

ED.L.D. CAPSTONE SUMMARY

Finding Great Teachers for Blended-Learning Schools

C. Elizabeth Rabbitt, Ed.L.D. '13

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CAPSTONE SUMMARY

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Organization: Touchstone Education

Role: Led project to develop and implement a teacher recruitment strategy for an emerging charter management organization

PROJECT GOAL

Ed.L.D. candidate Beth Rabbitt was tasked with finding the proverbial needle in a haystack: highly talented teachers who were particularly skilled in blended learning environments. Her objective was to create for Touchstone Education — an emerging charter management organization — a way to identify and successfully recruit teachers with the skills and attributes needed to be successful in its schools, which use a blended learning education model. The specific objectives of her project were threefold:

- 1) Define the teacher competencies needed to be successful in a blended learning environment, and use this to guide candidate recruitment and selection;
- 2) Develop new strategies to expand the pipeline of job candidates; and
- 3) Create internal systems, processes, and tools to ensure effective implementation of the new recruitment and hiring process.

THE (UNFULFILLED) PROMISE OF TECHNOLOGY

In recent years, growing numbers of researchers and educators have emphasized technology's potential to transform teaching and learning. Among the expected impacts: technology makes it possible for students and teachers anywhere to access tools for learning and information; it allows for more individualized learning because students can access the content they need when they need it (and for as long as they need it); and it tightens the linkages between assessments and instruction (for example, by providing better, quicker performance data). In addition, it fosters more collaboration between teachers and students and frees up valuable teacher time, by improving efficiency and offering the opportunity to eliminate lower-value tasks.

Yet in spite of substantial investment and increased use, most of what happens in classrooms has not changed significantly as a result of technology. As Rabbitt explains:

Even those schools that claim to be “high-tech” are usually only so in terms of having basic technology. ... From a technology innovation standpoint, schools have stuck mostly to replicating old practices on new platforms. All of this means that U.S. public education has

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treated education technology as a supplement to traditional classroom models rather than engaging with it as an enabling force for changing the instructional core — that is, the fundamental relationship between students, content, and teachers.

Touchstone has a different vision, though: its founders aim to transform the education model with technology. From the beginning, they knew this would have fundamental implications for what it means to be a successful teacher.

TOUCHSTONE EDUCATION

Over the past several years, entrepreneurs across the U.S. have launched a variety of innovative new education ventures designed to more fully harness technology's potential. A small but growing number of schools are using a “blended learning” model, which integrates online content and instruction in order to make the learning process more personalized and flexible, so that students have much more control over where, when, and how they learn.

Touchstone Education is at the forefront of blended learning. A nonprofit charter management organization founded in 2011, Touchstone opened its first school (Merit Preparatory Charter School of Newark) in New Jersey in August 2012. Today, it serves students in grades 6 through 12 and aims to expand to 30 schools within 10 years.

Like many of its peers, Touchstone's mission is to provide its students — the vast majority of whom are economically disadvantaged — with a personalized education that prepares them to achieve at the highest levels of college, work, and life. Unlike many of its peers, however, it pursues this mission by providing a highly individualized, mastery-based learning environment that blends digital learning with traditional elements. Specifically, Touchstone uses a “flexible” blended learning model in which students spend at least half of their days online, mastering core standards at their own pace while teachers act as facilitators, mentors, coaches, and intervention specialists. Key elements of the model:

- ❖ Each student has a laptop, access to online learning programs, and a personal learning plan that is directed by teachers.
- ❖ Students work at their own levels and paces while receiving feedback in real-time from teachers.
- ❖ Teachers work in teams to serve as guides and facilitators to student groups.
- ❖ Students advance based on mastery of content, not seat time. Curriculum from multiple grades is combined to promote individualized learning.

More information about Touchstone Education's model can be founded on its website, touchstoneeducation.org and in this report from Public Impact (opportunityculture.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Touchstone_Education_An_Opportunity_Culture_Case_Study-Public_Impact.pdf).

WHAT KINDS OF TEACHERS DO BLENDED LEARNING SCHOOLS NEED?

Beth Rabbitt began her Ed.L.D. project at Touchstone Education in July 2012, just a year after the organization was founded. Having worked in entrepreneurial education enterprises for many years, she knew that “the people side of innovation” was crucial. But as she studied blended learning efforts across the country, she found that very little attention was being paid to the teacher competencies and human capital systems needed to implement these new teaching and learning models; the focus was primarily on school structures and logistics.

About Blended Learning

To learn more about blended learning models, watch this short video from the Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation: christenseninstitute.org/?multimedia=heather-staker-explains-blended-learning-models.

Additional resources on blended learning — and on technology as a “disruptive innovation” in education — can be found on the Institute's website: christenseninstitute.org/education.

