

The Strengths, Needs and Vulnerabilities of Gifted Employees

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Abstract

The abilities of gifted employees are extremely valuable in a knowledge based economy. However, research on the functioning of gifted adults in the workplace is relatively scarce. In this study we focus on the strengths and needs of gifted employees and investigate how well these fit with their current job. We also explore which barriers may hinder gifted adults at work. The results are based on two online surveys (N = 48 and 35 respondents respectively) and biographical data. This study shows that gifted employees stand out because of their high cognitive abilities, strong willpower and creative drive. They are eager to solve complex problems and would like to allocate nearly 85% of their time to non-routine tasks. However, in reality many feel bored and experience a big gap between their intrinsic capabilities and the current requirements of their job (~ 80%). Unsuitable job contexts may lead to the desire to change jobs (~ 70%) and bore outs (~ 50%). On the other hand, gifted workers are also prone to workaholic behavior and burn-outs (1/3 respondents), because of the very high standards they set for themselves (and others). They may also suffer from emotional distress because of the 'intellectual disconnect' they experience with colleagues.

Keywords: Gifted adults; gifted employees; gifted traits; pitfalls; job satisfaction; bore out; burn-out.

Introduction

Today, more and more emphasis is placed on educational provisions for gifted children (e.g., see Heller, Mönks, Sternberg, & Subotnik, 2000). Gifted children typically show an enhanced capacity to learn and tend to be more mature than their age mates. They have a huge thirst for knowledge and are very curious by nature. Because of this, gifted children have different needs than the mainstream children in school (Rogers, 2007). When the curriculum is not enriched or moves forward at a too slow pace, gifted children tend to get bored or malcontented, which in the worst case may lead to (severe) underachievement or an aversion to school (Kanevsky, & Keighley, 2003). Boredom may also lead to behavioral problems or to stress-related complaints and depression (Merrottsy, 2013). Gifted children are also vulnerable to potential pitfalls such as fear of failure and unrealistic goal setting (Kieboom, 2015). Therefore gifted children, just like any other children, need the guidance from parents and educators to grow up to happy and balanced individuals.

Many schools around the world acknowledge the specific needs of gifted children and provide educational interventions that allow them to match the level of complexity of the curriculum with the (cognitive) abilities, readiness, and motivation of the gifted child. Interventions can range from compacting the curriculum and replacing it with challenging assignments, to grouping gifted children with alike peers, or accelerating the most advanced children by grade-skipping etc. (e.g., see Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004; Heller et al., 2000). Long-term studies have demonstrated the positive effects of these interventions on the wellbeing of gifted children (e.g., see Lubinski, 2004; Lubinski, Webb, Morelock, & Benbow, 2001; Park, Lubinski, & Benbow, 2013).

But what happens when gifted children grow up and become gifted adults? Giftedness is not something that children will outgrow once they reach adulthood (Fiedler, 2012; Jacobsen, 2000). Giftedness is an inherent part of someone's personality, so it can be assumed that the same needs and pitfalls will still be present in gifted adults. However, research on gifted adults and their performance at work is scarce (e.g., see Corten, Nauta, & Ronner, 2006; Nauta, & Corten, 2002; Nauta, & Ronner, 2008, 2013; Persson, 2009; Ronner, & Nauta, 2010; Siekanska, & Sekowski, 2006; van der Waal, Nauta, & Lindhout, 2013). This is surprising, because gifted people, because of their intrinsic gifted

traits, could play a vital role in our current economy which is mostly driven by knowledge, innovation and technological advancement (Corten et. al, 2006; Shavinina, 2009a).

The current study is part of a bigger research project in which we try to understand the specific strengths and needs of gifted employees and explore the major roadblocks that hinder them in their careers. We also investigate to what level their job matches their intrinsic capabilities and how this impacts their job satisfaction. From a research point of view these questions are still largely unexplored. In the discussion we also provide some helpful tips for supervisors of gifted workers.

Material and Methodology

Limitations of working with gifted adults

Giftedness can be formally ‘diagnosed’ using a valid IQ test. However, the majority of gifted adults refuse to take an IQ-test or feel reluctant to admit that they are gifted (Fiedler, 2012; Jacobsen, 2000; Kuipers, 2007). Some were underachievers at school and will deny all obvious signs of giftedness. Others believe that they have outgrown their childhood giftedness or even question the results of an IQ-test. Also negative experiences during childhood may inhibit gifted adults to show their true nature. When working with gifted adults, it is therefore important not to focus only on intelligence or the numerical findings of an IQ-test, but also on the ways in which giftedness manifests itself in everyday life (Jacobsen, 1999, 2000).

