

Role of talents in the development of agribusiness organisations

Role talentů v rozvoji organizací agrobyznysu

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Abstract: Currently, the world of business is more and more dominated by companies which possess and know how to exploit their intangible resources, in particular the potential of their employees, to achieve competitiveness. The importance of learning organisations, knowledge organisations and corporate culture has been constantly growing. The article presents the outcomes of a survey carried out with the aim of identifying attitudes of managers of agribusiness organisations to talented people and the role of these people in gaining a competitive advantage. The survey has found that Czech agricultural enterprises are somewhat special in this area and that the existing conditions affect managers' approaches and distinguish them from other large companies in other industries. It has also shown that agricultural companies do not have the same opportunities as large companies to select and develop talented individuals, and therefore these activities should be carried out, to a large extent, by universities.

Key words: talent, talented individuals, leaders, project talent, conditions for talent's utilisation, role of talents in the company development

Abstrakt: V současném podnikání se stále více prosazují podniky, které vlastní a umějí využívat k dosahování své konkurenceschopnosti nehmotné zdroje, především potenciál svých pracovníků. Stále více se zdůrazňuje význam učící se organizace, znalostní organizace a podnikové kultury. Článek přináší výsledky výzkumu zaměřeného na identifikaci přístupů manažerů podniků v oblasti agrobyznysu k talentům a k chápání role talentů při dosahování konkurenční výhody. Provedený výzkum ukázal, že v českých zemědělských podnicích existují v této oblasti specifické podmínky a z nich vycházející přístupy manažerů, které tyto podniky odlišují od velkých podniků v jiných odvětvích. Dále se ukázalo, že zemědělské podniky nedisponují takovými možnostmi pro výběr a práci s talenty jako velké podniky a z toho vyplývá potřeba většího přesunu těchto činností na univerzity.

Klíčová slova: talenty, leaderi, projektové talenty, podmínky činnosti talentů, role talentů v rozvoji podniku

INTRODUCTION

The goal of enterprises currently running their business is to satisfy their customers' needs and thus become competitive. The typical characteristic of the most successful companies is a competitive advantage, resulting from the combination of the special resources they possess and their position with respect to other competitors. To maintain, in the long term, this competitive advantage has recently become the crucial problem as the rapid development of competitors' business activities leads to imitation and the desire to reach and win similar or even better positions and resources. Therefore, employees and their knowledge become the only unique and inimitable resource of the

company. People are enablers of change, they help the company to dynamically develop and to achieve the longer-term sustainable competitive advantage.

Competitive advantage is not founded on the knowledge of isolated individuals, but on the system built on the creative use of knowledge and the resulting synergic effect and teamwork, which are mirrored in corporate values and culture and subsequently in the company strategy and customer orientation. A knowledge organisation is an organisation based on knowledge, operating in the conditions of the knowledge society and exploiting all time-tested trends which have already been implemented by some of the world-class enterprises in their managerial practice (Truneček 2003).

In knowledge organisations, human resource management concentrates on improving the organisation's intelligence and releasing employees' potential. On the intelligence scale, the value of intelligence increases from cognitive knowledge to self-motivating creativity. In this connection, we have to ask ourselves the following question: "Which employees determine the organisation's intelligence, who are the knowledge employees?" It is a widespread opinion that the greatest competitive advantage is the utilisation of talented people across the company, in all positions where they may be of any "benefit" (Truneček 2003).

The term "talent" has not been defined and understood in a uniform way. It is often identified with a talented person with an exceptionally favourable structure of special natural abilities. This approach, however, ignores the manifestation aspect of these abilities connected with high performance. Natural abilities are the fundamental precondition for becoming a talented person, but simultaneously the influence of exogenous factors and other personal characteristics is necessary.

On the basis of the existing talent concept, the following features have been identified:

- certain structure enabling the individual to perform exceptionally well in a certain kind of activity,
- performance in demanding conditions which help to develop the talented individual,
- skill to perform and an interest in, a certain kind of activity, the time necessary for its mastering and its development in a creative way (Kodým et coll. 1978).

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The aim of the contribution is to identify the approaches of agribusiness enterprises and their managers to particularly talented individuals, their utilization and the appreciation of their role in the process of achieving a competitive advantage.

The contribution presents some of the outcomes of the research task "Talent as a Source of Competitive Advantage" carried out by the Faculty of Economics and Management of the Czech University of Agriculture Prague in 2003 and 2004 (GA CR 402/03/1003). And the same time, it means an entry into the issues of the institutional project "Information and knowledge support of strategic management" (MSM 6046070904). In the first phase of the project, the questionnaire technique was used to conduct a pre-survey, however, it did not bring the required results. Therefore, in the following survey phases, managers of agricultural and food enterprises and companies providing services to

the agricultural sector were interviewed (technique of semi-standardised interviews). In order to compare and identify the characteristic features of agribusiness, similar interviews were held with executives from other branches of the national economy.

