

“You fit the profile, you’re hired!”

by Dr. Andrea L. Santiago

“We are looking for team players. Are you a team player?” This was an actual interview question posed to an applicant. How do you suppose the applicant responded? Would an eager applicant ever admit he can’t work in a team?

At some point in our lives, we will be interviewers. Yet interviewing is often times taken for granted. “Isn’t it simply conversing? As long as I can ask questions, I can interview.” And so the untrained interviewer browses through the resume during the interview, throws out several questions, receives answers that confirm the required profile, hires applicants on this basis, and later confronts the question: “This employee cannot perform at the level we expected. How was he ever selected?”

Many seek comfort in the fact that organizations are given six months to determine whether a probationary employee will be retained or not. What is not apparent, however, are the costs associated with severing relations and hiring new employees to replace the poor performers. There are both direct and indirect costs for separating, acquiring and training. The bottom line is: profit is affected.

In statistics, we learn about type I and type II errors. We apply the same terms in recruitment and selection. A type I error occurs when we reject a qualified person. Conversely, a type II error means we recruit and hire an unsatisfactory performer. And where does the critical point of selection occur? The answer of course, is in the interview.

Some studies show that the interview is an unreliable predictor of performance. There are many things that may go wrong in an interview, most especially with untrained interviewers. The circumstances, the interviewing environment, the type of questions asked, the manner questions are asked, all affect the outcome of an interview. Yet the interview is a step in the selection process that is not done without.

The task of the human resource department of any organization is to minimize the errors in recruitment and selection. The confidence level in selecting high performers should be at least 90%. This begins with clearly defining the selection criteria. The interviewer must be clear as to the qualifications that lead to high performance.

The confidence level is then better improved with appropriate interview preparation, not only in interviewing techniques but also in interview design. Careful thought should be given as to who and how many will interview, when the interview should be, where should the interview be held, how much time to spend on the interview, what type of questions should be asked, what kind of information to share.

The purpose of the interview is draw out information from a candidate to determine whether the person can perform effectively given the corporate culture. There are five aspects that should be explored.

Can the person do the job? Does the applicant have the technical qualifications to perform well? Does he have the ability? Does he have the aptitude, appropriate educational background and relevant experience to prepare him for the various aspects of his work assignment?

Will the person do the job? Will he be properly motivated to consistently perform at his best? Given his abilities, what would drive him to be committed, to assume risk, to lead others to perform better?

Most work in corporate organizations requires some degree of social interaction, unless the job is to count microbes in a laboratory. How well does the person get along with others and himself? Is he socially effective? Can he get along well with others? Is he emotionally balanced?

How much trust can one place in the person? Does the applicant have good character? Is he honest? Reliable? Is he fair, impartial? Does he have the courage of convictions?

And finally, will the person fit in? Are the values and principles he believes in the same as the corporate values and principles? Will he be happy in the environment? Will this happiness lead to higher commitment and better productivity?

There are many ways of systematically collecting evidence on the five aspects. There are selection tests, normally used for lower ranking positions, there are reference checks, and then there is the crucial interview by the direct supervisor. Ask the right questions, ask the right way. Can high performers be selected? Definitely! With training and preparation, the likelihood of selecting the more effective performers increases. With better performers and lower turnover rates, the costs of recruitment and selection decrease thereby leading to better profit margins.

Going back to the question on team-playing: Seasoned interviews ask, not hypothetical questions where the answer is fairly obvious, but where the answer reveals the applicant's actual behavior, which can be verified (and which the applicant knows can be verified). To determine whether the applicant prefers to work alone or in a team, try this approach: "Describe in your previous job, a task where you had to work as part of a group, and a task where you had to work entirely by yourself. How did these tasks turn out? Which work situation did you prefer?" Past behavior predicts future behavior. If the applicant's story indicates a strong preference for working alone, he isn't likely to be an outstanding team player.

*Dr. Andrea L. Santiago, DBA is Associate Professor at the Business Management Department, College of Business and Economics of De La Salle University-Manila.*

Keywords: recruitment, selection, employment, job interview

*These article are contributed by the CBE Faculty in the column of Business Focus of Manila Bulletin published March 21, 2003.*