

Objective Assessments: The Key to Hiring Excellence

By Tom Northup March 2008

Have you ever found yourself complaining about how difficult and frustrating it is to identify the right candidate for an open position? Most executives, although they lack experience at conducting employment interviews, won't hire a professional service firm because of the expense. Therefore they run the hiring process themselves.

Executives know that hiring a new employee is an opportunity to improve staff capabilities. They also know that the importance of this activity rises geometrically with the responsibility level of the position. Yet they often treat the hiring process as less important than other day-to-day tasks and end up frustrated with the experience.

Of the two extremes, hiring an "A" performer brings great success while hiring a failure costs some money but the mistake is quickly identified and corrected without long term consequence.

The real problem arises with the mediocre performer. Executives often lull themselves into thinking the person will get better with time. Since they did the hiring, they don't want to admit that the employee is average and even with training will never reach "A" level.

The cost of an ineffective hire is both direct and intangible. Direct costs are salary, benefits and business and overhead expenses such as a car, advertising, interviewing costs and training.

While less easy to measure, intangible factors are just as important. First, management can become preoccupied with what to do about the average hire and when and how to do it. Another cost is the lost opportunity caused by the person not completing the initiatives they were hired for. There may also be significant organizational morale issues to address.

There are other reasons we fail at hiring besides lack of experience. We may hurry because we think we cannot get the work done without quickly filling the vacancy. We may also place too much reliance on a referral from an acquaintance.

The primary reason we fail to identify a truly outstanding candidate is that we focus on the capabilities, background and experience of the prospective employee. Experience is important. We must ensure that our new hire meets the specific skill and knowledge requirements called for by the job. However, focusing on just experience does not address the fact that the interviewee is a human being that the company must live with day after day.

Which would you prefer, an employee who is extremely good at his or her job but has a bad attitude or a less skilled employee who has a positive attitude? Experienced CEOs understand that bad attitudes can reduce the effectiveness of their organization. Skills can be taught. Attitude is more difficult to change.

To be truly effective, every new hire must fit both the experience and personal requirements of the job. Many studies show that turnover is greatly reduced when a company takes job fit and culture into account during the hiring process. People who integrate into the team and fit into the culture are happier and get more accomplished.

Several personality dimensions are highly important in understanding the attitudes that lead to success. These dimensions become more important as the responsibility level of the job increases.

- **Reasonable flexibility in use of rules.** Employees that view rules as situational and who only adhere to them when it is convenient can be very detrimental. We can never be certain how they are representing the organization. On the other hand, the employee who views rules as inviolate may also inhibit the organization.
- **Communication ability.** We all know how important it is to communicate effectively. An important consideration for a management candidate is whether they have the ability to handle interpersonal conflict.
- **Assertiveness.** Is the person an influencer, a leader or a follower? How do they use control? If they are highly dominant, can they work effectively through people?
- **Mental toughness.** A strong personality will let criticism roll off their back. A weaker person will take things personally and in some situations might be prone to depression.
- **Personal motivation.** Is the person looking for a job that is stable, secure and low risk or do they need high incentives, challenges and recognition?
- **Competitiveness.** Is the person individually competitive or are they relationship oriented with their energy flowing through teamwork?

These dimensions must be considered within the context of the job. In most situations the job requirements determine the personality traits most effective for success. A car salesman will have vastly different traits than a sales representative selling a complex product as part of a team.

An additional trait that is very important for a candidate to possess is mental acuity, that is, how slow or fast they process information and how they do it. In many technical areas the most successful managers process information quickly and accurately.

Because candidates prepare for interviews with programmed answers, inexperienced interviewers have difficulty determining whether the candidate possesses the personal traits that are important to job success simply by asking questions. As a result, the interview process fails to uncover the person's true capabilities and characteristics. Interviewers end up evaluating candidates based on how they like them.

A pre-hire assessment is a widely accepted tool used to measure these traits. Such tools have a high degree of reliability at measuring the traits described above. Some use validity scales to measure how reliably the results characterize the person as they actually are. Validity scales provide some confidence as to how well a candidate will perform. (Caution – no psychological instrument is able to predict a precise level of performance.) The best tools meet all EEOC and other agency guidelines and will withstand legal challenges.

In larger organizations, the company can establish a benchmark, such as the traits of high performers in similar positions, to measure candidates against. This is an effective, legal method to validate the assessment for use in hiring. In smaller organizations, many assessment

tools have standard benchmarks for comparison.

Assessments provide objective information about the candidate that most executives have difficulty eliciting during an interview. They identify characteristics that are important to success in the position and point the interviewer to further detailed questions they can ask the candidate. Assessments are not a stand-alone solution and should always be used as part of a hiring process that includes interviews, reference verification and background checks.

Summary

An open position offers the opportunity to improve the excellence of the organization.

Many executives are inexperienced interviewers. They focus on previous experience and minimize job and culture fit. They fail to uncover the true characteristics of candidates. The resulting hire becomes a missed opportunity to increase the effectiveness of the organization.

Candidates are accomplished at answering interview questions, which means the interviewer will not get an accurate profile. Pre-hire assessments provide an opportunity to learn about the candidate's personal traits. Validity scales ensure that the candidate's responses accurately reflect the true person. Assessments are a low cost means of getting valuable information to help screen and evaluate candidates.

People with positive attitudes are winners. Winners are outstanding hires. When you have a hiring opportunity use all available tools to increase your percentage of outstanding hires.