The Generalist Bias: Why Specialists Are Undervalued

Key Concept
In just about every domain — from sports to business — there is a widespread bias to hire generalists over specialists, even when specialist skills are needed to fill the gap. This generalist bias is reinforced by joint evaluations (comparing specialists and generalists side-by-side) that undervalue the importance of complementarity: a group of narrowly focused experts with complementary specialties can be more effective than a group of generalists with overlapping skills.

Idea Summary
A talent shortage combined with today’s intense push for constant growth and competitive differentiation can make hiring the right people a difficult balancing act: Organizations want to hire qualified experts with specialized skills but they also want to build up their talent pool of broad knowledge and general skills for greater flexibility and agility.

This balancing act is further complicated by a widespread generalist bias, according to professors Long Wang of the City University of Hong Kong and Keith Murnighan of Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management. Specialists are not only under-recruited and under-promoted or under-compensated, according to the research by Wang and Murnighan, they are also underutilized — for example, they are put in positions that don’t take full advantage of their specialized skills and require them to apply broader skills.

The performance levels of specialists and generalists are dramatically different. Specialists will be particularly high performers in their specialties; but because their focus is so deep and narrow, they will usually perform at below-average levels at other tasks. Generalists may not be the top performers at any one task, but they give the organization flexibility by being able to cover a variety of tasks.

The research by Wang and Murnighan shows that, when evaluating generalists and specialists side-by-side, leaders and recruiters notice the obvious flexibility advantage of generalists and the narrow performance results of specialists. However, they are ignoring the key complementarity advantage of hiring specialists. Specifically, they fail to recognize the value of a group of specialists with complementary skills, each performing their designated tasks at the highest level; taken as a group, these complementary specialists will perform better than a group of generalists with overlapping skills and no specific top-level expertise.

There can, of course, be disadvantages to hiring specialists, including communication breakdowns or higher coordination costs. Some positions, notably leadership positions, can require cross-functional knowledge,
especially when cross-functional teams play an important part in the organization’s success.

However, Wang and Murnighan, using a combination of controlled experiments and research of archival data, demonstrate that the generalist bias exists, that it is exacerbated by joint evaluations, and that it is undermining the recruiting, development and promotion of the best people to fill the needs of the organization.

**Business Application**

Not every position or every organization is right for specialists — the goal is not to replace one bias with another. However, organizations should hire generalists for the right reasons. This research offers clear guidance for understanding which type of recruit or employee to hire or promote:

- Make an effort to understand and appreciate the advantage of complementary specialized skills in your team. This will not be easy: large-scale complementarities are not simple to analyse.
- Be aware that joint evaluations will increase the generalist bias. Do not focus on the negative — the specialists’ lower skills across a broader range of tasks as compared to generalists — when that negative can be irrelevant to the needs of the organization or the position being filled. Use separate evaluations to acquire an unbiased view of the employee or candidate.
- If you encourage ‘big picture’ thinking in your organization, you may be undermining your recruiting effectiveness. The reason: big picture thinking overvalues multi-tasking or cross-functional individuals and undervalues the benefits of specialist complementarities.
- At the same time, a silo mindset will cause ‘local’ (at the business unit or division level) managers to hire only those specialists who benefit their area. Don't ignore specialists who can satisfy larger organizational needs.
- The complexity of an organization’s task or an uncertain environment will lead organizations to over-recruit generalists in the search for flexibility and agility. Don’t overreact to uncertainty; the more comforting recruiting decisions might not be the best ones.

Leaders must make their recruiting based on a clear and complete understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of both specialists and generalists; only then will they find the right people for the right job.

**Further Reading**


**Further Relevant Resources**

Keith Murnighan’s profile at The Kellogg School of Management
Long Wang’s profile at the City University of Hong Kong
Kellogg School of Management Executive Education profile at IEDP