

# Strengthening Workplaces

Achieve performance excellence using  
a strengths-based approach



**73%**  
Increase in  
engagement



**36%**  
Employee  
performance  
increase



**90%**  
Felt more  
positive &  
solutions  
oriented

# Contents

<b>About Strengthscope®</b>	4
<b>A brief history of the strengths-based approach: from fringe to mainstream</b>	5
<b>I. The value of the strengths-based approach</b>	6
<b>II. How focusing on Strengths boosts performance</b>	7
<b>III. Optimizing and stretching strengths</b>	10
<b>IV. Common myths about the approach</b>	13
<b>V. How to integrate the approach in the DNA of your organization</b>	15
<b>Talent management and strengths: The next 10 years</b>	28
<b>Videos and resources. References and further reading</b>	31

# About Strengthscope®

The Strengthscope® system ([www.strengthscope.com](http://www.strengthscope.com)) is the world's most complete and innovative strengths profiling system that helps energize peak performance at work.

Strengthscope® focuses on helping individuals build awareness and confidence in their strengths, while also providing powerful insights around risks to performance associated with weaker areas and strengths in overdrive (when strengths

are used ineffectively). Helping leaders and employees optimize their strengths and identify strategies to deal with performance risks improves their effectiveness, confidence, engagement, agility and wellbeing.

“At Facebook, we try to be a strengths-based organization. We focus on what people’s natural strengths are and spend our management time trying to find ways for them to use those strengths every day.”

Sheryl Sandberg, COO, Facebook

# A brief history of the strengths-based approach: from fringe to mainstream

It's still the norm to identify people's weaknesses before we focus on their strengths. To find what's wrong, what's missing, what's less than perfect, before we notice and appreciate what's good, what's abundant, what's exceptional about them.

This seems true for society in general, and specifically in education and in the workplace. And this focus has also defined psychology and the study of human behaviour for many years. However, over the past two decades, starting as a whisper but with a growing voice, we have started to see a shift towards the positive.

While some assume that the focus on strengths is relatively new, the roots of this movement was established a long time ago. Peter Drucker, widely known as the father of modern management, wrote about the importance of strengths in the 1960s. In his book, *The Effective Executive*, he asserted that organizations would perform better if they leveraged the full strengths of their workforce and tolerated areas of weakness.

Later, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as a reaction to what he regarded as a biased account of the 'human condition', psychologist Martin Seligman began to actively promote the notion of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihályi, 2000). Seligman's call to arms to his fellow psychologists was to start to study with as much rigour and enthusiasm the science of 'what goes right in life' (Peterson, 2005), to balance the accepted focus on dysfunction and disorder. While some saw the merit of the approach 20 years ago, it was only the most radical organizations and thinkers that started to consider shifting their practices towards the positive in a meaningful way.

We found this to be true when we started up Strengths Partnership in 2006 – there were certainly pockets of positive practice and a growing interest in the strengths

approach, but for many organizations, it was too soon and too great a stretch to consider moving away from established models of HRM practice, such as competency-based approaches and standardized appraisal systems, at this stage.

But many researchers and practitioners started to build evidence in the validity of the approach. Gavin and Mason (2004) studied meaningful, 'happy' workplaces and concluded that these employers tended to see better business results for longer than those which did not share this focus. Luthans et al (2010) summarized the state of the art at the time, concluding that a raft of performance improvements at the individual level could be seen when employing positive practices in the workplace.

And so fast-forward to 2016. Increased dissatisfaction with the status quo in HRM combined with greater evidence for the utility of alternatives such as a strengths-based approach has seen more employers trialling, adopting and tweaking their people management approach in favour of a more positive way of working. Management consultancy Deloitte's latest report into global HR trends captures this well: "Look hard at your performance process and push toward simplification and strengths-based assessment and coaching. Train managers on how to give feedback. The days of traditional appraisals and forced ranking are coming to an end; performance management is now a tool for greater employee engagement."

# I. The value of the strengths-based approach

The strengths-based approach to talent assessment and development has been used by some of the leading companies around the world for almost two decades now and is becoming one of the fastest growing trends in human resources. In fact, a recent Forbes article listed strengths-based leadership as one of the fastest growing trends driving business success in 2016. (Altman, Forbes, 2016).

Probably the biggest reason for this surge of interest is the compelling evidence linking strengths-based approaches to a wide range of positive work and life outcomes, including performance improvement, well-being and stress management, motivation, creative problem-solving and improved relationships, self-confidence, career success, and teamwork (e.g. Rath, 2002; Luthans, 2002b; Luthans et al, 2007; Boniwell, 2012; Harzer and Ruch, 2014).

Recent evidence shows:

- **73% improvement** in employee engagement when employees are encouraged to play to their strengths (Rath and Conchie, 2008)
- Employee performance is, on average, **36% higher** when line managers focus their appraisals on employees' strengths and talents (Corporate Leadership Council, 2005). Customer retention is **44% higher** in companies where people are allowed to do what they do best every day (Harter and Schmidt, 2002)
- Positive psychology based interventions help to **reduce stress and burnout** (Cotter & Fouad, 2013)

Strengths Partnership's own research into the value and application of strengths and specifically the use of Strengthscope® in strengths-based development initiatives reveals:

- **73% improvement** in overall work performance and results
- **79% improvement** in confidence in strengths and how they could best contribute at work

- **66% removal** or reduction in limiting weaknesses by capitalising on strengths.

Our clients have also reported similar improvements to performance:

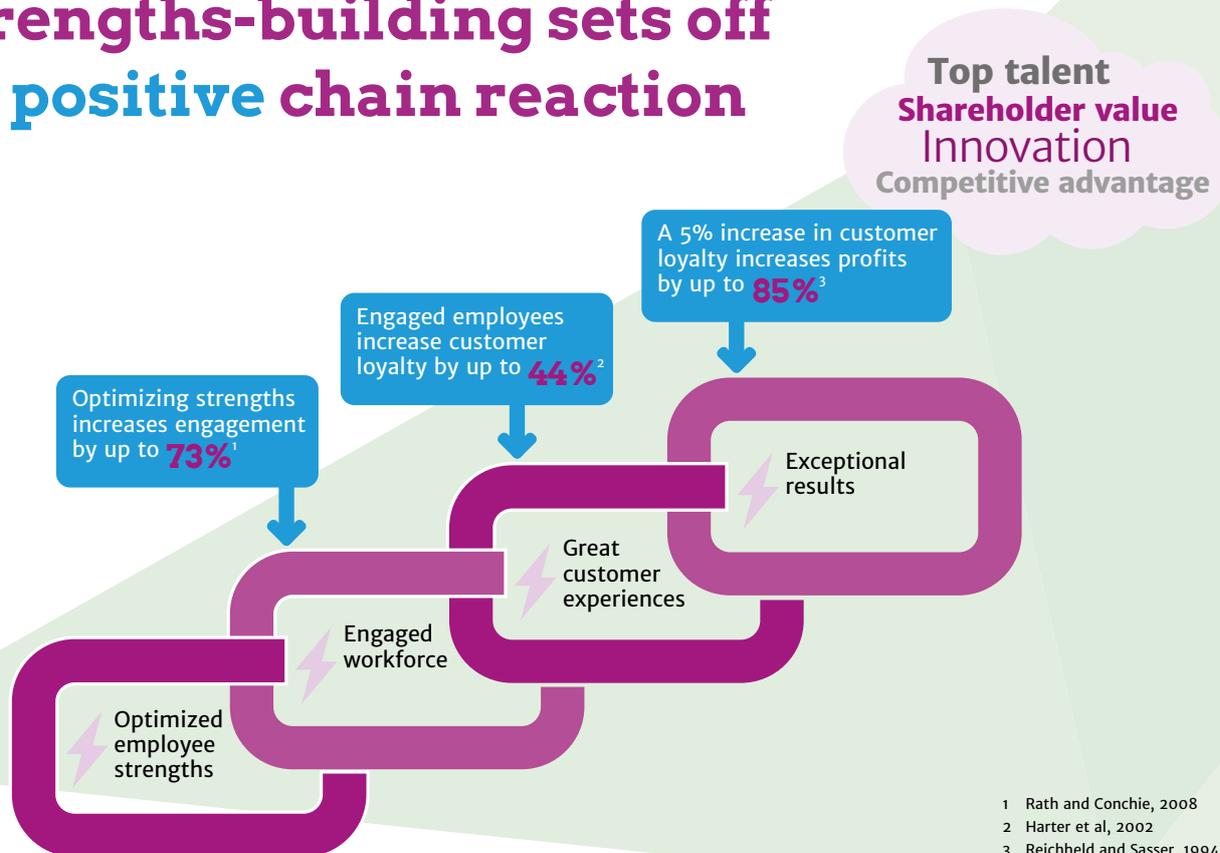
**“Team morale is much improved, resulting in very significant improvement in long-term global employee survey scores.”**  
(Energy provider, BOC)

**“Making strengths-focus an underpinning principle of the management development core curriculum increased levels of engagement, enthusiasm and performance.”**  
(Legal & General)

**“Adopting a strengths-based approach has provided a lens to what we're good at, as individuals, as teams, as a business. It's helped us to recognize and promote PhotoBox at our best.”**  
(PhotoBox)

Helping people find and optimize their strengths more of the time at work sets off a powerful chain reaction, leading to significant improvements in a variety of performance outcomes, including: talent attraction and retention; customer loyalty competitive advantage; innovation; well-being and financial performance.

