

## Peeling Back the Onion

By Randall Birkwood

What does "peeling back the onion" mean to you? For you who have not heard the expression, it refers to learning more about something or someone by peeling back the layers. It's unfortunate that we don't do a very good job of peeling back the onion when it comes to hiring people.

We make only the slightest effort to know what a candidate is made of. We typically bring them in for a round of interviews and ask them only the most basic of questions that refer to their experience and knowledge. We then make them an offer and — voila! — they're hired.

Can you imagine if you did that with a prospective spouse? I don't mean spending only four hours interacting with him on dates; I mean spending only four hours asking him the most basic questions about dating experiences, whether he likes kids and pets, etc. Well, folks, that's how deep we get when it comes to hiring. We make a decision that will affect our company's future based on a few disorganized meetings with a candidate — and we haven't even peeled back the first two layers!

So how do we go about peeling back the onion so we can truly learn about the candidates we interview?

First of all, we have to determine what we want to learn about them. Will their past work experience be a predictor of their success at your company? Sometimes, but not always. Is their knowledge a good predictor of their success? Sometimes, but not always. Are their behaviors an important predictor of success? Always.

So why do we relentlessly focus on someone's experience and knowledge, but seldom learn about what makes her tick? I have rarely seen anyone get fired for poor knowledge, but I have often seen people let go because of a poor attitude, laziness, or unwillingness to work with others.

When you put a recruitment strategy together, I suggest you consider these questions:

1. What attributes and behaviors can we consistently assess to ensure we make a hire who will be more productive and stay longer?
2. Which kinds of experience and knowledge are essential for a job, and which are merely "nice to have"?

A good example is peeling back the onion when looking for a spouse. If your date is beautiful, successful, and drives a great car, but at the same time angry at the world, rude to your family, and terribly selfish, the marriage will not work.

That's why you must find a way to learn more than what a candidate has done at previous jobs and what she knows about her profession. You must learn her personal attributes and the behaviors that result from them. My suggestion to get this information is through the use of professional pre-employment assessment tools. A

tool will ask questions that will give you a good sense of what matters to an individual and what behaviors to expect.

If you don't learn more about what will make someone successful in a long-term relationship with you, and if you don't learn more about the attributes and experience a prospect should have to be successful and happy, then you have not peeled back the onion. The result is an unhappy and unproductive employee.

---

*Randall Birkwood has over 16 years of experience in recruiting, currently as director of talent acquisition for T-Mobile USA.*