After Erik ten Hag agreed to take charge of Manchester United, he set aside a couple of hours each week away from managing Ajax to discuss the shape of the squad he would inherit in England. He wanted to get a head start on recruitment and spoke to United’s football director John Murtough about the types of players he would like waiting for him when he officially began work. Ten Hag asked for a midfielder in the mould of Frenkie de Jong, an established centre-forward, and a left-footed centre-back.

Agents contacted in that period, however, paint a picture of a club acting without an established plan. It transpired that, although United use a tailormade scouting database containing thousands of reports, nobody had assembled a so-called “shadow squad” of potential signings in each position, as is customary at clubs across the football pyramid. United were starting from scratch, rather than having potential deals lined up. Murtough does now have a thick dossier that outlines targets for each position, categorising them by levels of quality based on scouting reports and data, as well as detailing their expected cost. But that uncertainty at the start emboldened Ten Hag to take matters into his own hands in certain circumstances, such as when Murtough returned with a list of centre-backs that included Ajax’s Lisandro Martinez. Josko Gvardiol, Alessandro Bastoni and Pau Torres were also discussed but Ten Hag preferred Martinez, partially due to their established relationship and the player’s attainability, but also because he was seen as the most suitable of the targets. Martinez understood Ten Hag’s way of working, so had merit as the first piece in his jigsaw, and Murtough, seen by some former colleagues as an administrator rather than a visionary, acquiesced. GO DEEPER Lisandro Martinez: Why Manchester United pushed hard to beat Arsenal to £55m deal By the time the 2022-23 campaign kicked off, Ten Hag’s two other signings were Tyrell Malacia, a deputy left-back, and Christian Eriksen, a No 10 on a free transfer. United were still pursuing a forlorn bid for De Jong, having agreed an €85million (£73m; $93m) fee with Barcelona. Yet, although five experienced players had left the squad at the end of their contracts — Paul Pogba, Jesse Lingard, Nemanja Matic, Juan Mata and Edinson Cavani — and Andreas Pereira had been sold to Fulham for £10million, Ten Hag was informed there was no further money to spend in the summer of 2022. Advertisement Then United lost to Brighton & Hove Albion and Brentford, and panic spread. Chief executive Richard Arnold became more visible around Carrington and sat in on a lengthy recruitment meeting following the 2-1 defeat by Brighton at Old Trafford. It was then that staff decided to pivot from De Jong to Casemiro. The decision to go for Casemiro, a different profile of midfielder to De Jong, was taken despite some internal resistance. It was calculated that signing Declan Rice from West Ham United for £120million, as an example, would have been better for United’s long-term financial-fair-play (FFP) prospects than bringing in Casemiro, then aged 30, for half the fee. Rice’s salary would have been significantly smaller than Casemiro’s earnings of around £350,000 per week and he could have signed a longer contract owing to his age, meaning the cost could have been amortised — or spread out — in the accounts over a longer period. Rice, then aged 23, also had potential resale value. The Casemiro deal from Real Madrid is one Sir Jim Ratcliffe questioned during his tour of Carrington in March and, as the British billionaire puts the finishing touches on his 25 per cent investment into United, which gives him control of sporting matters, he is tasking INEOS’ director of sport Sir Dave Brailsford with auditing the club’s processes and personnel. Here, we will detail many of the aspects Brailsford’s work will explore, including: The Casemiro deal, worth £60m plus £10m in add-ons, ended United’s hopes of a move for Harry Kane this summer because the England striker’s wages would have been too great to work into FFP regulations. Kane was Ten Hag’s top choice at centre-forward but United never considered a genuine approach. United went for Casemiro because Ten Hag needed an immediate impact and he was available having decided to leave Real Madrid after nine years. United’s football department mapped out how he would fit in the team, delved into his injury record, and came to a unanimous decision to proceed. At the time, West Ham were refusing to entertain offers for Rice and Ten Hag did not want to wait. Casemiro enjoyed an excellent debut campaign, playing a career-high 51 games, but has looked short of his best this season and has been out with a hamstring injury since November 1. Advertisement One source with knowledge of the process — who, like others in this article, is speaking on condition of anonymity to protect their position — believes a year’s work was crammed into three months in Ten Hag’s first summer. Rather than starting conversations on signings in September 2021, after the previous window had closed, United began that work in May 2022, the justification being that a new manager — with Ten