

# **So You're a Superstar Programmer... ...Why You Still Might Not Be Picked for the Team**

Diana Stuart, Veramed, Twickenham, UK

## **ABSTRACT**

Which type of programmers make up a team that is successfully efficient and productive? The answer might not be what you expect. A team of star programmers who compete to out perform each other are often less likely to be successful. High-achieving teams are those which have developed strong Social Capital. So what skills do these programmers have? And how do we interview for them?

## **INTRODUCTION**

If you have made the effort to recruit the best programmers the industry has to offer, you may be asking yourself why your selected team is not performing as well as expected. This paper is aimed at teams and those who lead teams, who seek cohesion, collaboration, efficiency, innovation and success. Its purpose is to help team leads, managers and team members understand what might be holding the team back from success and what changes can be made to achieve better cohesion, collaboration, efficiency, innovation and success. Social Capital can be an important part of improving the cohesion of teams, and this paper offers practical tips for growing Social Capital, including training, team selection and interviewing techniques.

## **A COMPETITIVE START**

We could be forgiven for feeling that life is a competition, even in the work place, given that the majority of us experience competitiveness from an early age. Whether it is trying to win races as a 5 year old on school sports day, sitting entrance exams to get into the right secondary school, school sports teams, national exams, university places or the job market, we are made to feel the heat of competition against one another. Quite often there is a price to pay, for one person to win another must lose, the zero sum game, for which we must put personal feelings aside and strive to achieve our goal. Once we have achieved our goal, the job that we desire, the place on the team, what happens? How does this competitiveness translate to the world of employment? Does the drive to be the best work well in a team? This is one of the questions to be addressed in this paper. Competitiveness has its place, but evidence suggests that we should also be teaching other skills at a young age, such as skills to grow Social Capital.

## **SUPERSTAR PROGRAMMERS**

National sports teams are perhaps a good example here. Let's look at something like the England football team. On paper the team looks like they should be successful, perhaps a lot more successful than the results that they have achieved. The individual players are presumably successful in their club teams, where they have the opportunity to train together frequently, could a lack of cohesion and the feeling that individuals need to prove themselves as superstars be the reason behind a less successful national team?

We have all come across high achievers in our lives, and in our world this may be in the form of ambitious programmers who have amazing coding skills and seem to know it all. In our workplaces however, we are often organized into teams and we deliver as teams. Having an individual that is excessively competitive in the team can be counter-productive.

In the extreme, an overly competitive star programmer may actively undermine the confidence of other team members. This could have a detrimental effect on the team's productivity, ability to be innovative and ability to problem-solve. More minor behavior types such as arrogance, over-confidence, unwillingness to ask for help or to share knowledge can also have an effect on teams.

## **SOCIAL CAPITAL**

Social Capital is mentioned throughout this paper, so what is it? A dictionary-type definition is that Social Capital is the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively. Another similar definition is; networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups. It is not a new term, references to Social Capital can be found throughout the last century.

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There are three main varieties of Social Capital; bonds, bridges and linkages. Social Capital as discussed in this paper takes a little from each of these. Essentially it is about building connections to each other and in turn building trust. It could be said that trust is at the centre of Social Capital, and it is reliance and interdependency that builds trust. In very simple language Social Capital is talking to one another, listening to one another, understanding one another and making use of the benefits those bring. Those benefits include:

- Building trust
- Sharing knowledge
- Shared norms
- Asking for help
- Giving help

Social Capital is about creating an environment that makes people feel brave enough to share and constructively criticise, and to want to help one another.

Social Capital is a huge subject, this paper focuses on two of the most important elements, listening and empathy.

### LISTENING

If we don't listen we can miss so much. Listening is important because without it we miss out on things like new ideas, developing ideas and important feedback. Does one individual, a superstar programmer really have all the answers? The reality is that better solutions come from a group of people, and listening to the opinions of others.

