—what are the gaps, and how can the team address them? The third day is all about action plans and building out the solution."

Melissa Thompson

Global Head of Talent Acquisition
for Ford Motor Company

Kaizen in Recruiting:

Calibrating for Success

Recruiting is not a production line, and talent is much more than another category of spending that needs to be controlled and streamlined. But that doesn't mean there is no place for Kaizen in talent organizations.

If you look at the principles that underpin Kaizen, you can see straight away that they are similar to the principles that drive hiring best practices. Collaboration, data-driven decision-making, creative uses of the budget, choosing technology that works for your process and not the other way around—these are all things that talent acquisition professionals constantly strive for. If you have been exploring Hiring Operations as a way to operationalize and streamline the many moving parts of recruiting, you have already been taking a Kaizen-like approach to your work.

To give this context, consider the following scenarios where Kaizen could be applied to improve processes and outcomes:

You are processing too many candidates

To use the language of Kaizen, resourcing has the tendency to favor 'overproduction' when building and processing a slate of candidates:

- Easy Apply functions generate large volumes of unqualified candidates that recruiters then have to wade through.
- More candidates are passed to a hiring manager than are needed, especially in the early stages of hiring.
- Excessive pipelining of candidates, all of whom need sourcing and processing when there's no immediate need.

In Kaizen, overproduction is considered to be the mother of all waste. Activities should be focused on "getting the right candidates," not "more candidates."

You have disjointed and duplicated processes

Every step in a process that requires the movement of inventory—in recruiting, that's your candidates—carries the risk of so-called "transport" waste. Emailing resumes to the hiring manager, moving data from one system to another without seamless integrations, or shuttling candidates from a recruiter to a hiring manager and back again in a complex or uncoordinated process all add little value to the candidate or the organization. It's easy to get clever in talent acquisition, but thousands of dollars are lost in transport waste alone.

You are doing more work than necessary to accomplish the task

Overprocessing is the waste of exerting more effort than is necessary to accomplish any given task. In recruiting, it means doing things that don't really matter for success—like creating a job application that's five pages long when all you need is two or three screening questions, putting candidates through endless rounds of interviews, or asking for too much data at the wrong point in the process.

The concept of overprocessing is somewhat new in recruiting. However, point to ways in which companies overprocess, and it becomes clear that this is one of the largest opportunities for recruiting teams. From manually posting jobs on job boards to sifting through hundreds of unqualified applications, the areas in which recruiting teams exert tremendous energy for little value are endless.

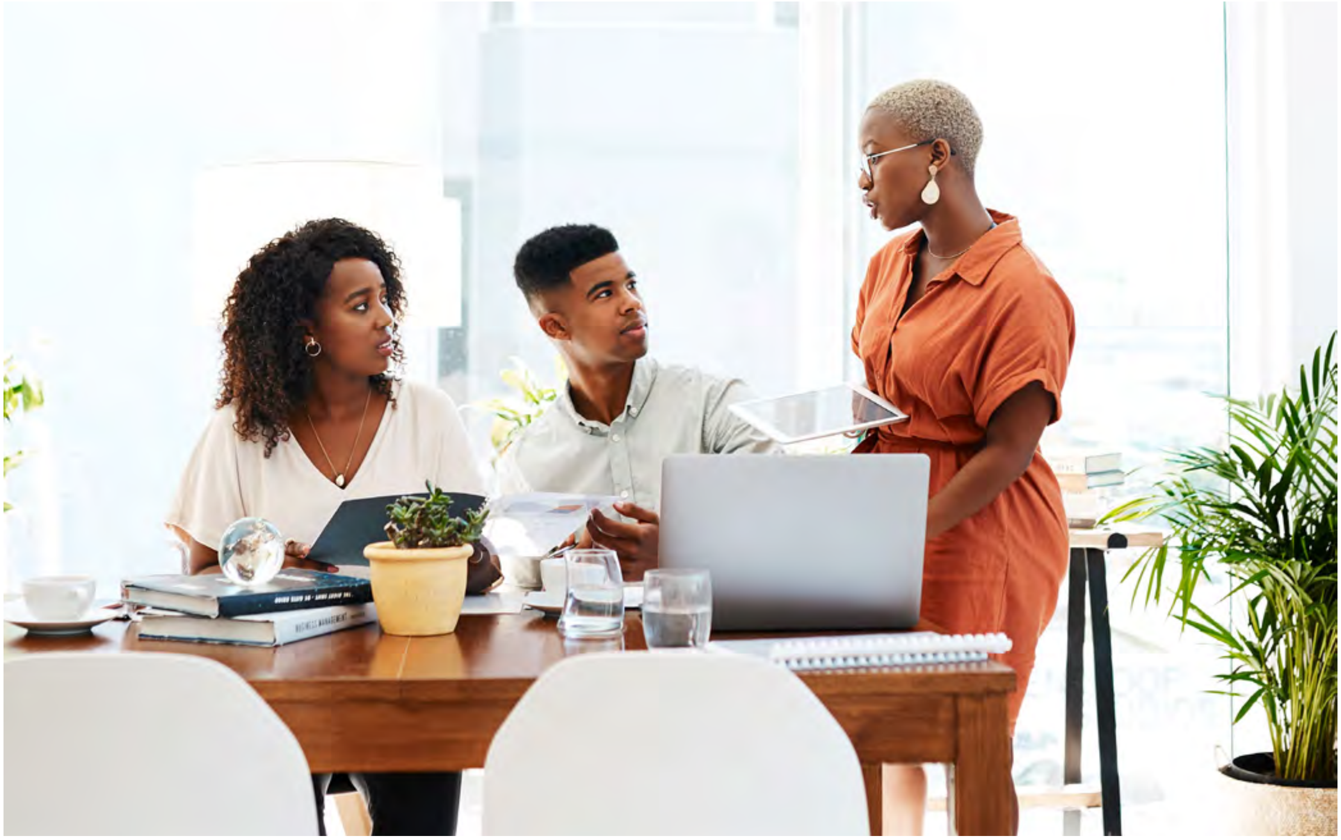
Simplicity is key in Kaizen, and it should be in your recruiting processes, too.