Hag replacing interim manager Ralf Rangnick — meant new plans. Action sped up even further as the summer transfer deadline approached, with Ten Hag anxious for a stronger midfield. Separately, Ten Hag felt he needed an additional attacker and though he had reservations about returning to Ajax, the target to gain universal agreement was Antony. Under the management of Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, United’s scouts had made reports that left staff valuing Antony at around £25m. Midway through the summer of 2022, United cut off talks with Ajax and privately communicated they would not pay more than £60m. In the final days of the window, with desperation around Old Trafford heightened and Ten Hag pressing for reinforcements, United agreed a fee of £86m (€95m guaranteed plus €5m add-ons). Ajax chief executive Edwin van der Sar later told The Athletic he had “challenged” Arnold and Murtough to “go as far as possible” at a time when the Dutch club had already sold several first-team players. Ten Hag undoubtedly wanted to sign Antony, but sanctioning the outlay came from above. Those with an understanding of United’s structure say several directors are involved in “checks and balances” during a transfer window, including chief financial officer Cliff Baty and general counsel Patrick Stewart, who is now interim chief executive, which leads to slower progress on negotiations. Joel Glazer, based in the US, adds a final layer of sign-off. GO DEEPER Who is Manchester United's incoming chief executive Patrick Stewart? But ultimately the system falters because, at crucial moments, United can decide to pay over the odds for a player and break their budget. Sources insist there is nobody at the club skilled at assessing a player’s worth who also has authority on spending and can take a holistic view of squad building. The cost of Ten Hag’s first summer meant United were on the brink with FFP regulations and January signings were limited to loans. However, rather than delve into the scouting database for solutions, many of their transfers appeared to be coincidental. Cristiano Ronaldo’s departure in November 2022 left a big hole at centre-forward. United initially pursued a move for Cody Gakpo, who had enjoyed a good World Cup and shared the same agency as Ten Hag, SEG International. PSV Eindhoven were open to selling. Advertisement A few days before Christmas, however, United pulled the plug on any permanent moves, deciding that only loans were possible. With his options limited, Ten Hag identified compatriot Wout Weghorst because he wanted a striker who could join as soon as the window opened. United paid Besiktas £2.5m to cancel his loan in Turkey and signed Weghorst, who scored two goals in 20 games at Burnley the previous season, on January 13. He went on to start 19 consecutive games. Then, when Eriksen got injured on January 28, the manager eyed a deadline-day move for Ryan Gravenberch from Bayern Munich. Bayern insisted Gravenberch was unavailable for loan, but proposed Marcel Sabitzer instead, an idea Ten Hag liked. United had historical scouting reports on Sabitzer but only went for him through circumstance rather than design. United argue this is an example of their dexterity, with a deal sorted in three hours once talks began in earnest. Bayern took calls from Kees Vos, Ten Hag’s agent, once the extent of Eriksen’s injury became known. Vos, a co-founder of SEG, has been a visible presence around United since Ten Hag’s appointment, attending games in the Old Trafford directors’ box and visiting Carrington for meetings. He has been seen in the training-ground canteen where players eat, access some staff have questioned. United are conscious of potential conflicts of interest but are satisfied with an arrangement that assists their ability to assess the market. In the summer of 2022, Vos, who had arranged Robin van Persie’s move to United 10 years earlier, was arguably the most experienced transfer facilitator around the club, with Murtough in his first window as football director. Tom Keane, an established agent, was head of negotiations on secondment from law firm Brandsmiths following the departure of Matt Judge. Andy O’Boyle started work as deputy football director that July after leaving the Premier League. Dominic Jordan became United’s first director of data science that March, having spent the previous two years at N Brown Group, an online fashion retailer. That new configuration left United playing catch-up and Ten Hag leaning on Vos for support — mindful, some suspect, of the transfer experiences of previous managers. Ten Hag’s second summer followed a similar pattern of flexible plans, inflated prices, and broken budgets. United ended up committing nearly £200m on Mason Mount, Andre Onana, Rasmus Hojlund, Altay Bayindir and Sofyan Amrabat, despite initially communicating internally that spending would be seriously restricted. Had the eventual scope of finance been known in advance, sources believe Ten Hag may have assigned the money differently, although he accepted landing Kane would have left little cash for any other players. United feel they strengthened the team in nearly every area