

The Immaculate Misconception

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Introduction

This paper contains a ‘real’ story of how one firm selects people based on their fit. It comes from a large database of recruitment and selection stories, fifty of which I have published in a book entitled *Experiencing Recruitment and Selection* (Billsberry, 2007). The stories in this book came from students taking certificate in management courses at the Open University. They are the students’ best recollection of events as they looked back on them.

The story in this paper was told by Philip (pseudonym). It relates his own recruitment into a senior role at Omega (also a pseudonym) and how he was so impressed by the selection process that he has replicated it for the recruitment of other people. The story is particularly interesting because it captures a common method of selecting for fit based on a high degree of face-to-face contact between organisational members and applicants.

Philip’s Story

I was recruited to set up a new business under a group umbrella. As the position within the organisation was at a senior level, three simultaneous methods were used to recruit: a headhunter was briefed with the profile of the type of person envisaged, several specialist placement agencies were contacted, and an advert was placed in the trade press. As a new position was being created and a new business being set up (which were both sensitive to existing suppliers and to competitors), the advert asked for responses to go to a box number and did not state the company name (all very mysterious to the candidate!). I responded to the advert. After replying with my CV and a covering letter, a reply confirming receipt was received within three to four days, and a further letter asking me to make contact followed a few days later. I telephoned the next day and was asked a few basic questions and told a little more about the role. Was I still interested? Yes, then a date was set for an initial meeting.

The first interview was held at the office that had been put aside for the new venture and in the evening so that I could attend after work from my current employment. I was greeted at the door, offered a drink and led to a quiet office. This initial interview was held by the person who is now my business partner. It was conducted on a one-to-one basis and covered a broad range of topics. The interview actually started very gradually, as we informally chatted for quite some time about our common interest in classic cars (I had arrived at the interview in my MG) and the conversation gradually turned to more formal business. I was shown the company portfolio, which demonstrated its experience. I, in turn, showed the interviewer my portfolio, which demonstrated my experience and style of working. I was given a job description, a tour of the building, a company brochure and a very clear picture of the role and

its potential. This meeting lasted over two hours, which was a very positive outcome from an initial meeting. I felt extremely positive about the company and the venture it was embarking on. I thought it had a great deal of potential.

A week or so later, a further meeting was arranged by letter as I had made it through to the shortlist of three. I was greeted at the door by a different person, offered a drink and led to a meeting room. This second meeting was very different, starting with a proof-reading test of a recruitment advertisement (which contained deliberate mistakes). The conversation then turned into a very detailed discussion about the profile of the business, potential clients, suppliers and equipment. Following this, each of the key department managers in other areas of the business that I would be dealing with were invited to have a chat with me, on a one-to-one basis. During these discussions much wider issues were covered, such as my interests, how I relax, where I see the new venture going and how quickly; and of course this was my chance to ask a few questions to managers working for the boss who was setting up the new company. I got reassuringly honest answers! This session ended with another tour; but because this visit was during the work day there were actually people at their desks when we wandered round, and we chatted to each person as we did so. Finally, anyone who wanted to was asked if they would like to join us for a drink at the pub for a more informal chat, which several people did.

It was a few days later that I took a call from the man who conducted the first interview. He let me know I had the job and he asked me to think about my decision overnight or a couple of nights and call him back with an answer. I gave him an answer straight away, as I was confident that I wanted to accept the offer and said I would confirm this in writing. A reply confirming my position, salary, starting date and job title followed a few days later. I have now seen this approach to recruitment from the inside (when the company was recruiting after I had joined) as well as being a candidate. Unusually, every member of staff is allowed to have their say about a prospective employee, so it is important that as many people as possible meet that person before the final decision is taken. Ensuring that a different person meets and greets the candidate and that senior members of staff have the opportunity to talk to the candidates on the shortlist makes sure that all members of staff are comfortable with recruits, even before they come on board. It also ensures that candidates get the chance to see different staff members' points of view of the company, and get a feeling for the type of people they will be working with, the office environment and the organisation's culture. Thus over the longer term, this policy has involved everyone and given them confidence and experience of the recruitment process, and has encouraged a culture of openness and the ability to express opinions with colleagues.

