



Secrets to a successful hiring strategy – it's better to hire a squirrel

Many organizations today are still making recruitment decisions based on an individual's qualifications, skills or schooling (in some professions it amounts to 'which' school an individual attended). However these don't give a clear view as to whether an individual is suited to a role. What makes better sense is to recruit for those characteristics linked to success in the role.

Since the early 70's, leading organisations have been using competencies to help recruit, select and manage their outstanding performers after Dr David McClelland, Harvard Business School Professor of Psychology, found that traditional tests such as academic, aptitude and knowledge tests, did not predict success in the job.

More recent research by individuals such as Daniel Goleman in Emotional Intelligence and Rick Boyatzis, in The Competent Manager, have reinforced and emphasised the importance of competencies as essential predictors of outstanding performance.

There are 5 different types of competency characteristics as defined by McClelland:

Motives – the things a person consistently thinks about or wants – typically very deep seated eg the desire to climb a mountain or be the best at what you can do

Traits – physical characteristics and responses to situations or information eg reaction time and good eyesight are physical trait competencies of pilots but how an individual responds to a stressful situation is also a trait

Self Image – a person's attitude values, how they see themselves eg if you value being 'in management' you are more likely to exhibit leadership behaviour

Knowledge – information a person has in a particular area eg a surgeon's knowledge of nerves and muscles in the human body

Skill – the ability to perform a certain physical or mental task eg a dentist's physical skill to fill a tooth without damaging the nerve



What this means

It is important to distinguish between the types because they have implications for recruitment and selection and training once a new recruit is in a job.

Both motives and traits are deep seated and intrinsic to the individual. They are more likely to predict what people will do on their jobs long term, without close supervision. However they are also more difficult to shift. Skills and knowledge are generally easier to train. If you have a salesperson who gets satisfaction out of managing others rather than being the best then chances are they will never be the best salesperson. On the other hand, if you get the salesperson with the right motives and traits but who lacks the knowledge of the product being sold, this can easily be addressed via training courses.

It makes more sense to recruit on the basis of motives, traits, self image and train individuals in the technical skills and knowledge component of their role. Hence the saying, "you can teach a turkey to climb a tree but it's better to hire a squirrel".

How do you use competencies to recruit?

Firstly, you need to understand what your good people do. What do you see them doing, saying, communicating that makes them good performers?

Secondly, take what the good performers do and define these as competencies such as 'Leadership' or 'Team Working'. It is possible to use off-the-shelf competency models but tailored models usually give better results.

Finally, use focused interviewing to identify these competencies during recruitment interviews.

Once the new recruit is on board competencies can be used for performance management, coaching and training.

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