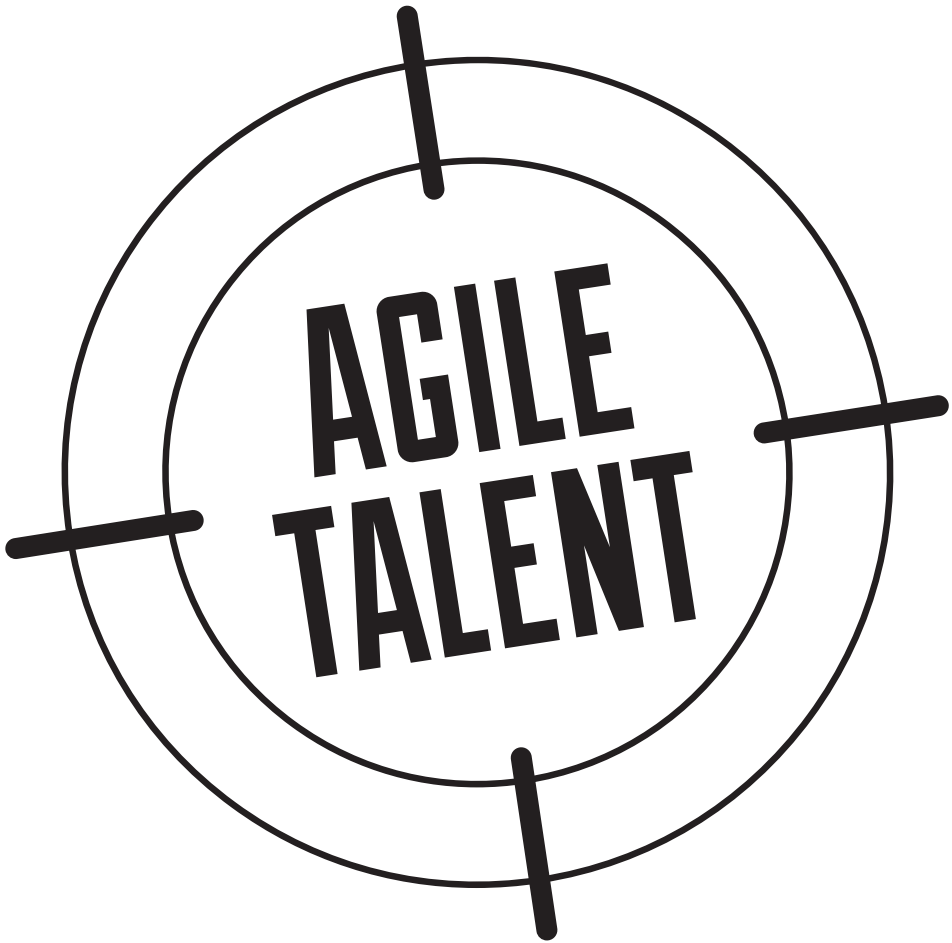


RALF KNEGTMANS



**NINE ESSENTIAL STEPS FOR
SELECTING TOMORROW'S
TOP TALENT**

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**“It is not the strongest of the species
that survive, nor the most intelligent,
but the ones most responsive to change.”**

CHARLES DARWIN

PREFACE

“The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those that cannot read or write, but those that cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.”

ALVIN TOFFLER (1928-2016)

Even as a child, talent held a particular fascination for me. Of course, I was not focused on managers, experts or leaders back then. I was intrigued by exceptional craftsmen, such as the cobbler who won European awards and displayed his trophies in his shop window. I was just as intrigued by TV celebrities and professional athletes: what was the secret of their success? Were they gifted with a special talent from birth, or did some mysterious “x factor” propel them to success? My parents had several psychologists as friends, and I would pay special attention when they discussed the topic of talent. Yet the answer to what constituted success remained elusive. My childhood musings did not lead me to the secret elixir that made some people recognisably successful, but they were a good stimulus for my later inquiries.

In 1993, I became chief operating officer of a US-based recruitment agency, and examining people’s talent became part of my professional activities. I met a great many colleagues who were passionate about their field and who aimed to seek out the most talented candidates. Still, it was rarely feasible for them to research in depth every prospective job candidate, as they were often engaged in assignments from companies hit by urgent problems that needed to be fixed at once, generating a host of vacancies to be filled quickly.

A good friend introduced me to the executive search agency De Vroedt & Thierry in Amsterdam. Given their extensive experience recruiting for senior management positions, board members and supervisory bodies they made sure to devote ample time carrying out thorough selections. This agency decided to make me a partner, and I was then lucky enough to work with a range of clients who were very serious about finding exactly the right candidates for their man-

agement teams. What stood out for me was the focus on the candidate's experience and knowledge base as well as his or her academic record and demonstrable intelligence. The process – even then – took several rounds, but in general the interviews were unfocused. The final decision on candidates was often based on the external criteria, but complemented by a healthy dose of intuition.

