

**MINDFUL.LESS. THE CORPORATE MINDSET THAT  
DISMISSES AFFORDABLE TALENTS  
HOW TO OVERCOME THE LIMITS OF CURRENT TALENT  
MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*'What a man can be, he can be!' could be the best and shortest way to understand that once a person gets to be different, it will stand out! And it is an undisputed fact that we are all different from one another due to our unique mixes of traits, endeavors and emotional propensities.*

*We have come to commoditize absolutely everything. And most of all, ourselves. Evolution has reached the level when extreme segmentation and differentiation becomes mass the second day. We live days when we all want to feel as if we are special, yet discover every day that we might just as well be 'one of the many'. The result? We are all the same because of the things we want to be different through. "I am not like the others" is the first thing that any herd-minded person would say.*

*The present research was built on the premise that freewill seemed to have become optional to many of us. The concern addressed along the paper, the pleading it relies on and the final empirical evidence started from the humanity within us, the concept of potentiality and what makes a high potential individual. As assumed beforehand and proven through theories worldwide presented along the research, this shadowed corner is what allows freewill to lose its compulsoriness and makes it look as if dispensable.*

*As nature tends to penalize those who try to escape it, and it does so through extinction, alienation, unexpected self-defending mechanisms or deviations, I considered important to look deep into the reasons why people end up leaving themselves afloat, disregarding their strengths, lean into comforting mediocrity (if not misery) or exonerating themselves from the consequences of their actions.*

*My paper addresses my own research on the professional environment in Romania and experiential conclusions within a frame of international researches and theories on the subject, leaving it all open to circulation and debate.*

**KEYWORDS:** *High potential, talent, talent management, employer branding, humanity, growth mindsets, learning organisations, empowerment, psychological contracts, compensative feedback, Hogan assessment, Hudson high potential evaluation, Gartner HIPO model, HIPO, CEB model.*

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Should people remain as genuine as when they are children, they might become more themselves more often, because what makes one authentic is the willingness to do what one believes to be made of, the drive to follow one's curiosity and the lack of any kind of censorship. And who does that better than a child?

The world has reached dangerous levels of harassment which we can encounter only by looking out the window: defiant politics, mad advertising, bad movies, services we buy even we don't need them, violent driving, medicines we take based on bias prescriptions rather than science, anger, stress or managerial pressure in our professional lives. The extremity of this harassment is what has become now a paralyzing phenomenon which disables any form of talent and native potential: poverty.

As nature tends to penalize those who try to escape it, and it does so through extinction, alienation, unexpected self-defending mechanisms or deviations, I considered important to look deep into the reasons why people end up leaving themselves afloat, disregarding their strengths, lean into comforting mediocrity (if not misery) or exonerating themselves from the consequences of their actions.

My paper addresses my own research on the professional environment in Romania and experimental conclusions within a frame of international researches and theories on the subject, leaving it all open to circulation and debate.

## **2. STUDY ON THE ROMANIAN MARKET.**

I started my study building on the premise that there is a great deal of unused talent and potential in Romanian organization, due to both personal lack of wit or willingness of our employees to become better and develop themselves and also to corporate cultures which dismiss disruption, opinionated people standing for a cause that challenge their status quo.

Based on this assumption, I addressed the most important stakeholders that could have had a relevant input on this topic:

- **HR managers**, People Development Managers or CEOs - as holders of the professional tools to attract, develop and maintain talents
- **Employees** with personal, professional and social competences associated to HIPOs - as they would have an inside view on how context allows them to be who they want to become
- **Freelancers** with personal, professional and social competences associated to HIPOs - for a perspective on how potential can be discovered on one's own
- **Recruitment agencies** and headhunters - as having the knowhow of how the market moves and develops on both the employees' and the employer's sides

The fields of activity covered 31 different areas: Education, Telecommunications, IT, Advertising, Retail, Accounting services, Legal services, Production & Manufacturing, HR, PR services, Innovation & Design Thinking, Creative Industries, Insurance, Banking, Stock Exchange, Training services, NGOs, Courier services, Cosmetics & Pharmaceuticals, FMCG, Market studies and research, Public sector, Industrial Electronics,

Cinematography, Project Management and Consultancy, Financial Services, Clothing, Government institutions, Press, radio and television.

The sizes of the companies whose people I interviewed cover from sole owners, small and medium sized with 5-100 employees to large firms of over 200 people and multinationals exceeding 17.000 people.

With regards to the types of companies entering the survey, they range from entrepreneurial, representatives of European firms or state owned, to large international conglomerates covering all continents.

In terms of education, all interviewed persons graduated at least a Bachelor' degree program, the majority of them going further with Masters of Science, MBA Programs and ever PhD studies.

The number of surveys studied were split between 54% women and 46% men with a total of 83 surveys.

I have come to understand, even from the first question addressed, that there is not a definition to match perfectly any of the ones given in the next chapter of the paper, but all of the answers, put together, comprise in one. Of course, we know that there is not a clear 'definition' on what a HIPO is, there are several methods to spot them (and they are very different from one another), so the subjectivity on the matter is rather high, still. Most of the answers gravitated around effectiveness, leadership, motivation, exceeding job description and going the extra mile, professional expertise. There was one short definition which stood out "highest paid person opinion". Should 'opinion' include vision, courage, empathy and personal mastery, regardless of the financials behind, I would say it is a good matching with reality.

As far as freelancers are concerned, surprisingly (or not) they scored very good at the definition given by CEB (ability, aspiration and engagement) as they were the closest to it. What stood out here was the definition of "being unique at exquisite standards".

Headhunters gave one description that stood out and described potential symbolically and in a nutshell: "the intuition of what a person could become when growing up".

While 92% of employees consider themselves as HIPOs according to their own understanding, 90% of freelancers think the same about themselves.

Almost all employees consider themselves respected and appreciated in their working environment, yet there was a visible trend of people saying that their human potential falls a lot behind their potential and also that current performance is far more important than potential. A very practical perspective was given by one respondent: "Professionaly, their opinion is from *I do not know what this person does on a daily job* to *This project cannot start without this person*. In the end, I guess I am just another useful resource to achieve objectives." Other answers came as a surprise, I would say, and stated that being women made them feel inferior and even "As a woman in a job area full of men, there are situation when supplementary proof of knowledge needs to be provided". Gender inequality is a subject I will not accommodate here, though.

When asked about how they felt when they first came into the current company, the answers varied a lot, from being extremely valued and appreciated to being marginalized

for having opinions different than those of others. I would argue here that, apart from the person coming in the new team, it is the organizational culture that makes one feel welcome or not. This is also valid for how the people felt after spending time in the companies, up to the point where personal drive, style, business acumen, wit or will start making a difference. Some of the answers related to ‘‘I am missing something’’ or ‘‘I would like to be part of an organizational culture that values more people’’.

With only very few exceptions, almost 88% respondents felt as not being disadvantaged when entering their company and saw in their peers and superiors superior trust, moreover ‘‘as the evaluation criteria are only performance based, seniority within the company does not play a big role’’. Also, one of the respondents gave a demotivating description of her working environment, ‘‘I felt attacked and assaulted by my peers. In the last months I felt alone, underrated and mistrusted’’. Other respondent felt as if people being in the company for longer periods of time were often ‘‘patronizing’’ to newcomers. As far as freelancers are concerned, they usually felt trusted by their clients.

