

MANAGING DIRECTORS IN MANUFACTURING

WHAT TODAY'S REALITIES MEAN FOR LEADERSHIP AND TALENT



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Not long ago, manufacturing businesses could plan with confidence. Three year strategies were standard; five year roadmaps were achievable. That world has gone. Today, uncertainty is the only constant; economic volatility, geopolitical shocks, supply chain disruption, and shifting customer expectations have made long term planning almost impossible. So what does this mean for leaders? The MD role has changed more in the last three years than in the previous ten. Skills, behaviours, and leadership capabilities are evolving fast. Here are three major shifts and why they matter for senior hiring.

“Planning Ahead? Easier Said Than Done”

Energy crisis, cost pressures, fragile supply chains, geopolitical tensions—risk planning can't be done with the same confidence. Instead, leaders spend more time on contingency planning and “what if” scenarios. Forecasting now blends engineering insight, market data, and probability modelling—skills rarely on an MD's radar a decade ago. Talent implication: Agility, resilience, and data-driven decision-making are now essential. This breaks the old mould of MDs coming from pure Sales, Ops, or Finance backgrounds. Demand for succession planning and future ready talent is rising fast and many SMEs lack these capabilities internally and don't have the bandwidth to think proactively.

Commercial Capability Is Non-Negotiable

While some firms hesitate, others are making bold moves. We're seeing significant hiring activity upstream in supply chains, upgrading talent after years of underinvestment. Private equity-backed firms remain active, but PE boards are taking a more active role in the hiring of broader leadership roles outside of the normal CEO and CFO positions. Commercial Directors, Operations Leaders, and Product Heads—roles that drive execution and growth. One recurring theme: lack of commercial capability among MDs. Group CEOs often express concern about leaders struggling to articulate vision, maintain sales momentum, or spot product opportunities. Commercially savvy leadership is now urgent. The implication for talent; For firms sitting on the sidelines, the risk is clear: fall behind and lose competitiveness. For proactive businesses, the challenge is securing the best operational and commercial leadership in a fiercely competitive market.

Culture Isn't Soft—It's a Hard Driver of Performance

Culture is no longer a ‘soft’ issue; it's a fundamental driver of performance. Leadership strategies are shifting from pure financial oversight to a more human centred business evolution. Inspiring and motivating teams, especially younger cohorts, matters as much as operational excellence. Digital and data literacy is now mandatory. Leaders must embrace technology that drives efficiency and competitiveness, including emerging AI tools. The implication for Talent: MDs need clarity, vision, and the ability to lead change from the front. These skills aren't always found in legacy leadership teams. Some can adapt, but for most SMEs, this means looking outside for fresh capability.

The Bottom Line

The MD role has never been more complex—or more critical. From navigating relentless uncertainty to driving cultural transformation and embracing digital capability, today's MD needs a broader skill set than ever before. For SMEs, the question isn't just “How do we survive?” It's “Do we have the leadership talent to thrive?” At Aston Fisher, we help businesses plan ahead—building leadership pipelines, identifying next-generation talent, and securing senior hires that make the difference. If you're thinking about succession planning, upgrading your leadership team, or benchmarking your talent strategy, let's talk. The firms that act now will be the ones ready for whatever comes next.