# Strengths-building sets off a positive chain reaction



## II. How Focusing on Strengths Boosts Performance

### Defining a personality strength

When we think of 'strengths', the first thing that might come to mind are sports stars flexing their muscles, preparing to show that they are the best in their field using their physical and mental strengths. Or perhaps we think of tasks we are good at, in other words, areas of skill and competence we have learned over the years.

However, our definition is different, as we wanted to capture that the word 'strength' has two key main elements – the first is about how much energy or passion you get from a task or activity, while the second is how good you are or can become.

The first part is of great importance as it will determine how much you will stick with a task or activity over time in order to build real strength or mastery.

We therefore define strengths as:

**“Underlying qualities that energize us, and we are great at (or have the potential to become great at)”.**

Strengths energize us and enable us to perform at our peak, in both good times and during challenging times. In this way, they are different from our skills and competencies, or what we have learned over the years to be competent at.

You can be energized by a strength. However, you may not yet have had the chance to develop skills that help you use that strength in the most effective way. For example, you may be energized by the strength of 'Developing Others', but haven't yet taken on a role enabling you to put this into practice. Therefore, your skills and effectiveness in this area might still be underdeveloped.

You can also have a competence that is not an area of strength as it doesn't energize you. For example, you might have learned to be really good at detailed tasks, but are drained by these. If this is the case, you are unlikely to perform well at tasks involving a lot of detail for prolonged periods.

**Spotting strengths**

The best way to identify strengths is to use an objective, accurate and widely used strengths measurement profiler such as Strengthscope®.

However, there are a number of others ways to spot strengths in yourself and others, including:

**Work prioritization and preferences:**

The type of work you prioritize and actively put yourself forward for will provide clues as to your strengths.

**Positive emotions:** You will be happy, positive and energized when doing work that plays to your strengths.

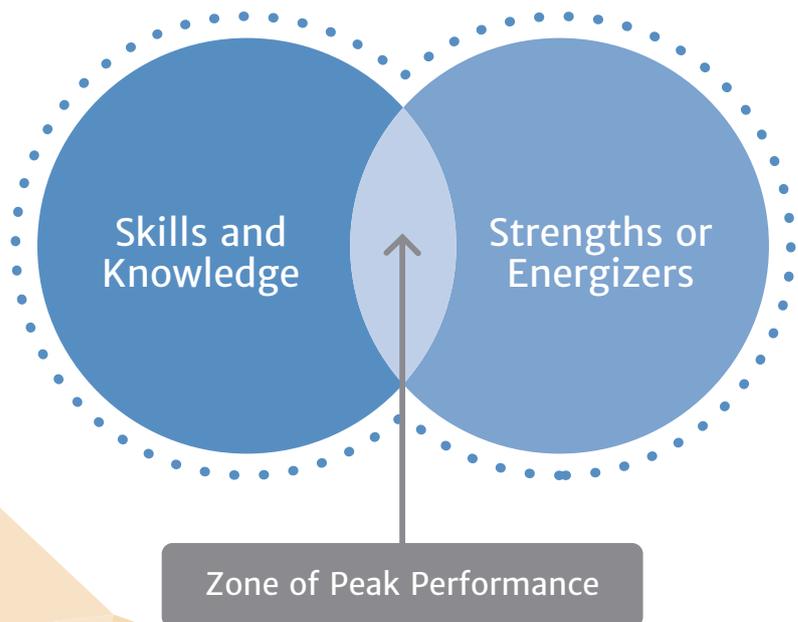
**Rapid learning:** You will find it relatively easy to learn new tasks when you are playing to your strengths. You are therefore more likely to make rapid progress toward high levels of effectiveness in these areas of your work.

**Repeated success:** When using a natural strength, you are likely to achieve repeated success when you perform an activity.

**Focus and perseverance:** You are more likely to show focus and determination in areas of strength, persevering even in the face of pressure and adversity.

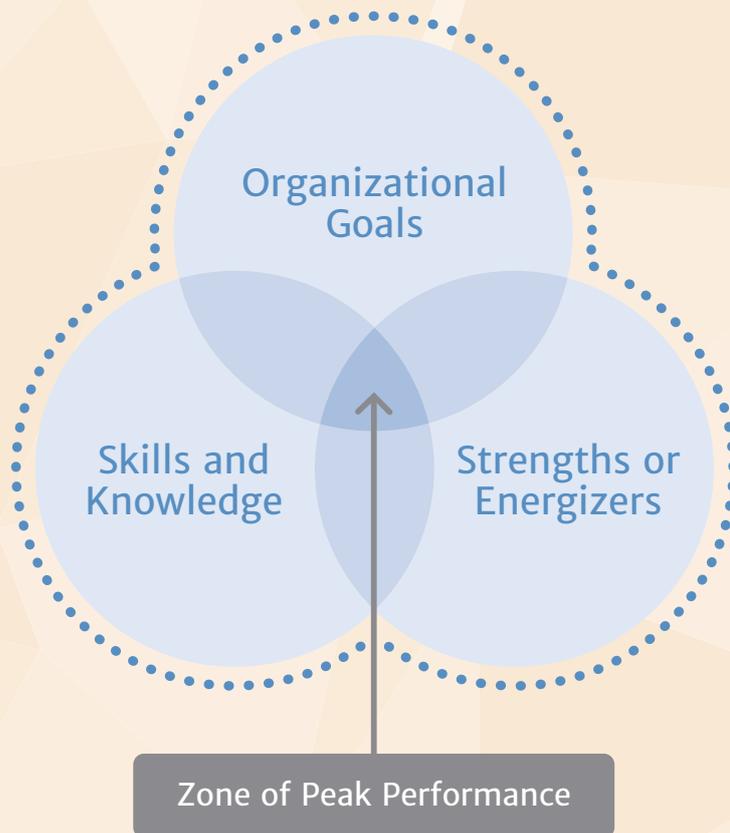
**Zone of peak performance**

Our biggest opportunities for peak performance and career success are when our strengths and skills come together, in other words, we become skilled and competent in strength areas we are naturally energized by. This is called our *zone of peak performance*, as illustrated in the diagram below.



Just like when we build muscle strength, the more we develop and practise using our personality strengths, the more skilled we will become in using our strengths effectively and differently across different situations. In other words, our zone of peak performance will grow and grow, boosting our performance and success.

Of course, strengths are only useful if they are closely matched with the requirements of the job and goals of the organization.



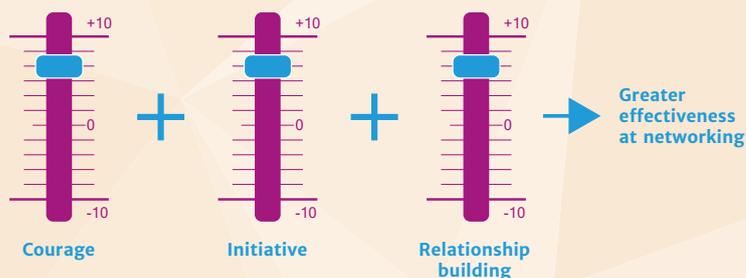
### Powerful strength combinations

The true power of the strengths approach comes alive when you combine strengths in new and powerful ways to develop and deliver results.

