

To do or not to do, that is the Executive Psychometrics question

The process of recruitment is riddled with risk – refer back to my article “Recruiting is a risk business” in issue 11. The underlying contention of that article was that any



organisation must limit their exposure to risk by systematic, and preferably structured, assessment of all potential candidates. In so doing you should cover the hard and soft skill requirements demanded by the role as it currently stands and for how the organisation needs it to be performed in the foreseeable future. Determining what these requirements are is critical to the success or otherwise of the recruitment process – if you don't know where you are supposed to be shooting the arrow, how do you expect it to hit the target? You skimp on this stage at your peril. “Yes, yes, I understand all that!” I hear you say to me with impatience riddled throughout the statement. My 16 years worth of experience, however, tells me that most managers use time constraints as an excuse to devote too little time to this critical early stage in the process. And yet your whole project, and its chances of success, hinge on this more than any other aspect in the recruitment effort. If you can clearly define what you want when you commence the process, trust me, even an averagely skilled recruiter can spot a well qualified candidate when they see one!

Once the foundations are created you can then build the other aspects around them. That includes the techniques you will use to assess how the candidates match up to your well produced brief. These techniques can be many and varied but are usually bundled together under the heading of psychometric assessment. In my travels the discussions I have had around this subject produce the usual mixed bag from the ‘fervent detractors’ to the ‘devoted supporters club’. So we arrive at the pivotal point in the debate around whether to use these tests or not.

Let's get quickly to the point: -

- Don't be dissuaded by feedback from candidates who just don't like doing these sort of assessments – they are not taking the largest part of the risk remember!
- It is estimated that upwards of 2 out of every 5 CV's have significant exaggerations, inaccuracies or even bear faced lies – you need all the help you can get to identify them accurately.
- It is now accepted in all sensible quarters that using interviews alone has strong limitations that discriminate against good candidates that just don't interview well and

yet heap excessive kudos on the skilled interview 'game player', or worse, the proficient fraud.

- The added cost of completing psychometric assessment is usually dwarfed by the level of resources the successful candidate must control or by the costs associated with managing a poor performer out of the business.

If you are not convinced by that lot then you must be an 'I'm a fervent detractor' t-shirt wearer. In which case read no more!

In chatting to a number of experienced HR professionals and consultants, as well as using my own experience, the consensus is that most senior managers and executives are happy for other people to sit through psychometric assessment but become markedly more hesitant when they discover that they may also be asked to subject themselves to it.

"I've been doing the job for years now, if you can't assess me based upon that, then I don't see why I should waste my time doing tests." This is a fairly typical statement from the small proportion of people that choose not to sit tests. That's their choice, but it's your choice to set sensible candidate evaluation processes in place and you lower your standards at your peril.

A significant number of HR professionals, and recruitment consultancies, that offer psychometric profiling, are more than happy to

use these tools for all levels below senior management but seem reluctant to adopt them for senior managers and directors. Part of this, I'm sure, revolves around embarrassment – being too embarrassed to ask an apparently time-served and highly successful manager to sit through these tests of their competence.

I chatted to an experienced consultant this week who recounted a story of a candidate for a very senior Engineering Manager position. This candidate objected strongly to being subjected to these apparently meaningless tests of his competence and promptly removed himself from the recruitment process. One has to ask, what was his motivation? Several likely explanations exist – he was nervous of being exposed as less talented than his CV declared; he was not interested enough in the job in the first place to put himself out and complete the assessment; he was ill-informed about the best practice standards applied in recruitment and you'd have to ask what standards he would apply to recruiting members of any team he managed; he was intolerant to the standards being set by people within a different professional discipline to his own and you can only surmise that he would remain less than balanced, and a potential source of conflict with other professional colleagues. Characters such as this should be bracketed firmly in the 'no loss' category. That doesn't mean that you should be dismissive or rude towards them but you should certainly make no concessions to

the standards that you apply. In each case you should try to persuade them that being assessed is a routine part of the process and is only one part of the decision-making criteria. But don't waste too much time as fervent detractors are usually intractable in their opinions regardless of any argument or evidence. I would contest that they are not the sort of person you would want in your organisation if that is their approach.

A significant change should occur in the focus of your psychometric tools the higher you apply them up the organisational ladder. The shift should move towards closer scrutiny of the soft skills rather than the easy to measure. Retain the verbal and numerical ability tests by all means as they will add some value to debates around a candidate and cost relatively little money to do. However, the key arena of value will be around the leadership skills and management styles the candidate uses. A mismatch here means that all people within their sphere of control could be adversely affected by them once recruited. It is critical therefore to evaluate them as closely as possible. A good recruitment consultant should be able to offer you help in devising a structured approach to the right tools to use. Unfortunately a lot of recruitment consultants offer only the more limited first interview service. If that describes your recruitment consultant, work instead with one that can help you assess the right candidate all along the way until an offer is made. After all, if they were true partners with you then their goal should be the same as yours, namely ensuring the right candidate is placed into the vacancy you have.

In closing I would argue that far from being less inclined to psychometrically assess senior candidates I would, in fact, be much keener to do so bearing in mind just how much the presence of ineffective soft skills can have a truly hard impact on any business.

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