required and took a long-term view by buying younger players (Hojlund, 20; Mount, 24; Onana, 27). Internally, the price set for Mount was £40m because he had only a year left on his Chelsea contract, but that was the first offer Chelsea received. United’s bidding rose 50 per cent to a total of £55m plus £5m in add-ons. If the full £60m is realised, United will be delighted, however, as they will make a £1m payment every time Mount plays 70 per cent of games in a title-winning campaign during his five-year contract. Advertisement Atalanta had told Hojlund he could leave for £50m, and United communicated they would draw the line at £60m, but then agreed a fee worth £72m during all-day talks in Bergamo that lasted until 3am. Atalanta had demanded £86m for a player they signed for less than £15m just 11 months earlier. Onana signed from Inter for £47m, a year after leaving Ajax on a free. United agreed to pay Fiorentina an £8m loan fee for Amrabat, in part so the purchase clause was optional rather than obligatory. Once again, all those millions have pushed United close to the line on the regulatory caps set by the Premier League and UEFA, meaning the maximum number of deals possible this January is two loans, according to internal communications. Considering United’s revenues for 2022-23 totalled a record £648.4m, it is regarded as some achievement that the club are in this predicament. United lost £28.7m last season. An issue over several seasons has been a lack of link from one market to the next. There has been no overarching recruitment concept that has survived managerial changes. Critics also argue United are unable to leverage established industry relationships for better value and do not proactively cultivate the type of information-gathering that could give them an edge. This is compounded by frequent personnel changes. Staff built up a rapport with Keane, who was offered a long-term position, but his impending appointment was cancelled amid the financial uncertainty of the strategic review and so, this summer, Matt Hargreaves stepped in as head of football negotiations in a permanent role. Hargreaves was hired from Adidas, where he had good commercial relationships with players and agents, but had not executed transfers before. There are inconsistencies even within a window too. During the summer, for instance, United went first for Mount because they feared Chelsea would otherwise sell different players to alleviate their FFP concerns, and Arsenal and Liverpool were in for him too. Observers regarded that as a jumbled strategy when a new striker was the priority. Advertisement Responsibility for instilling greater methodology and value for money falls to Ratcliffe, who will task Brailsford with investigating processes and recommending improvements. Industry sources say Brailsford is aiming to appoint a sporting director to oversee operations as well as a transfer specialist to refine recruitment. This has been interpreted by some as terminal for Murtough, and some people at the club anticipate his departure eventually, but sources insist no decision has yet been made. Unlike Arnold, who agreed to walk away as chief executive owing to the changing ownership structure and issues with co-chairman Joel Glazer, Murtough has no intention of stepping aside. He has made clear his openness to staying and working with INEOS as part of a revised structure that could see his authority reduced, which former and current colleagues say is characteristic of a shrewd political operator. Murtough is seen by those who have worked with him as a great survivor, more amenable and less egotistic than other executives in his position who would reject operating under a new regime. One leading agent, not known for handing out easy praise, says Murtough is courteous and good to deal with. That range of views helps explain Murtough’s presence this month at Old Trafford alongside Stewart for meetings with Brailsford and INEOS sporting director Jean-Claude Blanc. The feeling was those meetings went well. GO DEEPER What can Man Utd learn about INEOS from their sports empire? Murtough has also been in Saudi Arabia with Hargreaves to establish connections before a January window that would see United open to offers for Casemiro, Raphael Varane, Jadon Sancho and Anthony Martial. Initial feedback from these talks is that while contacts have been established, Saudi club squads are full and greatly restricted on signings due to regulations, leaving some close to United believing this work should have been done earlier in the year to take advantage of the boom during the summer. To understand how United’s structure came to be shaped this way with these personnel, it is necessary to rewind to the David Moyes era. That is when Murtough entered the club in December 2013, a hire by the then-United manager because he wanted administrative support. Moyes had worked with Murtough at Everton and felt he was somebody he could rely on when stepping into the control room of a vast machine with several unpredictable parts. Advertisement Murtough had got close to Moyes over a couple of spells at Goodison Park, assisting on all manner of things including logistics, sports