

Labour Disputes of Gifted Employees

Ido van der Waal

Altena Advice group, The Netherlands

Noks Nauta

Gifted Adults Foundation, The Netherlands

Rebecca Lindhout

The Netherlands

Abstract

This article describes a study on labour disputes of gifted people. Fifty-five gifted people, who have had one or more labour disputes, which resulted in their staying at home and filling out an online survey. Face-to-face interviews were held with seven respondents with more than two labour disputes. In this article, we describe the results of the interviews. There were two major differences between gifted people's conflicts and those of the non-gifted. First, for the gifted people, the source of the conflict was a matter of job discontentment and/or unwelcomed open criticism about processes within the organisation. They saw what went wrong and talked about it. Second, the conflict developed over a long period of time in a more rational and non-emotional manner, comparable to the qualities of a cold conflict. Many respondents saw a clear relationship between their giftedness and their dispute(s) at work. More investigation is needed in order to compare these results to the results of non-gifted people and to further explore the relationship between giftedness and labour disputes.

Keywords: Labour disputes; gifted employee; job discontentment; cold conflict.

Introduction

Gifted employees are often thought to be difficult to work with; they don't adjust very well and may experience conflict more rapidly, and perhaps more intensely. But is that really the case? Do they really have more labour disputes, and do these disputes have specific characteristics? Are there any recognisable differences between labour disputes for gifted and non-gifted people? No reliable literature on this subject was found to answer these questions and no study has been conducted about the labour disputes of gifted people. However, there is a lot of casuistic data within the community of the gifted (Nauta & Corten, 2002; Nauta & Ronner, 2007, 2008). Practical experiences among the gifted from mailing lists within Mensa, from workshops and other gatherings of gifted people indicate almost all labour disputes were with supervisors, and issues with the prevention and resolution of them. Also, these labour disputes have often led to extensive damage to the health, career and private life of individuals.

Noticing the large number of experiences and the serious consequences of them, provided an incentive to find out if gifted employees have structural problems regarding labour disputes and if so, could these structural problems be influenced in order to prevent them from happening? The results of a study on this subject could help gifted employees recognise potential conflicts at an earlier stage; thereby, preventing escalation, or, preferably, preventing a dispute altogether. The information gained from this type of study could give supervisors, HR managers and mediators a lot of relevant knowledge. The predominant research question was: *What do gifted employees themselves have to say about the labour disputes which they have been through?*

The current study was exploratory in nature, with no control group of non-gifted employees questioned. General knowledge on labour disputes was used, and prior to the study general information on labour disputes in The Netherlands was examined. A definition of gifted employees and why this group requires explicit attention was presented.

Background information

Labour disputes

The term 'labour dispute' means the following: "Two individuals, one individual and a group, or two groups within the confines of a labour organisation, have a labour dispute if at least one of the parties thinks that the other frustrates or annoys them. This may relate to job content, working relations, working conditions or working terms." This definition was created by Van de Vliert (1989).

Reliable literature on the number of labour disputes in The Netherlands in general was not available. Most recent information was included in a publication by TNO (Van Putten, 1996). This publication states that approximately between 70,000 to 100,000 labour disputes occur per year. On the Internet, estimates can be found that around 90,000 people reported in sick per year due to a labour conflict. It was also reported that according to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment 3 to 4 % of the people whose illness was a direct result of a labour dispute go on to receive a disability benefit. The source for these figures was not found; however, they were first mentioned in a 2001 speech by Minister Hoogervorst.

The financial implications for employers are extensive, especially if there is prolonged absenteeism and / or legal proceedings; pay-outs mentioned range from 45,000 to 50,000 euro.

Regarding the content of the labour disputes, a division into four conflict spheres as described by Ritsema van Eck and Huguenin (1993) was selected.

