

How to hire

The best person for the job

(Who hired this person, anyway?)

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YOU GET IN A CRUNCH. One of your best employees decides to leave the company and you scramble to advertise, interview and hire a replacement. Six months later she too leaves. You start the process over, but you wonder how much have you lost?

With a base salary of \$1500 a month, after figuring in recruitment, fringe benefits, training, etc., the tangible cost could be about \$17,000. However, according to Michael Riordan, president of Riordan and Associates, a Kansas City management consulting firm, the figure could be much higher. As noted in the February, 1992 issue of *INC Magazine*, he pegs the amount at potentially seven times that—\$136,000.

If you find this figure difficult to believe, take a moment to calculate the collateral costs. It's hard to quantify the consequences of lowered morale, missed sales or customers who lost confidence in your company and took their business elsewhere. You also squandered all the favorable benefits of hiring the right person: The positive influence on your team, the enhanced customer loyalty, the new ideas, the increased cash flow. Perhaps she might have become your next manager or a future department head?

In this decade, when companies are running leaner, to mismatch an employee and a job can be a memorable, if not monumental mistake. Growing companies are equally at risk; more than one company has made the mistake of assuming that explosive growth meant guaranteed future prosperity.

What's the solution? Some hiring methods and systems are so complex they require a computer to decipher the results. At the other extreme, managers who rely predominately on gut reaction are courting disaster.

Strategies

Still, if you want to improve your chances of finding the perfect employee—and doing it consistently—the following strategies can help you double or triple the effectiveness of your hiring choices.

- **Write a complete job description.**

This is the foundation of the search and although you may consider it a nuisance, it's critical. If you already have a job description, chances are it may be only half a job description.

Most job descriptions consist primarily of horizontal information—the hard data. This includes the training and/or education required, the functions of the job and how to perform the job. This is good as far as it goes, but in view of new and sweeping anti-discrimination legislation, protect yourself by dividing this information into categories of importance.

Separate essential functions of the job from less important functions. You would certainly require a delivery driver to hold a valid drivers license, but the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission may not agree that it's a necessity for an order clerk, one who occasionally gets asked to run an errand. This also lets you know which job requirements you need to

emphasize when you interview.

- **Vertical data.** The most important aspects of a good job description are also the ones many managers overlook—the vertical data. This is the soft data, the stuff difficult to quantify. For example, what are the patterns of behavior of the employees who are doing a superior job? What makes them stand out from the pack? How do they build morale among their co-workers?

- **The candidate profile.** Use these employees to establish a template or model for future hires. If you don't have extensive personal experience with them, ask their immediate supervisor to give you examples. Be sure the examples illustrate the personality profile of the employee, more than how many widgets they sell or produce. Get specific and think about the reasons these traits should be duplicated in future hires.

While you are examining the unique talents of a good employee, make a list of

Checking references

OFTEN CHECKING references is the last element of the hiring process. Unfortunately, many managers skip this step entirely, or only do a halfhearted job. Here's how to do it more effectively.

- Get a witnessed release from liability. This helps protect you and encourages former employers to be more candid.

- For added protection, inform the applicant that the reference check could involve personal or sensitive areas of his or her life.

- Ask for additional references during the interview. Those listed on the resume or application are likely to give only glowing reports.

- Ask the reference for a reference. Even references who are reluctant to talk, for whatever reason, will give another reference, if just to get off the hook themselves.

- Network. If the candidate has worked in your industry, contact friends or members of your staff for names of people who might

know the candidate.

- Use a script. Treat the checking of references as a mini-interview, utilizing well-structured questions. Like the interview, keep questions professional; avoid questions that could be interpreted as discriminatory.

- After acquiring the hard data from the reference—squaring the resume and application data with the former employer's records—dive into the vertical information using questions that require a subjective response.

- Behavioral questions work well, but ask for examples. How did he or she compare to other employees in the same job? What are specific examples?

- Ask the reference to rate the former employee from 1-100. Someone hesitant to say average may be more comfortable rating a former employee as an 80 or an 85.

- Many professional interviewers throw out overly flattering responses or extremely negative ones. There may be reasons unrelated to work habits for either response. ❑

The best person for the job

the work habits and personality traits that historically have proven disappointing.

Now, take it a step further. Think about the results of hiring the right person for the job and list the possibilities. But be realistic. If the job does not require an MBA, don't list it. Overqualified employees can grow bored or feel stifled in a job too simple for their qualifications.

Among the numerous advantages of developing a realistic candidate profile are two powerful but intangible benefits: 1) you go into the interview process with a sense of preparedness, and 2) you

feel a renewed attitude of expectation. Every person in business has experienced the almost phenomenal way that positive attitude can translate into success.

