

Helix Top Tips - for managing talent in your business

The value of talent

Managing talent in your business is such an obvious thing to do - if you've got it, it is worth looking after, nurturing in fact. You need the right people with the right skills to achieve your business plan;

- To maintain that competitive edge over your rivals
- To avoid costly recruitment mistakes
- To encourage staff to further their careers with you and not elsewhere
- And to have that succession plan in place so you're not left high and dry when your highest fee earner is head hunted

The funny thing is that few organisations actually do this. I don't think many people understand what it is. To me, talent management starts with the strategic activity of mapping the skills and knowledge requirements of the business; it includes recruitment and selection, performance management and development activities; and it culminates in succession planning.

It seems complex, and indeed it is. In their 2006 survey Talent Management - Understanding the Dimensions, the CIPD identified that only 20% of respondents had a definition of talent management. 51% however said that they engaged in talent management activities. The respondents were HR professionals. I wonder if this figure would have been as high if the wider line management population had been canvassed?

Most organisations engage to some degree or other in the activities described above. Where they tend to fall down is in pulling them together, creating a strategy aimed at an inclusive (rather than elitist) approach to recruiting, growing and managing the skills base of their organisation.

Organisations who do actively manage the talents of staff strategically, will reap the benefits in terms of performance.

Here are our top tips for managing talent in your business:

1. Think strategically

To make it work, the process needs to be strategically managed. Most organisations spend a reasonable amount of time trying to recruit talent. They spend much less time thinking about the bigger and long term picture:

- Identify the kind of talent that will be required say five years from now.
- Performance management and appraisal procedures often boil down to getting the job done. Instead use them to look for, and develop, talent.

- Retaining talent is clearly the ultimate goal, but people do move on, and organisations need to be prepared for this. Make succession planning proactive, rather than simply reactive when you know you face a vacancy. So, get strategic about it. A big part of this will be ensuring that your management and leadership teams understand the value of talent management and support the underlying activities.

2. Recognise that talent is talent, whether sexy or not

For some organisations, the need for talent is more evident than for others. For Gordon Ramsay, talent in the kitchen is the very basis of his brand (along with the f-word). For other organisations, perhaps with a heavier reliance on administrative functions, talent is a word less often heard.

It is there none the less. Talent in administrative and support functions (often seen as costs) is as necessary as it is in high profile, fee earning or revenue generating roles.

The result? We are more likely to look out for talent in these high profile roles, which risks the association of talent only with the elite.

How effective would Gordon Ramsay's burgeoning empire be without talent in his administrative functions: project management, PR, finance or purchasing? And, what about the people management talent of his head chefs?

Whether it is strategic thinking, high level negotiation, reception duties or debt collection; value them all.

So go looking for it, with specific reference to your business. What is needed? What have you got? Would you recognise it if you saw it? Perhaps not. An organisation currently closing a plant in the UK was surprised to find that some of their factory staff built houses, ran photography businesses and built ocean going boats all in their spare time. Transferrable talents going un-noticed? Perhaps.

3. Recruit people skills

This starts with managers. These are your role-models. Functional talents like sales and IT skills are often easy to spot. Recognising people talents in managers, not always. You need managers who can get the job done, sure. But a big part of the talent involved in this, is motivating, inspiring and supporting teams to achieve *without* supervision or close management.

The CIPD* reports that talented managers and leaders are difficult to recruit, and this gets harder with seniority.

Talented people managers will understand and recognise talent in others, are more likely to encourage it, and so set the culture that values talents. Eventually, you'll find that everyone has a talent for something.

4. Be creative to un-earth talents

A lady I know with dyscalculia, had, as she put it "a talent for cocking up anything financial". This led to a lifetime of being told, and telling others that she was no good at finance. When, one day she tried her hand at credit control, she found that she had a real talent for it - because of her exceptional interpersonal skills.

Both the organisation she worked for and she herself had been constraining her ability to succeed. She now heads up a credit control division for a large financial institution, and is happily sharing her talent with others.

Secondments, shadowing and inter-departmental project teams are all ways to highlight latent or embryonic talents.

Most organisations will use talent when, as here, they stumble upon it. Some organisations don't even recognise that they have stumbled upon it.

5. Take development seriously

Like all skills and abilities, talent needs nurturing. The 2007 CIPD Learning and Development survey reports that 47% of respondents say there is a lack of talent in the UK.

I disagree. I think that it is more likely that 47% of the respondents aren't looking for talent. Consequently they don't spot it, and can't possibly grow it further.

Investment in growing knowledge, skills, abilities, competencies and talents is a critical investment for any business. It is also one of the most vulnerable budgets when times are tough.

Organisations with good talent management procedures, including development activities, will recognise impact on the bottom line, and will find it easier to recruit talent. Graduates and those with MBAs and PhDs all look with great interest at development opportunities in prospective employers.

Interestingly, the Department of Work and Pensions runs an Early Talent Scheme where graduates can nominate themselves for development, rather than be nominated by their managers.

6. Manage performance - when it's great, acceptable and poor

Good performance management and appraisal processes are crucial here. Frequent, focussed and well managed one-to-one and team performance reviews will benefit everyone:

- Managers learn more about their staff and so are better placed to spot talent and help them succeed.
- Everyone gets the recognition for their effort, success and input.
- Poor performance can be spotted more quickly.

- High achievers can be recognised, utilised and rewarded.
- High potential individuals can be spotted and fast tracked.
- Maverick behaviour (a danger when developing talents and high potential) can be brought back into line more easily.
- Talent can flourish.

7. Create your own talent pool

Good talent management strategies should generate talent pools. Even if you don't currently have the opportunities, aim for a 'waiting list' of individuals with the talents you will need in the future - from inside and outside the organisation.

8. Plan to succeed

Nothing succeeds like success: one success leads to others. What you need are succession plans.

Succession planning is about growing or recruiting the right talents to deliver your business plans. Who are your key players of the future? Who has the right talents to create success in the various parts of your business? It also means helping some people leave the business. Cross Keys Homes does just this with it's Upwards and Outwards process. Sometimes these are the people we would like to keep. However if it is right that they go, help them go on good terms, and they'll do wonders for your employer brand and your ability to attract talent.

* CIPD Report 2006: [Talent Management - Understanding the Dimensions](#)

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