

Aligning Your Talent To The Business You're Really In

By Carl Hicks



In my years guiding client organizations through growth and change, I've found no function more vital to a company's success than how it attracts and develops talent.

But there's an important corollary to that principle: You can't hire and develop the right people to help you run your business unless you know what business you're really in. And on this point, Ted Levitt's classic 1960 article, "[Marketing Myopia](#)," remains a call to arms (and cautionary tale) for business leaders around the globe. His message is clear: Define your business not by the products you sell, but by the problems you solve, and the needs you satisfy for your customers.

Here are two of my favorite illustrations of that point:

Quicken Loans: From Mortgage Company to Innovative Technology Business

Quicken Loans Inc. is the nation's second-largest mortgage lender. But that's not how the company defines itself. Rather, it sees its distinct customer value (and competitive advantage) to be its fast and hassle-free online mortgage application process. Founder and chairman Dan Gilbert and his top executives frequently tout their [internal mantra](#): "At Quicken we say we're a technology company that happens to make home loans." And that perception has impacted the company's talent strategy in very deliberate ways.

Recognizing that its isolated suburban locale was hindering the recruitment of the young, tech-centric college grads it needed, Gilbert moved Quicken Loan's headquarters to a hip space in downtown Detroit in 2010. The company has created an internal

culture that reflects innovation and technology as key drivers of the business. Managers encourage employees to bring their ideas to their bosses (and give them the work-time to explore them), and formalized programs give staff opportunities to devise and implement the next "big idea."

With a talent strategy aligned to the technology business, the company has been scoring big with employees and customers. Quicken Loans has claimed the [top spots](#) among the "Best Places to Work in IT" by Computerworld magazine in six of the past ten years, on "Fortune's Top 100 Companies to Work For" in each of the past five, and has landed top "customer satisfaction" awards by JD Powers annually since 2010.

Apple: From Technology Giant to Luxury Lifestyle Brand

Apple's expanding ecosystem of high-end hardware has its legions of loyal users transitioning effortlessly among their multiple devices throughout their day. It's no wonder business analysts have trumpeted Apple's successful transition from technology products company to "luxury lifestyle" business. And in the world of up-market lifestyle brands, delivering a consistently pleasurable and personal customer experience reigns supreme.

In 2014, Apple raised its sights above the Silicon Valley horizon and [hired Angela Ahrendts](#), the dynamic CEO of luxury fashion brand Burberry, to head its retail and e-commerce operations. While her Apple predecessors had come from big-box electronic and mass-market retail, the elegant and personable Ahrendts had risen through the ranks of the fashion world. In her eight years at Burberry, she rejuvenated the ailing British label through the sleek integration of brick-and-mortar, online, and social media channels. The result was a tripling of Burberry's revenues and a [300%](#) increase in stock value.

Since coming to Apple, Ahrendts has championed the brand's customer-facing employees as key assets for its business, not only in delivering an excellent experience to customers but in telegraphing vital information about customer needs and opinions up

the line to company leaders. In 2015, Apple saw its highest employee retention rate of [81%](#) and recorded its largest sales and net revenue.

Amidst the tech industry's constant leapfrogging of processor speeds and functionality, and the commoditization of mobile devices by lower-priced competitors, Apple's ability to deliver five-star concierge services to its customers will be critical to preserving its distinctive brand vision.

Final thoughts:

Identify what your business offers to satisfy and delight your customers. Then, as Ted Levitt wrote, "... push this idea (and everything it means and requires) into every nook and cranny of the organization."

Indeed. And there's no better way to get into the nooks and crannies than this: create recruitment, development, and performance measurement strategies – throughout every functional area of your business – that reflect the employee skills, experience, and personality styles that will deliver on your customer promise.