



# Book The Truth about Talent

## A guide to building a dynamic workforce, realizing potential, and helping leaders succeed

Jeremy Kourdi and Jacqueline Davies  
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### Recommendation

Talent is the key to business success, but how do companies recognize it and develop it? Human resources expert Jacqueline Davies and international life coach Jeremy Kourdi understand that many employees possess nascent talent and offer a guide on how to provide your workers an environment where their gifts can flourish. *BooksInShort* recommends this authoritative, in-depth manual to human resources professionals, business owners or leaders looking to engage employees and secure their companies' future. Talent is all around you. Learn how to recognize and nurture it.

### Take-Aways

- Your HR department may be unintentionally suppressing employee engagement.
- All your members of staff – not just a cherished few – have talent that is worth uncovering and developing.
- Successful strategies encourage talent, provide flexibility, offer consistent guidance and pursue meaningful goals.
- Talent requires the right atmosphere, recognition, learning and support.
- Create a “talent ecology” at your company to find and keep great employees.
- Channel and expand the hidden talents of a diverse employee population. A disparate workforce ensures a steady supply of talent.
- To inspire staff, leaders should use their “head, heart and guts” instead of relying only on “data and rational analysis.”
- Segmenting employee groups helps you identify and develop in-house talent.
- Employee engagement attracts and retains a strong and gifted labor pool.
- Your employees want growth, fair treatment and the sense that they make a difference.

### Summary

#### Talent: What It Is, What It Isn't

Business leaders tend to believe that only an elite group of their most intelligent employees is worth cultivating and advancing. But undeveloped talent exists at all levels of every company. Workers require a nurturing environment – a “talent ecology” – to connect to their abilities and bring value to the company. You can't manage talent; you can only encourage it. Human resources departments must stop focusing on a favored few employees and help the many.

“Leading for talent means getting the best performance out of every single member of your team and teaching them how to get the best from each other.”

Leaders who recognize “the truth about talent” know that if they improve their company's ability to channel and expand the undiscovered talents of a diverse employee population, they can outpace their competitors and achieve greater success. This is important because the labor market is changing: Previously undeveloped economies are becoming powerhouses; worldwide communication is easier and instantaneous; younger people lack the skills they need because educational systems are not keeping up; and older people are staying in the workforce. Some firms might erroneously try to cope with these changes by instituting “succession planning,” which attempts to chart which current employees might become ready to promote in the future and to which positions. Generally, succession planning is not the answer because it doesn't adequately match a company's present workforce with its future employment needs. Instead, firms should develop programs that “connect strategy with talent.”

## Diversity Makes the Grade

A diverse employee base ensures a steady supply of talent. Companies need to develop “a more sophisticated view” that appreciates diversity as being more complex than mere demographics. Don’t measure employees who differ from one another in terms of age, education, skill level and background by a rigidly defined “notion of success.” Encourage diversity and distinctive goals because homogeneity stifles creativity and growth. Take these steps:

- **“Integrate talent, diversity and organization strategies”** – How will your employees’ various skills dovetail with your business plan?
- **“Identify the ‘DNA’ of the organization”** – Do your leaders regard individuality as a crucial building block of business? Or do they expect everyone to fit in a box?
- **“Develop a dedicated career development approach for underrepresented groups”** – Give women, workers of color and other minorities opportunities to learn and grow.

## From Strategies to Scenarios

To achieve crucial congruity in your talent development efforts, join your “people management strategy” to your “overall business strategy” to make sound decisions in three main areas: “development, implementation and selling.” Identify who your customers are (and are not); clarify the products or services you provide; and determine how you will operate efficiently. Enlist your HR team to build engagement by promoting employees’ “ownership” of challenges, offering training opportunities and encouraging inventiveness and originality. Be sure to:

- Analyze where your firm is lacking and get people who can decide how to tackle it.
- Determine your customers’ needs, how you’ve met them in the past and what challenges will test your efforts to meet them in the future.
- Create and review scenarios – scripts of likely occurrences – to envisage your future.

“Getting the best from talented people (or most people) is best achieved by giving people work which has meaning.”

Remember scenarios are not forecasts; they address anticipated challenges.

When you implement your strategies, you will know they’re successful if they:

- Are adaptable and allow you to respond to unexpected change.
- Help your employees understand the way they work now.
- Serve as an “essential, constant guide” to building your firm.
- Focus on clients’ needs as the best way to expand your business.
- Recognize that the present is as significant as the future.
- Support your workers as they set and work to achieve interim goals.
- Are easy to communicate effectively.

“Conventional approaches [to talent management] fall short because they are process heavy and people light. They fail to recognize the dynamic interplay of individual aspiration and organizational behavior.”

Among other duties, your HR team should lead strategic implementation, as well as: 1) augment your culture to inspire employee engagement and “high performance”; 2) help your leaders of tomorrow learn and grow; 3) offer learning opportunities to all; 4) improve employee benefits and rewards; and 5) work to boost employee satisfaction.

## A Hothouse for Talent

Create a positive talent ecology at your business, that is, a nurturing environment for talent that fosters productive interaction among your workers, your talent management operations and the broader structure of your firm built on your company’s culture, processes and market dynamics. These linked variables depend upon one another. Bring your employees into an ambiance that is welcoming and transparent, a wellspring of meaningful work.

“Talent management works with data; it doesn’t work with people and their potential.”

Your current in-house talent can serve as a “change tool” to push your business strategy forward. To understand that their work matters, your employees must know your firm’s goals and the reasons they’re important.

