

Why extensive candidate testing won't find you the best employees

Description

One of my managers devised a mental agility test he gave to all the candidates he was interviewing. It went like this: on a normal clock face, what is the angle between the hands if the time is 3:15? He was hiring engineers, so like me, engineers typically love these kinds of math/logic puzzles, and he wanted to see how people could think on their feet. But how much emphasis do you put on the answer to the question? And is it even ethical to give someone an ability test like this? And what is the angle anyway?

Would I lie to you?

Finding the right people for your open positions in a company can be one of the most stressful, daunting tasks. Choosing new employees can alter your company culture, launch your productivity or hinder it, provide you with trusted allies in your mission, or create toxic problems you have to correct. Most traditional hiring practices involve CV reviews, face-to-face (or nowadays Zoom calls) interviews, and reference checks. How much can you trust these activities to reveal the individual's true nature and get to the heart of whether they have the right skills, talent, personality, and motivation?

We all wind up asking the same tired, and overused questions to try and get to the truth like:

- What is your greatest strength
- What is your greatest weakness
- Tell me something that isn't on your resume
- Tell me about a difficult work situation and how you overcame it
- Why are you leaving your current employer?
- What is your ideal boss like?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
- If you were a color, what color would you be and why?

Even when you go through all this effort, you may be disappointed in the new employee once they start and they aren't everything they promised to be in the interviewing process. Some people are really good at bullshitting their way through an interview to get the job. So why not do even more testing to weed out the liars and cheats, right?

Being clever doesn't mean being smart

One option I've seen some companies turn to is aptitude tests. Anything from math quizzes for accountants (poor bastards), to IQ tests, these companies and leaders think this is a sure-fire way to weed out the resume exaggerators and get to the truth of who a person really is. A truly analytical way to select the perfect candidate, right? Hang on.

Robert Sher, a contributor online with Forbes, advocates for candidate screening with [testing](#). He says

a better way to minimize the costs of hiring is to craft a customized testing scheme where you test for the minimum skills a person needs to have in order to do the job you are recruiting. This way, he argues, you can be assured the candidate can do the basics and you weed out the 'posers' who try to dupe you in an interview that they're more qualified.

While a customized test looking only for technical skills that are a minimum is a better approach than a general IQ-type test, I think it focuses on the wrong aspect of hiring people: the person's character, motivation and ability to learn and adapt. This is one reason why I believe a rigorous technical test is a completely wrong direction to finding the best candidates.

Culture and work ethic is the most important aspect when hiring new employees, and it's way more important than how well someone tests on technical skills. Skills can be learned and improved, but someone's beliefs, ethics, and values will not likely change for you.

People aren't computers, and there is no single objective way to screen out people and be assured they will be great employees. Some people don't respond well to test settings but can perform very well in the workplace. Some cognitive tests can actually lead to discrimination as [well](#), so you also open yourself to the risk of lawsuits and actions against you if someone believes and can show that your test unfairly evaluated the candidate's abilities.

Skills testing seems like a clever way to make hiring objective, fair and easy for you as the recruiter to find those unicorns in your unending stack of CV's on your desk. But in reality you will likely lose some potential great employees while you try to outsmart the liars.

And what does it say about you?

To me, testing candidates also implies that you don't trust these people. And while it is true that people will always present the best version of themselves on resumes and interviews, most people are honest about who they are (with only slight exaggerations). By insisting on testing your candidates you are telegraphing the world that you are a mistrusting boss. You are letting all your potential employees know that they have to prove themselves to you every day. That isn't leadership, that's running a prison work camp.

If you are looking for mindless automatons that will keep their heads down in their drab grey cubicles, and crunch out results for you and never talk to anyone, then by all means test them for their ability. But that's all you will get. you won't find out if these people can be future leaders for you, or bring great teamwork, or tell you the truth when you need to hear it.

Another thing it tells candidates is that you're not willing to help them learn. You're saying to them, "you better come with all the skills you need, because you're on your own in this company". Great first impression (that's sarcasm).

Also, it can be very demeaning for the candidates. Imagine you're a veteran procurement manager with 15 years in the business, and you're interviewing for a position in a new company. You go through an interview, then another with the next level management and they like your personality work experience, and educational background. They ask you to complete a review of a sample contract template and 'spot the errors'. The final step for them is a test on building a business case for a

hypothetical supplier selection, including doing hours of research and presenting to them.

While you can do the work because it's been your career for 15 years, why would you have to prove your skills like that after doing the job successfully for so long? Wouldn't it feel like you they are treating you like a fresh-out-of-school new grad? Wouldn't you feel like they don't trust your background and resume and knowledge from the interviews, and they are trying to catch you in a lie somehow? Maybe you would decide to walk away from it, and they would lose a great potential candidate.

And even if the candidate does all that work and presents successfully, what lingering resentment will there be about your approach of mistrust?

By the way, this is a real-life situation of a colleague of mine.

Hey, why not try being human? I know it's crazy

Great organizations are built on relationships, not on skills. Yes, everyone has to perform their roles to the best of their abilities and you always want people with great skills. But the highest-performing companies are built on great teamwork, values, culture and leadership.

So when you are hiring, why not focus on these attributes instead of technical skills. And trust people. You hope that the people you hire will be great colleagues for years, and even friends. Don't start relationships with mistrust.

Take time in interviews to get to know them as human beings, their interests, their values, their vision of a great place to work. And ask yourself if their values, interests, and culture matches yours. Ask them details of their skills, to get a comfort they know what they are doing, and then trust that it's good enough for you.

I find that the most important 'skills' great employees all share are:

1. Honesty and directness
2. Desire and ability to learn
3. Accountability
4. Teamwork and social connectedness

Notice none of that involves directly someone's technical skills? Because in a complex workplace, what is most important is how well people work together to get jobs done and solve problems, not how good any one individual is. If someone can be honest about mistakes they've made or things they don't know, if they can be willing to learn everything it takes to excel, if they can be accountable to deadlines, quality and decisions, if they can work well and support others, then they will be rockstars. Nothing else matters more.

In the end, no one is going to be perfect

People are messy, and imperfect. That's life being human on this planet. You can't get around it so embrace it instead. Some of the best and brightest people I've had the privilege to work with came into their jobs with almost no experience or 'technical' skills but came with curiosity, energy and

enthusiasm. Within weeks or months these people surpassed their peers with years of experience.

Hiring employees is an act of faith; you have to believe and trust they are going to be great. If you focus on values instead of skills, most of the time you will get it right. Be willing to invest in people early on in their time with you and it will really pay off.

I think some managers look for new employees that fit perfectly into their jobs with zero training, zero investment of their time, and can never get it wrong. Which is why these type of managers turn to aptitude tests to ensure they don't have to help these people when they join. It's naïve, unrealistic, and can set up these employees to be a disappointment if they aren't 'perfect' right away.

If you're still trying to work it out, the angle of the hands at 3:15 is 7.5 degrees.

Category

- Uncategorized

Date Created

June 2021

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