

# Gifted Adults at Work: The Netherlands Experience

Rianne van de Ven

IN THE NETHERLANDS prior to 2000, no educational programs were available for gifted children. Even today no certainty exists that children will be identified as being gifted at an early age or provided with the specialized educational support they require. However, interest in gifted children is growing in the Netherlands, and because of this new attention, many adults are beginning to recognize their own gifted characteristics. Ellen Fiedler calls these types of gifted adults “The Invisible Ones” (Fiedler, 2015): gifted adults who were not identified as being gifted in childhood and may come to understand their potential later in life.

Results of research to date show that most previously unidentified gifted adults have experienced themselves as being “different” their whole lives. They report not being mirrored by peers, and they experienced and perceived the world differently than others of similar ages. Gifted adults report that, as they grew up, they did not understand their peers, and they did not feel understood (Brown, M., Peterson, E. R., & Rawlinson, C. 2020). Without an understanding of their giftedness, many of their experiences remain unexplained, or misinterpreted (Webb et al. 2016). As a result, the unidentified children (now adults) seem to develop an unrealistic or incongruent self-image.

## Potential and Gifted Adults

As we know, potential does not rely on identification. The potential remains, even with little understanding of giftedness. Late (adult) identification as “gifted” often leads to feelings of mourning for what might have been, but also invigorates a passion for personal growth.

The late discovery of giftedness often leads to strong feelings of wanting to fulfill previously unacknowledged potential. In the Netherlands, the strength of this passion for achieving potential in adulthood has resulted in awareness and advoca-

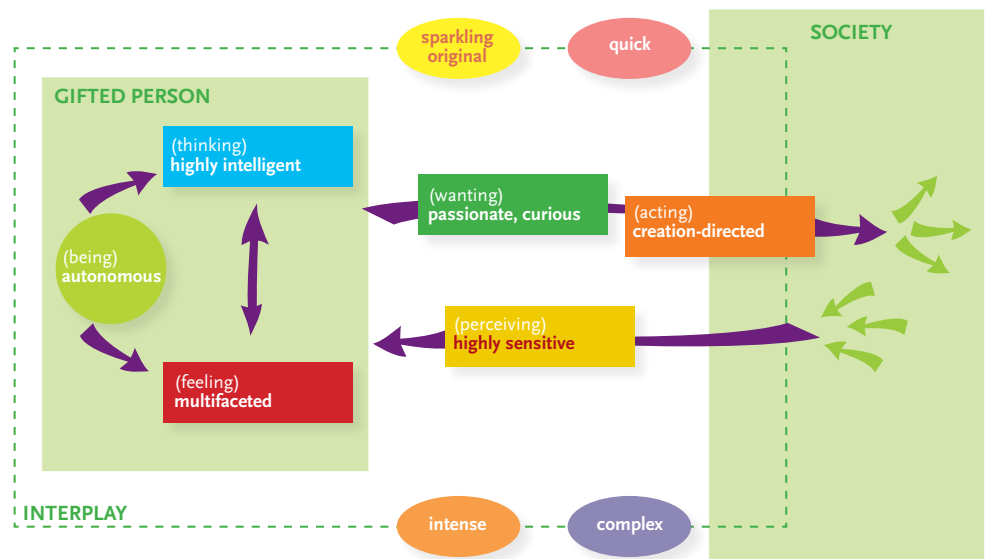
cy for gifted adults, a movement that is separate from gifted education and ideas about gifted children. This is why the Gifted Adults Foundation ([www.ihbv.nl](http://www.ihbv.nl)) was founded. As a result, a growing body of research exists in the Netherlands, seeking answers to questions about gifted adults, as well as their experiences and needs, as noted in references at the end of this article.

## Gifted Adults and Work

The potential and drive inherent in gifted adults, along with their high intelligence, and frequently, heightened sensitivities (van de Ven 2016), show up in the workplace. For example, gifted adults report seeing solutions to problems faster than their (not gifted) colleagues. They have innovative ideas for new products or services, and they quickly see patterns and deviations in processes and organizational culture. These abilities, along with a strong sense of fairness and justice, often make them problem-identifiers, and perhaps, whistle-blowers. Their persistence and determination also mean they do not “let go” easily.