At the same time, non-standardised interviews were conducted to deal with additional questions which often provided the most valuable information.

RESULTS

The perception of talents in agricultural enterprises differs according to their size and specialisation. Compared to other branches of the national economy, the managers' approach to talent assessment also takes into account certain agricultural particularities. With minor exceptions, managers of agricultural companies consider talents to be a stimulating factor in the organisation. Special emphasis is placed on the role of management talent – i.e. a leader. Some of the interviewed, however, mentioned that in terms of recruiting and maintaining talented individuals (key personnel), agricultural enterprises have poor records, as young people do not want to work in the agricultural sector. This may be the reason why love for agriculture and appreciation of its specifics are understood as one of the most significant characteristics of talented people in agricultural enterprises.

Managers of the largest agricultural enterprises (i.e. of those examined) literally stated that particularly talented people are their key employees. If a company wishes to keep up with the times and wants to make changes, it needs fresh ideas and views. This is why it is so important to "win" talented people, whatever the cost, and to create suitable conditions for them to develop a positive relationship to the company and to work hard to the company's benefit. According to these managers, imagination, creativity, and ingenuity are the most important factors to reach competitiveness. And the company's task is to provide financial resources to put these ideas into practice.

Definition of "talented individual"

The term "talented individual" (key employee) is interpreted by the majority of responding managers as follows: a person who is able to fulfil his tasks faster than other employees, to promptly react to new circumstances and distinguish between weak and strong points, and who can come up with untraditional solutions to problems. The executives' picture

of a particularly talented person is associated with imagination, creativity, and initiative. They also place emphasis on natural abilities which, however, must be utilised in practice as well as on the importance of expertise in the broad sense (production, i.e. technical and technological, economic, legal knowledge). They perceive talented people as the “driving force” of other employees. Nevertheless, they point out that their talents have to be evaluated in relation to the organisation they work for and the relevant field of activity. Talent does not exist in isolation, with no relationship to its working environment.

The majority of managers stated that upon deeper reflection they were able to identify the following (predefined) types of talented people:

- *leader, i.e. management talent* – leader of the organisation, top-class, outstanding executive – manager: *leader in the right sense of the word and strategist* – member of the management focusing on conceptions, long-term goals, strategies, etc.,
- *project talent* – perceived as a young, competent person not burdened by routines who has fresh ideas and who becomes, through his involvement in the project, the moving spirit behind changes: *team brains* – specialists who work as members of teams (sometimes individually) on new ideas, projects,
- *project team leaders* – people who have both the abilities to bring and elaborate new ideas as well as to lead a team of collaborators who are involved in their development or their implementation,
- *organisational talent*, i.e. leaders of working groups of executives who implement organisation's goals,
- *business talent*, i.e. people who have the skills to sell, convince others, and negotiate.

One of the rare opinions expressed was that companies also needed people with a sense of information and modern information and communication technologies. One of the interviewed managers explicitly said that, even among ordinary workers, it was possible to find talented individuals – people with a sense for broader picture, who are inventive and possess organisational skills.

The importance of individual types of talent has been differentiated on the basis of the size of the company and its specialisation. Often, the presented types of talent are personified by one single person and develop according to the conditions in which they operate. The relationship between talent and environment is double-sided – the environment enables the utilisation of skills and talent development while talented people change both their immediate and wider environment.

The possibility of identifying the characteristics of individual types of talent proved to be a more complex issue for the interviewees. The dominating features of the leader-type talent were: leadership skills, willingness to bear risks, exceptional abilities and skills in the area of company's specialisation, intense search for information, readiness to overcome difficulties, ability to create strategies, ability to lead teams and organise teamwork. Few of them also mentioned the ability to listen to the opinions of others and to adapt the language of the message to the listener's level. More frequently, the characteristic of the respondents included the ability to define visions and set goals. This qualification does not really differ from that of a strategist and therefore it is likely that in practice, company managers do not distinguish between a leader and a strategist, i.e. in agribusiness organisations both types of talent coincide.

Managers have struggled to define project talent – the following are considered the most significant qualities: intense search for information, thinking in perspective and broader context, outstanding abilities and skills (in the area of company's specialisation), courage, originality, and creativity. In several cases, the interviewed stressed approach unburned by stereotypes and old, obsolete methods of work. A team leader should also be capable of guiding people, supervising a team and organising teamwork. The issue of utilisation of project talents was considered solely by the managers of large companies. It can be therefore assumed that only these companies had created conditions for their specific tasks.