There were just few exceptions with regards to investments in themselves; other than that, everybody (freelancers and employees) said that it’s common practice for them to do that constantly and as much as possible. As far as employers are concerned, it seems that the appreciation for their employees’ investments in themselves fell in 20% of the cases even to the extreme of ‘‘different opinions are discouraged’’. The same employees not feeling appreciated within the company and taking things on their own, said that the company they work for do not invest in them whatsoever. For the rest of the people, out of the total investments made, all of them consider that they are made to meet, if not completely, then for sure with priority, company’s needs. This is to be correlated later on with the fact that companies invest to firstly meet their interests (87%), although not so much in the benefits of their employees.

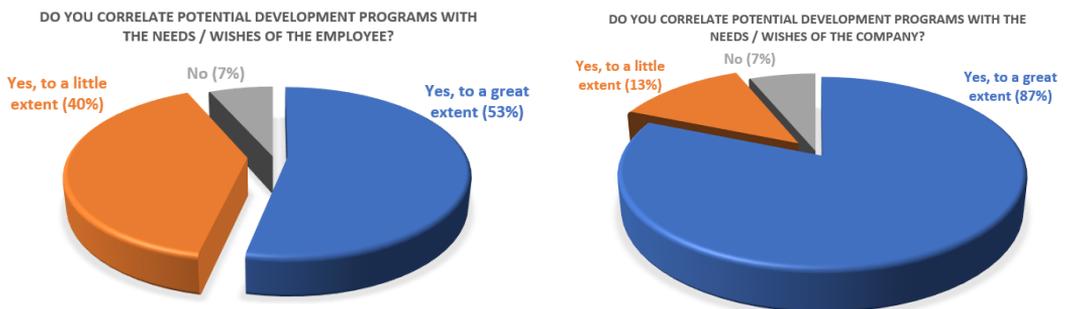


Figure 1.

Although almost all of the respondents know they add value to the teams and companies and some of them know in every little detail how everything they do impacts the others (except one notable exception who said that the contribution was surely there because it was validated by the ‘‘feedback received from my customers’’ - not from the team members or superiors), the majority is reversed in terms of the financial impact they have and the extent of their contribution. Some of them never even thought of that and actually believe that what they do has zero impact. Things are also not very clear on the employer’s side, as most of them never isolated this impact. Nevertheless, in medium

companies or within communication departments the impact is often tremendous, especially when the specificity of the industry requires top talents. As far as other industries are concerned, things look differently in terms of adding value, as ‘‘from one moment onwards the value of the brand well taking care off is higher than the financial value of the company’’.

For freelancers things are different and cover ranges from ‘‘I add value to the extent I am allowed by my client; if they let me, I bring them my value, if not, I bring them theirs’’ to the extent of 100% for specific projects that are completely developed by them and have a significant, fast and measurable financial impact (innovation).

Headhunters’ approach is not by far different, as they also consider HIPOs extremely valuable and ‘‘driving the company forward in the right direction’’, but with no real possibility of isolating their true specific impact in the financials.

Based on the feedbacks of the freelancers, it appeared that having had a HIPO status inside the company might be of help after starting working on your own, for instance because it builds your confidence and you start with another vibe. Also in domains where this kind of reference is relevant and might be a recommendation is its own, it certainly matters. But it is dependent on the industry, basically, and of course, on the individuals.

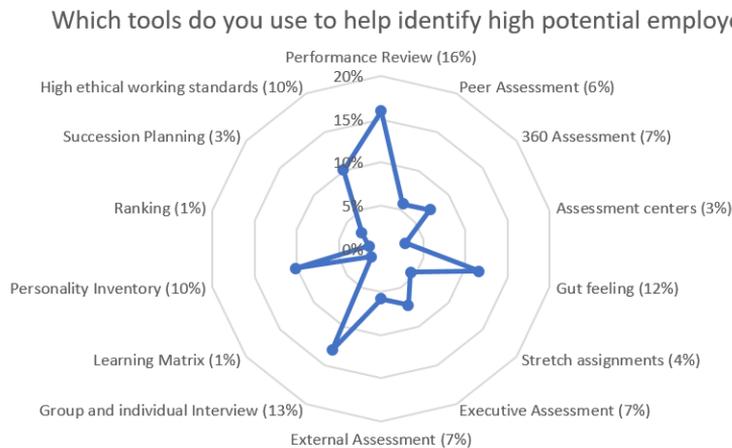


Figure 2.

Contrary to some people’s expectations (and for sure the researchers’ as well) ‘gut feeling’ ranked third in the reasons for HR or CEOs to choose their HIPOs. They think they ‘feel’ if one should have what it takes to be considered high potential.

Now that we know what research tell us, we might challenge the fact that ‘‘performance review’’ ranked first (when we know already that high performers are not necessarily high potentials), just as much as we can challenge the small importance that is given to ‘‘learning matrix’’ (for the necessary LQ), ‘‘stretch assignments’’ (for self-growth) or ‘‘peer assessment’’ (for the ability to lead and engage team members). It brings us a bit of comfort, though, that ‘‘personality inventory’’ is largely used to allow the understanding of personal traits.

When coming into companies, HIPOs are thought to embark with enthusiasm, great knowledge, impressive theoretical knowledge, need to prove results, high engagement. As to what he takes with them when they leave, most of responses gravitated towards more practical skills, more realism and pragmatism up to the point of having “a different opinion about how much you can achieve in one day if you get organized and communicate”.

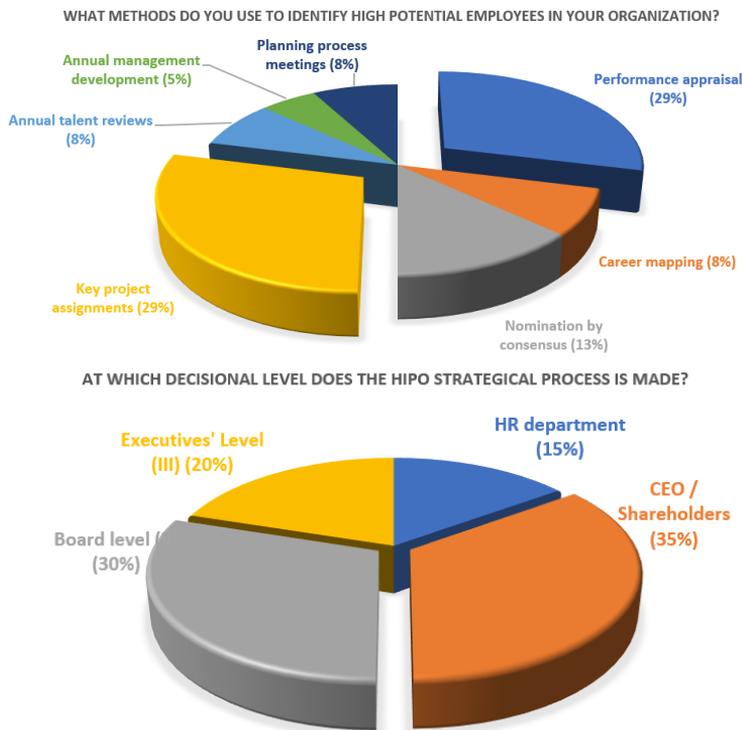


Figure 3.

“Performance appraisal”, unfortunately, yet expected, is top method used to identify HIPOs, along with individual targets disguised in “Key project assignments”. We have seen by now that in order for organizations or teams to grow, group KPIs are mandatory, yet they don’t seem to be present. The internal and external recruiting is made almost ongoing through classical methods of recruiting and also recommendations. Headhunters recruit on both levels: internally, where they look for initiatives, personality tests, the discretionary effort and attitude and externally, where motivation, achievement orientation, aspirations and “the way he/she speaks of past experiences” are the things the look for. The appointment of HIPOs is made on a pretty high level of “Nomination by consensus”, allowing public acknowledgement of one as reputed and appreciated talent, but also allowing subjectivity and politics. This is mostly linked to the stakeholders who actually appear to decide on who is to be HIPO, and those who are the highest level in the companies. “Annual talent reviews” should rank higher than they do, if we were to listen to research.