science and recruitment. At United, Murtough earned the trust of Ed Woodward, the executive vice-chairman, by offering a sober perspective in a tumultuous time. Woodward had taken over from David Gill as the top official at United and was finding out the hard way that running the football operation was much more difficult than steering the club’s commercial growth. Murtough noticed Woodward struggling to get to grips with the transition, so he kept minutes of meetings and collated the information into easy-to-read documents. Murtough was an expert at regulations, having been central to the implementation of the Elite Player Performance Plan when working at the Premier League, and he assisted Woodward’s knowledge of granular details around the game. Woodward also wanted the departments at Carrington revamped and Murtough noted possible changes in a little black book while walking around the training ground and talking to staff. For those on the ground, the line of communication to Woodward went through Murtough. Murtough also struck up a good rapport with Woodward’s boss. When Joel Glazer flew in from the United States to go to a game, Murtough impressed with his thoughts on United. There was, however, one influential person at the club who did not warm to Murtough: Sir Alex Ferguson. The tension between the pair exists to this day. One of the early issues related to Murtough surviving Moyes, the man who had brought him to the club, and growing influential after his sacking in April 2014. As Ferguson’s authority at the club he had managed for 26 years began to subside, Murtough’s power grew. Woodward appointed him as head of football development in 2016 and asked him to reshape United’s recruitment system and academy setup. The task was codenamed Project Bethlehem and change swept the club. Murtough hired Steve Brown, having worked with him at Everton, and they ran a bespoke database of players called TrackerMan, from which Woodward proudly said United had reviewed 804 right-backs to sign Aaron Wan-Bissaka. Brown’s job has at times been communicated as head of recruitment, but his title internally is now director of scouting and his brief is to organise scouts and collate reports rather than pass judgments on players himself. Advertisement A schism opened up at the club between the old guard and the new order. Some departing staff alleged they were pushed out for speaking against what they felt was a shift away from what had made the club so successful. They also questioned what qualified Murtough and Brown to oversee such a major restructuring at a club the size of United. In July 2019 Nicky Butt switched from head of academy to a newly created position as head of first-team development, with Nick Cox taking over the running of the youth department. This happened after a blazing row between Butt and Murtough in the canteen at Carrington. The pair had long had disagreements on various issues, but matters erupted when Butt discovered Murtough told a colleague he planned to move him out of his position by the end of the season. Butt was furious at what he saw as a secret plot. Murtough declined to comment for this article. Those close to him dispute the severity of the argument but acknowledge that tensions arose from what they describe as a misunderstanding over a proposed reorganisation of academy administration in which Butt would still have had a role. Murtough has told colleagues of his respect for Butt and his sadness at the breakdown in relations. Butt was adamant though. He had recognised Cox’s abilities suited the requirements of a head of academy more than his and was happy to vacate the job, but he regarded Murtough determining the move without his input as hugely disrespectful. Butt told Murtough this during a heated altercation, finishing by stating he wanted no further communication and walking off. Murtough followed in pursuit to give his arguments. GO DEEPER Nicky Butt exclusive: Why he left Man United, how their youth system fell behind and learning from Mourinho There were also tempestuous scenes involving Murtough and Ferguson. United’s greatest manager was enlisted by Solskjaer to assist on the charm offensive for the Carrington visit of Birmingham City midfielder Jude Bellingham in March 2020. Solskjaer and his assistants had prepared an analytical presentation to prove Bellingham’s prospects in the first team, as well as compiling detailed personal reports, and felt Ferguson would add a glamorous finish. Murtough had a different view of how to approach the sales pitch, however. Ferguson shook hands with Bellingham, 16 at the time, but rather than allow them time to talk, sources say Murtough guided the player and his parents out of the room for a tour of the facilities. Ferguson was reportedly incandescent at the perceived slight and said so to Murtough’s face at a later date. Murtough has told people he did not interrupt the meeting and that, as with the Butt fall-out, any tension was the result of a misunderstanding. Advertisement As time went on, Murtough’s influence became obvious to staff in Manchester. He effectively became the highest football executive at Carrington, with Woodward