To attain its expansion goals, Touchstone Education would need to hire hundreds of teachers. But what kinds of teachers? Rabbitt's task was to figure out the answer to that question. She also knew that it would be important to understand the environment in which teachers work. "All innovative qualities are moderated by contextual factors, including organizational design and culture," she observes. "I knew it would be important to account for the current environmental conditions in which teachers work as well as to try to use selection as a mechanism for building overall culture and capacity."

What is a competency?

Rabbitt adopted the definition proposed by Richard Boyatzis: "A competency is an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to effective or superior performance." Characteristics include enduring motives, traits, self-concepts, values, knowledge, and skills that can be assessed and differentiated.

WHY A COMPETENCY MODEL?

Rabbitt recognized that what Touchstone needed was some type of competency model for teachers — in other words, a multifaceted framework or description that defines the crucial skills and characteristics that teachers need to be successful in its schools. As she explains:

When done well, competency models can serve as guides for selecting the right people for the right roles. The benefits of modeling go far beyond articulation for recruitment purposes, however. The most powerful argument for defining a common set of employee skills and behaviors is that the organization can more quickly develop a systemic competitive advantage; common competencies have a "coordination effect," ensuring that work is conducted in consistent, culture-building ways, lessening the need for bureaucratic control.

The use of competency modeling in education is not new. In fact, Singapore's educational success is often attributed to its sophisticated competency model, the Enhanced Performance Management System, which is used as the basis for identifying, hiring, developing, evaluating, and paying teachers. Rabbitt's initial research on existing competency models in education and other sectors yielded some important take-aways for building a successful model — and an effective teacher recruiting and hiring system as a whole:

- 1) A good competency model is easy to understand and use. "Models are of little use if employees do not use them," Rabbitt emphasizes. Thus, while it may be tempting to create a highly detailed and complex model, it is important to keep in mind that the purpose of competency modeling is to create a shared understanding of what excellence looks like. This means including enough components to be discriminating, but not so many as to hinder transparency or ease of use.
- 2) Competencies vary not just by type, but also by the degree to which they can be developed. Some skills (for example, most technical or subject-specific skills) can be cultivated, while others (for example, values or ways of thinking) may be difficult to develop. A good competency model must therefore include expected developmental performance ranges. This finding is especially relevant to Rabbitt's work at Touchstone. As she notes, "Particularly given our start-up status, the priority was to select most rigidly for traits that would be hardest to develop while at the same time building structures to support the growth of characteristics that are easier to build over time."

DEVELOPING A COMPETENCY MODEL FOR TOUCHSTONE EDUCATION

From the outset of her project, Rabbitt knew that teachers in a blended learning context like Touchstone's needed to be able to handle many of the same kinds of activities that their counterparts in traditional classrooms do — for example, developing lesson plans, managing student behavior, etc. But many aspects of the job would be different in a school with high levels of personalization and extensive use of technology resources. As she notes in her capstone:

As certain tasks are taken over by technology, teachers will spend more time in functions like enrichment, targeted remediation, and the implementation of more complex pedagogies. New technologies also offer teachers opportunities to work with each other differently, acting collaboratively rather than individually.

Even with all these anticipated changes (and new expectations) for teachers, Rabbitt found little about the competencies that teachers would need to succeed. To help fill this information gap and provide the basis for a competency model, she interviewed Touchstone's senior leadership team and surveyed staff to gather their insights on key teacher competencies. Many emphasized that teachers in a blended learning environments must be learners — that is, able to take on new roles and adapt quickly to change. They also underscored their roles as facilitators, guides, and innovators in their daily work. Among the key skills identified were flexibility, perseverance, self-evaluation, commitment, and team work.

To provide a broader perspective, Rabbitt convened leaders from various organizations operating in the blended learning space for a working group session focused on human capital. Participants included leaders from the Clayton Christensen Institute for Innovation, Rocketship Education, Alpha Schools, School of One/ New Classrooms, 2Revolutions, First Line Schools, Education Elements, and NewSchools Venture Fund. The group brainstormed the characteristics, skills, and mindsets that teachers need to be successful in a blended learning context. These included some traditional classroom skills (e.g., lesson planning, student engagement) as well as newer skills/mindsets (e.g., entrepreneurial spirit, deep analytical skills, grit, focus on individual student success, collaboration, innovation, etc.).

Over the next few months, Rabbitt worked with a team of four at Touchstone to translate this input — along with research on competency models in education and other sectors — into an initial draft of a teacher competency model. The model was developed iteratively; the group tested its components as Touchstone recruited and interviewed several last-minute hires and replacement teachers.