Peak performers learn how to get the most from their strengths, regardless of the situation. They are agile and adapt themselves to the environment with speed and precision.

The analogy of a graphic equalizer for creating the sound quality that suits a given situation demonstrates this principle well. It's about knowing when and how to use your strengths in the right amount, the right situation and the right combination. Being able to identify when to turn the volume up or down on a strength is key to achieving agility.

For example, if you combine your 'Courage', 'Initiative' and 'Relationship Building' strengths, this could enable you to enhance your network by connecting with more senior people than perhaps you would normally do. This could in turn, help you to progress your career faster.



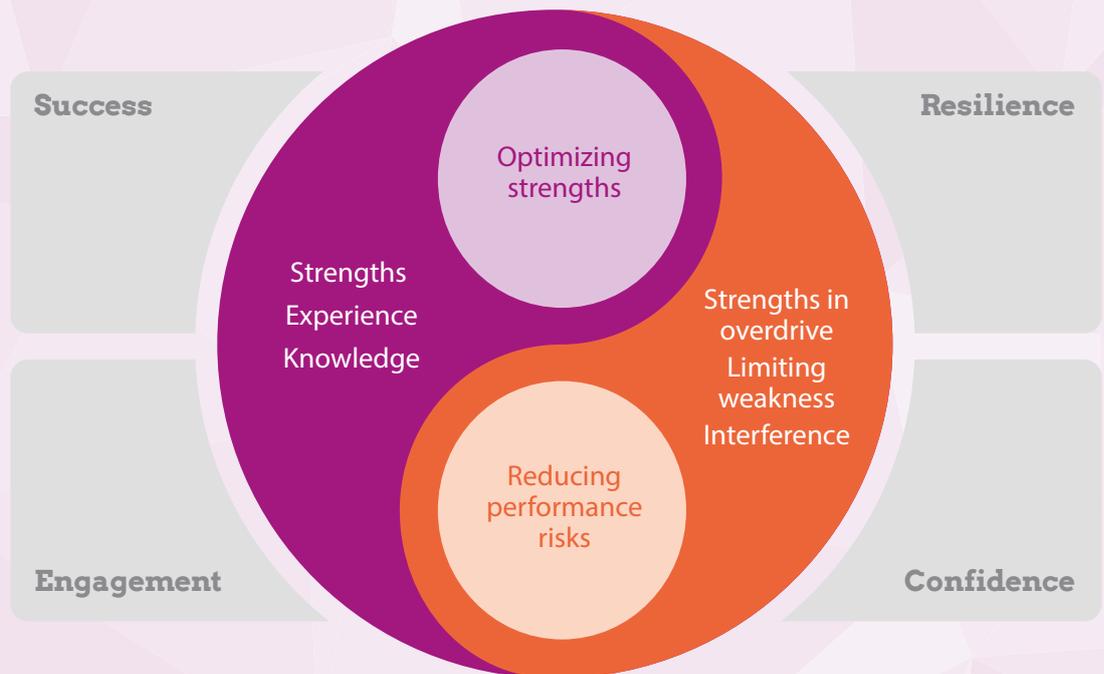
# III. Optimizing and stretching strengths

In Asian philosophy, the concept of Yin–Yang is used to describe how seemingly opposing forces are actually complementary opposites that interact within a greater whole to give it strength and balance.

Similar to this ancient Asian principle, we believe that human development is very much about balancing two opposite and interdependent dualities – optimizing strengths and reducing the effect of performance risks, including weaknesses, see diagram below.

We have developed a powerful approach to optimizing and stretching your strengths. You can use this when you want to develop an underdeveloped strength (i.e. one where your level of skill and effectiveness is low) or when you want to take your strength from ‘good to great’. We call it the 3Es Strengths Development Approach: **Experience, Engage and Educate**.

It is based on the well–researched and practised 70:20:10 adult learning model. Research into effective learning found that 70 percent of knowledge comes from job–related experiences, 20 percent from engaging with others and 10 percent from formal education and training.





### Optimize your strengths



In line with this approach, strengths can be optimized in 3 main ways:

**Experience:** On-the-job experiences (project work, stretch assignments, team roles, etc.) to help stretch you outside your comfort zone.

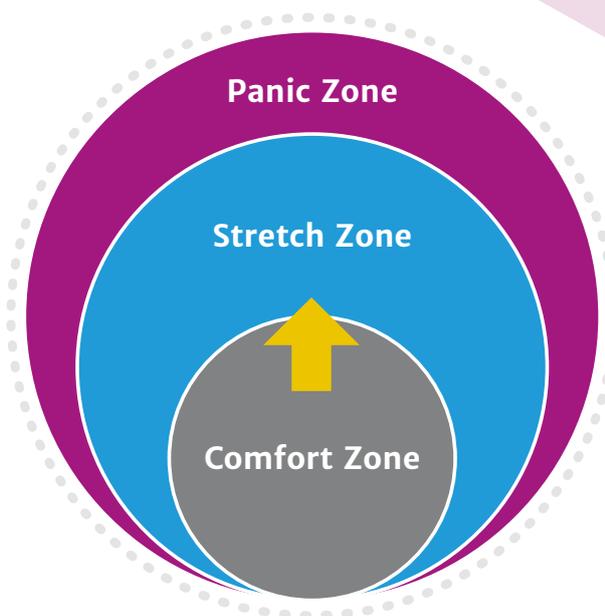
**Engage:** People you engage as coach, mentor, feedback-giver, etc. to help you develop your strengths to the next level.

**Educate:** New skills, knowledge and experience you need to develop to become more effective in areas of natural strength.

### Finding Positive Stretch

In the same way that professional athletes need regular practice and stretch to build their physical and mental strengths to remain at the top of their game, so do employees in order to increase their value to their employer and achieve their aspirations.

People need regular opportunities to test their 'limits', to move into the 'zone of stretch' (see diagram below) in order to develop and realize their aspirations.



It is important to monitor your thoughts and feelings when you stretch beyond your comfort zone. In order for stretch to feel positive and energizing, it should ideally be in areas of strengths for you and you should have a good level of support from co-workers. There also needs to be a good match between the level of skill you have and the challenges you face.

If there is too much stretch (especially in areas of weakness or where the stretch is unsupported) you are likely to become anxious and frustrated and your performance is likely to drop off. However, if you stay within the stretch zone, you will develop new skills and ways of applying your strengths, feel energized and get good results.

### Reducing performance risks

Performance risks are things that can get in the way of you achieving your goals and peak performance. There are three main types of performance risk (as defined below): strengths in overdrive, limiting weaknesses and other sources of interference, or blockers. You can't ignore these risks. Build awareness of the most critical risks to your performance and find ways to reduce these in order to maximize your success.

### Strengths in overdrive

This is when certain strengths (or a combination of strengths) are over-used, or used in the wrong situation or with the wrong person, resulting in unintended negative outcomes.

### Limiting weaknesses

Limiting weaknesses are weaknesses that represent a genuine blocker to achieving success in your goal, job or career.

### Internal and external blockers

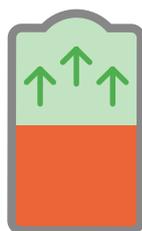
There are two types:

- **Internal blockers** are self-limiting beliefs and assumptions (e.g. low self-confidence) that hold you back from using your strengths
- **External blockers** are work environment factors impacting your development and performance

There are **three potential strategies** to reduce performance risks:

- **Dial up or dial down your strength:** involves adjusting your strength(s) to the needs of changing situations so you are using the right strength(s) at the right time in the right way.
- **Draw on people with strengths different from yours:** involves partnering with co-workers and other people who have strengths you lack so they can complement you.
- **Developing new habits:** involves deliberately developing new habits and skills to reduce areas of risk through on and off the job learning.

### Reduce performance risks (inc. overdrive and weaknesses)



**Dial up or dial down**  
the volume of your strengths

**Draw on**  
people whose strengths are different from yours

**Develop**  
and practice new skills and habits

## IV. Common myths about the approach

A more widespread adoption of the strengths approach has been frustrated by a range of misunderstanding and flawed assumptions. This is a great shame as the approach offers huge potential to significantly improve performance, engagement, teamwork, innovation, well-being and many other crucial HR outcomes.

