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Ever Hired the Wrong Person? Can We Blame Your Intuition?

For the past 20 years, I have been studying and working within the science of talent selection. My main focus has been to understand what science tells us are the best tools and procedures to use to avoid bad hire decisions?

A reoccurring theme is the poor validity of the traditional hiring interview. Despite years of scientific evidence, hiring managers are still relying on the traditional interview as the major tool to confirm a candidate's suitability for the role.

Richard Nisbett, Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Michigan says, "When it comes to choosing a candidate, (traditional) interviews are as much use as flipping a coin". Countless scientific studies support Nisbett's contention.

On top of the hiring interviews poor predicting capabilities is the cost of conducting the physical interview. Usually, a traditional interview will take up to one hour. That's a big chunk of time out of a busy manager's schedule.

So why after years of irrefutable evidence do hiring managers continue to rely on the interview as the major hiring decision tool? In many cases the only hiring tool!

Most people think they are pretty good at 'reading' people if you feel you fit this group maybe you should change your career to fortune-telling or palm reading – good money for colourful guesswork. When it comes to hiring, guesswork usually costs you money, a lot of money!

Most of us trust our instincts – our intuition. There is much psychological evidence to back up the accuracy of decisions made by instinct.

The German psychologist, Gerd Gigerenzer makes a case for intuition. So does the social scientist Malcolm Gladwell in his book 'Blink'. Both gentlemen propose that people use smart heuristics* or rule of thumb to make decisions when time and knowledge is limited. Many of those decisions can prove accurate against those where long fact-finding exercises

are employed. However, heuristics are based on current social cues, and our past learned experiences – conscious, or unconscious. When it comes to hiring, basing our decisions on social cues is very dangerous.

It is these social cues that contribute to poor interview validity – we can be charmed by people who know how to make a good impression. There is no way in a hiring interview to fully understand the person you have before you. They could be a truly wonderful motivated individual, or perhaps a narcissist or sociopath.

Recently I was alerted to another common psychological trap that impacts on hiring interviews. It's called 'The Hydrangea Effect'.

Back in 2010, the CIA uncovered a Russian spy ring in a sleepy, leafy New Jersey suburb. They discovered the 'nice couple next door' was a pair of deep-cover Russian spies. The neighbours could not believe the charges against this polite, friendly couple who had two school-aged daughters and a beautifully tendered garden. One neighbour said, "They could not possibly be spies, look what she has done with the hydrangeas!"

In short, plant and attending to hydrangeas is as much an indication of whether or not someone is a spy as being charming and well presented at an interview is an indication that a person will be a good hire.

There are many people that present 'nice' and can fool the best judges of character. I mentioned earlier, narcissists. A 2014 study by Peter Harms at the University of Nebraska show how narcissists perform much better at interview than non-narcissists.

Harms study did highlight that there was little difference in the work effectiveness between narcissists and non-narcissists (learned behaviours – both groups had the knowledge, skill and experience to do the job). However, there was strong evidence to show that the narcissists were very disruptive and destructive when dealing with others in their place of work (These are innate behaviours, you might refer to these as soft skills). The only way to measure soft skills is with a validated [Job Fit Assessment](#) (a psychometric test).

In short, if your hiring interview is not structure and the interviewers trained properly, the Hydrangea Effect is going to create a lot of false positives.

So, this begs the question, "How will you and your hiring team be able to separate the person who interviews well - a good fit for the role, or a narcissist? The answer, focus on

understanding the key personality trait: Empathy. The behaviours of an empathic person are the opposite of narcissistic behaviour.

The personality trait, empathy is a difficult trait to uncover via an interview. Our team at AssessAdvantage would recommend a valid personality assessment like OutMatch. However, to better understand a candidate's empathy, interview questions need to tease out the candidate's humility, self-awareness and the desire to admit mistakes. It is important to structure these questions around past behaviour – past behaviour reflects future behaviour. It's imperative you ask all candidates the same questions, delivered by an interview panel. Never conduct one-on-one interviews as this introduces personal bias – and that's another article in itself.

The takeaway – Concentrate your interview on the “How and Why”, the innate behaviours the candidate will bring to your organisation. Will they be a good cultural fit?

The three key elements to focus on are

1. Structured behavioural questions that are critical to your culture
2. Use a panel of interviewers
3. Have a rating formula to enable the hiring team to compare candidates after completing all interviews (don't rely on memory – another opportunity for personal bias).

Many of our clients have found a successful balance between using technology for hiring while allowing some wriggle room for intuition, the latter usually at the end of the total filtering process. Our assessment tools all contain behavioural interview questions based on the competencies required for your specific job role. Also, where candidates display ‘red flags’ there are customised questions to tease out and validate these behaviours and their impact on performance and company culture.

**Heuristics are rules which people often use to form judgments and make decisions. They are mental shortcuts that usually involve focusing on one aspect of a complex problem and ignoring others.*

Rob McKay MA(Hons) Organisational Psychology

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Rob can be reached at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/robinlmckay/>