working from London. Murtough was the man responsible for signing off many developments at the training ground, but often there were delays and, in some cases, no answers at all. Colleagues were informed getting feedback from the Glazers, with Woodward another layer, caused a backlog. Whatever the reasons, slow progress on several projects led some at the club to describe the in-tray on Murtough’s desk as “The Black Hole”. Several critics describe Murtough as reluctant to make decisions, while there have been occasions when staff struggle to pinpoint accountability on certain calls. At other times, things would happen quickly. Amad Diallo, an 18-year-old with 24 minutes of senior football, joined from Atalanta for a fee potentially rising to £37m in the summer of 2020. Murtough worked on the deal, flying out to Bergamo and then spending two weeks in a makeshift office in his garage as a quarantine for Covid-19 regulations. Solskjaer had given his blessing to the signing 48 hours before the announcement, having watched some video footage, but he was unaware of the significant fee, which rose dramatically from when prospective buyers enquired at Atalanta earlier that year. Solskjaer initially believed Amad, an exciting talent, was an academy player but realised after the move was finalised that the money involved meant he was expected to soon feature in the first team. A few months later, Murtough himself was officially promoted to a senior level. In March 2021, Woodward announced Murtough as United’s first football director, alongside Darren Fletcher as technical director. The hunt for such an important position had started when Jose Mourinho was in charge but after a process lasting more than two and a half years, with several major European executives linked, the appointments came from within and happened suddenly. The trigger, according to sources, was the offer to Murtough of a role at Inter Miami. Advertisement David Beckham’s Major League Soccer franchise used Mike Forde as a consultant on shaping the club via his Sportsology company. Forde, director of football operations at Chelsea between 2007 and 2013, had a relationship with Murtough and recommended him for a leading role in Florida. (The pair are long-term close friends after meeting at Liverpool John Moores University, with Forde acting as best man at Murtough’s wedding this year.) Murtough informed Woodward of his intentions to leave and replied, when asked, that the only way he would stay was by gaining the job that had been so long advertised, if never properly defined. Woodward told colleagues that Joel Glazer had intervened to impress on him the need for Murtough’s promotion so he was not lost to Inter Miami. Woodward appreciated the difficulty of selling Murtough’s appointment to fans anticipating an established sporting executive, so combined the announcement with making Fletcher United’s first technical director. Fletcher is a highly respected figure in football, a graduate of United’s academy and winner of several major trophies, but the move spread surprise because he had only joined the first-team coaching staff two months earlier and had no experience in the role he was taking on. Sources say Woodward felt it important for public perception to have somebody alongside Murtough with a rich United history, but knew he could not give the job to Butt due to their rift. Butt, having worked his way up after returning as a coach in 2012, was aggrieved to be overlooked and also because the brief outlined for Fletcher covered many of his responsibilities on youth development. Butt had a meeting with Woodward to express his thoughts and, despite attempts to persuade him otherwise, he handed in his notice. In practice, the roles of Murtough and Fletcher have never been completely clarified publicly, although both have written job briefs internally. Fletcher was part of the interview team for Ten Hag while also continuing to assist with training sessions. He has a strong presence in the link between youth and senior football, but does not, as Woodward originally mapped out, have a pivotal role in selling United to senior signings. Murtough is the central figure for recruitment but, according to United, he also has a wider remit involving the academy and the women’s team, which he started and built up, and overall football operations. Rangnick struggled to get his head around the setup. Appointed by Murtough as manager on an interim basis with the prospect of a director role at the end of the 2021-22 season, Rangnick soon found himself isolated. Murtough cut down communication on sensitive subjects. Rangnick, struggling to gain authority over players, responded by taking his observations public, stating that United required “open-heart” surgery to fix the issues at the club. Advertisement When Arnold took charge as chief executive in February 2022 he conducted a root-and-branch review of club protocols. Internally, he asked hard questions of recruitment, wanting to know how United had got so little to show for a £1billion spend on new players. The result was Jim Lawlor and Marcel Bout, two long-standing chief scouts, being ushered out. Lawlor, a Ferguson