

8 Great Ways to Make Bad Hiring Decisions

By Lou Adler

As a business owner or manager, many important decisions, especially hiring decisions, are based on invalid assumptions, false impressions, personal beliefs, and lack of objective data.

Here are 8 common ways people make hiring mistakes:

1. Make emotional decisions and justify them with facts.

It is easy to make quick judgments about a candidate based on the four "A's" - how attractive, articulate, assertive, and affable the candidate is. Candidates who pass the test are asked easier questions, with the manager looking for information to justify the positive impression. Contradictory and negative information is ignored.

Candidates who don't meet the appropriate first impression standard are assumed incompetent, with the interviewer asking tougher questions and seeking only information to prove their initial emotional judgment. Why waste your valuable time? Instead, just conduct a five-minute interview and forget collecting any facts. It won't make any difference in your final decision, anyway.

2. Do not seek out objective data if it contradicts your beliefs or ignore it if you find some.

I remember meeting a very attractive and seemingly quite competent candidate for a VP HR spot, who gave a superficial answer to an HR strategy question. I had to fight with myself about whether to ask a challenging follow-up question which would prove she was unqualified on this important job criteria. After some soul searching, I asked the question, which she flubbed, and she was not presented.

The point of this is that it's very tough to eliminate a candidate you like, and even tougher to seek out positive information for candidates you don't initially think would fit. So rather than get to the truth, go the easy route, and trust your gut feelings and first impressions.

3. Make sure no one knows the real job.

The purpose of a job interview is to determine competency and motivation to do the actual work required. If you don't know what work the candidate is actually going to be doing it's impossible to assess motivation. Competency, on the other hand, is pretty easy to figure out with just a rough understanding of job needs. Unfortunately, when you look at the underperformers in your company, you'll discover most of them are quite competent to do the work, they just don't find the work they're doing very satisfying.

These are the people that need to be over-managed and pushed to achieve average results. So to make sure you hire more of these people, go out of your way to not tell the person you're hiring anything about the job until the day she starts. What a surprise that will be.

4. Use skills-based job descriptions to find, screen, and assess candidates.

The best candidates tend to have a track record of achievement, comparable (but not identical) skills, and are quick-learners. This is how the best talent is promoted within an organization. Yet, when hiring from outside we use a criteria that eliminates these

top performers from consideration, seeking only those candidates who have exactly the right skills doing exactly the same work. The only people who fit this criteria are average candidates. So keep up the average work. While you won't get promoted, you will get hired.

5. Make sure that interviewers are untrained and can ask any questions they want.

Hiring mistakes are no big deal, so why not let anyone interview the candidate, ask any questions they want, and then ask them whether you should hire the person using whatever criteria they think appropriate. To make matters worse, only let untrained interviewers meet your candidates. This will certainly impress those top candidates you see regarding your company's level of professionalism.

6. Add up the yes and no votes.

Here's a sure-fire way to get the hiring decision wrong...let each untrained, biased, emotional, and superficial interviewer have a full yes/no vote on who should get hired. Then to even out these errors, give a no vote more power than a yes vote, give unprepared interviewers the same voting rights as prepared interviewers, and then add up the votes. To make sure this process works as described, do not challenge anyone's assessment, just in case the person might get offended. This is more important than the right answer.

7. Force candidates to formally apply before you can even chat with them.

Top people, when they just enter into the job-hunting process, have lots of questions and are comparing different companies and situations. One good way to prevent seeing or hiring any of these people is to not let them talk with anyone in the company unless they formally apply first. Most won't, but if you have some persistent person who still decides to apply anyway, make sure you have him complete a rigorous application process, submit a resume and a statement that everything stated is true. Of course, to make sure a good person doesn't sneak through this bureaucratic blockade, be sure not to contact the person for at least a week. Collectively, this will show the person you mean business.

8. Focus on compensation and skills rather than career opportunities.

Since the best people are more concerned with career growth, the opportunity to make an impact and want to know the broad details about the job before getting serious, we don't want to give them any of this information. Who knows, somebody good might actually be interested in and qualified for one of our open jobs. Instead, to prevent this from happening, don't discuss the job at all, first screen candidates only on their skills and then tell them what your comp range is.

If there isn't a fit here, don't waste your time, just go on to another candidate. You certainly wouldn't want to ask candidates about some of their major achievements first and see if any of your other openings better match their needs. They actually might be interested in one of these jobs, despite the comp range. Wouldn't that mess things up?

You can see why these are my favorite rules for not hiring good people. What amazes me is that so many companies follow them and expect different results.