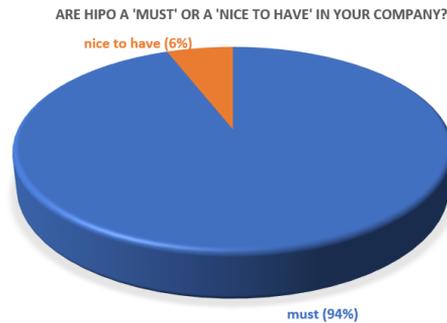
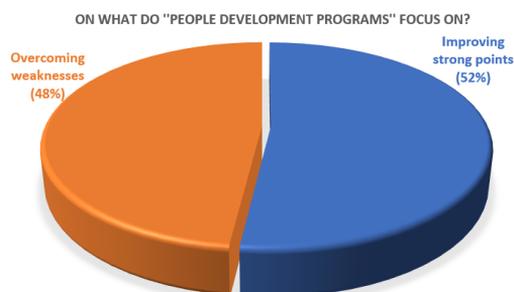


Figure 4.

The confirmation that high potentials are considered as strategic business pillars in the company (due to the attention they have from highest decisional levels) is endorsed also by the propensity to rather invest resources to as to serve the company, rather than that of the employee / HIPO.

There were very few disruptive answers related to HIPOs in general. From “They offer the possibility of courses and seminars but they do not offer the time for it”, or “There is no HR arrangement of development” to “For my company high potential doesn’t mean anything”, adding afterwards that no significant people development programs were made in their organizations, nor they had any priority due to “seriously understaffing”. So the personal development was a personal choice to which these respondents answered positively. The same companies stated that there is “a big difference between what is preached and what actually is. Only a handful of people are taken into account when it comes to changes or direction of development” and “My company (...) does not necessarily make sure that potential is being followed and enforced by the appropriate training”. Reluctance to change was another feature to be found in their organizations, where the feeling of being “a small wheel in the bigger mechanism” was presented as highly strong.



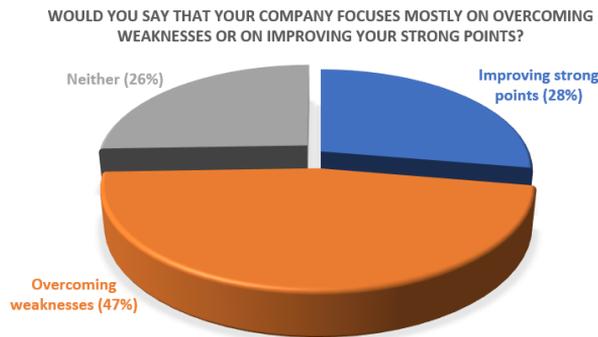


Figure 5.

Coming back to the companies with policies on HIPOs, as strategic and important HIPOs might be in all they are acknowledged to have as strong assets (leaning agility, ability to attain performance through others, adaptability, engagement, going the extra mile), they are also considered by the exact same executives as “no supermen; they need not to succeed everywhere, under any circumstances, without any flaws”. Hence, be invested with programs that rather overcome their weaknesses than strengthen their strong points.

Employees have a whole different perspective on this, as 26% of them said that there either aren’t development programs, or they are subject to personal choice and depend on them alone, while only 28% consider that strong points are the main focus! The answers even go to the extent of “they struggle to overcome my weakness but so far it hasn’t been very efficient”. One respondent said that, although having an official HIPO statute for five years, no investment were made in her professional skills, nor did she felt respected within the company.

Headhunters allow the idea that HIPOs can have seasonality in their performance, to the limit of underperformance, when “the HIPO is no longer on the same page with the rest”.

The percentage on this level (47%) is staggering, and this coming from companies which declared as very interested in having HIPOs in their companies (95%), when we know that being ‘good at all levels’ and focusing on improving strong points only lead to mediocrity, at best. And high potential has basically nothing to do with mediocrity.

When questioned about self awareness of people for their potential in general, headhunters have divergent opinions: some believe that “people are usually aware of their potential”, some that “I am not sure self awareness is something built within every individual, but rather a skill to be developed in time, with the support of some mentor as well.” They all come to agree, though, that “looking for a job does not necessarily mean improving what one is good at”, as people have various reasons for doing what they do just as they “may have relevant careers in a domain different than the one they are good at”. The point: it seems that “the more mature they become they tend to focus more on passion than social status or money”. This maturity is closely linked to the fact that “the more mature a manager is, he will want people whom he can help become better. For the rest of them, fear and lack of self esteem is dominating their decisions, thuy they tend to be rather transactional’. This is also related to the fact that ‘motivating good people (...) is an art that has to be mastered’.

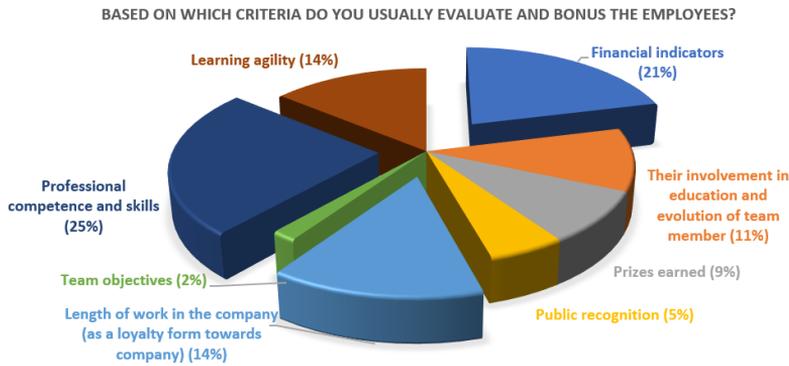


Figure 6.

Having the ‘Length of work in the company’ as an indicator for evaluating HIPOs is dangerous if it is not backed up by the segmentation between those engaged and those not willing to make a discretionary effort. What might seem as loyalty is very different from engagement.

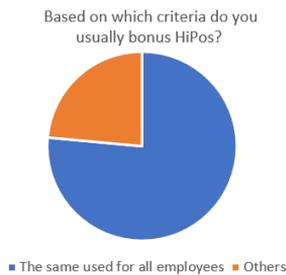


Figure 7.

Financial indicators and professional competence and skills have the saying in the evaluation and bonus of employees, be it HIPO or not, as they do not seem to be treated differently when given bonuses. And this has proven to be theoretically correct as we have already seen that HIPOs present no elasticity in terms of financial means when acting on their calling.

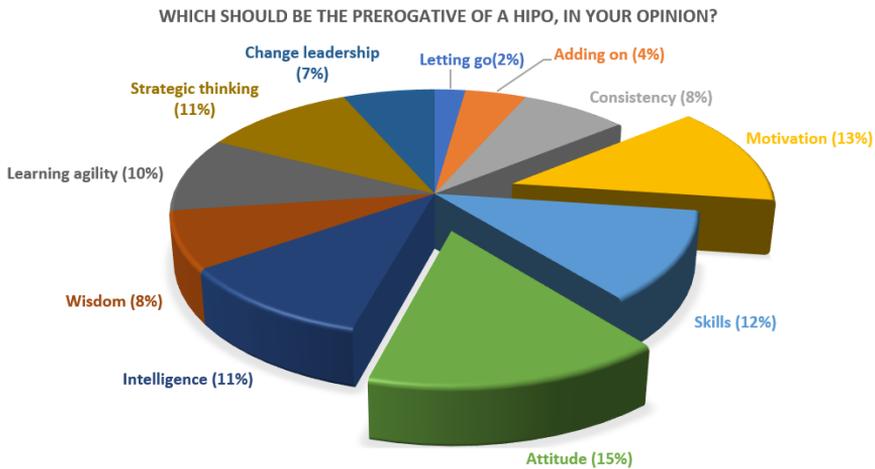


Figure 8.

