Harvard Business Review

Hiring

Hiring for Intangibles

by Harvard Management Update

February 29, 2008

The two candidates for the position of CFO at a prominent Silicon Valley firm seemed nearly identical: their education, job experience, and promotion history were remarkably similar. Then someone on the search committee noticed that one candidate graduated from college with honors and the other had not.

When the candidate who didn't graduate with honors was asked why he didn't, he explained that when he was in college he had been married with two children and was holding down a full-time job because he had been obliged to pay his own way.

"And then," says Bill Rusher, a committee member, "he stopped himself midsentence and said: 'That's a lot of bull. The real answer is that it wasn't a priority for me to graduate with honors at that time. If it had been a priority, I would have figured out a way to do it.'"

His no-excuse attitude won him the job, says Rusher, CEO of the San Francisco-based executive search firm Rusher, Loscavio & LoPresto. "A willingness to take responsibility for your actions is one characteristic we really look for, and we actually made our selection based on that."

Whether you're trying to fill an executive-level position or one closer to the front lines, intangibles such as attitude can spell the difference between a hire who proves merely competent and one who goes on to shine. Of course, serious candidates usually need to meet a certain baseline in terms of their education and experience. But beyond that, other criteria come to the fore in assessing how well the candidate is likely to perform one year, three years, five years down the road. And hiring experts such as Rusher point out that a candidate who exhibits an exceptionally strong facility in creative problem solving, for example, yet lacks the education and experience profile the hiring manager seeks may prove to be the better choice.

A readiness to take unconventional routes to solve a problem, an ability to mediate conflict, and the independence of mind to question the status quo–while such traits may be challenging to uncover during the interview process, the game is well worth the candle. This is especially true, say HR professionals and hiring managers, if your company is in a rapidly evolving industry, has ambitious growth targets, or is undergoing a major organizational change. They recommend following a three-step process:

1. Determine which intangibles you want

Before the first candidate comes in for an interview, determine which intangible traits you're looking for and how much they should be weighted in making the hiring decision. Laurence Haughton, a management consultant and the author of *It's Not What You Say...It's What You Do: How Following Through at Every Level Can Make or Break Your Company* (Currency/Doubleday, 2004), suggests asking yourself these questions about the role's demands:

• **How important is creative problem-solving?** If the person you're hiring will need to revitalize a nearly moribund brand, go beyond standard procedures to find unique solutions for customers, or consolidate supply chains currently serving very different product lines, look for that person's ability to find solutions by working creatively both within and beyond existing systems.

• Is calm in the face of fire a must? Will the person work in a particularly unpredictable and sometimes unpleasant work environment–one, say, with highly variable demand cycles or intense intradepartmental competition? If so, you need someone who can stay calm and cope in the face of crisis.

• How important is learning agility? If the competitive environment is volatile and unpredictable change is the rule, whoever fills the role needs to have the flexibility and agility to learn and adapt rapidly.

• Is the ability to get work done through influence and persuasion a must? In flat organizations and in cultures that place a premium on cooperation and collaboration, the ability to use persuasion and influence is a critical skill. Has the candidate worked in environments that honed this skill? Does she demonstrate the necessary emotional intelligence to collaborate effectively with others and enlist support from people over whom she will have no formal power?

2. Craft targeted questions

Thinking about each question listed above will help define what intangibles to look for in a candidate. As you review résumés, "look for experiences that, when discussed, will reveal a candidate's personality traits," writes Haughton. For example, to gauge how well the person learns on the job, try to find a point in her work history where she entered unfamiliar territory. Ask about a time she felt she was in over her head and how she dealt with that. To assess how well a candidate copes with conflict and sudden change, don't ask him to describe what he would do in a hypothetical situation; instead, ask him what he did do in response to an unexpected work crisis in the past.

3. Distinguish real from rote

Job candidates are, by and large, a savvy bunch; they are usually quite good at reading the signals you or your colleagues may unconsciously project. Discern when an interviewee is being genuine and when he is just telling you what he thinks you want to hear.

When Tom Loker–the COO for Ramsell Holding Corporation (formerly Ramsell Corporation), a public health organization in Pleasanton, Calif., that provides federal AIDS Drug Assistance Program services–interviews job applicants, he looks for any hint of insincerity or apathy. Because his organization serves fragile and vulnerable populations, he says that hiring people with a genuine commitment to the organization's ideals is crucial. "Cultural fit is almost more important than educational fit– education can be obtained," he says.

To that end, he often puts a candidate's résumé aside and simply says, "Tell me who you are." Another favorite question of his pushes the candidate to delve into her priorities: "Tell me about what makes you get up in the morning that has nothing to do with work."

Candidates can't rely on rote answers to these sorts of questions, Loker says. He gives high marks to applicants whose answers display honesty and passion. "People that interest me are those who become engaged in the conversation," he says. "They are the ones who will lean forward, drop their arms, and become very animated. Those who remain still with their hands folded tend not to be engaged."

In any interview, Haughton says, "turn your radar on high, just as you would if you were meeting your son's or daughter's date or college roommates." People should be at their best during a job interview, so any negative vibes–arrogance, impatience, or insincerity–are too important to ignore. When in doubt of your own instincts, get a second opinion.

What else can you do to check if you're seeing the genuine article? Stretch the interview out to give any forced charm a chance to wear off. And use the time to see how the candidate deals with conflict.

Haughton tells of a manager who routinely disagrees with at least one of a candidate's statements. How candidates respond to such a challenge can be revealing, he says. Does a candidate remain agreeable and professional while defending his point of view, or does he become irritated or aggressive? Does he give in to pressure too fast? Does he probe the questioner for more detail to understand where the challenge is coming from?

The payoff

A talent for creative problem solving, the ability to maintain grace under pressure, the doggedness to persevere despite roadblocks– interviewing and hiring for such intangibles jump-starts a good working relationship. Why? Because when the person arrives for her first day, you have already spent time learning what makes her tick. Says Haughton: "You begin with a much stronger connection, you are more likely to have matching agendas, and you will have a better understanding for how to shape their development."

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This article appeared in the January 2007 issue of Harvard Management Update.

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