The interview

Most experts agree that an unstructured interview is the least effective way to pick a new employee. Some rank it as little more than a toss of the dice. The following improve the odds considerably.

- **Employ a script.** If an interview were a battle, few would argue that you own the high ground. It's your office and you

sit in the big chair. Yet, more than one commander has lost a war through overconfidence.

You need to get under the candidate's facade and he or she does not want that. They only want to show you their best features, and conceivably hide something pivotal to your decision. Well-designed questions help you achieve your goal.

Scripting questions to discover horizontal information (hard data) is fairly easy. Because of the effort you put into developing a job description, you already know how much schooling or work experience you are seeking.

Ferretting out vertical information—the candidate's character and personality traits, how the person works, etc.—is more difficult and will ultimately determine who gets the job. Open ended questions that call for subjective answers will serve the purpose best.

Candidates will have prepared answers for many stock questions—"Where do you want to be in five years?" And asking, "What would you do if..." may telegraph the type of answer you want. If your question suggests that you like aggressive people you have relinquished the high ground. A smart applicant will try to convince you that he or she is aggressive, even if that is not the case.

Put a slight spin on the question. For example, "How would you counsel a fellow worker who is discouraged?" Even a small change of perspective, putting them in the position of counselor rather than how they would personally overcome discouragement, can help to crack their shell and give you a peek inside.

Follow with a second question, "Why would you advise them in this way?" There may be a slight pause as the applicant looks inside themselves for the answer. Give them a moment because this is your opportunity to get a better look at their true nature.

This type of follow-up question also works well with hard data. If you structure it correctly, you can again slip past the groomed exterior and closer to the genuine person. "How did you increase sales by 27 percent?" Use words such as explain, review and describe.

Another reason to prepare questions before the interview is so that you can ask the same questions of each applicant. Unstructured questions will defy comparisons of the candidates when all the interviewing is finished. Almost as important in today's litigious atmosphere, prepared questions help you to avoid questions that can lead to charg-



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es of discrimination.

• **Let the applicant talk.** An effective interviewer listens 80 percent of the time, but some authorities say it should be 90 percent of the time. Talking too much increases the likelihood of revealing what the interviewer wants. When too much time is spent selling the company or the position, not enough information is gleaned and the interviewer must rely too heavily on impressions.

Discuss the company and the job at the end of the interview, when you know more about the candidate. Then you can tailor the information, and you may decide to add more or cut it short, depending on how the interview went. Interviewers who spend most of the time talking tend to feel better about the interview than is justified.

• **The Halo Effect.** Which brings us to the "Halo Effect." When not enough solid information is gathered—typical of the unstructured interview—decisions are made not because the person fits the job but because they fit the interviewer or because they look good. It's a sad fact that countless bad hiring decisions are made because managers tend to hire clones of themselves. Many interviewers make a decision in the first six to eight minutes, on such things as smile, firm handshake or how they dress. The Halo Effect means that the manager hires "a nice person" rather than the "best person to do the job."

• **Take notes.** Don't sabotage all the hard work you have put into the process; take notes. Jot down key points and quantitative data to insure a more methodical comparison. Successful interviewers often rate the prospective employees on each segment of the interview. Without notes subtleties are lost and impressions loom. Notes also allow you to ask better question when checking references.

• **Check references.** At this point you have a pretty good idea of the strengths and weaknesses of the candidates and you may not feel it necessary to check references. Further, you are probably tired, if not exhausted, by the whole process. Do it anyway.


Aside from the business benefits of properly conducting a reference check, the consequences of not taking "reasonable care" to verify references can prove disastrous. Should your employee commit a felony or hurt someone, whether on the clock or not, if they have a history of such activity and gained access to the person or place because of their association with your company, you could

be held liable. Awards range to six figures, and they are not uncommon.

• **Trust your intuition.** If the hiring game could be completely objective and logical, matching prospective employees with job slots would prove as simple as connecting the dots. No one has yet devised such a solution. The above mentioned techniques will help you to quantify and make your selection process more consistent, but in the end, do not discount your intuition.


Intuition is the perception of truth

without the benefit of reasoning or hard facts. However, intuition is usually based on experience of fact perceived at a subconscious level. Successful executives, managers and business owners all utilize it in the decision-making process, with powerful results.


Yes, you should do everything in your power to make the hiring process as systematic as possible. But you are a professional or you wouldn't be sitting in the big chair. In the final analysis, trust your experience and your intuition. 



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