



THE ADECCO GROUP



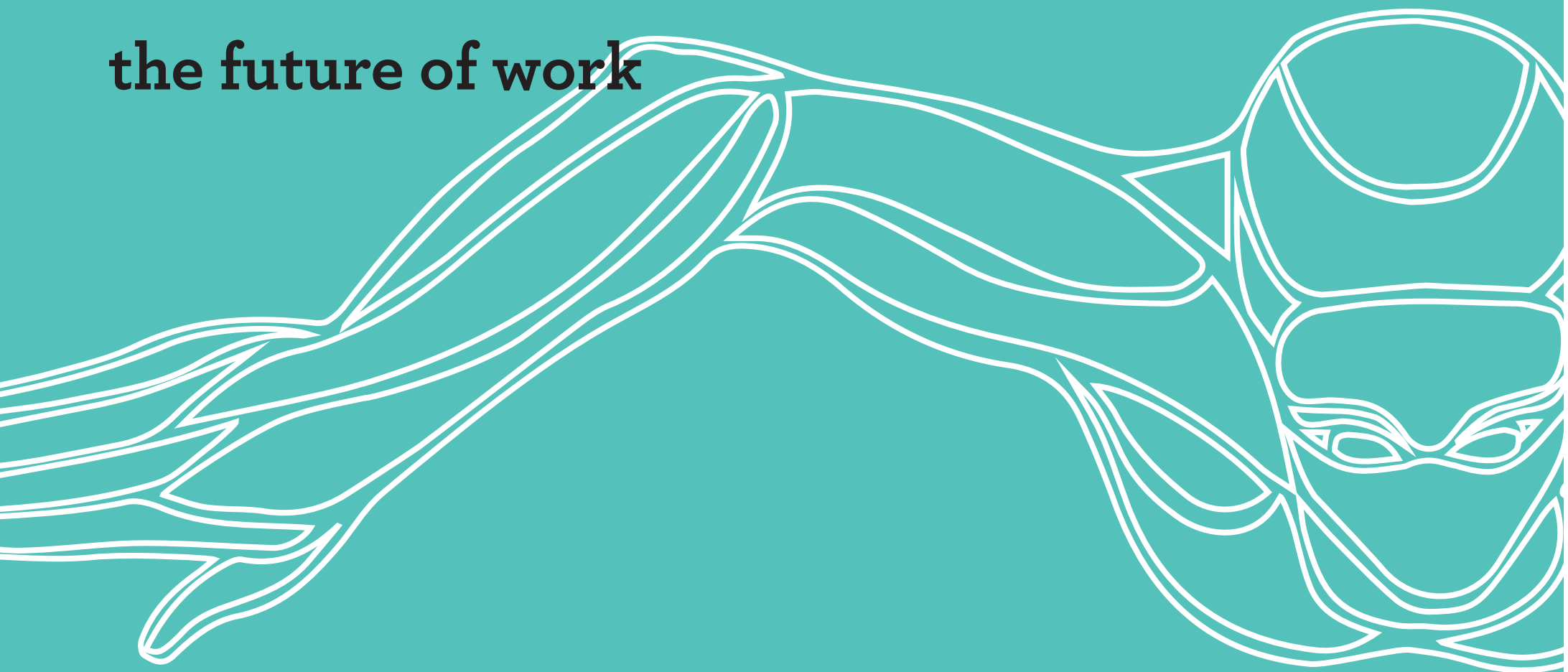
Unbeatable talent.

Why the corporate world is turning to athletes – and how to join in

The Adecco Group
Athletes report

Unbeatable talent

**We see athletes as one group that
can help business make the most
of the opportunities presented by
the future of work**



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“Companies that hire Athletes, increase their chances of staying ahead

Introduction

An unmissable opportunity

In the current business environment, where companies compete across sectors and industries for a decreasing number of viable candidates, hiring managers are often on the lookout for new sources of talent. Research suggests that the global talent shortage could cost firms nearly \$8.5 trillion in lost revenue by 2030, and 77% of CEOs believe the unavailability of key skills is the biggest threat to business growth.

“A diverse workforce brings a variety of different viewpoints. It drives our decision making and, ultimately, drives our performance. And if we want a diverse workforce, we need a diverse talent inflow.”

Remo Hauser, Head of Employee Experience, Swiss International Air Lines (SWISS)

Professional athletes can provide a unique solution. They can bring fresh thinking and a hidden set of skills to their organisations. Studies indicate that former athletes demonstrate higher levels of leadership and achieve higher-status careers than do their peers.

Yet few companies understand the value of, or have a process for recruiting, athletes.

Awareness on both sides is still relatively low, and sportspeople and businesses alike are missing out on valuable opportunities. Because of athletes' atypical backgrounds, hiring managers often automatically overlook them. And athletes often overlook opportunities in the corporate world because they may not realise how applicable their skills are.

“It's all about the transferability of the athlete's skill set,” explains Dr Jarrod Spencer, sports psychologist and founder of sports psychology firm Mind of the Athlete. “Today's athletes are developing those emotional skills that the millennial generation isn't necessarily garnering in quite the same way that we used to. It's definitely a competitive advantage when they begin hitting the workforce.”