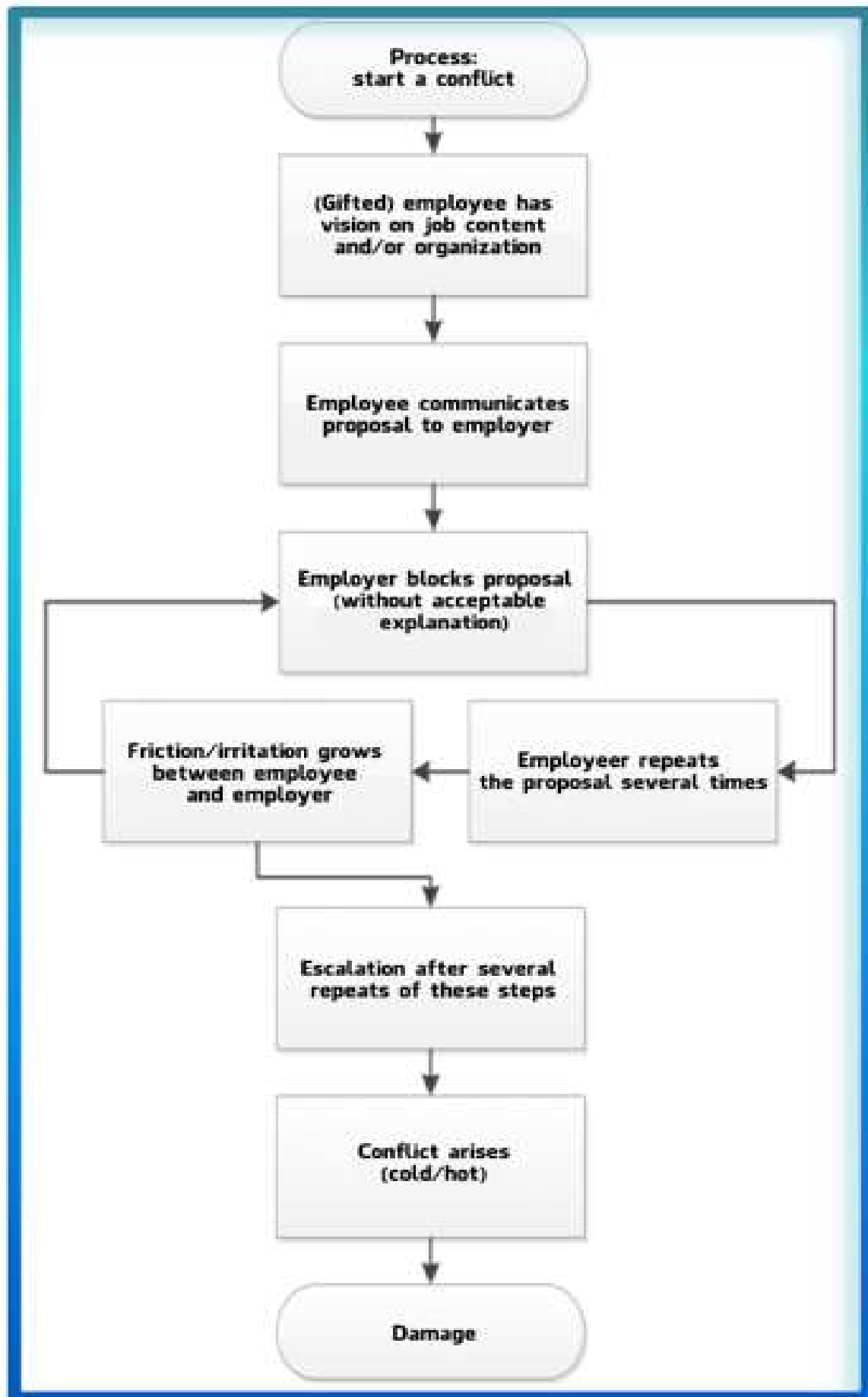
1. Job and organisation sphere;
2. Social emotional sphere;
3. Identity, vision and insights sphere; and
4. Interests sphere.

1. In the job and organisation sphere, the cause of the dispute may lay in the lack of organisation, too much or too little work, unclear structure, etc.;
2. Causes of dispute in the social emotional sphere lay in the interpersonal contact, like having different opinions on issues outside the direct working sphere, likes and dislikes between colleagues etc.;
3. The labour disputes occurring in the sphere of identity, vision and insights are mostly about a conflict in value systems, human nature; these cannot be solved rationally; and
4. Conflicts of interest will occur for example when existing (organisational) compromises in the cooperation no longer work and irreconcilable conflicts of interest arise.