The most common of these include:

### *1. People know their strengths*

Our work in this area over more than 10 years suggests that people don't fully understand their strengths or take them for granted. Even if they do understand their strengths they have mental blocks around talking about them, including fear of coming over as complacent or arrogant. By contrast, most people, especially those with greater work experience, are all too familiar with their weaknesses. However, we haven't met one person who has achieved excellence by turning their weaknesses into areas of mastery.

### *2. Playing to your strengths is the easy option*

Great performance is all about positive stretch in areas of greatest strength. In other words, it involves doing things better and better by leveraging your strengths. This is far from easy as we know from the perseverance and hours of practice by Olympic athletes and maestro musicians who hone their strengths for many years to achieve moments of peak performance.

In fact, it is a lot harder to optimize one's strengths and move from good to great than it is to improve one's weaknesses from poor to mediocre. However, it is of course a lot more satisfying and rewarding for the individual as well as more valuable for the company when a person achieves greatness in areas of strength.

### *3. Ignoring or avoiding weaknesses*

The strengths approach, when implemented effectively, doesn't ignore weaker areas and other performance risks including overdone strengths and psychological barriers such as poor self-confidence. In fact, it is much more powerful in helping to deal with these for a variety of reasons:

- It ensures a more positive, solutions-based conversation about how to reduce and mitigate weaker areas and other risks to peak performance. When people consider weaker areas and other performance risks using a "strengths lens" they engage in creative problem solving and take more ownership for changing their behaviour.
- It ensures a less threatening conversation, removing fears and defensiveness about talking about weaker areas. One of the underpinning principles of the approach is that we are all 'spiky' possessing great strengths and also great vulnerability. We always emphasize this at the outset of a coaching or feedback conversation, which encourages people to talk more openly about their weaker area and other risks/blockers to performance.
- It encourages people to partner with others who have strengths in areas where they are weaker. This complementary partnering not only helps reduce the impact of weaker areas, it also builds a strong team culture within the organization.

The strengths approach is unique in helping people become aware of and reduce strengths that are overdone, or used in the wrong way, resulting in disappointing outcomes. For example, people who are too confident may become arrogant and those that are too compassionate may find it difficult to avoid becoming overinvolved in their co-workers' personal problems.

The damaging effects of overdone strengths was found in research conducted by Centre for Creative Leadership in the 1990's and should be well established and practised by now. However, because of the competency-based approach used in most organizations, the vast majority of people are unaware of their overdone strengths and how to deal with them. Helping them understand and manage the triggers and limiting effects of overdone strengths is an integral part of the strengths-based approach.

#### 4. *Doing only the things you like doing*

Many people assume that the strengths approach means that people can choose what they love to do and leave everything else. However, this is not the case.

We encourage people to increase the amount of work that they are doing that plays to their natural strengths as this increases their engagement and contribution. However, we go to great lengths to point out that this doesn't mean you have license to avoid the less energizing aspects of the job. In fact, one of our strategies is what we call "going to the gym when you really don't want to" and involves building daily habits in activities where one's energy is lower and the activity can't be delegated to others.

#### 5. *Pursuing happiness as an end goal*

Positive psychology and the strengths-based approach have become largely synonymous with happiness in the popular press and literature. This is due to the early focus of highly influential positive psychologists like Martin Seligman, who tended to focus on the "happiness" concept more than any other.

Happiness is a highly subjective state that depends on many complex factors including our genetic make-up, our upbringing and our subjective interpretations of our achievements and progress. Rather than being an end in itself, it is a by-product of success. So, if employers really want to help people to improve their sense of well-being and happiness, they need to ensure they help each employee to play to their strengths and progress towards their goals.

#### 6. *Dismissing the value of negative emotions*

There are many who assume that the strengths approach means that people should always be happy, which diminishes the value of the full range of emotions at work.

However, as was so well shown in the recent Pixar movie, *Inside Out*, every emotion – including sadness and anger – has a role to play in ensuring success, productive interpersonal relations and wellbeing of employees.

The strengths approach doesn't encourage people to suppress emotions, simply to be aware of them and the implications on their behaviour and outcomes. So, if someone is angry or sad, we encourage them to focus on strengths – theirs and those of others who can support them – to help deal with the situation more positively. This enables them to overcome their negative emotions more quickly and constructively.

**“You can run a business any way you like, but you'll run it better if you build it around your strengths.”**

Duncan Bannatyne OBE, Scottish Entrepreneur.

# V. How to integrate the approach in the DNA of your organization

## Hiring

Momentum is growing across organizations to re-energize the interview process and provide an alternative to competency based interviews (CBIs). Whilst CBIs have added a great deal of structure to the difficult process of selecting the right person for the role and organization, an over-reliance on the approach has led to:

- Well-rehearsed candidates – making it difficult to really get to know the candidate, identify a high performer and favouring candidates who can ‘perform’ in such situations
- Rigid structure – which has led to line managers not always fully engaged with the process
- The language of competencies is sometimes difficult for candidates and managers to understand, as it brings too great a focus on current performance.

As a result, an increasing number of organizations are now adopting a strengths approach in their hiring process, for the following reasons:

### The approach delivers insights into a candidate’s ‘Effectiveness’, ‘Energy’ and ‘Fit’

Line managers prefer the conversational style of a strengths interview, which allows them to get a good sense of what candidates are energized by, how effectively they have applied their strengths and how much of a ‘fit’ the candidate will be for the team and organization. This is key as research shows peak performance is achieved when employees have the skills/competencies required by the role, love what they do (i.e. have the strengths for the role) and align their competencies and strengths with organizational goals and values. Having additional tools (such as Strengthscope®) provides another objective data point to validate candidates’ responses and allow for fine-tuned decision making.

## Everyone understands strengths

The accessibility of the strengths concept makes engaging hiring managers that bit easier. Whilst upskilling line managers is one of the key challenges of introducing this approach, the great majority find the concept very intuitive and incredibly useful to include in an interview. The support they typically need relates to how to score candidate responses and how to avoid biases. Equally, candidates find it very easy to talk about their strengths and come away with a positive impression of the hiring organization as they are left feeling like the interviewer is really interested in ‘knowing what I am about and what makes me tick’.

### Strengths data provides useful insight for onboarding and development

The scores from a strengths-based interview combined with the insights from a Strengthscope® profile provide invaluable insight around candidates’ core strengths, non-strengths and strengths ‘in overdrive’ (when strengths are used inappropriately for the context), feeding into better hiring decisions and providing a great start point for an onboarding/development plan for new hires. Most users agree the need for integrated hiring, onboarding and development processes, so investing in supporting line managers to have engaging performance conversations around new recruits’ strengths optimizes the data collected at interview and gets new hires off to the best possible start.

So when designing a strengths-based approach to hiring, what are the key things you will need to consider? The tips below come from organizations who have successfully embedded the approach:

1. Get the right stakeholders involved in defining 'what great looks like' for a role/part of the organization.
2. Ensure there is rigour and structure to defining 'what great looks like' – a combination of key stakeholder interviews (line manager and current incumbents) with profiling high and low performers provides confidence around the strengths you decide on assessing.
3. Create a clear roll out plan and map out the support you will provide to line managers to build their confidence and capability. This ensures that you will successfully embed the approach and can calibrate across interviewers.
4. Focus on outcomes, strengths, agility and learning. This allows you to assess for potential as well as current/past effectiveness and energy.

In summary, this type of interviewing allows the recruiter to 'get under the skin' of the candidate, find out who they are as a person and what makes them truly tick. We have found that strengths interviewing can be introduced readily into most assessment processes, with the proper training.

We have also found that taking a strengths focus into the design and delivery of assessment centres (combining interviews with psychometric tools, role plays, case studies, presentations, etc.) significantly improves the candidate experience, as well as providing far richer data on the candidate, as they are given the opportunity to present themselves authentically during the process, while still being objectively assessed for strengths and competencies.

Benefits we have seen for organizations include: improved hire quality, including higher performance, longer tenure and quicker promotion times; improved employer 'brand' due to candidates feeling that the hiring organization is genuinely interested

in who they are and what they can bring; and better feedback from hiring managers, who prefer the more naturalistic approach to interviewing where they can better see 'fit' between candidates' skills and strengths and the role and culture of the organization.

