

A Question of Hiring

Question

Hiring is a critical function of a manager. A good hire can lift an entire organization. A poor hire is a drain on resources and morale. So finding the right “fit” in a candidate is worth a great deal of effort. Of course, everyone who hires interviews prospective candidates. Some check references as part of the hiring process. Fewer still use supplementary testing, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, to try to gauge the temperament and personality of an applicant. Have you ever used such tests? If so, what has been your experience regarding their usefulness as predictors of success in the position you are trying to fill? If not, would you ever consider trying such an approach? Why or why not?

Note

The hiring process and the quest to get it right have always fascinated me. That is why I have taken the liberty of providing one of the responses. Because effective hiring is a universal challenge, I have solicited two responses from outside the discipline of science editing. One of them is from my brother. He and I are only a year apart, but our careers have taken us in very different directions. It’s nice to have the family converge for a *Solution Corner* column. What have your own hiring experiences been like? We’d love to hear from our readers with comments on this column or questions for future columns. Send your e-mail to solutioncorner@ametsoc.org.

Solutions

Although I do see the merit in tests like the Myers-Briggs test, I find these formal personality tests less relevant in the hiring process than standard questions and less formal conversations. Formal tests like the Myers-Briggs test often make people very self-conscious and prone to answering questions as they think you want them answered rather than honestly. That’s why I prefer a different method.

I typically use a multistep hiring process for candidates. It involves an initial telephone interview, during which I use a mix of standard questions I’ve developed and

a bit of general conversation to gauge the candidate’s grammar skills and interest in the position. I then invite select candidates into the office for another interview, which has a similar format of standard questions and general conversation. I also have candidates meet with the rest of my department as a group. I’ve been told by some applicants, after they have been hired, that it’s similar to the Spanish Inquisition! But I’d rather know up front if the team doesn’t think the candidate is a good fit or vice versa.

Eventually, I do move on to checking references and asking for a writing sample. You’d be surprised what people will say in a reference call. I’ve had a couple of hires stop at this point because the reference was not happy about being a reference or stated that the person’s “growth area” was something difficult to get past, such as, “He really isn’t good with people.” or “She is a great employee when she makes it to work.” The writing sample involves answering a general question and serves a couple of purposes: it illustrates the candidate’s written communication skills, and it shows a person’s initiative because the answer is actually found on our Web site.

Although the process I use is not informal, it includes less formal tools than a long personality test. I find that a mix of guided conversation and specific questions helps in assessing a candidate’s personality and potential fit better than the results of a stock test like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Honestly, who really sets out to hire an ESTP over an INTJ?

Jennifer Fleet

Director of Customer Services
Aries System Corporation

I have come to regard hiring as one of my most important responsibilities. If I make good hiring decisions, it not only is good for my department (I have a staff of 35 production editors), but the entire organization benefits. It can truly be the gift that keeps on giving. Conversely, if a selection does not work out well, it can be a drain on everyone, and hiring mistakes are magnified in small staffs. Sometimes

Solution Corner

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good fortune comes into play. I can think of a number of people I have hired who I felt very confident would be “merely” very good employees who turned out to be nothing short of spectacular. But don’t depend on luck when making a decision as critical as hiring!

I have never used personality testing as part of the vetting process (and I’ve never been asked to take such a test when applying for positions myself). In principle, the merits of doing so seem clear. For example, sometimes candidates have all the right credentials but don’t fit in well with the staff. And perhaps their temperament is not a good match for the job (or even the career) that they are seeking. Supplementary testing may bring such potential problems to light.

My approach is to maximize the number and type of “data points” for each candidate and then base a decision on the full range of information (combined with input from others and old-fashioned intuition). To this point, that has included interviews with me and with my staff, the candidate’s resume, and—critically—telephone conversations with (preferably three) references. I am intrigued by the possibility of adding a dimension, such as profile testing. The only danger I see in that or any other single measure of a candidate’s worthiness

for a position is if it is weighted too heavily in the final decision. It may be tempting to get a bit lazy and let a “test” that someone else developed make your decision for you. But that is a recipe for disaster. Considering *many* facets of a potential hire may be time consuming and difficult, but in my opinion, it represents due diligence, and the payoff can be enormous.

Ken Heideman

Director of Publications
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What are the personality traits that best fit the position that you are looking to fill? After identifying credentials, experience, and education goals, I would advise taking the added step of determining which characteristics are likely to translate into success in your organization and in the job itself.

For example, I have been involved in the hiring of many salespeople over the years. Dominance is a personality trait that has to do with one’s ego strength. A strong ego is critical in sales, because it means that one has a drive to succeed by closing as many sales as possible and the fortitude to avoid taking inevitable repeated, and sometimes harsh, rejections to heart. Influence is another trait of importance. How well does

someone interact and communicate with others? According to the DISC (dominance, influence, steadiness, and compliance) assessment, so-called high-influence people are naturally empathetic and love people; they are also very persuasive. Low-influence people tend to be more serious, logical, factual, and probing. Neither of those types is inherently better than the other; they are simply different.

In editing, I imagine that low-influence traits might be a better fit. In sales, high influence is the way to go. One may think that it should be possible to simply observe these traits in a candidate during an interview, but there is a much better and more scientific way of determining someone’s makeup. Write down the personality profile that you think best fits the job you are hiring for. Consider using a DISC assessment or a similar gauge as part of your candidate evaluation. Adding this step could make your hiring decisions better.

Rick Heideman

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