ally, was judged to be dismissing too many targets as not good enough. Murtough and Brown, the main architects of the system, stayed on. Arnold also consulted Ferguson and Gill for their opinions. Ferguson advised Arnold to scrutinise Murtough and recommended an approach for Dan Ashworth due to his work building a club structure at Brighton, following on from success at West Bromwich Albion and the English Football Association. Arnold contacted Ashworth to sound him out before he joined Newcastle United. But when it became clear the role would have been working under Murtough rather than as his superior, Ashworth declined to enter proper talks. Murtough too, has, privately investigated the addition of a senior recruitment specialist to his department, in addition to Hargreaves, but found several experienced individuals with proven track records did not wish to join given the ownership uncertainty. Executives in similar positions at other clubs have remarked on the unique complexities of steering United under the glare of intense scrutiny. In that period, he has been growing his network, and while he limits his interactions with some agents to protect his workload he has strong relationships with Dave Lockwood, of Stellar, and Frank Trimboli, of CAA Base. Those who appreciate his way of working say Murtough is fair and clear, which is not always a given in the industry. He has implemented a new contract structure for signings and renewals that places heavy emphasis on incentives and builds in increases over the duration of deals, so that United are not hit hard in terms of financial fair play. Colleagues tell how Murtough has barely taken a holiday in three years as he tries to modernise United and insist the systems now in place are the best in years. They extended to the process for appointing Ten Hag. It was a rigorous series of interviews and background checks in which Ten Hag excelled when Murtough drilled down into details on his methods. Ten Hag had thorough answers for how he would deal with every imagined scenario and a clear plan for approaching the job of restoring United to a position where they were winning trophies. Fletcher added a tactical edge, asking Ten Hag how he adapts from domestic to Champions League football. In a later round of talks, Ten Hag was questioned by Forde, the chairman of Sportsology who had been brought in by Murtough as a consultant. Advertisement Ten Hag also had a video call with Joel Glazer, who signed off on his appointment. A different person will have authority over Ten Hag’s future, however. Ratcliffe feels United require upgrades elsewhere, rather than in the dugout. Although results will inevitably dictate decisions, even now indications are that Brailsford, as the man on the ground, will take his time to assess the club. Undoubtedly, manoeuvring the monster that is United, with its various high-profile stakeholders and enormous staffing levels, will be hard, whoever takes the reins. Ratcliffe has already identified that the employee tally of more than 1,000 can be streamlined. Sources say Ashworth is high in Brailsford’s thoughts, with Paul Mitchell, Julian Ward, Dougie Freedman, and Andrea Berta also discussed at INEOS. Former Liverpool sporting director Michael Edwards, who has held informal discussions with various United figures, is said to be happy running his advisory business, which launched in September. Players appreciate the issues are wider than the manager. One senior player, for instance, is said to be disappointed at United’s summer recruitment, having been promised major signings to get United competing for the biggest honours when he spoke with Murtough before joining. Kane would have come into this bracket. Ten Hag is, though, wrestling with dressing-room grumbles at his methods, with some players frustrated at late changes to schedules, overnight stays in Europe that keep them away from families, and unexpected selections in matches. The mood at Carrington is described by some as flat, with Ten Hag and influential assistant Mitchell van der Gaag both approaching coaching in a didactic manner. Regular meetings going over specific instructions can last an hour. Ten Hag is unapologetic over his determination to instil a strict code on and off the pitch, however. He feels discipline in training and during games helped United finish third in the Premier League and win the Carabao Cup last season, and continuing that approach is the only way to return the club to title contention. He wants players to fully understand tactical requirements. Ten Hag experienced pushback at Ajax before his demands clicked with the players, and trophies followed. Advertisement United hired Ten Hag because he built two different teams at Ajax and also because he promised to get a grip on a squad populated by players who had at times taken liberties with Rangnick, Solskjaer and Mourinho. The fact certain players have been allowed to succeed managers is seen as a mark against the club by close observers, and generating an environment where there is accountability for actions across the board will be one of the main requirements for the new people at the helm. (Top photos: Getty Images)