

## ENVIRONMENTAL IQ

### Mastering the External Factors that Limit or Support Job Performance and Career Success

The image of the corporate executive making a solo climb, King Kong style, to the top of the headquarters skyscraper is a universally recognized picture of “making it.” While team-building retreats and group training seminars are talked about and promoted as means of enhancing company culture and retaining the best people, true to the image of the independent leader, job performance is primarily seen as the result of innate talent and individual skills. Most current thinking on professional development emphasizes “internal issues,” those things the individual needs to do to develop strengths and overcome weaknesses to improve his or her performance. Important as this may be, it fails to account for the enormous influence of “external” forces that promote or derail the process. The majority of issues people have at work stem from their inaccurate assessment of the work environment and underestimation of its influence on their success. We grossly overestimate the impact of our innate traits and our ability to significantly alter many of them (intelligence, for example, and key personality factors). This primarily individualistic focus is unrealistic and naïve. It promotes the widely held belief that with the right goals and plans our actions alone equal our results.

#### An Ecological Model of Career Development

In *Guns, Germs and Steel*, Jared Diamond showed that innate characteristics failed to predict the most successful societies in history, while external factors like geography, animals, and climate reliably did. We can say something similar about the world of work. Most people can become significantly more productive and successful by leveraging environmental factors, including:

**Resources (needed versus current and future supply)**—Boss’s time and ability; honest feedback; mentors; customers and clients; supplies; budget; support staff; training

**Competition (struggle for finite resources)**—Peers; young high-potentials; outside competitors; basis for comparisons; how “winning” is defined

**Predators (those that go after you—or your job; extinction of group that goes after your enemies)**—Co-workers and outsiders who go after your resources; outsourcing; technology; consultants

**Genetic range (the parameters of potential development)**—Accurate knowledge of innate traits and what can and cannot be changed

**Co-evolution effect (when two things evolve and affect each other)**—Proximity to complementary talent, knowledge or technology (e.g., Silicon Valley or Cambridge, MA)

**Climate and setting (factors that impede or support growth)**—Expectations and standards; “learning cultures”; smart peers; formal and informal reward systems; unwritten rules; politics and true power sources

**Changing conditions**—Mergers; downsizing; new bosses; promotions and transitions; organizational realignment; new markets; economic and demographic trends

**Social environment (psychological and group dynamics)**—Systems thinking; group behavior; obedience to authority; peer influence; scarcity principle; cognitive dissonance

## Increasing Environmental IQ

- 1. Situational Awareness** An aeronautics term, “situational awareness” means learning to process multiple data inputs to achieve an overall view of one’s environment. The pilot needs to know where the plane is relative to other things—including the ground. At work, it’s common to fixate on one factor at the expense of others, like the pilot who fixates on altitude and flies into the side of a mountain.
- 2. The Environmental Scan** What is your company culture really like? Are you seeing clearly the full range of environmental factors without perceptual filters? Do you understand how the work “system” affects you as well as how you operate? On-going scanning of the environment prevents derailment and leads to innovation and productivity. *Note: Providing accurate environmental data to employees jumpstarts on-boarding and reduces turnover.*
- 3. Self-Assessment** Without *really* good data an environmental plan will be undermined. However, self-assessments are consistently unreliable. *In studies, 95% of American men put themselves in the top 50% for attractiveness.* We need to get outside help and outside data to attain it (think of medical diagnoses or competitive-level sports coaching). We can apply these findings by working on what can be changed and augmenting what can’t be (by hiring a good detail person or extrovert as an assistant).
- 4. Survival of the Fittest—Letting Go of Strengths and Fixed Beliefs** As Darwin taught us, the best adapted may not be the smartest or most self-aware, but instead possess those traits that help them survive in particular environments. Our strengths and weaknesses are all relative to our current job, company, industry and location. Moreover, strengths are not static and our assumptions about them (often derived in childhood or early career) may not stay valid. Like good editing, professional development often entails cutting out things that we like the best to expand our roles in new areas.
- 5. Having and Making Choices** While environmental factors affect all living species, one qualitative difference stands out for humans—our ability to make choices. We have the ability to assess the advantages and nuances of one environment over another, to adapt to that setting, to alter that setting, or to change the setting we are part of.

### “Restriction of Range”

In psychology, “restriction of range” means that people in a particular pool are actually very similar on a trait (or traits), and as a result you can’t make a lot of predictions about success based on what they have in common. Take professional basketball players’ height. If you took a random sample of non-NBA adult men (some tall, some short) you would find a significant correlation between their height and basketball ability (the taller ones tend to be better at basketball). On the other hand, because of the NBA players’ restriction of range, height does little to predict the best players. A similar phenomenon occurs among professionals. There is enough of a restriction of range in professional settings (the top 15%) in terms of intelligence, education, and skills, that these traits have less ability to differentiate people. While it is critical to “know your range” (capitalize on your assets and compensate for liabilities), *most people can become significantly more successful by turning their focus outward and leveraging their environment.*

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