

## Why productivity now matters:



# 5 TALENT ESSENTIALS

## Can the productivity of knowledge workers actually be bolstered in a 'down' economy? *Matt Moore* investigates

**T**alent management has been a hot topic in HR for the past decade – largely as a response to economic and demographic factors. The economy has been booming (meaning a higher demand for skilled workers) and the birth rate has fallen (meaning a decreasing supply of them). The response of many organisations has been to focus on attraction and retention – or to put it another way, getting bums on seats and keeping them there. Employee value propositions, talent pools, GE-style ranking systems, creative use of rewards have all been deployed to meet these goals.

However, the world does not stay the same. While the skills shortage is not going away, the immediate economic future is not looking so bright, either. Getting the right people remains critical but in the short term, hiring will decrease and employees will get more risk-averse and thus less eager to jump ship. There will be a renewed focus on costs and that includes salary costs. What does this mean for talent management? Simple: the focus has to shift from attraction and retention to include productivity – a renewed focus on what people do and how they do it.

### Fundamental work shifts

For many organisations this shift will not be easy because they have a poor understanding of how productive their employees actually are. This is because the nature of work has changed over the last 30 years. It was all about individual performance – how much the individual made or sold or did. All our performance management tools and techniques focus on the individual. This is not wrong – after all, work is done by someone specific applying themselves rather than the 'work fairy' flitting through the building at night – but it does need to be supplemented.

Work has become far more complex and collaborative. We work more in teams, often cross-functional or even cross-organisational. As human beings are social animals, this is a good thing – both in terms of the quality of outputs and the quality of our working lives. Work has also become more 'knowledge-based'. The workforce is better educated than ever before and globalisation means that we, as both a nation and as individuals, compete on our smarts. We are all knowledge workers – even ancient occupations such as farmers and miners use their specialist knowledge and modern technology to succeed. The challenge here is that the process of knowledge work is rarely visible (even if the outputs are) and difficult to measure.

The question is: how do we help our people to be more productive collectively? The mediocre will ignore this question; the ambitious will recognise it as an opportunity for improvement. Here are five things the smart HR manager should be aware of:

### 1. Do our people have collaboration skills?

We all know about teams. We can draw the Tuckman model (Form-Storm-Norm-Perform) in our sleep and we all know our Belbin roles. However, teams are only one form of collaborative entity. Communities of Practice (CoPs) involve people from across an organisation with a common skill or focus-area working together on a semi-formal basis. They are now commonplace in Australian organisations – from resource companies to the army.

However, the skills for nurturing and managing a community are very different to those for managing a project team – with a focus on creating an engaging environment rather than driving specific deliverables.

Network collaboration requires a different skill set yet again. We are part of formal and informal networks that we utilise to get our jobs done. Unlike teams or communities, these networks are not explicitly mandated but are personal. Online tools such as Facebook or LinkedIn or investigative techniques such as Social

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Network Analysis have made these networks more visible, and research has indicated that high performers tend to manage their networks well – and yet how often do we explore with employees (especially junior ones who are more likely to have underdeveloped ones) how well they manage their networks? This is not about milking relationships for short-term gain but appreciating the importance of these relationships in supporting how work really gets done (not just what is written in the process manual).

## 2. Are we looking for ‘positive deviants’?

Being different has mixed blessings. Small, creative organisations tend to celebrate it but despite the recent focus on diversity, for many large organisations different equals bad. However, there are some deviants that you want – high performing teams and groups. An approach called ‘positive deviance’ looks for high performers and focuses on what they do differently. Unlike benchmarking or more traditional ‘best practice’, it focuses on the internal capability of an organisation. Like Appreciative Inquiry and other strengths-based initiatives, it focuses on amplifying what your organisation does well rather than what it does poorly.

As an example of positive deviance, a pharmaceutical company had one unit that far outsold all of the other groups. While the other groups believed that the more sales reps you had and the more calls you made on customers, the more you would sell, the positive deviants within the company had fewer salespeople making fewer calls. These salespeople spent more time with individual doctors, educating them on the benefits and the uses of the products that they sold. By spreading these practices throughout the sales organisation, they significantly increased their revenue.

