

# Fostering talent: opportunities and challenges

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**GABRIEL FERRATÉ**

I usually say that our world is essentially dynamic and complex, a world in permanent change in which people, with their ability to innovate and their technology, develop products and processes modifying it at an increasingly rapid pace. However, as Schengen said, «there are no innovations nor new ideas, no matter how good they may be, if they are not based on a learning process and developed».

Such changes happen mostly as a result of progress in science and technology that, in an increasing diversification of knowledge and effects, catalyses the advent of new concepts and changes that eventually affect convictions and ways of life considered until recently to be permanent and unchangeable.

**I have no special talent.  
I am only passionately curious.**

*Albert Einstein*

## Talent in a changing world

In the new knowledge society, information and knowledge are the forces driving the world and as essential as former traditional factors such as land, work and capital. Information and communication technologies (ICT) act as a driver changing many paradigms taken for granted in the traditional conception of our society and labour relations. Some of the latest developments such as telerobotics, increased reality, smart interfaces, diffuse computation and nanotechnology, just to mention some examples related to the network society, will eventually have a total effect

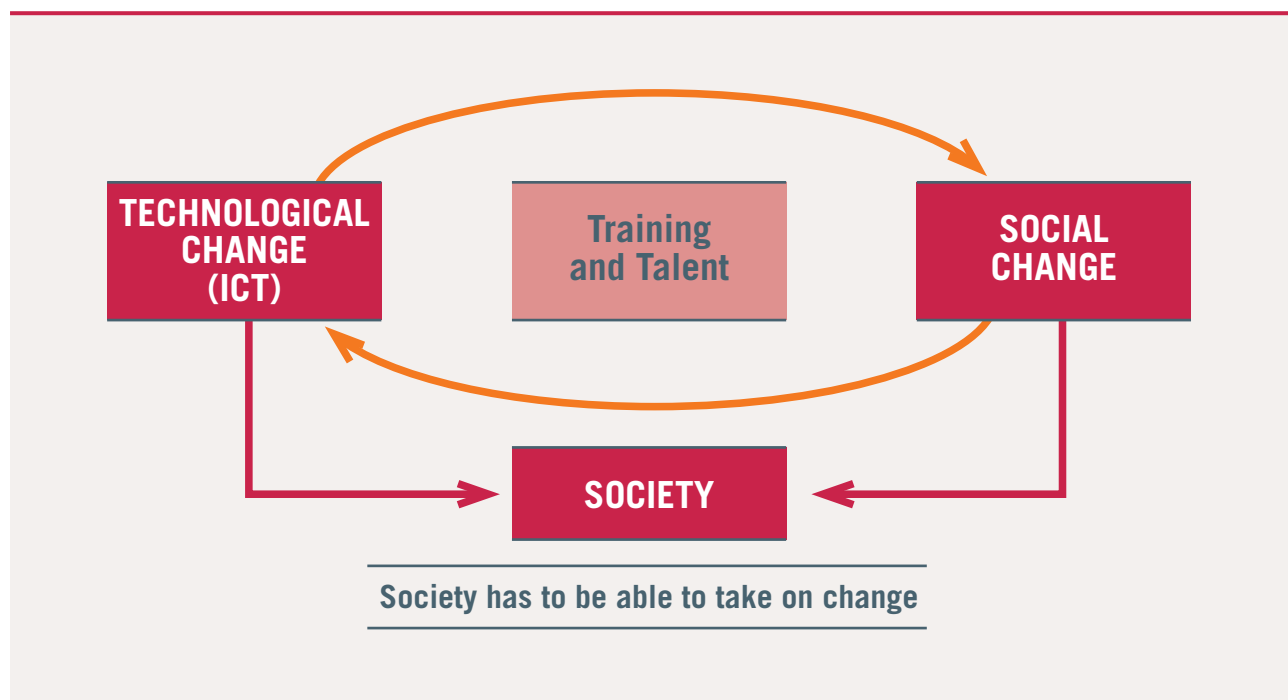
on the conception and orientation of social and relational life and shift currently assumed rules in production, services, business as well as leisure.