Our research with businesses and individuals who have made the transition from sport to the corporate world has identified eight “hidden” attributes that deliver real value for the organisations that hire them. Athletes are often:

- **Analysts**
- **Resilient**
- **Passionate ambassadors**
- **Positive disruptors**
- **Creative thinkers**
- **Persuasive communicators**
- **Business-minded**
- **Natural publicists**

1. <https://www.kornferry.com/institute/talent-shortage-future-of-work>
2. <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/ceo-survey/2017/deep-dives/ceo-survey-global-talent.pdf>
3. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1548051814538099>
4. <https://www.thriveglobal.com/stories/22981-looking-for-new-employees-hire-a-former-student-athlete>

Why look to athletes as a potential talent pool?

The world of work is changing. New jobs and professions are being created constantly, often too quickly for existing members of the workforce to master the skills needed to feed the growing demand.

Technological innovations around artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics are shaping the skillsets that will be needed for the jobs of tomorrow. It will no longer be sufficient to tap the traditional pools of talent coming out of schools, universities and training programmes; the competitive company of tomorrow needs lateral thinkers, disruptors and employees who come from contrasting backgrounds, offering fresh perspectives and new ways to tackle problems.

It comes down to diversity. Often dismissed as a buzzword, the value of diversity is real. There is hard evidence that diversity helps companies to grow. Companies in the top quartile for ethnic/cultural diversity on their executive teams are 33% more likely to have industry-leading profitability, according to recent research from McKinsey. But it is not just about race, gender or geography; diversity of thinking and approach can also be a key competitive differentiator. Diverse teams stimulate diversity of thinking, which can generate the valuable fresh ideas that companies require to get ahead of the competition.

That kind of diverse approach means that organisations will have to tap into less-traditional talent pools to create an inclusive and diverse workplace. People no longer stay in one sector for life, and those with a multi-sector background will be increasingly in demand. With their eclectic paths to success, their emphasis on creative strategies for victory, and their unusually well-practised methods of dealing with failure, athletes exhibit many of the hallmarks of diversity. They could be just the people to challenge business orthodoxy and drive innovation.

The key to unlocking this value – and preventing athletes from looking elsewhere – lies in opening doors, asking the right questions and finding common ground.

About the research

The insights in this report are based on a combination of industry research and in-depth interviews. To ensure a balanced view, we spoke with former athletes who have transitioned into business roles, and senior managers within organisations that have made hiring athletes part of their recruitment strategy. These athletes and managers are based in a range of global locations and work in a number of different sectors.



01. Recognising the potential

Businesses that actively recruit athletes and help them to succeed are creating a huge opportunity to secure competitive advantage. So, attracting candidates from a wide range of backgrounds with the skills and experience to win in an increasingly competitive and evolving labour market is going to be critical for future success.

Philippe Femel, Director of the Internal Audit Department at Bouygues Construction, believes that athletes possess unexpected skills that provide a compelling solution to the talent challenges that companies are facing. “Delphine had leadership qualities that she wouldn’t have had if she didn’t come from a world of high-level sport,” he says, describing Delphine Racinet Réau, the former Olympic shooter who he recruited into the firm. “She mobilised the team, and her pride in results echoed with our business values. I thought it was an experience that we could replicate.”

“I trained 3,700 hours until the moment. I dove into the pool in Rio for less than five minutes of racing over 10 days. Every day counted. Every time you came in, you had to be Paralympian.”

Tucker Dupree, former Paralympic swimmer, now at BP

What businesses don’t always see

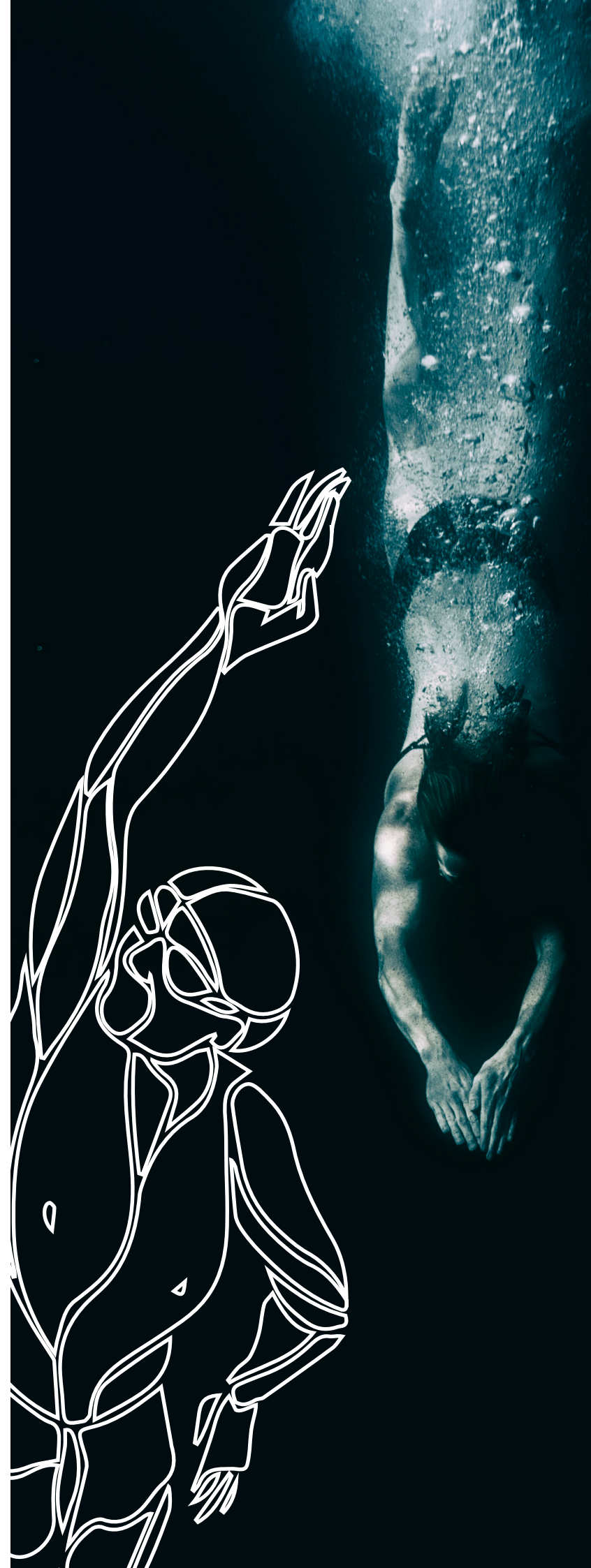
Across all industries, budget, time and resource constraints create both significant obstacles to, and opportunities for, growth. As businesses strive to do more with less, having an efficient and well-rounded workforce will play a critical role in driving them forwards.