At our expertise center “Exentra” we have helped > 6000 gifted clients over the last 18 years. From thousands of in-depth coaching sessions we have learned that many parents recognize themselves as being gifted through the typical traits shown by their gifted children. These include both cognitive (high intelligence, creativity, etc.), and non-cognitive components of giftedness (feeling different, strong moral sense, etc.) (Kieboom, 2015). In this study we included both adults who scored in the top 2% of a valid IQ-test, and adults who were not officially tested, but recognized themselves as being gifted through the typical signs of giftedness shown by their children.

Research design

The current study is an exploratory study in which no control group of non-gifted adults was included. The results are based on two separate online surveys (designed with Qualtrics Survey software), combined with testimonies from gifted clients. The testimonies are “masked” so that the content is unrecognizable to third parties. The first survey was part of a bigger research project on gifted employees in Belgium funded by ESF (European Social Fund). The second survey resulted from a discussion forum in Antwerp (Belgium) on the manifestation of giftedness in children and adults. All the respondents consented on paper that their contribution could be used anonymously for scientific research. The participants came from various age categories, and gender, educational and professional backgrounds.

We collected 48 valid responses in the first survey, and 35 in the second survey. Seven (= 15%) participants in the first survey were tested via a valid IQ-test, the other 42 (= 85%) were not officially tested, but recognized themselves as being gifted. In the second survey, the proportion was 22 (63%) tested over 13 (37%) non-tested participants. The first survey contained a list of 95 statements that had to be scored on a 5-point Likert-Scale ranging from ‘not at all like me’ to ‘very much like me’. The second survey contained 20 similar matrix statements, combined with questions that had to be scored on a scale of 0-100%.

In both questionnaires, we also included general questions on education and job context, and a number of “open questions” where respondents could elaborate on their personal experiences. The most prominent findings of these surveys are presented in this article. Due to the small sample sizes, non-parametric tests were used for the statistical analysis of the data (using SPSS).

Results

Manifestations of giftedness

The findings in Table 1 show the manifestations of giftedness to which the respondents in this study could primarily relate to (n= 48). (i) *High intelligence*: The majority of respondents recognized themselves as “rapid thinkers” (96%) and “quick analyzers” of new information (98%). They could easily link concepts of different domains (95%) and reason in great depth at different levels (95%). The majority also claimed to have multiple interests in different fields (95%). (ii) *Motivation*: Around 95% of the respondents indicated that they become very passionate and focused when subjects capture their interest. They also feel the urge to advance quickly in their job (96%) and become the best in whatever they undertake (90%). (iii) *Creativity*: Around 90% of the respondents indicated that they think independently from others. They are good in defining new concepts and ideas (77%), and consider themselves as creative problem solvers (~90%). 98% of the respondents said that they are always looking for possibilities to improve or to optimize.

Table 1: Manifestations of giftedness to which gifted employees could mostly relate. The total percentage of responses in the categories “more like me” and “very much like me” are given, together with the means (\pm SD) on a scale of one (not at all like me) to five (very much like me).

Manifestations of giftedness		Total %	Mean \pm SD (n= 48)
HIGH INTELLIGENCE	I can quickly analyze information.	98%	4.48 \pm .54
	I am a rapid thinker.	96%	4.52 \pm .58
	I can reason at many different layers at the same time.	95%	4.46 \pm .76
	I can easily link concepts from different domains.	95%	4.49 \pm .76
	I have many different fields of interest.	95%	4.62 \pm .75
MOTIVATION	I am very enthusiastic about my passions.	97%	4.73 \pm .60
	I like to advance quickly in my job.	96%	4.46 \pm .58
	I can deeply concentrate myself on subjects that interest me.	94%	4.52 \pm .74
	I like to be the best in whatever I undertake.	90%	4.40 \pm .73
	When I start something new, I want to know everything about the subject.	81%	4.19 \pm .78
CREATIVITY	I am always looking for possibilities to improve or to optimize.	98%	4.40 \pm .53
	I always see different solutions for a problem.	92%	4.22 \pm .81
	I like creative solutions.	89%	4.43 \pm .95
	I think independently from others.	89%	4.24 \pm .91
	I am good in putting forward creative ideas and concepts.	77%	4.00 \pm .74

