



Small Scenarios for Changing Times:

# HiPos

By Heather Bussing, Michael Kannisto, and John Sumser

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# Remind me again why we call them High Potentials?

*When we finally return to work after the pandemic, things will be different. Some changes are easy to imagine – increased focus on workplace hygiene and enhanced social pressure to stay home when you get sick.*

Other changes we are just beginning to imagine. For one, it's probably time to lose our focus on “high potentials” and renew our appreciation for the people who actually get things done.

“High Potential” programs were designed to identify employees with “runway” in order to accelerate their promotion into senior roles. Critics argue that Hi-Po programs are just formalized versions of an Old Boys’ Club – populated by younger versions of the current leaders who are showered with development opportunities. Others defend the concept as an important part of succession planning. But even most proponents admit that many people in the programs are there because they have shown some recent success rather than meet criteria for longer term strategy or need

Under normal business circumstances,

companies have the luxury of time (and enough people) to allow the “real” strategic leaders to eventually emerge from these programs. After the pandemic, we will have to evaluate resources, strategies, what we’re doing and how we are doing it.

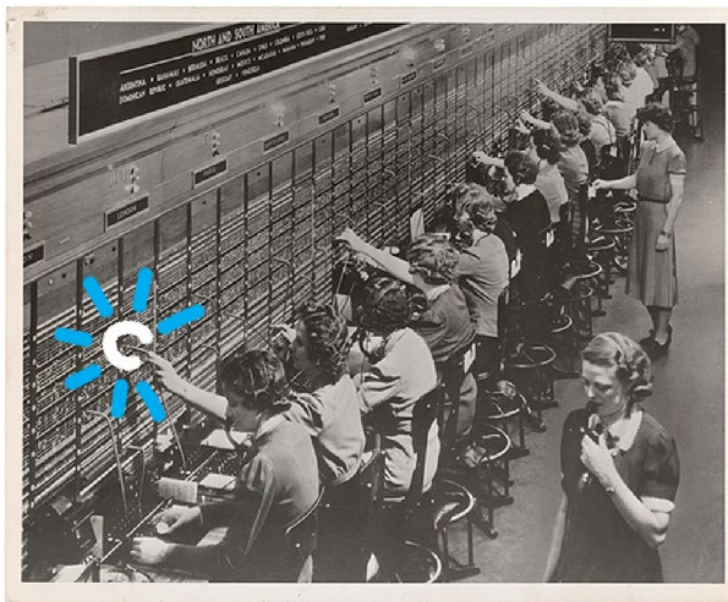
In the meantime, EVERY company has a Ted. Ted is the awkward close talker who has worked in the compensation department for twenty years. Ted has few social skills. He is undeniably brilliant. Yet, almost no one notices him.

Every two weeks, Ted manages to magically wrangle an error-free payroll report out of a system that is outdated, no longer supported by the vendor, and only works because Ted understands programming and keeps it running. Ted is the only person in the company who can ensure people get their paychecks.

Needless to say, Ted is not regarded as

a high-potential. However, in the closest thing to a dystopian future that hopefully any of us will experience, Ted is one of the most important people in the company.

This current public health crisis will likely result in a complete inversion of who is really important at your company. Instead of paying attention to the people with charisma and connections, we need to focus on people with competence.



*The Way We Worked: Bell System Switchboard, National Archives, Records of the Women's Bureau*

# Here are ten things you should do now to make sure you identify the other people like Ted

## 1. *Make sure EVERYONE is in your performance management system*

Companies often only include “senior” people in their skills database. Many non-senior people do some very important things. Find out who they are.

## 2. *Link business successes to specific skills*

Many companies have an official list of “competencies.” Maybe it is correct; maybe it is not. Take the time to review a couple of recent key business victories and determine what skills truly made the difference.

## 3. *Play “What would happen if . . .”*

Imagine what would happen if various employees were not able to return to work as a result of this pandemic. How would their work get done? In times of crisis, performance beats potential.

## 4. *Configure your system to identify people with important skills, not to just validate the list you already created off-line*

Sometimes companies pre-select “High Potentials” without using objective performance data. Try using the system as it was designed and see if it identifies any “surprise” talent.

## 5. *Simplify the conversations you have about talent*

Talent discussions are frequently overly-complicated and overly-formal. In times of crisis, the goal is to quickly identify who has the skills you need to keep the company running. Period.

## 6. *Rethink success*

Promoting and developing people based on their business critical capabilities (rather than their future potential) will cause disruption. Some of it will be positive as brilliant performers see new opportunities to advance that were previously closed to them.

Also, many talented people don’t want to be promoted into an administrative or leadership role. They love what they do and are great at it. Pay them more and recognize them. But don’t give them jobs they will hate.

## 7. *Be ready to amp up your learning and development offerings*

Encourage continuous learning. When we come out of this, priorities will be different. So will the skills we need. Be prepared to provide opportunities for employees to learn new things.

## 8. *Think about how this crisis will affect your business model.*

No one is suggesting it is a bad idea to identify leaders with future potential. The point is that the current health crisis may force organizations to decide what’s most important when your workforce (or some subset of your workforce) returns to the office – long-term strategic potential, or capable and motivated workers who know how to run your business.

*Ted is about to become an important topic of conversation.*

## About the Small Scenarios series:

Massive change is afoot. The pandemic gives us the opportunity to rethink and reappraise. The small scenarios project is designed to provoke thought about the medium-term future and how it will be different. The goal is to help HR prepare for the future we will encounter in a few short months.

## The Small Scenarios Team



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## About HRExaminer

HRExaminer is a research and publishing company focused on the evolving edges of HR and HRTechnology. The publications team includes a 25 member editorial advisory board who deliver insight and opinion. The company also produces two award winning podcasts (live on Thursday and Friday mornings at 8:00 AM Pacific). Each year, HRExaminer delivers the market benchmark report on the evolution of Intelligent tools in HRTechnology.

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