“Attitude” ranked first in terms of what HR and managers think that define a HIPO. The next in line were “Motivation”, “Intelligence” and “Strategic thinking”, which is fair to have their place in the first part of the hierarchy. “Adding on”, on the other hand, appeared to have a dramatically low significance, although we know empathy is paramount in one’s personal growth and alignment. Empathy means “putting yourself in other’s people shoes” for understanding, support and giving results, but never remaining there! It seems that not many managerial people see it like this. Consistency also ranked too low than it might have been expected, as we know that there is not such thing as “occasional HIPO”.

60% of HR managers believe that appointing a HIPO as such might influence their motivation and 27% believe that at the beginning it will for sure boost the motivation, but up to a point of a plateau, with the comment that “a person should be free from categories, which is the only key to maximizing one’s potential”. Contrary to this reality, researchers specifically recommend the official appointing of HIPOs, as motivation shouldn’t change in them, if HIPO in the full sense of the word. This was a fact acknowledged by only 13% of the respondents.

As it turned out, the nominating of someone as HIPO came with lack of confidence, uncertainty or job insecurity for the ones appointed, for 69% of the companies. Moreover, one of the companies specifically said that the fear of this nomination was seen in that company as “failure to prove real potential”. On the other hand, “a professional HIPO takes the opportunity, even if it could be difficult for them at the beginning”, as one company stated.

78% of HR managers claimed they, themselves, were officially appointed as HIPOs, while only 38% of the employees interviewed said they were. The same reluctance that the managers exposed when asked whether HIPOs should be publicly recognized, was to be found here. A few of the ones appointed also mentioned that they do not see themselves as such. As one of the CEOs answered: “you should be also in the position and in the right time to show your best”.

In terms of strengths and weaknesses, 19% of employees consider that their employer doesn't know them, whilst 94% of the executives are very sure they do, at least to some extent.

As far as what employees interviewed consider as weaknesses, what the study revealed was a bit curious, yet perhaps justifiable in today's business world: being kind, "not severe", helping others too much or caring too much seem to be dragging them down. Of course, helping others to the level that distracts themselves from their purpose might be detrimental, but not damaging in itself! Speed, doing things in a rush, not taking the time with non-performers and not paying attention to details or low tolerance to stress and short deadlines have turned out to be the next in line for most, just like 'time management' (which now we know it's all about prioritizing) followed. After these three vectors, dispersed weaknesses of many kinds incurred: from the perseverance of "digging deep in order to achieve a bulletproof result", to "a weak leader attitude", "don't like working on my own, I need team work to keep my enthusiasm up", "diplomacy" or "not enough self-promotion".

What freelancers have to say about their weaknesses is not very different, apart from the fact that "fickleness" has been pointed out as an extra drag.

When talking about strong points, the vectors moved towards "delivering good and on time", "result oriented", "learning fast", "good at what I do", "visionary" or "adaptable" and fast learner". What is still surprisingly present is the "perfectionism" as strength, especially if we talk about HIPOs, in whose cases excellence comes even from allowing failure. This is an idea reinforced also by headhunters, saying that a very critical approach can only make one HIPO decline. What came out very rarely (and most of the interviewed people manage teams!) was "the ability to grow people" or "emotional intelligence". It comes out as being obvious the focus on skills, rather than on potentiality (engagement, leadership, personal mastery, team learning, motivating others). A very interesting answer as given on strengths: "I can make tasks seem – and be – simple and clear". Based on researches of HIPOs, this could be linked to the equations of intelligences (see III.I.C).

The extra element given by freelancers (in all other aspects, being on the same page with employees) is a new perspective on perfectionism: "I never stay in certainty. I push the limits beyond delivering excellence to an extent which for sure brings my being wrong". I would relate this mindset to the dark side of the personal mastery Peter Senge spoke of<sup>1</sup>: have the drive and willingness to expand towards all that seems reachable, yet not managing to not torment over the forced imperfectness.

Also related to this, there was a corporate answer which stated "I always felt like I have the impostor syndrome, meaning I am never prepared enough and I always have to go back to school/ training and learn more and absorb so I can better face the challenges of every day professional life". This sounds like a combination of perfectionism and personal mastery.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, see Bibliography

Weaknesses and strengths above, confronted with the specialists' findings and the models presented before lack, perhaps, the most important element: aspiration. Dreaming big. None of the respondents gave it.

Headhunters and recruitment agencies almost unanimously agreed that what make HIPOs grow are support, constant appreciation and autonomy.

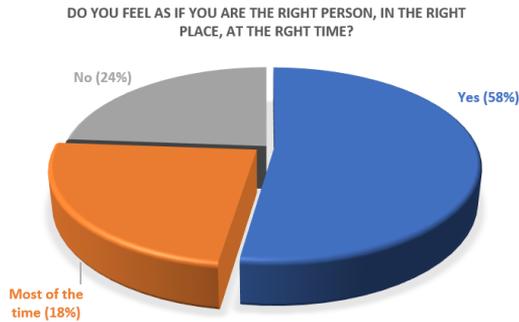


Figure 9.

When asked whether they feel about themselves to be the right person, in the right place, at the right time, the answers were 76% on the positive side, while as for the freelancers the percentage was higher (86%).

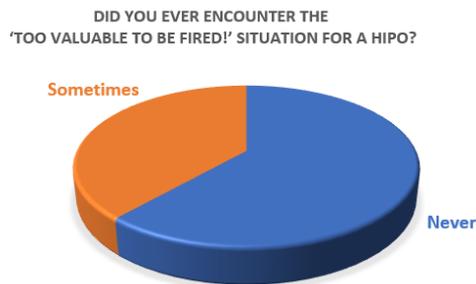


Figure 10.

Managers of all industries accept, in majority, that not even HIPOs are irreplaceable, but rather try to keep under control (through 'stay interviews') any potential unexpected threats of them living by will.



Figure 11.

I mentioned earlier in the paper about the huge mentality gap between what HR managers thought of their people as being interested to be asked and what the employees would like to be asked for in reality. Whilst the first ones were interested in how people could improve in any way related to the company or for the benefit of the company, the employees were rather looking for meaning and personal growth. There was one question to be understood as both: "What is going on?", which I would say is a good idea. Once addressed, you leave it to the employee to answer what he feels like.

There was an answer in the headhunter's survey that tackled reality ("Employees appreciate being addressed issues that matter to them").

When asked about the difference in turnover between HIPOs and the other employees, there were again companies from the creative industries that considered this turnover higher, the others saw it as more or less similar.

What seize to make a HIPO, a HIPO, is either being promoted / switched to other roles, or leaving the companies in equal proportions.

In terms of how much time do HIPOs usually stay in the companies, with no exception all the creative industries have the smallest retention span: from a couple of months to maximum 3-4 years. The rest of the companies said they usually manage to keep the talents in their company for as long as both interests are met, except for extremes of financial requests that can't be met or selling of the company. These periods could exceed even 16 years in some fields of activity.