Listening is something we all think we do, but many of us do it badly. There many different types of listening and not all of them involve actually listening, quite often we are just waiting our turn to say what we want to say. My other half says he suffers from domestic deafness, which is another way of saying he "pretend listens". This is something we do in a domestic environment, particularly with children, and is not something we would want to experience when in a work environment and trying to get ideas across. Effectively listening to one another is an important skill to develop and practice. Feeling listened to is an important aspect of building trust.

Another important part of listening is creating an environment where individuals can speak and be listened to. The environment needs to feel safe and equal, where everyone can talk and no one person is dominant.

In general, people want to be open, and feeling listened to encourages openness. If we don't listen we aren't open to new ideas and we can miss many opportunities. We learn from our mistakes, and we need to listen to constructive criticism.

### EMPATHY

When recruiting we could look for empathetic personality traits, and this is discussed later in this paper. However, empathy can be developed as a skill, and if you desire to line manage empathy has a big role to play so it is important that it is developed. Empathy is essentially seeing the world through the eyes of others. You don't need to agree with the view, but you should have an understanding. As with listening, empathy contributes to the building of trust. If an individual feels that others understand where they are coming from, then they are more likely to have the courage to share their ideas.

Appreciation of another person's point of view can be invaluable. What challenges are being faced, what reservations do they have, what are their motivations, and what fears are they trying to overcome? All of these types of question can lead to better solutions. Having an understanding each other's challenges can also lead to a different point of view. In addition, rather than having an idea that possibly just deals with one challenge, by taking into account other perspectives, an idea could address more issues.

### DEVELOPING SKILLS IN-HOUSE

In order to create an environment which allows the development of Social Capital, the changes can be small. You can read much more about how making small changes can have a big impact in Margaret Heffernan's TED book *Beyond Measure*.

Social Capital is not about everyone being great friends with one another, it's about making connections and becoming more connected, and that doesn't happen if we don't talk to one another and stay firmly in our working bubbles. There are small changes we can make, for example:

- Encouraging people to make coffee/tea together
- An office of "hotdesks"
- Enforcing a policy of not eating lunch at desks, so people eat in a communal room

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- If in geographically different locations, present to each other about the location
- Present to each other about each other
- Level the playing field give everyone an equal voice in team meetings, rotate roles or make a point of the most senior team member not speaking

As people in technical roles we can be a little dismissive of soft skills training, possibly feeling that it is not relevant. However, we are probably amongst those that could most benefit from training courses such as:

- Active listening
- Giving and receiving feedback
- Assertiveness

Learning these skills gives people the confidence to practice the elements that contribute to Social Capital.

### **BENEFITS FROM MAKING CHANGES**

The point of getting people to be more connected is to build trust, and give people the courage to speak up. The hope is by connecting people it could lead to:

- Innovation (the seed of an idea can be grown more effectively and successfully with the input of many)
- Solutions (rarely is the first suggestion The Solution. Solutions are borne from a gathering of opinions and ideas)
- Disaster avoidance (fear of looking stupid could easily override the want to speak up about a possible risk factor)
- Efficiencies (people ask for help and give help, which leads to knowledge sharing and efficiencies. If someone is intent on finding a solution on their own, let's say by means of research, rather than seeking out someone who has experience and can share that experience they could be wasting a lot of unnecessary resource)

### **INTERVIEWING**

Recruitment is a normal part of our lives and in order to build a team that has strong Social Capital it may be necessary to consider a couple of factors.

#### **WHO ARE YOU INTERVIEWING?**

This is not a question about the role type that you are interviewing for, but the individual you are interviewing. Are you interviewing a mirror of yourself? It is perhaps natural that we do this, someone with a similar background, a similar education and similar interests. People like people that are like themselves, because it is easy to compare an interviewee's values, beliefs and attitude to your own and use that as a mechanism for interviewing. The issue with this is that if you surround yourself with like-minded individuals there is nothing to challenge the prevailing opinion. The problem with not challenging the prevailing opinion is not anticipating what could happen if the prevailing opinion is wrong. I'm not suggesting that we all interview to recruit a permanent devil's advocate, but we should consider whether individuals are able to constructively challenge opinion.

