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When to Take a Chance on an Imperfect Job Candidate

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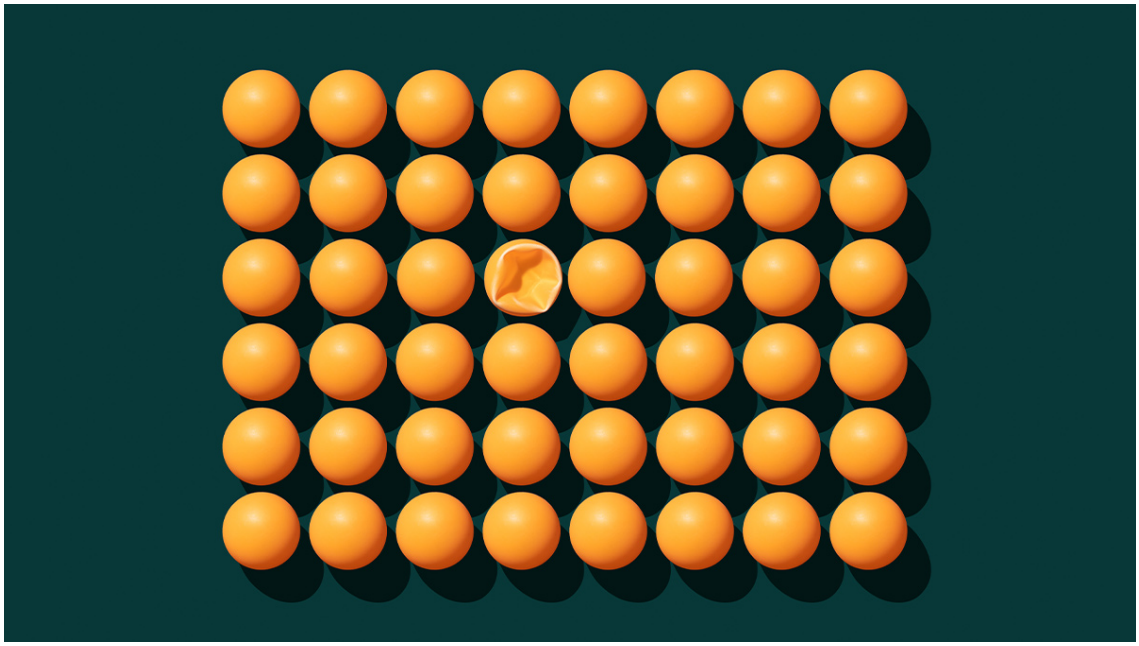

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Summary. When evaluating candidates for a position, start by understanding that you'll never find the perfect candidate for the job — that person doesn't exist. Hiring the wrong person can do a lot of damage, so start by using data to understand the basic requirements of the... **more**

Sometimes a job description and request for applications yields less-than-ideal candidates. How do you evaluate someone you know isn't exactly right for the position? How do you know which qualities are

workable and which should be nonstarters? At what point should you take a leap of faith?

What the Experts Say

First things first: You're never going to find the perfect candidate for your job opening. "The perfect candidate does not exist," says Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, a senior adviser at global executive search firm Egon Zehnder and the author of *It's Not the How or the What but the Who*. Besides, "even if the candidate does exist, it's [not a given that they would even] consider taking the job." In that sense, every applicant you're evaluating is inadequate in one way or another. "And they're not really flawed — they're just inferior to your dream candidate," says John Sullivan, professor of management at San Francisco State University and author of *1000 Ways to Recruit Top Talent*. Still, he says, all imperfect candidates are not created equal. "A bad hire can do a lot of damage." Here are some tips on how to decide which job candidates you can work with even if they don't fulfill all the requirements.

Be data driven.

When the HR department draws up the profile of the ideal candidate for your open req, the result is often "some combination of Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man," says Fernández-Aráoz. Since superheroes are in short supply in the labor market, Sullivan recommends being more objective and data driven in how you define what you seek in a candidate. "Look at the 10 people you have already doing the job. Then ask: What do the top three performers have in common? What characteristics do they share?" The answers will provide insight into the basic requirements of the role. "That's what's needed to succeed in the job, and you will assess candidates on those factors," says Sullivan.

If an applicant lacks one of the qualifications you've deemed necessary, it's an indication that they can't do the job. The objective of this exercise is to help you see more clearly which flaws are fatal and which are constructs designed by HR. For instance, you shouldn't

automatically discount “someone who was a job hopper, or who was out of the workforce for two years, or who doesn’t have a certain job title or degree,” Sullivan says. “Some of the best web designers in the world don’t have a degree in web design.”

Assess capacity for learning.

Even some serious inadequacies are surmountable, according to Fernández-Aráoz. “Hiring managers tend to weigh knowledge and skills, but that has many limitations,” he says. Knowledge is easy to acquire and skills can be developed, so if an otherwise promising candidate lacks a particular skill, you don’t need to write them off. “You want someone who has the capacity to continue to grow and learn,” he says. The past is precedence, adds Sullivan. Because certain skills can be learned, find out whether anyone else at the organization has ever learned that specific skill on the job and done well. It’s also worthwhile to ask candidates to describe the steps they take to learn something new. “Find out if they have a network to help them learn,” says Sullivan. An inability to learn — or, worse, a lack of interest in doing so — are flaws too great to be conquered.

