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If I was... looking to hire a top performer

By Herb Greenberg

The founder and chief executive of Caliper, a talent consultancy, puts himself in the position of a hiring manager looking for their company's next top performer:

If I was a manager looking to hire a top performer – which, incidentally, I frequently am – I would strive not to make the mistakes so often made. For example, while I would certainly inquire about an applicant's experience, I would be careful not to allow that experience – or even the lack of it – to dictate my hiring decision.

In putting experience in perspective, I would recall the many times I had hired someone with "10 years' experience" on their CV, only to find it was nothing but one year's bad experience repeated 10 times. I would also remember all of the studies that suggest nearly 70 per cent of workers are not in jobs best suited to them.

But if experience is not the all-consuming value upon which to focus, what's left?

Instead of placing attention on what a candidate has done, I would make certain I understand what a person has to be in order to be effective in the role for which I am hiring.

For example, what level of problem-solving ability or abstract reasoning must the person have for this position? Do they enjoy the persuasive process – do they need a "yes" as a means of gaining personal fulfilment? Does the job call for extreme personal organisation, including being a self-starter? And how important is it that the individual strives to be liked by colleagues and customers?

Obviously, there are jobs that might require the need to get the "yes" without the need for good personal organisation. An example of this would be a sales job, which requires a great deal of cold-calling.

Whatever the case, I need to know what qualities are necessary for the role, as well as attributes that are not as important. I need to understand the nature of the job itself and then figure out whether a candidate has the qualities to do that job right.

Studies show that people placed in jobs best suited to their personalities are not only more engaged in their jobs, but also become more productive for a much longer period. So hiring on the basis of who a person is, rather than what they have done, would be something I would emphasise in my search for the perfect candidate.

The question then becomes: "How would I determine the personality attributes of this applicant?"

I would begin with an in-depth, behavioural interview. This would give me the opportunity to ask more robust questions beyond "what have you done before?". Instead, I might ask: "What

aspects of your last job did you enjoy most? What drove you crazy? What did you find boring? What did you find most challenging?" These questions will give me insights into what part of their last job brought a smile to their face.

Another line of questioning I would include would be around the applicant's goals. I would want to see if I could find out how this job fits that individual's dream. Is this what he or she always wanted to do?

Apart from the more in-depth interview, I would gather references and ask those referees specific questions about elements of the candidate's performance. Did they come to work late? Were they often away with illnesses? Did they seem to be bubbly each morning coming to work?

I would want to find out more than "he did a good job" and get a more descriptive answer around elements of performance.

In addition, a valid psychometric assessment would be integrated into my hiring process, either at the beginning or after the initial interview. The right personality and behaviour test can quickly provide in-depth information as to what genuinely motivates the applicant, which would give me several ways of understanding who the applicant is.

If they are a good fit, I would determine how to maximise their first 90 days by providing customised coaching and training that will work best for them.

Although these steps would take time and work, they would provide a much better return on my investment.

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