

How We See What We Expect to See – The Biggest Trap When Hiring New Staff

Impression management is a common concept in social psychology. Most managers make the decision on whether they want to hire a person within the first 5 minutes of meeting/interviewing. The employment interview is a good example of how easy it is to abandon the tools of objectivity — the scientific method, logic and the rules of evidence — for our "gut feel" and emotion.

While there is a mountain of evidence showing that psychological testing of job candidates improves retention and productivity, most organisations don't add psychological testing to their selection process. Many think this process is expensive and only for major corporations. Attitudes, personality and mental ability cannot be assessed through the interview process.

Numerous researchers have pointed out the need to gather a variety of data about a candidate. Managers generally settle for a CV and unstructured interview – two of the least valid and most dangerous tools to rely upon when assessing future employees.

The CV, interview combination only measures job knowledge, skill and experience, not innate workplace personality, attitudes, learning and problem solving ability. In most cases managers hire on knowledge and skill, but will always terminate on attitudes (personality) and mental ability.

Why are we so resistant to psychological profiling and other more objective sources of data? Perhaps it is because our expectations, preconceptions, and prior beliefs pretty much always influence our interpretation of new information. Experiments conducted over and over again by social psychologists have shown that *we see what we expect to see and conclude what we expect to conclude* – let me explain...

Tom Gilovich, a psychologist at Cornell University, writes: "Information that is consistent with our pre-existing beliefs is often accepted at face value, whereas evidence that contradicts them is critically scrutinised and usually discounted." So when we meet and interview a candidate who meets a large number of our pre-existing conditions for employment, we have already hired him/her in our minds. This is also why reference

checking is discountable; it's usually done as a final thought with negative feedback explained away as manageable or trainable, another dangerous trap!

If, following initial positive meeting and CV appraisal, we are presented with evidence from a psychological test that a job candidate possessed innate personality traits that would not be conducive to high performance, we would likely explain this away as he/she must have had a bad test day, or the test was wrong.

We tend to find some other excuse to downplay the test results because our initial impressions lead us to believe this person would be "right" for the job. On the other hand, if the person did not meet our pre-existing conditions for employment, we would have an easy time accepting that the psychological test results were highly accurate.

There are countless examples of how we deceive ourselves in the process of interviewing and screening candidates. We tend to ask leading questions to elicit the responses *we want* ("You have made presentations to senior management, haven't you?"). We ask references the same kinds of leading questions.

It's not that we don't examine information critically. In fact, experiments have shown that we look at all the evidence quite carefully, but we subtly massage it to make it support our preconceived ideas or wishes. If evidence seems to be against our desire, we find excuses for why the information is bad, or we lower it in our priorities for making a decision. And we do just the opposite for favourable information. We also will find data to validate our choices later on. If a person is successful, we will tend to attribute that to our superior interviewing skills ("I can pick 'em when I see 'em"), but if they fail we will find other reasons for their failure. Actually, we failed, not them, we picked a person who did not "fit the job".

Managers and recruiters are experts at the art of "scapegoating" their poor hiring decisions. In fact, what is most interesting is how often someone removed from the process predicts the end result well before it happens because they can see things more clearly and do not suffer the preconceptions. Usually these people are usually the team here at AssessSystems, or the organisation's HR Manager who had little, or no influence over the hiring manager's decision!

The bottom line is that unstructured, one-on-one interviews are very poor tools for selecting people for specific jobs. It is almost impossible to apply objectivity to the interview process. With that in mind, here are three things you can do to make yourself more effective as a hiring manager, or manager full stop!

1. The first step to a better solution is *awareness*. While we cannot prevent our preconceptions from clouding our judgment, we can apply corrective measures. We can develop criteria for jobs that are based on competencies, not on vague personality traits based on gut feel (they have clean shoes so they must be organised!) . We can apply the scientific method to the recruiting process, just as we do to most other aspects of manufacturing, production, and research and development. I highly recommend you read the book, *How We Know What Isn't So*, by Thomas Gilovich. It is easy to read and is an eye-opener on how easily we are duped and misled by seemingly objective evidence as well as our own human nature.
2. We can remind ourselves that *superficial and circumstantial evidence may be very wrong*. Every court of law has developed elaborate rules of evidence to ensure that they see an accurate and well-rounded view of a situation as possible. Yet even with all of those rules and procedures, innocent people still get convicted.
3. We can use more objective tools, such as *psychological testing of personality, attitudes and mental abilities*. We can refine and hone these tools until they are excellent at predicting success (we call this benchmarking). Many of our clients have built strong “success profiles” to test incoming applicants against the job role.

Even though none of us will ever achieve perfect objectivity, taking a serious look at ways to make your screening and selection as objective and therefore as predictive as possible can at least get you a lot closer to avoid hiring your next horror story.

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