

Urban Talent Myths EXPOSED

Many talent managers still hold onto outdated models and theories that are in need of being revised.

ESSAY BY KENNETH M. NOWACK

Urban myth: a humorous or horrific story or piece of information circulated as true.

It has been said that when human resource practitioners lock on to an idea or become a fan of a favorite model or assessment tool, they resemble abalones clinging strongly to the rocks they are attached to. Like an abalone, many of us find it difficult to pull away from what we believe, teach others or use in practice, despite evidence that suggests the contrary.

We all know that theories constantly evolve, that the half-life of technology is excitingly and particularly short today,

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and that new research continuously revises what we know. Yet, many of us continue to hold onto outdated models, theories and several very popular talent development urban myths that are in need of being exposed and revised.

Urban Myth No. 1: The 10,000-Hour Rule

Evidence: How long does it take to become an expert in one's field? The answer most commonly cited is the "10,000-hour rule of experience."

This myth has been popularized in books like Malcolm Gladwell's "Outliers" and Geoff Colvin's "Talent Is Overrated." These two books and others suggest it takes roughly 10,000 hours of practice to achieve mastery in a given field.

Even K. Anders Ericsson, the noted researcher whose original work Gladwell and Colvin base their argument around, came out against the "magic" of the 10,000 rule in a 2013 article in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*. He argues that the heritability of expert performance is currently unknown, that the sheer number of hours of practice is not as important as the quality of deliberate practice, and suggests that expert performance varies among individuals and domain.

Southern Illinois University researchers Elizabeth Meinz and David Hambrick in 2010 studied a wide range of piano-playing skill. They found that deliberate practice accounted for less than half the variance in performance, and that working memory capacity, which is highly stable and heritable, accounted for a significant proportion of the variance, above and beyond deliberate practice.

Recently, Miriam Mosing from the Karolinska Institutet studied 10,500 Swedish twins on music ability (rhythm, melody and pitch discrimination) and measured their practice time. Their findings not only suggested that music practice may not causally influence music ability, but also that genetic variation among individuals affects both ability and inclination to practice.

Finally, psychologist Brooke Macnamara from Princeton University conducted the largest known review of studies exploring the relationship between deliberate practice

and performance in several domains. The research included 111 independent samples with a total sample of 11,135 participants.

It found that the percentage of total variance accounted by deliberate practice in each of these five specific domains was quite small overall and played almost no importance for professional development.

Moral: Deliberate, challenging and varied practice over a period of time will make one better — but up to some finite genetic set point for each individual. Taken together, it appears more realistic to expect that success and expertise in one's field is truly the intersection between deliberate practice and innate ability.

Urban Myth No. 2: SMART Goal Effectiveness

Evidence: There is a large gap between intentions to change behavior and actual behaviors to change. Recent findings suggest that attempts to change people's intentions alone may not always result in successful maintenance of behavior over time. For example, a recent review of health behavior — exercise, cancer screening, etc. — found that people translated their "good" intentions into action only 53 percent of the time.

We all know about SMART — specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely — goals, but do they really help facilitate behavior change? In a 2012 study, leadership training and research firm Leadership IQ studied 4,182 workers from 397 organizations to see what kind of goal-setting processes actually help employees achieve great things.

The firm discovered that people's goals are not particularly helpful. In fact, the survey found that only 15 percent of employees strongly agree that their goals helped them achieve great things.

If SMART goals aren't the answer, what is?

Nearly 200 published studies focusing on leadership, health, lifestyle and interpersonal relations have shown that deciding in advance under what conditions you will plan to implement a new behavior can significantly increase your chances of actually doing it.

Research from Peter Gollwitzer at New York University have confirmed that implementation intentions, rather than goal in-

FIGURE 1: Example of Goal vs. Implementation Intentions

Goal Intention Example:

“To stay calm in anxiety producing situations”

Goal Implementation Example:

“If my heart starts to race, then I will begin using my breathing technique and focus on how relaxed I begin to feel”

Source: Kenneth M. Nowack

tentions, can result in a higher probability of successful goal attainment (Figure 1).

Implementation intentions are simply “if-then” plans that link situational triggers, or opportunities to practice specific behaviors or at specific times, with responses that are effective in attaining goals — “If situation X occurs, then I will initiate behavior Y to reach goal X.”