You make candidates play the waiting game

The longer the process, the more "waiting waste" is created. Great candidates abandon applications when no one gets back to them, or the hiring manager takes too long to make a final decision. In situations where speed of hire is crucial, waiting waste can be fatal to a company's ability to compete and attract top talent.

You have poor post-hire outcomes

Making a poor hire is the recruiting equivalent of a production defect. In manufacturing, a defect is a waste of resources and a safety hazard; in recruiting, a poor hire leads to high turnover or low productivity, both of which carry significant costs for organizations. "Defect waste" in Kaizen can also include situations where you have to revisit the requirements after you have started sourcing—how much work are you repeating because you didn't get it right the first time?



How to Succeed With Kaizen:

Lessons from Ford

Kaizen is a flexible system, and you can find many adaptations from the best companies in the world. The following strategies helped Thompson and her team at Ford develop a culture of continuous improvement that led to significant cost savings and improved efficiency—and they can do the same for your talent organization.

1. **Clarify your problem statement. Peel the onion.**

Kaizen events are problem-solving sessions—they will not work unless you have a clear problem statement and goal. A problem can be any trouble, difficulty, abnormality, or deviation from a desired result or metric. It's worth taking time to establish this, however, since recruiting problems can be surprisingly hard to define.

Ford illustrates this with an early example from Ford. "Our Aged Reqs were really high, and that was the metric I was leaning in on. But when I presented it to the CHRO, she pushed me and said, "Is time the most important thing for the business?" And I realized, actually, the business doesn't care about time. Yes, they want hiring to be fast, but they want you to find the right quality candidate."

The five whys technique can help you get to the problem behind the problem. Each "why" serves as a gateway to uncovering additional factors contributing to the issue. In Thompson's example, she uncovered "a super long list of 120 things" that were feeding into the Aged Reqs problem and other issues, starting with the length of time it was taking to open a requisition. Peel the onion—get to the real problem, not the symptom.

"The first thing you do when you decide to do a Kaizen is clarify your problem statement. What is the critical metric that you're trying to improve?"

Melissa Thompson

Global Head of Talent Acquisition
for Ford Motor Company

2 Know your problems before seeking solutions. Use bite-sized teams, time chunks, and processes to stay focused.

When teams come together, they have a tendency to jump into solution-seeking. Thompson is a fan of breaking each Kaizen event into manageable parts to fully understand where the waste is hiding and keep everyone tightly focused on that problem.

One of her preferred approaches is CRISP, which stands for Clarify, Review, Interview, Select, and Prepare. CRISP is a model of the five prerequisites for a successful recruiting process, where C includes the initial discovery session and job requirements, R includes the sourcing strategy, S is about the debriefing session and making the offer, and P is the keep-warm strategy between making an offer and candidate onboarding. Interviews are obvious.

