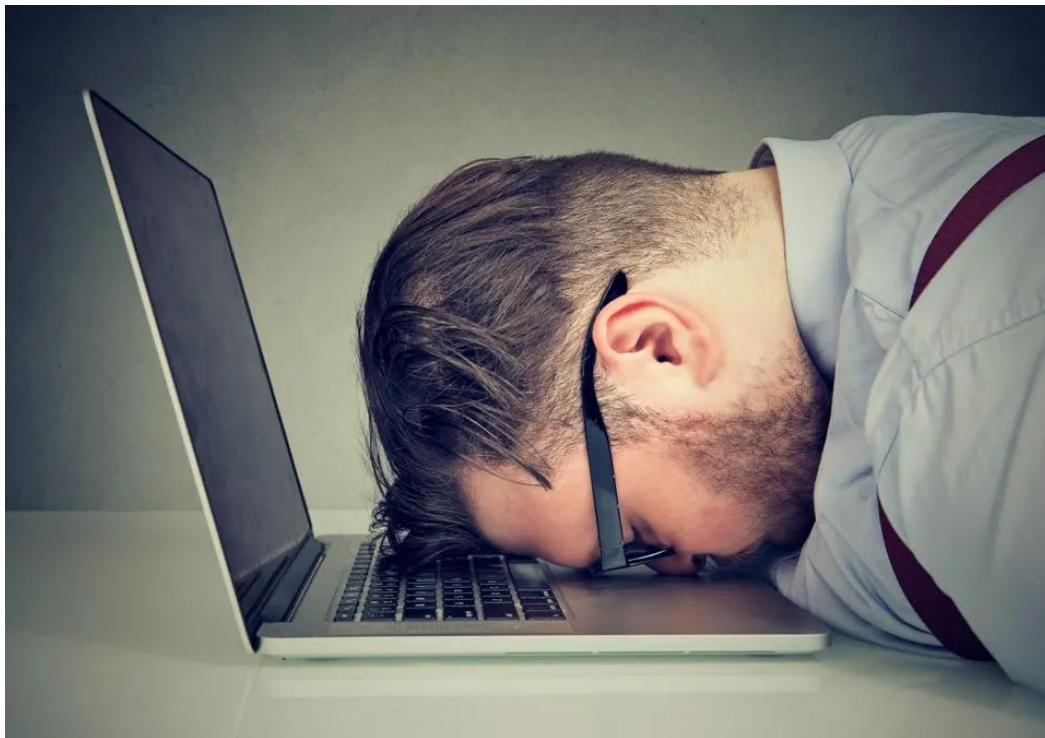FORBES > LEADERSHIP > CAREERS

The Bitter Truth About Why People Fail To Succeed In Their Jobs

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We hire for success but fire for failure. We promote people with the best education and experience and then complain that they can't lead their teams, build coalitions or resolve conflict. We think of people as great leaders and then get disappointed when they don't know how to manage. Disastrous hiring and

performance management methodologies are causing organizations, leaders and employees to fail.

Both sides are unhappy. Employees aren't being set up for success, and supervisors report being drastically dissatisfied with employee performance. The Eagle Hill National Attrition Survey found that "employers end up with average or low performers 75% of the time." This is a huge problem. We – employers, hiring managers and supervisors – get too excited about what people promise and too disappointed when they don't deliver.

This is the bitter truth about why people fail to succeed in their jobs.

The bitter truth is that soft skills trump hard ones.

We know that the most effective leaders and employees demonstrate superior skills in communication, conflict resolution, critical thinking, ethics and emotional intelligence. Soft skills trump hard ones, but we don't hire for them. Instead, we still prioritize candidate rankings by experience, education and school brands.

Education and experience matter, and depending on the job, hard skills such as budgeting, writing, software design, typing, engineering, etc. really matter. Hard skills are important considerations when making hiring and promotion decisions. I consider these factors when making hiring decisions, and depending on the position, the minimum education and experience requirements may be rather non-negotiable. However, the bitter truth is that soft skills provide a better metric than education and experience ever will for assessing performance and predicting success. Highly educated and very experienced employees get fired every day because they fail to demonstrate critical soft skills.

