

# The Rise of the Roberts

Why cloning talented people isn't the answer to great talent strategy

ORION GUIDE



**ORION**  
Transforming HR

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# 'Just give me more Bobs'

**What if you could clone your best people?  
It's what every manager secretly wishes  
they could do; a heartfelt response to the  
bewildering array of complex talent  
'interventions' and performance management  
initiatives that try to address what seems to  
be a remarkably straightforward problem.  
'Take Bob' they say, 'he's my best guy. I wish  
I had ten more like him. If you could just clone  
Bob for me, I'd be happy.'**

# So what if you could clone Bob?

**Imagine for a moment Genes-R-U's, a rapidly growing life sciences company, constrained only by their inability to find the best people in the industry. After a meeting of the board, Genes-R-U's takes the bold decision to solve its talent crisis by cloning their best guy. The choice of who to clone is easy; Bob is a brilliant young life scientist with an acute commercial focus and an obsessive attention to detail. He is the obvious candidate and Genes-R-U's quickly clone an entire new workforce of Bobs.**

At first, everything goes well. The new Bobs assimilate quickly and Bob finds he can communicate well with himself. Consultation periods are dramatically reduced because Bob always agrees with what Bob thinks. The Bobs don't waste time on unproductive debates about the best way to do things because Bob already knows the best way and Bob's deep technical capabilities and knowledge of the business lead to massive increases in productivity and profitability within the first few weeks.

But, gradually, it dawns on the board that all is not quite right. Despite the growth in production, Genes-R-U's begin to lose deals. Subtle new technological advances have given their competitors the edge and Genes-R-U's haven't kept pace. Of course, keeping track of new technology had never been Bob's strong point. But then he always had someone to do that for him.

Things quickly go from bad to worse when Bob and his team attempt to brainstorm their way out of the problem. All the Bobs rely on the tried and tested methods that worked for them in the past. But the paradigm has shifted and Genes-R-U's find themselves in a hopelessly declining spiral with a workforce that is unable to adapt.

As the receivers hammer on the boardroom door, the senior executives realise, too late, that the cloning idea was probably not one of their best.

# What should Genes-R-Us have done instead?

**Cloning your staff either biologically or by managerial means is never a good idea. You can understand why it's tempting. But in trying to clone success, Genes-R-Us killed off diversity, flexibility and innovation in their workforce – the very ingredients on which success relies.**

So what should they have done instead?

# Think personalities not person

**Well, Genes R Us did do one thing right, they looked for the best people in their business. Their error was to stop at the person, and not to go one deeper to find *the underlying factors that make that person successful. And this is the crucial difference in our opinion.***

The way to make sure your organisation maintains the right talent is not to create doppelgangers of successful people already in the business. It's to understand the qualities that have enabled them to be successful in your business and copy these. At Orion Partners we call these your 'success attributes'.

Once you pinpoint the success attributes you can fill your company with people that possess them, while still leaving room for individual personalities, diversity and imagination in your workforce.

In short, you get a workforce with the capability, imagination and capacity of a Bob, but with a constant stream of fresh thinking, ideas and energy that can keep your business going long after Bob himself has moved upstairs to the boardroom.

**Who are your best and what makes them successful?**

The good news is that you don't need to look outside the company for inspiration. In your most successful people you already have examples of the talent and capabilities you're looking for.

# Find 4 or 5, not 45

**Of course, pinpointing success attributes is easier said than done. Bob, for example, has lots of elements to his personality that help him get on with his work. He's organised, he's methodical, he's commercially focussed – but he's also quirky, a bit geeky. Which ones are the attributes you're looking for in your future leaders and which are just bits of Bob?**

Simply listing all of Bob's skills doesn't work (anyone that's been part of a recruitment process knows how unhelpful a list of 45 'key skills' is in reality – and anyway, if you succeeded in finding someone with them all you'd be back to a Bob clone again).

Instead, we think the key is looking for the exemplars in your business who are already operating in a way that will create future success, then to look for 4 or 5 key attributes that they all share. Once the key people have been identified interview them to understand not just their skills but also their way of thinking, their purpose, beliefs and mindset.

## Ask questions like:

- Purpose:** *What drives them?*
- Beliefs:** *What are their values?*
- Mindset:** *What capabilities do they use?*
- Behavioural:** *How do they actually work?*
- Environment:** *How do they use the talent levers available?*

Common patterns might be around the way they're motivated, or a particularly strong sense of purpose. It may be the way they manage relationships or a particular type of insight they bring to the table that makes everyone else think differently about problems. These are the sorts of things you're after.

# Create red threads

**In a way, cloning Bob was effectively an ultra-fast form of recruitment. Genes R Us were looking for a silver bullet to sort their problem – and they're not the first company to opt for recruitment to provide it.**

But here's the thing just relying on recruitment when it comes to talent is the equivalent of throwing money at the problem at 6 o'clock on Christmas Eve – it smacks of desperation. Instead, there are at least five different levers in a good talent strategy: compensation, development, performance and culture as well as recruitment; Genes R Us should have used them all.

## Join the dots

*It's amazing how often we've seen people get recruited to do one thing, rewarded for doing another, and then trained in something altogether unrelated. Simply using all the talent levers isn't enough either. Genes R Us also needed to make sure they were all being used to achieve the same goal.*

One of the great benefits of having a success profile is that, because of its simplicity, it enables you to notice gaps in the continuity of your talent levers. For example, if one element of your success profile is about being highly collaborative, you can make sure you recruit people with those skills, you develop those skills among the workforce, and you then reward them for using them.