Unexplored potential of gifted employees

The results in Table 2 illustrate that $\geq 77\%$ of the respondents (n = 35) experience a big gap between their intrinsic capabilities and the current requirements of their job. They regularly feel very bored at work and may start looking for a new job because of this. This is clearly illustrated by the following two testimonies:

Marc is working as a Global Account Manager for a big pharmaceutical company. Senior management is very happy with his performance, but Marc feels uncomfortable because he realizes that there is a big gap between his true potential and his actual output at work.

“It feels very demotivating”, Marc says, “that people praise my performances, while it feels to me as if I am just “walking on the edges”. My true potential lies miles away from what is expected from me in my job and it feels as if I am constantly “driving with my brakes on, as if I am always waiting and waiting and waiting for others”...

Table 2: Gap between the potential of gifted employees and what is required from them at work. The total percentage of responses in the categories “more like me” and “very much like me” are given, together with the means ($\pm SD$) on a scale of one (not at all like me) to five (very much like me).

‘Unexplored’ potential of gifted employees	Total %	Mean \pm SD (n = 35)
I have much more potential than what is required from me at work.	80	3.97 \pm 1.15
Not all my capabilities are “used” at work.	77	3.83 \pm 1.62
I regularly feel very bored at work.	77	3.89 \pm 1.08
I always reach the point where I will become bored and start to look for a new job.	71	3.86 \pm 1.17
I often have the feeling that I need to work with ‘my breaks’ on.	60	3,51 \pm 1.15

The feeling of being held back by others is also familiar to Ann. Ann is working as an HR Manager in an international banking company. She is a successful and well-respected employee, but she is obliged to adjust herself to the (much lower) expectations of others and stay within the ‘boundaries of her job’.

“I often feel very bored and frustrated at work, but I have learned to keep myself busy with other things. The fact that I always have to hide my true potential really drains my energy. Sometimes it becomes so demotivating, that I feel the desire to look for another job”...

Needs of gifted employees

The findings in Table 3 show the most common “needs” of the participants in this study (n= 35). 94% of the respondents indicated that they have a great hunger for knowledge, and feel very driven when they can work on challenging projects. The majority truly dislikes repetitive tasks (78%). 77% of the respondents said that they enjoy collaborating with peers with the same “level of thinking”, but they also need autonomy in their job. When asked how it feels to work on challenging assignments, the participants answered that it makes them feel “*euphoric, very motivated and curious, in the zone, recognized, as if all their senses revive*”! One participant described it “*as if the lights are finally turned on in my head, as if I finally wake up*”. Challenging tasks also seem to stimulate their creative mind: “*New ideas well up day and night, 24 hours around the clock*”.

Table 3: What gifted employees need the most at work. The total percentage of responses in the categories “more like me” and “very much like me” are given, together with the means ($\pm SD$) on a scale of one (not at all like me) to five (very much like me).

Needs of gifted employees	Total %	Mean \pm SD (n = 35)
I have a great hunger for knowledge.	94	4.74 \pm .56
I feel very driven when I can work on challenging assignments.	94	4.51 \pm .70
I truly dislike repetitive tasks.	78	4.11 \pm 1.18
I feel very motivated when I can collaborate with other gifted people.	77	4.20 \pm .80
I prefer to work autonomously.	77	4.03 \pm 1.15

Challenging assignments

The need for autonomy and challenging assignments is further illustrated in Figure 1. Gifted employees significantly prefer tasks for which they have “carte blanche” (Mean \pm SD = 90.14% \pm 12.26), creative, innovative tasks (Mean \pm SD = 84.83% \pm 14.67) and non-routine tasks of high difficulty (Mean \pm SD = 78.09% \pm 19.04) over strictly defined tasks (Mean \pm SD = 33.03% \pm 22.40), non-routine tasks of normal difficulty (Mean \pm SD = 50.34% \pm 22.09) and routine tasks (Mean \pm SD = 27.46% \pm 26.49) (Kruskal-Wallis test: H (5) = 133.06, $P < .0001$).