Diversity is good because if everyone brings the same knowledge and ideas to the table then why have the discussion at all? The aim of a discussion is to explore different points of view, build on ideas, and reach a common agreement and understanding.

#### **WHAT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS YOU ASKING?**

Are the right questions being asked? Being technical people interviewing for technical roles, we of course tend to focus on technical ability. Technical ability is important, but interviewing for competencies is also important. This is often part of the HR interview, of which we can sometimes be a little dismissive. If we want to have individuals on our team that have the ability to grow Social Capital, then we need to ensure we ask questions relevant to those competencies.

So how do we find out if an individual has the capacity to contribute to organisational Social Capital? Let's take an individual's ability to ask for help as a starting point. An often asked question is asking a candidate to describe a challenging situation and how they resolved it. This may highlight a scenario where help was sought, however, asking a more targeted question, such as, can you describe a situation that you've been in which was beyond your

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ability or knowledge and how you moved the situation forward, will give a better understanding of ability to ask for help. What you are looking for in a candidate's answer is an indication that help was pro-actively sought, rather than someone having to step in.

Empathy is more difficult to qualify. Sometimes we are given indicators in the additional information in a CV, or when finding out what a candidate does in their leisure time. Asking about whether a candidate has ever experienced a job swap, or has been asked to assist in a different functional area, and what they learned from that experience is one way.

Teamwork is easier to ask about as most people work in a team. We can question what does teamwork mean to them? And ask whether they can give an example when their team resolved a problem, and how did it happen? We can also ask about what a candidate considers to be the most important factors for successful team working. From this question we can learn whether a candidate is aware of the concepts of collaboration and cohesion, and that everyone having an equal voice is important. A less satisfactory answer might be one that indicates they had a strong leader and everyone did what they were told.

As we are actively looking for diversity, it is important find out what is different about the candidate in front of you. The question; what do you have to offer that no one else can bring? could help. The answer to this could be anything, and hopefully not technical and is something that will give further insight to the character of the candidate.

When interviewing for line management roles, the questions need to reveal whether the candidate understands their responsibilities to their reports and how to support them, in addition to understanding what is most important to line reports. Questions such as:

- As a line manager what do you consider to be the most important thing you can do for your line reports?
- As a line manager, which of your qualities do you think your line report considers most important?

Line managers are there to serve their line reports, and they have a responsibility to the professional development of their line reports. Google's Project Oxygen found that whilst line reports did expect some level technical expertise, it was way down on the list of what was most important to them. What was far more important and top of the list, was that their managers believed in them and critically, let it show. Another finding was that line reports wanted to have open conversations about technical problems, and that their managers helped them solve problems by asking questions and letting them work it out for themselves, rather than simply providing them with the solution. Returning to the interview questions posed above; a good answer to the first question should indicate some understanding of the importance of listening, empathising and supporting the professional development of a line report. If the answer given to the second question is strong technical expertise, it might indicate a lack of understanding of the role of line manager. A better answer would indicate the desire to help develop the individual, and to establish openness by building trust.

You can see that competencies have a large role to play in interviewing if we want to recruit teams that work together more effectively, innovatively and efficiently. In theory these competencies are cross functional and could be asked in an HR interview, however, in my experience liaison between HR and the functional area to decide on which questions to ask is rare in larger companies.

### CONCLUSION

Teams could be more successful and efficient if they are encouraged to grow Social Capital. An equal voice for all is an important part of this, and a competitive, outspoken superstar programmer could derail the process of forming cohesion within a team.

### REFERENCES

Beyond Measure - Margaret Heffernan  
Google Project Oxygen  
[www.businessballs.com](http://www.businessballs.com)

### RECOMMENDED READING

Beyond Measure - Margaret Heffernan

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### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

Your comments and questions are valued and encouraged. Contact the author at:

Diana Stuart

Veramed

Regal House, London Road

Twickenham TW1 3QS

Work Phone: +44 (0)20 36967240

Email: [Diana.stuart@veramed.co.uk](mailto:Diana.stuart@veramed.co.uk)

Web: [www.veramed.co.uk](http://www.veramed.co.uk)

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