Their 'usage' in the workplace comes down to "the right people in the right place", allowing HIPOs the liberty to take decisions and also giving them higher responsibilities and challenges according to their valued or estimated potential.

With regards to HIPOs leaving the company, the range varies from significant huge human and financial impact to none, especially in companies more practical and procedural or where there is always a buffer. In others it can go up to the level of personal relationships in which "the emptiness that is left after a nice man's leaving hurts for a while" or "from human point of view it is considered a loss but rarely this will be admitted by companies managers or HR or top management".

Headhunters believe almost the same, with the observation that it has been indicated that they might also come for the company and/or the future to be manager, and leave because of him as well, signaling the importance of the "emotional contract" that appears between the two (see again Psychological contracts section, for details).

DO YOU ALLOW TIME AND OTHER RESOURCES FOR A LOW POTENTIAL TO DEVELOP SKILLS THAT MIGHT IMPROVE THEIR AVAILABILITY AND WILLINGNESS FOR PERSONAL GROWTH?

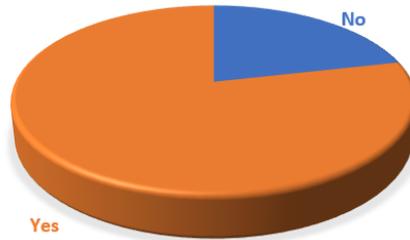


Figure 12.

A HIPO is or can become an officially assigned HIPO if he sees himself as such, therefore if he makes no effort towards his talents, he might not get the support of the company which, otherwise, would definitely invest in his future. Should the investment be in the interest of the company or of the person behind the HIPO, is another thing, as the perception among the employees is that the investments in them are made mostly for the benefit of the company.

This shouldn't come as a surprise, as companies' reason to exist is profit, but if we take the idea to a deeper level of thought, an investment in what might make a HIPO better, humanly speaking, it might just as well improve the results of the company, perhaps even more, than a usual workshop.

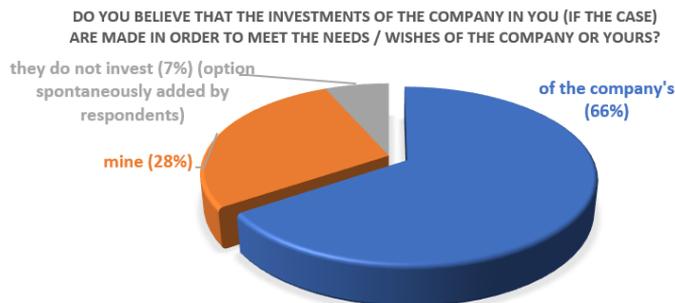


Figure 13.

When asked about investments they feel the company makes for them, perhaps the most worrying thing incurred during the research (as a spontaneous answer) was that their employer does not invest in them at all.

Regarding the perception on being challenged or not by the context they work in, most of the employees answered 'yes', even if the degrees within this 'yes' differ. "The investments are made to serve company's purposes' (...) otherwise why would they care?" was another answer to clarify the context.

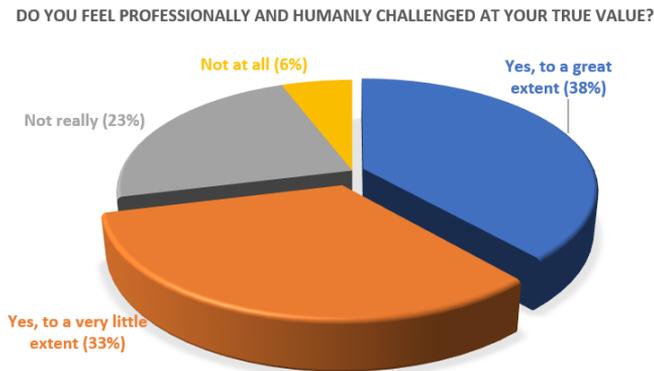


Figure 14.

What we can take from this split of opinions regarding personal challenge, is that, at least theoretically, 62% wasted talent and potential out there. This is a dramatic figure to look at especially when you see statements like “there would be potential for a lot more but it is hampered”, which can come from several causes: people unhappy where they are due to lack of authority they think they deserve, managers dismissing their team’s opinions or unable to relate to them, misalignment of personal belief to company’s values, work disengagement due to poor communication. There might be reasons coming from both parts, as one can not just expect to be discovered, just as much as there are toxic environment killing any will to work there. This figure should be seen also in the context of the 28 very different industries it reaches.

Making a link between the 38% that feel challenged and engaged to the 76% of employees that feel as if they are the right person, in the right place at the right moment, I can only conclude that these persons expect more from their **current** employer and might be among the very special human resources that are both engaged and willing to stay (see again III.1.A for details).

In terms of challenges, freelancers answered in a proportion of 60% to 40%, thus most of them considering to be happy with the way things worked out for them on their own. Yet, clients of freelancers might be, to a great extent, the same companies that gave the terrifying dissatisfaction amongst employees, therefore justifying their 40% of unused potentiality they know they have.

What appeared from the study was that clients rather do not appreciate freelancers’ human potential, they usually appreciate their skills, as “what we often miss in the collaboration with our clients is appreciation”. The collaboration, therefore, remains mostly transactional for many. Depending on the person, there are also cases of clients who “use me for more than what they ‘buy’, so I tend to become an external member of their leadership team”, as one freelancer answered. It is definitely in the personal charm and drive as well! Other than that, freelancers usually feel appreciated by their clients for that which they deliver.

When coming in contact with people of the same expertise as theirs, almost all freelancers answered that they interact satisfactorily with them and consider “communication to be easier” and “the appreciation on what I can deliver’ better”. There is also a subtle

perception of employees being more limited than they are, hence less likely to have their liberty to go outside the comfort zone.

As a rather transactional activity and in a different world than that of the corporate wage schemes, freelancing comes with “every day is a constant negotiation” issue for some of them (25%). For the undisputed majority, it is easier to negotiate fees as freelancers, but for very different reasons, the extremes being “I do not have to compete with any internal salary grids” and the fact the employer usually has the upper hand, to the contrary idea that “all of them have a budget, it only depends on you to show how much you want it”.

On the level of public recognition, 73% of the companies believe that HIPOs should officially be assigned as such (with the comment of a respondent that “you should inform them that they are doing good, but the fight is not over”), while the rest don’t think it is recommendable at the beginning, at least, or at all, because it might be “demeaning of the work of non HIPOs”. When appointed, HR managers should keep in mind that “What is most important is also to actually do something about it. Because most of the time what happens is that they are included in one-two trainings and that is it”.

After having been assigned as such, for those who were, 82% felt that the company invested them with much more trust than before, whereas the others didn’t up to the extent that “I felt that I had to prove myself; the HIPO status was more obvious between my colleagues than to my superiors, whom I had to prove that I am worthy of it”.

For those who were on the positive side, the trust investment developed in 81% of the cases a higher motivation, although we have specifically seen from researchers that motivation has no elasticity towards appointing a HIPO. It might be that in these cases the motivation within needed a push and it came along with the appointing. The arguments given were about receiving confirmations and thriving for new challenges with a whole new different drive. Almost with no exceptions, the same respondents confirmed that their employer branding went up, but not really for the right reasons. Of course, that part of the employer branding is time spent within the company, but there can be cases (exposed previously, in the paper) when people stay in the company out of no other choice, because they prefer not to leave safeness and so on. From this perspective, the answers were not really accurate in terminology, but the general emotional vibe was rather positive. The ones that said that HIPO assignment impacted not their motivation, also said now that “loyalty is decided by company values, not necessarily by status investments”.

