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Talent too often goes unrecognized at firms

Evaluation systems may not identify the quiet hidden stars

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Lots of money, time and angst are expended when companies go scrounging for talent.

That investment is often needless because many companies are inept at identifying and developing the talent that's already on their payrolls, employment experts said.

Stars are hidden throughout companies. Quietly – often too quietly – they perform beyond peers with little, if any, notice.

"Absolutely, there are people whose contributions go unrecognized," said Curtis Ludwig, a Dallas executive with Robert Half International, which specializes in placing employees.

Who's at fault? It often cuts both ways: The employee is clueless about how to be noticed and the company's system of finding the best employees is flawed.

Employees who keep a low profile present a special problem for companies. "The challenge is to find the talents hiding as wimps" and turn them into tigers, said Subir Chowdhury, whose most recent book is *The Talent Era*.

"Some talented people might be very shy, but they're phenomenal," he said. "They often are seen as nerds, and they quietly do their work while others are kissing the boss and they get 90 percent of the credit."

One problem is that many companies use a constrained method of labeling the real talents.

"Most organizations limit their view of who's best too tightly," said Beverly Kaye, a specialist in career development and talent retention.

Some people rise less on talent and more on visibility, she said.

"It's who's on what teams and what projects that let management know them, and those ways are dangerous because they overlook that unrecognized star who may be less of an extrovert but contributes much more than those who are visible. These people might not become the leaders of the organization, but they really are needed," she said. "They are treasures."

Ms. Kaye sees irony in the corporate obsession with grooming successors for the high positions but giving little attention to those lower on the organizational chart.

"Maybe they should reach all the way down into entry-level operations people. That should spread more talent – and more loyal talent – throughout the operation, said Ms. Kaye, president of Career Systems International, a Pennsylvania company that consults businesses on career development and talent retention.

There's agreement that management needs to have more intimate knowledge of who's doing what, how much and how well. Also, the typical performance review, based on the views of only a few people, may not help identify the unnoticed overachiever.

Nontraditional methods are getting tryouts. One is the "360-degree" review. Instead of a review based principally on the employee's and the supervisor's perceptions, comments are sought by those under, above and on the same level as the worker. The goal is to get an accurate, comprehensive idea of the worker's abilities.

Whatever method a company uses to uncover talented workers, the targets themselves can take the initiative to be noticed.

"So how do I get recognized? Part of that is stepping up to the plate and saying, 'You want me to do some of the stuff that somebody else doesn't want to jump into?' Or you can try, 'This is what you can expect of me. Outline it. Then deliver,' " said Mr. Ludwig.

When the challenge is met and a talent is revealed, a new problem often pops up – rewarding the discovery, Ms. Kaye warns. "Management has to say, 'You're critical to us, and what can we do to keep you?' "

"If 'more money' is the answer," Ms. Kaye said, "the manager may have to say, 'What else?' That gives the employee time to list some accommodations that can be made quickly."