I have noticed that over a period of time (I have now been part of this organisation for five years), often when asked whether we can work with such and such a candidate, someone is just as likely to ask 'Are they an Omega person?' or 'Would you invite that person to the pub on Friday evening?' The recruitment process we go through to get the right people is not an analytical process, although they may be asked to perform certain basic procedures and have certain predefined requirements (such as distance travelled, qualifications, enthusiasm and ambition), but also a subjective, social process to ensure that people fit in and that social capital is built between each team member.

Discussion

Philip's story relates one of the three main ways in which recruiters currently assess fit. One approach is to use a realistic job preview or a job trial. Another approach is to have the candidates attend so many selection tests on so many occasions that only the keen survive and they enter fully aware of what the company will be like (e.g. Bowen, Ledford & Nathan, 1991). The third method is to have applicants meet as many people as possible. This is the approach taken at Omega. Its underlying principles are different from the two other methods. In the first two, applicants are able to experience the work and the organisation and to decide for themselves whether or not the recruiting organisation will be one they will enjoy working in based on prolonged and relatively deep contact. In effect, the recruiting organisation gives the applicants the opportunity to discover for themselves whether they will fit. In the process, the organisation discovers whether the person has the required KSAOs through simulated and analogous tests and actual work.

The third approach is based on very different assumptions towards fit. Instead of basing this on assessment and prolonged contact, it is about interpersonal contact and multiple short interactions. The interpersonal contact is conducted under the auspices of recruitment and selection, which is an important distinction from realistic job previews as the participants are all aware of the 'unreal' nature of these interactions. Applicants are on their guard and may be manipulating the impression they convey. Organisations are on their best behaviour and trying to show themselves in the best light. Consequently, these are interactions of actors. Both parties may be inquisitive, but they are confronting manipulated and managed faces.

Omega's approach has other weaknesses, some of which are quite worrying. Philip openly admits that this is a subjective social process. While subjectivity is a complex term that may not always be bad, Philip uses subjectivity in its common usage to signify a decision based on 'gut feeling' or intuition. His firm's approach is an emotional, non-systematic, non-scientific or irrational method of making a selection decision; only the proof-reading test provides any objective counterbalance, but that merely seems to play a minor role. Worse still, it does this in an environment of managed images. Who will get a job at Omega? Who will thrive in this speed-dating assessment process? Presumably, someone with an 'everyman' quality, someone who can form instant friendships, someone whom no one dislikes, someone with charm, someone who makes other people feel good about themselves, someone who conforms to the archetype of an organisational employee, someone who shares your passion for classic cars. If you were recruiting a politician this might be an admirable set of qualities that form part of the selection criteria, but for most jobs these characteristics are just one aspect of being successful and fitting in.

Another worrying aspect of this approach to selecting for fit is its impact on equal opportunities. It is well known that, contrary to the adage that opposites attract, similarity attracts. People like to be with people like themselves. Omega's selection process is likely to reinforce the existing profile of employees and recruit 'similar types'. In such environments, it is notoriously difficult for people who are 'different' to the organisational norm to enter. Omega's process is particularly bad as it hints at a 'black-balling' ethos, the process where one naysayer can eliminate a candidate from

the running. One bigot could unreasonably, unfairly and irrationally block people for no other reason than personal dislike.

This approach is not just disadvantageous and potentially discriminatory to candidates, many question whether it is beneficial to the recruiting organisation. While 'right types' might be recruited who don't rock the boat, the danger is what Schneider (1987, p. 446) has described as organisational 'dry rot'. This is the destruction of the company based on employing a workforce that has similar experiences, interests, personalities and ideas. He argues that in such circumstances, the organisation occupies an increasingly narrow ecological niche.

Finally, I find myself worrying about the balance of Omega's recruitment and selection process. The company has gone so far down the interpersonal fit route that it seems to have forgotten the importance of assessing applicants' ability to do the job. There is a strange disjuncture between the large amount of time and effort it puts into its recruitment and selection process and the paucity of its assessment of applicants' KSAOs. Overall, Omega's approach to recruitment and selection, although very typical, demonstrates many of the mistakes that organisations wishing to 'select for fit' make. The process is open to abuse, probably disadvantages many people, might be detrimental to the organisation over time, relies on intuition, and does little to assess the KSAOs of applicants. Despite the professional and thorough appearance of this approach, it is not one that can be recommended.

References

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