Also, the so-called organisational talent must have outstanding abilities and skills (in the area of company's operation), leadership skills, excellent communication skills, ability to convince others, organisational imagination, and be a hard worker (emphasised). The managers also highlighted the ability to deal with problems without help from their superiors, independence, dedication, persuasiveness, as well as leadership. The non-standardised interviews showed that the term “organisational talent” was somewhat misleading (all key employees should have organisational skills). It would be therefore more appropriate to use the term “operational talent”.

Business talent has not been specified in detail, however, the interviews have revealed that such a person should be able to spot opportunities, seize the market niches, be a good communicator and, in particular, negotiator.

The list of common characteristics of all types of talented person comprised the following: dedication, diligence, positive attitude to learning, search for information, professional skills and expertise, active-

ness, and initiative. Upon reflection, the interviewees added the willingness to bear reasonable risks, organisational skills, the ability to stimulate other people and awaken their interest, ability to deal with critical situations, ambitiousness, and a high level of self-motivation.

Possibilities of talent selection

The managers were very sceptical about the pre-selection of talented people on the basis of any sophisticated methods. They all stated that a truly talented person could only be recognised in practice, by performing specific tasks or participating in projects, etc. The interviewed experts who carry out psychological testing share their opinion. They suggest that young people participate in adaptation training programmes organised for graduates by certain large firms or be recruited as assistants.

According to the managers of agribusiness organisations, in particular of agricultural enterprises, the size of their organisations and their financial situation does not allow them to implement the aforementioned recommendations. From the point of view of the managers of agricultural companies, the preliminary conditions for the recruitment of a graduate are: the graduate's relationship to agriculture, his expertise in the field of agriculture, knowledge of specific characteristics of this branch and his "love" for agriculture. Other secondary criteria include: creativity, imaginativeness, proactive approach to work, etc. Their assessment of the candidate's suitability, and their choice of talented young people, is primarily a question of "impression".

However, it should be said that the managers of large (and progressive) agricultural enterprises would, under certain circumstances, welcome the possibility of verification of their opinion of the applicant. They did not further exploit the possibilities of such verification but in the discussion they gave preference to the idea of assessment centres rather than psychological methods.

As far as the assessment centre qualities are concerned, the managers appreciated in particular the following: concentration on behaviour, use of various tasks which capture and simulate the key aspects of the job, multi-tier performance measurement, as well as testing of applicants in groups to enable interaction. Nevertheless, they mentioned the necessity of adapting these methods to suit the specifics of the agricultural sector and expressed their concern that developing a comprehensive set of methods would be very costly.

Conditions for the utilisation of talented people in the organisation

The semi-standardised interviews with managers of agricultural enterprises have revealed that the issue of utilisation of talented individuals in their organisation is not considered the top priority. They concentrate, in particular, on short-term issues, their main point of interest being the position of their company after the Czech Republic's entry into the European Union and the consequences arising from it. They acknowledge the necessity of maintaining, i.e. increasing, competitiveness, but this is not primarily associated with the utilisation of the human potential already available in their companies. The atmosphere in the companies they are in charge of tends to be, they say, rather non-creative and non-innovative. They believe that the following values should continue to be generally respected: properly executed and high-quality work, product and service quality, high and stable performance, responsibility for work, and professionalism. Thus far, the managers' ideas are acceptable. In contrast, the other values seem to be rather progress-blocking: orderliness, self-control and self-restraint, conformism, non-conflict behaviour, setting up of goals primarily based on their preceding activity, etc. These values are connected with stability, as opposed to chaos which, they think, may go hand in hand with creativity and invention.

It is obvious that managers' thinking and conduct is strongly affected by stereotypes resulting from the lack of managerial creativity. By directing their creativity outwards, the managers would stimulate the creativity of the entire team, build creative atmosphere and support creative production. The opinions and standpoints presented by the managers are a logical consequence of absence or shortage of such managerial creativity.

However, few of the statements have shown that managers of large agricultural enterprises do think about the conditions for utilising talented people. They find it necessary to give them space for self-realisation, invest them with sufficient powers and to openly communicate with them. They mentioned the necessity of allowing "broad limits" for this type of individual, creating conditions for their development and giving them a chance to show what was inside them. They also stressed the importance of opportunities for further learning and growth.

The majority of managers highlighted the need for favourable conditions in the family – understanding for their talents, their interest in, and dedication to work. However, the personal and family life of talented people is often limited.