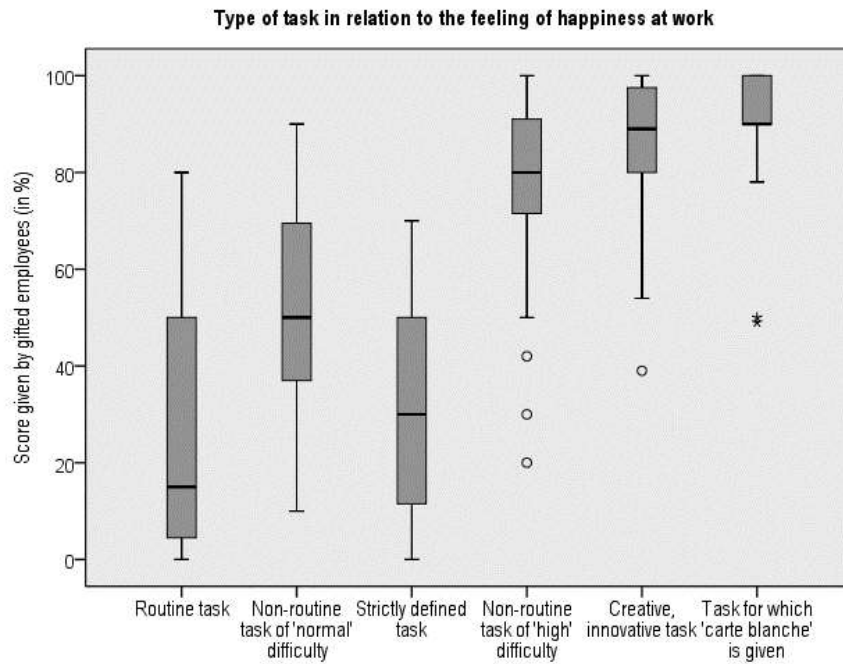


Figure 1: Box-plot illustrating the scores given by gifted employees to different types of tasks on the work floor in relation to their feeling of happiness at work (100%= “it makes me very happy”).

Ideally, gifted employees would allocate on average 59.17% ($SD = 22.73$) of their daily worktime to challenging tasks for which their brains need to work “at full speed”, 24.14% ($SD = 16.48$) of their time to the more easy, non-routine tasks, and only 16.69% ($SD = 14.15$) of their time to routine tasks which they can perform on “automatic pilot” (Figure 2). The preference for challenging assignments was significant (Kruskal-Wallis test: $H(2) = 53.11, P < .0001$).

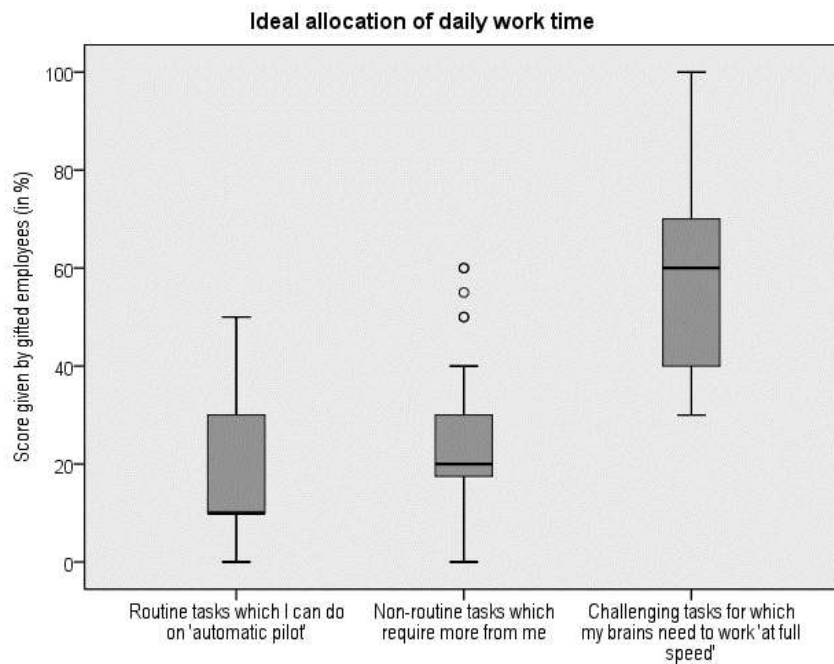


Figure 2: Box-plot illustrating how gifted employees would ideally allocate their daily work time to different types of tasks on the work floor (100% = “I would devote all of my time to this task”).

