

THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS – THE PEOPLE PART

Last month we started the recruitment process, and got up to the point of finding our most promising candidates for the sample job of gourmet ice cream sales manager and moving on to the next step.

There are a number of common ways to assess candidates, which are mentioned briefly below. You want to use the methods that have the best *predictive validity*, or in other words, can tell you how well somebody will perform in the job.

Usually how candidates are tested depends a lot on the level of the position, the skills needed for the job, the hiring budget, and time available. If you have the scope to use a number of different assessments, your testing can be considered more reliable, as you are receiving information from multiple sources.

Regardless of their other methods, most employers will use, at the bare minimum, an interview.

Interview

Many managers believe that a friendly, unstructured conversation, which minimises stress for the candidate, is the best method. Since it is a social encounter, this might help to assess social skills, but not much else. The casual interview is different for every person and every time it is run, so it is not a reliable or valid comparison tool.

Interviews tend to be better if they are systematic and similar for all candidates. One way to systematise them would be to base them on the job analysis (already performed at an earlier stage). Structured interviews make it much easier to compare data. Even if the interviewer is reading the main questions, the candidate is not, and tends to give more honest and open answers because there is very little time to think.

Research consistently indicates that interviewers are not very good at assimilating complex information, and do not make decisions as well they would like to think they do. To mitigate the limitations of human decision making processes, interviewers should be properly trained, they should take notes, they should use rating systems, and there should be more than one (maybe a panel). This will make the interview process more reliable.

Psychometrics

Psychological testing is commonly referred to as *psychometrics* because it is making mental measurements of some kind.

Specific personality profiles have low *face validity*: when looking at them, you can't tell how they are relevant to the job in question. Interestingly, they also have low predictive validity: there is very little evidence that they predict job performance, and certain elements on them can sometimes be faked. Similarly, intelligence tests might indicate that a candidate is "smart enough", but does not test skills or abilities.

However, tests of specific aptitude (e.g. sales aptitude) and abilities (e.g. writing ability) have both face validity and predictive validity, and are probably the best personality measures for jobs.

Work Samples

Rather than ability or aptitude, a work sample tests an actual example of the work that is to be performed by the applicant on the job, such as a sample in-tray of tasks (e.g. memos, emails, phone messages) for our potential ice cream sales manager to handle. These tests are among the best predictors of future job performance.

Unfortunately, work samples are highly task-specific, and it can be difficult to do this kind of test with work that is diverse, abstract, or involves interactions with other people. Interview work samples (where the candidate describes performing the tasks rather than actually doing them) are much cheaper and safer to run, and demonstrates at least knowledge of the task, if not skill in performing it.

Assessment Centres

The job skills and personality characteristics (also called *dimensions*) to be tested are determined by the job analysis. An assessment centre is a series of tests run over a whole day which examines these dimensions. Each job dimension is usually tested in two different ways, to ensure reliability of the testing. For our ice cream manager role, it is likely his general social skills, selling ability, and leadership, among other things, all need to be assessed.

Activities often include the aforementioned interview, psychometrics, and work samples. Assessment centres are usually run with a number of other candidates for two reasons: it's cheaper, and it offers a chance for candidates to interact with one another, so that testers can objectively observe social skills instead of being part of the interaction. The method is fairly reliable and has good validity, as it measures a number of realistic job tasks.

The Final Decision

Remember that the purpose of recruitment is to discriminate. However, when people hear the word “discrimination”, they usually see it as a negative thing. In most of western society, is illegal to discriminate in any job selection process on the basis of gender, race, religion, or age - and this is good, because these are not relevant to the ability to do a job. Discrimination is acceptable only if it is to find the person who is best for the job – on the basis of the job requirements.

A word of caution! In some countries, unsuccessful job applicants sue the company which rejected them over unfair discrimination. If this is a possibility where you are, or where you are hiring, be very careful in planning your testing procedure, to ensure it really does give the best possible assessment of your candidates.

Great Expectations

In an earlier article, we discussed the psychological contract. You begin creating that contract from the moment of first contact with your potential employees, usually in the job advertisement, in print or online. Your description of the job should be accurate in order to attract the right applicants, and even a routine job should not be made to sound too exciting during the selection process. Some people are suited to more sedate work, others to more glamorous positions. A poorly-represented job will breach the trust between you and your employee, creating problems.

Then we have the problem of hiring underqualified personnel. Nothing is worse than hiring somebody who seems perfectly suitable on paper, but it becomes very clear very quickly that their work is not up to standard. In today's competitive world, many job candidates lie on their CVs, and even produce fraudulent degree certificates. They don't even consider this unethical: "Everybody else does it," they reason. "So if I don't, I won't get the job, because their CVs look so much better than mine."

As a result, it is *very* important to check references – before you even ask the candidate to interview (it will save time later). Research indicates that references do not provide a lot of information, because they are usually positive and uncritical. However, they can confirm claims made on the CV: if the person attended a school or university, or worked at some company in a particular position.

Conclusion

Doesn't such a recruitment process take a lot of time and money? Yes. Isn't it still possible to hire the wrong person? Yes. But without putting time and effort into your recruitment, you might as well throw your applicants' CVs down the stairs and pick the one that lands at the top. A well-planned recruitment process is much better than guessing.

A poor hiring decision will cost your business a lot more than the time and money spent on a quality recruitment process. Every businessperson knows that good work will bring more customers, in both repeat business and word-of-mouth - but if you hire somebody unsatisfactory, you will lose even more customers: both the ones for whom your company did bad work, and the potential clients you would have had if the work had received praise.

So recruit carefully, and build your business the way you want it.

Some related links (copy-paste into your browser):

Suggestions for a good structured interview

<http://www.workforce.com/archive/feature/22/17/60/index.php>

Advice preparing job candidates for an assessment centre

<http://www.jobsite.co.uk/career/advice/assessment.html>

EU rules on anti-discrimination

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/fundamental_rights/spot/dec06_en.htm

Next month, we will be discussing what happens right after recruitment, when your new hire starts work: employee orientation.

References:

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Statt, D.A. (2004). *Psychology and the world of work* (2nd ed.). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

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