

Overcoming Hiring Mistakes: Inappropriate Prerequisites

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Did your last job ad read like a drive-thru menu at a fast food restaurant?

If so, say Barry Deutsch and Brad Remillard, you have just committed a hiring mistake -- placing too much emphasis on specific education, technical skills and industry experience as necessary requirements for the job.

"Most job ads contain a long list of prerequisites, such as 12 years of industry experience, an MBA, a CPA, or this skill or that certification," notes Deutsch. "As the resumes come in and hiring managers begin the screening process, they check off those boxes one by one as if they were ordering items from a fast-food menu.

"The problem with this approach is that it excludes a lot of good candidates early in the process because they don't get checks in all the boxes. With competition for top talent getting tougher than ever, you can't afford to screen out the best candidates before they even show up at your door."

Why do hiring managers rely so heavily on inappropriate prerequisites?

According to Remillard, most don't know how to define the outcomes, deliverables and expectations for a specific job, so they fall back on the old standbys of knowledge, skills and experience. Plus, relying on standard prerequisites allows them to practice the "CYA" method of hiring.

"Suppose I hire someone, they fall flat on their face, and the boss tells me I'm a bad manager because I made a hiring mistake," suggests Remillard. "I can say to the boss that I did *not* make a mistake because we agreed on the prerequisites for the job and I checked them all off. If the person failed on the job, it wasn't my fault."

Generic vs. Specific

Why don't knowledge, skills and experience lead to good hiring decisions? Because they are *not* proven predictors of job success.

"Just because someone has a certain skill doesn't mean they can apply that skill in the way you need it," states Deutsch. "For example, suppose your ad lists 'strong computer skills' as a requirement. You get a resume that indicates the applicant has experience using Microsoft Office tools, so you check off the box because you want someone with good computer skills.

"But what you're really looking for is someone who can use Microsoft Access to enter data about clients and then create complex merge Word files for a biweekly newsletter. You need a specific application of a skill versus the more generic 'good computer skills.' Unless you ask, you have no way of knowing whether the applicant can deliver that specific application."

The same concept applies to experience."

Typically, hiring managers will say something like, 'I need someone with 12 years' experience,'" adds Deutsch. "But what is experience? Does it mean the candidate has done the same thing for 12 years? Or have they developed new and higher-level skills on the job? Does it mean the applicant achieved certain results? Or did they just show up and punch the clock every day for the past 12 years?"

"For all you know, the applicant could have 12 years of producing lousy results, and a person with six years of producing good results could be a much better candidate. When your hiring criteria depend on elements that have nothing to do with success, all you can do is guess."

Think Outcomes and Results

How do you overcome the innate tendency to look at the wrong criteria? By focusing on outcomes and results rather than knowledge, skills and experience.

And that, suggests Remillard, requires defining what success on the job looks like.

"The first step in hiring top talent is to get very clear about the outcomes and deliverables you need from the job, so that you can measure someone's ability to get results," he explains. "That needs to happen *before* you start screening resumes, doing phone interviews or meeting people for the first time. Otherwise, you eliminate a lot of good candidates who don't have checks in all the boxes but know how to get the job done.

"The quickest and most impactful way to improve your hiring process is to teach your managers how to define success on the job. That involves going beyond the traditional job description and creating a Success Factor Snapshot™, which breaks down a position's requirements in terms of specific, measurable deliverables, benchmarks and timetables. Once you define the job in terms of outcomes and results, it doesn't matter whether someone has two years of experience or 20. All you care about is whether they can deliver the outcomes you need."

To avoid eliminating top talent, Deutsch also recommends changing your job ads.

Most companies post the entire job description (or an abbreviated version of it) in their online ads.

Deutsch refers to this as "drill sergeant" advertising, because it barks at the candidate. It says, "You *must* have this knowledge, skill or experience or don't bother applying!"

"Drill sergeant advertising not only reinforces the wrong criteria, it actually drives away the best candidates," explains Deutsch. "When they see job ads full of inappropriate prerequisites, they get turned off by the description of the job and screen themselves out before you even get a chance.

"Instead, describe the outcomes and results you're looking for, along with some of the challenges inherent in the job. Position the job as an opportunity to achieve at a high level and make a real difference in your company. You'll get more candidates from the top 25 percent of the talent pool, and because you're looking for outcomes rather than experience, you won't screen them out before learning whether they can produce the results you need."