When they would have to install a new process on the work floor, gifted employees would feel most energized during the starting up phase, when the process needs to be designed ($Mean \pm SD = 81.26\% \pm 18.58$) (Figure 3). They also like the implementation phase, when still a lot of obstacles have to be overcome ($Mean \pm SD = 74.09\% \pm 16.06$). During the optimization phase, when the process needs fine-tuning, their interest slightly starts to drop ($Mean \pm SD = 64.94\% \pm 20.52$), but they mostly dislike the maintenance phase, when the process is up-and-running and only daily problems need to be tackled ($Mean \pm SD = 27.63\% \pm 20.52$). The difference in energy level between the maintenance phase and the other phases in the process was significant (Kruskal-Wallis test: $H(3) = 61.22, P < .0001$).

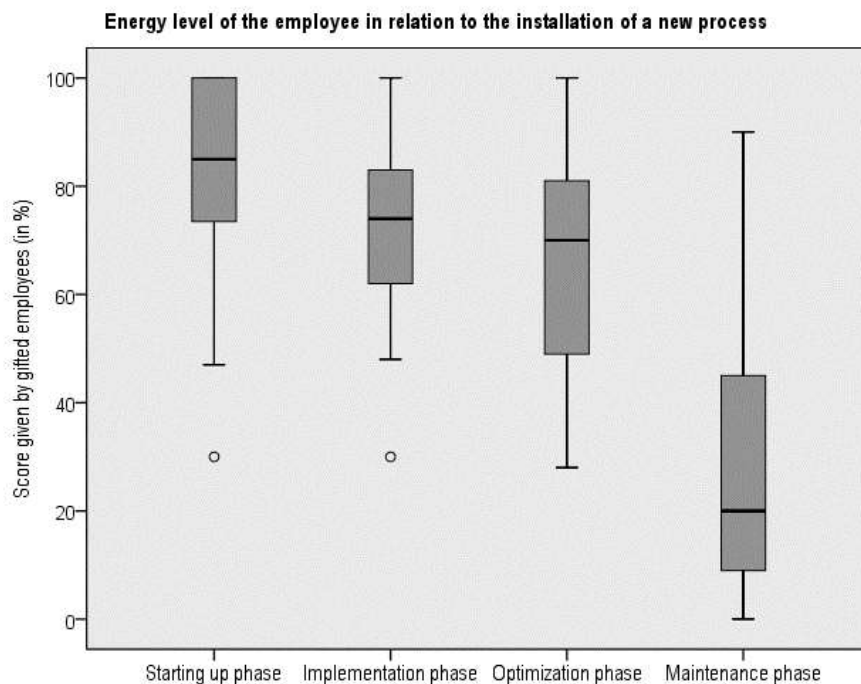


Figure 3: Box-plot illustrating the level of energy gifted employees feel in relation to the different phases of the installation of a new process (100% = “I feel much energized”).

Potential pitfalls of gifted employees

Many gifted adults are enthusiastic, respected employees, with thriving careers. However, they are also prone to potential problems, which may lead to dysfunctional behaviors and emotional distress (Table 4).

Intellectual disconnect

The majority of respondents claimed to experience a substantial difference in speed of thinking compared to their colleagues (83%). They feel as if others slow them down (81%) or do not understand their concepts and ideas (77%), and they easily see the gaps in the proposals of others (77%). This “intellectual disconnect” may be the ground for many frustrations on the work floor as is illustrated by the following example.

Steven is working as a construction engineer. When new projects are proposed, Steven can almost instantly envision the obstacles that the team will have to face. *“My problem is that too many thoughts are spinning around in my head when I try to explain my objections. My colleagues then blame me for seeing ghosts and for always running ahead of the facts. I only want to help the team, but my advices are usually ignored and the predicted problems become reality. It feels so frustrating that nobody ever seems to listen to me and see me as a threat. I often just give up and withdraw myself mentally from the team”.*

Table 4: Potential pitfalls of gifted employees. The total percentage of responses in the categories “more like me” and “very much like me” is given, together with the means ($\pm SD$) on a scale of one (not at all like me) to five (very much like me).