## 3. Do we know what makes our experts expert?

Simply rewarding your top performers so they hang around is not enough. You need to understand what makes them expert and use it to help others. Apprenticing and work-shadowing are traditional, however, many organisations have discontinued these practices. At the other extreme, some organisations have experimented with brief interviews (sometimes recorded on video or audio). These are rarely extensive or deep enough to detail anything truly useful. Psychologists and researchers have developed an extensive set of techniques known as Cognitive Task Analysis to make what is tacit more explicit. The process consists of:

- Eliciting what experts know through indepth interviews and observations, about cognitive events, structures, or models
- Analysing what experts know through inspecting, selecting, simplifying, abstracting, transforming information, developing explanations, and extracting meaning
- Representing what experts know through the process of displaying data and depicting relationships, explanations, and the meaning derived from data analysis
- Whilst full-scale apprenticing may not be appropriate, building

up the expertise of your workforce has to involve more than classroom training or simplistic e-learning. Guided experience – where newbies are coached through new, challenging tasks and then given progressively more demanding work with decreasing supervision – and other work-based learning techniques need to be applied to ensure your people are performing better.

## 4. Do our people have the right tools?

In the early 1990s, Lotus Notes was a cutting-edge collaboration tool set but there was little beyond e-mail available for non-corporates and consumers. The situation is now reversed. The tools available to consumers have proliferated wildly – eg, wikis, blogs, RSS feedreaders, Google Apps, social bookmarking sites such as del.icio.us, social networking sites such as Facebook or LinkedIn, and ‘community-in-a-can’ tools such as Ning – not to mention cheap digital media recording devices, free media

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editing software like Audacity and media distribution channels such as Flickr or YouTube. Meanwhile the default collaboration tool in most enterprises remains e-mail. Products such as IBM’s Lotus Connections or Microsoft’s Sharepoint 2007 are starting to catch up, but it is a fact that there are richer platforms outside organisations than within them.

Savvy HR professionals are already experimenting with these tools for recruitment, managing alumni programs, and engaging employees in many different ways. If you want to join in, then here are some words of advice:

- The only way to truly appreciate these tools is to try them yourself. Get a LinkedIn profile, start a blog, or join a Ning group that interests you
- You get more benefit if you try them with people you know. These tools are called social software for a reason. Being by yourself on Facebook is lonely and boring and you’ll ask yourself “what’s the point of this?”
- Apply them to low-impact tasks while you get a feel for them – ie, writing next year’s confidential strategic plan is probably not the best project for road-testing a wiki
- Banning employee use of these tools is counter-productive. You do not want people on Facebook eight hours a day but your firewall will not stop the world getting more connected and more dynamic multimedia-wise. It will just keep you out of it

## 5. Is our organisation learning?

Many organisations claim to learn from their successes and failures but only a handful seem to do it consistently. During

the disastrous Vietnam War, the US army developed a set of techniques such as the After Action Review (AAR) to improve the performance of their troops on the ground when it became clear that centralised command-and-control were woefully inadequate for the conflict they found themselves in. The AAR asks four simple questions:

- What did we expect would happen?
- What actually happened?
- Why the difference?
- What will we do differently next time?

Organisations such as BP have applied techniques like the AAR, Peer Assists and Pre-mortems to identify issues and learning opportunities when they arise. None of these techniques are very complicated but successful implementations have three characteristics:

- The focus is on learning rather than apportioning blame or scoring points
- The focus is on applying lessons rather than simply collecting them. A lesson is not learned until behaviour changes as a result
- The techniques are used consistently and in a disciplined way

If you want to be part of a learning organisation, you have to ask the question: do we want to get better at what we do or are we

happy just coasting along? Learning may happen by trial and error but it should not happen by accident.

We are used to thinking of learning being an individual issue but it is as much a collective one as a personal one. A long-term challenge for talent management is to understand and manage the collective and connected talents of an organisation rather than those of a few brilliant individuals. A shorter term challenge can be put more directly. Talent management has borrowed many ideas from fields like sport (such as rankings and rewards) and it needs to go further in these borrowings. The best coaches do not simply focus on getting and keeping good players. Talent held but not deployed in work, used to improve others and developed further in the individual is talent wasted – and we do not have the luxury to waste that talent. **HC**

### About the author

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