

..... interview for engagement

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How do you predict which of today's applicants will be tomorrow's engaged workers?

Many organisations believe they can increase engagement – and, by extension, productivity – by doing the right things for existing employees. But change achieved in this way will only ever register as a flicker if you don't select the right people in the first place. So how do you predict which of today's applicants will be tomorrow's engaged workers?

1 IDENTIFY WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR

Does your organisation have a clear and consistent definition of "engagement"? If not, agree a definition and make sure it is understood by line managers and anyone involved in selection decisions. In our work with clients, we usually define engagement as "the extent to which people enjoy and believe in what they do, and feel valued for doing it".

2 SCREEN APPLICANTS FOR ENGAGEMENT

Recent research by DDI involving almost 4,000 employees in a variety of industries and jobs has revealed six personal characteristics that predict the likelihood of individuals becoming engaged employees. These are: adaptability, passion for work, emotional maturity, positive disposition, self-efficacy and achievement orientation. "Career batteries" offer a low-cost and highly effective way of helping managers to unearth these six magic ingredients. Such questionnaires – online or paper-based – cover a wide range of jobs in services, sales and manufacturing, and can help to predict which candidates will perform effectively, derive satisfaction from the role and become engaged. They pose questions about how candidates would handle certain situations, or how they would rate the effectiveness of various actions in accomplishing goals. Taking the time to screen applicants for engagement readiness will yield a far greater return in the medium term than hiring solely for skills and knowledge.

3 CHECK FOR 'JOB FIT'

Line managers' confidence in HR processes is bolstered when they spend precious interview time with only the best candidates and when those selected remain in their jobs for some time. So as well as using pre-employment tests to identify the characteristics associated with engagement, look for evidence of individuals' motivation – or "job fit" – as early in the selection process as possible.

That means establishing whether the job includes enough of the things the candidate loves about work, and whether some important job components are likely to irritate him or her. Asking existing job holders to identify the key characteristics of the role and matching these against a candidate's description of their ideal job is an easy way to do this. Managers, too, often need reminding that being able to do a job doesn't mean someone will be happy doing it for any length of time.

4 CHART YOUR COMPANY CULTURE

Another important consideration is the candidate's fit with the company culture. If you haven't already articulated this, ask a sample of employees what characterises your culture. For example, is risk-taking encouraged? Are processes important? Is yours a status-conscious organisation? Is it entrepreneurial? Creating a list of 20 attributes against which you can chart your company culture will give you a reference point for selecting people. If their values and needs are aligned with their work environment, they will give more of themselves.

5 USE A CONSISTENT HIRING PROCESS

By now you'll have a shortlist of strong candidates who seem to possess the optimal basic ingredients to not only do the job, but to want to do the job well. But are you confident that managers desperate to fill empty seats know how to obtain information from candidates that will truly predict their likely degree of engagement?

Research and experience point to interview guides as a great way of ensuring consistency in technique, as well as in candidates' experience of your company's hiring process. Interview guides focus interviewers on questions specifically designed to elicit relevant and significant data from the candidate. They enable hiring managers to avoid the consequences of poor preparation and reliance on gut instinct.

6 ASSESS ADAPTABILITY

"Adaptability" - one of the six magic ingredients - is relatively easy to spot. Ask candidates for examples of times they have demonstrated openness to new ideas and experiences, or modified their work approach in response to change.

"Achievement orientation" can be evaluated in the same way, through questions such as: "Tell me about a time when you had to push yourself through a continual cycle of setting goals, reaching them and setting progressively more challenging goals. What did you do and what were the results?"

7 PREDICT PASSION

"Passion for work" is about maintaining a positive view of one's job despite periods of stress and frustration. According to the DDI research study, Predicting Employee Engagement 2005, highly engaged individuals are 33 per cent less likely than less engaged employees to leave their organisation within the next year. Since no organisation in today's fast-changing global economy is without its provocations and obstructions, this tolerance is essential, especially for leaders. Talking to candidates about how they've reacted to obstacles will reveal such resilience, or the lack of it.

Key points

- Screen candidates for the six key ingredients that predict the likelihood of individuals becoming engaged employees. These are adaptability, passion for work, emotional maturity, positive disposition, self-efficacy and achievement orientation.
- Consider candidates in relation to both job fit and cultural fit.
- Give line managers the tools to gather meaningful interview data, consistently.

Consider also if they recount events with enthusiasm and energy. Psychometric inventories, which look at adjustment, will provide rich supporting data.

8 EXPLORE EMOTIONAL MATURITY

The attributes of "emotional maturity" and "positive disposition" are critical if you're hiring for service, managerial or soon-to-be-supervisory roles. In the retail sector, for example, these characteristics take the form of better customer service skills and fewer negative work behaviours such as time-wasting or even theft.

Interviewers need to search for examples of outstanding teamwork and customer focus under fire, an eagerness to help others accomplish their goals and a willingness to place results ahead of ego.

9 SEARCH FOR SELF-EFFICACY

"Self-efficacy", the final predictive ingredient, indicates unyielding confidence in one's ability to succeed in the job and go on to bigger and better things. One question that gives candidates the opportunity to demonstrate their mettle is: "Tell me about a time when you took action despite knowing that others thought your chances of success were slim. What was your rationale for taking the action and what happened?"

Look also for evidence of a candidate's desire to learn and develop, even from mistakes and setbacks. Ask about feedback they've received from performance reviews and 360-degree appraisals, and what actions they've taken as a result.

Identifying and selecting an engaged candidate is like hiring the caterpillar that turns into a butterfly, rather than the moth that eats away at the fabric of your organisation. And the beauty of it is that engagement is contagious. Our research shows that highly engaged employees are much more likely to be good coaches, effective salespeople and strong team players than poorly engaged individuals.

It's a quick and easy win to pre-screen for those who are most likely to become butterflies - and a long-term triumph for your organisation when managers use the interview process to spot those likely to fly higher, for longer.