



Assessing Job Candidates for Fit

By Joan K. Ustin

Dave swiveled in his chair, grabbed what was left of his lukewarm morning coffee, and, hoping for enlightenment, stared out the window at the sea gulls swooping across the harbor. He had just fired the company's marketing director, after three frustrating months on the job. "What happened?" he asked himself. "This person seemed bright and energetic, and had great credentials. What did I miss?"

Sound familiar? Chances are, what Dave missed – and what many of us tend to overlook – was an assessment of the candidate's "fit": the specific interpersonal skills necessary for success in his organization.

Research shows that people tend to fail more for lack of fit than lack of skills or desire to do well. Yet, during interviews, managers tend to spend most of their time probing for technical expertise.

Think about the last time you interviewed a job applicant. In the first instance, how much time did you spend *preparing* for the interview? Did you read the applicant's resume – really study it? Did you think through what was required to do the job well, and compose specific questions to assess those attributes? Or did you just grab the resume five minutes before the scheduled interview, when the receptionist called to let you know the candidate had arrived at the front desk?

In general, do you give as much thought to making hiring decisions as to investing in new equipment? You need to. A poor hiring decision can be very expensive. Consider the costs of

- ◆ terminating the employee (the time to conduct the termination meeting, the administrative costs in removing the employee from payroll and benefits coverage, separation pay, unemployment tax);
- ◆ recruiting a replacement (advertising, screening resumes, interviewing, doing background checks);
- ◆ orienting and training a replacement; and
- ◆ costs associated with lost productivity, including overtime for remaining workers to pick up the slack and the negative impact on morale.

According to Deloitte & Touche consultants, it costs \$12,000 in recruitment and training expenses alone to replace the average nonprofessional worker and \$35,000 to find a new professional employee. Experts at the Families and Work Institute maintain that it will cost about 75% of a non-managerial worker's annual salary to replace him or her and 150% of a manager's annual salary! Workers with sales responsibilities can cost much more, if lost revenue is included in the equation.



Hiring decisions affect the future of your company. Making the right hiring decisions can ensure that there is a future. And managers can know they are making the right decision only if they can answer, confidently and substantively, all three of the following questions concerning a particular candidate:

- 1 – Can this person do the job?
- 2 – Will this person do the job?
- 3 -- Will this person fit in my organization?

Interviewing is essentially a research process. In the case of human beings, the best predictor of future performance is past performance. Therefore, in conducting the interview (and in doing other research, such as checking references), the interviewer is looking for data that will predict whether the candidate will perform well in a particular job.

“Can do” refers to the technical skills and knowledge the person needs to get the job done. This can be assessed by examining work history and education, including grades. “Will do” refers to the level of motivation, or drive. Does the applicant exhibit a high level of energy during the interview? Does his or her work history demonstrate patterns of achievement and advancement?

“Will fit” refers to the specific attributes, or traits, that the candidate will need to interact successfully in your organization. If interpersonal skills are important, then define which skills and behaviors. For example, is teamwork an important part of your culture, or is success driven more by individual effort? Is it a high-pressure environment, or more laid back? Is there a family atmosphere, or is it more formal? The ability to adapt to your environment will have a direct bearing on an applicant’s success.

If you haven’t thought much about what “fit” means in your company, it may help to take the following steps when you’re trying to fill a job:

- ◆ Identify the characteristics of successful performers in that job (aside from technical expertise). Who held the job previously and did very well? What were that person’s characteristics that accounted for his or her success?
- ◆ Identify the characteristics of prior incumbents who performed less well. Why did they fail? What characteristics could be associated with their ineffectiveness?
- ◆ If you’re filling this job for the first time, then ask yourself what it would take to guarantee success? What would someone performing the job at a peak level look like? What are the must-have attributes? And, conversely, if someone were to fail, what would be the likely reasons why?

Once you have answers to these questions, you can begin to craft questions for the interview that will help you determine fit. Questions should be open-ended and broad,



designed to get candidates to reveal themselves. If the interviewer does a good job of establishing rapport and trust, then the flow of helpful information should be effortless.



A type of question to avoid is one that requires a simple yes or no response. For example:

Interviewer: *“So, are you a team player? We need team players around here.”*
Applicant: *“Sure, I’m a team player.”*

Not only has the interviewer broadcast the desired response in this case, but he has not learned anything about the applicant in this exchange. Also, it’s conceivable that the two parties may differ in their assumptions of what constitutes teamwork.

A more effective approach would be:

“Tell me about a time you worked on a team project and encountered difficulties with a team member. How did you handle that?”

This type of question is called “behavioral” in that it seeks to get at an applicant’s previous behavior, or way of dealing with an issue. Depending upon the applicant’s response, the interviewer may want to probe more deeply, by asking follow-up questions, such as:

“Tell me what you learned from that situation.”
“What did you do that was particularly effective?”

Another type of question is called “situational”, through which an applicant is asked to project how he would handle a specific issue in the future. Thus, a follow-on situational question in the line of inquiry described above could be:

“If you were to face a similar situation in the future, what would you do differently?”

These types of questions will yield solid, relevant data about an individual’s “fitness”.

Effective assessment requires good listening and good observation skills. A manager is actually gathering data from three sources during the interview: the individual’s track record, or history; the individual’s self-perception, or evaluation of strengths and weaknesses; and the interaction occurring during the interview itself. While the applicant is talking and responding, the manager also needs to be noting what he or she sees: Does this candidate appear warm and friendly, articulate, thoughtful, or otherwise demonstrate those characteristics that are important for success in the company? How will this candidate get along with co-workers? These observations are critical indicators of fit.

Assessing job applicants responsibly includes an assessment of their ability to fit well in your organization. Undoubtedly, such a comprehensive assessment requires time, the time to prepare for interviews and the time to conduct them. But it is an investment that proves its value in the long run and prevents the far greater cost of failure.