## Career Development

Whatever the stage of the economic cycle, the strengths approach always has a place in career development. If we are more focused on the things we do well, the aspects of work that energize us and enthuse us, research suggests that perhaps we can remain more positive, more resilient and more productive.

Indeed, even when we are under pressure and feel that the future is uncertain, we can create a more positive outlook for ourselves and for our careers by building on the strongest aspects of our contribution at work and of who we are, rather than by focusing on mitigating our weakest areas.

This has been the case for several organizations we have worked with, who have commissioned strengths-based career management programmes for employees at various levels in a range of professions. For one well-known insurance company, we were asked to develop a workshop-based programme to help senior technicians to identify their career 'anchors' (i.e. their desired career direction) and then understand better their strengths as resources that they could use to achieve their aspirations. This then led to delegates developing a strengths-based career plan designed to help them build a clear 'brand' for themselves, with a clear career path and real certainty on how they would use their strengths to get there as well as the internal and external resources and support they would need.

For another organization, our strengths assessment tool, Strengthscope® is one of a battery of tools offered to staff at middle management levels who are considering their next career move. Once they have completed the tools and have had a career conversation based on their Strengthscope® profile from one of our team, they then meet with HR to discuss their findings and agree an action plan.

Across these strengths-based career conversations, of which there have been over 100 to date, participants report feeling energized, more confident, and far clearer on their next actions. We believe that this is because the area of strengths and what energizes people remains relatively under-explored and so even in a short conversation (in this case, 60 minutes), people gain a significant set of insights into what drains them and energizes them at work, what obstacles might exist to them getting the most from work (and overcoming these obstacles), how to talk to others about their strengths and their weaknesses (without worrying so much about the consequences) and finally, understanding how to communicate about their strengths in a way which demonstrates value to the organization.

So what practical steps can you take to ensure that you are communicating your strengths and contribution at work?

1. Firstly, you need to be able to describe both what it is you enjoy doing at work and which energizes you (your natural strengths) in a way which makes sense to other people, and which helps them to see quickly where you could add value to their project, team or part of the business. There are various tools available which help provide a framework for describing your strengths – ours is Strengthscope® (see more at [www.strengthscope.com](http://www.strengthscope.com)).

“The whole day was like a 100 pennies dropping 1 after another! I can see we have only just scratched the surface on the strengths-based approach.”

Customer Retention Supervisor, Leading Educational Assessment Provider assessments to UK schools.

At the simplest of levels, our research and practice in the area has shown that if we focus on our strengths and communicate these to others we have more chance that the kind of work we really enjoy comes our way. This can create a virtuous cycle which sees us doing more of the work we love, which we deliver to a higher quality standard, so attracting positive feedback and giving us more of this kind of work to do, as well as making our position in the organization more secure.

And building on this, communicating about the positive contribution that our strengths are making is also key: so naming and describing our strength areas and the contribution they are making is important in ensuring that we are seen as vital to the organization's future.

2. Once you have given a name to your strengths – for example, you may have Collaboration, Strategic mindedness and Results focus – try and link your strengths to outcomes that the organization values in a very practical way. For example, you could use these strengths to build a cohesive cross-functional work group (Collaboration) tackling a tricky issue for the organization created by changes in the external environment (Strategic mindedness), which will deliver recommendations to the Executive team within three months (Results focus).

3. Ensure that your strengths ‘get seen’ by others so that you can start to build a reputation and a ‘brand’ based on your strengths. We have developed a ‘brand pyramid’ methodology that helps employees establish various levels of their ‘brand’, from underlying values/ motivations, through strengths and expertise, to the contribution you would like to be remembered for, and ultimately your ‘brand essence’ in six words or fewer (how you would like to be introduced at a meeting or conference). Creating something similar for yourself will help to crystallize what makes you different (your unique selling point) and will help you become comfortable in talking openly about your strengths. As Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon says, everyone has a brand... “It’s what people say about you when you’re not in the room”. So we would encourage you to get working on yours. The trick with this being useful to you is in becoming comfortable with strengths language so that you can communicate your value without it feeling clumsy or arrogant. This does take practice, but it is worth it.
4. Finally, make sure that you weave the strengths language (linked to outcomes) into your interactions with key stakeholders and into any documents that relate to your performance at work. So your CV should contain strengths language, giving prospective employers a flavour of what it would be like to have you on the team. At any interviews you attend for new roles, describing your strengths and passions will help you to stand out, in an authentic way, from other candidates. At appraisal time, make sure that you describe your strengths clearly to your manager so that they fully understand your strengths and can describe why they’re important to the team. As you enter new project teams, encourage the group to talk about its strengths and lead by describing yours.

## Leadership Development

There are lots of different approaches to leadership, many of which are highly prescriptive about the type of qualities and behaviours needed for effective leadership. These ‘hero’ leadership models assume all leaders have similar strengths and stress the importance of qualities like charisma, persuasiveness and decisiveness in determining success.

“The strengths-based approach flicks on a switch for people. Some say – I have never felt or thought about myself in this way – which gives tremendous impact to the person and value to the organization”.

L&D Director, Data-driven Marketing and Loyalty Analytics Company.

However, recent research shows that successful leaders have very different qualities they draw on in achieving their results. Leaders are not well rounded people, nor do they possess the same qualities and competencies. Like everyone else, they have strengths and vulnerabilities and need to discover and optimize their strengths as well as reducing performance risk areas in order to be effective.

In today's volatile, uncertain environments, where organizations are all being challenged by fast-shifting social, political, economic and technological forces, leaders are being asked to do more with less, to work smarter and optimize the energy, ideas and morale of their workforce. They need to inspire and empower people to optimize their strengths and adapt these to ever-changing requirements. They also need to continuously stretch people to push the boundaries and achieve in the upper range of their strengths and potential.

Based on our extensive research and work with leaders, we recommend applying the following strengths-based principles in the way you develop and deploy leaders in your company:

### Help leaders find and optimize their “Leadership Edge”

Leaders need to develop good self-awareness and make the most of who they are at their best. We refer to this as finding their ‘Leadership Edge’. A leader's edge comes from the unique and powerful strengths and qualities they bring to the way they lead. It also involves being clear about their values, aspirations and the type of value they want to bring as a leader. Once discovered and activated, this leadership edge helps the leader to build trust by leading in an authentic, honest and positive way. This in turn inspires people around them to work hard for the leader and achieve strong results.

Effective leaders know better than to try to be someone they are not. They stay true to who they are at their best and make sure they optimize their unique mix of strengths, skill and experience.

### Help leaders develop four powerful leadership habits

Self-awareness must be followed by ongoing learning and stretch; effective leaders are lifelong learners. The most effective leaders never stand still and they adopt four Stretch Leadership Habits – *Sharing Vision, Sparking Engagement, Skilfully Executing, and Sustaining Progress*. They push the boundaries of thinking and possibility, looking for new and innovative ways of doing things to achieve the organization's goals, whilst advancing their own career. In doing so, they create: a clear sense of Purpose; a Passionate and engaged workforce; clear, scalable Processes that deliver value to the customer; and a culture of peak Performance and continuous improvement.

These leadership habits can be learned by any leader through on-the-job experience, engaging others for coaching and support and training and education programs.

### Focus on strengths, but don't ignore ‘performance risks’

Most leaders are high achievers and are often hard on themselves – they focus more on their weaknesses than they do on their strengths and lack confidence to lead effectively. In fact, research shows that many fear acknowledging or talking about their strengths as they don't want to appear arrogant or complacent. However, the greatest leaders are not only aware of their strengths, but build their performance around these. Leaders like Richard Branson, Steve Jobs and Sheryl Sandberg have been particularly effective at doing this.

To unlock the full potential of their leaders, companies should therefore put more emphasis on strengths awareness and strengths optimization in leadership development and succession programs.

“You don't have to be Nostradamus to know you'll achieve results better and faster if you lead through strengths”.

Altman, Forbes, 2016.

