

Star employees don't always shine

Many companies are in the habit of forking out bundles of cash to attract star employees because of their rainmaker reputations; but a stellar CV and glowing standing can mask the real reasons for their success.

Debbie Goodman, Managing Director of Jack Hammer Executive Headhunters who has spent eight years placing some of the top people in SA's leading corporates, says: "When companies are in the process of mulling how much they can pay for what they believe to be real talent, they should be thoroughly researching the reasons for that success.

"And that's because there are instances of disappointment and confusion when a star signing fails to deliver."

Goodman says the reason for this is that a star's performance is sometimes a result of their employer or co-workers which is frequently as big a determinant of success as individual talent.

"A Harvard Business School study concluded that stars sometimes under perform when they move companies and their presence can even result in resentment from existing employees who may feel overlooked."

The study assessed leading share analysts over an eight year period and found that just less than half did poorly in the year after they switched companies and even five years later still underperformed.

"It just shows how important it is to know whether they relied heavily on others or unique company circumstances for their success. When interviewing people, a key 'red flag' regarding the individual's performance is when the candidate uses the term 'we' when describing tasks, projects and achievements.

"It is therefore very important to thoroughly assess a star's claims in order to determine exactly the individual's role. If the person cannot tell you precisely what he or she did, and puts this down to the fact that 'you know, we work as a team', I would regard this as a big question mark in terms of individual performance."

"Top performers are usually very articulate when describing their role. When you still can't make sense of an individual's role versus that of the team after a one to two hour interview, there is likely to be some 'hiding' going on."

Goodman notes that in big organizations, it is much easier to 'hide' or shift the buck than in smaller companies: "If the individual displays a pattern of blaming things that have not worked on others, yet always seems to take the accolades for achievements, there is something fishy going on."