EXAMINING CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH POTENTIAL EMPLOYEES FROM EMPLOYEES' PERSPECTIVE

Nurita Juhdi

International Islamic University, Malaysia

Fatimah Pa'wan and Ram Milah @ Simranpreet Kaur Hansaram

UNITAR International University, Malaysia

The objective of the study was to determine the major characteristics of high potential (HIPO) employees. Three hundred and twenty nine employees participated in the study. HIPO was mainly described by three major characteristics – high performance, learning agility and leadership spirit. The data were collected using survey forms and the items were adopted from various studies that discussed HIPO traits and characteristics. The multiple linear regressions showed that the first characteristic – high performance – was significantly predicted by learning agility, leadership spirit and low turnover intention. The second HIPO characteristic – learning agility – was significantly predicted by leadership spirit, high performance, organizational engagement and job engagement. The third HIPO characteristic – leadership spirit – was significantly predicted by high performance, learning agility, increased job scope, organizational engagement, number of years in the organization, education level and higher turnover intention.

Keywords: High potential, High performance, Learning agility, Leadership spirit, Development program.

Introduction

To date, there have not been many studies conducted to quantitatively measure the dimensions of employee potential let alone those with high potential (HIPO). Prior research indicated various characteristics and traits portraying HIPO personalities, characters and competence but the studies only discussed the matter conceptually and in theory. For instance, Schumacher (2009), Ready, Conger and Hill (2010) and Gritzmacher (1989) project major characteristics of employees who possess high potential to occupy higher positions in organizations. These authors put forward various types of traits and characteristics but they revolve around three major competences namely strong drive for excellence in current job performance, learning oriented and strong leadership spirit. These competences are regarded as important in HIPO identification that will facilitate HIPO employee development and management. Realizing the importance of identifying HIPOs among employees, there is a need to design a measurement instrument that can operationalize the construct of 'high potential'. Therefore, feedbacks and views from both employers and employees must be sought in order to get their inputs on the make-up of a person that can be considered as a HIPO. The present study was actually a part of a bigger research project that sought to identify major traits of HIPOs from the perspectives of employees and

employers. The project was divided into two stages; the first stage was to get the views from employees themselves. They were required to give their opinions about their work performance (especially the drive to achieve excellent performance), learning agility and leadership spirit. In stage two, which has yet to be launched, employers will be consulted and they will be asked to give inputs on the type of competence or characteristics reflecting a HIPO. The final stage of the study will combine findings from both sources in order to determine if there is any consistency between the views of employees and employers with regard to HIPO characteristics.

The present study only reported the findings from the first stage. Therefore, the paper reported in detail the dimensions that made up the characteristics of a HIPO based on the study findings. Some of the measurement items were adopted from Williams and Anderson (1991) who conducted a survey on employees' perception on their work performance effectiveness. However, the items to operationalize learning agility and leadership spirit were tapped from studies by several authors like Schumacher (2009), Gritzmacher (1989), Snipes (2005), Ready et al. (2010), Lombardo and Eichinger (2000). The characteristics and traits proposed by these authors were compared and contrasted and finally, the final set of the measurement items were developed and used in data collection.

High Potential Employees: General Traits and Characteristics

In order to determine which employees to be assigned with higher positions in the organizations, managers would choose those with excellent performance. This is considered the best indicator for a person's potential. Performance appraisal is normally used as a source to identify which individual who has the potential. However, if the successive position at the higher level requires different set of skills, looking at past and current performance only may not be sufficient. In this case, the individuals' potential has to be assessed. Oxford dictionary defines the term potential as qualities that exist and can be developed. It means, in identifying employees for higher positions, the person's qualities that are possible to be developed should also be gauged. Therefore, employees who are identified as HIPOs must be asked to give inputs on their career aspirations.

