

---

# Why Geeks Are a New Talent Opportunity



By Antoine Tirard (INSEAD MBA '97D), founder, NexTalent and Claire Harbour (INSEAD MBA '92J), founder, Culture Pearl

**As business becomes increasingly technological, the proportion of 'geeks' in the ranks is rising. Some say they're annoying and others that they just don't fit in, but it's essential for managers to integrate these knowledgeable individuals, no matter how awkward they are.**

We all have or have had someone at work, who was mildly or even deeply annoying to work with, who just did not seem to “get” situations, and who seemed to function in a world apart. At the time, most of us probably just gently put up with the misfit, occasionally becoming more annoyed, and thought little more of it.

There is an increasing need for numerical, technical brains, with big horsepower, and organisations are noticing that these big brains do not necessarily fit in well with the regular brains. They are often the ones that end up being the misfits, whose brains are needed, but whose presence is barely tolerated, and whose value is definitely not fully exploited, due to all the contradictions involved in working with them.

But as we explore in this article, executives who do not fit in with the norm in their organisations can get help to bring them closer to the crowd, or at the very least, understand the crowd better.

## **IQ vs EQ**

Companies are increasingly recruiting high IQ and technically specialised people, to manage the complexity of today's business challenges, and yet, research consistently finds that, in the very high ranges, IQ tends to be inversely related to EQ.

A recent Korn Ferry study, as shown in Figure 1, shows that self-awareness determines whether a very high IQ improves leadership performance or hurts it. Assessment data from 209 managers and executives suggests that if two executives have high self-awareness, the one with the high IQ will be the better performer. But among those with low self-awareness, the reverse is true.

This formula can be pretty shocking to people like Jan, a senior team and thought leader in the science field in Scandinavia. He was identified by his board as “the least self-aware” of all the leaders, and by his staff as lacking in empathy and communication skills, as well as clarity and vision.

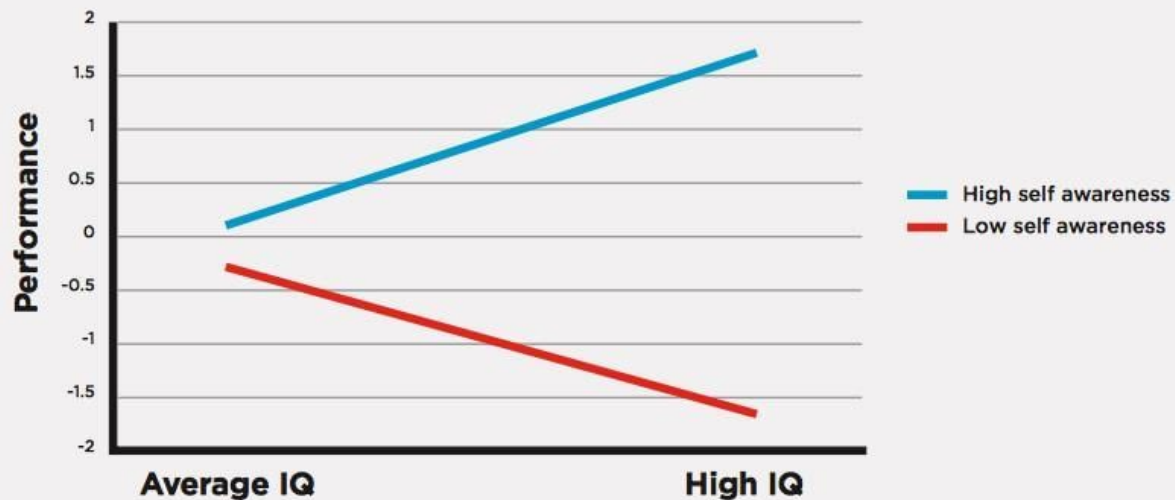
For some years his relatively low impact and low team morale had been attributed to significant organisational change and disruption, rather than looking at the leadership skills and behaviours of Jan and his colleagues on the leadership team. They had all been promoted to leadership roles without actually having developed their leadership skills. The entire team began a development journey.

When Elliott Nelson and his coaching team took on Jan's case, he did not see the need to change, but was open to seeking guidance. However, once he had seen, read and scrutinised the 360° report on him, he did rapidly become keen to understand the reason that others saw him as difficult. With objective curiosity and his high IQ on his side, he asked open questions about what and how he wanted to change, and Jan's scientific mind led him towards more conscious and vastly improved behaviour in meetings and in one-to-ones with his team. Jan made a strong realisation: “This work is the most important thing I can do”, and he was later rated as the “biggest transformation” by the same leadership team that had been so negative about him at the outset. Questioning, checking assumptions and working with a coach, not a controller, were very enabling techniques for him, and,

allied with humility in taking feedback, he was able to fly at a performance level in line with his IQ.

