

When is "Good Enough" Good Enough?

By Dr. Wendell William

There is no such thing as a "best test." The only real question facing an organization or hiring manager is, "When is 'good enough' good enough?"

Everyone is an HR expert. It's easy, right? No one ever hires a dud. So how do all the "experts" explain why managers continue to be promoted based on their ability to perform and not manage, why 20% of the salespeople produce 80% of the sales, or why about half of all new hires fail?

Can Training Fix Bad Hires?

One of the major complaints of trainers is that they are unable to train the untrainable. Most researchers are also still looking for proof that training has a significant effect on changing behavior. Besides, we all know in our hearts that attempting to change behavior is like trying to grow feathers. Anyone besides me see a connection between trainability and selection?

Ponder this: On sports teams, why isn't everyone invited to training camp – only the most talented athletes?

Getting to Know Is Not "Being Qualified"

Interviews give folks a nice warm feeling. We "get to know" the applicant, but we frequently learn we hired the nutcase from the movie "Fatal Attraction." When pressed, most people agree that applicants do a good job of faking in interviews regardless of the questions or techniques. Does anyone except me see that people can, and do, fake interviews?

Ponder this: Why don't talent scouts recruit serious athletes using interviews?

Generic Competency Lists

Maybe professors, business consultants, or trainers have the answer? We can always get a generic competency list from someone who conducts training programs, right? How about seeking advice about raising a family from someone who's never raised kids? Do we really think a management team that asks other organizations for competencies is in full control of its operations?

Ponder this: There is a good reason why soccer teams don't ask basketball teams for a list of competencies.

What Does It Take?

Simple. Take a lesson from organizations that depend heavily on employee skills. Commercial airline pilots, for example, are subjected to physical exams (we don't want any blind pilots in the cockpit), flight simulators (it's nice to know, before it happens, whether a pilot can land a plane with a Canadian Goose lodged in its engine), psychological tests (no barrel rolls during take-off or landing, please), and a host of other job-related tests (like navigation and so forth).

Is all this testing excessive? Well, as a commercial flier, I applaud their efforts and encourage more, more!

Your Personal Test Results

Most people don't know it, but virtually everyone has been subjected to an occupational test. It's usually administered by the Department of Motor Vehicles. The DMV eye test, for example, is a rudimentary physical exam; the written test evaluates basic knowledge of driving rules; and the driving test is a rudimentary flight simulator.

It's a no-brainer. Testing drivers prior to licensing significantly reduces traffic accidents. Not enough, you say? Well, how about adding a psychological test to evaluate potential for road rage or an all-weather simulator where the driver is faced with hours of rain, ice, night-driving conditions, fatigue, and road hazards? How about a drug test?

You get the idea. Make the tests more like real life.

I can assure you each additional test would reduce accidents and save thousands of lives each year. So why don't they do it? First, because the politicians running the DMV are not directly at risk; second, it's expensive and time consuming; and third, the results are probabilistic, not certain.

But even though licensing is not as good as it could be, you'll notice the DMV doesn't use interviews very often.

Internal Politics

Company politics are a fact of life, and I readily admit I have neither the skill nor the stomach to play the game. Nevertheless, most HR departments and recruiters are daily faced with the political decision, "When is 'good enough' good enough?"

The answer might be when the six-month guarantee has passed. If you are a manager, it might be when you promote a jobholder to manager.

Yes, these are all legitimate answers if one does not care about wasting organizational profits, if productivity is irrelevant, if there are excessive training dollars to burn, if customer satisfaction is unimportant, if managers have abundant free time available to coach, if people think it's too much work, if executives don't have any particular goals in mind, if profitability is unimportant...

Legitimate reasons? Give me a break! We all know that poor placements cost way more money than good placements.

Do You Have a Test?

Sure. There are plenty of tests available — tests that measure mental horsepower, planning ability, interpersonal skills, or job motivation, as well as other tests like sales simulations, coaching simulations, presentation simulations, customer service simulations, case studies, and behavioral interviews, to name a few.

But what do you want to measure? How accurate do you want to be? And when is "good enough" good enough?

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