High potential (HIPO) employees, as defined by Schumacher (2009), are employees who produce excellent work performance consistently. The author also noted that HIPOs are not similar to high performers because the latter are employees who produce immediate results but not necessarily possess aspirations or engagement. HIPOs are the people who have the potential to assume higher positions in the future and they normally score well on various leadership assessment criteria (Schumacher, 2009). Further, Schumacher lists several characteristics such as quick learners, risk takers, consistent high performers, have growth potentials and positive energy. Gritzmacher (1989) outlines nine characteristics that include independent, committed, time conscious and have high need for continuous improvement and creative. Snipes (2005) establishes thirteen attributes that are most sought after by organizations. That includes the ability to maintain a high level of competence in technical or functional discipline, to consistently produce results above expectations and to be bias for action. Derr (1987) notes that normally HIPOs are general managers who have the possibility of climbing up the corporate ladder by certain time and HIPOs must eventually ready to become heads by the age of forty.

At this juncture, one might wonder if a high performer would be as valuable as the high potential one. To gauge potential, the most common method used is performance appraisal on current performance and those with outstanding achievement would be regarded as having potential to be assigned with higher responsibilities, and thus to be put in higher positions in the future. The issue is some high performers may not be able to realize their potentials. Lombardo

and Eichinger (2000) posit that many executives who have been successful in their jobs for many years derailed mainly due to failure to learn new things. One major reason is these executives refuse to make transitions to different jobs and they are trapped in their own old way of doing things (McCall and Lombardo, 1983). They fail to acknowledge the fact that change is the only constant that requires innovation and new paradigm. Learning is therefore pertinent.

Learning is defined as a permanent change in capabilities, behavior and attitude as a result of a new experience (Gagne and Medsker, 1996). This infers that if a high performer is not able or unwilling to undergo new experience or changes, the person would remain a high achiever in the present job but not having the possibility to make transition in the job, either laterally or vertically. Prior research found that employees with various on-the-job experiences were more successful in their career (McCall, Lombardo and Morrison, 1988). In another study, employees with low potential could become more successful in their career if they were given opportunity to learn and develop their skills (Howard and Bray, 1988; Bray, Campbell and Grant, 1974). However, it also depends on the person's growth potential or willingness to learn new things and especially if the new experience only means increased responsibilities and more difficult tasks. Some high performers who have vast experience in the current position may become too satisfied or complacent in their comfort zone that they refuse to change and learn new things. There have to be strategies to use to make these high performers to leave the status quo and start to venture into new things.

Development Programs

Given dynamic business environment, emergence of new markets and stiff competition among employers in getting the best employees, the need to have HIPOs who can become the successors for the present management people is pertinent. Most organizations prefer to have their own internal successors to assume top management functions and thus they are willing to invest in the development programs. If the managements fail to prepare their executives for future high positions in the organizations, they are unlikely to be able to sustain their competitiveness and positions in the industry. Therefore, HIPOs must be identified, developed and managed well. At this point, it is worth noting the importance of coming up with the effort to identify and develop the potential so that the HIPOs are able to unleash their qualities. There have to be development programs that are used to hone the current skills and potential. In a long term study in AT&T on managerial lives (Howard and Bray, 1988; Bray, Campbell and Grant, 1974), it was found that employees who were given the opportunity for development activities successfully progressed in their career. This implies that even if the employees have the potential for higher level positions but if there is lack of development program, their true qualities are unlikely to be unleashed.

A study done by Pater et al. (2009) indicated that challenging job experiences served as the strongest predictor for upward movement than current job performance. Challenging job experience can be regarded as the tool to train the HIPOs before they are assigned with the real, higher level of responsibilities. Noe (2008) notes that job experiences include various programs such as job enrichment, job rotation and job enlargement. These programs allow employees to be exposed to new experience. But it can only happen with full support from superiors who are willing to assign employees with new functions and responsibilities.

It is noted by Snell (1990) that for employees to learn, they must be willing to learn new skills, apply the skills and master new experiences. Employees should be given different tasks or work on special projects in order to pick up new skills. They could also switch roles with other co-workers so that they know how to perform multiple tasks. Van der Heijden (2002) stresses on

the importance of giving different functions or tasks to employees. The author posits that an employee who holds the same position for more than seven years and remains in that position for another five years can be regarded as unemployable. It should also be noted that managers and superiors need to be opened for errors and mistakes that employees commit. Such support is highly needed so that employees can expand their skills and thus, employability. It is noted by Wang and Chan (2006) that strong support from managers and superiors has great potential in contributing to the multiplier effect of training.