Many of these changes start occurring, though we are not fully aware of them, and lead often to psychological and social upheaval as our mind and biology struggles to adapt to too quick changes or – perhaps better – faster changes than what we are used to, i.e. destabilising changes.

Our challenge is therefore to try to adapt to change and to the pace of change. Such change is unleashed by current technological progress that, to put it simple, turns upside down the traditional view of factors such as:

- ▶ Production systems
- ▶ Communication between people
- ▶ Decision-taking processes

**Chart 1. Interrelation of technological and social change**



- ▲ Information and communication technologies (ICT) act as a driver changing many paradigms taken for granted in the traditional conception of our society and labour relations.

Overall, dependence of people on technology in general and ICT in particular is growing in all areas. We are surrounded by machines, processes and systems working and thinking for us, quite often even guiding, orienting, driving and imposing on us!

**Dependence of people on technology is growing. We are surrounded by machines, processes and systems working and thinking for us. To make progress and live in this new global setting, we need to redefine our knowledge, our attitudes and rethink how to conceive and reach out to our talents.**

Technology-based society is therefore a complex society within a complex world, which leads us necessarily to an essential uncertainty about doing things, managing and taking decisions due to our ignorance of phenomena and the society around us or the way to control them. This causes with many people a certain anxiety about knowing where we are heading to, where the world is heading to and also about knowing what to do and how. This needs to be considered when thinking of training and assessing personal qualities and abilities.

To make progress and live fully integrated in the new global setting in which patterns are changing, we need to redefine our knowledge and attitude and especially rethink how to conceive and reach out to our talents.

Beyond standard definitions describing talent as a «particular ability to do something», we could define it as «a set of specific skills that, together with our personality, facilitate an optimal handling of our interpersonal and social relations». Talent can be considered a potential. It is so in the sense that somebody has a set of characteristics or abilities that can – or cannot – eventually be developed or deployed at a faster or slower pace according to the dif-

ferent variables one can meet in their own field of action.

Talent can also be considered a derivative or a manifestation of so-called *emotional intelligence*, and is an ability or a set of abilities pointing out in a setting of people or a social group to carry out certain tasks or functions with success and full acceptance.

Talent can be inherited or acquired by training or learning. Unlike acquired, intrinsic talent is characterised by the individual being able to not practise it over a long period and pick it up later with the same skill, whereas acquired talent needs to be practised on an ongoing basis in order not to lose the achieved skills or have them weakened. It could be said that talent does not mean to have many ideas but to be able to get the best out of them!

**Talent is a potential, the skills a person is able or unable to develop according to the different variables they can meet in their own field of action. Having talent does not mean to have many ideas but to be able to get the best out of them.**

We can conclude from the above said that believing that talent is exclusive to a few is the first big mistake we can do to stimulate or manage such talent, for despite talent may have a more or less strong inborn component, it requires continuous work, hands-on experience based on trial and error and especially a clear orientation.

To think that talent is derived from the youth's genetic pool only is a crass error, for experience is crucial to generate talent and to truly implement it so it can become useful for anybody's personal career. Those who have learned how to successfully manage difficult situations and teams are about to have a talent of their own that needs to be appreciated.

These concepts are important to educate and train people as well as to select and prepare them for specific academic or professional tasks. In education, for instance, it is not so much about teaching but teaching to learn, to solve problems and new or untypical situations, to foster the capacity for critical analysis and for research and innovation. At work, the goal shall not be to concentrate our efforts on «headhunting» but on something more real and efficient in the long term such as creating overall opportunities and conditions so it is the talented who seek our own company or organisation. The first case requires teachers and administrative staff with a deep change of mindset, and the second awake, reflexive managers able to take risks to a certain point, but also to communicate and delegate without being afraid from people under their responsibility improving day by day in doing their job.

Our «network society» has a double meaning for the relevance and management of talent. On the one hand, it has brought about globalisation and new emerging social, political, commercial and industrial challenges that require people with new and diversified education and abilities (i.e. talent); on the other hand, it provides new tools turning upside down traditional concepts of training, work and acquisition of abilities. Tailor-made lifelong learning as well as working and collaborating in disperse, multi-location teams – breaking up time and space barriers – are good examples for that.

