

Strengths-Based Recruitment

The innovation that is adding millions to the bottom line and improving customer service

The importance of talent management, and specifically the selection, nurture and retention of top performers, is obvious in today's competitive business world. But why are conventional approaches to recruitment flawed, how should you go about appointing the best people in key roles, and what is the real cost of getting your hiring strategy wrong?

Sally Bibb, founder of Engaging Minds, discusses how **a new focus on the innate strengths of top performers is being taken seriously by boards**, because it is proven to add millions to the bottom line of organisations that adopt the approach.



3 reasons that leading companies are switching to strengths-based recruitment

- ① They want a step-change in performance
- ② They want to save cost associated with high staff turnover
- ③ They need to improve customer service to become more competitive



Strengths-based recruitment can add millions to your bottom line

- A financial services company saved £4.5 million in the first two years
- A call centre increased productivity by 20% in three months
- A sales operation's staff turnover fell from 65% to 32% in six months

Why focus on strengths?

The old adage of 'play to your strengths' is one we are all familiar with, but it's a fact that strengths-based human resources practices have the power to transform an organisation's overall performance, by ensuring that the best people are appointed to business-critical roles.

When we talk about strengths we are talking about what makes people great performers, that is, what they are naturally good at, love doing and are energised by.

The traditional approach to recruitment and people management is to first hire on the basis of core competencies – ie what people can do rather than what they are naturally good at, and then to set about training them to acquire certain strengths that they may be missing. People do, of course, have the capacity to learn new skills, but their real strengths are hard wired at an early age. So, it is better to hire people with the right strengths in the first place, than to try to train them in areas where they are naturally weak and will only ever become competent, at best, rather than truly excel.

What are the business imperatives behind strengths-based recruitment and what can it deliver?

A recent report by Oxford Economics found that staff turnover costs British businesses at least **£4.12bn** a year. This is an enormous cost to be borne by business and a waste of productivity. In 2012, the Corporate Leadership Council found that emphasising employee strengths in performance reviews increased performance by **36%**, whereas an emphasis on weaknesses caused a **26.8%** decrease in performance.

Ultimately, as a visionary leader, regardless of the sector you operate in, you will want your organisation to thrive; this means improving performance, elevating customer service, reducing costs and increasing competitiveness.

Strengths-based recruitment can help you in all of these areas by:

- Putting people in the right roles where they excel
- Widening the talent pool available to your business to include people with the right innate strengths who may previously have been overlooked because they lacked the relevant experience
- Reducing the time and money you spend recruiting people who are wrong for the role or training people to fix their weaknesses
- Reducing the cost of staff turnover

While many public and private sector organisations are still firmly wedded to the traditional competency-based methods of recruiting and developing their staff, there are already some powerful examples of pioneering organisations who are taking bold action to challenge the status quo. For instance:



Standard Chartered Bank was one of the first large organisations to introduce strengths-based techniques. They adopted the approach in the year 2000 for sales roles. As a result, **new employees**, on average, delivered **40% more revenue** than those previously hired using the competency-based recruitment process.



Acromas Group, the former parent company of AA, Saga and Allied Healthcare, reported that for one of its businesses the **turnover rate** in the first three months of employment **fell from 22% to 10.8%**.



Starbucks UK experienced a 30% reduction in staff turnover amongst new apprentices in the first year of implementing strengths-based recruitment.



The Shelford Group top ten NHS University Trusts improved the quality of their ward sisters by selecting them based on their strengths, thereby achieving higher patient satisfaction scores and happier wards.

“The strategic benefits (of strengths-based recruitment) are about cost savings because of the reduction in attrition. Also, the service we are providing to customers because our new recruits connect well and are naturals with our customers.”

Nick Corbo, Director of Customer Experience and Agent Development, Saga

How do you find great performers?

How do you go about finding high performers?

Ultimately it means looking beyond the surface and understanding their innate strengths and what really makes them 'tick'.

As Steve Jobs, the late CEO of Apple, once said: "Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do."

Identifying people who will do 'great work', because they are a natural fit, is the essence of strengths-based recruitment.

We know from neurobiology that our strengths are established early¹. This means we are who we are by the time we are in our mid-teens, and after this people don't fundamentally change that much.