Organizational Engagement, Job Engagement and Turnover Intention

HIPOs are the organization's top performers in their current jobs and have the potential to move to higher positions and more challenging responsibilities. Further, as noted by Schumacher (2009), a HIPO must also have high level of engagement. Engagement among HIPOs is imperative because they are expected to be highly engaged in the organization and continue to contribute their expertise. However, the possibility for the HIPOs to leave for better career prospects in other organizations is always there because these talented people are always hungry for more challenges and advancement. There must be opportunity for them to hone their skills and they must be provided with development programs that are coupled with better positions in the organizations. Failure to offer higher level positions to HIPOs would lead to frustration and thus, the tendency to depart from the organizations is imminent. Therefore, it is not surprising when engagement is indicated as the top priority for HR practitioners and it was considered as a major issue in the year 2010 and beyond (Clinton and Woollard, 2011). Engagement is the level of being enthused about the job and the organization (Saks, 2006). His study found that both constructs were closely related but distinct. Job engagement was predicted only by job characteristics and organizational engagement was predicted by procedural justice. This finding implies that if the job is challenging and has much opportunity for progress, the incumbents' job engagement would be increased but not necessarily boosting the employees' organizational engagement. However, both constructs were found negatively related to turnover intention.

It is undeniable that providing development programs for the HIPOs is crucial. Nonetheless, huge investment in molding and developing human capital would be in vain if the employees leave and bring along their skills and experience to other organizations. But if the HIPOs are highly engaged to the job and the organization, the tendency to resign is likely to be low. Employees with high level of engagement are five times less likely to voluntarily leave the organization (Vance, 2006). Perhaps, this is the reason why Schumacher (2009) posited engagement as one important characteristics of a HIPO. Therefore, given the importance of organizational engagement, job engagement and turnover intention, these variables were treated as significant traits/characteristics of HIPOs.

Data Collection and Research Instruments

The respondents of who participated in the research were professionals and employees in middle to higher level positions (lowest position was administrative executive) because these were the people who had the potential to assume higher positions in the organizations. The survey form was organized into four sections. Section A asked the respondents to indicate their views on their work performance (mainly the drive to achieve excellent performance), learning agility and leadership spirit. The items used to measure work performance and the drive to produce results

were adopted from Williams and Anderson (1991) who developed and used the items in their survey. Items on learning agility were tapped from a study done by Lombardo and Eichinger (2000). The actual items were not revealed in the article and thus for the present study, the items were tapped and self-developed. Items used to measure leadership spirit were tapped from the articles written by Ready et al. (2010) and Schumacher (2009).

Section B contained eight items that were used in a study by Juhdi et al. (2010) to measure the amount of development programs and job experience of the respondents for the last three years, regardless of where the respondents worked. Section C contained items used to rate job and organization engagement (five and six items respectively) and three items on turnover intention. The items on engagement were used in a study by Saks (2006) and the latter items were adopted from Camman et al (1979).

All the items in Sections A and C were measured using five-point scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) and items in Section B from never (1) to very often (5).The last three items asked on age, years in organization, gender, highest level of education and present position that ranged from non-managerial position/level (administrative executive), professional, and managerial level.

Factor Analysis

Thirty nine items in sections A and C were analyzed using principal components analysis (PCA) and eight components were extracted which explained 61.192 percent of the total variance. The Bartlett test of sphericity is significant and that the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy is 0.903 which was far greater than 0.6. Only loading 0.5 and above were included. The output of the factor analysis is as indicated in Table 1.

Factor 1 consisted eight items which reflected 'the drive for high performance' with cronbach's alpha .876. Factor 2 consisted six items that signified 'organizational engagement' with cronbach's alpha .816. Factor 3 contained five items that portrayed 'learning agility' with cronbach's alpha .781. Factor 4 had five items and two items were then removed (to get the highest reliability coefficient) and labeled as turnover intention with cronbach's alpha .883. There were six items in factor 5 that was named 'leadership spirit' with cronbach's alpha .740. Factor 6 had three items that reflected 'job engagement' with cronbach's alpha .741. Despite the high loadings, factors 7 and 8 were dropped from further analysis because the items in the factors which were not interpretable.

Table 1. Principal component loadings of HIPO competences, engagement and turnover intention.

