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Hiring the best: It's more than interviewing good people

Hiring managers want to hire the best, of course, and often use face-to-face interviews as the primary path for hiring decisions. Defining “the best” may be more difficult than it seems. Five individuals with identical credentials and experience may not have equal chances of succeeding in a given position at a given company. Success or failure in a new position goes beyond credentials and experience and into the culture, personality and temperament of the company as well as the perception of the position by both the candidate and the company. What can line managers and human resource professionals do to ensure that on the day of the interview they really are looking at the best candidates for the job?

Line managers, in addition to their day-to-day responsibilities, are charged with building good teams. In any workplace there are internal assumptions and terminology that are believed to be well understood. Consequently, as discussions for a new position take place, these assumptions and terminology are included without critical review. The hiring manager and the human resource partner are deeply imbedded in the organization. They use language that is clear and understood between them. There is no perceived need for further clarity. These internal codes are almost sub-conscious and very difficult to detect. When someone from outside the organization reads or hears about a position, those assumptions or terminology are translated into another context, not necessarily the same as that of the hiring manager.

An executive search consultant, listening carefully to a discussion between the HR professional and the line manager, identifies those internal codes and helps the client understand how a thoughtful candidate will hear and understand a position description. Writing a detailed position document for a client allows them to understand how positions will be perceived by candidates. In addition, reframing the internal language allows clients to hear their own assumptions and terminology. This enables them to make critical revisions to the nature and scope of a position description and to be clear about expectations. When there is a shared and clear understanding of expectations, it is much more likely that the candidate will meet them.

Successful individuals want engaging, strategically important and rewarding work. Understanding why a position is strategically important to an institution frames the larger context of any position. A clear discussion about the tactical issues associated with the larger strategic objectives provides candidates with an understanding of the level of institutional commitment to the role and whether the opportunities and challenges are engaging. Clear concrete measures of success, with specific delivery periods, allow candidates to evaluate how thorough management has been in developing the position. When measures of success are specific, and clearly relate to the strategic and tactical objectives of the institution, potential candidates' reaction to any position will be much more positive. The thoughtfulness of it demonstrates to the candidate the importance of the position within the organization.

Line managers and their supporting HR professionals should be as candid as possible about challenges and issues within the organization. It is human nature to avoid discussing anything that might be perceived negatively. Organizations have external reputations that are based on interactions with third parties and former employees. Negative perceptions and experiences tend

Quorum

to travel faster than positive views as people “warn” friends and colleagues. Regardless of the challenge or issue, it is important is that these issues are well understood and discussed openly. In one instance, a global investment management client was seeking to hire a country manager. Many candidates found the position interesting but perceived the designated country of operations as a career dead end. The client, on the other hand, felt its name and reputation should more than compensate for the location of the position. After a frank and open discussion, including a review of both internal and external candidate reactions, it became clear that the role needed redefining to include career advancement outside of the host country.

Potential candidates need to be sure a position is right for them. They will try to determine how the role fits with their professional development and if they have the right experience or skill set to be successful. They may have some knowledge of the hiring company and a sense of whether or not they are a “fit.” This last point is very important. This is where the culture of a company becomes critical. Cultural attributes are difficult to define and even harder to communicate.

So now the candidates understand the range and scope of the role. They have an understanding of the issues and challenges that need to be faced. But they still do not know what it will *feel* like to work in the client organization. They need and want to understand the culture and temperament of the business. The word culture raises a wide range of complex issues. Many companies spend a significant amount of money to define their culture and values. So how can line managers and their HR partners help an outsider understand the environment within the company?

Reviewing experiences of recent hires, whether successful or not, can help to articulate different dimensions of the institution’s culture and temperament. Discussing how decisions are made and how issues are raised within the organization discloses important aspects of the company culture. Asking how bad news is received is a good way to learn about the temperament of a company. There are a few ways to facilitate this understanding. In the first instance, it starts with line managers and their immediate reports. Listening to the line manager describe each member of his team; how and why they are valued, providing a balanced assessment of key skills and abilities, and defining specifically what it is that makes them effective both within and outside the department. This should include a discussion of the line manager’s management style, how the manager gets comfortable with members of the team, and how trust is built or broken.

It is also important to understand what challenges the line manager has with the institution and what are the most effective ways of managing those issues. The HR business partner can provide insight into how other managers negotiate their way through the institution and deal with similar issues. By listening carefully to these conversations and synthesizing them, it is possible to define the culture and temperament of an organization that rings true to the line manager and HR professional, yet is clear to someone unfamiliar with the company.

The issues discussed here are neither easy nor trivial. However, what they yield is a deeper understanding on the part of clients and candidates about the goals, objectives and expectations for a given position. The time and energy invested in the deeper understanding of the company

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allows potential candidates to decide quickly if the opportunity presented is right for them and to subsequently make a solid, well-informed decision to accept a position.

Quorum markets clients to potential candidates. Each client has a story to tell and marketing that story is a part of attracting high quality candidates. By the time candidates reach the interview, the client will still have a difficult decision. But rather than having to decide *if* they would hire any individual, they will have to decide *which* individual to hire, since they'll want to hire them all.

Francis Goldwyn
Managing Director
Quorum Associates LLC
www.quorumassociates.com

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Quorum is a retained international executive search firm with offices in New York and London. You can email Francis Goldwyn by [clicking here](#), or contact him by phone in New York at (212) 231-8343 or in London at +44 (207) 193-9267.