DISCUSSION

When listing characteristics of talented individuals, the executives left out a number of features cited in literature. The characteristics of a management talent usually are: sense of context and perspective, ability to forecast development trends, ability to make decisions in non-transparent situations without having all the necessary information, ability to stimulate creativity and innovativeness, ability to work in and lead a team, ability to stimulate interest, enthusiasm, and zeal, empathy, willingness and ability to support the development of others, aspirations (in relation to challenges), creative approaches to problem-solving (by mixing inventive, innovative, organisational, and managerial creativity).

Even the pre-survey, carried out by means of non-standardised interviews (Horalíková 2001), has provided a more detailed picture of leaders, it emphasised the ability and competency to delegate, ability to stimulate others, active communication and other qualities.

In literature, a project talent is characterised by liking for the new and unusual, potential for growth and development, and the possibility of speedy self-fulfilment. Unlike in the case of older employees, his intellectual agility, including inventiveness, creativity, flexibility, originality, and goal awareness, is not limited by existing barriers which can be summarised under the term “organisational blindness”. Among other characteristics, there are routine-free behaviour, liking for the new, ability to quickly master new methods, flexibility, and courage to overcome obstacles.

Whilst bearing in mind that talented individuals are creative personalities, it is also necessary to consider other characteristics (Fišera 1990; Hlavsa 1985):

- curiosity, strong interest in everything that is new and enthusiasm,
- higher sensitivity, in particular higher sensitivity to problems,
- tolerance towards ambiguousness, complexness, and contradictoriness of reality (problems),
- inclination to playing, thought and material playfulness,
- refusing conformity and routine on the one hand, and openness to originality, independent – thinking and courage to express one’s own opinion on the other hand,
- high motivation, stability, endurance, perseverance, diligence, and high performance accompanying the above qualities,
- appropriate level of self-confidence and self-assurance connected with a minimum (or no) concerns about failing,
- sense of humour.

The features and personal traits of creative individuals include, among others: knowledge ability, wide range of interests, many-sidedness, increased openness to one’s own feelings and emotions, giving preference to individual feelings over rational thinking relatively frequently, sense of aesthetic reflected also in the thinking and specific value orientation of creative individuals, modesty, limited economic demands, limited inclination to conform to authorities and discipline, giving preference to complexity and asymmetry, even disorderedness, etc. (Provazník 1995).

Organisations can only produce first-class results and sustain their growth if they nurture talented individuals. As Vácha (1994) states: “In order to be of benefit, the talented individual must work exploiting his abilities to the very limit.” The following findings are applicable to the systematic utilisation of management talents and also, to great extent, of project talents:

- There is a shortage of truly talented people for change projecting and business management.
- A talented individual does not know (or may not be aware of the fact) that he is gifted and might not assert himself on his own.
- Both management and project talents have to be recognised and utilised in time, otherwise they become barren and get used to “leisure” life or use their creativity in a different field.
- An organisation can only recognise and utilise all the talents available if it is “in motion”, under intensive business strain or having serious problems which are unsolvable without innovators and enterprising leaders.
- In order to test talented people, they have to be assigned tasks which are on the edge of their abilities.
- In order to identify talented individuals accurately, it is necessary to carry out continuous comprehensive assessments.
- There must be continuous competition among talented people of all types for their place in the company and promotion, this requires continuous and systematic transfer of the able upwards and those less able downwards, i.e. transition to new projects.
- To identify their values and preferences and analyse their strong and weak points, talented individuals have to be approached on an individual basis. The findings are subsequently utilised for the motivation and development of the personal growth plans of these people.

The research outcomes have shown that agribusiness companies still lack the concept of working

with talented people. If we are to participate in their education, we must respect not only the opinions of managers of agribusiness enterprises, but also the recommendations of experts in this field. What has to be underlined, however, is the executives' vigilance or mistrust in the selection of talented individuals "beforehand". They all agree that a truly talented person may only be discovered by his involvement in a practical activity.

CONCLUSION

The development of agricultural enterprises and maintaining, or rather increasing, their competitiveness requires a combination of various types of talent. True progress can only be achieved by exploiting the synergic effect of their activity.

The survey has verified the finding that it is necessary to focus on talented individuals, and create appropriate conditions for their work. It has also been confirmed that companies need to recruit talented young people with the possibility of developing and utilising their talents. The companies will have the possibility of choice only if the content of curricula is continuously updated and education of students concentrates both on knowledge and skills. The instruction should put a greater emphasis on the use of active methods and project processing and presentation. Although universities attempt to adopt a more flexible approach to teaching, it is necessary to further intensify their efforts in this area.

The future task of the companies is to improve co-operation with educational institutions. It is also

necessary that a process for recognising and encouraging especially talented individuals is established, developed and implemented in order to prevent their migration to other organisations.

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