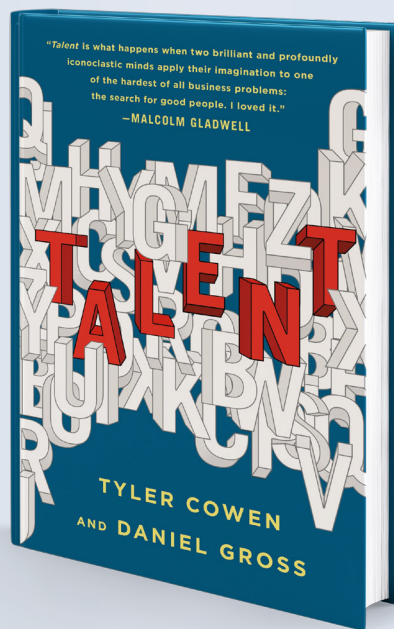


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Talent

How to Identify Energizers, Creatives, and Winners Around the World

By Tyler Cowen and Daniel Gross

Tyler Cowen holds the Holbert C. Harris chair in economics at George Mason University. He is the author of *Discover Your Inner Economist* (2007), *Create Your Own Economy* (2009), the New York Times bestseller *The Great Stagnation* (2011), *An Economist Get Lunch* (2012), *Average is Over* (2013), and a number of academic books.

Daniel Gross is an entrepreneur and investor. At 18, he was accepted into Y-Combinator, the youngest founder ever at the time. He founded Cue, an AI-powered search engine, which was acquired by Apple in 2013. In 2018, Daniel founded Pioneer, a search engine for the millions of “Lost Einstein’s.”

Finding Talent with a Creative Spark

References to sixteenth century pirates is not something one necessarily expects to see in a book about searching out and landing talent; nevertheless that is precisely what can be found in Tyler Cowen and Daniel Gross’s book about the talent search entitled, *Talent: How to Identify Energizers, Creatives, and Winners Around the World*. Just like pirates of centuries past needed to be brazen and ooze charisma, so does a modern day corporate creative or the potential inventor of the next great product that will revolutionize the world we live in.

Both Cowen and Gross spend their days searching for talent, and as such, they have much advice to the person looking to improve their skills in this area. What they say talent searchers need to avoid most is a bureaucratic approach to finding talent. A search like this focuses too strongly on credentials and not strongly enough on finding the creative spark and drive in a person that can propel them to heights beyond their peers. Some recruiters, they posit, spend too much time looking for a proven track record. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but such a focus will not allow recruiters to find the up and comer or the diamond in the rough.

The Talent Search Is Both A Science And An Art

One of the necessities of uncovering hidden promise is to understand creativity and what motivates and propels people to pursue it. Oftentimes recruiters and talent seekers have a large amount of data about a candidate. They may also possess great understanding of behavior and personality traits. Neither of those, however, is of much use unless he or she can take those paradigms and use them to help them effectively evaluate the individual in front of them.

The first area that Cowen and Gross examine is the interview. One main trap that the two authors hope their readers avoid is relying on questions during an interview that are so predictable that the interviewee can prepare and rehearse an answer in advance. These answers do not provide the interviewer with quality information about the candidate because they will get a canned, prepared, and possibly performative answer. The two authors want their readers to, instead, develop questions that the inter-

viewee is not prepared for and that will therefore steer them into authenticity. This authenticity will give the interviewer more insight into who the candidate is than a canned answer ever could.

One of these questions they recommend is, “What are the open tabs on your browser right now?” They like this question because they believe that what a person does in their downtime can reveal their potential professionally. This will help the interviewer know if the candidate truly is creative. It will also provide insight into what the candidate does to continually self improve. Candidates not overly focused on self improvement may come in with high skill levels, but they are unlikely to advance much more than that. Individuals, however, who are continually seeking improvement can grow exponentially and can thus prove to be highly beneficial employees in the long run. Further, they recommend asking interviewees what exactly they do to improve their skills. This will give insight into their growth potential while also giving the interviewee helpful tips for how they can improve their own skills.

Cowen and Gross differentiate between structured and unstructured interviews. They focus on the latter for many situations and instances because these interviews help the interviewer understand who the candidate is in a more authentic setting. They recommend changing rooms mid-interview, meeting at a coffee shop, going on a walk, or finding some that means by which to get the candidate out of interview mode and thus allow for more accurate reflections of who the person actually is. In the same vein, the authors recommend trying to get the interviewee to tell stories about him or herself. It is not as easy for most people to lie when telling a story, and thus, stories give the interviewer a good opportunity to look for both sensitivity and intelligence.

Another suggestion the authors have is to find out how much interviewees know about themselves. Two questions that can help with this are, “Which of your beliefs are you least rational about?” and “What views do you hold almost irrationally?” These questions move the interviewee into an area of weakness which can help the interviewer understand them more fully. To understand an interviewee’s level of ambition, a person can ask them directly, “how ambitious are you?” The answer is hard to fake according to the authors, and as such, it will give some added insight.

Engaging with people online provides a whole new set of challenges, but in today’s marketplace, online interviews and meetings are not uncommon. They also, however, provide a set of opportunities. There is not a lot of research on online interviews, and as such, there is not a set of best practices readily available. Keeping note of some of the difficulties of online interviews can help an interviewer compensate for them to the best of their ability. One of the difficulties of online interviews is that it is harder to establish trust because it is harder to see body language and discern eye contact. Many people rely on these cues in order to gauge how their interview is going. To overcome this, the authors recommend trying to make the interviewee feel more comfortable by sharing common interests and using self-deprecating humor.

