

A Short Case Study on Misfit

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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 Petra (pseudonym). It relates her own recruitment experience as she started her first full-time job. It is an interesting case because it reveals one organisation's reaction to finding out that they have recruited a misfit.

Petra's Story

I was dismissed from a job after 10 days because the company felt that I could not learn the job fast enough. I had graduated from secretarial college in Germany and this was my first permanent job. The company is based in London and sells advertising space in German magazines to British advertising agencies.

The company used an employment agency to fill the position. It wanted to hire a college leaver, who would take over the job as PA when the current PA went on maternity leave in six months' time. The variety of skills and tasks it itemised in the advertisement (using languages, supporting the entire team, getting an opportunity to familiarise myself with everybody's tasks since the company counted only six people) attracted me. I also felt a strong draw to the profession: I was interested in advertising and work of the media in general and thought that this would provide me with a good stepping-stone. During the interview, the company tested our mental abilities using a work simulation: I was asked to draft a letter on a given subject. In feedback, I was told, 'You have shown almost too much imagination. This is more than we expected.' I felt very comfortable during the process and was delighted to accept the job when it was offered to me.

After I had joined the organisation, I received training by staff members and was invited to attend meetings. I found it difficult to understand how their business actually works: I was confused by the jigsaw of advertising agencies, magazine publishers and the administration holding them all together. Also, I found myself struggling with the jargon. The general attitude towards me changed when I asked people to explain the nature of the business and the industry. A few days later I was dismissed. I quote the manager, she said, 'We did not know what we were looking for, actually, we thought a college leaver could do the job. We have the feeling you have too many gaps in your experience and general knowledge and we do not feel that you can learn the job within six months. It might be too demanding for you.' She also

added that she felt I am not suited for office work and that I should change careers entirely, possibly towards a more artistic field.

My thoughts and emotions at the time of the incident were of utter dejection. I could not understand how they could take me on without knowing what they were looking for in a candidate and then decide that after only ten days I could not learn the job in six months. Also, I could not understand the sudden change of attitude towards me as soon as I started asking questions and told them where my problems were. Looking back at the incident, I realise now that I should not be blinded by nice people. After recovering from the disappointment, which I put down to experience, I feel the company should have been either more tolerant towards my weaknesses or not taken me on in the first place.

Discussion

The callous disregard this company showed towards Petra is shocking. To take someone on only to kick them out two weeks later demonstrates brazenness towards applicants and a 'hire 'em, fire 'em' attitude towards people. When a company offers someone a job, it takes on a responsibility. The reason for this is that when applicants accept jobs, they may have to give up a lot. They may already have a good job, they may have to move house, many friendships with colleagues may end and so on. To give all this up, successful applicants should expect some sense of commitment from their new employers. But this is another of those recruitment and selection paradoxes, because the law offers least protection to employees in the first months of employment, precisely when they are most vulnerable.

Petra seems to have responded stoically to these events and has decided to learn from the experience rather than get angry. Perhaps the fact that this was her first job and she was relatively naïve about the world of work led her to think that this was how organisations treated their employees. Or perhaps she had other opportunities to fall back on. But it has left her with a cynicism about organisational life: 'I realise now that I should not be blinded by nice people.' How sad is this? Petra appears to be an enthusiastic, bright individual straight out of college who was open about her weaknesses and who was keen to learn this job. Two weeks later she has developed a world weariness usually reserved for grumpy old men.

As I read Petra's story I find myself unconvinced by the reasons offered by this organisation for her early departure. Someone cannot learn a job they have already been trained for in six months? This seems most suspicious. I wonder if she did not fit in. Petra's questions, her lack of familiarity with the jargon, the comment about her unsuitability for office work, the comment about her working in a more artistic field, coupled with her naivety about work all suggest to me that the real reason for her dismissal was the organisation's categorisation of her as a misfit. This highlights one of the real practical difficulties in selecting for fit: at the moment there are simply no tools available to selectors to help them assess applicants' fit. Give someone a couple of weeks in the role and it becomes a lot more apparent.