'Failed' candidates add to talent pool too

By Sujaya Banerjee

At one organisation I worked, we regularly hired fresh chartered accountants to join as management trainees in the audit department. We would hire them in large numbers and be left with a handful at the end of every 12-18 months. Most of the trainees left for better assignments/roles, as they found audit work repetitive and non-stimulating, especially on the back of three years of audit work they had already completed as a part of their CA articleship.

A new president for the audit team joined soon thereafter and described this as insanity — doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting a new outcome each time. His frustration forced us to go back to the drawing board to explore new solutions to build talent pipelines for the audit function.

The exercise proved to be an eye-opener as we began exploring all the alternate talent pools available to us across entry levels from inside and outside the organisation. Externally, we had commerce graduates and those with master's in commerce as available pools, and we could also perhaps consider more CAs for the next-level roles. We listed the following:

* Engineers already familiar with the plants' operations could be included through the internal job posting process

* QA/QC or procurement executives who may want a career in audit

* CAs already in the system who would want to explore joining mid-level positions

* BCom and MCom graduates who generally have no placement support in college

We brainstormed till we suddenly hit upon an interesting talent pool we had not considered before — CA 'inter-fail'! This group is large in India, given the stringent pass marks in the CA exams, and has no real career opportunities in except accounting-related jobs. We clarified with our talent-acquisition teams that we would treat them as graduates with 3-plus years of work experience and immediately set about finding this group. We hired 20 in the first year and soon hit a treasure trove. This pool was mature, diligent with great humility to learn and deliver results. We had a great experience and 100% retention in Year 1. We had now tasted blood.

We hired another 30 in the next year and this became a great success story of new talent contribution and retention. This experience urged us to question the stigma of 'Failed' on many who attempt competitive exams and don't pass tests for coveted programmes like IIT-JEE, CAT and UPSC.

What happens to the large numbers who fail these exams every year? Even worse, what about the ones who attempt these exams several times and are not successful. If we remove the stigma and our bias of failure, it is imminently possible to find people with aspiration, with otherwise great academic records, good critical thinking, analytical thinking capability, general knowledge and good communication skills. What's more, many are humbled by the experience of having failed and are open to new learning opportunities and alternate careers. In fact, early wins in their new careers can quickly lift confidence levels that have taken a beating with repeated failure experiences.

Every year, 12 lakh of the 14 lakh candidates who attempt IIT-JEE do not clear the JEE Main. The cut-off for JEE Main is often 100 — How normal does that sound? CAT has about 2 lakh exam takers, out of which 5,000 pass to make it to some IIMs and 5,000 make it to other leading MBA schools. There are other entrance programmes for various streams that also have stringent cut-offs, with large numbers not making it to the programmes they intended to join. Despite this, the latest India Skills Report indicates only 46.21% of graduates and post-graduates are employable from these talent pools. In fact, it also indicates that at least 40% of the employable management students remain invisible to recruiters because they lie beyond the top 1,000 campuses. Also, interestingly, the report indicates that at least 60% of management graduates do not make it to deserving jobs as they lack the appropriate levels of English needed. There are various reasons attributed to poor employability, ranging from K12 education, selection procedure to graduate colleges, curriculum, quality of teaching, student interest and the lack of corporate involvement.

Unfortunately, most of these reasons have a huge part to play in this challenge that has no quick and easy solutions. Most graduates/post-graduates are left to their own devices to improve if there is sufficient awareness around the gaps to enhance their employability quotient.

Robust entry-level programmes offered by employers can help, but many organisations do not invest in these development efforts and leave new talent to their own devices to learn on the job.

At entry levels, employers broadly look for a mix of aptitude, language, personality and domain skills in selecting the right candidate. The detailed fine-tuning normally happens based on the job role they may be hiring for. College learning outcomes rated as most important are oral communication, critical thinking, ethical judgment, working effectively in teams, written communication and the real-world application of skills and knowledge.

Interestingly, these attributes can be developed better through a liberal arts programme rather than the technical, science, math courses that we have come to value to the exclusion of other streams.

A diverse workforce is a catalyst for growth

Conscious and unconscious biases, trapped in old thinking and past practices, may well be in your way if you find yourself with a too narrow a talent pool. It is time to throw out the uncreative, plug-and-play hiring, and open your organisation to well-considered, inclusive and innovative hiring approaches that can reap richer dividends:

* Foster a culture that embraces diversity in a powerful way to attract great employees. Up to 67% of job searchers want to work for companies that have a diverse workforce. Especially the 'woke millennial' generation values this to consider you a contemporary employer

* Organisations need to deliberately reach out to diverse pools that can bring socio-cognitive diversity (people with different education, exposures, experiences, religious beliefs). Gender, generational diversities, persons with disabilities — many of which will need to be deliberately sought until we strengthen these talent pools in society

* Consider diverse interview panelists as well to represent the diversity you want to see in the workplace

Conscious and unconscious biases are more significantly in our way than we would like to admit. Community, socio-economic class, appearance, education, past failures and our likes/dislikes and experiences with this can very significantly come in the way of giving people opportunities. Constant awareness training and communication around the theme of biases and leaders' role-modelling inclusion is a powerful way of combating this.

Here's how you can stop expeditious hiring by not repeating past patterns and old thinking — look for hidden talent to expand the pool:

* Deliberately explore education streams and disciplines you have not hired before. Focus on the attributes you need most for the job and identify talent pools who could deliver to these attributes or could be trained easily, if you had no past policy/practice/resource constraints to access them. Explore, experiment, include!

* Veterans/retirees are a good pool to explore even as we are heading to become the youngest talent pool in the world. Experienced retirees are often knowledgeable, disciplined, committed people, and now — with increased life expectancy and longevity — can become great mentors to talent and a great pool to pick from

* Seasoned gig workers in addition to talent-on-demand — this labour pool can save employers cost and can deliver high-quality services with greater flexibility

* Apprenticeship programmes can offer a good source of entry-level talent that can be groomed and prepared through backward integration to create a robust talent pipeline through offering on-the-job-training exposures

* Customers, not current, but if you know of their talent and they know & like your organisation and there are no conflicts of interest, then why not?

* If you exclude 50% of your talent pool, no wonder you find yourself in a war for talent. While most organisations are making commendable efforts to attract entry-level female talent, including lateral hiring, there is a challenge of both availability and inclusion, which are symbiotically linked to each other. More deliberate actions in this space can increase the talent pool and

Enhancing inclusion in the workplace and making this a pre-condition to leadership positions, both internally and while hiring, can help increase retention and enable organisations accrue the many benefits of a diverse workforce — increased productivity, teamwork, creativity and innovation. Here are some good questions to ask to get started:

* What are our organisation's definitions of ability, competence, performance?

* How can we deliberately create an inclusive culture?

* How can we keep our brand promise of being an equal opportunities employer?

* How can we redefine our hiring policies and practices to remove biases trapped in past habits?

* Can we consider revisiting the education criteria we have defined for our jobs, so we can explore new talent pools not considered? (Failures from competitive exams; candidates who don't speak good English (English can be learned!); persons with disability)

* Can we ask diverse employees for suggestions on improving initiatives for attracting more diverse talent?

* Can we consider late-career progressions and figure out how to include talented women through flexible schedules on the gig economy?

Talent acquisition is a powerful mechanism for not only changing the culture of your organisation by including new groups and providing new opportunities, but also shaping the society. Talent is abundantly present, if only we moved out of the quagmire of past habits and deficit narrow thinking, to find fresh treasure troves of real talent.

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