



Talent management: Why are there still concerns?

Jan Hills explores the reasons companies still lack the talent they need and questions if the main reason is because HR has been focussing on the wrong area.

Just about everyone you come across in the HR profession is involved in some kind of talent management project. This has always been a topic that has caught people's interest, but now it seems to be red hot.

But despite this activity, most companies still say they are concerned about the quality and quantity of the talent they have. I began to wonder why, if so many companies are running talent management projects, they still have these concerns.

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One answer could be that in today's fast moving and competitive environment it is becoming increasingly difficult to forecast what skills and talents will be needed. However, I feel that the responsibility for finding a solution lies at HR's door and the main reason companies still lack the talent they need is because HR is not yet able to balance the different activities that talent management requires.

Talent management processes usually begin with the analysis phase. This identifies who within the company has potential, who will succeed whom, and what talents are needed or missing from the business. For this phase to be successful you need good analytical tools and a clear idea of what you are looking for. In my experience some very useful and innovative ideas are being used in this phase. Indeed most HR teams seem to have a good grasp on how to conduct analysis.

The balance problem occurs when companies spend too much time on the analysis stage and fail to progress sufficiently into the next phase. I think this happens because the initial analysis phase is very tangible and that lends itself very nicely to presentations and reports to the client to show progress and activity. But the businesses' talent management process is not complete at this phase and the process needs to move on to phase two of the talent management process – developing the identified talent.

Training and development

The second phase should ensure that people have the experience and training needed to reach their potential and it is at this stage the process usually falls down. Why does it often receive less focus? I believe there are two main factors.

First, developing a person's skills and talent is not a clear and linear process, people require different types of assistance and they develop at different rates. The problem that most HR functions find and why most stumble at this stage is that it is a messy process. There is not a cover all programme that is suitable for everyone, that can be put into place and then left to run its course; it is an opportunistic process that relies on watching and waiting to see how the individual will respond and develop to the training programme or business experience.

What's more, it doesn't produce tidy numbers and statistics that can be turned into a report that

can be presented to the board, but demands that HR create a flexible programme.

Secondly, it is often unclear who will be responsible for managing the development. Many companies say it is the responsibility of the business manager for facilitating the development process, but there is habitually no incentive for them to do this and the development is given low priority.

Often managers feel that if they develop the skills of the team or an employee, all it means for them is that that person will be promoted or move on and they just have to find someone else to replace them. HR needs to work with the business to put a plan into place to reward the business manager for developing the team or individual.

For example, if they develop a great team they themselves should get a bonus or promotion. An alternate solution would be to work with the business manager to assign more challenging tasks that will develop the employee or teams' skills. This would mean that the manager does not lose employees to training days and as the team strengthens, the manager also benefits.

Variety is key

I have seen a few companies that have managed this process well. One client employed a very successful 'rotation programme'. This consisted of looking at how people were working in their current role and putting together a thorough description of what they are doing, the level they are working to and the skills that they had.

The next step was to then make an in-depth description of the skills an individual needed at various levels and key roles and then to identify all the roles within the business that could provide those missing skills. For example, if the employee needs experience of running P&L, they can be rotated into an assignment that includes a P&L role. This assignment will act as a plug for the missing skills needed for them to progress.

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However, although a rotation programme can work incredibly well, it must not be the only string in the development bow. HR needs to be aware of and use a combination of approaches such as mentoring, coaching, and training. By using a variety of development programmes, it allows for the differences in how people learn and respond to different types of input.

It can be very tempting for HR to follow fads and quick wins, and talent management will not work if the programme is not robust. HR needs to present the idea and ethos of continued, positive development to the business and to keep the momentum going with a flexible programme that allows for the differences in learning styles.

A successful talent management programme demands much more intervention, feedback and flexibility than most talent programmes currently exhibit, and until these changes are made, companies will continue to be concerned about the quality and quantity of the talent they have.

Jan Hills established [HR with Guts](#) in 1999 to help HR teams add value to their businesses. Jan was previously global head of HR for several financial organisations and was COO for an investment bank. She is a fellow of the CIPD and a NLP master practitioner and coach.

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