

## **SELECTING STAR PERFORMERS**

By: Lauren M. Bernardi

My first experience selecting staff occurred a few years ago when I needed to hire an assistant. I failed miserably.

Like most people, I conducted this important task with virtually no training or information. So I took the traditional approach. I quickly reviewed the resumes, discarding those that didn't look professional. Then I interviewed a few candidates, but since I didn't have any questions ready, I relied on gut feel to tell me which ones I would like to work with. I might as well have drawn the name from a hat.

My story is not an uncommon one. Most people rely on the traditional resume and interview approach to hiring candidates. But traditional methods don't work! With more and more qualified candidates applying for jobs, it is critical to implement a strategic process for selecting star performers.

### **The Process**

The goal of the hiring process is to find the right person with the right skills for the job. The best way to do this is to implement an objective process and apply that process consistently. Not only will this help you find the right person, you will also be less likely to violate human rights laws.

The strategic hiring process involves three steps - planning and preparation, recruiting and selecting the most suitable candidate.

### **Step One – Planning and Preparation**

Hiring employees is like shopping. If you run to the mall without thinking about what you want or need to buy, you waste time looking at a lot of inappropriate items, get very frustrated because you can't find the right item and end up spending more money than you wanted, on something that isn't quite right.

So too with hiring employees. If you don't make a shopping list for hiring employees, you may waste a lot of time on unsuitable candidates, get frustrated and spend too much money on a poorly matched candidate who doesn't meet your requirements.

To prevent impulse buying you need to determine the requirements and qualifications for the position. This is best accomplished through the job description. A job description outlines the duties of the position and the qualifications necessary to fulfill those duties. It helps measure a candidate's skills against the requirements of the position and makes it easier for you to know if you've found the right match.

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Once you have determined your needs, you must create a method for screening candidates on an initial basis, to determine whether they meet those needs. Resumes are often viewed as the only way to screen candidates. However, they are not the only way to screen candidates and are rarely, if ever, the best way to do so. Resumes pose too many difficulties - they don't always provide you with the information you need, they are difficult to compare, they sometimes include information human rights laws prohibit you from having and many candidates take creative liberties with their qualifications, in order to distinguish themselves.

A better approach to using resumes is to create a comprehensive online application form. Before you dismiss application forms as only being applicable to part time jobs at McDonald's, consider the possibilities they hold:

- you can get all the information you need in a form that makes it easy to compare candidates
- you can ask questions you would normally only ask at an interview, reducing the amount of time wasted on unsuitable candidates
- you can require candidates to confirm that the information they provide is truthful, with the condition that false information can constitute just cause for termination.

### Step Two – Recruiting

Now that you know what you are looking for, how do you find people to apply for the position? The possibilities are limited only by your imagination, but some of the more common methods are:

- advertising
- networking
- referrals from past and existing employees
- colleges and universities
- Human Resources Development Canada
- open houses
- unsolicited applications
- the Internet
- word-of-mouth

Word-of-mouth is one of the most common approaches to recruiting - hence the old adage "it's not what you know it's who you know". It can be a very effective way to recruit suitable candidates but it can also be very dangerous. The problem with word-of-mouth is that it sometimes acts as a barrier to equal opportunity. We tend to like people who are like ourselves. By relying on word-of-mouth, we tend to replicate the demographics of our

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existing workforce. This can prevent you from obtaining the diversity of talents essential to competing in the global marketplace.

The best approach to recruiting is to use a combination of methods that appeal to as wide a candidate base as possible. The more candidates you attract, the better your chances of finding the star performer.

### Step Three – Selecting

We traditionally rely very heavily on interviews as a means of selecting candidates. While interviews are very effective, your ability to select the right candidate increases when you couple them with other assessment methods.

#### *Interviews*

If you interview candidates without being fully prepared, you are more likely to fall into “cocktail party” chit chat. This is where many legal problems occur. Unprepared interviewers tend to ask questions normally associated with social gatherings, such as “tell me about your family” or “how do you spend your time on weekends?”. These questions can lead you to receive information that at worst, human rights laws prohibit you from having, and at best, are irrelevant to determining a candidate’s qualifications.