	Component							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
I believe I have the ability to accomplish assigned tasks effectively.	.812							
I fulfill responsibilities specified in my job description.	.786							
I am able to manage and organize my tasks effectively.	.782							
I am able to perform the tasks that are expected of me.	.737							
I believe I perform well on the job.	.668							
I always meet my formal requirements of the job.	.572							

I never neglect aspects of the job that are obligated to perform.	.472					
I am always engaged in activities that will directly affect my performance evaluation.	.429					
I always look for the why and how of events and experiences in order to find meanings.						
Being a member in this organization make me come alive.		.764				
I am highly engaged in this organization.		.756				
Being a member in this organization is very captivating.		.649				
One of the most exciting things for me is getting involved with things happening in this organization.		.611				
Being a member of this organization is exhilarating for me.		.569				
I am highly engaged in this job.		.557				
I have the flexibility to accept new duties and responsibilities.						
I look forward to changes and new things.			.674			
I like to find new ways of doing things.			.663			
I am a risk taker.			.632			
I am a curious person.			.610			
I can pick up on things in a hurry.			.589			
I probably look for a new job in the next year				.866		
I will likely actively look for a new job in the next year				.843		
I often think about quitting				.831		
My mind often wanders and think of other things when doing my job (Deleted)				.609		
I am really not into the 'going-on' in this organization (Deleted)				.514		
I look forward to leadership roles.					.710	
I am not satisfied with the status quo.					.659	
I am willing to accept higher levels of responsibilities.					.474	
I am willing to coach and train other employees.					.454	
I am able to build relationships with others.					.433	
Sometimes I am so into my job that I lose track of time.						.781
I really throw myself into my job.						.679
This job is all consuming that I am totally into it.						.573
I have a significant and noticeable presence.							.688
I can perform well under first-time conditions.							.612
I can put myself in the shoes of others.								.806
I know both my weaknesses and strengths.								.450

Another factor analysis was conducted on items in section B. The eight items were analyzed using principal components analysis (PCA) and two components were extracted which explained 69.992 percent of the total variance. The Bartlett test of sphericity is significant and that the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy is 0.873 which was far greater than 0.6. Only loading 0.5 and above were included. Factor 1 consisted of four items which reflected 'formal development program' with cronbach's alpha .852. The items were taking temporary roles at other company on full time basis, assignment to key people, leadership/managerial workshop and master's program in business/management. Factor 2 contained four items that was labeled 'increased job scope' with cronbach's alpha .844. The items were assigned to various tasks/functions, assigned to special projects, assigned with more responsibilities/functions and asked to research new ways to serve customers.

Demographic Analysis

The average age of the respondents was 34.03 years. Almost 40 percent of the respondents were between 20 years to 30 years of age and 22 percent were those above 40 years old. Majority of them (47 percent) had not more than 5 years working experience in the organizations and almost 30 percent of them have worked in the same organization for more than 10 years. There was almost equal number of male and female respondents. Almost half of the respondents has bachelor degree or higher. Table 2 summarized the respondents' demographic characteristics.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the respondents (N=329).

Demographic Variables	Classifications	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	160	48.6
	Female	169	51.3
Highest education level	High School or less	65	19.8
	Diploma of equivalent	103	31.3
	Bachelor's degree or higher	161	48.9
Current rank in organization	Non-managerial	159	48.3
	Professional	59	17.9
	Low level manager	47	14.3
	Mid-level manager	56	17.0
	Top level manager	8	2.2

Dimensions of High Potential Employees

The factor analysis output in Table 1 clearly indicated three main dimensions of HIPO competences. All the items used to measure the characteristics fell in three major factors namely the drive for high performance, learning agility and leadership spirit. These findings are in line with the major traits proposed in the previous studies (Ready et al., 2010; Schumacher, 2009; Gritzmacher, 1989; Snipes, 2005; Lombardo and Eichinger, 2000; Williams and Anderson, 1991). Based on the dimensions derived from the factor analysis, the dimensions were then used in further tests and analyses in the study.

Predicting the Drive for High Performance, Learning Agility and Leadership Spirit

Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations of the study variables. First, it is worth noting that turnover intention was only negatively related to drive for high performance (r = -.115, p = .019) and surprisingly, it was positively related to leadership spirit (r = .095, p = .043). Turnover intention was also positively related (but insignificant) to learning agility (r = .080, p = .074). In order to find out what predicted drive for high performance, learning agility and leadership spirit, three separate multiple linear regression (MLR) were run.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations among study variables (N=329).

