Talent management is also known as HCM (Human Capital Management).

The process of attracting and retaining ‘desirable’ employees has become known as “the war for talent”. Based on a view that only a tiny few have the ability to handle what we are told is the enormous complexity of administering large organisations, “the war for talent” has resulted in mouth-watering levels of inflation in the pay and benefits packages on offer to “top talent”. In 1980, for example, the highest-paid director at Barclays Bank received £67,500 (around 10 times the average national salary). The package of the CEO of Barclays is now around £10 million (closer to 400 times the average).

If pay in the public sector is anything to go by, the Prime Minister and cabinet ministers come a long way down the “top talent” league table. According to a report from the TaxPayers Alliance, around 2,290 people in local government received more than £100,000 last year. 48 local authority executives received more than £250,000, an increase from 19 in the previous year. Meanwhile, a report from Incomes Data Services found that 1,600 managers of NHS hospitals and health trusts now earn more than £150,000 a year.

So despite there being a massive surplus of people looking for work, companies are apparently having a hard time finding talent. But are they? There is a growing body of evidence that they’ve got all the talent they need. They employ it already. It’s just a matter of whether they are getting the best out of it or not.

Bounce

Matthew Syed, bestselling writer and international table-tennis champion (after many hours of practice) combines personal experience with the latest academic research findings to debunk the talent myths that prevail in many organisations. It’s in the sports arena that the talent myth has blossomed the most. People assume that to be a top tennis player you have to be born with faster reactions or for a top golfer, better hand-eye co-ordination than most people. To become a top chess player or musician, you’d also have to be born with the relevant genetic advantages.

In the book, however, Syed explains how it has been established for even the most complex human activities, that natural talent is of relatively low importance because the development of the skills required to
succeed can only be achieved through a massive amount of “purposeful” practice. The end result of this practice is often mistaken for natural talent, but in fact the trait that most high achievers have in common is a willingness to work harder than their peers, a very well organised training regime based on the right kind of “purposeful” practice and a belief that this hard work will drive greater improvement and success, not a belief in their innate superiority. There are many very convincing examples in the book, the most amazing of which is a family of Hungarian chess players whose father set himself the objective of proving that he could turn anyone into a world champion with enough “purposeful” practice. He chose chess as the medium simply because nobody believed that you could become a chess champion unless you were born with the right kind of mental attributes. All of his three daughters became champions and were amongst the best female chess players ever.

When Roger Federer or Novak Djokovic return a fast serve, it’s not because they have faster reactions, but better anticipation. They can use the movement patterns of their opponent to make more accurate inferences about where the ball is going to go, so they’re in position almost before the ball has been hit. First class cricketers have figured out whether to play off the front or back foot 100 milliseconds before the ball has been bowled. These skills are not innate, but learned and repetitively practised for many hours. The rule of thumb is that it takes at least 10,000 hours of “purposeful” practice over a ten year period to get to the top, and Syed demonstrates how “child prodigies” such as Mozart or Tiger Woods had actually clocked up the 10,000 hours at a very young age.

Purposeful practice

I have kept referring to Syed’s descriptor, purposeful practice. This is important because success isn’t assured by 10,000 hours of any old practice. Practice kind of makes perfect. It doesn’t necessarily make you perfect at tennis, chess or golf. It makes you perfect at what you have practised. So if you practise the wrong thing, if you practise bad habits, you will become perfect at consistently repeating those flawed skills. To become a world class performer you must practise the right skills executed in the right way. As well as relevance to sport, this has a business application. It shows that training must be sharply focused on the relevant and precise skills that the employee needs to improve his or her performance and that employees’ learning and subsequent ability to execute those skills must be closely monitored. If necessary the training and practice must be repeated until the goal is attained. Contrast this with the plethora of unstructured, wide ranging workplace training and, crucially, the absence of subsequent testing to verify that the specified skills have been mastered.

Praise effort not talent

Another of Syed’s recommendations that has strong relevance to the workplace is his assertion that you can inculcate the “growth” mindset by praising effort rather than talent. If success is linked to talent it breeds complacency amongst the more successful and despair amongst the poorer performers. Either way it is detrimental to organisational success. If you want your current over- and under-achievers to work hard in the future you must always link success to effort. Don’t tell people they’re good at something. Tell them they deserve their promotion, bonus or recognition because they’ve worked really hard, and link that praise in everyone else’s eyes with effort rather than talent.

‘Bounce’ was published by Fourth Estate in April 2011 and is priced at £8.99. It is currently available from Amazon for £5.82.

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