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Overlook the introvert and miss out

An article by Espen Skorstad that looks at how businesses may lose out on significant attributes and overlook real benefits if they ignore the more introverted personalities amongst the workforce

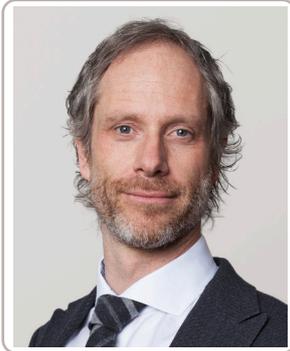


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Espen Skorstad is the CEO of *cut-e* Norway and specialises in work and organisational psychology. He has been a consultant and organisational psychologist since 1999 and he, along with Rudi Myrvang, founded the Nordic *cut-e* company.

His primary areas of expertise include assessment centre methodology and work-based psychometric tests. He has previously been editor of the *Scandinavian Journal of Organisational Psychology*, published the book *"The right person in the right place"* (Gyldendal, 2008) and taught at the University of Oslo and the Norwegian School of Management.

In this article, Espen suggests that businesses lose out on significant attributes and overlook real benefits if they ignore the more introverted personalities amongst the workforce.

Overlook the introvert and miss out

All too often it's the extrovert who appears to have the coolest job or the high-profile rewards. But why is this? What about the introvert? What does he or she have to offer?

Any look at current job postings on job boards shows that a fairly high percentage (around 10 percent) includes 'extroversion' or a similar such word as a requirement for anyone looking to apply. For example, *"We're looking for cheerful and outgoing employees to join our team"*, is commonplace. It's probably reasonable to assume that there are many more businesses that look for this kind of person but just don't articulate it in the job ad.

The idea behind this sort of statement is that the more extroverted you are, the better you are to communicate, collaborate or lead. In comparison, if you search for 'intelligent', it pops up only two to three hits among several thousand items in total. Of course, it's interesting that so-called 'intelligence' is, in most cases, a considerably better indicator of someone's ability to perform a job than what is known as extroversion. In fact, the ability to 'deliver on objectives' is signposted not through 'extroversion' but through the personality factor of conscientiousness or control.

Within psychology extroversion is considered to be one of the five major personality traits.

- **Extroversion:** Tends to be 'sociable' and seeks / creates opportunities for emotionally stimulating activities.
- **Openness to experience/experiences:** Propensity to imagination, seeks new experiences, has a liberal outlook on life.
- **Easy-going/compassionate:** Propensity to enjoy and help others, focused on others and empathetic in nature.
- **Conscientiousness/scrupulous:** Tends to be goal-oriented, conscientious, thorough and thoughtful.
- **Emotional stability/neuroticism:** Tends to withstand stress and uncertainty without deep concern and anxiety.

So why then the focus on extroversion?

It's one of those well-known phenomena that extroverted applicants often do better in job interviews than those who are introverted. In reality, interviews are simply a social arena where it's about being liked by the other person – or people. Traditional job interviews tend to be tailored towards the extroverted; they are the people who blossom when given the opportunity to meet a new person and have the prospect to talk about their own performance. Alternatively, the introvert is often a little embarrassed and finds it hard to boast of his or her own achievements and to highlight their 'top three skills'.

Research has shown that introverted leaders can be just as effective as those who are more extroverted

But those who are extrovert are also seen as doing well at interview stage (and subsequent offers) because of the very narrow and constricted view by organisations as what 'good' is. They see only sociability as essential to great team working, leadership and job performance. Of course, the more introverted aren't necessarily equally suited to the jobs that the extroverted get, but it is important to look at each job role for what it is, and the skills and attributes that it needs to be successful – and that isn't always being extrovert! For example, research has shown that introverted leaders can be just as effective as those who are more extroverted because they are often better at listening to their employees. They also take up less of the 'me' space, so that others find it easier to share their ideas.

Why is this?

Susan Cain suggests in her book, "Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking", that society (in educational setting and the workplace) is increasingly emphasising the value of the more extrovert attributes. The result is that knowledge and prudence disappear in the noise that the extroverted creates – and this is neither good for the individual or the company's bottom line.

Those of us introverts may like to look at how we can develop methods to compensate for our own lack of extroversion. For example, think about those falling somewhere in the middle of the introversion-extroversion scale and going on a business trip with colleagues to hold meetings all day, and follow this with a working dinner in the evening. Between the meetings and dinner, the more extroverted may propose going to a museum or shopping trip together but the introvert is likely to need some time for him or herself. This can lead to a misunderstanding when their need for their own company is misinterpreted as not liking the others and therefore not wishing to spend time with them.

So what can we do?

Businesses miss out on valuable human resource because the social expectations mean that the extrovert overshadows the introvert. If we can get better at defining what it takes to succeed in a given position then what the introvert brings to the table will start to be recognised.

- **Define success** – look at the values, strategy and competencies of the organisation and define what 'success' in the business looks like, what it is to be 'good' and also 'great'. Remember, it isn't just about getting things done, it's about how things are done. You may like to interview incumbents of the role to understand the reality.
- **Translate this into personality characteristics or competencies** – take the words you have used when defining success, and look at these in relation to your competency model or other framework.

- **Take these personality or competency characteristics and build them into your selection assessment.** How will you look for and assess these? Remember this is about being fair and finding the person with the best fit with the role.
- **Assessments and interviews:** The introvert may not relish the selection process unlike the extrovert, so look to see how you can assess fit with the job and your organisation. Using your updated and realistic knowledge of the role and what makes for success, think about:
 - Creating a Realistic Job Preview upfront of the application process so that only the most motivated apply.
 - Consider creating assessment exercises that allow those more reflective to shine, and recognise that they may need 'time away' to recharge or gather their thoughts.
 - Can you make use of a structured interview guide that will draw out even the introverted so that he or she can articulate and demonstrate their success? This also gives you a scoring system that helps you avoid becoming too enamoured with the more extroverts.
- **Collate and integrate the information from all sources.** However obtained, draw together all the information to inform a final decision and, in that way, you will be able to focus on the best fit candidate which may not be the most extrovert.

For more information and related documents about how to recognise and select diverse talent, please refer: to www.cut-e.com

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