Ways to do this include:

- Ensuring leaders are aware of their strengths and how these are perceived by others by using a 360-degree strengths profiler like StrengthscopeLeader™
- Helping leaders understand how they can develop and optimize their strengths using the 70-20-10 development model discussed previously
- Facilitating exploration of how strengths can be adjusted to the needs of different situations to ensure effective outcomes
- Encouraging leaders to share their strengths and how they want to use these in discussions with their colleagues and direct reports
- Ensuring all leadership strengths are valued and expressed by encouraging inclusive and diverse leadership teams
- Encouraging leaders to provide feedback to each other on their strengths and when these are used effectively to deliver results
- Allocating leaders stretch assignments in line with their natural strengths
- Introducing challenging action learning and stretch projects into leadership development programs to inspire leaders to stretch their strengths and move beyond their comfort zone
- Finding opportunities for leaders to use their strengths in new and challenging ways by taking up secondments and assignments within or outside of the company. For example, some companies like John Lewis encourage the use of work experience with not-for-profit organizations.

As discussed before, weaknesses and other performance risks cannot be ignored when these are undermining the leader's performance.

Leaders' performance risks include limiting weaknesses, overdone strengths and sources of interference including self-limiting assumptions and beliefs.

Overdone strengths in particular often undermine leaders' effectiveness and should therefore form a key part of their development plan. They should be helped to identify the triggers causing overdrive as well as actions they can take to reduce problematic behaviors. Ways to reduce risk areas include:

- One-to-one or peer coaching
- Teamwork and complementary partnering
- Mentoring
- Regular feedback from key performance stakeholders, including 360-degree feedback
- Skills training, including role plays and simulations
- Opportunities for practice and a 'safe space' to learn from mistakes

### Challenge leaders to move people beyond their comfort zone

The most effective leaders positively stretch themselves, their people and the organization at multiple levels. They push the boundaries of thinking and possibility, looking for innovative ways to achieve the organization's goals, whilst strengthening their own leadership and learning.

“Great leaders are not defined by the absence of weakness, but rather by the presence of clear strengths”.

John Zenger, Leadership Expert and Author.

These leaders know there is no “one size fits all” approach for getting the best from others. They discover their employees’ strengths and create an engaging and challenging environment that allows employees to use and stretch their strengths, empowering them by providing support and coaching to ensure people have the best chance of success.

Leaders who regularly challenge their people to move outside their comfort zone and use their strengths in new and different ways can expect exceptional performance and positive employee engagement.

### Invest in building strong leadership teams

Effective teamwork is imperative for leaders in order to do more with less, improve collaboration, raise performance and ensure the pace and quality of innovation is high.

Helping leaders identify their strengths and how these can best be deployed to contribute to team goals will create higher levels of clarity and accountability as well as promoting greater levels of autonomy.

Encouraging complementary partnering within the leadership team, where team members support colleagues in areas where they are weaker or less developed with their standout strengths is also a powerful way to improve team morale, trust and effectiveness.

Building a high level of strengths awareness within the team also enables the team to adapt to changing goals, stakeholder needs and processes more quickly, as well as pinpointing strength and skill areas in the team that might be lacking to meet future requirements.

### Ensure a positive ‘leadership shadow’

Through their day-to-day actions, leaders influence their stakeholders and the organization in different ways. Their influence can be small, moderate or powerful. It can also be positive or negative in terms of its impact on productivity, morale and well-being.

In other words, leaders can cast a strong and positive shadow on others, ensuring they bring about positive change and sustained performance improvement over time. In order to build a positive, energized culture that promotes excellence, leaders need to show the way. They should be mindful and intentional about identifying, valuing and building on others’ strengths and successes. This will encourage others to find their natural strengths and optimize them to deliver peak performance.

### Team Development

Despite all the change and churn going on in the world today, some teams still manage to raise their game and performance to another level. Whether in sport or in commerce, while unusual, these examples are not hard to find. Whether they label it as this or not, many teams have learned to optimize their strengths and limit the impact of any risk areas they may have in order to drive towards their goals. Our recommendations follow on helping teams to navigate through change and strengthen their performance to beyond what they thought was possible:

- 1. Know your purpose**– the most effective teams operate the ‘gold medal’ strategy: namely, what is the one overriding goal that the team needs to focus on in order for it to be a standout success? Of course, we might feel that sporting teams should find this more straightforward, as they may well be literally aiming towards a ‘gold medal’ goal. However, the same pinpoint approach can be adopted in the business world too. Teams should identify what is the one goal or single overriding purpose that outweighs all others.

**2. Find your strengths**– teams need to understand the strengths, skills and most important contribution that individuals can make to a team. Part of this data can come from a strengths profiler such as **Strengthscope®**, which will help individuals identify what they love the most and where they can make greatest impact. It is also important to know how the strengths of individual team members combine to 'define' a team's brand – this will often be a blind spot for teams until they gain an understanding of how their strengths can combine most effectively to deliver on goals.

**3. Understand how to use strengths at their best**– knowing one's strengths doesn't necessarily equate to using them effectively. At the individual level, team members can benefit from reflecting on how they can use their strengths most effectively to help the team achieve its goals, particularly where they have a strength in short supply within the team. At the team level, gaining an understanding of 'what great looks like' for predominant strengths comes through powerful conversations. For example, using strengths of Empathy and Collaboration to adopt a 'one team' approach in practice to deliver on important project goals. Or using strengths of Resilience and Decisiveness to steer a team through a turbulent and unpredictable period, emerging stronger as a result. Ongoing powerful conversations can help teams find more examples of strengths at their best to help build awareness both inside and outside the team.

**4. Manage the risks**– the most productive teams are prepared to be honest and open about risk areas. Individuals can call on other team members for feedback and support in areas where they feel weaker. At the team level, possible blind spots should be identified due to strengths in overdrive or weaker areas. Consider shared Resilience and Courage strengths which if left unchecked may lead a team to take risky decisions without a clear benefit. Or a lack of relational strengths, which may result in the team becoming insular

and isolated from the wider organization, potentially losing sponsorship as a result. Actively managing these risks is essential if a team is to maintain high performance under pressure.

**5. Build team habits** – without strong processes and disciplines to support strengths, a team can never become outstanding. Planning, delivery, reviewing and learning all require time and focus to be done well and create a sense of belief in what the team can achieve at its best. Teams which have built these habits over time are more likely to report clarity of goals, trust of one other, a sense of individual and collective responsibility, readiness for change and confidence to stretch beyond comfort zones.

**6. Direct strengths towards goals**– teams should always remember to start with the end in mind: being clear on team goals and pointing strengths and habits in that direction. The team should follow a simple action plan of 'plan, do, review' in order to learn from experience and to refine its approach over time to create a culture of marginal gains using individual and collective strengths, supported by powerful, positive team habits.

What we have found in applying the strengths approach is that teams that follow these principles in a disciplined way report a number of important benefits. These include:

- clarity around team purpose, priorities and roles
- a more collaborative team culture in which strengths are truly used by the team and for the team
- a positive, energized team environment
- a genuine appreciation of diversity
- more open, authentic communication and feedback
- improved confidence, resilience and resourcefulness in the team
- improved team productivity and results.

So, is the identification and use of a team's strengths the 'silver bullet' to developing high performing teams? It may not be the only answer but it can certainly provide teams with a sense of control and a renewed sense of identity and meaning in an otherwise unpredictable environment. We would encourage teams to understand their strengths and talents and to drive up team performance by using them more effectively.

## Performance Management

Two-thirds of organizations feel the current approach to appraisals is in need of review. The bureaucracy and tedium surrounding existing processes has driven high-profile companies – such as Deloitte – to stop using traditional appraisals altogether.

It is beyond doubt that appraisals are a demotivating experience for most. A heavy emphasis on negative feedback means managers spend a significant amount of time criticising employees, leaving staff feeling under-valued and demotivated. Many managers dread the process as much as their employees, as they fear employees' reactions to their feedback. Yet appraisals have the potential to be a powerful HR tool, helping organizations maximise performance, engagement, and retention.

By following a strengths-based approach to performance conversations, companies can banish appraisal dread for both managers and employees.

### 1. Abandon the outdated 'sandwich approach'

The sandwich approach has been acknowledged as the go-to appraisal format for human resources and training professionals. Intended to soften the impact of negative feedback by placing it between a positive opening and closing statement, all the method actually does is shift employee attention to the wrong performance areas. Strong performers will often focus on the negative aspects of the message and leave their appraisal demotivated about the areas where they need to improve. Poor performers, however, will choose to acknowledge only the positive feedback and leave their appraisal with an inaccurate view of their current level of achievement.