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	34	7.9	1									
2. Years	8.1	6.8	.70**	1								
3. JE	3.8	.62	.16**	.14**	1							
4. OE	3.8	.59	.11*	.07	.55**	1						
5. TI	2.8	1.1	-.36**	-.32**	-.10*	-.01	1					
6. IJS	3.5	.76	.02	-.07	.33**	.49**	.05	1				
7. DHP	4.1	.49	.15**	.13**	.34**	.42**	-.12*	.33**	1			
8. LA	3.9	.55	.08	.05	.38**	.49**	.08	.41**	.55**	1		
9. LS	3.9	.53	.11*	.09*	.27**	.45**	.10*	.43**	.54**	.61**	1	
10. FDP	2.9	1.0			.22**	.38**	.21**	.62**	.19**	.32**	.30**	1

Note: Years = years in organization; JE = job engagement; OE = organizational engagement; TI = turnover intention; IJS = increased job scope; DHP = drive for high performance; LA = learning agility; LS = leadership spirit; FDP = formal development programs.

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed)

Predicting Drive for High Performance

The first MLR was run to predict drive for high performance using various variables namely age, years in organization, education level, job engagement, organizational engagement, turnover intention, increased job scope, formal development programs, learning agility and leadership spirit. The results in Table 4 showed that all the variables explained 40.5 percent of the variance in drive for high performance. When all the variables were entered into the equation simultaneously to predict drive for high performance, only three variables were found as significant predictors. Leadership spirit was the strongest predictor for drive for high performance (ß=.316, p=.000) followed by learning agility (ß=.292, p=.000). Turnover intention was negatively related to drive for high performance and being the weakest predictor (ß=-.137, p=.004).

Table 4. Summary of multiple linear regression analysis of high performance (N=329).

Predictor variables entered	P	Standardized beta	R	Adjusted R^2
Age	.888	.009	.651	.405
Years in organization	.773	.018		
Education level	.752	-.014		
Learning agility	**.000**	.292		
Leadership spirit	**.000**	.316		
Job engagement	.124	.082		
Organizational engagement	.197	.077		
Turnover intention	**.004**	-.137		
Increased job scope	.297	.063		
Formal development	.377	-.050		

Predicting Learning Agility

The second MLR was used to predict learning agility using similar variables used to predict drive for high performance, except that learning agility now was treated as the dependent variable and drive for high performance was included as an independent variable. The results in Table 5 showed that all the variables explained 47.5 percent of the variance in learning agility. When all the variables were entered into the equation simultaneously to predict learning agility, only four variables were found as significant predictors. Leadership spirit was the strongest predictor for learning agility (ß=.340, p=.000); followed by drive for high performance (ß=.257, p=.000) and organizational engagement (ß=.127, p=.022). Job engagement was the other weakest predictor for learning agility (ß=.108, p=.029).

Table 5. Summary of multiple linear regression analysis of learning agility (N=329).

Predictor variables entered	P	Standardized beta	R	Adjusted R^2
Age	.770	.017	.701	.475
Years in organization	.740	-.020		
Education level	.916	.004		
Drive for high performance	**.000**	.257		
Leadership spirit	**.000**	.340		
Job engagement	**.029**	.108		
Organizational engagement	**.022**	.127		
Turnover intention	.091	.077		
Increased job scope	.470	.041		
Formal development	.334	.052		

Predicting Leadership Spirit

The third MLR was conducted to predict leadership spirit using similar variables used to predict drive for high performance, except that leadership spirit now was treated as the dependent variable and drive for high performance was included as an independent variable. The results in

Table 5 showed that all the variables explained 47.8 percent of the variance in leadership spirit. When all the variables were entered into the equation simultaneously to predict the dependent variable, seven variables were found as significant predictors. Learning agility was the strongest predictor for leadership spirit (ß=.337, p=.000); followed by drive for high performance (ß=.277, p=.000) and increased job scope (ß=.157, p=.006). The other significant predictors were organizational engagement (ß=.128, p=.022), years in organization (ß=.122, p=.037), education level (ß=.111, p=.008) and turnover intention (ß=.106, p=.019).