## Talent in a global setting: change, innovation, diversity and cooperation

In previous paragraphs, the words *change*, *innovation*, *diversity* and *cooperation* have appeared several times, and for good reason. These concepts are interrelated as well as linked to phenomena based on the deployment of the network society and the new technologies that are leading to increasing globalisation and interdependence of phenomena and people in our world.

It is not difficult to state – in fact, it has been vastly dealt with – that change and innovation are intimately entangled and affect the parameters related with talent and its management. But what is the relation between such talent on the one side and diversity and cooperation on the other?

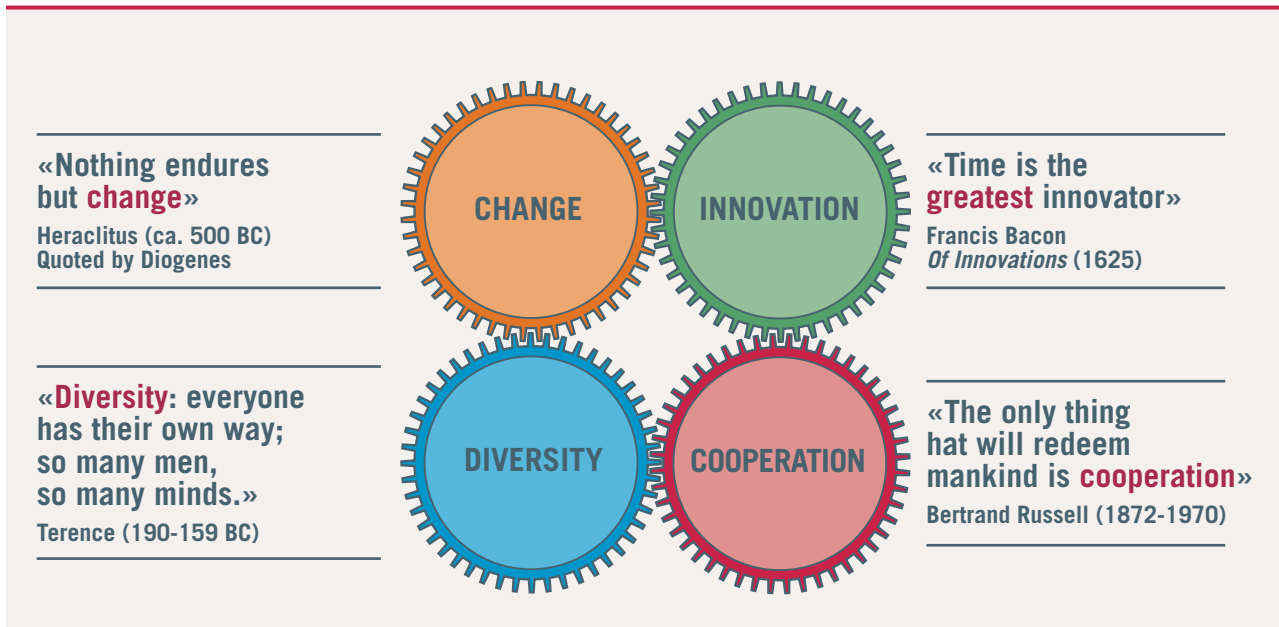
**We live in a global setting, where opening up to and cooperation between team members and between them and other teams is indispensable. The ability to cooperate is another point to consider when evaluating and managing the development and promotion of talents.**

To give an example, we all know that the car industry is highly automated and makes intensive use of robotisation and computerised management of production, distribution and sales processes, quite often following a fully decentralised, outsourced and geographically spread pattern. This could appear to mean a strong uniformisation of manufactured models and their finishing, but this is not the case. Intelligent automation of related processes and increasing competition, together with increasing requirements by customers, lead to manufacturing and distribution being adapted to individual wishes and needs. As a consequence, talent and its management have to open up to diversity of demand, not to uniformity as automated and global development may initially suggest. As early as in the 2nd century BC, Terence stated: «Diversity: everyone has their own way; so many men, so many minds.»