So the truly “smart” way want to create new habits is to translate intentions into implementation plans.

Moral: Goal intentions weakly predict sustained behavior change. Implementation intentions are significantly more effective in actually building and sustaining new habits.

Urban Myth No. 3: Developing Talent Using the 70-20-10 Rule

Evidence: The 70-20-10 rule for talent development refers to the mix of experiences that includes on-the-job experiences (70 percent), coaching and feedback (20 percent) and structured learning experiences (10 percent). It has been reported that the 70-20-10 ratio was based on research from the Center for Creative Leadership in the 1980s that suggested leaders develop best through means other than formal training.

However, as CCL researcher Morgan McCall has suggested in a 2010 issue of *Industrial & Organizational Psychology*, “Somewhat less certain is the resulting folklore that there is a ‘70-20-10 rule.’” He concludes that the original formula should be used in support of on-the-job develop-

Reader Reaction

Fewer people are relocating for job purposes. Why? How does this impact business?



@ashleighwNC:
Talent mobility shouldn't also equal relocation.

Technology allows the right talent to perform successfully remotely.



@monicamfochtman:
As you have children & they get older, it gets harder to justify uprooting them. Also, health benefits.



@tim_slager:
More companies are realizing that candidates need not move to the HQ city to have an impact.



Donna Lang:
Relocation for a job is very tenuous from an employee's perspective. The employee risk is reduced in a number of ways, including minimizing the upheaval to their family, their friends and their support network, and they have a career change without ever leaving home. For the employee, the choice of where to live, not disturbing a spouse's career, and leaving kids in their schools with friends is important, and it does not deplete their focus on a new job because they are able to focus on the job, not on finding a new home, helping the family and spouse adjust to a new city/country/schools/home, etc.

There is a large down side. The company can lose its sense of culture if it does not take special steps to ensure that the new "remote" employee finds and builds an internal network within the company and truly becomes engaged.

What do you think? Join the discussion at tinyurl.com/relocatingtrends or follow us @TalentMgtMag.

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ment and suggests that the combination of all three is better than any of them used as a stand-alone intervention.

A recent survey by both consulting firm DDI Inc. and The Conference Board Inc. asked 13,124 leaders, 1,528 global human resource executives and 2,031 participating organizations about the ratio used by organizations that provide the highest-quality leadership development. The results suggest that a revised ratio of 55 percent experience, 25 percent coaching/feedback and 20 percent structured experiences more accurately describe the actual learning time spent in development.

Moral: There is less support for the exact talent development ration of 70-20-10, but without deliberate practice and learning through professional challenges, both on the job and in one's career, new skills are unlikely to develop. Challenging on-the-job experiences together with coaching/feedback and structured learning all help to enhance knowledge and skill development.

Urban Myth No. 4: Leveraging Strengths

Evidence: The strengths-based coaching and training orientation emphasizes the leveraging of people's competence and expressed skills to become even better. This movement has resulted in a sometimes-blind following of the edict to identify and accentuate what people do well in terms of their core skills and abilities.

Proponents of this camp argue that strengths should always be leveraged and that they indeed differentiate low vs. high performers. What's more, numerous assessments and tools now exist for the sole purpose of identifying and categorizing one's signature strengths and emphasizing their deployment on the job.

There are several issues, however, that are important for practitioners to understand. The first is that the majority of our personality traits appear to have a curvilinear relationship with diverse organizational outcomes, including job performance.

For example, recent studies confirm that personality traits like conscientiousness and extraversion as well as ethical behavior can maximize performance even when these traits are neither exceedingly low nor high. These findings support the argument made by other researchers and practitioners that overdone strengths truly become one's liabilities.

The second issue is that not everyone will be equally motivated to actually work on what his or her strengths are.

In 2012 research published in the *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, my research colleague and I found that one group of employees we call "underestimators" — those who rate themselves lower compared with feedback from others — are consistently mindful about information in their results that is perceived to be negative. They are mindless to data that overwhelmingly suggests they are skillful in the eyes of others. These individuals are locked into a mindset of being highly perfectionistic and self-critical and only tend to focus on their perceived weaknesses in their developmental goals.

