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WEEK IN IDEAS | OCTOBER 9, 2010

## Week in Ideas

### Education

#### Top-Tier Teachers

Amid the ongoing debate about how to improve the performance of America's schools and students, new research draws attention to an often-ignored piece of the puzzle: the quality of incoming teachers.



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A report shows that other countries make the profession of teaching more selective and attractive.

A report by McKinsey & Co. finds that in Finland, Singapore and South Korea, which have the world's best school systems, a remarkable 100% of incoming teachers come from the top third of their college cohort. In the U.S., only 23% do.

According to the report, the difference is that other countries make teaching not only more selective but also more attractive, by offering higher salaries and creating a more professional work environment.

Teaching in Finland, for example, ranks among the top career choices for the country's elite graduates. By contrast, research indicates that the cream of America's graduating crop do not view teaching as a profession that offers what they value.

*"Closing the Talent Gap: Attracting and Retaining Top-Third Graduates to Careers in Teaching," Byron Auguste, Paul Kihn and Matt Miller. McKinsey & Co. (Sept. 2010)*

### Organizational Behavior

#### Smart Groups & Women

Just because a group is full of intelligent individuals does not mean the group as a whole will necessarily be smart. But having more women does, according to a new study.

The researchers found that a group's collective intelligence is affected not by individual intelligence but by social sensitivity and the ability to make inferences—skills women are more likely to possess than men.

The study observed groups' intelligence over multiple tasks, such as completing puzzles or problem solving exercises, in order to come up with an overall measure to predict the groups' performance on new, novel tasks.

Adding smart people did not raise the group intelligence measure, nor did throwing dominating personalities into the mix. (In fact, loud-mouthed, strong-willed additions tended to set the group back.) Social sensitivity was the key to better performance.

The good news for employers: It's easier to make a group more intelligent than it is to make individual employees smarter.

*"Evidence for a Collective Intelligence Factor in the Performance of Human Groups," Anita Williams Woolley, Christopher F. Chabris, Alexander Pentland, Nada Hashmi and Thomas W. Malone. Science (forthcoming)*

### *Sports Psychology* *Grunting Grumbles*

Is your tennis partner a grunter? You know the sort, the Rafael Nadals and Maria Sharapovas of the world, who let out big grunts as they smack the ball. That may not be an expression of athletic intensity—it could be something more akin to cheating.



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UPI /Monika Graff /Landov

Maria Sharapova

A new study finds that grunters gain an arguably unfair advantage by distracting their opponent. Researchers had test groups watch clips of a racket striking a ball and then asked them to judge the timing of the hit and the ball's direction. The images were then played along with a simultaneous burst of sound. The results showed that when a sound occurs at the same time the ball is struck, participants are slower to react and make "significantly more decision errors regarding the direction of the ball."

The authors of the study say they hope their findings lead to a reduction in grunting on the court. Although, with scientific proof that grunting can throw off an opponent's game, one wonders if this study won't inspire an entire new generation of noisy players.

*"A Preliminary Investigation Regarding the Effect of Tennis Grunting: Does White Noise During a Tennis Shot Have a Negative Impact on Shot Perception?" Scott Sinnett and Alan Kingstone, PLoS ONE (Oct. 2010)*

### *Health Economics* *Too Fat to Fight*

In America, the pool of citizens from which the military recruits has grown so out-of-shape that the Armed Forces may have to shift even more of its focus to unmanned weaponry—and lean more heavily on private security companies, which recruit from a fitter international pool.



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Retired generals produced an alarming report on this subject earlier this year. Now scholars have added comparative historical data, going back to 1959. In the 1959-62 period, some 6% of men in the Army's target demographic were too fat for military service. By 2007-08, the proportion of overweight men in that pool had doubled, to 12%. For women, the change was even greater: Over the same period, the proportion of otherwise Army-eligible women who were too fat to serve grew from 11% to 25%

Are Americans too fat to serve in the military?

WHO WERE TOO FAT TO SERVE GREW FROM 11% TO 35%.

The situation is currently manageable, but it could provoke a crisis if the military suddenly needs to expand its ranks. The growing heft of Americans also raises the possibility of a new kind of draft dodging, the paper notes. In the past, men and women escaped service by enrolling in graduate school or hurriedly starting families. Today, so many citizens are close to overweight that a few extra pizzas would be sufficient to keep them out of a war zone.

*"Unfit for Service: The Implications of Rising Obesity for U.S. Military Recruitment," John Cawley and Johanna Catherine Maclean, National Bureau of Economics Research Working Paper (Sept. 2010)*

—Clayton M. McCleskey and Chris Shea

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