I find the Delphi Model of giftedness—named for the Delphi research method used to gather data—to be helpful as I conceptualize how gifted adults often experience work contexts. In 2007, a team of researchers (Van Thiel et al. 2008) conducted a unique project aimed at developing a new descriptive and experiential model of adult giftedness. The Delphi Model (see Figure 1 below) was devel-

DELPHI MODEL OF GIFTEDNESS®



From: M.B.G.M. Kooijman - van Thiel (ed.). *Highly Gifted. Obvious? On Identity and Image of Gifted Persons*. Ed: OYA Productions, 2008

Figure 1: Delphi Model of Giftedness

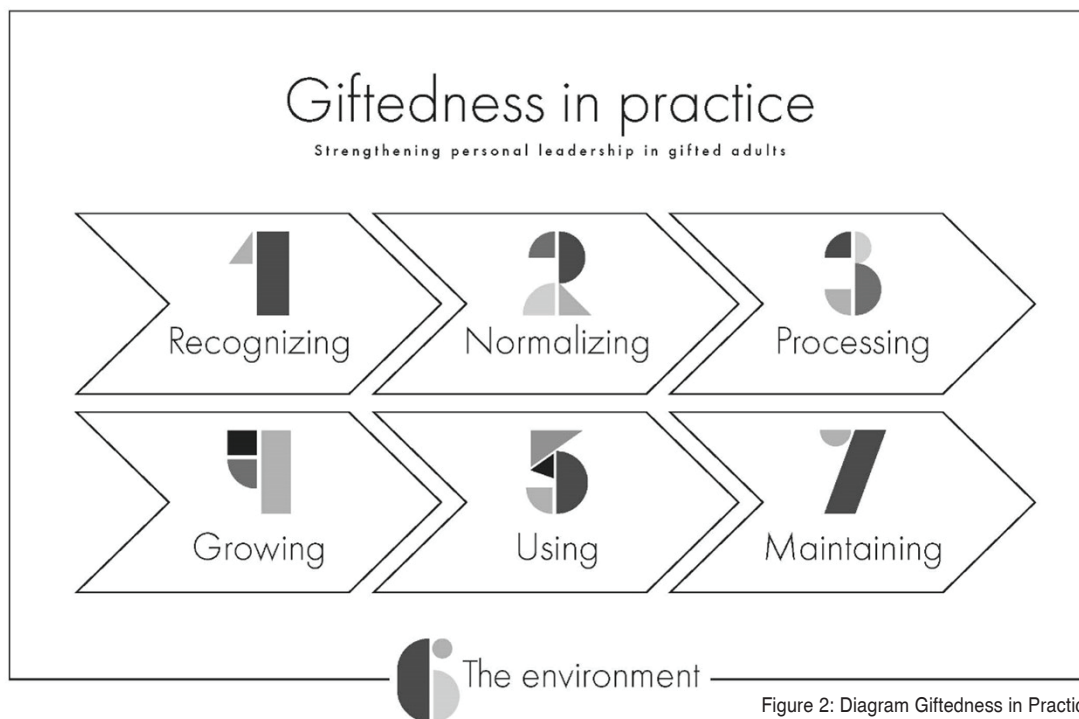


Figure 2: Diagram Giftedness in Practice

oped in consultation with gifted adults. Its main purpose is to provide a framework for previously unidentified gifted adults to understand themselves and to integrate a more complete and accurate self-identity.

Taking these tendencies and characteristics into consideration, it is not hard to imagine that gifted adults often experience problems in the workplace. However, despite the obvious potential for disappointment and conflict at work, very little attention has been paid to the experiences and specific needs of gifted adults in work settings.

### A Process for Supporting Gifted Adults at Work

I identified my own gifted potential at the age of 33 and continue to develop my potential. In my coaching practice ([www.riannevdven.nl](http://www.riannevdven.nl)) I have been guiding gifted adults since 2007. At this moment, at age 50, I am a successful social entrepreneur. I have developed many supporting services including a company that consults with employers and employees in the Netherlands to build workplaces that support gifted adults to reach their potential.