### 2. Emphasize strengths to boost development

The typical appraisal looks at past activity to gauge levels of current performance and views weaknesses as the major focus for development. Unsurprisingly, this technique has a tendency to undermine efforts to enhance performance and damage self-confidence. To facilitate progression, appraisals must emphasize the factors that energize and inspire individuals — their strengths and successes.

For employees who meet or exceed acceptable performance standards, strengths-based appraisals can generate impressive results. According to a 2005 Corporate Leadership Council study involving 135 organizations, using a personality and strengths-based development process boosted performance by nearly 40%\*.

To implement this approach, organizational culture must be realigned with strengths-based thinking and processes to encourage openness, collaboration, and positivity. Managers need to become performance enablers, rather than critical judges, and employees must be empowered to shape their future by highlighting what they want to achieve.

Hiring costs  
reduced by

40%

using a strengths-based  
recruitment approach

### 3. Take a realistic stance on weaknesses

A focus on strengths does not mean poor performance should be overlooked. In fact, a strengths-based approach to appraisals can help overcome weaker areas more effectively, as managers and staff consider ways to deal with overdone strengths – strengths used in the wrong way or at the wrong time – which undermine performance. For example, attention to detail can become perfectionism and courage can become reckless. These overdone strengths are frequently the most important source of performance shortfalls and correcting them can result in big performance gains. Considering ways to use strengths to overcome weaker areas and other performance blockers can also reduce defensiveness, and promote creative techniques to deal with stubborn weaknesses. For example, it may be useful for team members to collaborate with others in their department who have the strengths they lack.

Appraisals for individuals who fall short of acceptable standards must highlight areas where development is required and agree actions for improvement. Mistakes should also be treated as a learning opportunity rather than a punishable offence, thereby fostering an environment of transparency, where employees are motivated to overcome challenges.

Customer retention is

44%

higher when people get to play to their strengths regularly

It is, however, important to acknowledge that vulnerabilities are often integral to an individual's personality and is unlikely to change. Though neuroscience research has demonstrated that behaviours can be altered, attempting to embed a new skill when an individual does not have the base potential or inclination, will not be successful.

Organizations should match individuals with roles that suit their natural strengths by pairing individuals with others who possess complementary skills or by using performance software solutions that reduce the impact of weaknesses.

### 4. Embrace the rule of three for priorities

With too many tasks to focus their attention on, employees can rapidly reach burnout and fall into the deficit trap. Yet this scenario can easily be avoided by managing priorities efficiently — setting no more than three goals for each individual to complete over a three-month period in what is known as the “3 x 3” approach.

Flexibility is paramount and organizations should be careful to ensure timelines are realistic or can be extended for long-term or complex goals. This applies in particular to ‘stretch goals’ that aim to take individuals out of their comfort zone, or area of psychological safety, to achieve a challenging priority that will broaden their skills.

### 5. Break the direct link between appraisals and pay

One of the chief causes of employee disengagement and low morale is the connection between annual appraisals and pay grades. This is a significant problem in organizations where performance ratings are regulated using a ‘forced distribution’ method that limits the number of employees in each category. Though there is no simple fix for the issue, organizations can explore alternative, more motivating approaches such as: linking pay increases to objectively verifiable results, holding separate pay reviews, abandoning assigning overall ratings for the performance cycle altogether, and implementing regular calibration meetings to ensure ratings are being applied fairly.

## Culture change

Culture change towards a high engagement, peak performing workplace will ensure that employees are committed to their organization's goals and values, motivated to contribute to organizational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of wellbeing. And this type of high engagement culture is seen today as somewhat of a 'holy grail' when it comes to managing people.

Vance (2006) said, "Employees who are engaged in their work and committed to their organizations give companies crucial competitive advantages — including higher productivity and lower employee turnover."

So how do people professionals create the conditions for employees to feel engaged in their work? We suggest there are three key elements:

1. Have a meaningful purpose
2. Involve your people
3. Get people playing to their strengths.

### In a little more detail:

1. Engage people. Each organization needs to have a purpose in the world that is relevant to employees so they can feel that what they do makes a difference. That their work matters. A lot has been said about the importance of organizational meaning to the 'millennial' working generation but in truth, meaning matters to all generations. We recommend that an organization's vision and purpose is clear and meaningful, so that it is something people can buy into and hold onto. So that the efforts they put in every day at work make sense to them. This needs to be communicated regularly to people so that they don't lose sight of it.

2. Almost all research on high engagement cultures describes the importance of people's involvement with their work – both from an organizational point of view and from a role point of view. So employees need to feel empowered to do their jobs in the way that works best for them and for the organization. This gives people a sense of autonomy in, and personal control over, their work. It can be achieved by encouraging line managers to take a supportive, coaching approach with their teams, rather than being dictatorial. Employees also welcome a sense of control and involvement in the future direction of the organization, so give them a 'voice' to feed into strategic and local decision-making.

3. Employees report that having their personal strengths acknowledged and being able to play to these every day in their work can be one of the most engaging aspects of their work. People find that being encouraged to master their areas of strength gives a great sense of motivation and connection with work. This leads to more frequent experiences of 'flow' where people become fully immersed and absorbed in their work and contribute the greatest value to the organization. So stretching areas of strength is seen as one of the greatest untapped opportunities for driving engagement in the workplace today.

People professionals should therefore look to their enabling people processes to see where these elements can be included, from recruitment and induction through to personal development, talent management and performance management. And where their processes are found wanting, it's possible to make simple changes in order to make a big difference to employees' likely 'discretionary effort' at work.

Management consultancy Deloitte's latest report into global HR trends captures this well: "Look hard at your performance process and push toward simplification and strengths-based assessment and coaching. Train managers on how to give feedback. The days of traditional appraisals and forced ranking are coming to an end; performance management is now a tool for greater employee engagement." Global Human Capital Trends 2015, Deloitte University Press, p56

### 7 keys to success when implementing the approach

In the drive to build more positive, productive and high performing, high engagement workplaces, an increasing number of organizations are choosing to introduce a strengths approach at various points in their talent lifecycle. What we have found over the past 10 years is that the organizations who achieve lasting success with the approach share some commonalities.

- Pilot and test – very few organizations, irrespective of size or stage of development, are willing to risk a wholesale transformative approach to managing their people or to shifting their culture without piloting first. So successful strengths-adopters prefer first to identify a team, group or area of their organization which could benefit in a tangible way from piloting the approach. This provides early evidence of the efficacy of the approach, as well as providing learning as to how the approach may need to be tailored to the requirements of the wider organization. And these important elements of data gathering can be used to build a stronger case to engage in conversations with key stakeholders.
- Engage key stakeholders – it is likely that HR (Learning & Development or Organizational Development) will have been involved in commissioning any strengths-based pilot project but it is now important to engage the people function more fully in conversation about the benefits and drawbacks of the approach, as well as discussing and agreeing the role that the organization's people professionals will want to play in any wider rollout. Crucially at this stage, it is also vital to engage those at the top of the organization in conversations about the scope of introducing the strengths approach as well as giving them a personal experience of the difference this will make.
- Create pull – once programme scope is agreed, we have found it important to engage line managers early on so that they can understand how any programme will affect them (for example, if they will be required to alter their approach to appraisal conversations, or to hiring interviews), then provide them with a personal experience of how different the approach will feel and to allay any concerns about additional workload, at the same time as providing upskilling briefings to ensure the programme's success. For some organizations, this may involve some classroom-based training, for others it may be closer to hour-long webinars which provide good coverage of the basics. As quickly as possible then, line managers are likely to want to see evidence of whether what is being presented is a useful approach and the extent to which the benefits outweigh the costs in order for them to become sponsors. If this is done well, it will create a 'pull' internally as line managers will become advocates and sponsors of a programme who will also have the skills to deliver on its 'promise', i.e. to ensure that employees are playing more to their strengths more of the time.