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Whether we like it or not, we live in a global setting, with relocated, disperse and often

**Chart 2. Change, innovation, diversity and cooperation, interdependent phenomena related to talent in a global setting**



▲ Change, innovation, diversity, cooperation: concepts interrelated as well as linked to phenomena based on the deployment of the network society and new technologies.

outsourced development, design and production markets and processes. If we add the multidisciplinary of techniques and methodologies used to find solutions to new needs, we can infer that we cannot move on our own. Opening up and cooperation are indispensable – cooperation with the different members of a team as well as with other physically or thematically different teams. The ability to cooperate and all it means is another point to consider when evaluating and managing the development and promotion of talents.

As Bertrand Russell once said, «the only thing that will redeem mankind is cooperation».

nise it. Psychologists and neuroscientists try to find out where it is, if it is an inborn feature or rather acquired through education and learning.

**Managing talent is to set up a dialogue through which elements like personal and professional development, organisational goals, confidence between stakeholders and setting up taskforces based on quality and sharing information become the pillars of management.**

## Talent management

M. A. Sabadell says that everybody believes they know what talent is, but only few are able to define it. There are companies devoted to talent search, but they do not seem to be able to recog-

Is talent something absolute or just circumstantial, is it momentary or permanent? Can it be practised and developed? Is it equivalent to ability? Many of us would probably feel able to answer these questions but the answers could turn out not to be the right ones. In fact, headhunters look for what they are not really able to define.

We could even ask if talent can be detected or just recognised when its effects are stated. It may well be a combination of method and intuition!

The philosopher and writer Elbert Hubbard once said: «There is something scarcer, subtler and more valuable than talent: talent to recognise the talented.» It has also been believed that a high IQ secured excellent professional performance, but later studies have demonstrated that this is not necessarily the case. Different pieces of research have concluded that humans are split into two groups: those who believe that intelligence is unchangeable and those convinced that it is malleable. If we further consider the dichotomy between inborn and acquired abilities, short-term and long-term memory, genetic and environmental factors, etc., we will forcibly acknowledge that understanding talent is not really easy and hence its adequate management can become – at least theoretically – complex and not within everybody's grasp.

In spite of any more or less theoretical consideration made so far, and although it may seem extremely difficult, identifying talent is not only possible, but we often are even fully aware of where it is. However, we need to start managing it. Managing talent is nothing else than setting up a dialogue through which elements like personal and professional development, organisational goals, confidence between stakeholders and setting up taskforces based on quality and sharing information become the true pillars of the management process. All these elements need to point towards a common, fully identified goal. We only need to find or identify talent in the company or its setting.

But beware! In order to find talent in our organisation, we first need to know what we are looking for and what we are ready to do as human resource managers so the «rookie» gets to work with enthusiasm and commitment. It has to be said that it happens quite often that our organisations are full of valuable people with a positive attitude, totally unused and waiting for their opportunity. The challenge is to know how to detect it, and especially to do so in time! We must not

forget, however, that attitudes towards work are not assumed nor do they remain for good, but they need to be consolidated and built up permanently; they depend to a high degree on management as such at the company. Any initial push can get lost during the first month of work.

**Human talent management is the ability to attract, mobilise, engage and develop the most competent and committed professionals and to transform individual into organisational talent.**

It is unrealistic to believe that there are exact and simple recipes in human relations. Intuition and common sense have to make up for shortcomings in statistics and apparently unmoveable patterns. Human beings, as intelligent and sensitive decision-makers, thus become more valuable in business.

There is a seemingly insignificant fact that however emphasises clearly the change of paradigm in human resources: the progressive replacement of the expression «human resource management» by «human talent management». This means that people are not considered mere tools anymore but the main capital bringing life, movement and action into any organisation.

Given all this, we could assert that human talent management is the ability of companies and organisations to not only attract, mobilise, engage and develop the most competent and committed professionals, but also to transform individual into organisational talent through an exciting project.

