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## Looking for Talent in All the Wrong Places

Michelle Malay Carter

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All men (and women) are created equal, not identical. In terms of talent, I believe this means we all have talent(s), and we all desire to use that talent to our fullest potential at work. None of us shows up to fail. If you can accept the premise that all but a tiny fraction of us are well intentioned and endowed with abilities, why is there so much dysfunction in the workplace?

Perhaps it's not the people themselves, but rather the context within which they are working.

If we were to match people to jobs that suit their talents, we would need not worry about motivating, engaging, or policing employees. Engaged and productive employees would be a natural byproduct of well-placed employees. Suddenly, our "talented employee" list could grow from 20% of our employees to nearly all.

### Defining Talent

Let's define talent as a combination of three things - **what we know** via training, education and experience, **what we like to do**, and **what we can handle** in terms of complexity, and then, let's define jobs in the same way - what you must know, what you must do, and what level of complexity is involved. Once this is done, we can easily put round pegs in round holes, square pegs in square holes.

Sadly, our understanding of the third component of talent, our ability to handle complexity, is not widely understood. Hence, it

is assessed intuitively but not in terms that can be articulated, consistently applied, or measured. This can lead to square peg, round hole.

### Defining Work

A way to distinguish types of work based on their level of complexity exists based on a model by Elliott Jaques, M.D., PhD. It proposes that some jobs are more complex than others, and it provides a universal means and scale for understanding not only what makes one job more complex than another but also to what extent. Just as H<sub>2</sub>O is always H<sub>2</sub>O, but can be present in the form of ice, water, or steam based on temperature, work is work but can be present in various states based on its complexity level.

Once we understand this, we can begin to talk about jobs (any job, from zookeeper to bank teller) in terms of these levels, called stratum. Stratum I work being least complex and stratum VIII representing leadership of the largest corporations.

Stratum I work consists solely of following predetermined procedures. The next strata, respectively, would require: completing a list of tasks; executing a sequential implementation; and then, balancing resources among multiple, competing projects.

### Matching the Two

We all know intuitively that some people can handle more complexity than others. Using a stratum scale, we can make an apples-to-apples comparison between stratum level of work and a person's ability to handle that level.

Now, back to the other two components of talent. Both **what we know** and **what we like to do** are important to job success and satisfaction. However, they should be considered ONLY AFTER it is clear that an employee is matched to a job that suits his or

her current stratum level. Sequence is vitally important.

If an employee with talent currently matching stratum II is asked to do stratum III work, no amount of knowledge, training, coaching or grit can equip him or her to handle the work. If an employee with stratum III capability is asked to do stratum II work, issues surrounding boredom will arise.

Research suggests that one fifth of corporate employees are underutilized in this manner! Matching current talent to job stratum is key.

Finally, it is important to note that one's ability to handle complexity is not static. It matures with age. For reasons not yet understood, some will mature to a higher level by the end of their careers.

This is why some people desire to move up the corporate ladder (high potential mode), and others are content to stay within one job throughout their career (expert mode).

Corporations need a mix of people at all levels and with all combinations of upward mobility potential. Unfortunately, there seems to be an upward-mobility bias within corporations, which equates those with the potential to climb the ladder as more talented and valuable. They may have more potential to take higher-level roles, but talent exists at all levels.

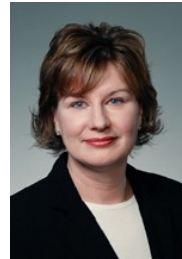
Let's face it; positions at the top are limited. Shouldn't we be just as interested in having talented clerks and machine operators as we are talented managers and vice presidents - especially considering some of these "lower-level" jobs constitute our "face to the customer"?

## Where to Look?

The best place to look for talented employees is right under our noses. Let's view ALL employees as being talented and begin to focus on unleashing that talent through proper matching of employees to jobs.

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