Potential pitfalls of gifted employees		Total %	Mean \pm SD (n = 48)
INTELLECTUAL DISCONNECT	I feel like I am always “thinking five steps ahead” of my colleagues.	83	4.17 \pm .90
	I feel like I always have to wait for my colleagues.	81	3.92 \pm 1.10
	I quickly see the gaps in the proposals of others.	77	3.88 \pm .70
	Others do not understand my ideas, proposals or solutions.	73	3.49 \pm 1.00
VERY HIGH STANDARDS	I am very demanding for myself.	100	4.76 \pm .43
	When I start something new, I want to be an expert right away.	98	4.63 \pm .53
	Inefficiency makes me very annoyed.	90	4.29 \pm .89
	I am very demanding for others.	81	3.89 \pm 1.01
	Fear of failure is a familiar feeling.	73	3.86 \pm 1.28
OVERDRIVE <i>versus</i> BORE-OUT	I always do more than what is expected from me at work.	95	4.38 \pm .75
	I easily turn into a “workaholic” when I am interested in a project.	75	3.96 \pm .93
	I often take over the work of colleagues, because their work does not meet my own standards.	48	3.35 \pm .99
	I regularly suffer from bore-outs because I am not challenged at work.	49	3.00 \pm 1.25
	I alternate periods of overdrive, with periods of burn-outs.	33	2.71 \pm 1.34

Very high standards

All gifted employees in our survey consider themselves as very demanding (100%): when they start something new, they want to be an expert right away (98%), leaving very little room for errors and mistakes. They are also very demanding for others (81%), and may become very annoyed when things do not go smoothly and well (90%). This tendency to set very high standards for themselves and others, may lead to fear of failure (¾ of the respondents) and cause a lot of anxiety and stress. This is illustrated by the following example.

Karen is working as an administrative assistant in an academic hospital. She is very dedicated to her work and is always praised for her accuracy and flawless organization of departmental activities. One day, Karen is asked to organize a big medical event for the oncologists in the hospital. “At first, I felt honored, because it showed the respect that others have for my devotion to my work. However, soon my own desire to organize the perfect meeting became a big burden. It felt as if I was constantly balancing on a “loose cord” to keep my own towering ambitions in line with the (much lower) expectations of others. As the conference came closer, I started to work many extra hours and could hardly sleep because I felt so insecure and anxious. Of course the conference went smoothly and well, and I even received an award for my excellent organization skills, but the stress was hardly bearable and unpleasant”...

Overdrive

Nearly half of the respondents indicated that they regularly suffer from bore-outs when their need for challenge is not satisfied. However, on the flipside of the coin, many gifted employees easily

go in overdrive because of their driven nature. 95% of the respondents indicated that they usually do more than what is expected from them, and $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents even said that they regularly exhibit workaholic behavior. On top of that, they also have the tendency to take over the work of others (48%), to ensure that the quality of the work meets their own high standards. As a result, the risk for burn-outs is substantial: $> \frac{1}{3}$ of the respondents indicated that they alternate periods of overdrive with periods of burn-outs. The following example illustrates how the positive drive of gifted adults may sometimes turn into self-destructive behavior.

Erik leads a team of five laboratory technicians in a renowned chemical company. The team is regularly rewarded by senior management for their outstanding achievements. One day, Erik and his team are asked to implement a new process that could spare the company a lot of money. *"I immediately could envision how the process should work", Erik says "and could not wait to get started"*. However, Erik was so absorbed by his own ideas, that he did not spend enough time to explain the concept to his team mates. As a result, during the following weeks, the laboratory technicians one by one lost their interest in the project. *"I could not understand why my team mates were not as excited about the project as I was", Erik says. "They were just lazy and uninterested, and the work they delivered was really inferior"*. As Erik was still determined not to disappoint his management, he started to take over the work of his team mates and worked day and night to make the project a success. However, soon the project became too ambitious, and Erik started to feel very anxious and stressed. Today, Erik is at home with a burn out, very disillusioned in himself and his team mates.