Table 6. Summary of multiple linear regression analysis of leadership spirit (N=329).

Predictor variables entered	P	Standardized beta	R	Adjusted R^2
Age	.646	-.027	.703	.478
Years in organization	**.037**	.122		
Education level	**.008**	.111		
Drive for high performance	**.000**	.277		
Learning agility	**.000**	.337		
Job engagement	.051	-.097		
Organizational engagement	**.022**	.128		
Turnover intention	**.019**	.106		
Increased job scope	**.006**	.157		
Formal development	.997	.000		

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings suggest that a person with strong drive for high performance is less likely to leave, and must also have learning agility with leadership spirit. For a person with learning agility, besides having leadership spirit and drive for high performance, he/she is also highly engaged to the job and the organization. But for a person with strong leadership spirit, it is not just learning agility and drive for high performance that are important, the person also has high education level, seniority and more engaged to the organization. It is no surprise for an employee who has been with the organization for a long time to be highly engaged to the organization. And possibly, given the higher education level and seniority, the person is given more access to formal development programs and increased job (scope) that have momentous effect on his/her leadership spirit. Nonetheless, positive relationship between leadership spirit and turnover intention will remain as a nightmare to employers. This implies that the more the person looks forward to advancement and building relationships, the more he/she intends to leave the organization. This is plausible if the person perceives the opportunities for career progression in the same organization is limited that the only way out is to leave for other organization that provides better prospect for development.

The overall study findings indicate that the term HIPO was made up of different competences as projected by the previous authors (Schumacher, 2009; Gritzmacher, 1989; Snipes, 2005; Ready et al., 2010; Lombardo and Eichinger, 2000). The different competences were strongly related to each other because they complemented each other. It is reasonable to understand that a person with HIPO must be an individual who always want to produce results beyond expectation or at least meet with the job requirement. The person also at the same time is open for changes and looks forward to doing and learning something new such as taking up

higher level responsibilities. This type of person somehow knows that he is not able to achieve success alone that he needs teamwork and therefore, he is willing to teach others. However, given the findings from the study that indicated the three types of competences were predicted by different factors, HR practitioners had to ensure that the HIPOs needs and expectations were met. It gives implication on HR practitioners in HIPOs identification too. Not only that the employees must be assessed whether they possess the HIPO competences, but the degree of the competence level should also be taken into consideration.

For instance, if there are three persons identified as HIPOs, they must be assessed in terms of the three types of competences they have and the degree of the competences. One person might be having extremely strong need for high performance and learning agility but relatively lower spirit in leadership. The other might have strong spirit of leadership and learning agility but relatively lower drive for high performance. The implication is, the former might have lower intention to resign but must be provided with increased job scope, formal development programs and coupled with more attractive incentives. The same person also might have relatively lower needs to be assigned to higher position because he/she is more attracted to lateral movement that gives him/her new job experiences. This person possibly is more motivated to be remunerated with competitive compensation scheme as a reward for his/her excellent contribution. The case is different from the latter person who might have higher tendency to leave the company but is very invaluable to the present employer because as indicated in Table 5 and 6, individuals with high leadership spirit and learning agility had high level of organizational engagement to the company. The person must be offered with more development programs and better positions in the company or he/she would decide to leave for other company. Perhaps, providing attractive compensation benefits would do to boost the drive for high performance and reduce the likeliness to depart.

Given the complexity in managing HIPOs, HR practitioners have to be watchful of the types of HIPOs they are managing and be responsive to what they expect from the organizations. What is important in managing HIPOs is there must be appropriate tools to use in gauging the employees' potential. Performance appraisals, skill inventory, assessment centers, self-assessment using interviews or questionnaire and nomination system are helpful in identifying employees' talents and career aspiration. High performing employees with seniority in the organization and possess high education level should be given the priority in receiving development programs. The efforts have to be followed with the measurement of the degree in each HIPO characteristic because it is possible for employees to have varying level of leadership spirit, learning agility and drive for high performance. Finally, there must be development programs that are designed to meet unique needs for each HIPO employee that are coupled with other HR policies like attractive remuneration package and career planning program.

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