

## **Stumbling On the Solution:**

### **How John B. Samuel Uncovered the Principles Governing Human Productivity**

What makes a person tick? Why do some people seem to succeed and others fail no matter how hard they try? Are we just putty shaped by training and circumstances, or are we pre-disposed to function best in a certain way?

These were the nagging questions that haunted John, sending him on a restless search for answers. His vocational career as a corporate recruiter only heightened and accentuated these issues. Every time he helped a company select a manager or an executive, he yearned for some definitive insights about how the person would perform. Will this accountant be better doing internal audit or chasing payments from retailers who need to be pressured all the time? Will this engineer be good at handling breakdown maintenance or will he be better at preventive maintenance? Will this manager lift the division to new heights or will he be someone who maintains the norm? How can we know who is best for any given job?

Each candidate's résumé was always replete and bursting with facts – where they studied, what they studied, where they worked, what they accomplished – but there was nothing that pointed to the individual's passion, what they loved to do and what they did best. In short, there were no indications where you could bet on them. Most of the time, knowing how they would perform was nothing but a guess. But predicting performance was what each supervisor or employer would ask John. "Tell us more about what he will do best", "How can we be sure she will deliver given her lack of hands-on experience in managing a team?" "Will he perform better if he's allowed to function independently or if he's harnessed to a team?"

The questions were vitally important but the candidates' résumés did not provide any definitive answers. John's training in psychology didn't help much either. He attempted to secure some conclusive answers by using the psychometric tools from his training, but most of those tools only compounded his problems. While purporting to provide answers, most of the tests were vague and suggestive at best and misleading at worst. They were slices in the life of a person, not pictures of the whole person's productive orientation.

He began to experience the same frustration that most psychologists in the marketplace know too well: The frustration of inconclusive answers – the lack of definitive inputs that will make life easier for an employer and fulfilling for the employee. Man split the atom, but human design was still a mystery. "Don't expect to be sure about people. Trial and error may throw some light on performance, but still be wary" was his typical advice. "People are putty. You can change them into whatever you want. They only need more training". In the 80's and the 90's, training was the human resources mantra. "We can change anybody. Just give us enough time to train them." But the more the professionals pushed training, the more money spent on employee classes and seminars, the less productive increase we saw. Something was wrong with the model, but no one knew what.

John saw first-hand the limited efficacy of training. People were all hyped up after a training program but sooner than later it simply wore off. Those training dollars had no

lasting value despite the best intentions of top trainers. Apparently, training had a limited impact on making people change their “default settings”.

John noticed that the best predictor of human behavior was past performance. It made more sense to study how the individual performed over a period of time. His passion for clinical and observable evidence led him to design a process in which he and his team would interview at least 12 to 15 individuals who had known or worked with the candidate. These individuals included friends, colleagues, former colleagues, supervisors, family members and others. The interviews were conducted face-to-face whenever possible because John observed the candid feedback from these people was at its best when he talked directly to them.

John and his team would fan out across the country, meeting a diverse range of individuals who knew the candidate, asking probing questions about their experiences with him. “Did he enjoy working by himself or was he always keen to work in tandem with others?” “What do his subordinates remember him for?” “What were some of the strengths he demonstrated that impressed you?” “What were some of his limitations or blind spots?” “What did he do with his greatest passion?”

The data began to tell a story – a compelling story of a consistency and constancy in the way the individual behaved, performed and delivered results. It was all available and out there if only someone took the time and effort to collect and collate it.

John’s clients were impressed to say the least. The definitive data they had about the individual candidate helped them make some informed decisions about where they could position the employee to ensure he or she performed well. If enough effort was taken to research the past of an individual, second guessing what they would deliver best was not necessary.

But John knew that even though the data they gathered was substantive and revealed a consistent recurring pattern, it did not paint the complete picture. It provided glimpses of about specific employment situations. For example, John could now tell whether the individual worked best when allowed to handle a task independently or if it was important for him to be a part of the team. The symptomatic evidence was definitive but the foundation of the proclivity for behavior and performance still remained unclear.

To John’s delight the haze was beginning to lift. It became increasingly clear that if the ‘symptomatic evidence’ was studied more carefully and rigorously, there was a defining architecture behind it. A chance meeting with a friend in a conference introduced him to the SIMA model of human design. SIMA is the acronym for ‘System to Identify Motivated Abilities’ and was the life work of Arthur Miller Jr. who founded People Management International Inc., a human resource consulting company based in Hartford, Connecticut.

