

‘BUT THEY LOOKED SO GOOD IN THE INTERVIEW’

By Amanda Gome

Before you can choose the right person for the job, you need to choose the selection process.

Interviews may not always be the answer.

The shirt is well ironed, the smile engaging, the handshake so firm that it hurts. The salesman has had five years experience in similar positions. He has just the right amount of confidence, and does not seem to be so ego-driven as to be a bad team player. He is hired. Six months later, after one too many long lunches, he is gone.

Psychologist Dr. Herbert Greenberg is principal of the Princeton-based Caliper human resources consultancy in the United States. He says, “I can’t tell you how many people say, just as they are about to fire someone, ‘but they looked so good in the interview.’”

Greenberg says the example of the salesman illustrates the problem with hiring interviews. In the interview, it is impossible to detect whether an applicant has the inner qualities needed to succeed in sales. Does he or she have empathy (necessary to sense customer reactions), ego-drive (necessary to make the sale), and ego-strength (the ability to keep bouncing back from rejection)? Without these qualities, Greenberg says, failure in sales is almost certain.

“A good salesperson has to be able to accept that two out of three people are going to say ‘no’ – and not personalize it. But finding out if someone has ego-strength is very hard to do in an interview.”

Greenberg says individuals should be tested so they can be matched with the work they are best suited to. The interview is important, but it usually cannot get beyond the facade of an experienced employee. “Age, sex, race and experience – none of these are valid hiring criteria,” he says.

All people have important strengths and fundamental weaknesses. “The challenge for employers is identifying people with personal strength that match the work they are asked to do. For example, a welder needs to have good hand and eye coordination, and the temperament for repetitive work.”

Greenberg has developed a test to take candidates through two hours of questions. Most sections have four choices; candidates are asked which



Reprinted from

BRW
BUSINESS • REVIEW • WEEKLY

one they think most applies to them and which least applies.

“Although they can still present the person they think you want to see, they can’t be everything and must omit as well as admit to certain things. That allows us to take that projection and determine a picture of what they are.”

Greenberg says many tests in the marketplace were developed for clinical use and do not work when used for placing people in jobs, because psychologists’ clients and job candidates have different motivations.

“Take questions that are often asked, like, ‘Do you like people?’ In an interview, the job candidate will say ‘yes’ and paint the best picture of themselves.”

Greenberg says that more than half the people in sales have no sales dynamics and perform poorly at their job. One-quarter are good salespeople but are selling the wrong products and services, and the rest are excellent and in the right sales field. He says many studies have shown that the same 20-25% of a sales force are responsible for 80% of total sales.

Trying to pick a good manager poses different problems. The employer is looking for a balance between persuasive ability, the competence to lead assertively, and an ability to judge the capabilities of others. A manager must also be able to make quick decisions and not lose key opportunities – and be prepared to make mistakes. People in this role must also be able to delegate.

For customer service representatives, entirely different qualities are needed. Service staff need the “thank you” as much as salespeople want the “yes.” They must have the ability to solve problems, be personally well organized and have a strong sense of responsibility and a level of thoroughness not needed in sales.

Whatever the position, to hire the right person, Greenberg recommends two rounds of interviews. The first is a screening, a five-minute meeting, which can be used to narrow the field to a few likely candidates. Those on the short list are invited back to do the two-hour test, the results of which can be used to assist in the second interview, which should take a least an hour.

Greenberg likes to know as much about the workplace as possible. People in sales who have a lot of ego-drive are not suited to selling mainframe computers, as they may close only three sales a year. But put those people behind a retail counter, where they might close three sales a day, and you get a completely different story.

Greenberg also likes to find out about other aspects of the workplace, such as the manager, the market and the client retention rate.

“If client retention is important, you might need to team an ego-driven salesperson with a service person that needs the ‘thank you’ – someone to close the sale and the other to provide the back-up.”

These tests also help to evaluate whether, for example, a staff member should be moved from a service role, in which they may not be performing well, into sales.

Greenberg says, “It’s not as if we are saying to replace the whole interview system. We are saying to improve your hiring picture by adding this bit of information.”

He says his tests are successful predictors in many cases. In an industry such as real estate, which has high staff turnover, 85% of the people recommended by Caliper are in the top half of the sales force after a year. “Those bosses who hired people against our recommendations find that only 17% were in the top half of the team.”

The logo for Caliper, featuring the word "CALIPER" in a white, serif, all-caps font against a dark green rectangular background.

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