- Build internal capability – at the same time, as part of the planned rollout, many organizations will provide training for part or all of the HR team, in order to build internal expertise around changed processes and any tools or approaches that are being introduced for the first time. This creates an internal group of champions and experts to whom staff can refer with questions or challenges.
- Create push – introducing the strengths approach into graduate/new staff hiring, onboarding and early stage tenure development programmes can help to create a ‘push’ factor as new starters expect that they will experience strengths at different points in the talent lifecycle, and indeed will expect to be able to be given the opportunity to their strengths from the outset of their time with the organization. This can create a powerful force for change, which along with the ‘pull’ from sponsoring line managers, can bring about more rapid results from a programme.
- Plan, do, review – we have found that a staged, project managed approach gives the best possible start to any strengths programme, with an effective governance structure, a clear plan with owners and accountabilities, and planned opportunities to review, learn and amend a programme as it is rolled out. Taking a more ‘organic’, informal approach can sometimes work but we have found that this risks early benefits fading and the organization potentially losing focus and ultimately failing to realize the full potential of a strengths development programme.
- Provide support – while it is crucial to develop internal capability, most organizations will continue to benefit from the deep expertise and experience that an external organization can provide as regards embedding and reinforcing strengths-based practices at different stages of the talent lifecycle. So the most successful strengths-adopters tend to both create a skilled internal group at the same time as keeping their expert partners close to hand for embedding a strengths programme and ensuring that transformative change is realized.

“Strengthscope® is a flexible and engaging approach to developing our people from an individual level, to helping teams to perform at their peak through to growing our people managers and leaders”.

Monique Knaappen, HR Manager – Talent, Learning & Development at PhotoBox.

# Talent management and strengths: the next ten years

The pace of change in the UK and globally is continuing to accelerate at breakneck speed and we can expect these changes in technology, economics, politics, and society to shape talent management and strengths significantly during the next 10 years. Apart from the obvious changes like Brexit, some of the more transformational megatrends we predict are outlined below.

## More focus on analytics and application of artificial intelligence

Advances in digital technology will give rise to a whole host of opportunities within HR and talent management. As a result, HR and line management will have access to technology-enabled software to source, test, hire and develop talent. Several companies like IBM and Facebook are already starting to introduce artificial intelligence into their screening process to minimize subjectivity of decision-making and companies are also using social media data from LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms to profile people. One new HR tech company, HireVue, is even recording and analysing interviews to note things like word choice and changes in facial expressions. Several companies are also introducing virtual reality screening and development solutions into their HR programs, which enable them to see how candidates respond under pressure to challenging situations that might arise in real life, just like pilots who experience significant simulation training to learn how to handle challenging flying conditions.

Of course, all this is not without risk and privacy laws will doubtless be changed to protect personal data on the web from being used by companies in the hiring process. However, we can expect machines and algorithms to play a much greater role in HR decision-making in future as a result of their ability to gather, analyse and disseminate data in more objective and efficient ways.

## Taking an inclusive approach to talent management

Organizations will move away from approaching talent management in a narrow and exclusive way by defining high potential 'talent pools' in the upper levels of the organization and investing the lion's share of resources in these groups.

There will be a broader focus on talent at all levels of an organization. This more inclusive approach will value and appreciate the unique strengths, skills and ideas that all employees bring and ensure HR and talent processes and practices are aimed at optimizing everyone's strengths and ideas to help deliver the company's purpose and goals.

“Research shows that a person’s best performance comes when they are given meaningful work that leverages their personal strengths and aspirations”.

Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends Report, 2015.

## Death of the traditional job description

A narrow and rigid approach to job analysis and writing job descriptions is not fit for purpose in a fast-changing, uncertain and complex business environment. What many companies are noticing is that jobs are changing so quickly that job descriptions are often out of date within weeks or months of the person starting work.

Companies like Facebook and McKinsey are looking for alternatives and many are already piloting 'job crafting' approaches. This involves focusing on hiring employees with the right strengths, skills and values that align with the organization's purpose and then deploying them across multiple projects and assignments where their talents can best be utilized.

## Adopting a growth mindset

In today's hyper competitive and complex business environment, companies need people who cannot only do the job, but are also motivated enough to put in the extra mile and continuously raise their performance and contribution. In other words, organizations need people who not only work hard, but also work productively.

A significant amount of research shows that when people play to their strengths, they will be more passionate about their work and will put in higher levels of effort to overcome challenges and achieve their goals. They are also more likely to be engaged with their job and the company and experience higher levels of confidence and wellbeing at work. It is no wonder then that we are seeing such an upsurge of interest in strengths-based approaches to HR and talent management.

Organizations also need people who believe they can grow and improve through hard work and continuous self-improvement. Something Carol Dweck, a Stanford Professor in Psychology, calls the "growth mindset". People with a growth mindset are not afraid to take on new challenges and treat failure as an opportunity to learn. They focus on solutions and opportunities more than

problems and issues, believing it is possible to overcome any challenge by maintaining a positive, can-do mindset and bringing their co-workers in to support them.

## Social networks take centre stage

The digitization of society and the workplace means that we are connected through social networks in ways that simply weren't possible a decade or two ago.

This has numerous benefits for talent management. Some of the more interesting trends we expect to see growing over the next few years include:

- Involving all employees more actively in the hiring process through inviting them to tap into their social networks
- Using social media and online learning to support employees' development by setting up cloud-based learning platforms, webinars, virtual classrooms, online peer coaching, mobile learning apps, etc.
- Using mobile devices to measure engagement in a real-time way by asking employees for daily or weekly feedback and ideas on how to improve engagement.
- Encouraging online chat forums and in-company Facebook-type networks to facilitate networking, communication flows across organizational boundaries, mentor matching, better practice sharing, etc.

Productivity in the workplace is increased by

38%

when people are encouraged to optimize their strengths

## Nature vs. nurture for talent

A growing body of evidence from leading researchers and psychologists points to talent being largely learned and often presenting as 'spikes' in certain abilities as opposed to innate. Excellence, they conclude, is a combination of passion, perseverance and lots of practice, as well as having the positive conditions to thrive. Therefore, there is no such thing as a natural leader or sales person. Recent research shows, for example, that the greatest leaders have very diverse strengths and focus on building out three to four areas rather than trying to become all-rounders.

However, this doesn't mean we can all develop into expert performers in all areas. It is also clear from the research that the natural strengths or passions of people are well formed by the time they are in their teens. This means that the type of activities and tasks that will energize them are unlikely to change much over the course of their career. Accordingly, it is important for companies to focus learning and development around people's natural strengths rather than trying to develop well-rounded employees, as people learn better and faster in areas of strength.

Talent is also inherently spiky so great performers also have weaknesses and vulnerabilities that are extremely difficult and time-consuming to improve. These weaknesses can be improved marginally, however, they rarely develop into great strengths as a lack of energy and interest in these areas means the person won't put in the effort and practice necessary to achieve excellence.

In light of these megatrends, and the many others not mentioned, it is important for HR and talent leaders and professionals to be ready for change and uncertainty and understand how these forces might shape their organization in the years to come. They also need to demonstrate the courage and curiosity to let go of traditional and dated approaches to HR and talent management and experiment with innovative approaches such as strengths-based techniques in the way they source, test, hire, develop and retain new talent. Just like start-up tech entrepreneurs, they need to learn to spot new opportunities, bring innovative products and solutions to their clients, pivot to changing situations and 'fail fast' when the solution doesn't produce measurable returns. By taking these steps they will ensure they remain relevant and at the centre-stage of the ongoing development, adaptation and success of their organization.

Increased profits  
by up to

**85%**

when people are  
encouraged to  
optimize their  
strengths

# Videos and resources

## Our latest blogs and articles:

Go to <http://www.strengthspartnership.com/blog/>

## Videos:

Angela Duckworth's Ted Talk: GRIT: The power of passion and perseverance

[https://www.ted.com/talks/angela\\_lee\\_duckworth\\_grit\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_passion\\_and\\_perseverance](https://www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_grit_the_power_of_passion_and_perseverance)

Shawn Achor's TED Talk: The happy secret to better work

[https://www.ted.com/talks/shawn\\_achor\\_the\\_happy\\_secret\\_to\\_better\\_work](https://www.ted.com/talks/shawn_achor_the_happy_secret_to_better_work)

Various videos from Strengthscope® on the value of the strengths approach and how to apply it, including case studies

<https://www.youtube.com/user/Strengthscope>

Animation from Go Strengths: Understanding the negativity bias at work and in life

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E09077HRurg>

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“The effective executive makes strengths productive. (S)he knows that one cannot build on weaknesses. To achieve results, one has to use all the available strengths – the strengths of associates, the strengths of the superior, and one’s own strengths. These strengths are the true opportunities”.

(Peter Drucker, 1967)

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