SIMA was refreshingly different from other psychometric methods and tools. It was a study of the phenomenon of experienced success and satisfaction for the individual during his lifetime. SIMA was a by-product of Arthur Miller’s work with Bernard Haldane who pioneered the Success Factor Analysis. Success Factor Analysis required the individual to document life activities in which he experienced success and satisfaction. Typical research

questions in this model were “What did you do well?” and “What did you enjoy doing?” This process helped John to see with greater clarity the truth about a recurring pattern of behaviors and productive capabilities resident in a person. The very factors he and his team would painstakingly collate about individuals were the ones SIMA set out to establish about the person. The similarities were obvious. “How does the individual prefer to be managed?” “What kind of capabilities does he consistently demonstrate at work?” “Does he like to manage people?” Success Factor Analysis seemed to complete the circle.

People Management International invited John to become a Partner and a member of the Board. He continued his human resource consulting work using the SIMA framework. But after a few years of fervently championing this model, he was still left with nagging unanswered questions. The SIMA process provided a repertoire of well-defined classifications of behavior but the validity of the conclusions increasingly became an issue for John. The behaviors demonstrated by the client were not consistent with the description of the SIMA report. John struggled with this inconsistency and took it up with his partners but the discussion led nowhere and John chose to leave PMI. He gave up his position on the board and committed himself to his true passion – researching the design and architecture that is innate and resident in the individual.

The years in the wilderness began. He had a thriving consulting practice using the SIMA model. It seemed suicidal to abandon the business. But the call to research and investigation simply did not go away. The urge and pull seemed to become stronger and stronger. Supporting himself with some savings and a meager practice, he invested countless hours searching for that elusive design that seemed to be resident in the individual. Talking to John in those days revealed a person who was passionate and determined to uncover the design he was certain existed but did not know where to find it.

His friends found him sincere and earnest but they thought he was wasting his time looking for the “hidden treasure” of human resources. The suggestions and confrontations were always the same. “It just doesn’t exist. It all depends on the model you start with. There isn’t any absolute here.” “Why did you give up such a good job for this? You need to just get with the program and make money.” His income was minimal and sporadic. His career looked like talent being wasted. John had his doubts too. Is this quest worthwhile? Is this going anywhere? Should he just give up? But silencing the urge to plod on proved to be harder than he expected. It seemed easier to relentlessly push ahead despite the financial deprivation and the attendant social stigma. His quest for the ‘holy grail’ seemed foolhardy, but he was soon to discover it was worthwhile after all.

Apart from his professional passion, John had other enduring interests. Visiting inmates every week in prison and doing a Bible study for them was a deeply fulfilling part of his life. His Bible studies called for an intense study of the Scripture. His passion for the Bible led him to read and study the Scriptures in Hebrew and Greek. During one preparation study, he stumbled on an otherwise obscure passage which seemed to unlock the secret he so desperately sought. It was an eureka moment. The passage made some passing reference to gifts and capabilities naturally inherent in every individual – a passage of Scripture that millions ‘spiritualized’, dismissing its consequences about ordinary, innate human behavior.

John found a seminal truth in this passage which would easily have been obscured if he had not invested thousands of hours interviewing and analyzing over 8000 people the previous twenty years. All of a sudden, the pieces all began to fall into place. Finally it made sense. Just like design patterns in nature, there was a definitive design in the way people were wired and constituted. Just like design in the animal kingdom, differentiating vertebrate and invertebrates, or the plant kingdom distinguishing between shrubs, trees and herbs, there seemed to be an enduring design about how people are created. Breathless and excited, he realized he had found the grail – the architecture that governed human resource design.

And the rest, as they say, is history! His consulting work provided the platform to continue his research in the different continents and among various racial groups. The evidence became clearer and clearer. The reality that there is a definitive architecture to human design and that an individual's proclivities and productivity are defined more by that architecture than any other single factor, was at last empirical and demonstrable. He began to use this framework in a variety of applications including hiring for companies, helping individuals in midlife crisis make vocational transitions, team building for CEO's and their teams and helping college graduates make informed vocational choices.

To further his passion for research, John gave up running and managing a for-profit consulting outfit and started a not-for-profit research and teaching foundation. As the number of people he diagnosed increased, the clarity about this architecture strengthened. It was now possible to have predictive insights about the passion resident in an individual could be deployed in a role that engaged their 'sweet spot' - where they were energized and were able to perform beyond expectations. The architecture was as defining as the human blood types.

This body of knowledge is called the Zone Phenomenon or technically the "Optimal Productive Function" naturally embedded in an individual. Helping individuals to secure a definitive understanding about what they are naturally endowed to do best became possible and plausible. A revolution in human resource management began.

"Living Your Zone" was no longer a cliché. John began to see how it could become an intentional reality if and when insights about an individual's zone became foundational and pivotal to a person's life engagements.