## Proactive policies to foster and use talent

As previously referred, the combination of globalisation and the overall impact of ICT in manufacturing and management make competitiveness

indispensable. This means that public and private companies and organisations need to care for strategies to secure their competitiveness and their social and economic progress in the medium and long term. A whole set of comparative studies reveal that there is hardly any perceived urge to become competitive in this field in our industrial, social and political environment. The clue is to adopt measures encouraging the capacity to innovate and specialise in knowledge-based industries. Urgent measures are needed to foster an entrepreneurial community, basically in emerging sectors, and to count on talent by promoting it.

**Public and private companies and organisations need to care for their competitiveness and their social and economic progress. The clue is to adopt measures encouraging the capacity to innovate and specialise in knowledge-based industries.**

This problem does not affect Catalonia or Spain only, though there are apparent differences. The problem is rather global and affects the whole of Spain to a certain extent. The European Commission estimates that about 400,000 scientists and technologists from the EU are currently working in the United States. A similar piece of work carried out by the Studies Service of La Caixa savings bank reduces this figure to roughly 370,000. Although data collected from the different countries are not homogeneous, making it difficult to draw reliable comparisons, it can be said that countries like Germany, Italy and the Netherlands have a net outflow of about 20% of their national stock; in Spain, it is only 3%. Apart from the US, the leading countries regarding the ratio of researchers on total employment are Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Korea and Switzerland –just to mention a few– all of which are far above the European Union. China, India and other countries are emerging at a strong pace.

To summarise, Europe has exported to the United States the equivalent of one year's output of science and engineering graduates of all its

universities. This is a purely numeric approach that does not account for the quality of emigrated human resources. According to the above-mentioned report, it is presumable that much of the best talent has not left Europe.

A figure that possibly illustrates the increasing US leadership in research refers to the Nobel Prize winners. In the 1900s, 5% were American and 70% European; in 2006 the US took 78% of prizes, while Europe only 5%. No comment.

Although Catalonia has improved its R&D&I expenditure on GDP by 0.2 percentage points in the last six or seven years, it still is below some other Spanish regions and certainly under the EU average.

Do we need to worry? I think so. Our business and academic model is too vulnerable and hardly future-minded. For years we have been building an economic model based on salary advantages that allowed us to welcome immigrants and specialists in traditional, hardly knowledge and innovation-oriented industries. This model has contributed to lower the salary gap between graduate workers and the rest, thus reducing the incentives to go to university and attend permanent education. A study by ANECA proves that Spanish graduates are the worst paid in Europe, only second to the Czech. This is definitely not encouraging! It is not up to public authorities to solve this issue directly, but they ought to enact according policies to foster productive industries.

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As to universities, there is much to do. It is not about regulating more and more things, but to secure recognition of good results and internationally standardised quality. My friend Andrés Pedreño, a full professor of economics at and



former rector of the University of Alicante, wrote in an article published one year ago: «With a lack of quality at universities, brain drain from the European Union, low salary gaps between graduates and non-graduates, no common space and infrastructures for researchers and companies as well as a missing awareness of a relevant social role, universities may increasingly fall into endogamy».

The solution is similar to and consistent with the previous point: few uniformising and compelling legislation, approaches fostering and rewarding competitiveness and success, encouragement of enriching exchange (i.e. mobility)

with universities worldwide and with entrepreneurial and creative environments. Put in other words, acting as a catalyst for change – have *doing things well and in a creative way* pay off.

To finish, I would like to add that we must not mistake things. We shall not make wise (which is also desirable) but talented people: managing talent, commercial talent, technical talent, administrative talent, innovating talent, entrepreneurial talent, marketing talent...

Following Terence, «everyone has their own way; so many men, so many minds».

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He has been the director of the Technical High School of Industrial Engineers of Barcelona, rector of the Polytechnic University of Catalonia and the Open University of Catalonia, director general of Universities and Research and of Science Policy of the Spanish government, vice-president of CIRIT and president of the Barcelona Centre de Disseny (BCD) Foundation.