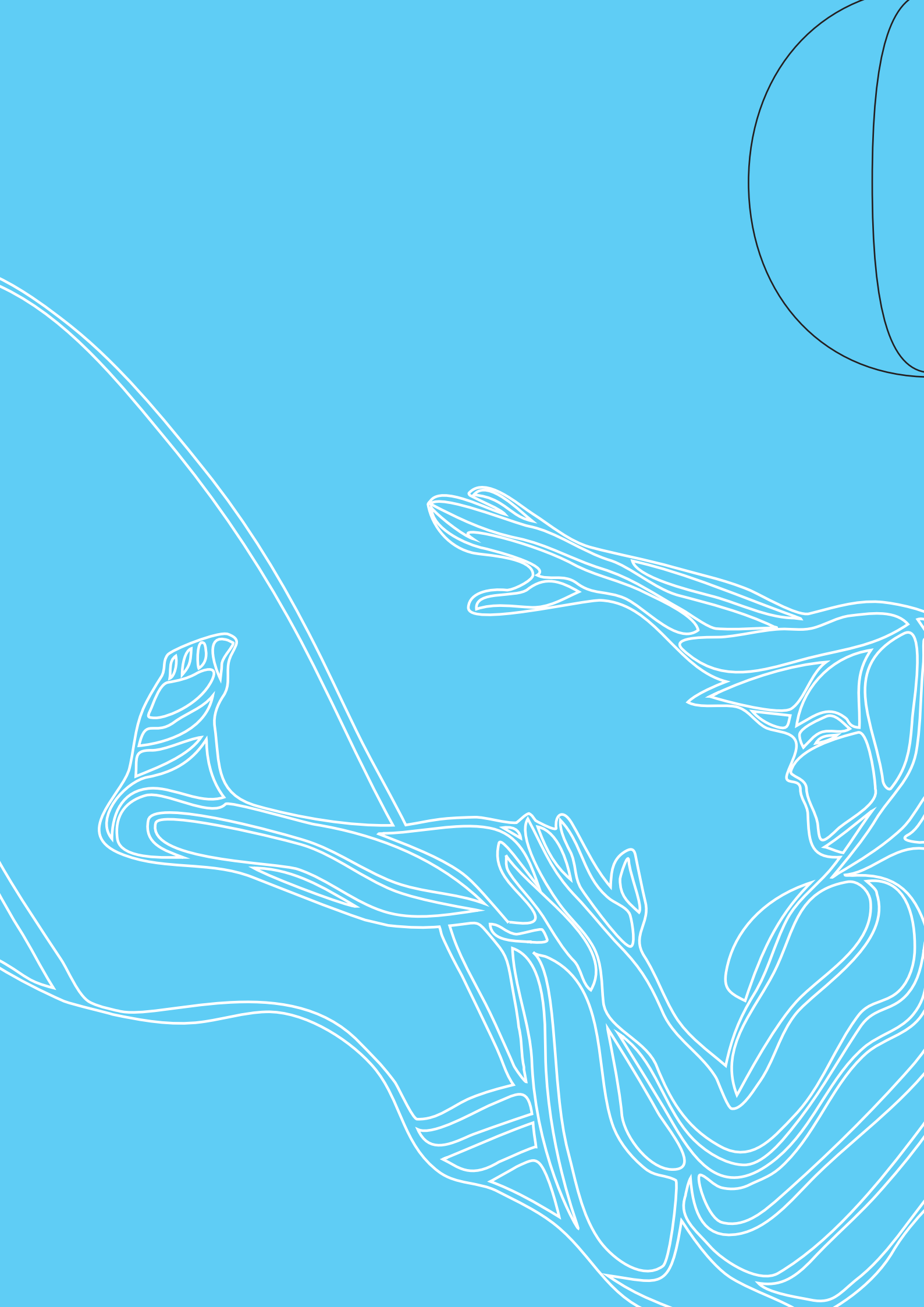
“In both business and sport, the pressure to perform is at an all-time high,” says Sarah Milby, CEO and Founder of Valor Performance and herself a former athlete. “I think that’s catalysed a lot of folks to ask, ‘What’s going to be that new advantage? And how are we going to compete in this new world?’”

