

The need of generalists

Ralf Andersson, *Society of Creative Generalist*, 10 Jun 2012

In a blog post in Harvard Business Review “All hail the Generalist”, Vikram Mansharamani argues for that the future belongs to the Generalist, he writes:

“For various reasons, though, the specialist era is waning. The future may belong to the generalist. Why’s that? To begin, our highly interconnected and global economy means that seemingly unrelated developments can affect each other”

(see: http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2012/06/all_hail_the_generalist.html).

I agree with Vikram Mansharamani and what he says in his blog, I have been feeling the change of attitudes regarding generalists for some time now, we are not yet there but we will be soon. Everybody – politicians, educationers, market people – is talking of the need of entrepreneurs to generate jobs and new ideas, and entrepreneurs are by nature generalist. see Stanford Graduate School of Business article “Generalists Succeed as Entrepreneurs”, <http://www.stanford.edu/group/knowledgebase/cgi-bin/2005/02/15/generalists-succeed-as-entrepreneurs/>

Since 5th of oct. when Steve Jobs died we have been overwhelmed by articles, blogs etc. about his genius and the need for people like him and he was a generalist by all accounts. Read August Turaks article in Forbes, in it he also cites Louis Mobley, his mentor and the founder of the IBM Executive School in 1956: “..the best executives were generalists not specialists. The trait they all shared was an inexhaustible curiosity on everything from “NATO to Plato”. see

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/augustturak/2011/11/21/steve-jobs-and-t...>)

Jobs and generalists are, as Malcolm Gladwell says, ‘Tweakers’.

(http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/11/14/111114fa_fact_gladwell).

In another article in The New Yorker,

<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2011/10/steve-jobs-ken-auletta.html>, Ken Auletta named him, Steve Jobs, a ‘bridge’: “What he was was a bridge—between businessmen and technology, between designers and technology, between animators and engineers and the public”, well isn’t that to be a generalist?

In a working paper, ‘The Renaissance of the Renaissance Man? Specialists vs. Generalists in Teams of Inventors’ by Eduardo Melero and Neus Palomeras, Departamento de Economía de la Empresa Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, they says in their conclusion:

“..we propose that teams that achieve variety based on generalists outperform those based on field specialists alone. The reason is that generalists are more effective in the recombination of knowledge and suffer less from some typical group process barriers such as communication problems, excessive conflict and free-riding issues. We test this idea using data on patents from teams of inventors”.(see <http://ideas.repec.org/p/cte/idrepe/id-12-01.html>).

In an article by Chuck Martin in CIO 2007 ‘Specialists vs. Generalists’:

“In these days of specialization, it can be more and more difficult for some to see and keep sight of the bigger picture at work.”

“We have a very short-term focus and specialists are not used to the best of their abilities. I predict disaster in the future.”

“The irony of corporate America is that while generalists drive innovation and long-term results, specialists are most often rewarded at the vice president level and below”

(see http://www.cio.com/article/102352/Specialists_vs._Generalists).

In 1993 Gordon M. Stewart at CIA wrote the article about the need of generalist in the organisation

“WHAT IS A GENERALIST?” where he states:

“Generalists are those very rare individuals who have the capacity to bring together many aspects and branches of the intelligence problem and organization, and wish to do so”.

The need is still there, an intelligence organisation couldn't function without generalists that can combine information from different sources and make them understandable. That's exactly what is lacking in today's world and business – there is a lot of specialists employed but few generalists.

(See

https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol2no3/html/v02i3a01p_0001.htm)