

## The Hiring Process as a Competition

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The hiring process requires judgments about several different people, usually based only on a few pieces of paper and only one interview's worth of interaction. With so little information, sometimes the wrong decision is made, and the best qualified candidate is passed over. Someone might then exclaim "That's not fair, they deserved the job!", and this would seem a reasonable objection. Assuming it is reasonable, and it is demanded, by justice, that they are hired, it is then necessary to find a reason. It is suggested that the best qualified candidate deserve the job as a prize, for winning the competition that is the hiring process.

Let us first consider a race. When someone wins a race, they also win whatever prize they were competing for, be that accolades or material wealth. So perhaps the applicants are like these racers, and whoever has the greatest ability, the one who is fastest, wins. However, this is not the result we want. The *most* qualified candidate is not the *best* qualified. A person with a chemistry PhD has a greater ability and is more qualified than someone who has only finished highschool, yet there is reason to think the highschool graduate would perform better in a fast food restaurant. The chemist would get bored quickly and perform much worse, quitting early and necessitating another hiring process. The high school student, meanwhile, would be happy with minimum wage and would be a reliable worker for at least four years. Additionally, this race analogy only considers current performance, not expected improvement. A hiring manager must consider how the applicant may improve after training, and this may not be the one who, at the time of hiring, demonstrates the greatest ability. So, it would seem, based on these two objections, the applicant must not deserve the job as a prize.

The previous argument can be corrected by changing the definition of competition. By considering the general properties of a competition, and how well the hiring process fits these properties, we will show that the best qualified candidate does indeed deserve the job as a prize. There are three major properties to a competition: competitors, win conditions, and conflict. In other words, a competition is a test of superiority. Without competitors, there is no question of superiority to answer, and no competition can take place. There must be conflict, as an extension of competitors. This conflict drives the demonstration of ability to meet the win conditions. Finally, win conditions mean are rules, and the competitors have a goal. It is important to note these conditions are dependent on the type competition and vary drastically between different events.

The hiring process has all these characteristics. There are usually multiple applicants (competitors). The competition of a hiring process is not direct. However, consider a figure skating competition. The competitors do not skate on the ice at the same time and are judged independently, yet this is still a clear case of a competition. In the same way, applicants "perform" (are interviewed) at separate times and are judged independently. Additionally, the way we talk about the hiring process uses language of conflict. We say the applicants are "vying" for a position, or a position in a certain firm is "competitive". These are hints that we think of the hiring process as one of conflict.

To match the third property, there are also win conditions: the applicants' goal is to demonstrate they meet the job description and requirements as the hiring manager has set them, whatever that may be. Contrast this with the race analogy. A race's win conditions state that the greatest ability, or most qualified, should win. But consider a contest where points are awarded based on how closely you meet

certain parameters. If this system of points was added to a well-established competition, such as a game of soccer, the soccer game would not be any less of a competition. It would simply change the objective of the game away from scoring goals, towards also meeting these new requirements. To address the second original objection, points in a science fair could be given to those who the judges feel has the most potential. If the best qualified and potential of an applicant are viewed as part of a scoring system, they become rules for the competition.

There is one major difference between the hiring process and other competitions. At the end of the process, the position does not have to be filled. There is no other example of a competition where the prize is not awarded at the end. Perhaps this is an inherent property of competition that was missed in the initial definition. However, I argue that the guarantee of a victor is not necessary for an event to be a competition, first by appealing to a “theoretical applicant”, and then to a general definition of competition. Consider first the theoretical applicant. The theoretical applicant is the ideal candidate, the one who the hiring manager hopes to find through the hiring process. If they choose to hire none of the real applicants, it could be said the applicants lost to the theoretical applicant. In other words, the theoretical applicant was not found in that round of hiring, and the hiring manager is reasonably certain they will find them the next round. Another possibility is, of course, to accept that a winner is not necessary for a competition. The Oxford dictionary defines competition as “The activity or condition of striving to gain or win something by defeating or establishing superiority over others” [1]. Notice that this definition does not say that the competitors must win, only that they strive to win. In a similar way, companies are said to “compete” on the market, striving for scarce resources, yet none of them will ever win. So perhaps only the conflict itself makes a competition, rather than the final determination of superiority.

One might seek to get around the question of victory by instead considering contests and awards, which are very similar to competitions. They have multiple nominees or contestants, and a prize is given under certain conditions. However, a contest does not involve conflict, instead the contestants enter, and then wait to see if they’ve won. The hiring process, as shown previously, does have some indirect conflict. Additionally, all contest participants all have equal chances to win, as those in lotteries and prize draws do. A lottery where one person is chosen because they are stronger, or better meet certain criteria, would be judged unfair. In contrast, in a competition the qualifications of the players are being judged, meaning some are far more likely to win than others.

An award seems more promising, at first. There is a similar sort of indirect conflict through judges, and, importantly, the prizes are not always awarded (e.g. the Pulitzer prize was not awarded in 1974 or 2012 [2]). But a job cannot be an award either for an entirely new reason: it cannot be considered as compensation. If someone has already been compensated, through wage or satisfaction, how then can justice demand they win an award too? An author is paid for their book, and a scientist for their work, and only after is a Pulitzer or a Nobel awarded to them. They are not “owed” the prize. So, if we are to say the best qualified candidate is “owed” the job, the job cannot be an award for their achievements.

The hiring process is not a contest, or an award. It can be considered a contest, if it is accepted that either no winner is needed, or that the theoretical applicant can win. The job description describes the win conditions, and the candidate best able to meet those qualifications deserves the prize.

[1] <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/competition>

[2] *The New Yorker* (2012). Michael Cunningham, *Letter from the Pulitzer Fiction Jury, Part II: How To Define Greatness?* [Online] Available: <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/letter-from-the-pulitzer-fiction-jury-part-ii-how-to-define-greatness>