Strengths-based recruitment allows you to select people who are a natural fit for the role. It differs from the more common behavioural competency-based recruitment approach because:

- It acknowledges that people cannot change their innate strengths, values and motivations.
- Its prime goal is to identify what people are naturally good at, love doing and are energised by, rather than discovering their past experience and skill.
- It focuses more on what a person is like (their true essence) rather than on how they behave.
- Applicants can usually determine from a strengths-based job advertisement whether they are likely to be a good fit, thus screening themselves in or out.

- A candidate cannot study or learn how to 'pass' a strengths-based interview, as they can for competency-based interviews.
- Unsuccessful candidates do not leave the process feeling deficient. Instead they realise that they would have been a poor fit for a particular job. They learn about themselves and so feel positive about their interview experience.
- Interviewers are confident in their decision making with strengths-based recruitment.



Why should strengths be at the heart of your talent management strategy for ultimate business success?

The strengths approach also works well for Generations Y and Z because they have high expectations that they will love their work and get a lot of personal satisfaction from it.

Industry needs are becoming ever more complex as the global economy evolves. Skills shortages and an ageing population are threatening the productivity of some countries and sectors. It is critical, therefore, that your organisation has the quantity and quality of people in place to meet your current and future business needs.

'People are your greatest asset' is a worn-out phrase. However, its truth remains. Attracting great people and knowing how to manage, motivate and engage them is a very effective, competitive advantage. For example, a company like Dyson is a technology and engineering success story – but its continuing success will depend on its ability to find and retain the best engineers.

¹The neuroscientist and paediatric neurologist Dr Peter Huttenlocher (2002), in his studies of neuroplasticity and neural connections, found that the typical pattern for a child's cognitive development is that an overabundance of synaptic connections are formed early on, only later to be refined on the basis of which are used most often, that is, which are most consistently fired in response to environmental stimulus. If our strengths are like a four-lane super-highway of the brain – the connections that are fast and efficient are those that are used often and are well trodden. The connections (or synapses) that are used less often are like a minor road which is unfamiliar, more difficult to navigate and not an enjoyable experience. Dr Harry Chugani, Professor of Paediatrics, Neurology and Radiology at Wayne State University School of Medicine, put it this way: "Roads with the most traffic get widened. The ones that are rarely used fall into disrepair." (Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina).

Most businesses spend a great deal of time and money gaining insight into their customers: what they love; what's important to them; what motivates them; how they like to be communicated with. However, **until the strengths movement came along, most organisations knew far more about their customers than they did about their own employees.**

Genuine insight into employees and prospective employees gives any talent management strategy a richness, depth and effectiveness that it otherwise wouldn't have.

The questions you should be asking yourself are:

- Which employee groups are key to achieving your corporate objectives?
- Does your company understand what makes the star performers in these groups great?
- How and where can you find more candidates like these people?
- Who supports them to do their job well, and how can your leaders support them?
- How best to engage, manage and reward them once they have been appointed?

These questions will guide you to take the necessary actions to implement a strengths-based talent management strategy that will deliver your company goals and objectives.

By knowing what is important to people and what motivates them, you can reward and recognise your employees in a way that personally matters to them. And, reorganising your talent management structure to be strengths led, ultimately means that you have people who will perform to deliver quantitative and qualitative results.



Why strengths-based recruitment will be the management innovation of our time

Given the financial and performance impact of strengths-based recruitment, the prediction is that this innovation in selection will take over from the competency method of recruitment in the next 5-10 years. Why? Because it offers a direct and fast route to getting staff to feel a level of passion and commitment that all organisations have previously aspired to, but have always found difficult to achieve. And the beauty of it is, dropping a tiny pebble in the pond can cause a huge ripple effect.

About the author

Sally Bibb's company Engaging Minds profiles organisations' high performers, discovers what makes them great and shows the organisation how to select more of them. The result: direct benefit to the bottom line because people are in the right roles enabling them to excel and delight customers.



For more details about how strengths-based recruitment is transforming organisations, read her new book: *Strengths-Based Recruitment and Development. A Practical Guide to Transforming Talent Management Strategy for Business Results*, published by Kogan Page (May 2016).

Read Sally's blog and get in touch with her via www.engagingminds.co.uk

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