



## Talent wars - the resourcing crisis

An organisation's capacity to identify, attract and retain enough high-calibre, high-performing people who can develop winning strategies - and the know-how to implement them - has become decisive in ensuring competitive advantage.

As Warren Bennis observes in his book *Old Dogs, New Tricks*: "Today's leaders must not only have the stature to attract top talent – they must have the character to retain it. Talented people have options. They can walk out the door at any time to go to a competitor or to become a competitor. In this environment, leaders don't automatically command respect. They have to earn it."

The resourcing problem organisations face today is not fundamentally a lack of technical personnel. Technical specialisations, important as they are, do not constitute the very highest level of talent organisations need to succeed in today's demanding markets.

So what is this highest level of talent? In essence, it is the genius for making things happen: completing projects on time, inspiring and leading colleagues and juniors - in short on their ability to get a business to work.

Americans have always recognised the importance of this kind of talent. Some US business people refer to it as 'tradeskill'. So what defines a high performer with tradeskill?

High-performers are easier to define than to find. They are people with apparently limitless energy and enthusiasm, qualities which shine through even on their bad days. They are full of ideas and get things done quickly and effectively. They inspire others not just by pep talks but also through the sheer inspiration of their example. Such people can propel their organisations to greater and greater heights.

The problem is that people of this calibre are keenly coveted and are likely to be poached by rivals. The costs of losing such people are fearsome and include expensive training and the opportunity cost of the lost productivity and inspiration.

However, organisations that lose high performers are not necessarily innocent. High performers leave because organisations do not know how to retain them. Too many employers are, for example, blind or indifferent to the agenda of would-be high-performers, especially if they are young.

Consider a Board made up of experienced senior directors with a record of prudence and caution. Their lack of receptiveness to new ideas suggested by talented young people will

frustrate and demoralise these newcomers who may feel that their talents are not being recognised and appreciated.

Further, the old way of letting rewards and responsibility devolve to people in the fullness of time does not necessarily succeed in an environment where an organisation needs to woo, win and retain talented people. They will not hang around to wait for recognition.

This is not to say, of course, that experience no longer matters. Nor is it true that prudence and caution have no role to play in business during the Internet age. But if organisations really do want to identify, attract and retain high performers they need to rethink their strategies for doing this.

In particular, organisations should consider how such people are likely to regard key motivating factors.

Money remains an important motivator but organisations should not imagine it is the only one that matters. In practice, high-performers tend to take for granted that they will get a good financial package. They seek real motivation from other sources.

Empowerment is a particularly important motivating force for new talent. Ideally, a high-performer will seek to feel that he or she 'owns' a project in a creative sense. Wise employers will offer this opportunity.

The challenge of the job is also another essential motivator for high performers. Such people easily get demoralised if they sense that their employer has little or no real sense of where it is going.

A platform for self-development should be provided. High performers crave the confidence that they are developing their skills and curriculum vitae. Offering time for regeneration is another crucial way for organisations to retain high performers. Work needs to be varied and time should be available for creative thinking and mastering new skills. The provision of a coach or mentor signals that the organisation has a commitment to fast-tracking an individual's development.

Individuals thrive in an environment where they can depend on good administrative support. They will not want to feel that the success they are winning for the organisation is dissipated by inefficiency or by inadequacies in support areas.

Above all, high performers - especially if they are young - want to feel that the organisation they work for regards them as special. If they find that it is not interested in them as people but only as high performing commodities, it will be hardly surprising their loyalty is minimal.

On the other hand, if an organisation does invest in its people it is much more likely to win loyalty from them and to create a community of talent and high performance that will make competitors tremble.

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