Research shows that athletes often possess traits that can provide businesses with the advantage they so desperately need. Of course, understanding the athlete and their long-term goals, skills and aptitudes will be paramount; a young athlete who has been striving for a place in the Olympics or Paralympics and has just fallen short is fundamentally different from someone who is retiring after a long career.

In order to leverage the talents of athletes, businesses must recognise that it’s not just about targeting those who already have the skills to thrive in a corporate setting; it is also about being open to interpreting other kinds of experiences to see how they can transfer into a business environment.

Here, we explore eight key traits of athletes that often fall beneath the corporate radar, or that current recruiting processes often overlook.





1. Athletes are analysts

Companies need much more than people who simply work well with others. They need people who proactively seek to improve themselves and those around them.

To be successful, athletes must be competitive analysts, critiquing their performance from every angle. In sport, observational analysis and critical thinking are “skills that are applied in drills such as repeatedly watching a basketball player’s free throw, a swimmer’s flip-turn, or a baseball player’s swing to identify performance outliers”.

Athletes frequently study their own performances and those of their rivals, trying to find ways to improve – from glaring areas of weakness to the tiniest flaws in technique. In today’s increasingly competitive business environment, organisations can survive or fail based on how they analyse their competition. In order to drive positive results, businesses must leverage athletes’ ability not only to undertake analysis, but to then turn those insights into action plans.

Athletes come from a rigorous coaching environment, which involves learning to accept feedback that, at times, can be hard to hear, says former snowboarder and now National Coach for Norwegian Snowboarding, Norwegian Snowboard federation Stian Sivertzen. “If the coach isn’t honest with you as an athlete, you don’t really improve your skills,” he says. “You have to hear what you’re good at and what you’re bad at.”

That kind of critical self-reflection drives athletes who have entered the corporate world to find ways continually to push their own performance forwards. When applied in a business environment, this ability to self-analyse and emphatically deliver feedback can become a driving force for change.

2. Athletes are resilient

Not only does elite sport drive you to push your limits with a positive mindset, it teaches you resilience when things don't go to plan. As celebrated US basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar famously said, "You can't win unless you learn how to lose." Athletes train themselves to see losing as one of the stages of improvement.

In a business environment, there is an increasing awareness of the significance and potential applications of the mental strength that athletes have built up, says Sarah Milby.

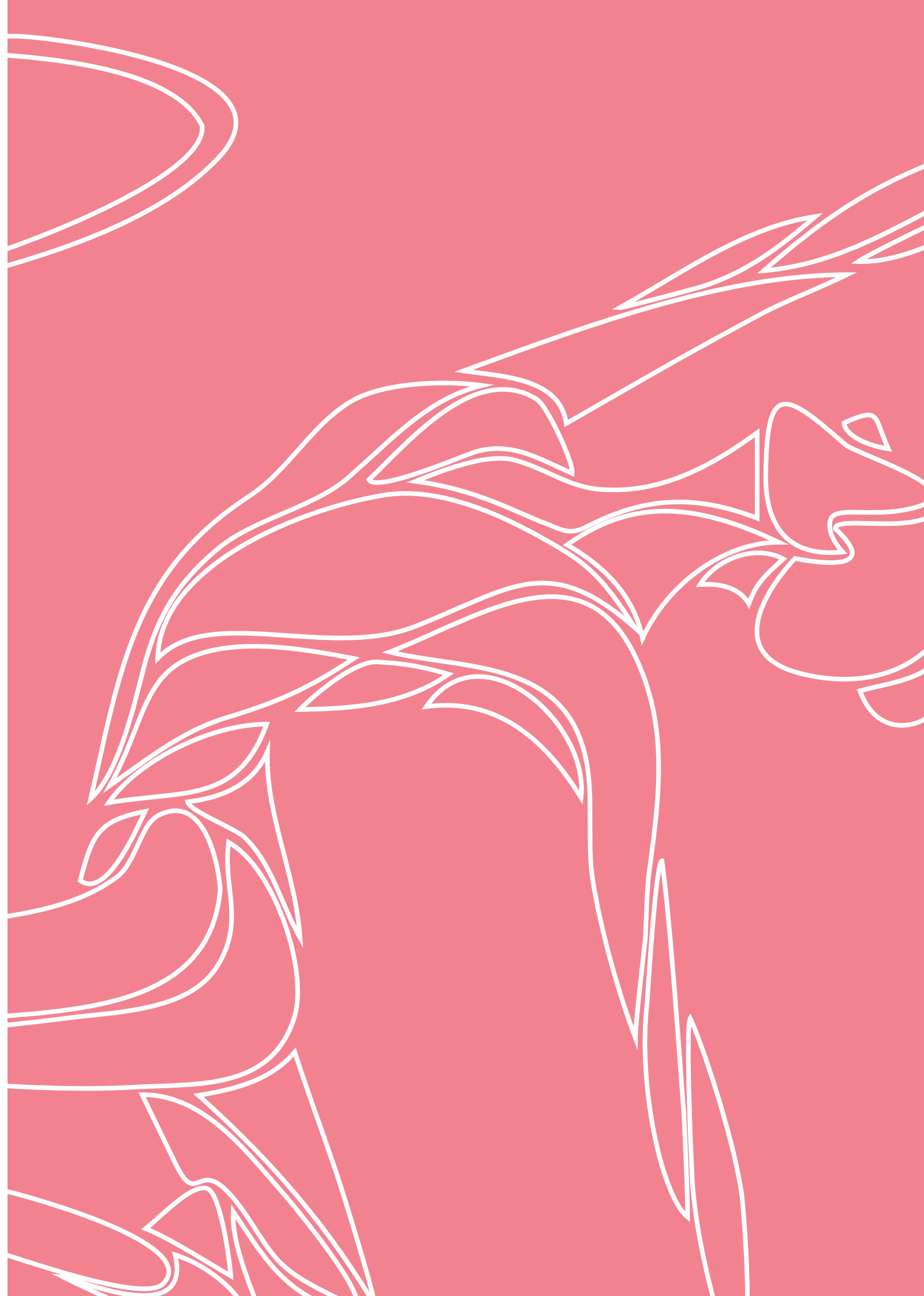
"We see now that the mental side of success is the new competitive advantage," she says. "We're seeing this in all arenas where there's pressure to perform and be at your best."