The initial draft of the model was quite simple, focusing mostly on general competencies linked to Touchstone's mission and values. But the senior team felt that it was too simple. As Rabbitt notes, "They wanted to take a more complex approach. Specifically, they felt that more competencies needed to be included in order for the model to work for talent selection as well as recruitment and development."

Accordingly, additional competencies and domain-specific skills (i.e., specific to math, science, English/language arts, etc.) were added. With Rabbitt's leadership, the full model was completed in December 2012, in time for the formal launch of Touchstone's recruiting efforts for the 2013–14 school year. As depicted in the following diagram, the model includes three areas: values, characteristics, and skills.



See Appendix A for the definitions of these competencies and the elements that comprise them.

DEVELOPING SYSTEMS, PROCESSES, AND TOOLS TO ENSURE EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION

Rabbitt and her team knew that just developing a good competency model would not be enough to guarantee success in Touchstone's future hiring efforts; it was also important to create (and align) systems, processes, and tools to ensure high-fidelity implementation. These systems, processes, and tools needed to be consistent with the competencies themselves — in other words, based on integrity, innovation, urgency, team work, and a commitment to excellence.

Systems

Among the systems that Rabbitt and her colleagues established:

- ❖ **An online recruitment tracking system** that allowed them to channel all job candidates through a single online job board and to collect, store, and search application materials, automate the candidate workflow, and update candidates' statuses.
- ❖ **A shared calendar for managing and communicating recruitment activities**, including phone screens, interviews, site visits, and other external activities.
- ❖ **A central electronic repository for candidate information**, so that team members could compile and readily access information from various recruiting and interview activities and then use this information to form a comprehensive picture of a candidate to guide hiring decisions.
- ❖ **A web-based tracker for sharing progress toward goals**, as weekly tracking on progress toward goals was essential for transparency's sake and for allowing the team to determine next steps.

Processes

To organize the candidate recruiting and selection work, Rabbitt and her team created a candidate workflow process which outlined the sequence of events from the beginning (screening of candidate resume) to the end (making an offer). The workflow process identified the participants and decisionmakers at each stage.

Tools

They also created a variety of tools aligned with the new competency model, including screening protocols and interview questions, tasks, and evaluation rubrics. Many of the tools were revised along the way, based on feedback from team members as they used them to evaluate candidates. All data collected through the tools were saved and synthesized in candidates' files.

EXPANDING THE CANDIDATE PIPELINE

In addition to building a high-quality competency model and establishing good systems, processes, and tools for employee screening and interviewing, Rabbitt and her team knew it was crucial to expand the pipeline of applicants. This would mean moving away from "passive" approaches (such as job postings on traditional sites) to more active cultivation of various sources likely to yield high-potential candidates. Efforts in this area included attracting candidates to the Touchstone Education "brand" and expanding the number and variety of sources for connecting with candidates.

Increasing Brand Awareness

The Touchstone team worked with a designer to redesign the organization's marketing collateral and improve the website, providing additional information for candidates (including a video explaining the organization's model and approach) and links to shared job boards. In addition, they worked to expand Touchstone's social media presence and used these outlets to connect more effectively with people and organizations.

Building Relationships with New Sources

Another priority was to identify and build stronger relationships with a variety of potential teacher candidate pipeline resources, including schools of education as well as reform-oriented organizations that could refer candidates (such as Teach For America, New Leaders, and others). In addition, Touchstone began posting jobs to a significantly expanded number of job boards.

Creating a Referral Bonus Program

Based on research showing that employees hired through referral programs tend to have stronger attachments to the organizations into which they are hired — which in turn contributes to higher productivity and longer tenure — Touchstone also decided to launch a referral bonus system to reward people who could help find candidates. The program was made available to current employees as well as those outside of the organization.

GAUGING SUCCESS

Did these efforts work? Rabbitt admits that it is difficult to say, since her project ended before the recruitment period for the 2013–14 school year ended. Early evidence suggested that her work had indeed better positioned Touchstone to meet its staffing goals; however, she emphasizes that the success and impact of the project will ultimately be determined not only by the organization's ability to hire enough high-quality teachers, but on their long-term effectiveness in the classroom.

She also emphasizes the importance of ongoing review and analysis over time. “Sustaining the work will require continued collection of data to allow for future evaluation of the competency model,” Rabbitt notes. “The team will need to see if our assessments of talent align with the actual behaviors and performance seen in the school environment. The model will need to be re-evaluated given the results of the analysis, and changes will need to be made, particularly as changes are made in other areas — for example, schedule or curriculum — that might require a complementary shift in human capital strategy.”

Ultimately, Rabbitt hopes that Touchstone Education's human capital work will benefit the sector as a whole. “I am hopeful,” she writes in her capstone, “that human capital work will move beyond the development of new approaches within individual schools or isolated networks of schools to be shared more broadly across the system.”

