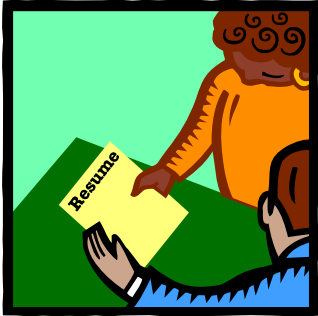


## The Dark Matter of Talent

### Howard E. Males

#### Research Pros, Inc.

During his March, 2007 Senate testimony, "Strengthening America's Competitiveness," Bill Gates made three points: 1) upgrade our students and workers with skills to succeed; 2) reform immigration policies to ensure a steady flow of talent; and 3) invest in new ideas and reward value creation. Mr. Gates acknowledged his reservations at the outset: "Yet when I reflect on the state of American competitiveness, my feeling of pride is mixed with deep anxiety."



**Asking, "What's not on your resume?" evokes biographical narratives that are far more revealing than documented pedigrees.**

He's right to feel anxious, because even if we internationalize our search for high performers, US businesses cannot upgrade, import and reward that which they cannot clearly define or see. The fact is that a significant portion of America's talent is missing in plain sight. The safe bet has been to direct hiring scopes on the right schools, degrees, and backgrounds. Yet, these easy talent targets shed only a partial light on what makes high performers tick.

Mr. Gates recognizes that talent development begins well before college. Among the many markers for predicting positive performance trajectories are: a work ethic cultivated in childhood, the number and quality of extracurricular activities pursued during high school, and a well-formed value system that prioritizes integrity and fairness. Our research further reveals non-obvious markers of high performance within a variety of work contexts. Second and third-tier colleges are no less attractive talent nurseries than elite schools. The data suggest particular attention should be paid to: records of college admission rather than only on the school attended; consistency of mentored relationships throughout young adulthood; and, early life foundations for soft skill development.

Asking, "What's not on your resume?" evokes biographical narratives that are far more revealing than documented pedigrees. In one study we conducted, top sales people reported their first sale of a service or product occurred during pre-teen years and nearly four years earlier than that of non-high performers. Significantly, this marker never appeared on a single resume across the entire sales force.

The lesson for business leaders is clear: solely looking for talent in familiar places is costly and limits the options for even high performing individuals to put skill and skin in the game. The key is talent measurement. Organizations will identify and harness the "dark matter of talent" by adopting new human capital strategies such as distributed hiring of individuals from less stellar backgrounds and surrounds, and by focusing on non-traditional markers of known high performance. Potential high performers already exist both within your organization and on the campuses your recruiters have yet to visit. Microsoft has committed enormous resources to unlock secrets of their talent. It is time for leaders to challenge existing talent strategies with more hard facts and less reliance on the same and shining nameplates.

Howard E. Males, PhD is CEO of Research Pros, Inc.  
© Research Pros, Inc., 2007  
Not for citation without permission