## Hiring from Outside

When hiring, choose job candidates with strong business networks; effective networking is a hallmark of a budding leader. You want employees who work well in teams, but be sure not to concentrate on only the apparent rising stars. Professional sports have shown that teams “without any star players” can win championships if the team members work well together.

“To retain and realize the capacity of talented people we need a more pluralistic view of what talent is.”

To retain talented workers, give them: 1) significant assignments, not just tasks to complete; 2) leaders they can look up to; 3) co-workers who share new skills and ideas; 4) acknowledgement and thanks for their accomplishments; 5) the chance to advance; 6) the ability to change their hours and work habits as their lives change; 7) the assurance of being “treated as individuals”; 8) input into how the company is run; and 9) the opportunity to belong to a highly regarded firm.

## Customization and Segmentation

Now that you've hired, encourage your employees "to bring all of their talents to work." You want to discover what they can do today and develop what they'll be able to do tomorrow. "Segment" your workforce as you would classify your customers – what are their interests, needs, abilities and limitations? Your employees will expect this, because, thanks to the Internet and social media, they already customize other aspects of their lives. Segmentation helps you "play to the strengths" of each group of employees.

"Talent strategy' and 'people strategy' need to be entirely in service of the overall strategy of the business."

To segment your talent, compare data on pairs of measurements: for example, "performance and gender, performance and bonus, performance and age." Note any dissimilarities among the various groups. Remember that your data will not be picture-perfect and allow for the fact that different employees are at different points in their careers. With that understanding, focus on:

- The best and weakest contributors.
- Those groups that have demonstrated a noticeable improvement or decrease in performance.
- Whether employee performance and potential correlate.
- How to use bonuses effectively to accurately recognize employees' contributions.

"The environment in which talented people operate...allows them to develop their potential and succeed: the organization gives them access, opportunity and encouragement."

Segmentation helps target the groups you most want to cultivate and should help you decide whether you're giving your workers a good "Employee Value Proposition" – the "reward, experience and opportunities" they gain by being in your employ.

## Let's Get Engaged

Engaged employees are more productive. Even if your workers seem pleased with their situation, you want to move them up a level to full engagement. While a paycheck motivates their "rational commitment," you're seeking "emotional commitment," which means that your employees love their jobs and have faith in the company. Workers who feel that way produce the most, are happiest and stay with you the longest.

"Culture is notoriously difficult to define and yet we all know it when we experience it."

Salary is important, but a person's boss is also a crucial element. A manager can spell the difference between engagement and disengagement. Supervisors should try to provide staff members with "equity, achievement and camaraderie." Workers want to feel that life at work is fair. They want to be proud of their jobs. And they want sustained rapport with their colleagues.

"The breadth of an individual's network is a good indicator of talent and future leadership potential."

While these seem like common-sense objectives, HR departments often work against them without realizing it, because HR can focus too much on the few employees who require close monitoring. Ask your HR team to review your firm's employee handbook. Could they eliminate any unnecessary rules and regulations? Do they conduct employee satisfaction surveys often enough and put the data into real practice, or do the results sit on a shelf? Does HR adequately encourage teamwork? Do HR officers resolve performance issues fairly? Do they make sure that workers understand the firm's business plan and their roles in it? And are the company's operations transparent?

"If you accept the link between enthusiasm and performance, is your organization doing all it can to enhance employee enthusiasm?"

All these considerations are important, but underlying all aspects of employee engagement is the need for people to believe they're making a difference. Feeling like a cog in a wheel can cause "alienation from work," which kills any chance for talent to blossom and develop. Work is meaningful when employees have:

- **"Social purpose"** – They contribute to a larger whole.
- **"Moral correctness"** – They know their work and their firm are ethical.
- **"Achievement-related pleasure"** – They like what they're doing and learning.
- **"Autonomy"** – They control their own destiny.
- **"Recognition"** – Their skills fit their jobs, and they receive fair compensation.
- **"Positive relationships"** – They network with good people, internally and externally.

## Leadership: The Other Maker and Breaker of Talent

Discovering, nurturing and retaining talent requires excellent leadership. Leaders should use their "head, heart and guts" instead of banking solely on "data and rational analysis." Your leaders should understand their own ways of managing and the impact their methods have on their employees. The four leadership methods are:

1. **"Directing"** – The boss tells the employees what to do. This approach is necessary when you've just convened a team or when you're tackling a new project.
2. **"Coaching"** – The boss keeps tabs on employees' progress, but allows them some control over tactics and decisions.
3. **"Supporting"** – The boss is not involved in day-to-day work but is available for long-range issues and questions.
4. **"Delegating"** – The boss intercedes only if necessary.

"Great employers...understand their people, valuing the clear relationship between the work they do and the difference they make."

Self-aware leaders display "emotional intelligence" – the ability to see other people's points of view. Leaders should question employees regularly and listen to their answers.

Trust is the most crucial aspect of effective leadership. You cannot force trust, and when destroyed, it's usually gone forever. Leaders earn trust by encouraging cooperation, inspiring passion, showing courage and articulating a "clear, dynamic vision of the future." Putting these leadership qualities to work can help you build an outstanding team of engaged employees who will devote their talents to your company for years to come.

"Being able to personalize who we are and how we live is now the 'new normal' and yet when we look at work, the closest we can get to this is the way we decorate our desks."

## About the Authors

**Jacqueline Davies** is a human resources professional and talent expert. Past roles include Global Head of Learning and Development with Lloyds TSB/HBOS, Head of Learning and Organizational Development at the Royal Bank of Scotland, and as an executive with HSBC. **Jeremy Kourdi** is an executive coach and business writer. Kourdi has held the post of senior vice-president with the Economist Group and also works as head of publishing and research at the Chartered Management Institute.

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