There are several key advantages to determining your interview questions in advance:

- you are more likely to draft effective questions that evaluate the skills you are seeking
- you can ask the same questions of all candidates, thereby comparing “apples” with “apples”
- you have time to evaluate your questions to make sure they are non-discriminatory
- you can offset personal biases and guard against common interview errors, such as dominating the interview or asking leading questions that suggest the answer
- you are less likely to rely solely on “gut feel” and will be more objective.

The type of questions you use is also very important. One highly effective type is the behavioural descriptive question. Behavioural descriptive interviewing (“BDI”) examines a candidate’s past behaviour in a specific situation as a means of predicting how he or she will behave on the job.

The first step in creating a BDI question is to determine the types of situations that are commonly faced in the position. These situations should relate to a specific performance criterion (e.g., customer service). You should then design questions that elicit information about how candidates have handled these types of situations in the past. For customer service, an example might be: “Describe a situation in which you have had to handle an irate customer. How did you handle it?”.

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Be careful not to create hypothetical questions. A hypothetical question usually asks “what would you do if...”. Candidates tend to provide the answers they believe interviewers want to hear, which does not necessarily indicate how a candidate would actually handle the situation.

While most people know enough not to ask questions that violate human rights laws, they sometimes follow up on information that candidates volunteer, such as information about children or spouses. This is still against the law. The issue is not how you get the information, but whether you have it. Having questions prepared ahead of time and steering candidates away from prohibited areas avoids this problem.

Once you have carefully drafted your questions, prepare a list of the ideal answers. This need only be in point form but will again make the process more objective.

You will also be better able to determine if the candidate meets the requirements of the position.

Before you meet with candidates, give them a copy of the job description. This lets them identify any questions they may have and may also assist them to screen themselves out if they are not interested or qualified for the position. If your job description is accurate (and you should not distribute it unless it is), giving it to candidates will also help you avoid a wrongful hiring lawsuit.

Employees have sued their employers when they have misrepresented the duties of the position.

Finally, have more than one person interview each candidate. This offsets personal biases and makes the process more objective, especially if the interviewers are of different backgrounds and genders. Each interviewer should take notes of the interview and score the candidate's answers immediately after the interview. The interviewers can then compare the scores and identify any discrepancies.

### ***Other Assessment Tools***

In addition to interviews, other assessment tools may prove to be very effective. For example, if word processing is part of the job, you can test the candidate's typing speed and accuracy. If you're filling a customer service job, you can conduct a role play to determine how candidates manage difficult customers.

You should also use background checks to verify a candidate's qualifications. This means confirming licenses and education and conducting reference checks. Although many employers are reluctant to give out references, you can usually confirm that the employee worked for that organization and his or her job duties.

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### *The Selection Decision*

Once each candidate has completed the assessment process, you will need to select the one who best meets your needs. It generally helps to create a list of candidates' names and their scores for each part of the selection process, i.e., the application form, interview, assessment tests and background checks. Comparing candidates in this manner helps identify the best candidate simply and objectively.

While this process may take more time than the traditional resume and interview process, the results are well worth the effort. You will be rewarded with a well-matched employee and will not face the extensive costs associated with terminating and replacing a poorly matched one.

Selecting star performers is an important investment that requires you to implement a strategic staffing process. I only wish I had implemented this process before my personal selection disaster.

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Balancing your legal obligations and business objectives can be hard. We act as your trusted advisors; not simply as lawyers but as an integral part of your management team. Through our practical advice, workshops and articles, we arm you with the knowledge and tools to address rapidly changing human resource issues.

Above all, we're on your side. We work with you to prevent costly problems and when litigation is necessary, we act as strong advocates to protect your interests.

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### **About Lauren Bernardi**

Lauren is a lawyer and human resource advisor with the Mississauga firm of Bernardi Human Resource Law. Lauren's advisory, training and educational services help managers direct their human resources in a strategically sound and legally appropriate manner. She is an accomplished and entertaining speaker on management and human resource issues.

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