

Generalist Managers Make a Comeback

Many are beginning to argue that breadth, not depth, will be the key to successful 21st-century management

The corporate quest of the moment is the search for the agile organization — flexible, efficient and rapidly adaptive. As companies have become flatter, more networked and less bounded, the prevailing wisdom is that increased specialization is the key to agility. Jobs are getting more specialized, people work in teams and cross functional boundaries, and success is being redefined by expertise, not span of control. In *Harvard Business Review*, Thomas Malone, a professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management, recently contended that we are entering “the Age of Hyperspecialization” in which “jobs atomize into complex networks of people all over the world performing highly specialized tasks.” Up to now, this canon that the big bang of specialization will create an agile universe has encountered very few heretics.

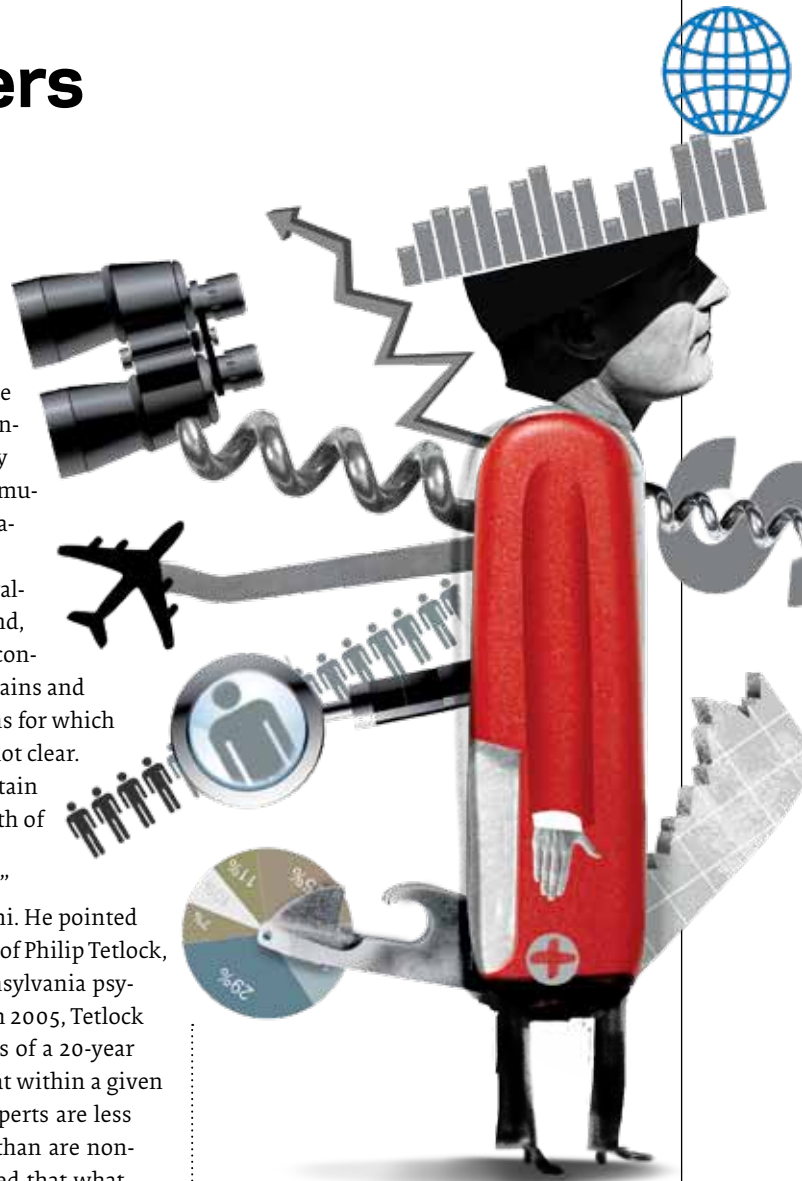
However, in a recent HBR blog which drew a good deal of reaction, Vikram Mansharamani, a lecturer at Yale, contended that increased specialization is limiting agility, not enhancing it: “Business thinkers point to ‘domain expertise’ as an enduring source of advantage in today’s competitive environment. For various reasons, though, the future may belong to the generalist.”

According to Mansharamani, specialists are great at working well-defined problems within constrained

domains, but because they “toil within a singular tradition,” they also try to “apply formulaic solutions to situations that are rarely well-defined.” Generalists, on the other hand, are great at making connections across domains and working on problems for which the parameters are not clear.

