

## Assessing the Fit of an Internal Applicant: A Case Study

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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 Trevor (pseudonym). It relates his experience of interviewing an internal candidate that he knew well. To what extent could, or should, he disregard his past knowledge of her?

### Trevor's Story

*The position we were interviewing for was deputy team leader in the company's executive support team. This four-person team provides secretarial support to the various senior management groups in the firm: organizing meetings, ensuring that papers are written and circulated in advance, taking the notes, preparing the minutes and so on. The team doubles in size and takes on a very high profile during the five-yearly periodic reviews, when the director resets the company's strategy. The three selection panel members had received all relevant papers on the five internal candidates from Human Resources (HR) four or five days before the interviews. Included in the papers was the document called 'Notes for Board Members'. A covering memo from HR made it clear that we were required to read and understand the rules and principles therein.*

*We met for a preliminary discussion at 9.30 a.m., half an hour before the first interview. This session was used to coordinate our thoughts on which candidate looked best on paper, to confirm the structure of the interview and our individual areas of responsibility. In line with standard company policy, the panel consisted of a chairperson from HR, the relevant line manager and a third person (me) unconnected with either. As usual, the chair asked questions arising from the application form (education, previous jobs and so on), the line manager asked questions connected to the specific role, and I asked general questions connected with our policies and culture.*

*The third candidate in was Belinda who, for three years, had been deputy personal assistant in the director's private office. She had returned from maternity leave three or four months earlier and had made it clear that she wanted to move on. She is well known in the company for being charmless, aggressive, a malicious gossip and dismissive of junior colleagues. When dealing with middle or senior management, she behaves as though she is the director and expects everyone else to respect the aura of his personal authority.*

*We expected a fairly torrid time. What we got was a near-perfect interview. The person specification had identified team working, flexibility and diplomatic skills as essential criteria for the job. About half of the interview consisted of open questions being used to explore Belinda's aptitude against these skills. She related examples of how she had used them in her previous and present jobs.*

*The only problem was that she was talking to an audience who knew her. All three panel members had first-hand experience of Belinda and how she actually worked. We knew how abrasive she could be and what she was really like at supporting and helping colleagues. At the end of Belinda's interview, the prospective line manager and I looked across at each other and said at the same time something like, 'That wasn't the Belinda we know and love.' But if she had been an external candidate, we would not have learnt that just from the interview, and would almost certainly have offered her the post.*

## **Discussion**

For me, Trevor's story is particularly interesting. This appeal is not due to it being particularly dramatic, funny or heart warming, but because of the fundamental question it asks of those who advocate the level-playing-field approach to recruitment and selection. To recap, this approach to recruitment and selection advocates the isolation of the process from other organisational processes so that all applicants are treated the same. Prior knowledge of candidates is forgotten by selectors and only information introduced by applicants during the recruitment and selection process is used to make the selection decision. In this way, internal and external candidates are treated even-handedly and selectors have a similar array of information on each candidate.

There are both conceptual and practical problems with the approach. It fails to appreciate the information asymmetries of selectors: selectors will always have different types and amounts of information on applicants. Human nature will always drive selectors to use this information. The approach raises the issue of the abstractness of the selection environment. Is information gathered during recruitment and selection better, different or inferior to information gathered elsewhere? Undoubtedly, the process favours those people who can 'put on a show' during the assessment. As a department personnel officer explained to Harris (2000, p. 41), 'The good bullshitters who know the system tend to do best.' There are also moral dilemmas. Internal applicants believe that their employer is ignoring all of the commitment they have given to the organisation. Moreover, they feel that they are being treated as commodities rather than as people who have a relationship with the employer. Nevertheless, it is a popular approach that is commonly used in public-sector organisations.

Although all his applicants were internal, Trevor's story illustrates the issue of information asymmetry very well. He and his panel members find it impossible to ignore their prior knowledge of Belinda. 'That wasn't the Belinda we know and love.' Should they ignore this prior knowledge and force themselves to use just the information introduced during the selection process? Should they make a selection

decision they know to be wrong? Perhaps the problem is not with the level playing field they are trying to create, but with their questions.

Perhaps the reason there is a disconnect between the information they gathered about Belinda during the interview and the knowledge they have about her from observing her at work is simply down to poor interviewing. Perhaps they should have asked her about occasions they have observed when she was less than diplomatic; this would have given her a chance to confront their prejudices about her. But this is another problem with the level-playing field approach: it prevents interviewers forming questions based on their prior knowledge of applicants. So the approach forces Trevor and his colleagues to ignore his prior knowledge in making selection decisions and in formulating questions. They found it impossible to do the first of these and consequently did not offer Belinda the post.

This story highlights a crucial, rather obvious, but commonly ignored difference between internal and external applicants. Selectors have, or have access to, information on how well internal candidates 'fit' the organisation. They should know if people in this category thrive in the organisation and whether their behaviours are appropriate. They can assess actual behaviour and performance in the workplace. However, the opportunities for doing this with external applicants are far fewer. In most selection processes, external applicants are a complete mystery to selectors when they walk through the door; all the information they glean about them is gathered in the highly charged, surreal and egotistical environment of selection.

## References

Billsberry, J. (2007) *Experiencing Recruitment and Selection*. Chichester: Wiley.

Harris, L.M. (2000) Issues of fairness in recruitment processes: A case study of local government practice. *Local Government Studies*, **26**, 31–46.