

Why Taking a Broad Approach Drives Optimal Performance

Featured in the March 2020 edition of the [Edge International Communiqué](#)

By Leon Sacks



A few years back, I was in England at a time that coincided with a reunion of my high school year. I had left England early in my professional life and thought it would be a great idea to reacquaint myself with school friends, most of whom I had not seen for over 30 years. I was really looking forward to the event and learning what people had done with their lives.

It was a shock when I discovered that the vast majority of my colleagues had lived their lives within a radius of 20 miles of our high school, and seemed to have a pattern of life that had been pre-programmed from the time they started work until the day they planned to retire. My initial reaction was, “How can people live such narrow existences?” but then I realized that I was selfishly pre-judging people based on my own experience of living and working in different countries. However, my initial reaction was also conditioned on observations over the years of the lost opportunities resulting from not thinking more broadly.

The Myopic Associate

I remember vividly dealing with a senior associate of a law firm who was hired to assist with the closure of a bank, where I was interim manager. The initial issues were of a tax nature, but the associate was aware that we also needed to divest of real estate and deal with employment issues, amongst others. We were satisfied with the resolution of the tax issue but, to my amazement, the associate never questioned whether his firm could assist with the other issues, despite the fact that the firm was a large full-service firm. We hired elsewhere.

Business as Usual

I remember discussing with leaders of a law firm’s “trade and commerce” practice group how to grow their practice and increase profitability. I asked them to identify their high-value services. The response was “trade agreements, regulations and commercial transactions” – nothing more than a generic description of what they do and not what generates the most value. After some discussion we discovered that litigation resulting from alleged trade-agreement breaches was where the highest value lay, and where there needed to be more focus.

Conditioned by Habit and Rules

I remember asking the leader of a practice group of a large law firm why the group had many large multinational clients, but those clients were not significant in other practice areas. The answer was that partners of the group were focused on delivery in their own practice area – partially because that is what they were used to, but also because work volume was the main determinant of compensation. Similarly, in another firm, I saw a huge predominance of clients in one industry but the inability to serve those clients outside of one practice area.

These observations illustrate the tendency to follow certain patterns of behavior that have been driven by experience and training and the culture and directives of organizations in which people work. People may be open to thinking and acting more broadly but they also need the motivating drivers – and that responsibility lies with firm management.

In the legal environment, specialization has always been viewed as a key element to success, and often as a competitive differentiator. Clients are looking for resources that have the specific knowledge and experience to resolve problems. However, with the advances of technology and the ability to provide efficient and low-cost solutions to legal needs, particularly those related to standard processes (contracts, registrations, search and discovery, etc.), law firms are addressing changes in their business models and how to leverage their resources to respond to increasingly sophisticated needs of clients.

In his book [*Range – Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*](#), David Epstein sets out “...how to capture and cultivate the power of breadth, diverse experience, and interdisciplinary exploration, within systems that increasingly demand hyper-specialization...”. Epstein recognizes that specialization is necessary and that when “... facing kind problems, narrow specialization is remarkably efficient.” However, following an analysis of the most successful individuals in multiple fields, he argues that when “facing uncertain environments and wicked problems, breadth of experience is invaluable.” He goes on to say that it empowers those individuals to excel in their fields.

Evidently organizations can and do endeavor to strengthen their bench through strategic hiring and programs of ongoing professional development, involving not just legal skills but also business and people skills. However, the real power of an organization is not in the “range” of each individual but rather in the ability to enable those individuals to work as a team and allow their collective skills and experience to benefit the organization and its clients.

To maximize the range of an organization I suggest that diversity, in the broad sense of the word, be considered, and that it be a key driver in the way the organization is managed. Diversity of capabilities, skills and experience should be considered in the composition of teams to most effectively address the agenda at hand, be it a client matter or an internal project. But it is equally important that diversification be considered when devising and implementing strategy, always visualizing how it can be used to achieve better results. Firms should strive for diversity in professional development to raise capabilities, diversity in approach to business solutions to enhance client service and satisfaction, diversity in performance goals and compensation incentives to drive the right behavior, and diversity in pricing and allocation of resources to maximize profitability.

Valuing diversity pervades everything we do. Yes, specialization is necessary, but cultivating diversity, collaboration and a broader approach drives optimal performance innovation and differentiation.

In subsequent articles I will discuss in more detail how to apply this concept in practice to challenge complacency, individualism and narrow thinking, and to sharpen the edges of your organization and business. In the meantime, I would welcome feedback and especially further examples of lost opportunities and their causes that may be of interest to our readership.

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