Interaction and overlap occur between and amongst the different spheres of conflict, and it is usually difficult to understand in which sphere the labour dispute had initially risen.

In a study of types of labour disputes (Hubert and Veerman, 2002) no literature was found which was showing to what extent certain conflict issues occur more than others. Quote: 'Occurrence of the different conflict issues is hard to determine, because a dispute is usually made up of different conflict issues. It is often not clear what the conflict is really about. Is it about the fact that someone is not being paid enough (interest in scarce resources), that he/she (the employee) doesn't feel appreciated (identity sphere), or the fact that the employee feels that the boss is abusing his/her power (the sphere of social emotional conflicts). The unravelling of conflicts and resolving the disputes to the actual conflict issue is a difficult profession exercised by mediators.'

To clarify development of a labour dispute, the manifestation of the conflict was described. The manifestation can clearly and recognisably be described as a hot or cold conflict (Glasl, 1990). Hot conflicts are characterized by violent verbal outbursts, 'rising temperatures' and escalating behaviour. Cold conflicts often play off in the background, involve less visible emotion, are usually long and drawn-out, and are therefore a war of attrition, which will eventually lead to sickness.



Gifted people

In this publication, the term 'gifted' means people who fit the description of the gifted in the so-called Delphi model of giftedness (Kooijman-van Thiel, 2008): 'A quick and intelligent thinker who can handle complex cases; Autonomous, curious and passionate by nature; A sensitive and emotional person, intensely alive; He or she enjoys being creative'. This is an existential description for which no valid measuring instrument exists at this moment.

We therefore choose to compose the research group of people who are members of Mensa (they have scored in the top 2% on a valid IQ test which is the admission limit for Mensa) and non-members of Mensa who also scored in the top 2% on a valid IQ test. This group can be called "highly intelligent people" in the strict sense of the word.

Until ten years ago, hardly any attention was paid to gifted adults. It was thought that they were so smart that they would be able to look after themselves. For a large number of gifted adults this is true, but it turns out not to be the case for all of them. A child who never learnt to deal with his or her special qualities can't be assumed to handle them correctly as an adult.

Many case descriptions (Nauta & Corten, 2002, Nauta & Ronner, 2007; Nauta & Ronner, 2008; Ronner & Nauta, 2010) report that gifted people can encounter all kinds of pitfalls and that a number of them need professional help to deal with those pitfalls. Many of these issues are comparable to what is seen in gifted children and are related to problems connecting with others and the fact that many facilities like schools and also jobs cater to people of average intelligence. Where a gifted child can become bored, a severe boredom and depression may develop, also known as bore out, similar to that of gifted adults. Where the gifted child can display behavioural problems, this can also be seen in adults, which can ultimately lead to conflicts. Some gifted adults may react by withdrawing and may exhibit stress-related complaints.

Being aware of one's giftedness will lead to better connections with others and more happiness in life in many cases. Knowledge and skills in this area are also important for teachers and professional people, such as psychologists, labour and insurance physicians and mediators. Reliable quantitative research on gifted adults is not available. The University of Utrecht Work and Organisational Psychology has studied a large group of gifted people in the context of a study of work experience. The results of this study will become available in 2014.

Methods

A preliminary investigation based on an online written survey was used to gather general information about gifted people with one or more labour conflicts in which they reported in sick and stayed home. The results of this survey will be published elsewhere. A group of seven gifted persons with more than two labour conflicts were approached for a face-to-face interview, and the information gathered in these interviews was used for this article.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed up by the first two authors based on the research question in order to gain insight into the frequency of labour conflicts, the kind of labour conflicts, and the question on whether there is a relationship between the conflicts and being gifted. The questionnaire contained questions about personal characteristics, and information about education and work, as well as questions about the number of labour conflicts experienced, the cause of these conflicts and the outcome. There were also a number of open questions in which the interviewees could elaborate on their experiences.