Regarding freelancers, HIPO acknowledgements within their companies was not a plus in further finding new clients, once they began to work on their own.

Whenever misalignments appeared between official HIPOs and their work, most (75%) of the companies said that any disparity should be eliminated through “adjustments on duties and responsibilities ” (be it inflicted or within a natural process of self-adjustment), but I have also noticed extremes: the negative one, very practical and extremely competitive of “we counterbalance by always having prepared people in the pipeline to take their place” (the same that declared that in their development policies the focus is on overcoming weaknesses), while the other sees the solution in ‘coaching’ (the same one that in terms of people development thought that “people elect the development programs that they consider necessary”). We can only believe that, if coaching is done correctly, everyone will know how to define what is ‘necessary’ for them.

Headhunters, unfortunately, also rely on overcoming weaknesses, although there is a slight refocusing on the latter, but ‘rather as an exception’.

Freelancers see the future in the same optimistic and daring perspectives, with the ambition to invest in them as much as possible and take their personal mission (for those that claimed having one) to its end. There was a daring answer claiming a goal of ‘changing the market towards quality and virtuosity’ and another one, exceptional from my point of view, which promises to ‘keep working to beat the unacceptable degree played by luck in my field’.

Coming back to my pre-assumption that there is a great deal of unused potential in the lucrative fields, the study confirms it, and unfortunately it does so on a level much higher than I expected. In the same time it offers practical answers about where to find the possible solutions. By reverse engineering people’s answers, we can spot the turning points from where the ‘wrong’ can become ‘right’.

There are people and people, and HIPOs could be ‘those who either stand out on their own or those who need just a tiny push to achieve greater things, if opportunity is provided’, as one respondent answered. They might also add value by ‘asking questions which might help the team progress towards reaching a correct conclusion’, as another one answered.

Both managers and employees, especially the ones of the high level that were involved in this study and who have something to say with regards to being or working with HIPOs should be the first to understand, engage, endorse and own this way of thinking.

I found the questionnaires’ feedbacks to be priceless and I am honored to have been dealing with each and every one of the respondents. Having come in contact to all of their answers and ways of thinking can only make me conclude that there is an informal and transcendental link that connects their lines of thinking, able to co-create the environment we all wish for intuitively, regardless on whether we are competitive, constructive, passive aggressive, unbalanced, self-reliant or on the contrary, need constant confirmations and the others to motivate us.

I could call this invisible link ‘the universal need of one to *happen*’.

We have seen by now that needs are universally shared by people of all ethnicities, gender, social status or beliefs. All the ideas expressed in the survey are somehow interwoven to the point when they reach practicalities, execution and the ‘how to’s. In concept, all respondents basically start from the same standpoint and proved to have developed differently throughout time due to circumstances, environments, teams, priorities or mental maps they ended up in and which they all helped built, on different levels and to different degrees. But people on both sides of the table know. They only need to be remembered!

## **2. WHAT IS POTENTIAL? A SHORT PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE THROUGHOUT HISTORY**

We live periods of major turbulences and paradigm shifting which disconnect us from who we are and also lead us into emotional and mental disruption, miss understanding, alienation from our core values or beliefs and in the end, suffering. Once here, we usually condemn ourselves to further repeating failure and leave no room for introspection. We let ourselves be dragged into long office hours, unrealistic tasks and targets, open space offices where even our own thoughts are excruciatingly hard to catch, politically correct answers in which we, ourselves, don't believe, unsuited managers or brainstorming on topics we never cared for, nor liked. We have been brainwashed to replace the unlikeable word 'problem' with 'opportunity to find solutions' and we consider as much as almost brainless a person incapable of 'multitasking'. We settle.

On the romantic level, things have changed dramatically in the last decades, up to the level where the notion of family has been severely diluted, where we officially shifted the meaning of monogamy from being with one person for a lifetime to being with one person at a time, and where what previously a whole village could provide we want now in one partner: belonging, identity, continuity but also transcendence, mystery and awe. Comfort, along with edge. Novelty along with familiarity. Predictability along with surprise. And we believe that this is a given, and toys and lingerie are going to save the day 1.

Do we allow ourselves to be held back because we might not feel worthy of being seen? Why do we choose instant wins and enjoying ourselves over self-actualization? The way people behave depends heavily on how they define themselves.

Mass. Mass market, mass production, weapons of mass destruction, mass media, mass influence, mass clients, mass assistance, mass consumption, mass emailing. Taking masses as a whole and jut analyzing big data makes a mess out of the parts.

This is the context of a world we all share today. What I consider important to challenge with this paper is strongly linked with it and also with the forced optimism of those guiding themselves by shallow personal development books, while dealing with heavy emotional distress and personal in-depth drawbacks. Helping identify the fictive limits of our universe is a process that can unleash human potential and reveal talents that have long been hidden and even forgotten.

Some of the people come to realize, later in life, that they have delegated their identities to somebody else, to things, emotions and conjunctures that were not theirs to handle, to places that should not have accommodated them and most dangerous of all, to an inauthentic belief. This process can last a lifetime and usually comes in the form of apathy, dullness, atony and huge inertia. What makes one reach true maturity are all that makes one grow: adverse relations, conflictual contexts, disruption from the status quo, novelty. In the absence of them all, mental laziness and inactivation of potential take the lead over one's life.

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<sup>1</sup> Esther Perel

Aristotle identified a dichotomy between what he calls the ‘potential infinite’ and the ‘actual infinite’. The concept of potentiality refers to any "possibility" available for a thing. It is one thing to can do something, and completely different to actually do it. That is the gap between owning something and putting to good use what one owns.

We know all we need to know, we have all the knowledge we need having. What we need is to remember it and we could do that in the right contexts and along with the right people.

The tendency to get lost in inactivated potentiality is extremely high, especially in today’s life full of temptations along our way to anywhere. This is why a new need was born, the need for a method, the need to be led and be shown the way, hence the ‘how to’-books filling the modern libraries: ‘how to raise money in 5 steps’, ‘how to be influential’, ‘how to lose weight in 10 days’. We want methods and shortcuts as very few have the time to genuinely and sustainably learn through experiences and self-actualizing their potential.

The ways in which potentiality becomes actual, real, authentic are willingness and motivation and they are based on work and exercised attention.

‘I have the potential to do what you do. But do I want to? And do I do it?’ These two are the questions that set potential free. Or not. Actualizing potential is a mark of the free man, is an act of freedom. People lacking motivation are the ones that got enslaved by a context, stuck in a paradigm that blocks their growth and self-fulfilling.

Whenever one is in look for meaning, for motivation and drive, then he is out of his freedom. A free and fulfilled man not only that he is not looking for a purpose, but on the contrary, he usually motivates the others.

Apart from seizing potential and making it fact, a new idea incurs: potential nurtures potential.

Aristotle’s synthetizing thought on potential and potentiality was that talent is the ability to make a lot out of a little.

Philosophers in medieval times and then, following our recent past and furthermore, in present times, have come to argue that potential should be looked at from two perspectives: that of an individual and that of a group. As ‘man is an animal that makes bargains’<sup>1</sup>, we must also consider potential as a commodity that people, if aware of it, trade in a way that benefits both parties. With the freedom provided by an equitable society which allows buying and selling of goods, individuals can enjoy their ‘natural liberty’.

How is talent or human potential different from skills? Talent is a feature that one has, dying to express itself and is the weakest obedient of regulations, corporate cultures, societal rules, guidelines. It needs to make itself noticeable, and not just for the reason of being seen, but because of its nature of holding the too big of a force not to be shared with the universe. A skill, on the other hand, is a set of tactical physical or mental belongings that are being taught. Potential or talent can never be taught, but perfected, even though through hard work one ‘un-talented’ could become a professional.