What's more, hiring elite athletes who have developed their mental strength can be beneficial to the workforce as a whole. They can help their colleagues in difficult situations, not only by setting an example, but also by helping them develop their own winning performance mindset.

In today's fast-paced environment, having employees with that ability to bounce back and learn from failure is more important than ever.



6. <https://onlinemasters.ohio.edu/blog/coaching-skills-the-importance-of-observational-analysis/>





3. Athletes are — passionate ambassadors

To excel professionally, athletes are driven by a passion for their sport. Businesses who hire athletes often find creative ways to leverage this energy to advance their business strategies.

At Bouygues Construction, one of the key management objectives is to participate in sport development in the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. In order to do this, the organisation must raise its profile as a sports-oriented company and demonstrate that it is not simply pursuing a manufacturing contract, explains Delphin Réau, former Olympic shooter.

“So, beyond my role I also work as a sports ambassador, visiting high schools and sporting events,” she says. “My goal is to show a different face from the simple manufacturer, and to prove that sports is part of the company’s DNA. It’s a business argument that supports the intent.”

Athletes bring this passion into the DNA of companies.

4.

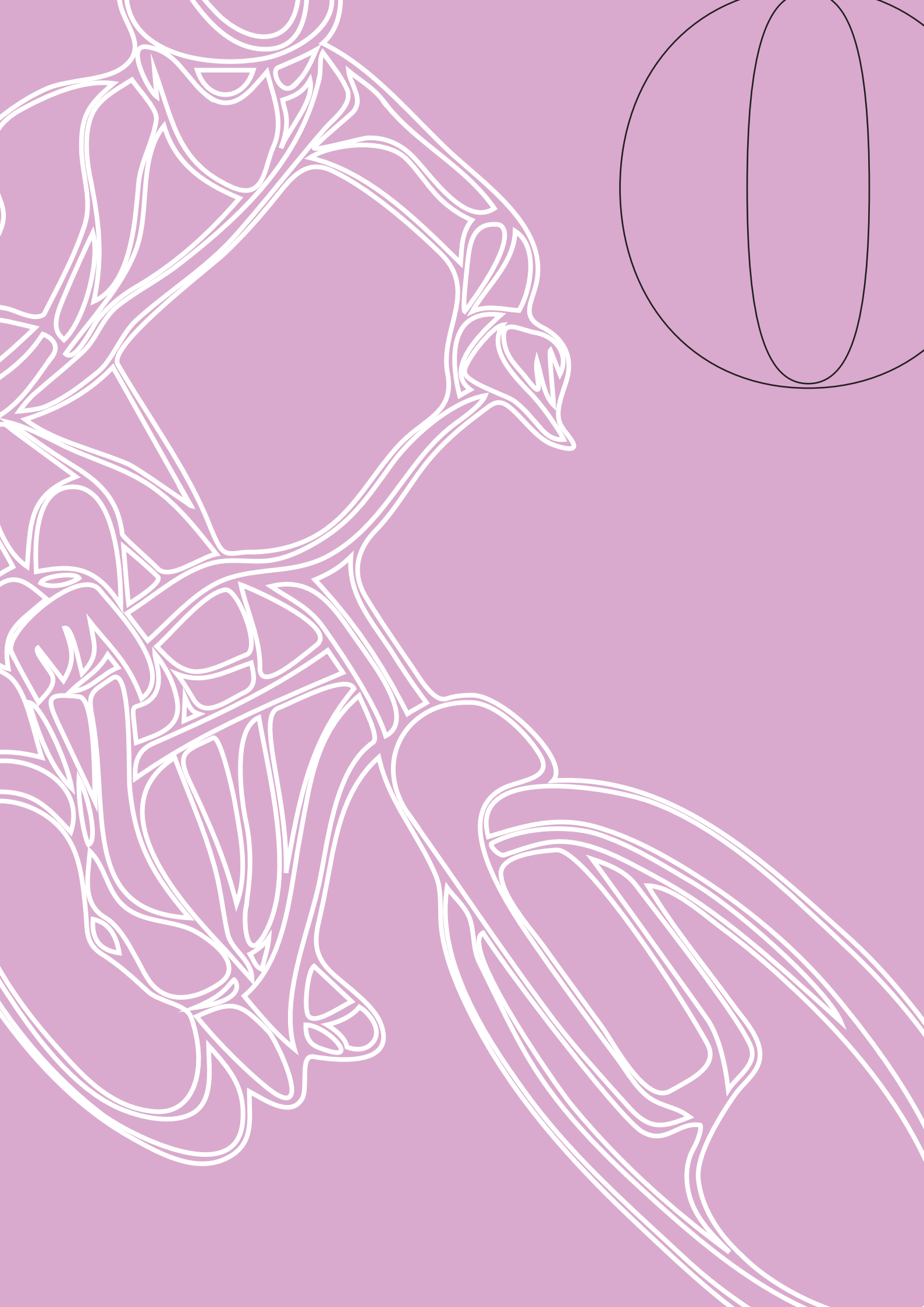
Athletes are positive disruptors

To differentiate themselves from their competitors, companies need people who have the confidence to disrupt the status quo by trying new initiatives and inspiring their colleagues to adopt different ways of working.

At Bouygues Construction, Delphine's energy and can-do attitude has helped to transform the accounting team, says Philippe Femel. "The image of this team is it's the back office, it's bureaucratic, administrative, it's a little hidden," he says. "Delphine has changed the entire team through her dynamism and has brought a lot of ideas about how we can do things differently.

"For example, there is an analogy that accounting is similar to preparing for a shooting competition. We produce a balance sheet every quarter, and we insist on the preparation to bring about a vision. Setting daily objectives – as Delphine did in the sports world – enables her team to drive forwards in a structured way. It's approaches such as this that have created more cohesion within our 30-strong team," explains Femel.





5. Athletes are — creative thinkers