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I've worked with thousands of supervisors and executives, and they are not talking about how they need to hire people with higher levels of education and more experience. No, that is not their challenge. They tell me that they desperately need to get people who will demonstrate better behavior. They want people who can communicate better. They want people who can resolve conflicts better. They want people who think critically and who ask thoughtful questions. They want people who are ethical and demonstrate integrity. They want emotionally intelligent people who are self-aware, reflective, disciplined and motivated. They want people who will give feedback and are also happy to receive it.

Work experience is not a substitute for soft skills unless the hiring manager is able to design and apply metrics to evaluate the development level of specific soft skills. Also, a college degree can't substitute for soft skills. Supervisors and managers report that they want employees who are intentional about behavior, and a degree only shows that an employee was intentional about an accomplishment.

The bitter truth is that behavior trumps knowledge.

We can hire people for what they know (for all their education and experience), but they will fail if they don't make it a priority to manage their behaviors. Following is a list of reasons a cross-

section of directors, managers and supervisors shared with me during a meeting on performance management systems.

I asked the group of about 200 to share the "real" reasons that they either fired, refused to promote or downgraded a performance review on an employee within the prior two years. This is an aggregate list (in order of number of responses) for what they provided.

Employees were fired, not promoted or rated poorly because they

1. didn't seem to fit with the team, or they didn't "mesh" in with the organizational culture.
2. didn't know how to lead others.
3. because they didn't resolve conflict well at all or completely avoided it.
4. didn't write well enough, or they didn't speak well enough.
5. never asked questions and kept failing to understand or follow through on instructions.
6. didn't think critically about things; they didn't know how to evaluate information or assess different alternatives.
7. didn't take initiative, weren't motivated or because they didn't display drive.
8. didn't have integrity, or they lied about something their supervisor cared cared about.
9. actually stole something from the company.
10. weren't reliable and couldn't be trusted to deliver.
11. didn't come to work on time; late too often.
12. treated people harshly or seemed way too abrasive (workplace bullies).
13. were disrespectful and/or we didn't like their attitude; they just didn't "play well with others."
14. were a bit "off," or their personality seemed odd.
15. failed to effectively perform the duties for which they were hired even though they had the experience and education.

16. actually violated company policy.

17. didn't like their boss and/or didn't seem to like their job.

18. had inappropriate personal relationships or showed inappropriate behavior (on or off) the job.

19. were unethical or demonstrated some sort of illegal or immoral conduct.

As you probably noticed, the lack of a college degree and a lack of prior work experience aren't listed as mitigating factors. It is clear that most identified issues are directly connected to deficiencies in soft skills and behavior rather than any education or experience deficiency.

The bitter truth is that organizational leaders must do better.

Organizations absolutely have to create and apply better hiring and performance management methodologies.

Sure, employees are responsible for their own behavior, but they are not responsible for establishing the behavior or performance standards which they will ultimately be evaluated against. More often than not, the directors and managers in the group reported to me that they didn't have clearly defined performance standards and metrics for behavior or soft skills. They really couldn't properly develop or evaluate an employee for these aspects of the job, so they would find other "justifiable" reasons and ways to deal with the employee without ever really dealing with soft-skill deficiencies.

The bitter truth is that we've got to do better. Organizational leaders must design and apply methodologies for hiring and for effectively evaluating and managing performance. The organization deserves better. The struggling supervisors deserve better. The employees deserve better. The customers deserve better.

The debate is over. Soft skills matter now more than ever.

Organizational leaders can do better by taking these action steps:

- Design and apply a hiring methodology and performance management system that directly aligns the soft skills and specific behaviors that you value and require for both the actual position and for the organizational culture.

- Conduct a job analysis to thoroughly evaluate soft-skill needs and then identify the specific skills for the role and for the culture. Consider team dynamics and behaviors that all employees – regardless of position – will be expected to display.

- Re-evaluate the job description for the position you need to fill and incorporate language to describe the soft skills that the job will require.

- Hire for success by creating behavioral interview questions and assessments that are precisely designed to hone in on and display the soft skills the job requires.

Think about it.

We hire for experience, but we don't fire for it. We hire for a degree, but we don't fire for it. We hire for a particular certification, but we don't fire for it (except in instances where the person has lied about it). And we don't mitigate poor performance as a result of these credentials. Most, if not all, factors that contribute to poor performance and/or employee terminations correspond to deficiencies in soft skills and human behavior.

Until we align the primary hiring factors to the primary firing factors, nothing will change.

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