Figure 1

### Executive performance across IQ and self-awareness levels.



### A Beautiful Mind

Helping executives to fit in means supporting the “issue” and of seeing it as “a different thing” instead of “a bad thing”. Michelle, whose nickname is actually “The Brain” works in a French consulting firm, and had a clear belief, before help was sought for her, that she “did not need people”. She was serious, introverted, and rarely laughed. She was about to take on a global leadership position and yet she behaved like a solitary analyst. The coach who worked with her, asked her to estimate how many people her behaviour impacted, and her answer was seven. When the coach showed her, with all kinds of graphs, arrows and links, that in fact, every time she acted, at least fifty stakeholders were affected, she was shocked, but curious, and keen to seek solutions.

Michelle’s managers, and her team, were willing players in the process on which she embarked, and her coach took great pleasure in finding her very technical tools with which to work. For example, she loved using psychometric tools, as they felt scientific to her, and she used it to analyse not only herself, but also those around her, and it gave her more comfort and certainty when planning interactions. As the support continued and she

progressed in her work, Michelle was able to “practise” her new empathic communication style, by connecting with a colleague around a common passion, tennis. While she still felt that this was “neither authentic nor useful”, when it was pointed out to her that she had, nevertheless, built a different kind of connection, she accepted that and moved on to a greater challenge.

Within weeks, there was a big international meeting for which Michelle was responsible. Previously, these meetings had been cumbersome, not much fun, and lacking in social highlights. But on this occasion, Michelle forced herself not only to plan a dinner and drinks evening for the participants, but also to stay and join in. This was far from a natural action on her part, but much appreciated by the whole group, and she was at least able to see the gratitude and the increased team spirit, even if she maintained she had not enjoyed it. At the end of the long engagement, Michelle expressed sadness that it was coming to an end, and acknowledged that she had finally learned to help her team to help themselves, rather than dominating them, and that she felt more supported by the senior management of her company.

Recognition of the efforts on the part of the “misfit” seems to play a very strong role in the support given to them and it is crucial that those above, below and all around be involved in the process of change.

The increased self-awareness, the new language, tools and feelings that our subjects now share have a deep effect, and it is enlightening to hear how they describe it. Jan tells us, “A year on, I feel more assured about what to do to guide team leaders. I also feel better equipped to deal with difficult behaviour”.

## **Leveraging Neurodiversity**

So, if we are going to be dealing with more and more “geeks” in our working and everyday lives, how do we develop our thinking and actions to make the most of it? By first seeing the strategic value of this particular kind of diversity. Neurodiversity is increasingly recognised as a phenomenon, and we actively encourage companies and individuals to consider and prioritise the value of these people to their organisations. They are brilliant technically, but also willing to do isolated or repetitive, detail-focused work quite happily. They also bring a natural curiosity and scientific approach to all they do, and this can be a huge advantage. If we can acknowledge and better understand what we are dealing with, then we can get on with making

the most of it, and turning it into a true strategic advantage. We believe that in many organisations there are 15-20 percent of managers and leaders who fit this “super-geek” profile, and that, as the Korn Ferry study suggests, given help with their self-awareness, they can be encouraged towards great performance and contribute to a sea change in how we succeed.

## Neurodiverse Talent Management “Dos and Don’ts”

	DOS	DON'TS
	Treat everyone as a fresh proposition	Treat any different individual
	Be positively open to neurodiversity	See it as a <i>bad</i> thing
RECOGNISE	Create the environment for conversation	Look at the baggage too close
	Help them become self-aware	Feel a need to diagnose and
	Use their special talents	Use their “difference” as a st

	Give them the tools and support	Punish before exploring
	Help them understand management jargon	Use tests to box them
RESPOND	Help them see things from other's point of view	Try to "cure" or change them
	Get support all around them: team, management, advisers	Take a one-way only approach
	Actively recruit them	Let old images stick after the fact
		Miss out on these talents

**Antoine Tirard** is a talent management advisor and the founder of NexTalent. He is former Head of Talent of LVMH and Novartis. You can follow him on Twitter [@antirard1](#). **Claire Lyell** is the founder of Culture Pearl and an expert in written communication across borders and languages. You can follow her on Twitter [@CulturePearlC](#).

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#)

#### Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/why-geeks-are-new-talent-opportunity>

#### About the author(s)

**Antoine Tirard** is an international talent management consultant, trainer and coach to large global organisations.

**Claire Harbour** is a global talent expert, focused on coaching and consulting across borders, and stirring up disruption.