Positive disruption is about more than driving teams to deliver with excellence. Workforces must be capable of finding new and better solutions that will take their company to the next level. The World Economic Forum is predicting that, by 2020, creative thinking will be the third-most important skill needed to survive and thrive as automation frees workers from more mechanical tasks.

In sport, when the difference between winning and losing can come down to a fraction of a second, your chances of success increase if you can use creativity and lateral thinking to find new ways to improve. When former professional cyclist Sir Dave Brailsford became head of British Cycling in 2002, for example, the team had almost no record of success. He took a gamble that applying a theory of marginal gains to cycling would turn the team's fortunes around. His creative thinking paid off: the team topped the cycling medals tables at both Beijing 2008 and London 2012.

That kind of creativity is in high demand in the business world: more than three-quarters of CEOs claim they struggle to find the creativity and innovation skills they need to grow their businesses.

"As an athlete, you're trying to negotiate the landscape to make your goals come true," says Angel Bovee, former boxer and Career Coach for the US Athlete Career & Education Programme. "So, when they get into the workplace, they're self-starters who bring ideas to the floor.

"When I started as an athlete liaison, I had to figure out what would be the best configuration to be effective for athletes. It was trial and error and there was little direction from above, because my role had never been done before. I took it upon myself to start putting together strategic plans and trying different initiatives to see what worked and what didn't," Bovee explains. "And that led me to become a certified Career Coach."

6. Athletes are persuasive communicators

Ideas alone are not, of course, enough to effect transformative change. Employees must also be able to communicate those ideas convincingly and tactfully – especially in large corporations where they have to win over any number of people in the right positions.

In the sporting world, athletes are exposed to all kinds of scenarios that require them to network, knock on doors and communicate persuasively. “After the 2012 games, I realised I wanted to go four more years and swim in Rio,” explains former Paralympic swimmer Tucker Dupree. “A big part of making that happen was figuring out how to network and be resourceful to get in front of the right people.”

