

How to Eliminate the Three Biggest Hiring Errors

by Lou Adler

Consider this: Based on hundreds of observations, about two-thirds of the time hiring errors can be attributed to one of three major interviewing mistakes. They're all easy to correct. It only takes a few simple steps which anyone can learn and use.

The reason no one has solved the problem before is interesting just in itself. First, it's so obvious and too simple. You don't get a PhD for identifying simple problems to solve. Second, no one came up with a simple solution to solve the simple problem. This is only natural since the experts were trying to solve the wrong problem (they're still trying to solve it, by the way). Third, managers don't like to change things, especially the way they interview, unless they're forced to do it. Who can blame them?

Most past hiring and interviewing solutions have been overly complex and not as effective as they should be, given the effort required to implement them. This has to do with the "wrong problem, wrong solution" approach generally followed in the past. My advice: If stuff you do doesn't work, don't do it any more. That's a pretty simple life rule — unfortunately one which not enough people follow.

Here's what I've identified as the three biggest hiring errors:

Error 1: Hiring people who are competent, but not motivated.

This is attributed to hiring people based on their resumes and how well they present themselves during the interview. When you hire on skills and presentation, you hire lots of people who are motivated to get the job, but not to do the work. Not surprisingly, their motivation stops the day they get hired. You can't correlate energy, motivation, and initiative shown during the interview with on-the-job performance. Instead, you need to determine what types of work motivated people to excel on the job.

Error 2: Hiring people who are partially competent.

This is due to the fact that managers globalize strengths and weaknesses. If someone is smart or creative or insightful, we never check to see if they are good at managing, good at executing, good at designing, good at dealing with pressure, or good at dealing with everything else they need to be good at. Intuitive interviewers incorrectly assume that strength in one area correlates with strength in everything. Conversely, if someone is weak at one thing or answers a question incorrectly or is a little nervous, the interviewer assumes total incompetence.

It doesn't really matter if you measure 7 competencies, 12 behaviors, or 10 performance traits (my personal preference); what matters is that you measure lots of stuff independently and more than once. This is how you obtain a "whole person" evaluation across all job needs. Often strengths and weaknesses balance themselves out, but the real key, as you'll discover below, is that looking objectively is more important than what you're looking for. (Note: this is why any structured interview will work, since it eliminates the tendency to globalize strengths or weakness error.)

Error 3: The best person is normally not hired.

The best employees are frequently not great candidates. On-the-job best employees work hard, work well with others, consistently meet or exceed expectations, have great potential, and can lead others. Yet these great people won't get hired if they're also not great interviewees or don't have all the requisite skills perfectly aligned on their resumes. What a waste. Most companies go out of their way to hire top candidates, and never consider all the top employees they didn't hire. This is a metric that should be tracked. You'll quickly discover that half of your sourcing problems have been solved. If you're a recruiter, you've experienced this problem first hand. How many of your best people didn't get the job that you knew was perfect for them?

Eliminating these three problems is easy, cheap, and fast. It only takes the following simple approach. The key is to establish a rule-based process that forces companies to overcome their personal biases and remain objective throughout the interview process.

1. Eliminate traditional job descriptions and substitute a performance profile in their place. A performance profile describes the top six to eight things a top person needs to do on the job to be considered successful. The job description should just describe minimal skills and experience requirements. It's what a person does with these skills that matter. Not having a realistic measurement standard allows managers to insert their personal biases into the assessment equation.
2. Neutralize personal biases to force objectivity during the interview. Most managers make quick emotional or intuitive decisions based on first impressions and gut feelings. Bringing these emotional biases to the conscious level is a key part of eliminating hiring mistakes. One way to do this is to objectively and formally measure first impressions at the end of the interview when the interviewer is no longer emotionally engaged. This can be supported by having interviewers track how they react to candidates when they first meet them. The difference between the initial emotional reaction and the more objective later measure of first impression quickly reveals the interviewer's personal biases. This simple technique forces objectivity.
3. Conduct a work history review during the first 20 to 30 minutes of the interview. Just mechanically asking candidates to describe each of their past jobs reveals a great deal about the candidate. Some of the information that needs to be gathered includes titles, company names, promotions, gaps in employment, team details, reasons for coming and leaving, the highlights of major accomplishments, and any recognition received. After 20 to 30 minutes, you'll know if the person is a viable candidate.
4. Get detailed examples of major accomplishments. With this work history review in hand, the balance of the interview involves asking the candidate to describe a few of his or her major accomplishments in great detail. Getting comprehensive information about three or four major team, individual, and job-related accomplishments reinforces the information obtained during the work history review. Trend lines and consistency are easy to observe. Core behaviors like initiative, team skills, technical competency, drive, and thinking skills are accurately revealed by understanding what a person has accomplished with their skills and ability. This also reveals true motivation. Understanding what motivates a candidate to excel is a primary outcome of the assessment process.

5. Conduct a formal multi-trait assessment that's been justified. Just filling in a form is not a formal assessment. For one thing, formal means that the ranking needs to be justified based on proof. For example, to say someone is a strong team player because the person was affable during the interview is not enough. Instead, you need two to three detailed examples of when the person helped other team members to succeed. Conversely, eliminating a candidate on culture fit because the person "just didn't feel right" is equally flawed. Examples of how the person under performed in a comparable environment would need to be provided to justify a low ranking.

However, the real key here is that it doesn't really matter what factors you measure; it's the objective measuring and required justification that provides the benefit. One way to implement this type of process is to conduct a formal debriefing session with all of the interviewers in attendance. You should lead this. This increases the company's influence and insures a more objective evaluation. As you go through each of the traits, behaviors and competencies, make each interviewer justify his or her evaluation with a specific example. Do not accept feelings or beliefs as evidence. It's okay if you need to re-interview the candidate to get more accurate information or details. This formal review will reinforce what information is required and improve the next round of interviews.

6. Make the process mandatory. While the impact of preventing the three common hiring mistakes is profound, an important part of making it work is the need to make the process mandatory. Low user acceptance is a common problem with any type of change initiative. Unless managers are required to modify their natural behavior in this critical area, they won't do it. Some type of formal requirement needs to be imposed with penalties assigned for failure to comply.

Of course, following the hiring rules is only half of the battle. After the candidate is hired, managers then must measure how successful they were. To do this, you need to formally compare how the candidate actually performed to their interview score on the ten factors. This type of feedback loop allows the company and individual managers to improve what's measured and how to best conduct the measuring.

Implementing something like this is a pretty big project, but one with a huge ROI. Each hiring mistake can cost you big time, so eliminating just a few errors makes it all worthwhile. Some of this stuff you can do on your own just to develop the proof you'll need to get senior manager buy-in.

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