

Recognising talent at NS

A field study of the potential of the staff



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Introduction

What is talent? What is potential? Do we, the management of Netherlands Railways, all look at potential in the same way and how can we get a better grip on this stubborn concept? These are all questions that arose during our search to find (better) ways of locating and utilising the potential of our staff. These questions also came up three years ago at the start of the 'development-oriented control' project, which we had put in place to help our staff keep developing.

We have split the concept of 'talent' up into two aspects: performance (looking at the past, the achievements and the skills) and potential (looking at the future, things that are suspected or predicted but not yet known). Whereas the concept of performance was described relatively quickly, we noticed that the concept of potential was harder to pin down. What do we actually mean when we are talking about potential? What are we looking at exactly and how varied is our perception of it? What angle are we looking at it from, and are we all indeed looking from the same perspective? Is it possible for one person to think that somebody has potential, whereas another person thinks not? What does that say about the potential of the staff member? Or does it logically say at least as much about us or the context within which potential is visible?

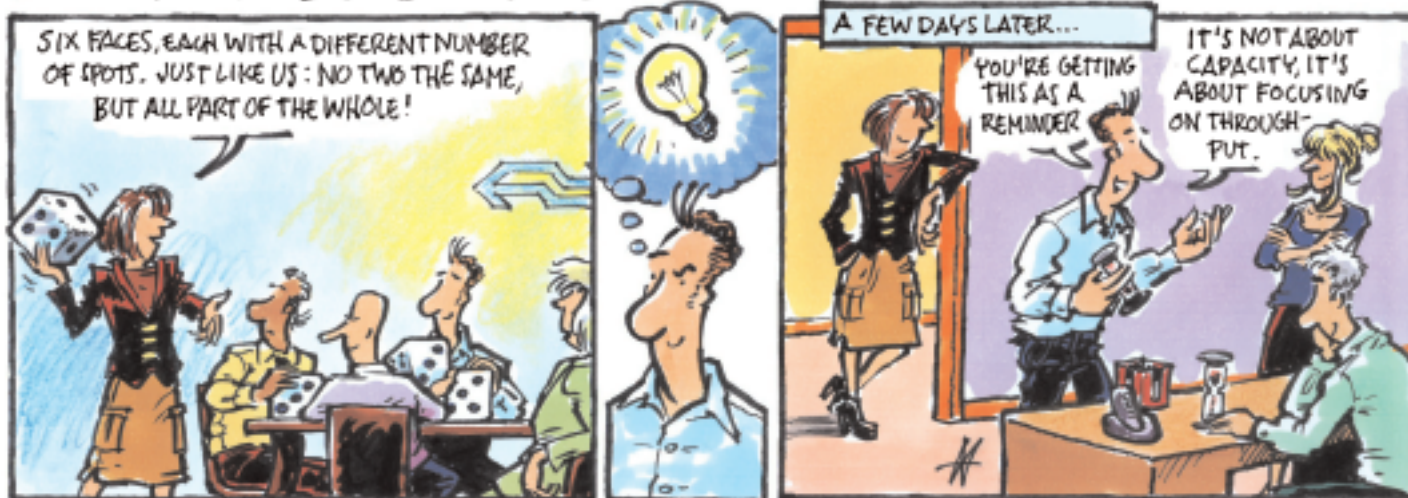
Not a method, not a checklist - a process

To answer the question posed above, we started an experiment. All the NS MT members have spotted a talent and asked that person to help with the experiment. The talents were then asked to make a video recording of a critical work situation. These videos were then reviewed and discussed by the manager, the 'talent', another manager and an interviewer, with the aim of understanding the convictions held by the 'potentials' and clarifying the behaviour. What drives them and why do they do things the way they do (the 'think out loud' protocol)? These discussions produced clear ideas that are helping us to recognise talent.

The results were positive and surprising. We have learned a great deal, but the study has also thrown up just as many new and interesting questions. The results of the study are presented in this booklet. Not as yet another list with criteria for 'potential', but in cartoon format. The themes for 'potential' are the ability to learn, ambition, strength of character, head and heart, surprises, making the time for things, and making connections. In addition, the second part of the booklet includes relevant background information and a number of findings from the study. For the sake of clarity, please note that staff members with potential are sometimes referred to as 'talents' in this booklet and sometimes as 'potentials'.