Intuition does have its uses, so I am not advocating that you ignore what gut instinct might tell you. There is a downside, though. Human instinct is not universally well-developed, nor is it infallible even in highly intuitive people. This book will deal with all manner of tempting traps and distractions that even experienced professionals can fall prey to. Furthermore, you would do well to be transparent about the various steps you take to make your final selections, and be able to back up your selection process with solid arguments. As a recruitment professional, you should see that an important part of your profession is to explain your selection decision and process to candidates, both those who will eventually land the jobs and those who will be passed over for specific employment positions. Both groups will benefit from this explanation.

After working in the field of executive search for a few years and having accrued some initial insights, my boyhood wonderment about success sparked my imagination again, but now with an adult focus: I began to wonder if the current methods of hiring could be improved, elevated to a higher level. My career experience aside, I decided to bring as few as possible preconceived notions or ready-made answers to my nascent quest; I would follow my itch to dig deeper. I delved into the latest research, analysed our company's methods and examined what our peers within the search-and-recruitment field were doing. Interviewing experts, successful CEOs and talented young high-potentials, I took note of what they regarded as essentials for success. In 2007, I set down what I had learned from my research in a book I called *Top Talent: the Nine Universal Criteria*.^{*} The book was well received and stimulated me to dig deeper into the subject.

Here is a quick summary of the criteria that will help you seek out, recognise and ultimately select highly talented people in various realms. They are:

- authenticity and creativity
- passion and self-motivation
- peaking at the right moment
- maintaining the ability to learn
- having the skill to reduce complexity

^{*} *Agile Talent* is currently the only one of my books available in English.

- knowing how to set ambitious yet realistic goals
- being proactive in solving problems
- being mildly lazy or quickly bored
- possessing courage along with confidence

I realise that this list of factors for success is not perfect. However, these criteria are precisely the ones that kept cropping up in my practical experience, desk research and the interviews I conducted. They have stood the test of time. What I noticed back in 2007 was how little these success factors were related to knowledge, degrees and experience. True, these qualities are all relevant to recruitment, but they carry far less **predictive validity*** than we often assume.

Over the next few years, I extended my quest and wrote two more books – about the sense and nonsense of diversity and about leadership (*How To Become CEO*, only available in Dutch).

Three years ago, I came to realise that the world was changing much more rapidly than before, and that this pace of change would have its repercussions on the selection of talent. In the near future, the predictive validity of degrees, experience and knowledge will offer ever less viable insights into the nebulous domain that makes for candidate success. IQ will remain an important touchstone. However, brain power needs to be examined alongside the other attributes a person can bring to corporate leadership. The profound transformation of selection criteria proved to be a topic worthy of further research. It offered me ample stimulation for writing this new book, which is addressed not merely to HR managers or recruiters but to everyone involved in the management, selection and inspiration of people.

It is my hope that this book can be of value for those in top management who might fancy themselves to be above the selection process and who can just delegate the task. To do so in fact underestimates the impact of future-proof top talent in organisations.

The key themes in this book all blend seamlessly with the developments I just described. I know they will help you to answer these kinds of questions:

- How do you recruit the right people in an ever-faster-changing world in which accumulated knowledge and experience run the risk of rapidly becoming obsolete? How does the speed of technological development impact a company which depends on the agility of its employees to future-proof it?

* There is a glossary at the back of this book, explaining key concepts. Whenever those words appear for the first time, they are printed in bold.

- What are the criteria for selecting future-proof talent needed to reach the company's long-term targets?
- How do I shape and build the recruitment process for future-proof or agile talent, and how can I be sure that the person I select will ultimately be a perfect match for my business?
- Are there any tools or aids that can help me objectify selection methods for finding new talent? How might I shape recruitment so that bias doesn't distort the selection process?
- How do I recognise agile talent within my own organisation? And what steps can I take to improve the retention of these talented individuals?
- Are there any case studies available of businesses that seem to have found the answers to these questions, and whose experiences might benefit other organisations?
- How might I set up the selection process for future-proof talented people, in order to make our company less dependent on outside consultants?

While this book showcases an example of agile working, its main focus is not "talent within an agile working atmosphere". Instead it examines how future-proof talent seems to constantly adapt to rapid evolutions in circumstances. These developments show no signs of slowing down, nor do they leave room for slack in the constant renewal of the selection process. It would be a mistake to think the process set out in this book is etched in stone. New trends and greater insights will call for more experiments on your part, and for you to make additions to the selection process. New insights will encourage you to get rid of elements that you find have become irrelevant.

