

# THE RULES OF ATTRACTION

There's a silent battle raging between organizations around the world. They all want the same thing. But who will win the war for talent?

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Innovation is fueled by creativity, and creativity is fueled by talent. Since innovation is the competitive edge of the 21st century, it's hardly surprising that countries, companies and all types of organizations are in a war for talent.

The most visible part of this war is attracting talent – companies and countries are in an arms race to provide incentives for capable and creative people and new start-ups are being acquired simply to capture the teams that run them. But the focus on attracting talent is just half of the story, because the war cannot be won without effectively nurturing talent. From kindergarten to higher education to employee development, countries and organizations can differentiate themselves by how they develop creative talent.

The need for talent is real. The 21st century is not a continuation of the 20th. Connectedness rules the world. Processing power and data storage are virtually free – a typical smartphone has computing power that shames a 1970s-era mainframe. A billion people – and soon many more – are now able to effortlessly communicate, socialize, trade and collaborate in real time. This introduces both chaos – flash mobs and the Arab Spring for example – and opportunity. Our systems and ways of thinking need to adapt to this new reality, but the process of developing a culture is slow. How can an organization attract or create the people who will have the ideas to shape the future?

My own views are shaped by contact with students for the last 30 years. A lot has happened in that time, and developing talent now requires a different approach than even ten years ago (the time before Facebook and Twitter and the beginnings of the internet). For universities, incoming students have changed. Youth now are different. Our students differentiate universities based on more than just rankings and reputation – they look at “greenness” and sustainability plans, at quality of life and opportunities to customize their learning experiences. They value individuality and see no limits to the impact that they will have on the world.

The challenge comes in adding value to these fresh and plastic minds to prepare them for a lifetime of impact. Educating leaders who are equipped to deal with the unprecedented complexity and constant change that we now face requires new ways of thinking. While I take the viewpoint of an academic institution, companies and countries face similar challenges.

A successful innovation ecosystem requires that we have the right numbers of people with the right types of skills. It's no mystery that science and engineering encourage “left-brain” activity: logical, rational, analytical, pattern-seeking, solution-solving, sorting and organizing. Innovation, however, requires attributes of the humanities found in “right-brain” skills: creativity, artistry, intuition, symbology, fantasy, emotion. Innovation requires the whole brain.

Scientists think like scientists, and scientific thinking is probably the most organized thinking of all. There is also humanistic thinking, not as codified as science, but with clear identifiers: critical thinking, the ability to come up with an original thesis. And, even though much less regulated, there is something like artistic thinking.

One of the keys to developing talent is to allow these types of thinking to co-exist. All too often, we force young people to converge into law, medicine, engineering, or another narrow specialization very early in their education, ignoring interests outside of their field. One of the reasons that American universities have been uniquely successful is their insistence that all undergraduates receive, at least in part, a humanistic education. There was no master plan behind this, but it has tremendous practical implications. By allowing different types of thinking to co-exist throughout undergraduate education, our students are afforded tremendous opportunities to unearth new ideas across disciplines.

Creating a system which produces talent is difficult, so often the focus is on attracting developed talent in the hopes that it results in innovation. This strategy has caused a global

arms race for talent. Countries as different as Brazil, Chile, Finland, Singapore and regions such as the Gulf States are open in their ambitions to attract the next generation of leaders.

In the academic world, a common strategy is to attract superstars, stellar researchers with big groups and big labs, and to give them resources to continue their work in a new environment. But this strategy has its drawbacks. Attracting talent that is already formed doesn't always lead to the creation of new talent. In academia, this strategy can create a graduate research culture which is disconnected from the undergraduate culture. A singular researcher may bring and form a group of graduate students or researchers, but they may not interact with others. The graduate population must interact with the undergrad students, and labs must interact with one another. Attracting singular stars does not necessarily result in an integrated ecosystem, and sustainable creative output is all about a seamless ecosystem.

That's why these initiatives often fail – they just look at a narrow part of the entire system. For example, many have tried to copy the success of the American higher education system. But the truth is, there is no system. Unlike a national, centralized educational system, there are a dizzying range of approaches in the several thousand American universities and colleges. The

most salient features of the system are flexibility and diversity of educational philosophies, curricula and the professoriate. This is difficult to copy, and mimicking one element of the system won't produce the desired broad outcome.

So how can companies and countries get ahead? The key is to take many bets, a Darwinian approach which enables competition between different models. Leaders must foster many new initiatives and encourage the development of different approaches. They must lower the barriers to allow broad collaboration and then let the systems grow and develop. There is often the inclination to lead from the front, but changing a system can be done more effectively by leading from behind. Create an environment, provide resources and monitor progress closely – but work with the system, not just the individual components.

For individuals, the key to success is to learn to move between domains. Resist the habit of focusing on just one area of knowledge and develop deep knowledge combined with broad awareness. The health of the system depends critically on cross-linkers – those who can jump between disciplines and domains. Individuals with a broad portfolio of interests and the ability to connect disciplines will be the ultimate prize in the war for talent. **A**