The link to the questionnaire was posted in LinkedIn groups of the Dutch Mensa group as well as in the 'Discover your giftedness' group in the spring of 2011. In total 41 members of Mensa and 11 others responded. The number of members of these LinkedIn groups was respectively 1000 and 500.

Interviews

The respondents selected for interviews had two or more labour conflicts in order to deepen the understanding of the research question. These criteria applied to nine respondents. With the information gained from these respondents, the study investigated the differences and similarities between the different labour conflicts.

The interview was semi-structured and consisted of an item list of basic questions to which the interviewee was asked to elaborate. The questions were mostly based on dozens of years of experience in mediation where all mediation efforts were preceded by an initial interview. Questions were posed about cause, consequence, systemic influences and special characteristics. The division into four conflict spheres by Ritsema van Eck and Huguenin (1993) was used, and a question was posed about the difference between a hot and a cold conflict, and the resulting escalation phase. The item list interviews are included in Appendix 1. The interviews were recorded, and completely transcribed, and were then analysed by the research team. The results of both studies were discussed in two meetings.

From September 2011 until March 2012 seven interviews were held. Two of the nine individuals approached did not respond to e-mail invitations and did not indicate why. The interviews were conducted by the first author and lasted on average over an hour. The interviews were recorded on a voice recorder and typed out verbatim by the third author.

The entire research team read the interviews and discussed the results in two meetings.

Ethical issues

We gave the interviewees full information on the study and the aims of this study. The interviewees all consented on the voice recorder that their interview was recorded. They all received the typed version of their own interview by e-mail and could react on it, which none of them did. We told them that we would use their data anonymously and that only the three researchers would see the whole interview and the names of the interviewees. We also offered to send them the articles about our study when ready.

Study group

The study group was made up of two men and five women, ages ranging from 35 to 63, and two of the interviewees had a managerial position. Of the seven interviewees six had IQ test scores in the top 2%, and the seventh interviewee identified himself completely in the description of a gifted person.

Results

The seven interviewees demonstrated characteristics that tend to come to the forefront mostly in conflict issues, the person whom the conflict is with, the development of the conflict, the communication and the nature of the conflicts. We also examined the outcome of the conflicts. An explanation of the various characteristics is included.

Conflict issues

The conflict of the interviewees almost always started in the same way. The gifted employee had an insight that he or she wanted to share with their supervisor. It was most often related to job content or an organisational matter where the employees felt, or rather was quite convinced, that their insight might help improve the organisation. The conflict was therefore placed in the realm of job and organisation.

Who is the conflict with?

In all cases the conflict was with the direct supervisor.

Development of the conflicts

The gifted employee's insight was sometimes brought as a proposal, but sometimes postulated and communicated as a given. A different opinion was quite impossible from the viewpoint of the gifted employee because there could be no other opinion based on the facts. They were just very certain that this was the case and something needed to be done.

The interviewees indicated that in this phase they were met with a lot of incomprehension. Sometimes because of the way the subject was put forth, unfriendly or inappropriately, but also because the supervisor really did not understand what it was about. The employees felt as if they were swimming upstream. This struggle could create such a strong feeling of powerlessness for some interviewees that they searched for other ways of conveying their message. Sometimes a person at a higher level in the organisation was involved, or legal rules were used to force the issue. In these cases there was no longer any form of cooperation, but only forceful behaviour. And ultimately an impasse was created and with that a labour conflict was born.

Communication

What struck the most during the interviews were the passion, the intensity, and the conviction of the employee when it came to advising the organisation on the content. Intrinsic motivation seemed to be the source of the energy that presented these insights to the company. Therefore, all interviewees demonstrated a lack of understanding if their well-meant advice was ignored.

Kinds of conflict

The conflicts developed as cold conflicts for all the interviewees. They were long term conflicts that started out as business rather than emotional conflicts.

Results of the conflicts

Health issues were frequent: the seven interviewees named health issues as the explicit consequences of the conflict. The health issues mentioned ranged from burn-out, being emotionally exhausted, depression, stress complaints, lack of confidence and back problems.