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Smith

It was established that society is actually a contract and that people, as they can not meet all their material, scientific, artistic and moral needs through their own efforts, they agree to help each other so as to best meet their mutual needs. In terms of motivators, Jeremy Bentham was convinced that there are two main forces to drive us: avoiding pain and seeking pleasure. Now, what happens with a disruptive talent in a sea of conforming joy which, because of being the majority, is given absolute priority in terms of fulfilment? How can this talent express itself, survive, make itself known and if not to become a change agent, then at least to remain a stand alone? ‘No man is an island’<sup>1</sup> just as much as ‘homo homini lupus’ (a man is a wolf to another man). As long as that talent can adjust to the opposing environment and become part of it, it could manage to exist; otherwise it should detach from the group and connect to other potentials able to sustain its further growth.

We grow through the context we put ourselves into and if we have the intuition that our world is expandable, then we never cease in exploring it. Just as Arthur Schopenhauer puts it, ‘every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world’<sup>2</sup>.

At some point one might find himself ‘alone, against the universe’, and usually, when that happens, he is either delusional or brilliantly talented. Regardless of how strong one’s drive can be, being rejected from everybody and challenged or even blocked, puts him in a universe of absurdity from where he believes that nothing he does will ever make a difference. The sense of things being pointless due to lack of allies could paralyze any ordinary man, but surely actualize a visionary talent.

Acting according to your beliefs could make a difference, regardless of how thin hopes there may be.

Foucault locates ‘man’ at the beginning of the 19th century and sees it as being rather paradoxical: ‘we see ourselves both as objects in the world (...) and as subject who experience and study the world – strange creatures that look in two directions at once’.

Coming back to the question ‘do people deserve only what they can get?’ makes me wonder whether potential can be identified by an outsider or it should rather be made seen by its holder. One should not expect to be discovered, as having a talent comes with the responsibility of publicly owning it. I will close this philosophical part with the words of Marcus Aurelius which actually comprise the multitude of thoughts that history came up with: ‘Dig within yourself – it is there where the source of good lies, always ready to erupt if you keep on digging’<sup>3</sup>.

### **3. WHAT MAKES US HUMAN?**

What makes a human, human, is the practice of virtue, according to philosophy.

What makes a human, human, is the ability to collaborate on a large scale and to manifest reciprocal altruism, says Sapiens, Yuval Noval Harari’s book, which also explains by this how is it that, in spite of any foreseeable expectations, the Homo Sapiens would have had

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<sup>1</sup> John Donne

<sup>2</sup> [www.platon.stanford.edu](http://www.platon.stanford.edu)

<sup>3</sup> Marcus Aurelius (see bibliography)

no chance to dominate the world as they do now (from 3.000 individuals they reached 7 billion in 70.000 years).

What makes a human, human, is the sense of trust, as neuroeconomist Paul Zak claims, due to the ‘moral molecule’ which is oxytocin, also responsible for empathy.

What makes a human, human is the moral code (understood as compassion, fairness and integrity all together), consciousness, the search for meaning, memory, religion, abstract thinking, aesthetics, reciprocal altruism, self-actualization, free will, love, reason, says the educational papers in top universities.

What makes a human, human is the disregard we have for our species and even for individuals from our own, the democratization of evil, the destruction drive against the world and vanity, would say the wildlife expert Chris Packham in a BBC interview, making a parallel of ourselves with the wild animals.

Potential and talent is also what makes us human, I would openly add to the above definitions, as they both depend on what is most personal within us: the wit, will and courage to make ourselves be seen.

We live in two social paradigms, the transactional one, which is rational and has homo economicus in the center, stating that the individual only wants to satisfy his own utility, and the social one, where the greater good preempts. Once a relationship is formed in the social paradigm and it is transferred in the transactional one, it can only remain there. Corporations are framed as transactional environments, as they are not built on human values and in a humanly paradigm, due to heavy stakes on revenues.

A. Akerlof and Robert J. Shiller opines that emotions make us who we are when we get out on the economic market. They identified five key ‘animal spirits’ responsible of how the global economy expands: confidence, fairness, corruption, money illusion and storytelling. By doing this they contradict the economists who claim that our behavior is driven by ration decision and demonstrate that what drives us are the animal spirit of human emotion.

After all, we know now that all our decisions are made based on an emotional filter which then is being rationalized post factum so as to appear that the decision was made based on rational arguments.

Dan Ariely, in his splendid Predictably Irrational enlighten us on why do smart people make irrational decisions every day. It is a good food for thought for anyone interested in critical thinking and tackling the instinctive thinking predefined patterns.

The need for self-actualization is what, ultimately, makes us human. The need to be better persons and the constant tension between who we are and who we can be, which stays with us forever. Once one gets to this need in life, it works against all other needs because it is insatiable.

The currency we measure our life with is time. What would courage, love, bravery, ethics be if we were immortal? The consciousness of time is, indeed, again, a prerogative of the humans.

There are also dark forces within us escaping the social norms which otherwise keep them aloof.

#### **4. IDENTITY. PERSONALITY. OUR SENSE OF SELF-WORTH.**

Peter Drucker thinks that “An employer has no business with a man's personality. Employment is a specific contract calling for a specific performance. Any attempt to go beyond that is usurpation. It is immoral as well as an illegal intrusion of privacy. It is abuse of power. An employee owes no "loyalty," he owes no "love" and no "attitudes" - he owes performance and nothing else. The task is not to change personality, but to enable a person to achieve and to perform”. Pretty rough, and more than that, perhaps a bit too transactional for what working spaces and professional environments have become in a world that doesn't know what wellness programs to add to the salary package to boost motivation.

“By looking in the mirror, man has become the owner of this own world. Mirroring is what helped man to rethink his relationship with divinity, to reinvent himself within his destiny and to switch from the belief that ‘man becomes what he is’ to ‘man is what he becomes’ “<sup>1</sup>. You first have to exist and only afterwards to be(come) the essence within you through constant self-polishing.

Personality is a collection of traits that make us distinguishable, most of it imprinted in our genes and the rest acquired through early stages of life, extremely difficult to change and describing the way we see the world <sup>2</sup>.

With deep roots in the relativity theory, the permanent search of human kind for individuality and differentness has reached very high levels of bias and, as Alain Renault says, modern world should be “understood as being, from one point to the other, an era of subjectivity”<sup>3</sup>. It is this period that started to permit the individual to perfect himself, to work with the self, to experiment with the purpose of betterment and self-improving. What once used to be ‘fulfillment’ has now become ‘improvement’. The man of today continues on evolving, building on the premise that he would rather be right than happy.

#### **5. WHAT ACTUALLY MAKES A HIGH POTENTIAL EMPLOYEE?**

After understanding what makes us who we are, what drives us, how we interact with the outer world, how others should prepare in interacting with us and the ‘why’s behind our behavior, we ought to find out what makes high, high, and why is there a clear difference between potential and high potential.

For a long period of time (and still going, for many organizations) the understanding of HIPOs as high performers was nothing but common sense. Meeting deadlines, outperforming targets, and a bit of going beyond the usual tasks required sounded as the good recipe for high potentials. CEB Global researches undoubtedly proved that only one out of seven high performers proved to be a HIPO (that is 14%!), while Hudson Research Studies found out that HIPOs count for an average of 1,5% of the population.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Bodea (see bibliography)

<sup>2</sup> [www.adrianstanciu.ro](http://www.adrianstanciu.ro)

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Bodea (see bibliography)

Only looking at high performance alone is, by far, not enough. What makes a HIPO goes beyond performance and it has been developed to be a combination of attributes not as obvious as one might think.

