common sense hiring

Dr. Edward Wright & Dr. Theresa Domagalski

Few events are more unsettling for supervisors or disruptive to staff than the termination of an employee for poor performance. Negative emotions can be strong and often run the gamut from concern for the welfare of the employee's family to fear of reprisal from the individual. Clearly, it is desirable to hire those candidates that are well suited for the job and those who have the greatest likelihood of a successful future with the organization. So what advice can be given to supervisors and their HR Departments to enhance the employee selection process and minimize such incidents?

First and foremost, thoughtfully reconsider your organization's hiring practices. For most organizations, employee selection typically follows the sequential steps of: **1)** application review (cover letters and resumes), **2)** screening for top candidates, **3)** interviewing, and **4)** final assessment leading to a job offer or a re-start of the hiring process.

While there is no panacea that will eliminate all hiring mistakes, evidence based, best management practices (those supported by peer-reviewed research and enduringly successful companies), point to possible improvements for many firms. In the remainder of this article, we review the steps to candidate selection, benchmark best practices, and offer suggestions for putting your organization's results among the top tier in candidate recruitment and selection.

Application Review

Despite the importance of the resume and its content, little is documented in academic literature concerning its origins and evolution. Anecdotally, older and retired Americans who entered the workforce in the 1940s and 1950s recall filling out employment applications but typically not the submission of a resume. Research studies mentioning resumes appeared in the early 1970s. The editors of the Advanced Journal of Management (Autumn 1975, pp 53-59)

discussed the appropriate content, length, and form of the resume and provided a model for young managers unfamiliar with its composition. While the modern resume has evolved from the 1975 model (particularly in regards to recommended personal data), one aspect remains common. That is the insistence from recruiters that resumes remain brief. A review of contemporary publications regarding resume guidelines includes comments such as:

➤ *A simple résumé is a summary typically limited to one or two pages*

➤ *A résumé is short (usually one to two pages) and contains only experience directly relevant to a particular position.*

➤ *For new graduates or entry level positions, the trend is to not allow a résumé to exceed one page in length.*

With such brevity, is it any wonder that applicants go to great lengths to manage their resumes to catch the eye of the hiring

manager? Recent studies include papers regarding "ingratiation techniques", "impression management", and "personality inferences" relative to resume preparation. As a consequence of its brevity, supervisors and HR hiring managers often base their assessment of a candidate's application on sparse and highly manipulated data.

Screening

Savvy companies, recognizing the likelihood of resume impression management by the candidate and perceptual biases by the firm, obtain additional data prior to selecting candidates for interviews. A 2010 report on recruitment practices of "Best Places to Work" companies reveals that these firms use "a combination of valid selection tools, measuring the success of selection decisions, and amending processes as needed". Such tools include the pre-interview screening of applicants by telephone and/or the use personality and aptitude assessments intended to match candidate attributes to job requirements.

While the scope of this article does not allow a definitive discussion regarding appropriate assessment instruments, commonly used selection tools include ability tests (e.g., cognitive, physical, or psychomotor), knowledge tests, personality tests, and background checks, along with the systematic collection of biographical data. It should be emphasized that these as well as all personnel selection procedures should be validated for content, construct, and/or criterion-related validity and adhere to professional standards such as those of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology's (SIOP) Principles for Validation and Use of Personnel Selection .

Interviewing

Typically, the most promising 2 – 3 job applicants are invited to the workplace for face-to-face interviews prior to final candidate selection. Informal feedback from Supervisors in multiple industries indicates a wide variety of current practices. Some companies leave the choice of questions and topic discussion to the discretion of the hiring manager and his or her reports. Others rely upon a combination of peer interviews and the opinions of multiple interviewing managers. Often times, the greater the number of interviewers, the more likely it is that the candidate will fail to receive a fully consensual endorsement, adversely impacting the probability of employment. By the same token, the involvement of peers in the interview process optimizes the likelihood of hiring someone who is a good fit with the organization's culture and philosophy. Thus, are there best practices that produce more reliable results predicting the interview – job performance relationship?

Fortunately, interviewing is a well researched aspect of the hiring process. A meta-analysis of post-1989 interview research investigated structured as well as unstructured interview methods and determined the validity of three different structured interview types: behavior description interviews, situational interviews, and comprehensive structured interviews. Behavior description interviews focus on "what did you do when...."or past-oriented types of questions. Situational interviews ask candidates "what would you do if...." or future oriented questions. In contrast, comprehensive structured interviews are broad in scope and may contain questions related to situational, job knowledge, job simulation, and /or worker requirements.

First, results of the analysis found that structured interviews (systematic, patterned interrogation with a specific set of questions) demonstrate a substantially higher validity than unstructured interviews. This would indicate that the use of spontaneous, off-the-cuff interviewing practices by panels and hiring managers should be challenged and possibly curtailed in favor of more uniform procedures. Secondly, the validity of situational interviews ("what would you do if...." type questions) was greater than that of job behavior-related interviews. These, in turn, had higher validity than those interviews with more comprehensive content. Thirdly, individually conducted interviews were shown to be more valid than panel interviews. This was the case regardless of whether interviews were structured or unstructured and indicates that the use of panel-type interviews should be discouraged.

Final Assessment

It is an obvious understatement to say that a final assessment process for hiring successful employees depends upon a wide variety of criteria and is highly contextual. Besides candidate skills and personal attributes relative to job fit, a litany of other variables comes into play regarding organizational culture, employee circumstances, and environmental influences. However, while certain variables may be significant to hiring success for specific jobs or occupational groups, only a few are also substantive in a wide variety of contexts.

Wide ranging studies in many industries and over decades of time reveal that cognitive intelligence is the most influential predictor of employee success. This is followed by the personality factor "conscientiousness" – defined as "a tendency to show self-discipline, act dutifully, and aim for achievement" and to engage in "planned rather than spontaneous behavior". A second personality attribute, "emotional stability" is also correlated to employee success but less impactful than conscientiousness. Employees identified as emotionally stable tend to be "calm and free from persistent negative feelings". More recently, researchers have turned their attention to emotional intelligence as a predictor of employee success. Emotional intelligence, as distinct from cognitive intelligence or emotional stability, refers to the ability to identify and manage one's own emotions as well as the capacity to recognize correctly and deal appropriately with the emotions of others. These skills are especially germane to organizational settings that emphasize collaboration and teamwork.

Occupational research has ascertained that supervisors often try to assess a candidate's intelligence and personality during the interview; however, findings are mixed regarding their success due in part to the variability of the interviewers' skills. Clearly, relying solely upon the interview for final assessment and candidate selection is not desirable. While the use of assessment tools is highly recommended during the screening phase of the hiring process, their use at the final assessment step is essential for minimizing poor decisions and eventual performance issues. Even though the expense of utilizing assessment tools may seem considerable, reliance upon informal, unstructured hiring methods such as intuition, appearances, or recommendations has proven to be unreliable and more expensive time after time again. So, to ensure that you hire qualified employees who possess the desired mix of skills required to perform the job and the personal attributes that will ensure high levels of productivity and engagement, a carefully planned and executed hiring process will reap dividends for your organization. sv