Retaining the brightest and best in a post-recession era
How to identify and hold on to those employees who bring the most value to your organization

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In this post-recession era, the rules that have up until now governed the “war for talent” in organizations will change. Dr Theresa Welbourne introduces the concept of “neglected warriors” and explains how you can identify this group of employees from among your workforce. She also examines why you need to hold on to this valuable subset to avoid them being poached by other companies.

The war for talent, as it was practiced, did not really differentiate much between people. The rallying cry was focused primarily on the overall perceived reduced supply of employees. During the recession, however, concern over lack of talent dissipated as firms conducted mass layoffs and unemployment rose to all-time highs. Supply went up, and the war for talent faded into the background.

Today, concern over the talent pipeline is changing. Our research suggests that an overall generic war for talent likely will not be the rallying cry post recession. Instead, a new battle will be waged for a select group of people that we call the “neglected warriors” of the recession. These people will be recruited away from their current employers and quickly transformed into heroes in their new organizations.

The difference between a neglected warrior and a hero is one thing: recognition. Heroes are recognized for their deeds. They’re not necessarily the best employees, but they are the people who courageously entered into the battle for their organization’s wealth during the recession. The neglected warriors harnessed their internal energy to drive many initiatives forward; however, with all these good deeds came very little recognition from their current employer.

The neglected warriors
We found this subset of key employees through our employee engagement and energy research conducted via the Leadership Pulse and in Pulse’s client-based research. Neglected warriors are those employees who have a high sense of urgency, who are compelled to move forward, who have supported their companies through the rocky changes of the recession, and who today find themselves unrecognized and unappreciated for their efforts.

These employees aren’t at high risk of voluntary turnover, but they are at risk of being poached away by the companies who know how to find them and who appreciate the type of talent they possess. In these findings we share a glimpse of what the neglected warriors looks like.

The Valour Pulse
The Valour Pulse and associated interventions grew out of a large body of research involving thousands of firms and hundreds of thousands of employees that was conducted from 1996 to date. That research focused on high growth and high change organizations and the drivers of individual, team and firm performance.
The word "Valour" is defined as: "Strength of mind and spirit that allows one to conquer danger with firmness."

Valour is an acronym that's used to describe the four major constructs in the Valour Pulse survey and research:

Val = value, that employees feel valued by their manager and peers.
O = sense of ownership in the job and organization.
U = sense of urgency.
R = rewards, that they are fair and related to performance.

We started our research with a 200 question survey, and based on the validation and predictive studies linking the metrics to performance, we found that we could reduce the number of items to 15. The Valour Pulse is not an exercise in improving survey scores but in optimizing firm performance and the employee experience. In some cases, employee Valour Pulse scores should be lowered to improve firm performance, and in other cases scores should be improved.

The results of the data analysis used for the Valour Pulse plot the percentage of employees that fall into the four quadrants shown in Figure One (see right). The 2 x 2 Matrix is a visualization of an underlying interaction effect between the questions that represent "Val-O-R" and those that cover sense of urgency "U." The interaction was found in research predicting performance outcomes over time, with control variables and adequate timelines to assure causal interpretation vs. only correlational work.

**Intervention path for Valour results**
An interaction effect tells the story about the "conditions under which" improving scores is good and the "conditions under which" improving these scores can be bad for performance. The Valour results indicate that it's not always important to increase scores on all of the survey questions in order to improve performance. In fact, it's specifically critical that managers do not increase the value (Val), ownership (O) and rewards (R) scores of the entitled group because if they do so, the entitled group will become even more entitled.

Also, improving only the Val-O-R scores for the disengaged, without simultaneously increasing sense of urgency, can lead to these people moving from disengaged to entitled. This movement, also, is not going to positively impact firm performance.

That entitled group of employees negatively impact performance. In John Kotter's book, *Sense of Urgency*, he talks about the impact of the "no-no" on performance. The "no-no" population is in the entitled quadrant. These are people who are resisting change because they're very comfortable where they are today.

The intervention that must happen with this group is to make them feel less valued and install more urgency. The path for improvement usually has them moving into the lower left-hand box, or the disengaged quadrant, as their sense of Val-O-R decreases. Once their sense of urgency has increased, they will move to the lower right-hand box in the valour quadrant (titled high opportunity). In exchange for their effort and high urgency, these individuals should then be provided with more Val-O-R (value, ownership, and rewards), moving them into the top right box of fully engaged employees.