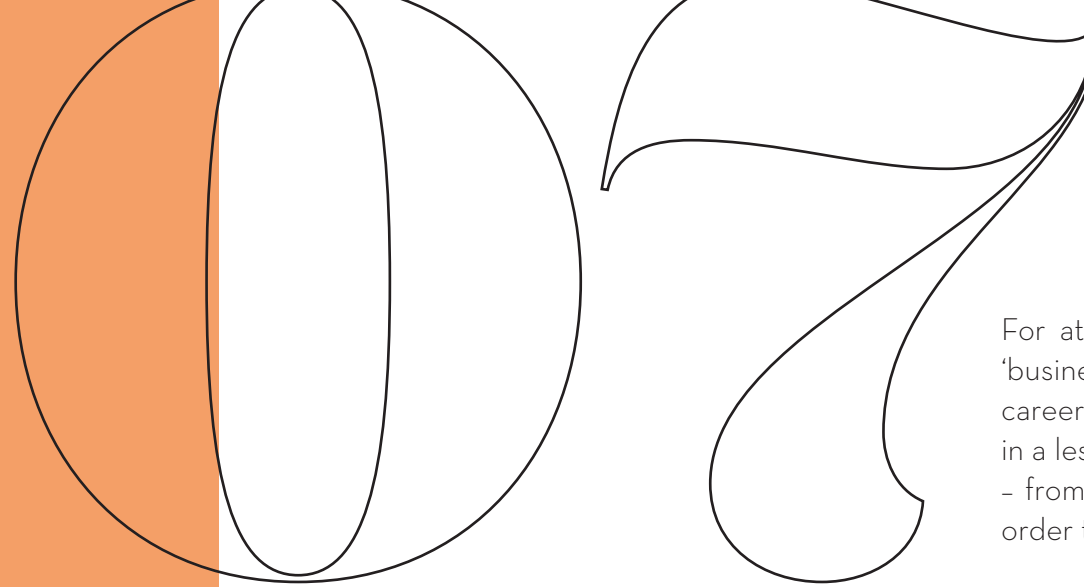
This kind of networking is quite common in sport, since every discipline has its own governing body and organisations in which athletes generally have to get involved. Angel Bovee plunged into the political side of her sport, boxing, when she started to fight for equal representation for women. “I decided to get elected to the national governing body’s board of directors,” she says. “I had to work in that environment without making everyone angry. I learned how to rewrite bylaws, run elections and creatively out-think the administration to achieve my goals.”

Bovee says the experience taught her the competencies needed to face the challenges of her role today. “One of my greatest skills is that I am adaptable and resilient and never say ‘no’. My problem-solving skills and intrinsic motivation to work without oversight from my seniors has allowed me to bring new initiatives to my team and help professionalise the programme.

“As a result, attitudes have evolved in that we now teach athletes how to find their own jobs instead of talking a company into hiring them. We find this is 10 times more effective than anything we have done in the past,” says Bovee. explains. “And that led me to become a certified Career Coach.”



7. <https://hbr.org/2015/10/how-i-performance-improvements-led-to-olympic-gold/> / In a comparison between athletes and non-athletes, athletes scored higher in originality and creativity <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/VikramSingh70/publication/315572800ComparisonOfBattingSkillsInTermsOfInfluenceOfIntelligenceOfCricketPlayers/links/592bf501a6fdcc44435cafc8/Comparison-Of-Batting-Skills-In-Terms-Of-Influence-Of-Intelligence-Of-Cricket-Players.pdf#page=94>
8. <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/ceo-survey/2017/deep-dives/ceo-survey-global-talent.pdf>



2. Athletes have — business acumen

For athletes, learning to operate effectively as a ‘business’ can be a critical element of their sporting careers. Whether they are Usain Bolt or a champion in a less lucrative sport, athletes wear multiple hats – from CEO to publicist to financial manager – in order to support themselves as they compete.

This can mean learning to manage a “day job” alongside athletic commitments in order to financially manage their career and avoid exploitation.

“I had to run all facets of a business,” says Tucker Dupree. “I was a coordinator, a manager and a director. I ran an editorial calendar and worked with ad agencies. I was surrounded by people, but, at the end of the day, I was the CEO of my brand.” These are the skills that can drive the success of a company but are often developed through non-traditional approaches.

For former competitive canoeist, Mike Kurt, the experience was a catalyst for starting his own business. “It used to be really difficult to get funding in some sports in Switzerland,” he says. “You were either a Roger Federer, and you got a lot of money, or you looked after yourself. So, for almost 20 years, I was either competing and studying, or competing and working.

“It was while I was competing for the Olympic Games and working part-time at an agency that I identified the idea to found my company, I Believe In You. It crowdfunds athletes, and it’s a very successful process; we have generated more than 10 million Swiss Francs,” says Kurt.



S. Athletes are publicists

Acquiring the business skills to attract sponsorship can also be critical to a sports career. This involves building a personal brand as any company might, using social-media campaigns, audience targeting, performance analysis and partnering with advertising agencies. It can also mean creating key messages, giving interviews and creating positioning.

“In 2008, social media was pretty foetal,” says Tucker Dupree. “So, I had the opportunity to see the digital space become where companies can really target marketing to their audiences and have the analytics to see how they’re performing.”

2. Unlocking athletes' value

For many athletes who transition to the corporate world, their new job is also a new life. So, they often benefit from a support process to adjust to the corporate world that is different from a conventional onboarding process.

A key barrier for many athletes is the lack of direct corporate experience, which can impede them from getting in the door in the first place. Once they do overcome that first hurdle – limited corporate experience can hinder them during the onboarding process. If companies have a desire to access this hidden pool of talent and unleash the value, they can make some relatively simple changes to overcome unconscious bias, such as providing new recruits with a mentor, offering greater flexibility, or running placement programmes to find the best fit.

