

Navigating the waters of selection

Turning the turbulent waters of hiring, promotion and redeployment into smooth sailing

With the rapid pace of change in today's workplace, organizations are being asked to make dramatic business and individuals are being asked to make critical career decisions, often with incomplete or inaccurate information. The risks can be substantial, and not always obvious to the decision makers and the personnel involved.

The following is a story used by my colleague Barry Felson of sales.org, to illustrate the perils we can all face when we move forward too quickly, and without the right information to arrive at the best decisions:

Legend has it that a radio conversation between a U.S. Navy ship and an unidentified respondent (released by the U.S. Director of Naval Operations on October 10, 1995) went something like this:

Navy Ship: Please divert your course 15 degrees to the north to avoid a collision.

Respondent: Recommend you divert your course 15 degrees to the south to avoid a collision.

Navy Ship: This is the Captain of a U.S. Navy ship. I say again, divert your course.

Respondent: No, I say again divert your course.

Navy Ship: This is the aircraft carrier USS Missouri, we are a large warship of the U.S. Navy. Divert your course now!

Respondent: This is a lighthouse. Your call.

What we seem to have here is a breakdown in navigation, either because of an equipment malfunction or an error in judgment. The potential cost of this breakdown was obviously huge. In this article, I will illustrate how the hiring process is affected by the same types of issues and can benefit from using the same techniques as navigating a large ship in uncertain waters.

While the consequences of any single poor selection decision in hiring, promoting or redeploying employees may not sink the organization (although,

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arguably, some key ones probably can), the cost of each decision that doesn't work out can be very significant. The accumulated impact of a repeated pattern of poor decisions can be devastating.

The stakes are exponentially higher in a merger or acquisition situation, where you are faced with hundreds or thousands of decisions in a very short timeframe.

How much does it cost to advertise, screen, interview and hire an employee? How much time, effort and related cost does it take to bring a person fully up to speed in a new role? How much management time and effort are required on an on-going basis? What is the potential negative impact on customers? What is the potential negative impact on the quality of work and morale of other members of the team? What are the costs in employee retention when inadequate assessment of your existing talent pool leads to external hiring being used for openings where talented, but unrecognized internal candidates are missed? What is the cost of termination? What is the overall risk to the organization and the real impact on the bottom line?

Marine navigation systems use the principle of triangulation – the relationship between three points (the boat itself plus two other fixed reference points) – to determine location. Ancient mariner used a sextant to take a fix by sighting off two stars. An aircraft carrier uses Satellite

Navigation (based on the relationship between a ground station antenna, a satellite and transmitter/receiver on board, accurate to within a few feet) to find its position on a transatlantic voyage.

No matter how sophisticated the technology, the basic principles are the same. And, if any one component of the system – transmitter, receiver, ground station or satellite – goes down, the whole system fails. (Sure, you can use one reference point to roughly estimate your position, but why do you think they call it “dead reckoning”?)

In the same way, the proper selection, placement, and development of people require three data points to make decisions with confidence: (1) Are they likely to do the job? (2) Can they do job? (3) Have they done the job?

• **Are they likely to do the job?** The use of psychometric assessments may be an effective way to predict performance in a job by answering several key questions: Does the individual have a natural predisposition for it? Do they have the psychological attributes commonly associated with success in the role? Do they value the work they will do in the role?

• **Can they do the job?** Competency assessments, when they accurately evaluate the depth of an individual's skills and capabilities, should indicate: Does the individual have the required skills and knowledge? Can they apply the skills and knowledge appropriately in the different types of complex situations that are common to the role? Have they become overconfident in their capabilities?

• **Have they done it?** A thorough review of performance history, using tools like performance evaluations, job shadowing, behavior-based interviewing, and reference checking will help to identify: What is the individual's performance record? What type of environment have they thrived in?

CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE

Has good performance been properly recognized, or has it inadvertently been punished in any way (e.g. the reward for great work is often more work and overtime, which may lead to decreased performance)?

When you combine the results of psychometric, competency and performance assessment, well-informed resourcing decisions can be made. If the results are consistent, you can proceed with a high degree of confidence that you are investing in the right people. If the results of the psychometric, competency and performance assessments are contradictory, stop and investigate why. Ultimately, the decision is also likely to be influenced by other, more intuitive factors (does this person fit my style and the style of the team, etc.).

Exercising judgment is the key to high-quality decisions. Relying too heavily on any one of the results and dismissing others will probably mean a less-than-optimal decision. Over-reliance on psychometric results may lead to an employee who, in spite of having the innate ability to do the job, may not have the experience and competency to do it well – a real problem if you don't have the time and resources to invest in their development.

Relying too heavily on competency results may lead to an employee who can do the job, but not in a way that fits well with your style or the rest of the team. Over-reliance on performance results in the case of a promotion decision may lead to losing a top performer in the current role and gaining a mediocre performer in the new role (how many times have you heard the saying that great salespeople don't necessarily make good sales managers).

Finally, over-reliance on your intuition may lead to organizational cloning (you hire or promote people that are just like you, missing out on complementary strengths and exaggerating weaknesses).

When you navigate well through the tricky waters of hiring, promoting, and redeployment, the payoff is enormous – the right people in the right roles at the right time, doing the right things and working toward the right results. Following up with appropriate direction, coaching, development and performance management will ensure even greater success.

Why have many organizations still not seen the value of using triangulation in their hiring, promoting and redeployment decisions? Perhaps they have put their faith in “potato navigation”, a trick used

by old-time sailors who found themselves in a fog. Send a crew member forward with a large supply of potatoes with the instructions to keep heaving them ahead, one at a time. When you don't hear a splash, turn quickly!

Even in the thickest fog, today's hiring technology can protect and guide your business decisions with the same advantages that advances in navigation have provided for sailors in their travels.

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