Despite coaching efforts, such individuals are resistant to "leverage their strengths" back on the job.

Finally, some individuals have fatal flaws that, if not corrected, will become critical for job retention and long-term career success. If not addressed and corrected by their organizations, such individuals will indeed be "released back into the wild global talent gene pool."

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Flatten hierarchies. Advances don't just come in the form of technological advances. It's also time to shake up organizational structure and exercise influence without formal authority. This transition encourages collaboration and decentralized decision-making. Across the enterprise, including third-party suppliers and independent agents, this breaking down of silos eventually allows workers to hold specialized skills and define their own jobs.

Embrace digital tools and technologies. Robotics, automation, technological augmentation, artificial intelligence and collaboration tools are here to stay. Embrace them proactively instead of playing catch up to competitors that have already improved the work experience through digital and gained the advantages.

Encourage talent to regularly refresh their skills. As the workplace changes, so do the profile of workers and the skills they need to succeed. Coach and enable employees to constantly develop new skills needed by the organization and seek out new opportunities to create value. And have them focus on human skills that will reign in the age of the machine, developing capabilities machines won't likely take over like idea creation, communication, empathy, analysis, experimentation and the ability to make sense of data.

Keeping the 'Human' in Human Capital

Organizations are shifting to a world where the innately human characteristics of collaboration, coaching, entrepreneurialism and fluid temporary teams are fast replacing hierarchy, bureaucracy, functional siloes and traditional notions of the job.

New digital technologies are driving that change. Through more tailored roles and rewards and a more democratized workplace, some might even say digital is putting the "human" back in "human capital."

Through digital, people can cocreate highly personalized work experiences, and lead and manage in ways that free employees to exercise judgment and unleash creativity at all levels of the organization. Leaders will need to loosen the old school "command and control" grip on hierarchies, and instead manage networks of employees and external talent pools, often at the far ends or outside the organization.

To be sure, digital isn't a cure-all. Just having the technology won't magically transform an organization into one with a greater sense of human touch. Humanizing the workforce through digital takes a conscious effort.

Organizations that embrace these changes from leaders down to front-line workers will be able to enjoy more engaged, satisfied employees, improve workforce productivity and effectiveness, and achieve new levels of meaning, innovation, agility and operational excellence. **tm**

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Moral: Not all of us will be motivated to focus on our strengths. For most of us, the overuse of what we do well can become our liabilities if not applied. Even if we were to exclusively focus on our strengths, we still may not become the expert that some claim we can will be.

Urban Myth No. 5: 360-degree Feedback

Evidence: It's commonly understood that poorly designed feedback assessments and interventions can increase disengagement and contribute to poor individual and team performance.

Feedback perceived to be judgmental, evaluative and critical could actually elicit a "pain response" in most people, as my research suggests. In fact, a comprehensive review of the feedback research literature suggests that although there was a significant effect, performance actually declined in one-third of all studies analyzed for various reasons, such as lack of depth in the feedback process, how feedback was delivered and personality of the recipient.

What do we know about the popular 360-degree or multirater feedback process combined with some coaching or follow-up?

A meta-analysis of 24 longitudinal studies published in *Personnel Psychology* in 2005 by James W. Smither from La Salle University found that 360-degree feedback followed by coaching does lead to significant improvements on both self-awareness and actual behavioral change. So when "best practices" are applied to 360-degree feedback, it can be a useful intervention to help talent gain more insight.

Still, the analysis revealed something very important: On average, the magnitude of behavior change in these studies would be characterized as small to very small statistically. Taken together, current evidence suggests that expected performance improvements may be modest for even those most motivated and capable of changing behavior over time when using 360-degree feedback and some form of coaching.

Moral: Insight and awareness are necessary, but not sufficient, to ensure successful behavior change. Therefore, 360-degree feedback interventions are unlikely to convert a "competent jerk" to a "lovable star." Small changes in behavior are most likely to occur using "best practices" with 360-degree feedback interventions.

Practitioners tend to believe what we think. As a result, our mindsets about these popular urban myths shape our individual and collective approach to coaching, training and consulting. It may be time to look at these myths in a new way that might just challenge our thinking — as well as our practice in coaching, training and consulting to help talent develop and successfully implement and sustain new habits. **tm**

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