As a result of the conflict, four out of the seven people were forced to stop working for the employer. They were either fired or quit themselves after realising the conflict would never be solved in a healthy manner. Also, four people, three of whom have stopped working for the employer, experienced a significant loss in their incomes.

At the time of the interview, three interviewees were on financial benefits, and two were forced to stop working and one resigned from his job.

Absenteeism was also seen as a result. Three interviewees mentioned this as a result. Two of the people on financial benefits are currently in a situation of long-term absenteeism, more than two years.

All seven interviewees were disappointed and felt discouraged about their paid work for an employer.

In summary, the consequences of the conflicts were considerable, both in private life and in health and income.

Quote

Some typical quotes from the interviews:

"I began to notice during work meetings that the things I said were completely ignored. There was just no response."

An example comparing the conflict to a tennis game: "I confront people with their weaknesses. I just used to return all balls, causing the opponent to make a mistake and for me to win the game. The opponent didn't think this was a proper game of tennis and refused to shake my hand afterwards."

"The labour dispute builds slowly and continuously."

"The feeling of injustice and the way things were done are things that are very important to me and to which I react very strongly."

“I think I have a certain awkwardness. Not being able to manipulate very well or not manoeuvring well in social interaction.”

“I always end up in a conflict with supervisors.”

“I notice something and say something about that. In my view I tell them in a gentle way first. Then after that, I tell them maybe in a way that is too direct and which creates a conflict.”

“Yes, it builds up. Initially unknown makes unloved, but at a certain point, if you’re not careful, you become the one that is always on the barricades or giving criticism or telling them you know better.”

Discussion

This survey was conducted to gain more insight into the labour disputes of gifted employees. The interviewees were suited to an exploratory survey, and for a qualitative study, the number of seven interviewees was sufficient. The focus was on people with multiple conflicts which resulted in them staying home sick, which made the problems for these people all the more important.

Some of the research team had knowledge and experience with giftedness, and some of them had none. Many discussions on the results led to an agreement on the pattern that was discovered. A follow-up study will be necessary to indicate if this is consistent with the findings of other researchers.

Although the study was exploratory and descriptive in nature, the question still arises whether differences can be seen between conflicts of gifted employees compared to conflicts of employees who are not gifted.

As a full-time employment mediator, the first author has decades of experience with hundreds of labour disputes. After comparing his experiences and the results of this study, the research team thought that the content of conflicts and the structure of conflicts for gifted employees are markedly different from average employees. Much was written about labour disputes in general by Kenneth Cloke, Director of the Center for Dispute Resolution (see for instance Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011). In our opinion this supports our conclusions.

The highly motivated and consistent giving of unrequested task-oriented or organisational advice is rarely seen as the basis of a conflict in the mediation practice. It was also striking that gifted employees mainly have cold conflicts in which emotions are less in the forefront. This can be explained because the conflicts are mostly about the content of the work and the employment was never in question. Many of the participants in the study reported they remained calm for a very long time. The research team found this to be a very interesting finding in relation to the average employee.

Conclusions and recommendations

The main question of this survey: “What do labour disputes of gifted employees look like?” was answered based on written questionnaires and oral interviews by recognising characteristics of gifted employees in the research group. The characteristics seen in the interviewees were examined closely and were confirmed.

In short, the gifted employees that were surveyed picked up very quickly what was not working efficiently in their organisation, or which tasks were not being executed correctly, and this gave the gifted employee an unstoppable urge to make this known. Apparently this was expressed very ineffectively, too intensely and too passionately, because in this group of surveyed employees it led to one or more conflicts.

The content and the course of the conflict of this group of gifted employees was remarkable when compared to what is known about labour disputes in general. An additional model is presented to illustrate the development of labour disputes of gifted employees noted in this study.

- 1) Process: Start of conflict;
- 2) (Gifted) employee has an insight into a task and/or organisational area;
- 3) Employee communicates a proposal for change to his/her supervisor;
- 4) Proposal is blocked by supervisor, without satisfactory justification;
- 5) Friction/irritation is created between supervisor and employee;
- 6) Employee repeats the proposal several times;
- 7) Escalation after several repeats of proposal;
- 8) A conflict starts (cold/hot); and
- 9) Repercussions (damage).

