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Finding the Hidden Gems to Meet Your Hiring Needs

This is the second of two articles on "hidden gems" – the uniquely talented people who are often hiding in plain sight. In this article, I focus on what it takes to find and hire the best people for the job.

Most leaders know that having the right talent – the best people in the right roles – is the key to competitive advantage for any company. And that all begins with recruiting and hiring the best people.

But what do we mean by "best"? Are they the ones who fit the job spec perfectly or could grow into it? Should they have all the knowledge and skills to do the job today or could they learn them on the job? Is experience or capability more important? Should they be ambitious strivers or quietly competent?

These are some of the questions employers are struggling with as they seek to fill job openings with new people. But before we answer them, there is arguably a more important question: are we inadvertently limiting the pool of suitable candidates before we start to apply specific selection criteria? Given the growing call for diversity in hiring to keep pace with the increasing diversity of the population, are the usual procedures for sourcing and screening job applicants leaving out people who could become valuable long-term employees that don't fit the usual mold?

The purpose of this article is to propose two areas where you can increase the diversity of great job candidates without sacrificing quality: opening the doors to candidates who might otherwise be excluded, and what to look for when deciding among seemingly equally qualified candidates.

Expanding the candidate pool

It should be obvious that the more qualified candidates you have, the better your chances of hiring the best possible ones. Unfortunately, many assumptions about what qualifies one candidate over another are just plain wrong and limit the pool of good people you could consider. So, here are three tips for increasing the quantity of candidates without sacrificing quality:

Lower the academic achievement barrier. The abilities needed in work and in life are different from those needed to achieve academic success. Good grades and test scores are fine, but academic smarts and book learning don't substitute for the learning that comes with practice and experience. After a certain point, abilities like communication, influence, and working well with others become more important. Therefore, rachet down the weight you give to grades and scores: someone who works really hard to get C's and B's can be a much better bet than someone who slides through school with straight A's.

Beware of personality testing for "fit". Recent research shows that being conscientious, agreeable, and open to experience are good predictors of success at work. However, over-using personality test scores to assess culture fit can cause serious problems and limit the diversity of your talent pool de facto. It's more important to learn whether a candidate's preferences tor types of work fit the nature of the job and whether their values align with those of your organization. Beyond that, though, don't hire for the same kinds of personalities that are the norm – people of all types can be great at the job you need done.

Distinguish "nice to have" from "essential". When you are looking for skills and experience requirements, don't overdo it. Challenge yourself to justify why X years' experience in an activity or prior role is more important than the ability and willingness to learn. And ask whether a particular knowledge or skill can be acquired on the job or whether it is absolutely needed for the new hire to hit the ground running. Setting up too many filters in your hiring criteria will almost guarantee that you will not find anyone who qualifies. The perfect hires will inevitably be those who are drawn to the nature of the work and see being a part of your organization as the start of a satisfying career.

Selecting the better candidates

Once you have expanded the pool, it's time to fish for the most promising candidates. Of course, you will want to assess for the non-negotiable skills and experiences required in the job. However, for those who pass this threshold, there are other things to look for that can tip the balance toward favoring one candidate over another – such as the following:

Have they worked their way through school? Working in an outside job to help pay for their education while taking a full academic load teaches how to balance work, school, and life and is a sign of motivation to succeed.

Have they served in the military? A tour of duty before, after, or even in place of college offers opportunities for leadership and personal growth along with advanced technical training, not to mention benefits like tuition assistance that can be applied to education.

Have they worked for a volunteer organization? Working in a community or nonprofit organization dedicated to helping others shows selfless service and a sense of purpose – desirable attributes in an employee.

Have they played a significant role on a team? Taking a lead role in activities such as a team sport, school newspaper, theater group, or student government indicates the ability to play well with others, and potentially to be a leader.

Are they drawn to your organization's purpose? If your organization boasts a compelling mission that stakes out its defining difference, candidates whose own sense of purpose aligns with that mission will be better long-term fits than those merely looking for "a job".

Solving two problems at once

There were two objectives that spurred putting these thoughts into writing. The first was how to find qualified people to fill an expanding set of new job openings; I addressed this by suggesting ways to unlock reservoirs of talent already in your organization that are ignored or undervalued. The second – arguably the more important one – was to help provide employment access to people overlooked by today's recruiting practices – including skill, personality, and even IQ tests, and algorithms that scan job applications and resumes.

In sum, I'm arguing for taking a fresh look at what really matters and considering factors that reveal personal qualities that are important in an employee regardless of the job. By doing this, I believe we can open up opportunities for greater numbers of people to have gainful and fulfilling employment in the years to come.

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About the author

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