



Can a Team Have Too Much Talent?

Attracting top talent is a key priority for competitive organisations. But can ‘more’ become ‘too much’?

Going into the 2010 World Cup, France had one of the best squads in the competition. Chock-a-block with talent, expectations were high, but the results could not have been more disastrous. Beset by internal bickering, the team imploded, failed to proceed to the second round, and was flown home economy class in disgrace.

Whether it’s a football line-up or organisational team, it’s generally assumed that bringing together the most talented individuals possible gets the best results. The reality however, is that when teams are required to closely coordinate their work, having too many talented members can lead to competition over status and rank, and decreased performance as a result.

The ‘too-much-talent effect’

The question of when and why high levels of talent reduce team performance was considered by Roderick Swaab, INSEAD Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour in the research paper [The Too-Much-Talent Effect: Team Interdependence Determines When More Talent Is Too Much Versus Not Enough](#), co-authored by with Michael Schaerer, INSEAD Doctoral Student; Eric Anicich, Doctoral Student at Columbia University; Richard Ronay, Assistant Professor at VU University Amsterdam and Adam D. Galinsky, Professor of Business at

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Columbia.

The researchers hypothesised that while the addition of talented individuals boosts team performance initially, there comes a point after which the benefits of enlisting a new star decreases until the extra talent eventually has a negative effect on the team’s achievements.

In addition, their assumption was that this ‘too-much-talent effect’ would only occur in teams that require high levels of task interdependence, but not in teams where members operated relatively independently. The theories were then tested in some of the most popular sports worldwide: football, basketball and baseball.

Talent diminishes team coordination

The research examined real-world data from national football teams during the qualification for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa and the 2014 World Cup in Brazil and found the linear relationship between talent and a football team’s performance was positive - but only up to a point. After this point the marginal benefit of talent decreased and eventually turned negative.

A similar result occurred when researchers tested their theory in a setting where on-court team

performance is carefully documented: the U.S. National Basketball Association. Using regular season play data from all NBA teams between 2002 and 2012, individual talent was computed using the Estimated Wins Added (EWA) formula, which estimates the victories that any given player adds over and above what a replacement player would contribute. The researchers calculated the percentage of top talented individuals within each team. By examining comprehensive on-court data from all the games they tallied team coordination while team performance was taken as the winning percentage at the end of each season.

Once again, they found evidence of a “too-much-talent” effect such that teams with very high levels of top talent actually performed worse. In addition, they found that this effect emerged because these teams failed to coordinate their actions on court.

It was now time to test the crux of the theory that the too-much-talent effect would only emerge when individual jockeying for dominance harmed team coordination. The researchers hypothesised that in teams where less coordination is required, the accumulation of talent should continue to benefit, and never hurt, performance. An analysis of talent and team performance in the context of Major League Baseball confirmed this hypothesis: more talent simply increases the team’s performance.

How to manage a talent overload

This sports analogy has important ramifications for business. “When hiring for an opening in a team with low levels of interdependence, such as sales teams, hiring the most talented individuals may be a good strategy as these individuals will not have to work with each other,” says Swaab. However, when teams require high levels of interdependence, simply hiring a group of top talented individuals may not be sufficient and potentially be disruptive. “One solution is to hire fewer top talented individuals, something the Argentinian and French coach did during the 2014 World Cup when deciding not to select talented players like Carlos Tevez and Samir Nasri. Another option is to invest more in training team members how to coordinate effectively in different situations. Establishing a legitimate hierarchy and formalising roles and responsibilities provides team members insight into what they must be able to do together without focusing their attention on jostling for intragroup rank.”

When talent can tear us apart

Counter to the belief that higher and higher levels of talent produce ever-better performance, these findings suggest that organisations should reconsider their priorities and remember that when

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teams need to come together, more talent can tear them apart.



Roderick Swaab is an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD.

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