These conclusions led to the following recommendations:

For gifted employees

- Recognise the outlined patterns and recognise the pitfalls you've fallen into based on your strengths/weaknesses. Learn to communicate in a different, more effective way. For example:
- Ask more questions and don't present a conclusion and solution immediately; this allows you to follow the thought process of the other person and assess whether there is effective communication.
- Avoid the role of the expert and only making statements; reacting to statements or to someone in an expert role doesn't leave the other person much room for his or her own reaction. The communication will shift from the content to the relationship (social and emotional sphere).
- Give others the space and time to follow your train of thought; the other will need time to assess the issue on its merits. Unnecessary pressure will often result in a negative reaction that is not on topic.
- Prevent loss of face or loss of reputation of the other person; in all cultures this is a serious issue and the working relationship can suffer irreparable damage by this.
- Ask for help if necessary. Through coaching on the job and a lot of practice you can learn more effective behaviour.
- Make sure that a budding conflict doesn't escalate. Rather, try to prevent the conflict. Be aware that a conflict is costly to all parties, both in the material and immaterial realm, so ask for help in time.

For supervisors

Based on the pattern of conflict described in this study above you could possibly recognise gifted employees. Further research needs to be done, because based on this study it cannot be said conclusively that the pattern we signalled was exclusive to gifted employees. If you believe your employee could be gifted, it is wise to keep this in mind during discussions, and if necessary get help from someone who knows more about giftedness. Gifted employees can be extremely valuable to an organisation. They are often creative and innovative (Corten, Nauta & Ronner, 2006), but in order to bring these talents to the forefront and make them blossom some work environments are better suited than others.

For mediators

If you recognise the pattern described in this article in a labour dispute, then you could consider if this could be a gifted employee and point this out. If possible find a professional with expertise in this area.

Having more information about the labour disputes of gifted employees can help in reducing the number of conflicts these employees have, and reduce the escalation, and hopefully also prevent the occurrence. This will be of benefit to all parties involved. Both in terms of welfare and well-being and also in material aspects. Moreover, the talents of this group of employees can be used more effectively, and this can benefit all of society.

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About the Authors

Noks Nauta, MD and psychologist, PhD. Since 2000 active in the field of gifted adults, especially in relationship to their work. She has written articles, books and teaches workshops on giftedness in adults.

Rebecca Lindhout is safety expert and process advisor. She helps companies in questions of safety and health, gives advice on improving internal processes of quality and safety. She also studies psychology at Open University The Netherlands.

Addresses

Ido van der Waal;

Alexine Tinnepad 89, 2553 TS Den Haag;
The Netherlands.
e-Mail: ijvdwaal@altena-ned.nl

Noks Nauta;

Timorstraat 31, 2612 EH Delft;
The Netherlands.
e-Mail: noksnauta@ihbv.nl

Rebecca Lindhout;

Alkenoord 212;
2903 XH Capelle a/d IJssel;
The Netherlands.
e-Mail: rebeccalindhout@qure.org

Appendix (1)

Item list/ Interview questions for gifted employees

1. Can you briefly explain more about each of the conflicts that we will discuss in this interview? Who were the people involved (or who was involved) and what were the consequences (for each conflict)?
2. What started the conflicts in your opinion?
 - a. Reason?
 - b. What is the first (in)tense feeling you can remember about this conflict?
 - c. Has anything happened previously that is related to the conflict?

Classification of type of conflict: job and organisation sphere/social emotional sphere/identity, vision and insights sphere/ interests sphere (Ritsema and Van Eck, 1993)

3. Can you tell us something about the structure and or development of the conflict? (For each conflict: escalation phases, cold or warm conflict?)
4. Do you see similarities and/or differences between the conflicts?
5. Looking back to your childhood and education for example, do you see characteristics or events that could have influenced the conflicts mentioned before?
6. Can you explain which characteristics of being gifted have played a role in the conflict? What is different from people who are not gifted?
7. What do you think are the repercussions? (in your private life and at work)?
8. What do you think should have been done to prevent or solve the conflicts?
9. What did you think of this interview?
 - a. What did you learn from this interview?