



Sustainable Employment of Gifted Workers

Gifted people exhibit many characteristics that make them valuable employees in an organization. How can an employer leverage the natural focus and drive of a gifted employee? Let's take a closer look at the theory of positive psychology and see what insights it provides.

Who are the gifted?

At the Gifted Adults Foundation we use the broad description that was drafted by a panel of twenty Dutch experts in 2008:

Quick and clever thinkers who like to deal with complex matters. They are autonomous, passionate, inquisitive, sensitive and emotionally rich individuals who live intensely. They enjoy being creative.

(Kooijman-van Thiel, M. (red.), 2008).

Giftedness in the workplace

Gifted people exhibit characteristics which can be very useful for employers. On the positive side, they see connections between seemingly separated topics, are creative in finding practical solutions, and are full of ideas and energy. Often, they are independent thinkers who have a high standard for quality and integrity. They work very autonomously with clear targets. They are highly sensitive and thus pick up signals quickly. Once engaged, they are very dedicated. On the contrary, these gifted characteristics may also present challenges in the workplace. Employees who operate differently than their co-workers can struggle when interacting with others in the workplace. If the gifted worker is expected to conform to workplace norms this might lead to problems. Misunderstandings can result from their extreme drive to pursue their own path, their high standards, and tendency to become easily irritated. When an employee constantly can not find a way to use their positive characteristics in an effective way, the situation does not improve and this can lead to frustration. Frustration leads to absenteeism, disengagement or burn-out, which can result in unnecessary work conflicts. In many cases, this leads to the departure of a valuable employee.

Sustainable Employability and Positive Psychology

Sustainable employability means that employees are working in a stable, healthy and motivating work environment. In order for sustainable employment to work, the most effective solution is to focus on people's strengths instead of trying to fix their shortcomings or solve problems born in the workplace (like conflicts and burn out). Positive psychology is the science of well-being and optimal functioning. Positive psychology in the work place focuses on encouraging people's strengths, inspiration and happiness. Inspiration is an important theme, as it highly correlates with well-being, the retention of employees and productivity. Engaged gifted employees are often highly driven when they are placed in a job that utilizes and values their individual talents. Every manager should ask him-/herself: how can I increase my employee's strengths or inspire him/her? And how will he/she flourish the most?

Recommendations for Supervisors

Based on the knowledge of gifted adults and insights from positive psychology, we offer the following insights and recommendations to supervisors in their contacts with gifted workers:

Attention on Values

- Integrity, honesty, trustworthiness, fairness and justice are highly valued by gifted people. When these values are not respected, they can react strongly.

Work Content and Environment

- Provide enough possibilities for growth and development. Gifted people need much more challenge than average. Being bored can lead to counterproductive behaviors.
- Many gifted people function better in a strategic rather than an executive role. They do not like routines and protocols.
- Gifted people are often great in developing, creating or initiating research, and in solving complex problems. They can see the big picture, and connections. Their capacity for pointing out what's wrong can irritate others, but can be very valuable in improving an organization's governance too.
- Many gifted people are perfectionists. For some tasks this may be an advantage, but gifted individuals may also get so lost in the details that they do not end up finishing the task. The goal and the boundaries of the task in terms of available time and resources should be clear to them beforehand.

Working Relations and Guidance

- Giftedness often comes with high sensitivity to sensory stimuli, like sensitivity to light, sound, smell, and/or touch. A quiet work environment helps gifted workers to work productively and happily.
- Gifted professionals are intrinsically motivated to perform their work and meet their own high standards. Work with employees to develop goals and allow them to determine how to get there. Too much control will make them feel undervalued and they can get discouraged in the end.
- Some gifted workers tend to make an assignment bigger than necessary because they see so many connections. Sometimes their wide interests lead them down the wrong path. They may need guidance regarding choices and focus.
- In order to stimulate a gifted (and any other) person's creativity, problem solving skills and intelligence, create open, equal communication. This also applies when a gifted worker has problems with the job or working relationships.
- Do not slow down a gifted worker. Gifted people may seem to possess an unlimited amount of energy, but when their enthusiasm is drained by boring activities, their engagement and productivity certainly will drop.
- Make clear that collaboration between all employees (gifted or not) is important and encourage teams to find their own way of working together.
- When a gifted worker approaches you with feedback and recommendations, do not reject these. Question further to get the details. Ask others to help with implementation.

References

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