

Hiring

Why We Modeled Our Hiring Process on the NFL and NASA

by L. J. Brock and Justin Pinchback

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Summary. While standard resumes and interviews can be useful in assessing personality and cultural fit, they're often less effective at screening for vital qualities such as analytical skills, teamwork, and performance under pressure. In this piece, the authors describe how... [more](#)

What's the best way to assess elite talent — those people you expect to play a critical role in your organization's success? Most management experts would say in-depth interviews, reference-

checking, and work sample reviews. Some forward-thinking companies might even use “auditions.”

But at Citadel and Citadel Securities, we’ve decided to go a step further. Inspired by the rigorous and competitive group tryouts you see employed by the Navy in its SEAL program, by NASA in its astronaut selection, and by the NFL in evaluating rookie recruits, our company has decided to host regular “datathons” — contests in which undergraduate and graduate students who we would consider for artificial intelligence, technology, and data science roles at our firm have the chance to compete for a cash prize, while we use observable and measurable criteria to evaluate their performance.

Why move so far beyond traditional HR assessment tools? While well-structured interviews can be useful in assessing personality and cultural fit, we believe they are much less effective at considering qualities such as analytical skill, teaming abilities, and performance under pressure. Think about it: If you were an NFL scout, would you ask a prospective wide receiver to describe how he made catches in college? Or would you ask him to run a few routes with your QB and watch how he handles those tosses?

Our aim is to do the same for intellectual athletes, giving them an opportunity to not just talk about but also demonstrate the qualities we seek: a passion for solving challenging problems, exceptional analytical rigor, and the ability to glean insights from complex data sets across markets industries and economies.

Over the past year, we have conducted 20 datathons at universities across the U.S., UK, Canada, and Ireland, and seen thousands of students participate. For each competition, we select up to 100 of the best candidates based on a number of inputs and variables. These participants then form teams and work together to glean insights and formulate a research question based on a large and complex data set — all in the course of a single day. For example, during one of the competitions, we provided students with data on the Bay Area Rapid Transit system (BART), which included information about

demographics, real estate, weather, station specifics, and fares. The resulting research questions addressed topics such as the impact of the technology boom on transportation, zip code–level commuting patterns, and the fairness of the BART fee structure.

The competitions allow us to not only assess prospective employees, providing our talent acquisition team with valuable data to help hone in on top people to hire, but also attract candidates who might not have considered a career in our industry. For example, one student who had previously interned at Apple and had an internship offer from Facebook decided to become a Citadel intern next summer after winning one of our datathons.

Candidates also benefit. Apart from the monetary rewards — winners split a \$25,000 pool and have an opportunity to compete for \$100,000 in the final championship — they are able to sample the work that our employees do and determine if it is a good fit for their skills and interests. And they have a chance to show their skills instead of speaking about them — a plus for introverts and others who feel uncomfortable doing the latter. We’ve also been told the experience is pretty fun.

In our view, these types of tryouts, in all shapes and sizes, can work for many organizations provided they spend time up front developing programs that focus on areas where they have the greatest hiring needs and where the right talent can have the greatest impact. Automattic, for example, does auditions by inviting candidates in to work on real projects, while Menlo Innovations uses “extreme interviewing,” pairing off 50 candidates and giving them 20-minute programming exercises that simulate real work.

Firms seeking elite talent must realize that all the typical interviewing and recruiting processes are ripe for improvement. The right people don’t always come knocking on your door. We can learn from elite organizations that are filled with superstars. Attract them, ask them to audition, hire the people who thrive under that pressure, and build your own powerhouse team.

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