Measure potential.

When the drawback in question is something like a nonstandard career trajectory, your appraisal should focus on whether the candidate has the “hallmarks and predictors of potential,” says Fernández-Aráoz. These include attributes like curiosity, engagement, determination, confidence, and motivation. He recommends using structured interviews in which you ask each candidate the same set of defined questions. Of course, “you need to ask the right questions and draw the right inferences,” he says, otherwise, you risk being fooled. “Even a psychopath can be highly engaging,” he adds.

Say, for instance, you’re trying to assess the applicant’s strategic orientation. “You need to look at behavioral indicators that suggest this candidate is curious.” Fernández-Aráoz suggests asking questions like, “Tell me about a situation in which you proactively sought

feedback. What did you do with the results? And what were the consequences of that?" The quality of your candidate's response will indicate whether the flaw can be ameliorated.

Gather second (and third) opinions.

And yet, don't take those responses as gospel. It's wise to scrutinize what your flawed applicant tells you, says Sullivan. "The world has changed," he says. "Because of Glassdoor, people already know the questions you're going to ask, and they know the answers, too." That's a boon to all applicants, but a challenge for hiring managers. Be rigorous — Sullivan recommends recording your interviews and rewatching them to validate your impressions. "Bring in outside managers for second opinions," he adds. Sullivan is also a proponent of peer interviews. Peers who will likely be working side by side with the candidate will be able to discern the severity of the weakness. "The best people to judge are those who are already doing the job. They're the ones who understand the job better than the manager, and they can predict success."

Provide multiple assessments.

Of course, interviews by themselves are not enough to evaluate a typical job candidate — let alone one who's flawed. Sullivan recommends so-called "whiteboard tests" to determine whether or not their limitations would keep them from being able to do the job.

These tests, popular in Silicon Valley, aim to measure an engineer's problem-solving skills. Candidates are given a code problem or task and a whiteboard, and they must work out their code and communicate their solution. The aim is to "give candidates a real problem they would have to solve on their first day," says Sullivan. These tests are transferable to other industries and functions. Going in, you, the hiring manager, "know that certain parts of the solution are non-negotiable." For instance, adds Sullivan, if you ask

prospective salespeople to write up their process and in doing so, they fail to ask their customers what they want, it's a sign that they can't work for you.

Gauge emotional intelligence.

Your assessment should not involve a consideration of whether you "want to grab a beer with your candidate" or whether "they're nice and energetic," says Sullivan. Indeed, those are the sort of superficial "flaws" that are famous sources of bias in the hiring process. And yet, it's important to gauge your flawed candidate's interpersonal skills. "People are hired because of their academic achievement and experience, but they're fired for their emotional intelligence"— or lack thereof — says Fernández-Aráoz.

Every desirable job candidate exhibits a certain degree of self-awareness, but this trait is especially important for less-than-ideal candidates. They need to know what they don't know and have good relationship-management skills and social awareness to cultivate colleagues so they can learn what they need to, adds Fernández-Aráoz. He also recommends reference checks to help you better understand the candidate. Talking to your candidate's former managers and colleagues will help you ascertain whether this person has the people skills or adaptability to thrive at your organization.

Don't compromise on character.

It's also important to assess whether what you perceive as a weakness or personality flaw is, in fact, a relevant issue in terms of the role you have open, according to Fernández-Aráoz. In a lot of jobs, for instance, you think you want a candidate who exhibits optimism — "that's particularly true of sales jobs." However, if the role you're looking to fill is for a controller, optimism would be a problem. "In this case, you want a pessimistic soul who spends sleepless nights ruminating" on all the things that could go wrong.

There is, however, one exception to this rule: character flaws. “Out of principle, you should never compromise on those,” he says. “If this person consistently lies, abuses people, or has lousy working habits,” that’s not likely to change. Besides, he adds, these things tend to come back to haunt you.

Don’t succumb to pressure to hire a flawed candidate.

Deciding whether or not to hire a candidate who lacks relevant experience in your industry, has an unconventional background, or has some glaring weaknesses is not easy. “We live in a world that is uncertain, ambiguous, and complex,” says Fernández-Aráoz. “The fact is, you don’t know what the job you’re hiring for will look like in a few years,” let alone how this candidate will adapt to those changes. When you’ve got a slate of flawed candidates, he adds, the best you can do is “figure out who is closest to the level required for the job and look at who’s the most likely to develop into the role with the right type of support.” But don’t be impetuous or too quick to give into pressure from your boss to fill the position quickly, says Sullivan. You must weigh the cost of a vacancy with “the cost of hiring a Homer Simpson,” especially for a critical, high-risk position. Simply put, don’t hire someone who’s just “pretty good” for a high-priority job. “It’s basic risk management,” says Sullivan.

