

# Management In Real Life

by Kevin Herring

Do you ever feel like you're going in circles? Early in my HR career, I was concerned about fairness in employment decisions and worked hard to remove all subjectivity from the hiring process. Now I find myself looking for ways to introduce subjectivity back into the process.

I know what you HR folks are thinking. You're worried about all those lawsuits resulting from managers who want to hire their cousin's neighbor's niece, and those rejected candidates who feel they were treated unfairly. Okay. So maybe we don't want to return wholeheartedly to the "gut feel" approach to hiring, but consider this. Have you ever met somebody and wondered how they could possibly be successful at what they do only to be surprised when you find out that they are a top producer? Have you ever been amazed by someone who everyone thought would be lucky to last a month in a job, and find them years later regarded as one of the best people ever to hold the position?

In my own experience, I have seen people hired who many would consider to be easy rejections in the application process. I once recommended for hire a young man who had been fired from his previous job. He turned out to be one of the best workers we ever hired, and as a result, I received accolades for years. In another company, I had a very sophisticated selection process that we went to great lengths to validate statistically. A candidate failed the process hands-down, but the hiring manager went ahead and hired him anyway. Much to my chagrin this employee turned out to be an outstanding contributor to the department.

I have seen people who are willing to challenge the status quo labeled a "pain-in-the-neck" in one company and a "real go-getter" in another. I have known employees who were considered mediocre at best suddenly be considered brilliant by a new manager or employer with equally high standards. I can name many more typically considered ineligible for hire or unlikely prospects for success who, once hired, demonstrated superior skills on the job. In fact, there's almost no end to the list of great inventors and business icons who, by today's hiring standards, would probably fall into the hard-core unemployable category. It seems that no matter how well-developed the hiring process, there are those who fail to fit the success criteria mold.

Although personality tests have fallen out of favor in recent years, many organizations still rely on them to ensure they hire the "right kind of person" for the job. Competency-based selection methods attempt to ensure that employees have requisite skills and abilities, and paper-and-pencil tests are often used to determine an applicant's probability of job success. In fact, an industrial/organizational psychologist once told me that with a 15-minute paper-and-pencil test he could predict success on the job with 80% accuracy. However, in all these selection processes, there exists a percentage of people who will access and employ attributes not adequately accounted for in formal selection processes and prove their ability to excel in the work. Those who have participated in traditional assessment centers have experienced this when, in a workplace simulation, a job candidate accomplishes a task effectively without using the competencies thought to be required for the task.

I suppose we can justify our disinterest in those who don't fit the mold when we have plenty of applicants that do. But I think there is a business case to be made for allowing some discretion, or flexibility, in hiring. Of course, I'm not suggesting we introduce illegal or unethical hiring processes, or irresponsible practices either. Believe me, over the years I've seen a lot of bizarre decision-making processes used by hiring managers that only invited suspicion and criticism. Nevertheless, I do believe that we have been unable, in formal selection systems, to capture all of the qualities that predict job success. Since we don't know what all of those qualities are, we need to allow room for decision makers to consider "other" qualities in job candidates.

Who knows? Maybe those who fail to fit the mold today have what it takes to create success tomorrow. Then again, maybe they have what we need today. We'll never know unless we come full circle and re-introduce some degree of discretion, subjective as it may be, back into the process.

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