

TALENTS? WHAT TALENT?

What companies on the talents warpath particularly try to do is to attract and hold on to young graduates from the best colleges. For François Gagné, a French-Canadian professor of psychology from Quebec, a talent is person of outstanding ability within the 10 per cent of the highest performers in his field (*Le Temps* 08.04.2011). Criteria of rapidity and intelligence – the IQ or educational achievement for example – can usefully help to identify such a person. In the war for talent, a company's success equation is derived as follows: recruit from the 10 per cent of talents and ignore the other 90 per cent. The downside is that the company then invests in something that is rare, expensive and, as is unanimously recognised, volatile.

The majority of people who have excelled in art, economics or science accord less importance to talent. In their view, success requires 10 per cent of talent and 90 per cent of work. The Balthus masterpiece *Les Joueurs de cartes*, for example, cannot be moved because the painter added so many layers in his reworking of the painting over seven years that the canvas could tear if shifted. Only the last layer represents a remarkable performance, but it requires the completion of the total thickness, in other words a long period of labour somewhat akin to a game, underpinned by an ideal, constantly oriented in the same direction.

If talent is overestimated, a company can envisage another paradigm: instead of waging war it can improve its radar system. A more sensitive system would enable another type of potential to be detected, with the profile of a sherpa rather than a Ferrari. A more sensitive system would make it possible to follow the credo of the celebrated investor Warren Buffett: invest when everyone else is backing out. – But what would the criteria be?

1.-Major potential ≠ major qualifications. Young Steve Wozniak had no qualifications at the age of 21 but he was mad about electronics and rigged up a blue box which when connected to a telephone resulted in totally illegal free calls. In a public demonstration he called up the Vatican pretending to be Henry Kissinger and asked for the Pope. When they told him the Pope was sleeping but that they would wake him, he hung up. In 1977 he founded *Apple* with Steve Jobs, a fellow traveller with a high school education.

2.-IQ ≠ creativity. Studies show that IQ tests reflect academic achievement but not a capacity to solve complex problems in a natural environment. Creativity gives a better correlation in this regard.¹ Creativity and intelligence are different things. Charles Darwin would have appreciated this when he said, "I was considered by all my masters and my father a very ordinary boy, rather below the common standard of intellect."² He became a geologist, an unorthodox geologist who asked questions in the unfamiliar discipline of biology, and came to formulate the theory of the evolution of species.

¹ M. Runco, *Creativity*, Elsevier, 2007.

² F. Gino & G. Pisano, *Why Leaders don't learn from success*, HBR, April 2011.

3.-X ≠ out. In an aging society, the elderly are also the future. In 2033 the over-45s will be in the majority in Europe while they only accounted for 30 per cent in 1950.³ Older people make up an increasingly large proportion of customers, who in their dealings with companies prefer the older members of staff according to a study by the University of Linz on the relations between banking customers and their wealth managers (*Le Temps* 19.01.2011). Above all, older people represent a rich vein of potential because creativity does not decrease with age. Fyodor Dostoevsky, for example, wrote his four masterpieces – *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Possessed* and *The Brothers Karamazov* – after the age of 45.

4.-Literature = mathematics. In an illuminating article,⁴ Professor Warren Bennis writes, “When the hard-nosed behavioural scientist James March taught his famous course at Stanford using *War and Peace* and other novels as texts, he emphatically was not teaching a literature course. He was drawing on works of imaginative literature to exemplify and explain the behaviour of people in business organizations in a way that was richer and more realistic than any journal article or textbook.”

5.-Failure = success. Why is the explorer Ernest Shackleton so much admired although all his expeditions resulted in failure? It is because after witnessing his vessel *The Endurance* being crushed by the Antarctic ice fields in 1915, Shackleton performed the Homeric exploit of bringing back all his men alive.

Balthus, Wozniak, Jobs, Darwin, Dostoevsky and Shackleton, like Le Corbusier, Einstein or Gandhi, did not have talent profiles. A company using a conventional radar system would not have detected them when they were just potentials. How can the radar be improved? 1. Accept that people with lesser qualifications but who are passionate about their work, who like to play and who have a slight tendency to overstep the line, perhaps have excellent potential. 2. Distinguish between creativity and intelligence, by awarding positions to people whose profiles do not correspond to the post requirements so as to encourage the emergence of new solutions that the specialists dare not propose. 3. Look rather for potential among the X people who are perhaps in the next room. 4. Bring in not only the numerate but the literate too, because they are also capable of decoding complex forms of organisation. 5. Ask about failures and subsequent progress, since overcoming a resounding failure often reveal qualities such as perseverance and the capacity to adapt.

It takes longer to identify and reveal a potential which is not a talent. Time spent on gardening is not the same as time spent on shopping. But for a company it could well mean a greater degree of attunement, singularity and loyalty. These qualities are quite possibly closer to beauty than performance, to culture than production, to endurance than rapidity. Indeed, taking a gamble on beauty eventually having as strategic a role as performance is another way of viewing talent.

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³ V. Raison, 2033, *Atlas des Futurs du Monde*, Laffont, 2010.

⁴ W. Bennis & J. O’Toole, *How Business Schools lost their Way*, HBR, May 2005.