### **A. The rule of the three attributes (CEB)**

The statistics of CEB<sup>1</sup> are staggering:

The conclusions, of course, follow: current programs fail, HR and Board members are not happy with the results, there is an overall dissatisfaction with the quality of people which are not motivated, many of them don't make it through the program, and the overall finding is the subjectivity on which selection is made.

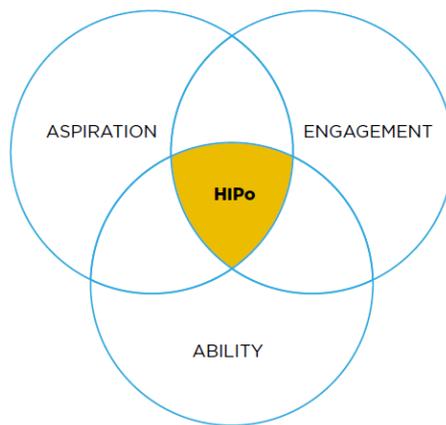


Figure 15.

- the **Aspiration** to rise to senior roles - assess for aspiration and critical career management behaviors to understand if an employee will rise to a senior and more challenging position and turn that motivation into career success
- the **Ability** to be more effective in senior roles - assess for future managerial and leadership ability to know whether the employee has the competencies required for success in more senior and challenging roles
- the **Engagement** and commitment towards the organization that they will remain in challenging roles - Evaluate engagement to know whether the employee is committed to the organization and sees the organization as the best place to realize their career goals. (Nearly 60% of HIPOs with high engagement levels have a high intent to stay – more than double than that of those with lower engagement).

These three combined give an effective manager and an efficient leader.

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<sup>1</sup> CEB reports, see Bibliography

After CEB analyzed 18 motivational factors, they came down to six which hold the drive and achievement:

- **Immersion:** they look for roles that require a personal commitment above the norm
- **Activity:** they prefer fast-paced, multi-tasking work environments
- **Power:** they want the opportunity to exercise, influence and shape how things are done
- **Interest:** they look for roles and assignments that provide variety and stimulation
- **Flexibility:** they seek out work environments that allow them more fluid ways of working
- **Autonomy:** they are attracted to roles that allow them authority in how they execute their responsibilities.

In order to recognize the HIPOs, an organization should use stretch assignments within a frame that detects failure and offers instant support. The right stretch roles are effective when they reinforce the three key elements of HIPOs: aspiration, ability and engagements. If well done, they bring recognition which is a good reason to be proud for a HIPO.

The relations between the three parameters could be highlighted through the symbols of CEB:

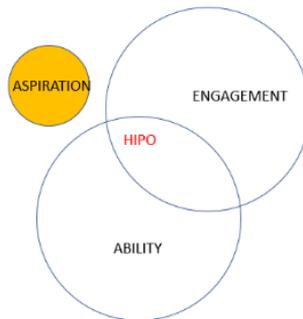


Figure 16.

**Misaligned stars:** Employees with high ability and engagement but low aspiration are unlikely to move into senior roles because they simply don't want them enough.

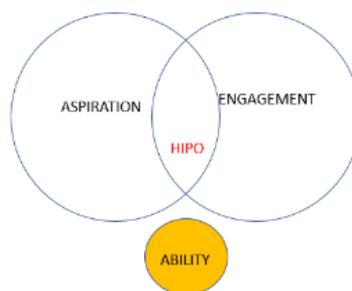


Figure 17.

**Engaged dreamers:** they want higher level roles and are engaged, but only have average ability, thus need skill trainings.

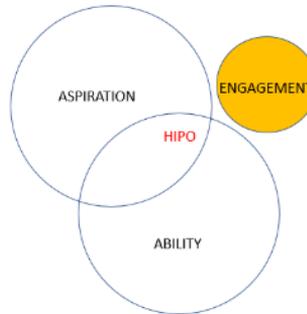


Figure 18.

**Unengaged stars:** employees with a great deal of aspiration and ability, but not fully committed to their work or organization and willing to leave the company.

**B. The equation of the intelligences (Hudson)**

Marc Timmerman, the Executive Director of Talent Management Europe proposes a whole different approach in terms of understanding what builds a HIPO.

First of all, he defines HIPO management as being at the crossroad between succession management developing future leaders and talent management which maps in house talent and build retaining schemes.

Then, he addresses the intelligences in the relation: **IQ + EQ + LQ = Top Talent.**

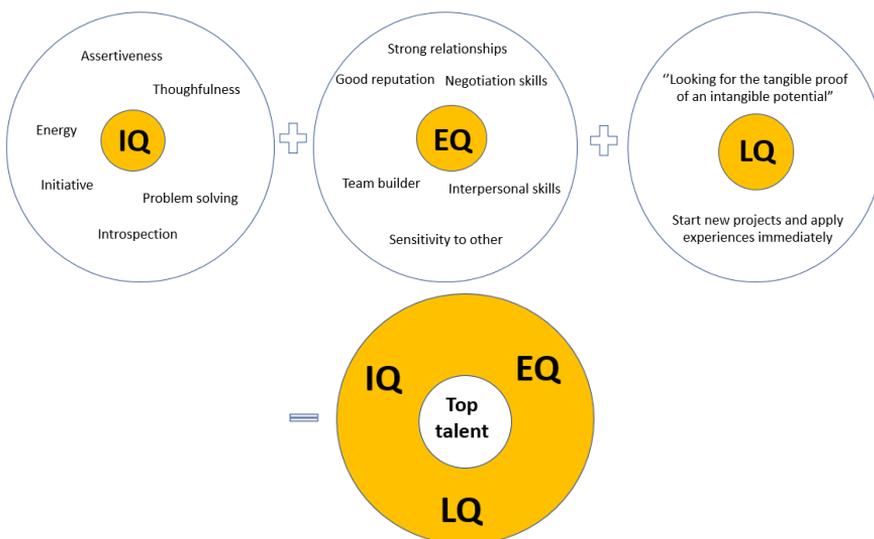


Figure 19.

Democratization of learning and the fast and easy access to information help us all in addressing much easier the knowledge out there. But as this phenomenon evolves, and it will evolve, the man behind the learning devices will become of absolute importance. Information is available, but it is crucial to have the potential to know what to use it, what to look for and with what you find to make the best of it.

### **C. The model that spots the threefold matrix of leadership (Hogan)**

The Hogan HIPO Model and The Hogan High Potential Talent Report are grounded in probably one of the most substantial research base in the world.

Three performance dimensions are crucial for leader success defining the model:



Figure 20.

- **Leadership Foundations** concerns the degree to which people are able to manage their careers and are good organizational citizens.
- **Leadership Emergence** evaluates the likelihood that people will stand out, emerge, and be labeled as leaders in their organization.
- **Leadership Effectiveness** involves the ability to successfully guide teams toward productive outcomes.

The three dimensions are linked to the person's strengths and gaps along these three dimensions, and the model suggests specific, targeted developmental actions that can be used to address them.

As we can see, perceptions on what a HIPO is and how or whether it can be measured are very different between the three main trends of today. The common denominator for top high potentials, though, remains their ability to rise harmoniously, shine, be balanced, inspire others and always go beyond the surfaces of the attainable.

The present article is an excerpt of the full paper, available upon request by directly contacting Raluca Mihaila@<https://www.linkedin.com/in/ralucamihaila/> -

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