

**Insight**

Cut the Talent Nonsense

Paul Davies

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It's time we cut out the mystical, OD, Talent War, Hero nonsense. Talent Management is a Nuts & Bolts tool like any other – P. Davies

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### Fluffier than fluffy

In a function already infamous for its unsurpassed fluffiness, nothing comes more fluffy than Talent Management.

No one knows what it is, but psychometric tests identify it, training develops it and compensation programmes reward it. The very existence of companies, it seems, depends upon it. Whenever an organisation is successful, that success is because of it. In fact, if you believe the hype, corporations across the world are locked in a global war over it.

The HR function has abandoned the mantle of Payroll Administrator and Pay Negotiator and seeks instead to adorn itself in newer, more mysterious robes.

These are the robes of Talent Gods, whose chosen champions bestride the globe, engaged in titanic battles that decide the fate of corporate worlds.

### Demi-god or Chimpanzee

It's a simple narrative, bequeathed to us from ancient sagas and propagated more recently by Hollywood's endless production line of heroes.

We know, deep down, that the world is a pragmatic, capricious, insanely complex mish-mash of cause and effect, but we prefer to interpret it through the lens of Schwarzenegger and Tom Cruise. The Talent narrative also serves the interests of business leaders who revel in the idea that they, personally, make the difference.

Lusha, the chimpanzee, suggests otherwise. During 2009, Lusha's choice of stock outperformed 94% of Russia bankers.

Some of us have a hunch that if Lusha was put in the CEO's chair and asked to pick a banana from a selection representing different business choices the chimp might not do such a bad job there either.

We'd probably prefer not to put the theory to test in our own company, but the point isn't to turn over control of multi-nationals to the animal kingdom; it is to recognise the massive part that dumb luck and external circumstances play in creating success.

### Practice Practice Practice

Also, let's face the fact that the influence of Talent may be a myth anyway.

Psychologist, Anders Ericsson, famously suggested that sufficient practice in a particular skill can take anyone to a world class proficiency level. His research was based on study of violinists at Berlin's Academy of music and was supported by further study of amateur pianists.

The idea was popularised in a book by journalist Malcom Gladwell which more simply argued that practice, not Talent, makes the most difference – 10,000 hours to be precise – for the most elite performers.

## **But Short Folk can't play Basketball**

Nevertheless, many of us find it hard to accept that Talent isn't the differentiator.

David Epstein in his book *The Sports Gene* demonstrates that physical Talent influences sporting performance significantly and Ericsson has accepted that physical attributes advantage elite athletes.

Epstein however also stresses the importance of practice, coaching and motivation and Ericsson still maintains that cognitive Talent does not impact elite performance anywhere near as much as practice does.

Common sense suggests to the rest of us that both must play a part.

Zack Hambrick of Michigan State University, has suggested that working memory (human RAM) accounts for 7% of the variation in sight-reading of pianists. However, practice alone accounted for about 30% of performance in the same study and working memory itself can be enhanced by practice.

## **Ordinary, Everyday People**

HR doesn't need to resolve this debate.

However, HR does need to take notice that in the business world of cognitive abilities, the innate superhero we're looking for probably doesn't exist. Instead, unsurprisingly, every organisation is filled, with lots of ordinary, everyday people like the rest of us.

Giving people like ourselves the training and practice hours we need to perform at the expected level has much more impact on company performance than spotting one or two natural-born heroes.

## **It's Nuts & Bolts Common Sense**

Whilst the idea of Talent has cultural appeal, the idea of achieving success through dedicated practice and honest, hard work strikes an unmistakably credible note.

Making sure that a business is equipped with the knowledge and skills it needs to address the workings of its market place is not revolutionary thinking; it is basic management practice.

Putting people in jobs they excel in and training them to excel is an equally mundane but no less fundamental point.