The NS Management Team hope you enjoy reading it!

LEARNING CAPACITY



Having a good brain - the intellectual capacity - is a prerequisite, but there are other characteristics as well that are part of the ability to learn: being quick on the uptake, able to adapt to a new context rapidly and getting the hang of things more quickly than other people. What is typical here is that the talents are able to take a critical look at themselves and keep improving the effectiveness of the way they act. Additionally, someone with a lot of potential sees how other successful colleagues deal with things neatly and cleverly, and they spontaneously start copying this behaviour and applying it. Talents can structure their own learning, will ask for training, work out what their colleagues are doing or go on work trips. Is the person in question already busy studying at home, as well as working? The 'mental flexibility' of a person with potential is obvious.

We have determined that the learning capacity is the most important of the criteria that we have defined for 'potential'. Without the ability to learn, you won't be a talent.

AMBITION



Ambition can easily be confused with perfectionism, but it's more about being determined to get the best out of yourself. Someone with ambition will appear eager, they will want to know everything and be everywhere, and they will practise, practise, practise! Not necessarily to be the best in the class, but to make the most of what they have. Someone who is highly ambitious is not afraid of high expectations and takes on the challenge of doing it even better next time around. One person in the study responded to being questioned about her ambition by saying, "Noblesse oblige: if I'm lucky enough to have lots of talents, then it's my duty to make use of them."

GUTS



The theme of having "guts" - strength of character - was the most difficult to pin down in a single picture, since what one person may see as needing a lot of nerve is perfectly normal to someone else. Having guts can be expressed in many ways: for example taking risks, being proactive, contradicting someone, doing it your own way, sticking your neck out, going against the flow, daring to be yourself, going your own way and not whining along with everyone else. Doing what you think is best.

HEAD + HEART



A potential has one of these and is looking for the other: he is good at connecting the content and the process together and coming up with the goods. Sometimes he will approach things from the content angle, but he is also good at handling people. Sometimes however he will be approaching things from the human perspective and then realise, "I need to know more about the content".

SURPRISE!



Resolving a problem quickly is only one facet of being surprising. Other aspects are the way that the potentials sometimes do things just a little bit differently, act in a less typical and non-standard way - and get results. They are strong characters, looking further than their own familiar areas and applying their own ways of looking at things to the situation. It can be described as “bringing colour to the grey masses” or “thinking outside the box”.

THERE'S ALWAYS TIME



"A talent always has time." This comment turned up a number of times during our discussions about talent. Someone with potential enjoys being kept busy. They pick things up fast, can do more than the job function requires and therefore go looking for extra things to do. That doesn't necessarily mean that the person in question is working all hours, but that they are good at structuring their work efficiently and setting priorities properly. The key points are separated from the peripheral items and the priorities are defined. Is he or she studying as well as working? Or busy with all sorts of things outside work that you never notice?

The jargon term is 'containment' - it means someone can handle a lot. In short: a talent has lots of energy and can take on a great deal.

CONNECTING



This theme is the touchstone for the others. Someone can have guts, bring a touch of colour to things, be ambitious... but would you really want to be this person's manager? The key concept for testing this is 'mutual attraction'. This is often based on a very strong suspicion that 'I could really get things done together with that person'. It may sometimes be someone who you see yourself in ('pedal to the metal' - just like me) or sometimes someone who you think you could learn from ('he's much more analytical and reflective than I am - complementary skills').