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Are you examining your human capital management? If so, consider these questions:

- 1) How does your organization currently identify and recruit talent? Does it tend to “hire on hunches” or does it use a more systematic, competency-based approach?
- 2) To what extent do your organization's screening and interviewing processes get at candidate skills and attributes that really matter (skills, values, organizational fit, etc.)? What could be improved?
- 3) What evidence do you have that your current recruitment, screening, and hiring practices are yielding strong hires?

How to Develop and Implement an Effective Teacher Competency Model

- 1) Define key competencies that are aligned with the organization's mission and strategy, and that can be assessed or measured (i.e., linked to direct indicators of success).
- 2) Omit factors or tasks that are not connected directly to performance.
- 3) Ensure that the competency model is easy to understand and use. This means striking a good balance between simplicity and complexity — i.e., including enough components to be discriminating, but not making it so complex as to hinder implementation.

Keep in mind:

- ❖ The goal is to move away from “hiring on hunches” to a system based on interviewing for the elements reflected in the competency model.
- ❖ Include in the model not only what is needed for the present, but also what will be needed for the future.
- ❖ Remember that many different factors contribute to performance and that the purpose of the selection process is to capture a holistic picture of the person, not isolated data points.
- ❖ Remember that competencies vary in terms of the degree to which they can be developed.
- ❖ Avoid preventable areas of hiring failure, such as lack of clarity about what is needed, weak candidate flow, low trust in selection ability, and loss of selected candidates.
- ❖ Following through on established systems and processes, and collecting data, are essential to evaluating the validity of the competency model and guiding changes over time.

- 4) Imagine that you are creating a competency model for your organization and the first step (consistent with Rabbitt's approach) is to articulate its values — that is, shared beliefs about the organization's work. How would you summarize these in a short sentence or two?
- 5) How active vs. passive is your organization at expanding the pipeline of talent? What are some strategies that you might use to broaden (and thereby improve) the pipeline of candidates?

USEFUL RESOURCES

- ❖ Bailey, Henry, McBride, and Puckett, *Unleashing the Potential of Technology in Education*. Boston Consulting Group, 2011 (<http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/CSD6149.pdf>).
- ❖ Campion, Fink, Ruggerberg, Carr, Phillips, and Odman, "Doing Competencies Well: Best Practices in Competency Modeling," *Personnel Psychology*, 74, 2011, 225-62.
- ❖ Dyer, Gregerson, and Christensen, *The Innovator's DNA*. Harvard Business School Press, 2011.
- ❖ Hassel and Hassel, "Teachers in the Age of Digital Instruction," in *Education Reform for the Digital Era*, Finn and Fairchild (eds.), Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2012.

APPENDIX A:

Touchstone Education Competencies



	VALUES	CHARACTERISTICS	SKILLS
	<i>Shared Beliefs About Our Work</i>	<i>Ways of Being and Thinking That Make Us Great</i>	<i>Know-How to Get It Done</i>
Definition	Commonly held, non-negotiable beliefs and values held by everyone in the organization.	Ways of thinking, acting, and being that all employees strive towards.	Most essential technical skills necessary for exemplary job performance within a given functional area.
Are these “developable”?	No. Alignment with these values is considered a prerequisite for being part of the team.	Yes. Different people may be better or worse at some of them, but all staff are trying to develop these mindsets, habits, and actions to their fullest.	Yes. We expect a certain level of skills at different stages of a career. A developmental framework was developed to assess levels of skill mastery.
Key Elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student achievement: Students always come first. • Integrity: We never miss a chance to do the right thing. • Innovation: We seek new ways to improve our work. • Urgency: We feel there isn't a single moment to lose in achieving our goals. • Excellence: We hold ourselves and our students to the highest possible standards. • Team Work: We believe two minds are better than one. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership: Establishes and aligns people and resources toward a common mission. (Sub-competencies: Vision, Big-Picture Thinking, Communication) • Fearless Learning: Is a relentless and resilient learner committed to improvement. (Sub-competencies: Efficacy, Self-awareness, Initiative) • Creative Problem Solving: Identifies/develops effective approaches and work-arounds to meet goals. (Sub-competencies: Analysis, Strategy, Design) • Working With Others: Works with, develops, and taps others' expertise and skills. (Sub-competencies: Relationships, Coaching, Empathy) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching and Learning (applicable to teachers and master teachers): Content knowledge, objective-driven planning, instructional strategies and tools, monitoring outcomes, student engagement. • Operations (applicable to deans, school leaders, etc.): Managing through processes and procedures, resource allocation, customer focus. • Managing Others (applicable to master teachers, school leaders, operations director): Directing employees, talent assessment, mediation.