Reflecting on my work with gifted adults, I see that my thinking and practice generally follow a particular pattern and process (Figure 2). I briefly explain that process below, and in detail in my recent book: *Giftedness in practice: Strengthening personal leadership in gifted adults* (available in English in mid-2022, [giftednessinpractice.com](http://giftednessinpractice.com)).

The first stage—Recognizing—is about identifying and recognizing one’s giftedness. Together, we consider if the problems and challenges a person experiences in life and

work might be explained by giftedness. We look at descriptive characteristics such as those identified in the Delphi Model, and may also consider formal (psychometric) testing.

In the next stage we normalize gifted behavior. That is, a gifted adult comes to understand that, despite being “out-of-the-norm,” many of their experiences are common among other gifted adults. In terms of self-identity, this work allows gifted adults to accept their giftedness and have a new way to understand “being different.” The explanation offers assurance, and boosts self-esteem. They are truly getting to know and appreciate themselves.

Then the processing starts, often beginning with mourning—acknowledging and feeling the grief and loss of “what might have been.” For some, there was serious trauma or disturbance in their development. Adjunct psychotherapy is useful to work with past trauma, and for this I refer to licensed therapists with whom I work closely. Most therapists I work with are gifted themselves and have specialized knowledge and skills to work with gifted adults.

The next stage—Growing—is about working on new competencies and skills that were not yet developed strongly. For many, these skills relate to certain cognitive executive functions. Often, gifted adults need to gain skills in areas related to communication and relating to others, particularly non-gifted colleagues, friends, and family members. During this stage of growth, common themes include fear of failure, being frozen in the face of uncertainty, and an over-reliance on top-down thinking, with little experience learning from the bottom up.

In the next stage—Using—clients start to use their newly learned skills. They approach life and work with a more realistic self-image and stronger confidence. Some make big changes in their careers; others start new study, such as getting that university degree at last! Many gifted adults decide to leave employment and, for example, start their own businesses. The gifted adult is starting to thrive and blossom, and a steep learning curve appears during this stage.

The role of the environment is also important in this work. Relationships may be re-evaluated, and giftedness frequently becomes apparent as a theme in the lives of other family members. Work environments are important in adulthood. When practicable, I work with both gifted adults and their direct managers. Obviously, that is not always possible. In any event, we consider what circumstances are needed for the gifted employee to gain more work satisfaction, and thereby improve results. In some instances, gifted adults can identify where they are able to modify circumstances themselves. At other times the work is focused on communicating and negotiating with employers and colleagues. A common theme at this stage is the pursuit of a meaningful life.

During the final stage of the work, the focus is on maintaining and continuing the process of personal growth, without my involvement. At this point, giftedness is well understood as being part of the person's identity. Of course, I always help my clients understand that they are more than just gifted. They have other important aspects of their identities, and the goal is to integrate new understandings of their giftedness within a full and evolving sense of selves.

I look forward to presenting at the Mensa Foundation Colloquium in July 2022, when I will go into more detail about gifted adults in work contexts, and the various models, practices, and processes being developed. I also look forward to sharing the English version of my book, *Giftedness in practice. Strengthening personal leadership in gifted adults*.

### About the author



Rianne van de Ven has worked as a professional coach for gifted adults for more than 15 years. She is an author, speaker, trainer, teacher, and researcher on the subject of gifted adults and was the chair of the Gifted Adults Foundation in the Netherlands from 2013 to 2020.

Rianne was not identified as a gifted child and did not receive special guidance in her education. She dropped out of university without a degree, going on to have a successful career in corporate environments (telecoms, ICT, banking).

After the discovery of her high intelligence (99th percentile) at the age of 33, Rianne dedicated her energy to improving the quality of life of gifted adults.

She founded the company Hoogbegaafd in Bedrijf (meaning Giftedness in Operation) where she and her colleagues help gifted adults with career coaching and re-integrating to work after a period of sickness commissioned by either their (former) employer or by the Dutch government.

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