As athlete's transition into the corporate world, obstacles they may encounter fall broadly into two categories:

- Easily defined gaps in hard skills and competencies, such as IT skills, business protocol and industry knowledge. Businesses can help athletes here by giving them access to learning resources and opportunities they might benefit from – training, courses, reading materials and access to subject-matter experts.
- Soft skills, such as office protocol, corporate-style communications, and how to balance workload with outside demands, including training for competing athletes. A number of these are also typical of many new hires into the labour market.

For both of these categories, there are a number of valuable initiatives that organisations can undertake specifically to support the success of the elite athlete.

1. Implement shadowing, mentoring schemes and internships

Pairing new starters with existing team members who share their outlook is a straightforward way to enhance the onboarding process, says Jeroen De Backer, HR Director at Renewi. "Selecting a mentor who can connect and relate to a new recruit is so important – whether that means somebody who does or did sports on a high level or has high level experience in the artistic world, or somewhere else." Athletes may also do well as interns or apprentices, giving them the chance to learn on the job before moving into permanent employment.

2. Be flexible

"When you've got the world championships, for example, in one or two months' time, you need to be able to work flexibly," says Daniel Wiederkehr, former Olympic rower and business engineer for SBB (Swiss Railways). "But they don't treat me any different just because I no longer compete. I can work from home one or two days a week, and it's no problem. They are very flexible."

At SWISS, athletes form part of a broader commitment to flexible working. "We want to position ourselves as an employer that's looking for people who perhaps want to work part time so that, for example, employees feel able to combine work with top-class sport or being parents," says Remo Hauser, the airline's Director, Head of Employee Experience, Human Resource Management.

For Renewi, this kind of flexibility provides advantages for both the company and the athlete, says De Backer. "We are a seasonal company and our business peaks in the summer months. This means that having an employee who competes in a winter sport, for instance, is a valuable possibility for us," he explains.

3. Look through the right lens

Many companies that hire athletes discuss their potential in terms of competencies – as a way to raise awareness of their value among hiring managers and to assess where they will fit best within the organisation.

"It was quite some work to convince the hiring managers, who would rather go for somebody with two or three years' experience," explains De Backer. "I mapped sports related competencies onto the competencies of the job to show that, yes, these are in fact transferable skills if the athlete has the necessary guidance and coaching."

"In the end, I convinced the hiring managers," he says. "My insight was right, and the athlete became one of our company's high-potentials."

"During the recruiting process, we went to workshops and open days organised by Adecco and the Belgian Olympic Committee. We talked to athletes and looked for those who had potential for the job vacancies we were looking to fill."

Jeroen De Backer, HR Director, Renewi

4. Offer rotations to find the best fit

If an athlete has great talent but the initial role or offer is not the optimal fit, motivated companies help them grow by developing their strengths and placing them into the right positions. This is often a successful strategy of a company who hires an employee with potential and optimises the position fit.

This is an approach that has worked well for Remo Hauser at SWISS when he recruited Benoît Schwarz. Hauser saw Schwarz as a valuable potential hire owing to his natural business aptitude and strong academic record.

“Before he left for the Games, we invited him to come here, to get to know him and to find out about his expectations about which departments he was interested to work for,” says Hauser. Schwarz was then employed on a five-month contract. He finally decided to join the business development team, where he could work for a broad range of various strategic initiatives, while getting insights across various departments and functions of the company.

The initiative has proved to SWISS that Schwarz is an employee worth waiting for while he pursues a master’s degree at university. Hauser highlights the importance of keeping in touch, so that, when the time is right, SWISS will be Schwarz’s first choice.

Conclusion

Businesses and athletes — the team to beat

Companies’ needs are changing in terms of how they attract talent and manage a dynamic workforce. Amid increasing awareness of the value of diverse personalities and backgrounds in the workforce, traditional talent pipelines are not cutting it.

Athletes can offer a unique combination of high-performance skills and traits, combined with proven hard skills. They offer a solution.

Companies that make relatively small changes to their recruitment processes will find that athletes can become some of their highest performers. These eight overlooked skills and traits that we have uncovered in our research can have a significant impact on internal teams and the culture of the business:

- **They drive business performance.** To compete, athletes must seek to improve continually. In the corporate world, this ability to analyse ways of working and take on board constructive criticism makes them a valuable asset, as they push both themselves and those around them to perform at the top of their games.
- **They disrupt the status quo.** Failure and learning are part of competition, and elite athletes must learn resilience to reach the top. This mindset, combined with an ability to think creatively, can

give athletes the confidence they need to shake up internal teams and processes.

- **They are persuasive.** Being a professional athlete means constant exposure to all kinds of people. The business acumen and communication skills required to build an athletic career are powerful traits that organisations can use to their advantage.

Some athletes have the potential to transform teams and even whole companies. Others will create value in their individual roles. Both are incredibly valuable. Learning to value what athletes have to offer will allow companies to discern how these extraordinary individuals can contribute to business and, ultimately, give them the competitive advantage needed to drive growth. . These are the companies that will stay ahead of the recruiting curve, based on individual abilities and diverse experiences, to gain a competitive edge in an increasingly talent-scarce world.





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Athletes report

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