

Shhhh!; Schumpeter

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ABSTRACT

Most companies worry about discriminating against their employees on the basis of race, gender or sexual preference. But they give little thought to their shabby treatment of introverts. Psychometric tests such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator consistently show that introverts make up between a third and a half of the population. And yet, if anything, the corporate approach to introverts has been getting worse. The biggest culprit is the fashion for open-plan offices and so-called "group work". Companies rightly think that the elixir of growth in a world where computers can do much of the grunt work is innovation. But they wrongly conclude that the best way to encourage creativity is to knock down office walls and to hold incessant meetings. This is ill-judged for a number of reasons. It rests on a trite analogy between intellectual and physical barriers between people. It ignores the fact that noise and interruptions make it harder to concentrate. And companies too often forget that whereas extroverts gain energy from other people, introverts need time on their own to recharge.

FULL TEXT

Companies would benefit from helping introverts to thrive

MOST companies worry about discriminating against their employees on the basis of race, gender or sexual preference. But they give little thought to their shabby treatment of introverts. Carl Jung spotted the distinction between introverts and extroverts in 1921. Psychometric tests such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator consistently show that introverts make up between a third and a half of the population. Susan Cain's book on their plight, "Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking", has sold more than 2m copies; the TED talk based on the book has been viewed just over 14m times. And yet, if anything, the corporate approach to introverts has been getting worse.

The biggest culprit is the fashion for open-plan offices and so-called "group work". Companies rightly think that the elixir of growth in a world where computers can do much of the grunt work is innovation. But they wrongly conclude that the best way to encourage creativity is to knock down office walls and to hold incessant meetings. This is ill-judged for a number of reasons. It rests on a trite analogy between intellectual and physical barriers between people. It ignores the fact that noise and interruptions make it harder to concentrate. And companies too often forget that whereas extroverts gain energy from other people, introverts need time on their own to recharge. The recent fashion for hyper-connectedness also reinforces an ancient prejudice against introverts when it comes to promotion. Many companies unconsciously identify leadership skills with extroversion—that is, a willingness to project the ego, press the flesh and prattle on in public. This suggests that Donald Trump is the beau ideal of a great manager. Yet in his book "Good to Great", Jim Collins, a management guru, suggests that the chief executives who stay longest at the top of their industries tend to be quiet and self-effacing types. They are people who put their companies above their egos and frequently blend into the background.

Many of the most successful founders and chief executives in the technology industry, such as Bill Gates of Microsoft, and Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, are introverts who might have floundered in the extroverted culture of IBM, with its company songs and strong emphasis on team-bonding. In penalising other people like them, firms are passing over or sidelining potential leaders. At all levels of company hierarchies, that means failing to take full advantage of employees' abilities.

What can companies do to make life better for introverts? At the very least, managers should provide private office space and quiet areas where they can recharge. Firms need to recognise that introverts bring distinctive skills to their jobs. They may talk less in meetings, but they tend to put more thought into what they say. Leaders should look at their organisations through the introverts' eyes. Does the company hold large meetings where the loudest voices prevail? That means that it is marginalising introverts. Does it select recruits mainly on the basis of how they acquit themselves in interviews? That could be blinding it to people who dislike performing in public. Some of the cleverest companies are beginning to look at these problems. Amazon has radically overhauled its meetings to make them more focused. Every meeting begins in silence. Those attending must read a six-page memo on the subject of the meeting before they open their mouths. This shifts the emphasis from people's behaviour in the meeting to focused discussion of the memo's contents. Google has downplayed the importance of interviews in recruiting and put more emphasis on candidates' ability to carry out tasks like the ones that they will have to do at the firm, such as writing code or solving technical problems. Managers cannot be on top of the very latest research on personality types. Nonetheless, they should pay more attention to the way that groups of people interact when it comes to designing teams. One study that looked at operations lower down an organisation shows that extroverts are better at managing workers if the employees are just expected to carry out orders, but those who tend towards introversion are better if the workers are expected to think for themselves.

Extrovert five times a day

Introverts must also work harder at adapting to corporate life, since work is essentially social. They could communicate over the keyboard rather than in meetings, or by arranging smaller gatherings rather than rejecting them altogether. This is important for climbing the ladder. Karl Moore of McGill University in Montreal, who has asked over 200 CEOs about introversion on the radio show he hosts, says that introverts who make it to the top usually learn how to behave like extroverts for some of the time. Claude Mongeau, the former CEO of Canadian National Railway, for example, set himself the goal of acting like an extrovert five times a day. In any case, the majority of people are on a spectrum of introversion to extroversion. Mr Moore thinks that quieter people can make as much impact as full extroverts, if they give themselves time to recharge. He sets his students the task of "networking like an introvert" or "networking like an extrovert" to broaden their perspectives.

In "Quiet", Ms Cain concludes that business has long been dominated by an "extrovert ideal", thanks to a succession of corporate fashions—whether the 1950s model of the "organisation man", who thrived by asserting himself in meetings and inside teams, or today's fad for constant communication. Fortunately, some trends do now push in the other direction. The field of technology, an industry where introverts are common, has made it easier for everyone to communicate at a distance. The aim of enlightened management is not to tilt an extrovert-oriented company rapidly towards the introverts. It is to create a new kind of firm, in which introverts, extroverts and all the in-betweeners are equally likely to flourish. Call it the ambivert organisation.

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