

TEAMS MAY LOSE OUT FROM HAVING ‘TOO MUCH TALENT’, NEW STUDY BY INSEAD REVEALS

- *‘Too-much-talent’ effect poses new questions for team managers as the 2014 FIFA World Cup approaches and NBA finals tip off*
- *Football and basketball teams negatively impacted by too much talent; yet baseball and other individualistic sports teams not affected*

Fontainebleau (France), Singapore and Abu Dhabi – June 11, 2014: As the FIFA World Cup kicks off and the NBA finals ‘heat’ up, new research released today revealing a ‘too-much-talent’ effect poses the question: can teams have too much talent? According to research led by INSEAD Professor Roderick Swaab¹, the addition of more superstar talent to a team can actually be detrimental after a certain point, resulting in poorer team performance. The study found that the presence of too many top talented individuals can undermine players’ willingness to coordinate, which is required for effective teamwork and performance. However, findings from the research, to be published in *“Psychological Science”*, also reveal that most people assume the opposite, believing that piling on more top talent is the key to team success.

“Most people believe that the relationship between talent and team performance is linear – the more their team is packed with talent, the better they will do,” explains Swaab. “Yet our latest research documenting a ‘too-much-talent effect’, reveals that for teams requiring high levels of interdependence, like football and basketball, talent facilitates team performance... but only up to a point. Beyond this point, the benefits of adding more top talent will decrease and eventually hurt the team performance because they fail to coordinate their actions.”

The study released today also reveals that the too-much-talent effect only emerges in teams that require a high level of interdependence between players. For more individualistic sports, such as baseball, very high levels of talent do not hurt performance.

Swaab continues: “As the FIFA World Cup 2014 draws near, we expect to see plenty of team-sheets boasting impressive line-ups with top talented players. However, coaches that simply select their side with superstars may, contrary to popular belief, be the ones taking an early exit from Brazil!”

¹ Research was conducted by a team of psychological scientists led by INSEAD’s Roderick Swaab and in collaboration with Michael Schaerer, also of INSEAD, Eric Anicich of Columbia Business School, Richard Ronay of VU University, and Adam Galinsky of Columbia University,

So, while Miami Heat fans may currently be rejoicing in their “big three” – LeBron James, Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh – the team of researchers’ cautions that they don’t forget their NBA title loss to the Dallas Mavericks in 2011, a team built around one star player – Dirk Nowitzki – and a number of lesser-known sportsmen. While the Mavericks were successfully complementing each other’s strengths, Miami’s newly acquired superstars were jostling for the spotlight, and paid the price.

While team managers from the World Cup, NBA, and MLB may do well to bear these findings in mind, lessons can also be taken to the boardroom. Swaab comments: “Like sports team, teams in organizations vary in their levels of interdependence. When team success merely depends on the accumulation of individual performance (e.g. sales teams), hiring and staffing could simply focus on getting the most talented individuals on board. However, these same strategies can hurt a willingness to coordinate effectively when team success depends on high levels of interdependence (e.g. strategy teams). When interdependence between team members is high, organizations could either hire a better mix of top talent and non-top talent and/or invest more in training to formalize roles, ranks, and responsibilities. These are important lessons because selection decisions in organisations can produce a too-much-talent effect because of misguided perceptions around the link between top talent and performance.”

The study was conducted using data from the 2010 and 2014 FIFA World Cup qualifying periods and the 2002-2012 National Basketball Association (NBA) and Major League Baseball (MLB) seasons. The research identified individual talent using individual elite club affiliations in football, Estimated Wins Added (EWA) in basketball, and Wins Above Replacement (WAR) in baseball. This, along with an unparalleled amount of information, including on-court intra team coordination data, allowed measurement of team performance in relation to the amount of talent on the books.

For any further information about the new research, please don’t hesitate to ask for the PDF of the article. For additional information regarding INSEAD Professor Roderick Swaab, please go to: <http://www.insead.edu/facultyresearch/faculty/profiles/rswaab/>

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About Professor Roderick Swaab

Roderick Swaab is an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. He studies the impact of communication structures and technologies on negotiation, conflict resolution, and group decision-making. He also studies the impact of social hierarchies on how people collaborate in teams by focusing on the interplay among identity formation, communication, conflict, and team performance. He has taught a variety of courses at INSEAD and the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. He has also conducted executive training sessions for various organisations including Astellas Pharma, Merck, and Societe Generale. His research has produced interventions that improve teamwork, negotiation, dispute resolution, and global collaboration and has been published in leading academic journals, such as *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, and *Psychological Science*.

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