**KEY POINTS**
- The author believes the war for talent has changed and it's now the "neglected warriors" of an organization who are the most sought after and who may be poached by other companies and turned into "heroes".
- This thinking is based on intensive research carried out into employee engagement through the Leadership Pulse.
- The author suggests interventions that can be carried out as a means of improving employee engagement and driving business performance.
"The real value of any type of employee survey process is the dialogue that happens from the data... when you use this to drive actions, then employees feel part of the solution."

Winter, 2010 survey results
The results from the 470 people who took the Winter, 2010 Leadership Pulse are in Figure Two, below. It shows that six percent of the sample reported being in the entitled group; 55 percent are fully engaged (high performers via our research); 17 percent are in the disengaged quadrant or represent the percent of the population at risk of voluntarily leaving the organization, and 22 percent are the people at risk of being poached or recruited away by others. The 22 percent are the people who are neglected warriors.

Which group should be of most concern?
If the war for talent were raging, many employers may be tempted to focus first on the employees in the lower left box in Figures One and Two. Those are the employees at high risk of voluntary turnover according to our research. People often get to this state as a result of burnout; they’ve worked hard for a long time and have become disengaged based on a number of factors, including lack of recognition, seeing people around them being rewarded for not working much, or other factors.

These aren’t the neglected warriors, (see Figure Three above for new labels reflecting the battle for the future) and they aren’t the group of people for whom the battle for future heroes will be waged. These individuals are potentially important, but they are at less risk of being poached away because of their disengaged state which is, in most cases, obvious to the people around them (including colleagues who would potentially refer them to recruiters).

The neglected warriors are the employees who will be poached because they have no good reason to stay with their current organization. They are visible to others because they have a high sense of urgency; they have been on the front lines fighting to keep the organization moving forward in tough times.

What about the fully engaged or the heroes?
You might be wondering about the top right box or the fully engaged employees (heroes). It’s important to keep these heroes; however, they are less at risk of being successfully poached because they are reporting that they feel valued. These individuals have a high sense of ownership in their job and company, and they say they’re fairly rewarded. These heroes are in a place that...
recognizes them for the sacrifices they’ve made. They’re not forgotten; in fact, they are applauded (at least for now).

Smart recruiters will not go after these people, and their friends will not recommend them to their headhunter colleagues. The highest risk employers face when it comes to their heroes is that these individuals, based on something that happens in the firm, no longer feel valued and move down to the neglected warrior quadrant. At that point, it’s more likely they too can be poached away.

Where the battle begins
In Table One (see page 34), you’ll find some insights about who the neglected warriors may be. We reviewed the leadership pulse data by subgroup, and we pulled out the demographics where the percentage of neglected warriors was relatively high.

As an employer, you should be aware that these groups of employees may be more likely to be poached away. Conversely, if you are seeking new talent, these may be good potential new recruits.

Proactively waging the battle for heroes
Today, organizations have a choice. Leaders can sit by and watch as neglected warriors get poached away. While this is happening they may or may not be aware of the current state of employees, including voluntary turnover risk, the degree of entitlement setting in, and the extent to which currently fully engaged heroes are secure in their position or slowly moving backwards into the neglected warrior state.

The other option is to be proactive. In order to do this, leaders need HR metrics and process that allow them to diagnose these employee states, do something about them quickly, and then continue to diagnose and act. Given the current pace of change and the fact that it seems by all predictions that change will only increase, organizations that wait for annual employee surveys and respond to that type of data will be left behind. They will be waging the old war for talent, simply trying to find enough people or adequate supply to survive.

Conclusion
The real value of any type of employee survey process, in the end, is not the data. It’s the dialogue that happens from the data. When you use data and dialogue to drive actions, then employees feel part of the solution. If action is taken without the dialogue, there’s less return on investment, and in many cases, employees never even see the connection.

ACTION POINTS
Below are the five steps you can take to be in a position of being the poacher vs. the poached.

1. Run the Valour Pulse or similar diagnostic tool with managers. This is a relatively low-cost (time and money) way to start the process. We find that the state of managers, overall, is a good estimate of the profile of the entire organization.

2. Deliver results fast. Executive review meetings should take place within three days of the survey or other diagnostic work.

3. Reporting and dialogue. First communications to all the managers who took part in the diagnostic process should be done within five days.


5. Continued dialogue. The process does not end with one data and dialogue session. Proactive firms engage employees in monthly dialogues.

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