09.06.16

Why Your Hiring Process Keeps Missing Candidates' Character Flaws

Researchers have found that people who are prone to feelings of guilt prove to be the most ethical employees.

[PHOTO: EVERETT COLLECTION VIA SHUTTERSTOCK]

BY DAVID MAYER

When companies screen job applicants, they aren't just looking for someone with the skills for the role. They're also looking for an upstanding person–someone who can be trusted and relied upon. But businesses aren't much better than ordinary people at judging character, something most people tend to think they excel at, even when they don't. In other words, that human challenge is also an organizational one, and the standard hiring process isn't always up to the task of meeting it.

WHY THE USUAL METHODS AREN'T WORKING

The unstructured interview is one of the most common tools for hiring supposedly ethical employees. It's an informal meeting with free-flowing questions that tends to differ from candidate to candidate. The conversation usually takes a behavioral turn–questions are rarely job-related. Most interviewers, especially trained human resources professionals, consider themselves well-qualified to give unstructured interviews. And in one sense, they are; evolutionary psychologists believe humans have evolved in order to detect deception–an important survival tool among social creatures like us.

But we may overestimate our abilities. One comprehensive review of the data found that, on average, we're barely better lie detectors than sheer chance. The University of Chicago's Nick Epley (in full disclosure, a colleague of mine at Ethical Systems) writes in his book *Mindwise* that we're much worse at knowing who we can trust than we think (and this even includes people like presidential candidates, whose trustworthiness we scrutinize just about every day for years before casting a vote).

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A second common hiring tactic are integrity tests–tools used to assess someone's personality, their beliefs about various unethical behaviors, and their self-reports of wrongdoing. But one recent review of the research found that the correlation between integrity tests and counterproductive work behavior was 0.3. That means if we're trying to predict misconduct, these tests reveal less than a tenth of the information they should. Integrity assessments have also been shownto be pretty easy to cheat on. Ironically enough, participants who tried to score higher to get chosen for a job did in fact earn higher scores.

And then there are character references. Intuition tells us this type of confirmation is useful. But they're flawed, too–as hiring managers are well aware, a candidate's references are motivated to be positive; you only approach someone as a reference if you know they'll endorse you. What's more, they may unintentionally enable gender bias. Research shows that women are more often described (including by their references) as more communal and less assertive, which can hurt their chances of being hired.

So what can you do instead?

SET THE TERMS WITH YOUR OWN CULTURE

Applicants are drawn to organizations when there's a match on values. So companies need to develop a strong ethical reputation in order to attract the right types of employees. That means laying the groundwork for recruiting ethical employees well before the hiring process begins. Adam Grant, author of *Give and Take* and *Originals*, suggests making it clear to applicants that they'll be evaluated in part on whether they positively influence others in the organization.

SELECT FOR THE GOOD INSTEAD OF REJECTING THE BAD

Usually when people think of hiring for character, they focus on eliminating unethical applicants. But it's just as important to pursue the *good* that new employees bring. For example, recent research showsthat positive energizers–those who lift others up and invigorate them through social interaction–help the workforce become more engaged and higher performing. If new hires can influence existing staff negatively, they can also have the reverse effect.

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Additionally, research shows that humility can contribute to both individual and organizational performance. That's why it's one of the key characteristics Google actively looks for in candidates.

HIRE THE GUILT-RIDDEN CANDIDATE

Carnegie Mellon professor Taya Cohen is an expert on hiring ethical employees. One of her most consistent and compelling researchfindings is that people who are prone to feeling guilty tend to be more ethical and prove to be better team players. As Cohen has written, "The guilt-prone employee doesn't need to be policed. She will act ethically because of her character." Other studies likewise show this type of employee is more likely to stay committed to the organization.

STRUCTURE THE INTERVIEW

Unstructured interviews may not be particularly useful, but structured interviews–which *are* job-related and have a scoring key that's based on

subject-matter expertise–can be helpful. Interview questions should reflect the specific, desirable characteristics that make somebody thrive in a given role, organization, or industry. In other words, look for the behavioral and temperamental stuff that matters–just know *why* it matters.

We know that ethical people have developed habits, rituals, routines, practices, and mantras to enhance their moral awareness–just as they do with any other of their abilities. So it's important to ask questions that can help you find out whether ethics is a skill they've habituated.

As organizational guru Ben Schneider has noted, "The people make the place." Creating an ethical culture is all about bringing in high-character employees. And you can do that just as systematically and rigorously as you test somebody's coding or accounting chops.

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