“In today’s uncertain environment, breadth of perspective trumps depth of knowledge,” wrote Mansharamani. He pointed to the oft-cited work of Philip Tetlock, a University of Pennsylvania psychology professor. In 2005, Tetlock published the results of a 20-year study suggesting that within a given area of expertise, experts are less accurate predictors than are non-experts. He concluded that what matters in making a sound forecast or decision isn’t so much knowledge or experience as good judgment and broad perspective.

Rick Jones, former CEO of biotech company Anchor Therapeutics, has witnessed that phenomenon in practice: “Experts with a deep focus on a particular field may be invaluable for the insights they provide in that critical area of a project, but may not even recognize what they don’t know about the wider issues.”



“Overspecialization often obscures our vision of things that are in plain view,” said V.P. Kochikar, associate vice president at Infosys Technologies. “There is perhaps no better example of this than the recent financial crisis. You don’t need clairvoyant flair or cutting-edge, specialized competence to see what’s coming — just a crystal-clear, common-sense view.”

Lee Thomas, a team facilitator of

The Latest Thinking

agile software development at IAG New Zealand, has seen his industry come full circle: “In our profession, we started as generalists, doing what was needed. We later moved to specialization as technology and tools became more complex. Now, as part of the agile movement, I see us returning to that generalist approach — with improved tools and a need for lower cost and overhead.”

The knock on the generalist has always been the glib assessment, “jack of all trades and master of none.” But in fact, the real generalist model was one of apprenticeship, coming up through the ranks and mastering several specialties. Those who displayed an ability to transcend that specialized understanding to reach a more global, multilayered understanding were drawn into general management.

“At one time general managers were at the center of the action,” said Ron Ashkenas, a managing partner at Schaffer Consulting. “Two decades ago, organizations were designed around stand-alone business units, so all managers had to understand finance, technology, manufacturing, sales, marketing, strategy, human resources and more. To get this broad exposure, managers were given a variety of functional roles. However, starting in the 1980s, many compa-

nies evolved to ‘functional’ structures to cut costs and reduce duplication. [Today] there are few opportunities for managers to learn all aspects of a business. This may be one of the reasons why many organizations struggle to perform.”

More and more companies seem to be recognizing that possibility and attempting to obviate it. IBM, Anheuser-Busch, Scotiabank, and MetLife all have instituted programs that allow their managers to gain experience in a variety of global and functional roles across the enterprise. General Electric, long famous for its executive training, evaluates people on a number of decidedly generalist characteristics, including external focus, clear thinking, imagination and inclusiveness.

Given sluggish economic conditions, some employers want to reduce their overall number of employees and find people that have multiple skills and can work cross-functionally. In some cases, specialist jobs are being outsourced or handed off to consultants, a surprising turn of events.

But some are not so surprised. “The ability to connect the proverbial dots will always be a superior skill to painting each dot perfectly,” said Dipesh Lall, director of information management and analytics at PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP. “As one faces

higher-order problems, one needs strong generalist ability and an abiding willingness to tolerate and temper ambiguity. There are some skills where deep expertise is necessary — surgery, building bridges, running the Large Hadron Collider in Europe — but a plurality, even majority, of human activities require the rich perspective of a generalist.”

To some degree, the specialist/generalist debate is a semantic one. Many who dismiss the value of generalists will, in the same breath, tout the value of “multi-specialists,” “versatilists” and “T-shaped skill sets,” each of which is little more than a rebranding of what true generalists have always brought to the table: an optimal combination of depth and breadth. The debate also presents a false choice. Effective leaders and managers typically possess traits that can be claimed by either camp.

“The world does require more specialization these days — we need people with deep knowledge of technology and complex products,” said Ron Ashkenas. “But the danger is going so far down that path that no one is able to provide the broader perspective, and we end up getting trapped in silos. My sense is that the answer isn’t to abandon specialization, but rather to find the right balance, which won’t be easy.”

NO VACANCY

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Top 15 Cities Globally by Average Room Rate (January–June 2012)

1. Moscow..... \$408	9. Paris..... \$306
2. Lagos \$343	10. Washington, DC.. \$303
3. Geneva \$341	11. Stockholm \$302
4. Zurich..... \$333	12. San Francisco \$285
5. Rio de Janeiro..... \$323	13. Oslo \$285
6. New York City..... \$321	14. Tokyo..... \$281
7. Sydney..... \$313	15. Sao Paulo \$270
8. Hong Kong..... \$307	

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