"I split participants so that one group is focused on the C, one group is focused on the R, and so on. Then we do a walk around. We ask each group—What are your gaps? What are your blockers? What's the process? What do you understand now? What did you learn? There's also a time element. You have 45 minutes to accomplish this task. All of the process is bite-sized so that we cannot go ahead and do the solutioning before we understand the process that we have in front of us right now," Thompson says.

3 Bring data into the conversation. Do the pre-work.

Many of Ford's Kaizen events have focused on college recruiting. This sector carries a unique set of baggage. People can become attached to their alma mater and the schools they have been dealing with for years. They have particular biases about which college is the best, regardless of whether those schools provide hireable candidates or not.

To address this, Thompson ran a blitz one-and-a-half day Kaizen event to better understand what objectively worked and didn't work in the company's early-career strategies. However, the data they gathered beforehand helped the team understand where they needed to make changes.

"We discovered that only 4% of University of Texas undergraduates leave the state, so this school was highly unlikely to send talent our way!" Thompson says. Adjusting their school selection toward schools that did send candidates to Michigan, where Ford's head office is located, cut a tremendous amount of waste. "We determined that if a school had fewer than five accepts or an offer-acceptance rate below 50%, we would reconsider its place on our target list," Thompson says.

Different problems need different data points. Collecting and analyzing data beforehand means emotion can be set aside, and the Kaizen event won't be wasted dancing around a solution that isn't relevant to your company. Without the data, there is no way to know where to start.

4 Work as a team to solve problems. Not ‘follow me’ but ‘join me.’

Kaizen is built around whole-team participation in problem identification and solution discovery. Anonymous surveys, suggestion boxes, huddle boards, process mapping (where team members actively log all the steps necessary to complete a process from start to finish), and in-person brainstorming sessions are some methods you can use to encourage a culture of collaboration and idea-sharing.

But for Thompson, none of this matters unless ideas are taken onboard and implemented: you actually address them. “The magic is when I say something, and they see me do the thing that I said I was going to do. That’s a trust brick that I’m getting in the foundation of the wall. The more you build that trust, the easier the change management is going to get.”

To convert nay-sayers and get buy-in, team members must feel like they are the ones driving the change forward, not being told what to do by those in higher positions. “Sometimes I design a solution, but I go to my team and say, okay, this is what I’m thinking. This is key–I don’t need ‘yes’ people on my team. I need people who will say, ‘Well, this makes sense, but why would we do this? When we do this, it has an impact. So what if we did this differently?’ It’s not ‘follow me.’ It’s: ‘Let’s all think about how we continuously get better,’” Thompson says.

> You have to put the hook out there that makes people want to follow the process. The magic is you need to go back and say, ‘I heard you say these ten things are your blockers. We’re going to address these three this quarter, and then you actually address them.”

Melissa Thompson

Global Head of Talent Acquisition
for Ford Motor Company

5 Quantify Kaizen's small improvements. Look backward to plan forwards.

Each small change you make is unlikely to turn the organization around. However, over time and in combination, those small improvements compound to a larger effect. Thompson advises pulling your metrics every month and at the end of each quarter so you can see the trajectory. Be patient; it may be three months or longer before a process change trickles into the data.

Thompson also recommends segmenting the metrics by recruiting manager and delivery leader. "What are the differences? How can these two delivery leaders learn from each other? If this one team has an age rate that is under 6%, what are they doing differently? And can they share with the rest of the recruiting managers?" Constant analysis, communication, and cooperation are key to maintaining momentum.

"We have bite-size, quarterly objectives that allow me to see, quarter over quarter, how we're making movement. At the end of each quarter, we look back and say what worked and what didn't work. We're consistently doing the look back and plan forward."

