



## Thought leader

# Britain's got talent... hasn't it?

Well, yes of course, but as [Raymond Madden](#), visiting professor of leadership from ESCP Europe Business School, points out, it's not just the top 10 per cent we need to focus on

**S**pelbound, an artistic group of gymnasts from Middlesex aged 12-24, won the ITV show Britain's Got Talent 2010. Their skill and innovation impressed the judges and population at large. Some may be sceptical about such shows and whether the general populous is qualified to judge talent. It could also be said this is increasingly what happens when we vote for politicians, and that this year's US-style political debates were popularity contests rather than deep policy debates.

Previous finalists of the show, Paul Potts and Susan Boyle, have gone on to be international stars. After the TV show's success, commentators suggested there is a dearth of talent in the UK and the next programme will need to go global. The sceptics among you may think this is because the programme makers would rather visit Miami to hold auditions than a wet and windy Manchester.

There are parallels here with the corporate talent market. Searches for senior leaders are increasingly global. Recruitment firms now approach

managers in Barcelona and Stockholm, talking about new opportunities in Beijing and Singapore.

The talent agenda has moved on. Most companies recognise talent is an important issue even if they find it challenging to manage. The focus has moved away from high potentials who were defined as future leaders, often the top 10 per cent of an organisation's workforce, and hot-housed for future stardom. They did not always have an easy time and some chose to return to the mainstream if their personal circumstances changed or the organisation's definition of talent moved on. Focusing development on a small number of individuals ultimately made them more marketable and sometimes more mobile. In the long run, this approach is unsustainable as it potentially alienates the loyal and dependable mainstream employees. Tom DeLong at Harvard investigated this in a provocatively entitled article, *Let's hear it for B-players*, praising those loyal, dependable middle managers, often with a long service history. They are the backbone of an organisation, the people that ultimately

create a learning organisation as they possess its memory.

Recent research by Deloitte suggests that almost 60 per cent of Generations X and Y are planning to move roles in the next 12 months, so this begs the question: where are we with the talent agenda? We are starting to recognise that talent operates at all levels and a broader definition of it benefits employee engagement. More importantly, it has the potential to develop a broader leadership cadre. After the recent financial crisis caused by hubris at the top of some of our financial services organisations, the time is right to focus on a more ethical and sustainable model of leadership, rather than leaders per se.

Ten years after the original work on talent we need to move on from the 'war' for talent based on shortages to playing the 'talent game', where we utilise multiple ways to develop an individual (eg, job moves, international assignments, job rotations, development programmes, coaching, mentoring and staff exchanges across the corporate/private sectors like a

world-class game of chess). Talent is more abundant than we would like to think, but some employees often decide to self-select out for personal or family reasons. Can HR engage better with talent? Many organisations run these processes by drawing up lists of people who will eventually succeed the CEO/chairman. Was this the case for Douglas Flint's recent appointment as chairman at HSBC? Market reactions suggest not.

Heidrick and Struggles, the executive search firm, reviewed the practices of 21 global companies and looked at attrition during the recession. Although turnover has been low, at about eight per cent, there are organisations who 'trade talent' and as a result their attrition rates are much higher at 40 per cent. In these organisations salary costs tend to be 20 per cent higher than average. On the plus side, these organisations are more agile and have a greater capacity to change their business model.

Limited resources during the recession means fewer people are being developed. It is time for HR to adopt a broader and more radical people agenda. Development has become a right of passage for many rather than a business-driven activity. Investment in the development of human capital focused exclusively on business strategy could see both short and long term business gains. Several

companies have demonstrated this can be done successfully regardless of the company size, structure or nature of business. Google has 21,000 staff and suggests that all are leaders in some way shape or form. GE remains a company that manages talent effectively because they manage performance with a ruthless determination to remove under-performers. Cisco is known to have adopted a similar approach in recent years. LloydsTSB is retraining over 20,000 former HBOS staff in their retail division, over a three-month period, to deliver a new service proposition to clients. This will be a blend of e-learning and face-to-face classroom delivery over an intensive three-day period with simulations to perfect the client engagement experience. All staff will be assessed to determine competency in the Lloyds way and need to be approved by the UK's banking regulator. When complete this will be the largest integration programme of any corporate group in Europe (see *TER Vol. 1.1:48-50*). This is a very real example of the importance of B-players in an organisation with the need to keep a large workforce motivated and engaged. As one of the UK's largest retail banks with over 30 million customers, Lloyds demonstrates UK plc does have talent.

Most organisations find performance management challenging

and many of us who coach have had to prepare senior managers for difficult conversations with underperforming staff. Perhaps we are asking too much of our leaders. Executives are conditioned never to turn down an expanding remit or challenging assignment whatever the personal impact. We give more and greater challenges to those that are successful often until they fail and then ask, often too late, what went wrong? For example when we review talent, we say 'Jim is not quite ready' for the next promotion but he will be in 12 months. So what form of focused development will we offer Jim that will make him ready in a matter of months?

Research has shown people learn most when they are in uncertain environments, and mostly from peers and subordinates rather than through conventional classroom methods. We should encourage a learning mindset that focuses on business strategy and innovation, which companies say is in short supply. The role of leaders is to develop other leaders and to bring on talent of the future. After all, Spelbound had a very talented choreographer who put the team through their paces from 7am most mornings to achieve the success they did. We have talent — we need to develop it in Britain and elsewhere. ■

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