Chapter 15

HIRING A JUGGLER

Circus Manager:	How long have you been juggling?
Candidate:	Oh, about six years.
Manager:	Can you handle three balls, four balls, and five balls?
Candidate:	Yes, yes, and yes.
Manager:	Do you work with flaming objects?
Candidate:	Sure.
Manager:	.. . knives, axes, open cigar boxes, floppy hats?
Candidate:	I can juggle anything.
Manager:	Do you have a line of funny patter that goes with your juggling?
Candidate:	It's hilarious.
Manager:	Well, that sounds fine. I guess you're hired.
Candidate:	Umm … Don't you want to see me juggle?
Manager:	Gee, I never thought of that.

It would be ludicrous to think of hiring a juggler without first seeing him perform. That's just common sense. Yet when you set out to hire an engineer or a designer or a programmer or a group manager, the rules of common sense are often suspended. You don't ask to see a design or a program or anything. In fact, the interview is just talk.

You're hiring a person to produce a product, presumably similar to those he or she has made before. You need to examine a sample of those products to see the quality of work the candidate does. That may seem obvious, but it's almost always overlooked by development managers. There is a surface reserve at work when you meet for a job interview. There seems to be an unwritten rale that says it's okay to ask the candidate about past work but not to ask to see it. Yet when you ask, candidates are almost always pleased to bring along a sample.

The Portfolio

In the spring of 1979, while teaching together in western Canada, we got a call from a computer science professor at the local technical college. He proposed to stop by our hotel after class one evening and buy us beers in exchange for ideas. That's the kind of offer we seldom turn down. What we learned from him that evening was almost certainly worth more than whatever he learned from us.

The teacher was candid about what he needed to be judged a success in his work: He needed his students to get good job offers and lots of them. "A Harvard diploma is worth something in and of itself, but our diploma isn't worth squat. If this year's graduates don't get hired fast, there are no students next year and I'm out of a job." So he had developed a formula to make his graduates optimally attractive to the job market. Of course he taught them modern techniques for system construction, including structured analysis and design, data-driven design, information hiding, structured coding, walkthroughs, and metrics. He also had them work on real applications for nearby companies and agencies. But the centerpiece of his formula was the portfolio that all students put together to show samples of their work.

He described how his students had been coached to show off their portfolios as part of each interview:

> "I've brought along some samples of the kind of work I do. Here, for instance, is a subroutine in Pascal from one project and a set of COBOL paragraphs from another. As you can see in this portion, we use the loop-with-exit extension advocated by Knuth, but aside from that, it's pure structured code, pretty much the sort of thing that your company standard calls for. And here is the design that this code was written from. The hierarchies and

> coupling analysis use Myers' notation. I designed all of this particular subsystem, and this one little section where we used some Orr methods because the data structure really imposed itself on the process structure. And these are the leveled data flow diagrams that make up the guts of our specification, and the associated data dictionary. ..."

In the years since, we've often heard more about that obscure technical college and those portfolios. We've met recruiters from as far away as Triangle Park, North Carolina, and Tampa, Florida, who regularly converge upon that distant Canadian campus for a shot at its graduates.

Of course, this was a clever scheme of the professor's to give added allure to his graduates, but what struck us most that evening was the report that interviewers were always surprised by the portfolios. That meant they weren't regularly requiring all candidates to arrive with portfolios. Yet why not? What could be more sensible than asking each candidate to bring along some samples of work to the interview?

Aptitude Tests

If it's so important that the new hire be good at the various skills used in the job, why not design an aptitude test to measure those skills? Our industry has had a long, irregular flirtation with the idea of aptitude testing. In the sixties, the idea was positively in vogue. By now, you and your organization have probably given up on the concept. In case you haven't, we offer one good reason that you ought to: The tests measure the wrong thing.

Aptitude tests are almost always oriented toward the tasks the person will perform immediately after being hired. They test whether he or she is likely to be good at statistical analysis or programming or whatever it is that's required in the position. You can buy aptitude tests in virtually any technical area, and they all tend to have fairly respectable track records at predicting how well the new hire will perform. But so what? A successful new hire might do those tasks for a few years and then move on to be team leader or a product manager or a project head. That person might end up doing the tasks that the test measured for two years and then do other things for twenty.

The aptitude tests we've seen are mostly left-brain oriented. That's because the typical things new hires do are performed largely in the left brain. The things they do later on in their career, however, are to a much greater degree right-brain activities. Management, in particular, requires holistic thinking, heuristic judgment, and intuition based upon experience. So the aptitude test may give you people who perform better in the short term, but are less likely to succeed later on. Maybe you should use an aptitude test but hire only those who fail it.

From your reading of this book, you'd hardly expect its authors to endorse the idea of hiring through the use of aptitude tests. But it doesn't follow that aptitude tests are no good or that you ought not to be using them. You should use them, just not for hiring. The typical aptitude test you buy or build can be a wonderful self-assessment vehicle for your people. Frequent interesting opportunities for private self-assessment are a must for workers in a healthy organization. (More about this in Chapter 24.)

Holding an Audition

The business we're in is more sociological than technological, more dependent on workers' abilities to communicate with each other than their abilities to communicate with machines. So the hiring process needs to focus on at least some sociological and human communication traits. The best way we've discovered to do this is through the use of auditions for job candidates.

The idea is simple enough. You ask a candidate to prepare a ten- or fifteen-minute presentation on some aspect of past work. It could be about a new technology and the experience with first trying it out, or about a management lesson learned the hard way, or about a particularly interesting project. The candidate chooses die subject. The date is set and you assemble a small audience made up of those who will be the new hire's co-workers.

Of course the candidate will be nervous, perhaps even reluctant to undertake such an experience. You'll have to explain that all candidates are nervous about the audition and give your reasons for holding one: to see the various candidates' communication skills, and to give the future co-workers a part in the hiring process.

At the end of the audition and after the candidate has left, you hold a debriefing of those present. Each one gets to comment on the person's suitability for the job and whether he or she seems likely to fit well into the team. Although it's ultimately your responsibility to

decide whether to hire or not, the feedback from future co-workers can be invaluable. Even more important, any new person hired is more likely to be accepted smoothly into the group, since the other group members have had a voice in choosing the candidate.

> *My first experience with auditions was in hiring people to be consultants and instructors. My motivation in torturing these prospective hires was simple enough; I wanted to get a sense of whether they were natural explainers of matters simple or complex, or people who could be taught to explain such matters, or those who could never explain anything to anyone. I also wanted some second opinions on the matter, so I had those of my people who were in the office at the time of the audition sit in on the presentation. Over five years, we conducted nearly two hundred auditions.*
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> *It soon became clear that the audition process served to accelerate the socialization process between a new hire and the existing staff members. A successful audition was a kind of certification as a peer. The reverse seemed to hold true as well. Failed auditions were a morale booster for the staff. They were continuing proof that being hired for the group was more than just the dumb luck of when resumes happened to hit my desk.*
>
> —TRL

One caveat about auditions: Make sure the candidate speaks about something immediately germane to the work your organization does. It's easy to be snookered by a talk on a topic from extreme left field, like "Caring for the Autistic Child" or "Effects of Acid Rain." You're liable to catch a glimpse of a very compelling passion on the speaker's part, a passion that you'll never see again on the job.