Principles to Remember

Do

- Be objective and data driven in your job description by figuring out the top three characteristics/skills you seek; ignore superficial flaws like job-hopping.
- Focus on the applicant’s potential for growth and capacity to learn; knowledge and skills are more easily acquirable.
- Seek out others’ opinions on whether a candidate’s shortcoming is surmountable. Peers are particularly good at ferreting out this information.

Don’t

- Ignore character defects. If candidates lie, are abusive, or have lousy work habits, they're not likely to change.
- Overlook the importance of self-awareness and emotional intelligence — these are especially important for candidates who don't necessarily fit the mold.
- Succumb to pressure to hire someone who's just "pretty good" for a high-profile job. The cost of a bad hire is steep.

Advice in Practice

Case Study #1: Decide what attributes you really want in a candidate and assess interest in learning.

Peter Miller, CEO of Optinose, a specialty pharmaceutical company, says that inadequate job candidates are the norm, not the exception. "We all have things we're great at, and things we're not so great at," he says. "You won't have a perfect candidate coming through the door and — even after years of development — you won't have a perfect, well-rounded employee."

Earlier in his career, Peter cofounded Take Care Health — a company that manages convenient care clinics and worksite-based health centers — and he needed to hire a chief nurse practitioner officer to lead the nursing organization. Before he and his business partner, Hal Rosenbluth, even reviewed their slate of candidates, they decided on the non-negotiable attributes of the winning candidate.

"We said: What is mission critical to what we're trying to do? And we realized that we needed someone who could inspire and motivate the other nurse practitioners on the team and someone who had an unrelenting focus on patients."

Peter says they received a great deal of interest in the job. "We had a lot of applications from heads of nurse practitioner organizations and from nurses who were running major parts of hospitals," he recalls.

But instead, he was drawn to an unorthodox resume from Sandy Ryan. Sandy, a former Air Force major, was a nurse in a family clinic. "She had leadership experience — but not in the environment we were looking for," he says. "And she had zero business experience."

Despite these weaknesses, Peter and Hal brought her in for interviews. "I put the job description in front of her, and I said, 'Tell me about what you're going to be exceptional at, and conversely, tell me what you're going to struggle with.'"

Sandy discussed her medical expertise and her patient caretaking abilities. She was also open and honest about her flaws and her lack of business acumen. "Sandy talked about how she was going to go about learning the business and the steps she would take to look for help," says Peter. "It was clear that she was curious, passionate, and driven, and had a capacity to learn."

Peter says that his assistant at the time, Tammy McCauley, who now serves as chief administrative officer at Optinose, also provided a favorable opinion of Sandy. "Candidates can be very good at fooling you — they're trying to get the job, but I am always interested to hear how they interacted with Tammy and her impressions," he says. "I don't hire anyone unless Tammy has given her stamp of approval."

Sandy got the job and has been a "star in the industry," says Peter.

Case Study #2: Assess social skills in multiple ways and look for signs of self-awareness.

A few years ago, Phil Jones,* the CEO of a small software company, needed to hire a head of sales. He knew that finding the perfect candidate would be practically impossible. "There are two big categories of sales leaders," says Phil. "Some are more process-oriented; they love to get into the data. Others are the hard-charging types who know how to rally the troops. Rarely can you find someone who does both."

Phil had identified a strong candidate — "John" — who fell into the former category. Based on John's solid track record and self-proclaimed strengths in initial interviews, Phil was confident that John would be able to improve the efficiency of the sales process. However, his people skills were lacking. Phil was unsure about whether John would be able to generate excitement and encourage the sales team to do its best work.

To find out whether John's flaw was fatal, Phil and his executive team asked him structured interview questions designed to assess his EQ. "We asked him things like, 'Walk me through a time when you managed a star performer who was causing internal strain on the team,' and, 'Tell me about a time when you had to have a difficult conversation with an employee who was not making his numbers.' I wanted to know how he handled specific situations — what he did and how he did it."

John answered the questions well, so Phil asked him to undergo a personality assessment. The results showed he had high self-awareness. "I gathered that he had the potential to be a good manager and relate well with clients."

Phil also spoke at length with John's references. "One of the most compelling comments I got was this: 'John needs to be present in the field [with junior team members] more often because his mentorship is invaluable.'"

By the end of evaluation stage, Phil says he decided to take the plunge and hire him.

Ultimately, though, John was not able to form strong relationships with his direct reports. "I had hoped that if we gave him the right support and put in effort to make sure he bonded with the team he was inheriting, he would be a good fit."

Phil's initial hunch that John was motivated more by data than by people proved accurate. John's tenure at the company did not last long. "He did a lot of great things here — mostly around process. But

[the overall job] didn't work out."

** Names and identifying details have been changed.*

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Rebecca Knight is currently a senior correspondent at Insider covering careers and the workplace. Previously she was a freelance journalist and a lecturer at Wesleyan University. Her work has been published in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Financial Times*.