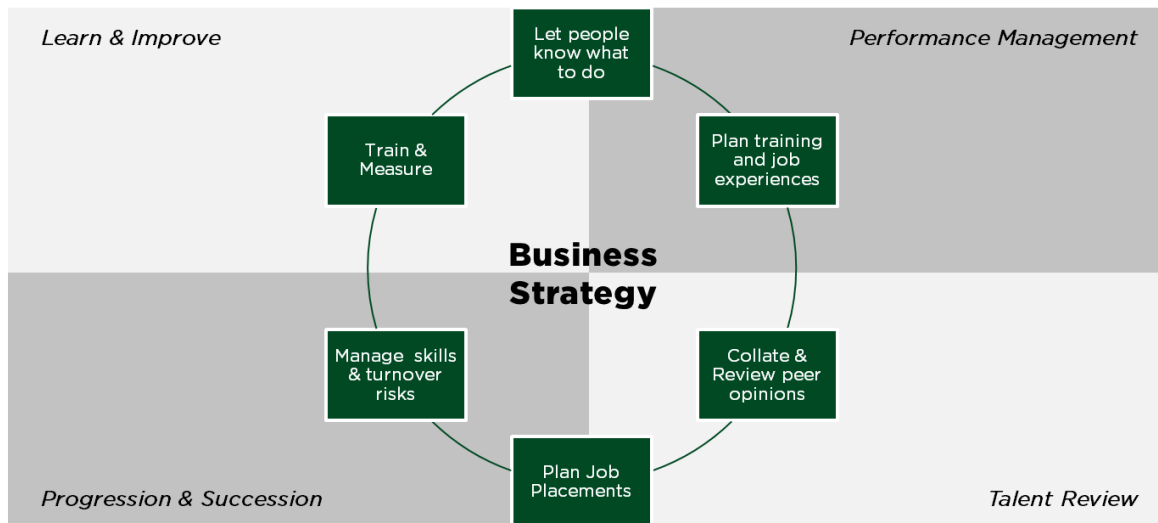
Training, of course, means more than courses; it means practice. So, jobs or work experiences double as practice for many people. The challenges, projects, and tasks in our jobs help us get better at what we do. It's hardly a mystical Druidic rite, therefore, to suggest that a degree of planned job placement will produce better prepared people.

There is also the matter of managing the risks associated with staff turnover and loss of knowledge and expertise. Ensuring that replacements are ready, especially for key jobs, isn't so much Succession Planning as it is risk management.

## **A Nuts & Bolts Process**

The way an organisation puts into effect these common sense provisions amounts, in effect, to Talent Management, and the Talent Management process is, at heart, a nuts and bolts process (Fig. 1.).

Figure 1. Nuts & Bolts Talent Management



Some useful tools have made their way into common use such as 360 Assessment, 3<sup>rd</sup> Party Validation, Development Plans, High-Potentials, Progression and Succession planning and Continuity Audits. These are undoubtedly useful things for complex corporations of 100,000s of people, but they can be self-defeating for the rest of us.

The trick is to keep the core simplicity of the cycle, and avoid these interesting tools taking on a life of their own. People's skills and knowledge need to be managed in direct relationship to the business needs of the company. Otherwise, if care is not taken, Line Managers can sink under the weight of HRs good intentions.

## The Top Talent

Ah, but what about the leaders of the future? What about the High-Potentials who will keep us in the game? Surely Talent is about spotting and nurturing these "High-value Assets"?

Yes, of course it is. Making sure that round and square pegs are in their respective round and square holes is basic organisation competence. And, what are "leaders" if they're not people who are an exceptional fit for manager jobs? That's all it is: leaders in leader jobs and engineers in engineer jobs.

Yes, this goes for engineers and designers, social workers and project managers too? In some circumstances, if companies looked after the training and practice given to their designers and engineers, the quality of their management may become superfluous.

## Top Two Inches

But it's more complicated than that!

How do you tell the difference between performance and potential? How do you establish a correlation between personal attributes and success in a job? How do you identify the motivation factor?

How do you factor-in gender diversity and make allowances for cultural differences. What role does transparency play, or self-nomination and self-motivated development?

What is the key to elite performance in business?

They are all valid questions, but they congregate in the tiny, intellectually stimulating corner of the playground. Most of our businesses and experiences lie in the vast expanse behind their backs, where most of the world is trying to play.

There is a place for seeking an edge in the top two inches, but only when the margins have become so tight that the top two inches truly differentiate.

## **Simplicity is the hardest thing**

Meanwhile, there is a job of work to be done just re-establishing the core goals and processes for developing people in organisations: goals that are to do with establishing professional competence and a bench of knowledge and skills ready to take on the company's future challenges.

An organisation stuffed full of such people is likely to be more effective than one seeking the Holy Grail of "Talent".

Then, if a researcher in the corner of the playground finally discovers the measurable psychometric or genetic trait that determines talent in business, it will be time to pay attention. That, truly would make Talent Management simple, although, somehow, don't you think we'd soon make it nice and complicated again?