Discussion

Strengths and needs of gifted employees

Many gifted individuals are well-respected employees, with thriving careers. They stand out because of their perseverance and tireless enthusiasm at work, and are often praised for their expertise and excellent performances. The characteristics of giftedness that were recognized the most by the respondents in this study are in line with the typical manifestations of giftedness described by other researchers in the field (e.g., Corten et al., 2006; Jacobsen, 1999, 2000; Kooijman - van Thiel, 2008; Nauta, & Ronner, 2008, 2013; Shavinina, 2009b). Beside their strong willpower and inner drive, gifted individuals stand out because of their outspoken knowledge and cognitive abilities. They think more rapidly than their colleagues and are able to "digest" large amounts of new information in a relatively short period of time. They are very curious and have an interest in a wide range of topics which they master in great depth. Also, because of their prominent divergent thinking skills, gifted individuals are able to easily integrate information of different sources and discover connections between seemingly unrelated ideas. This in turn 'feeds' the creative potential of the gifted, and the ability to move away from conventional ideas and arrive at unique solutions for a problem.

The desire for knowledge, autonomy, and challenging tasks were the most prominent needs of the respondents in this study. Gifted individuals truly dislike repetitive tasks and would allocate nearly 85% of their time to non-routine tasks if given the opportunity. They have a clear preference for complex assignments and feel very excited when they can participate in challenging projects with other gifted peers. However, when the most challenging phases are over, their interest easily wears off.

Because of their specific strengths and needs, gifted individuals particularly thrive well in innovative and creative environments (Corten et al., 2006; Shavinina, 2009a). These are fast paced working environments with few routine tasks, and plenty of challenge and freedom to stimulate their "sparkling minds". The same positive effects are seen in gifted children who are offered enriched and fast-moving curricula "stripped" from repetitive and already mastered tasks. Organizations with a lot of hierarchy, bureaucracy, and strict procedures are less favorable for gifted individuals (Nauta, Ronner, & Groeneveld, 2009).

Barriers hindering gifted employees

Although gifted individuals have the capabilities to excel in an organization, many of them are not doing as well as one might expect. Longitudinal studies show that giftedness is no guarantee

for success, nor does it automatically translate into satisfying and productive work lives (Freeman, 2010). Many gifted adults struggle in their careers, because they are hindered by unsuitable job contexts, tense interactions with supervisors and colleagues, and/or maladaptive personality traits (Jacobsen, 2000; Overzier, & Nauta, 2013; Streznewski, 1999). Because of these barriers, gifted employees may become “unbalanced” and unproductive on the work floor. They may either go in overdrive, taking too much work on their shoulders, or they may become underperformers, with little interest in their job (Corten et al., 2006).

Unused potential and boredom

The job of many gifted adults offers too little challenge, variety, and freedom to suit their needs and talents. Nearly 80% of the respondents in this study claimed to experience a big mismatch between their intrinsic capabilities and the current requirements of their job. Many feel bored and struggle with the limitations of their job. They may even feel obliged to hide their true nature in order to fit in. Also, the slowness of their environment and the feeling of being held back by others seriously drains their energy. Gifted workers often have the feeling that they could progress much faster if they were allowed to do things on their own.

Some gifted individuals will seek out a way by looking for creative activities or unusual hobbies in their free time. Others at a certain point may feel a strong desire to start looking for another job (~70% in this study). Job hopping is fairly common among gifted employees. Other gifted adults may find a solution in creating their own job context. In a Swedish study, it was found that work satisfaction was the highest for gifted individuals who started their own company and/or were having leading managerial positions (Persson, 2009). In these positions, gifted individuals have more control of their own time and working habits.

However, not all (bored) gifted adults are in the position of creating their own job or changing jobs easily. These employees may simply become ‘detached’ and may (seriously) start to underperform. This means performing (far) below their own intrinsic capabilities but not necessarily below the performance level of the “average employee”. Boredom and mental withdrawing are unpleasant feelings which may ultimately lead to bore-outs (~50% in this study) and long-term absences from work.

Potential pitfalls of gifted employees

Although gifted individuals may flourish in “suitable organizations”, supervisors and human resource managers need to be aware that even if the ideal job context is created, gifted individuals may still become unbalanced if they are hindered by certain emotional and/or behavioral barriers (Corten et al., 2006; Nauta, & Ronner, 2008, 2013; Ronner, & Nauta, 2010; van der Waal et al., 2013). In this study we presented three potential pitfalls typical for gifted workers.