One thing is certain: the game plan in this new world is unlike anything we have ever known. It's worth repeating futurologist Alvin Toffler's insight: "The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those that cannot read or write, but those that cannot learn, unlearn and relearn."

January 2017

Ralf Knegtman

De Vroedt & Thierry, member of Cornerstone International Group

INTRODUCTION

“The information based world is moving exponentially, replacing linear thinking organisations.”

PETER DIAMANDIS, SINGULARITY UNIVERSITY

The world is becoming an increasingly global, digital and volatile place. As technology advances at high speed, the life cycle of business models diminishes accordingly. Nobody can miss this: anything that is mainstream today, will be outdated by tomorrow. After all, hardly more than a decade ago the world was a completely different place, as these examples from the “good old days” illustrate:

- When you wanted to buy a book, you went to a bookshop (an independent or a chain store), where the book you were after was probably out of stock, and would have to be ordered. Now, you order it from Amazon, or easier yet, download it onto your Kindle.
- If you found nothing interesting on TV during an evening, you could brave the cold weather and dash out to the video store. But chances are you wouldn't find a film that interested you. Now you watch catch-up TV or go to HBO or Netflix to binge-watch your latest must-see show. Music has gone through a similar transformation. A monthly fee to Spotify or Apple Music has replaced relatively expensive CDs, leaving you free to listen to all your favourite tunes, whenever and wherever you like, and sample the latest releases too.
- Did you ever go on holiday and just when you wanted to capture some memories on camera, you realised you had left your – recently purchased – digital camera upstairs in the hotel room? (This has happened to me more often than I care to remember.) Now, you are never without your iPhone, Samsung or other brand of smartphone, maybe complete with a selfie-stick, which lets you take fairly decent pictures. Well before you embarked on that same

holiday you would have spent several hours at a travel agent's going over the various options. Fast forward to today, and you can arrange your own travel plans – flights, rental cars, museum tickets, restaurants, and hotels – all of them sourced and booked online.

- When you wanted to share your fabulous experiences and must-see destinations with friends and family, you would call them on the overpriced hotel landline, or send them – still expensive – text messages from your mobile. Now you call on Skype (free), or send a message using WhatsApp or similar (virtually) free tools of communication. Besides, your friends will most likely have already seen your “rating” of the places you stayed at on TripAdvisor, Facebook or other social media.

Professional literature has begun to refer to today's world as the VUCA-world. This acronym stands for the four words *volatile, uncertain, complex* and *ambiguous*.

VOLATILE UNCERTAIN VUCA WORLD COMPLEX AMBIGUOUS

The pace of change not only affects humans: it also has a profound impact on companies and businesses. But whereas globally life expectancy of humans has increased by five years since 2000, on average the life cycle of companies and businesses has shortened.

This shrinking life cycle is a universal trend affecting the whole world. Claudio Feser, author of *Serial Innovators. Firms That Change the World*, notes that the average lifespan of an American business has shrunk to a mere fifteen years, compared to an average of forty-five years in the 1950s. Extrapolating from this, if businesses do not adjust their ability to innovate, their lifespan may diminish further, to no more than five to ten years in the foreseeable future. The only way to escape this fate is for businesses to compel themselves to keep on reinventing themselves.

Not only do organisations have shorter lifespans, but they also have to cope with a whole new set of foundational values. Until recently, the attempt to keep a company's knowledge concealed, or at the very least protected through patents, was nearly universal. Through the mainstreaming of the Internet, a transparent world has emerged in which sharing has become the new normal. After all, knowledge itself now has a lifespan similar to fresh fish. In fact, the speed of acquiring and using knowledge has replaced knowledge for its own sake as the key to the proverbial castle.

Along similar lines, while capital remains vital to businesses, it has ceased to be the defining factor. Neither capital nor other goods still offer any guarantee of success.

An important new business essential is the capacity to innovate. Some of the ways to do this include being aware of technological advances through, for example, the highly sophisticated automation of self-learning programmes, or the use of big data analyses to increase efficiency. Innovation can also be spurred by tapping into future-proof or **agile talent**. In brief, "agile talent" refers to professionals eager to learn and keen to innovate; they will reinvent a company from within. Before we examine this topic at length, let us enhance our understanding of disruption.

THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES

The world is proving to be a place bursting at the seams through the rapid impact of technology. New market participants are often turning to unexpected business models in order to carve out significant chunks of the market for themselves. The element of surprise often gives these new entrants an unforeseen advantage. When Tesla started out in 2003, the company had never before produced a car.

“The half-life of knowledge relevance, has been diminishing and will continue to do so.”

MATHIEU WEGGEMAN, AUTHOR AND PROFESSOR OF
ORGANISATION SCIENCE AND MANAGEMENT
