

## Are Hourly Workers Professionals?

BY DAVID CREELMAN

My friend, a former partner with a major HR consulting firm, was buying cheese at the grocery store. He spent a long time with the woman behind the counter inquiring about the different cheeses. In the end, he decided that instead of getting cow cheese he'd get goat cheese. This prompted a burst of angry exasperation from the grocery store clerk: how could he spend this time talking about cow cheese and then get a completely different product, goat cheese. Why was a clerk getting upset about cheese? It's because even though she was a clerk she was a professional. Cheese was her *métier*.

Needless to say this didn't occur in the US, it happened in France. In France many workers in what we might consider modest jobs are professionals in the sense that they have been trained in a specific functional area and take pride in their knowledge and skill. It's an attitude that brings both dignity and higher performance.

The question then arises, is it possible for your hourly workers to be professionals too?

I remember complimenting a Ritz-Carlton employee on the service and he said, "Well, we see ourselves as ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen." This is of course the corporate motto, but he didn't say it as if it were something he was taught. He said it almost as if it were his own idea. He was, to my mind, a professional. Once again, this didn't happen in North America, this was Kuala Lumpur, but I can certainly imagine a Ritz-Carlton employee in Boston feeling the same way, whereas I'd be quite shocked to find a real professional working as a clerk in your typical Kansas grocery store.

There are three things that make a professional:

- Duration: a commitment to stay in that profession for a reasonable period of time;
- Content: a recognized body of knowledge and skill; and
- Feeling: a pride in the profession.

In the ideal world a widespread sense of professionalism would be characteristic of the society, not something an individual company had to foster. However, while what we might call "hourly professions" doesn't come as naturally to the US as to Europe, creating that sense of professionalism amongst hourly workers could provide a distinct competitive advantage.

Could some hourly jobs in your company become professions? The first question is **duration**. If you have high turnover then creating the *esprit* of professionalism will just not be practical. On the other hand, if the duration is not hopelessly short, then developing professionalism can reduce turnover dramatically, creating a virtuous cycle.

The question of **content** should not be too difficult. Organizations usually have a clear idea of the knowledge and skills needed in hourly jobs. It's a matter of formalizing how the content is presented. If it's "just a job" then the content is presented as a "do this, don't do that". If you are creating hourly professionals then the content needs to be presented as a set of professional standards, even a "way of being" (which is what Ritz-Carleton is doing),

Funnily enough, when it comes to creating professions you want to add extra content to the job, to require more knowledge and skill than would otherwise be the case. The tradition of American business has been to do the opposite. Dumbing down jobs has been the mission of productivity experts ever since Fredrick Taylor—who famously considered hourly workers to be ox-like in their intelligence. The dumbing down strategy is certainly one approach, but it is not the only one and it is up to each organization to decide which job design strategy will lead to the best overall situation.

The third component of professionalism, **feeling**, brings us to the most abstract aspect of professionalism. The idea of workers taking their jobs seriously and giving their personal best seems

appealing. However, here we run into the oddity that some managers may not truly want hourly workers to be proud, or perhaps to put it in another light, they are not proud of the workers. Mindset genuinely is the key to all matters of talent management. If management doesn't admire the sort of work that goes on at the frontline then it is unlikely they will be able to convince hourly workers to view themselves as professionals. If management thinks of calling hourly workers "professionals" as a kind of trick to get more productivity then it will almost certainly fail.

#### **Japan**

Japan takes the matter of professionalism to levels hard to imagine even in Europe. The janitor cleaning the banisters in the Tokyo Metro approaches the task almost as if he were performing a karate kata. The men lugging bags off the airport bus run out with the same enthusiasm as a hockey team leaping over the boards onto the ice. The clerk selling a pen refill at Mitsukoshi carefully dons white gloves and performs a replacement with the gravity of a tea ceremony. This respect for work must be deeply rooted in the culture and unquestionably is part of what makes Japan great.

One risk of pursuing a strategy of hourly professionalism is that it is not a strategy you can turn on or off at will. If you are asking workers to make a durable commitment to their profession then management needs to be making a durable commitment as well. This is difficult unless a belief in hourly professionalism is a solid element of the company culture. A company that seeks competitive advantage through better frontline performance will likely spend more on training, compensation, and even things like uniforms than a competitor would. Any clever MBA will see short-term cost savings to be had in ceasing to invest in human capital this way. Hourly professionalism is an attractive path, but not an easy one to sustain. But competitive advantage always comes from taking the road less traveled. Companies that buck the trend of treating hourly workers as a cost to be minimized may well find themselves with an unbeatable performance advantage.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

David Creelman is CEO of Creelman Research. His main interest is in helping HR leaders and CFOs better measure and report on human capital to the CEO, Board and financial markets.

David also does writing, research and speaking on the most critical issues in human capital management. His clients include think tanks, consultants, academics and organizations in Japan, the US, Canada and the EU. He publishes regularly in the US, Japan, Peru, Turkey, Brazil, South Africa, Holland, Romania and Singapore.

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