The first pitfall results from the fact that gifted employees because of their high cognitive abilities may experience an “*intellectual disconnect*” with supervisors and colleagues. During team meetings for example gifted employees may feel an overpowering urge to express their thoughts and opinions in the group, but colleagues with lesser cognitive abilities may not be able to follow their (rapid) reasoning and may feel threatened and overwhelmed by the (critical) insights of the gifted. As a result, colleagues may react with harsh feedback or may totally ignore the input of the gifted. In more severe cases, gifted employees may even be singled out from the group. Conflicts like these can be very damaging for the self-confidence of the gifted, especially when the gifted is unaware of the underlying cause and purely acts in the best interest of the company. If not addressed properly, the gifted may start to withdraw from the group and suffer from feelings of worthlessness and depression.

A second potential pitfall is the tendency of many gifted individuals to set *very high standards* for themselves and others. Case studies like those of Richard Branson and Bill Gates show that this tendency may definitely empower gifted individuals to excel and lead to extraordinary accomplishments (Shavinina, 2009c). However, when the expectations become too high and anything

less than perfect is unacceptable, this empowering trait may also become “unhealthy” and lead to maladaptive thoughts and behaviors, such as the refusal to interact with others, the inability to tolerate mistakes of self and others, and the deep-rooted habit of avoiding situations where success is not guaranteed (Kieboom, 2015). Gifted workers may even refuse promotions, because of their fear of not being able to live up to the expectations (Van Zuuren, 2014). In the worst case, unhealthy goal setting and fear of failure may literally “cripple” gifted individuals, making them vulnerable for stress-related complaints and depressive feelings.

On the other hand, gifted workers may also go “*in overdrive*” because of their tendency to set unattainable goals for themselves and others, and may start doing much of the work themselves because of their intolerance towards imperfections. This in turn may lead to workaholic behavior and complete exhaustion in the long run. The current study shows that the risk for burn-outs in gifted adults is substantial as 1/3 of respondents stated that they alternate periods of overdrive with periods of burn-outs.

Helpful tips for supervisors of gifted employees

Gifted individuals prefer to have a lot of autonomy, responsibility and freedom in their job. However, no organization can survive without stringent deadlines and well-defined goals and objectives. Hence, an open and respectful communication with the gifted is essential in order to use their talents in the best interest of the company. Regular interactions with the gifted can help them to stay in line with the company’s expectations and translate their creative ideas into feasible action plans.

It is also important for a supervisor to recognize the potential pitfalls of giftedness at an early stage and provide the necessary guidance where needed. Some gifted individuals are perfectly capable of meeting their own high standards and delivering superb results within the expected time-frames. Other gifted workers, however, may feel overwhelmed by their own high expectations and lack the necessary tools or insights to overcome this barrier. If this is the case, supervisors can help gifted workers to split up projects into small, achievable goals and formulate realistic expectations on the outcome. Supervisors could also assist in managing the time and workload of the gifted and help them to prioritize their activities.

In this respect it is also advisable to not only praise the gifted for an accomplished goal but also pay attention to the way in which projects were handled: were the actions taken in line with the expectations of the company, was the workload evenly divided among the team members, was the project carried out within the normal working hours, etc.? Providing constructive feedback on project management could be a vital learning opportunity for the gifted, because they often do not realize that the norms they set for themselves are far beyond those of colleagues and may even surpass the expectations of the company. This in turn may lead to a lot of unnecessary anxiety and stress.

Conclusion

The constant flow of new ideas is essential in today’s economy. Gifted individuals, because of their intrinsic traits could play a vital role in this. However, in most organizations little attention is paid to the specific strengths and needs of the gifted. Because of this, many gifted employees feel bored and experience a big gap between their intrinsic capabilities and the current requirements of their job. This may result in job hopping and underperformance at work. Gifted workers may also become unbalanced because of typical pitfalls related to their giftedness. If not addressed properly, these barriers may lead to stress-related complaints and burn-outs. Strong support (but not interference!) from supervisors is therefore advisable to help gifted individuals in their pursuit of a happy and successful career.

Although the sample sizes are small, the figures in this study show the significant potential that is wasted in today’s economy because of unsuitable job contexts and lack of proper insight in the functioning of the gifted. The risk of losing some of their most creative workers is high for

organizations that are unaware of the specific needs of the gifted. Further research on a larger scale is planned to further explore this topic.

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