Online conversations also alter the appearance of status markers. Because of this, some women “feel on more equal footing on a Zoom call.” Charisma comes across differently on screen, so some who rely on their charisma find they have more difficulties online. People who are concerned with coming across well often do worse online whereas people who do not care so much about presenting their own imperfections often do better. For people who struggle with this type of interview, Gross recommends turning off the video and conducting the interview just over audio. It is important to keep in mind that an online conversation is not the same as an in-person one. Being aware of this can help an interviewer understand what information they are able to get online and what information they cannot.

Intelligence And Its Role In Success

After all, it is important to know just how much a talent searcher should focus on this one area. Obviously intelligence has some very notable advantages. It can help people “find new ideas and put the pieces together where others cannot.” It also helps a person gain credibility when among the higher ranks of leadership.

Very high intelligence is more important in certain fields than others, however. One of these fields is that of inventors. In other high-esteem fields, however, like law and medicine, parental education actually plays a larger role than IQ in determining who succeeds. Where intelligence matters the most is often at the very top of a market. At the bottom of the market, personality and conscientiousness often matter more. Success cannot be attributed to one trait, however, and the multiplicative model of success helps explain that “final success requires a fairly tight combination of several traits - variables expressing the strength of particular traits are in some manner multiplied together to achieve a powerful final effect.” It is important to have “the whole package” when looking for people with the highest levels of achievement.

The importance of intelligence can be seen when selecting members of a team. Cowen and Gross explain how intelligent people “feed off each other and make each other better.” A single person cannot often make a huge change in an organization, but when paired with other intelligent people, they have more of a possibility of making a difference. There is also “direct evidence that higher-intelligence people are better at cooperating.” This is another crucial skill on any team.

Other factors can be just as important or even more important than intelligence. Among these are “drive, self-motivation, curiosity, and ethics.” In many cases, intelligence does not do a very good job of predicting income. A look at the IQs and performance of several of our last presidents shows that IQ and job performance are not always linked.

The Five Factor Personality Theory

This theory measures neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. While these five traits provide a solid framework for discussing personality, the authors are clear to note that this model is not perfect at



... the two hardest traits to determine in an interview are conscientiousness and emotional stability.”

predicting success, and it ignores some other important traits. When considering studies about these or other traits, talent seekers do not have to concern themselves with the determining between causation and correlation. Merely knowing a correlation can help a talent seeker find who they are looking for.

Personality traits are not always easy to determine in an interview. Cowen and Gross state that the two hardest traits to determine in an interview are conscientiousness and emotional stability. Interviewing references can help a little bit with this, but often unfortunately, conscientiousness cannot be determined until after a hire has been made.

Determining which traits to focus on depends largely on the type of position a person is hiring for. Research has found that conscientiousness and extraversion can correlate with an increase in earnings, but agreeableness can actually correlate with lower earnings in men. When looking at “the bottom tenth of earners, non-cognitive skills matter two and a half to four times more than do cognitive skills.” This does not hold true across the rest of the spectrum where cognitive ability starts to matter much more. While conscientiousness is often seen as a benefit, the authors note that it can sometimes hamper creativity and daring, and this can sometimes outweigh the benefits of conscientiousness.

The five factor theory ignores some other crucial personality traits. Other traits that are often beneficial include stamina, continuous self-improvement, and generativeness. Generative people are described by the authors as people who “talk quickly, move quickly, and in general seem to be enthralled with life.” On the other hand, one trait the Cowen and Gross warn against is insecure achievement. This occurs in people who perform well but never feel that it is good enough. Clutteredness, vagueness, precision, and precocity are other factors to consider in possible talent.

Another factor to take into consideration is disability. Cowen and Gross reject the notion that a disability should automatically eliminate a candidate from consideration. Oftentimes people with disabilities have other beneficial abilities specifically because of their unique makeup. Others develop coping mechanisms that make them particularly strong candidates. The authors go into detail about the benefits autistic and schizophrenic individuals can bring to companies. Merely having a disability clearly does not imply that a person will be qualified for a job or gifted in a certain manner. It also, however, does not imply that they should be disqualified automatically.

People have biases, and that can help explain some difficulties that women and minorities face in the hiring process. An inter-

viewer should be aware of these difficulties and differences. For example, “personality for women predicts earnings with more power than personality for men.” Emotional stability, for women, plays a significant role in their earnings. This will affect how women interview and how they interact in the business world. Because women and men act differently and because “many talent-spotting mechanisms are more geared towards males,” it can be harder for women to get noticed and hired.

Race bias also plays a role in hiring practices. At times this can lead Black interviewees to act more formally in an interview as they try to maneuver through the power structures. There are ways for interviewers to overcome their biases that the authors recommend. These include traveling abroad, reading autobiographies, visiting Black churches, and reading and listening to “some of the more radical takes on race.”

Cowen and Gross go on to discuss the role of talent scouts. They say that “the scouting model tends to be very effective when talent search is about starting with a very large pool and needing to narrow it down to a much smaller number of plausible competitors.” They go on to explain that scouts are most beneficial in places where there is not a high concentration of qualified people. They use the example of a model scout in Manhattan. Likely people with the looks and talent to become models have already considered that proposition. If scouts go to the Midwest or other less saturated markets, however, they can find the undiscovered talent they are looking for before others do.

Once talent has been found, it becomes important to convince them to join your cause. Cowen and Gross note that “finding talent is not completely separate from helping to create talent.” One way to help spur on talent is through raising people’s aspirations, helping them see what they are capable of. This can be done by placing people in groups with strong role models.

Finding and securing talent is as much an art as it is a science. Cowen and Gross present the data surrounding traits such as intelligence and conscientiousness. They also go into depth providing interview tips and guidelines for improving one’s scouting abilities. They maintain throughout that the art of the talent search requires the searcher to judge each person as an individual, paying attention to the unique personality, skill, and experience that make the person worthy of your enterprise.

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