The study

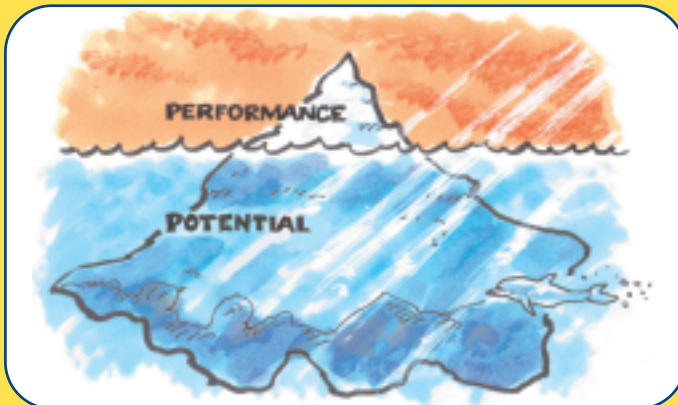
Background information and findings



How do you study talents?

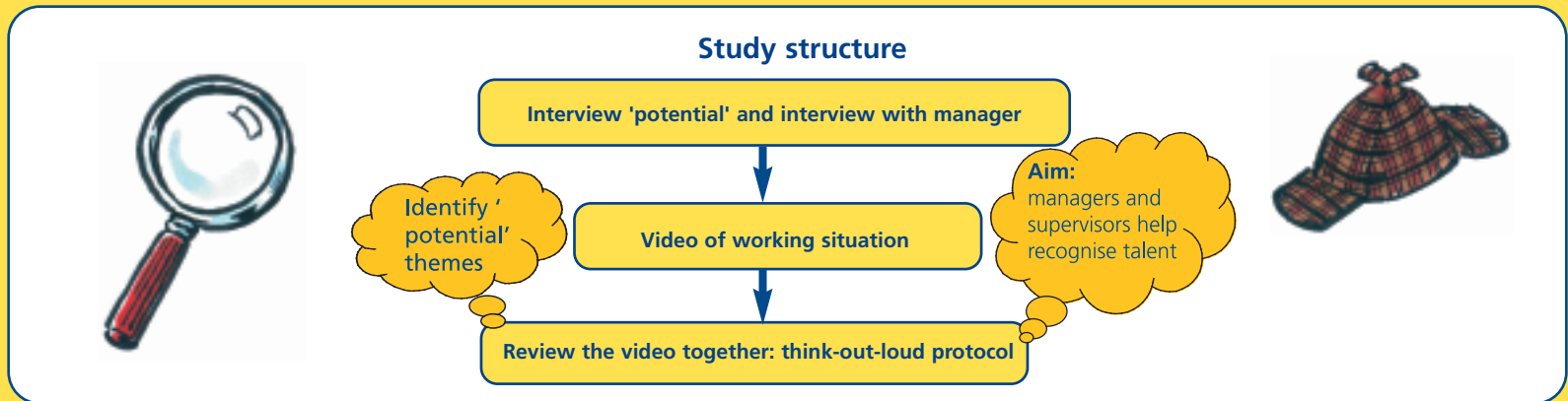
The intersecting axes and the iceberg

The axes are used to 'plot' staff members using two coordinates: performance and potential. A member of staff who performs well and has a lot of potential is a talent.



How can you make clear what you're looking for when you are studying talent? One metaphor that can be used is an iceberg. The visible part above the waterline is what you can see as performance: looking at past achievements, measurable, clear. The invisible part beneath the waves is the potential. You don't know how deep it goes, you can only base your suspicions on the visible part. Is that enough? No, what's needed is a technique to be developed that you can use to estimate the invisible part.

Another metaphor is drilling for oil. You may suspect that there is an untapped reservoir underneath, but you cannot be certain. So you sometimes have to drill a number of holes to find out if there really is oil and what kind of quality it is.



Elements that help in recognizing potential

Three factors are important when assessing potential

THE TALENTS THEMSELVES

- self-motivating
- skills
- competences

THE CONTEXT

- type of project
- immediate environment
- departmental culture

THE ORGANISATION

- supporting
- letting you be visible; allowing mistakes to be made
- encouraging learning, entrepreneurship and development

The time angle is also important when assessing potential:

PAST

- performance assessment
- performing in a variety of contexts

NOW

- surprising / moving
- attractive for a manager ('experienced potential') to work with

ANTICIPATED

- What are the perspectives for the future? What do you expect from someone if they were to operate in a higher-level function?
Pitfall: faults are often excused by expectations based on performance

