

Person–Environment Interactions: 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 Simon (pseudonym). It relates his experience of recruiting staff internally. A key point of interest in this case is the interaction of people with people and people with environments.

Simon’s Story

My company is part of a large organisation. Market forces, mainly driven by our customers, have forced us to look at our costs and subsequently to go through a change programme. As a result we have reduced the size of the workforce from 1,000 to 700 people. This was achieved through non-voluntary redundancies. Concurrently, 200 people were transferred to a satellite office outside London. The personnel who did not wish to relocate were made redundant and other people were selected for the transfer. Due to the size of the task this was done in stages. We were the first division to be downsized.

Approximately one month after we had gone through this process, a member of my group resigned. As we had already been cut to the bare minimum to service our clients, a request for a replacement was put to the directors. This was approved with certain provisos. I had to go through an internal staff recruitment procedure. And I had to target the other divisions, specifically looking for people made redundant due to their unwillingness to relocate.

Internal recruitment is done through a bulletin board on our intranet. The vacancy went out and I had 16 replies from a wide variety of people: van drivers to adjusters. I was pressurised to interview all of them even though it was obvious that most would be inappropriate. I justified interviewing them all by the thought that as I was unlikely to find someone with the skill level or experience, I should try to find someone with positive personal attributes such as enthusiasm, good attitude and willingness to learn, and develop them as an adjuster.

The interviews were a disaster. I spent days going through people who just weren’t suitable. Some looked wrong, others had a poor attitude and others were unable to answer the most basic questions. Also, some were so embittered by the company that they would have been a negative influence on the section. Others incorrectly thought that they had to go for internal interviews or they wouldn’t get their redundancies. I

was torn between telling them why they were not suitable and just wishing to get the whole thing over with.

I managed to whittle down the list to three. I was not convinced about any of them. I decided to consult with my staff, as they knew the three individuals involved and their reputations. This proved to be another mistake, as they could not agree and had now created the situation that whichever one I hired would upset some of them. With this in mind I took the path of least resistance and hired the one I felt would have the least disruptive influence (and he had a law degree, which may have been useful).

The whole way through this process I wasn't convinced he was the right person for the job, but I felt he could be trained to be. The main reasons he didn't fit were as follows:

- *Lack of outward enthusiasm. Maybe just quiet and needed to be motivated.*
- *Badly dressed. I felt I could explain to him that as a marketing division, presentation is important.*
- *Too quiet. Adjusters need to communicate effectively to brokers, Lloyd's syndicates and other adjusters. I felt this may come with training and confidence in his role.*

Things did not work out. He did not seem to respond to any encouragement. During this time the salary reviews came up. He received no consideration and I explained why. He felt the company was persecuting him, as he had the same last year in his old division. I explained his unwillingness to adapt was the problem; he did not agree. From this point on, he became unruly and was affecting other members of the group. They were baffled by his behaviour and his inability to learn from his mistakes. I had to inform him that his whole behaviour was unacceptable. He stated he would leave at the earliest opportunity and he has since taken a role in another division. I spoke to his new manager and he is pleased with his progress. It is now apparent to me that he just wasn't suited to the role.

Discussion

Simon found himself in a very awkward situation. Faced with the need to recruit an insurance broker with specialist skills, he was forced to recruit from a general pool of workers who were being made redundant. These workers had a different range of skills and would need training to become effective as insurance brokers. Simon is clearly upset by having to adopt this approach when he knows it is most unlikely that he would find someone suitable, but bowing to the organisational reality, he decides to make the most of the opportunity and 'find someone with positive personal attributes such as enthusiasm, good attitude and willingness to learn and develop as an adjuster'.

Simon expected to find an unsuitable set of applicants and was not disappointed. He says of the three shortlisted candidates, 'I was not convinced about any of them' and he 'hired the one I felt would have the least disruptive influence'. This is not a good approach to recruitment and selection and it seems to have been forced on Simon because he would lose the opportunity to recruit if he did not find someone in this applicant pool. Despite this, it seems a 'bit rich' to complain that the person he thought would be the 'least disruptive influence' turns out to be 'too quiet'.

Throughout this story, I found myself thinking about the nature of Simon's own behaviour and whether this might have caused some of the problems he encountered. He expected to find unsuitable applicants: he found them. He wanted someone who would not disrupt his department: he found someone very quiet. Given the combination of Simon's negativity all the way through this encounter coupled with the imminent threat of redundancy, is it surprising that the new recruit did not respond to Simon's encouragement? This is reinforced during the salary reviews when the new recruit received no consideration, which was accompanied by Simon's explanation that the 'problem' was the new recruit's unwillingness to adapt. Once in a new division away from Simon, the new recruit became an effective worker. To me, this is a relationship that got off on the wrong foot and never recovered. The tone was set during recruitment ('I wasn't convinced he was the right person for the job') and this created a managerial mindset that the new employee was unsuitable. That the 'least disruptive influence' became 'unruly' simply indicates the degree of alienation between the parties.

I spotted three other ways in which Simon's story relates to the process of recruiting for fit. First, it illustrates the proposition that people leave organisations when they do not fit. In this case, the new recruit found employment in another division when it was clear that he did not fit in Simon's division. Second, the story demonstrates the complexity of fit and how it is influenced by all manner of things, large and small, known and unknown. Third, it shows how difficult it is to assess fit during selection. Simon's criteria revolved around enthusiasm, a good attitude (whatever that means) and a willingness to learn and develop. These attitudes are very general and come from the selector's perspective. There is no consideration of what would make a good fit for the new recruit. This is a one-sided approach to selecting for fit that completely fails to appreciate the needs of the applicant, and therefore it can be no surprise that there was no fit from the moment the person was recruited.

Reference

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