Ironing out these inconsistencies develops what we call 'red threads' through your talent strategy. It creates much greater clarity to the business about what HR is doing and provides greater leverage of your resources.



## Think people, process and infrastructure

Of course, it's impossible to have red threads running through the different parts of your talent strategy if the levers don't talk to each other. It's essential to have an integrated technology solution to manage all the different talent levers you have at your disposal. From every perspective – cost, effectiveness, speed, simplicity – it's the best way of getting the most bang for your buck.

Alongside infrastructure, our experience has shown it's just as important to think about the processes and people involved with your talent strategy.

Simply put on the people side, it's essential that HR and line-managers are equipped to support people that display their organisation's key success attributes – otherwise there's no point in going through the rigmarole of finding them in the first place. It's important to ask yourself if your processes support what your exemplars need to be successful and are consistent with the culture they need to be most successful?

**Recent research suggests that integration across the five levers of talent improves business execution by a third:** *As is so often the case, integration of the talent levers relies not just on what your organisation does, but how you do it. Successful organisations have a particular way of going about their business – something we investigated in our recent piece of research, 'The How Factor'.*

# More haste, less success

**Without wishing to completely rubbish Genes R Us, the way they went about delivering their talent solution was all wrong, too.**

One-stop solutions are no substitute for a proper delivery plan. That's not to say change can't be quick with a plan in place, but it means the change will be properly thought-through and better embedded – so when the initial burst of change activity dies down, the changes you want to see stick don't die with it.

We could mention a whole host of things when it comes to delivery. The delivery of talent strategy is essentially a change project and by and large needs strong change leadership, the need to manage the brain's reaction to change and a robust cut-over plan (for much more on that, take a look at our 'Change leadership – using the brain for change' guide).

But the key thing about talent strategy is the absolute importance of buy-in from the business. This is the most common hiccup for talent strategies. A successful talent strategy relies so much on people from the business executing what's trying to be achieved. They absolutely have to believe in a success profile's relevance to recruitment, development, compensation and training.

## Using the brain for Change

From our work on neuroscience and how the brain works, we know that to really get change to happen you need to involve people. We call our approach CORE and it stands for:

**Certainty** – ensuring people know what you are doing and why

**Options** – getting people involved and give them choices in how they work

**Reputation** – find ways to enhance their standing in the group or company

**Equity** – treating people fairly

*You can read more in our Change Leadership guide.*

# Measure

**Ultimately, when things started to go wrong, Genes R Us were unable to see it coming. This highlights the final area where they came up short – measurement.**

When things start going wrong, you need to know why – and quickly. The only measure Genes R Us had to judge the success of their bold talent strategy was whether they were winning work or not. That's a pretty precarious KPI to rely on alone – not to mention one that's both slow and muddled with a whole host of other factors that confuse diagnosis (hence Bob himself being asked to brainstorm his way out of a situation where he was actually the problem).

Poor measurement data is actually a really common problem, but it needn't be. The main issue is that measurement is often an afterthought once processes and systems are already set in stone.

However, if you're going through a talent solution redesign you have the rare opportunity to embed measurement tools into the heart of your new technology and infrastructure. That way you can pick KPIs that actively drive the activity you're trying to achieve through your success profile (see the example below), not frantically trying to retrofit measurement metrics into old technology solutions – or worse, simply measuring things that are of little consequence or importance but easy to get data on.

## One tool, two jobs

One last note on measurement: Measuring tools can do two things: first, of course, measurement is about continuous improvement. The data you pull from the system needs to tell you not just where things are going right, but also where things are going wrong.

But measurements can also be tremendously useful in showing the business that your initiatives are having a return. In that respect, measurement metrics need to be easily understandable. We've found one of the big benefits of adopting a success profile is that you're focussing on relatively few success areas. It makes your measurement indicators much easier to determine and communicate.

This helps you to have an integrated measurement tool embedded at the core of your technology system – one that can provide top-level data for the board, and detailed analytics for you.

## Measurable Success

*One retail client of ours identified, through their success profile that if their sales associates adopted the attributes of the exemplars they could have more customers return to the store, have customers buy more of their clothes from them (gain a greater share of the wardrobe space, if you like) and spend more money. The company measured these elements before and after adoption of the success profile and saw gains in some regions by as much as 70%.*

# And finally...

## ...get a second opinion

We would say this, of course. But on a serious note, talent strategy can be an emotive area that an objective third-party view is well worth it for the additional credibility it creates.

For example, what if Genes R Us had sought a second opinion? What if someone had highlighted the perils of cloning, and the merits of developing their success profile instead?

They say the problem with the future is that it's so hard to predict but the chances are they'd have:



A workforce that shared 4 or 5 key success attributes that the business needed, but who also had different personalities, interests and, most importantly, ideas that would carry them in the future.



Strong intertwined red threads running between all the different talent levers – with all the different elements of their talent strategy reinforcing the same message, and all linked up with the same technology.



A talent strategy that had the complete buy in from the business, largely thanks to the clear and visible measurement metrics showing the value of their success profile.

And that's not a bad start...