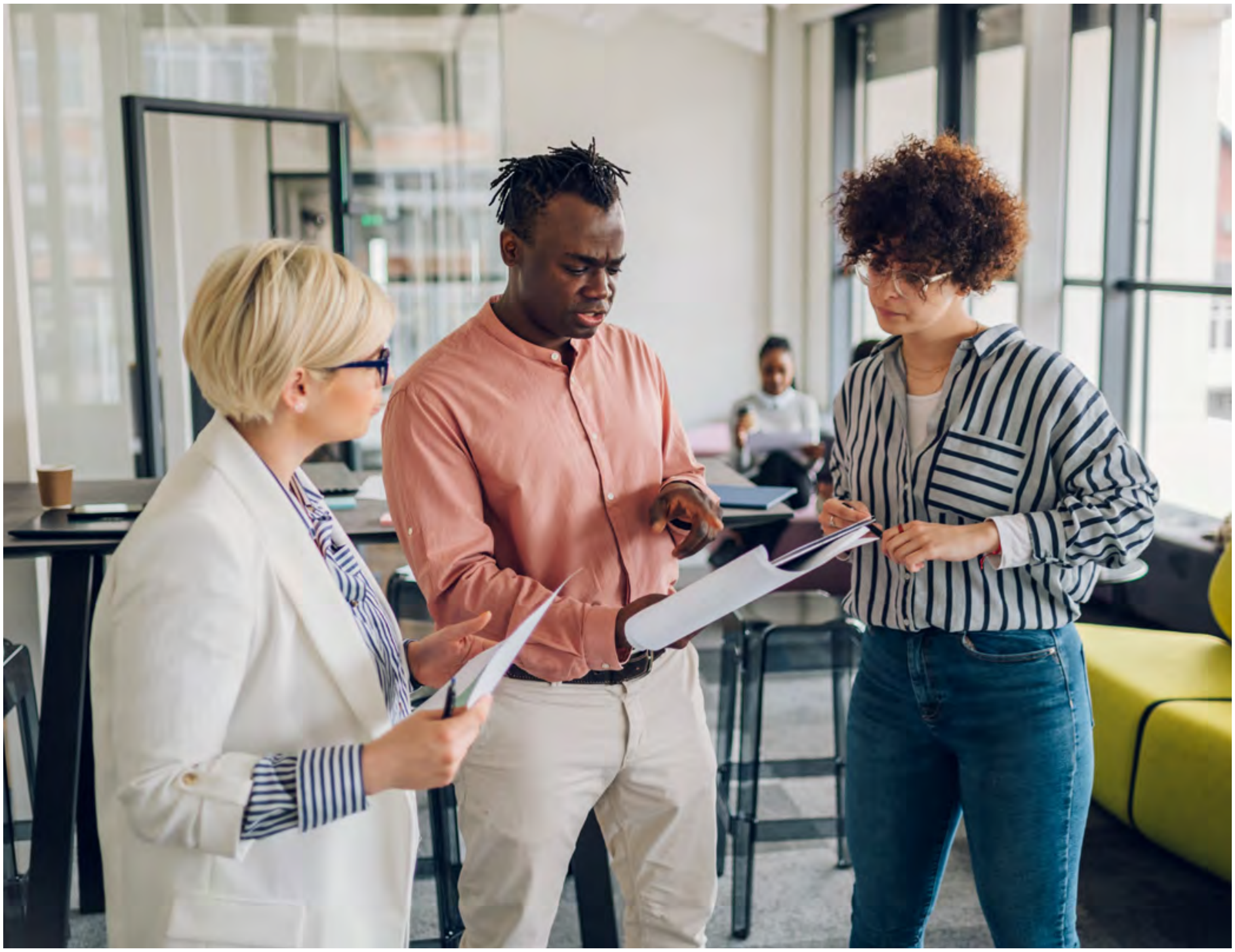
Melissa Thompson

Global Head of Talent Acquisition
for Ford Motor Company

5 Call regular intermissions. Know when to say stop.

Continuous improvement is exactly that—continuous. It needs careful management to prevent whiplash: “Make sure everyone has time to pause and absorb the change,” Thompson says. She’s an advocate for calling regular “intermissions” where nothing gets added, removed, or changed. Use this time to settle into the work as it is and revisit any issues the team had.

Periods of “just let it breathe” are also valuable for seeing the real effects of change—change too much at once, and the data gets muddled. Thompson advises having the patience and discipline to pause “so that that change gets sticky, it really locks in” before upping the ante with the next improvement.



Final Words

Talent teams can learn a great deal from companies that have been really successful at using Kaizen to effect lasting change. There are clearly a variety of ways of doing this. Melissa Thompson at Ford uses Kaizen events to identify root causes and shake up the talent organization in areas that matter. Others might take a different approach.

But whatever tools and techniques you use, we hope you can see that Kaizen is very doable. There are successes to emulate, and the results far outweigh the resources required—Kaizen doesn't take a huge effort, and you don't have to spend a lot of time or money to effect big changes. It's mostly about becoming the best version of your workflows, processes, and habits. And that's something that should be in everyone's interest.